Desolation Comes Upon the Sky

by casti3l

Summary

Five years ago, Dean hit a teenage girl who fell from the sky. Now, Sam has hit a dog. And Alex? Well, she's hit rock bottom. But the return of Castiel might be the thing that finally make things right. And for once, it finally seems like everything is going well. But that rarely goes as planned. Part 3 of the I See Fire series.
Chapter Notes

Okie dokie welcome back! Here's the first chapter, and I'll be posting three or so times a week.

Enjoy :)

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October 16th, 2013

St. Paul, Minnesota

The thin curtains fluttered as a soft breeze drifted through the open window, through which the early morning light dappled the paisley carpet littered with brightly colored plastic toys and blankets. The motel room was quiet, with only the low whir of the refrigerator as any form of noise. Outside, two light sets of footsteps could be heard, and two seconds later they paused, their shadows darkening the crack under the door.

The wooden door clicked and swung open, and an angel stepped through, grace flicking on the incandescent lights. A child stood at her side, one hand tightly grasped in her own. The angel’s face twisted into a deep frown as she surveyed the clutter, but a small tug had her looking away. “What is it?” Alex looked down at the child, and it pulled eagerly at her black shirt.

“Mama.” The fledgling pointed upwards at her face, small grey wings flapping clumsily but with as much eagerness as they could hold.

Alex shook her head, knowing exactly what he meant. “You know we can’t fly when we go to the store, Ashiel,” she chastised gently, pulling herself free from his tiny grasp before she turned and shut the door.

Ashiel frowned at her words, but his sorrows were short-lived. He turned and tottered further into the room, and Alex watched as he settled down on the floor among his toy blocks.

They had been on their own for over a year now, just the two of them. Alex’s wings twitched as her thoughts turned to the Winchesters. It had been a long time since she had thought about her friends, and she felt her heart twist in long-suffered grief. Over a year without Dean and Castiel, but at the same time she could have sworn it was only yesterday.

“Mama.” Ashiel pulled himself to his feet, small, downy wings going out to steady himself. They were far too small for him to fly, and deep down inside Alex knew they would remain that way for a long time to come.

“Yeah?” she asked, curling her darker, sleeker wings towards the fledgling. “What is it?”

In response, Ashiel pointed to something behind her head, and Alex turned to see the kitchen cabinet. “Cacka,” the child stated, and Alex heard the soft clasping of fingers as the fledgling made a grabbing motion with his hands.
“It is almost time for our morning cracker,” the angel agreed. She turned around and pulled open the wooden cabinet doors, and she couldn’t help but overhear the excited squeal the fledgling made as she set the box of crackers down on the countertop. “Okay, Ash. How many do you want?”

The fledgling was at her side in an instant, chubby fingers gripping the countertop as he peered up at the box. “Cacka,” he insisted enthusiastically, wings beating in excitement.

“How many crackers do you want?” Alex repeated, opening the box and pulling out the plastic bag within. When there was no response, she looked down to see Ashiel holding up all ten fingers. “Ten?” she asked, voice lined with playful incredulity. “You think you can eat ten whole crackers?”

“Yeah!”

“I don’t know. Let’s start with three, okay?” Alex held out three square crackers, and the fledgling eagerly took them and stuffed one in his mouth. He turned away and walked back over to his toys, and Alex shook her head. She didn’t know if fledglings were suppose to eat — it made sense, seeing as that was the only way for their bodies to get the nutrition it needed to grow, but either way, it didn’t matter — Ashiel loved food. Were human children supposed to eat as much as him?

She handed another two crackers to the fledgling as he hurried back for more, shaking her head in disbelief. “Slow down, buddy. Don’t eat so fast.”

“Don’t be hard on him. He is a growing boy.” A voice had Alex turning, and the angel shook her head with a roll of her eyes. Ezekiel stood by the door, dark wings folding in.

“Aja!” Ashiel sprung to his feet, his small wings flying out in excitement. Blue eyes went wide as he stuffed his last cracker into his mouth, and crumbs fell to the floor as the fledgling’s mouth twisted into a wide, toothy grin.

Alex quickly stretched out a wing to keep the fledgling from charging at the seraph in front of her. “Sorry, he can be a bit over-eager sometimes,” she apologized, reaching down to run a hand through Ashiel’s beach-blonde hair. “Sometimes I think he has no fear,” she added with a teasing smile down at the toddler.

Ashiel slipped under her wings and ran up to the seraph. “Anja!” he repeated, and his fingers gripped Ezekiel’s dark grey feathers.

The seraph gently arched his wings out of the fledgling’s reach. “Boys will be boys. Angels aren’t naturally endowed with much fear, after all. We have no natural enemies.” He looked down as Ashiel let out a small whine, hands grasping in the air, and slowly lowered one wing so the child could examine his feathers as he excitedly repeated his latest word.

“We’re still working on the word ‘angel.’ ” Alex moved forward and scooped Ashiel up into her arms, and he immediately set about toying with her blonde ponytail, his chubby fingers parting her hair into uneven clumps. “He seems to be picking up English pretty well.” Before the seraph could respond she asked, “So. Have … have you found anything?”

Ezekiel shook his head. “There’s still no news on the fledgling’s father,” he explained quietly. “No one has come forward to claim him, nor has any angel reported their mate as lost. I’m sorry.”

Alex looked away. “It’s not your fault,” she murmured. “You’ve done everything you can.” With a push of her wings she was standing by the bed, and she set Ashiel down before she moved back over to Ezekiel. “It’s been over a year,” she added in a soft voice. “Maybe . . . maybe he doesn’t want to be found.”
The seraph in front of her didn’t respond, and Alex watched as his wings twitched sympathetically. “Then what shall we do?” he finally questioned, gaze sliding over to the fledgling who was now preoccupied with getting himself off of the bed. “Perhaps it is time you consider that you may have to care for Ashiel in a more permanent manner.”

Alex felt her shoulders drop slightly, and she turned to look back down at the fledgling. He had given up on dismounting the bed, the drop apparently too far for him, and was now standing up, arms outstretched as he let out a high-pitched noise of frustration. “Up!” he insisted, hands grasping at thin air.

“Alright.” Alex walked over and picked the child up, settling him on her hip as she turned back to Ezekiel. “I don’t think that’s a wise idea,” she admitted. “It’s not safe down here on Earth — you know as well as I do what’s out there. Besides, he needs a real family.” She wound her grace around the fledgling’s, and he giggled at the feeling. “If Cas were here . . . then maybe. But he deserves better than just me.”

The seraph frowned, but decided to hold his tongue. “I can look to see if there’s an angel who is willing to take him in,” he said instead. “If you feel that’s what you want.”

Alex gave a small, reluctant nod, and her eyes fell onto the fledgling that clung tightly to her side. He was so fragile, so innocent … what could she possibly offer him? She could barely provide security, let alone a family, friends, education ... “Yeah,” she murmured. “I feel that’s what’s best.”

August 10th, 2013

Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Thunder cracked through the sky as Alex dove through the trees, eyes desperately scanning the houses that lined the streets below. It had to be around here somewhere. Why did everything look so different from above? The angel’s wings ached, and the muscles in her back burned, but Alex kept going, arms tightly clutching the baby closer and closer — there.

The angel dropped to the ground, feet stumbling as she landed unevenly on the concrete walkway. She brushed her wet hair out of her face as she hurried up to stand on the front step, and only there did Alex hesitate. Her wings flittered nervously at what lay ahead of her, but the restless and soaked fledgling in her arms forced her to put her fears aside and reach up to ring the doorbell.

She heard the low, irate grumbling through the door seconds before it unlocked with click, opening to reveal a tired and disheveled Jody Mills. “Whatever you want, I — Alex?” The sheriff cut off as she recognized her visitor, and she stared down at the angel, mouth hanging agape at the sight before her. “What the hell?”

“C-C-Can I come in?”

“You're soaked!” Mills continued, and her eyes widened in shock. “And you’re bleeding!”

Bleeding? Alex blinked in confusion, and her hand went up to her chin; when she pulled it away there was blood, pale and diluted with the rain. It dripped from her hand onto the porch below, and she looked down to see a large, dark stain on the front of her shirt. Her face flushed, both in shock of her wound and embarrassment to be found bleeding on the sheriff’s doorstep. “I-I-I don’t — can we come in?” she repeated as she gripped the fledgling tighter.
“‘We?’ — of course.” Jody Mills eyes dropped down to the child in her arms, surprise and shock lighting up her face as all signs of her exhaustion disappeared. She jumped backwards, giving Alex room to step inside. The fledgling whimpered as they entered the dimly lit house, eyes screwing up in a heart-breaking wail, and Alex wrapped her grace even tighter around him. The sheriff closed the door behind them, eyes wide. “What’s going on?” she demanded as she turned on the lights, bathing the two young angels in a soft yellow glow. “Actually, no, wait — let me get you both a towel.”

Alex shifted nervously as the woman hurried deeper into the house, and she took a second to look down at the child in her arms. Bright blue eyes were hidden behind tears, and his thin, bleach-blonde hair was plastered to his scalp. Chubby fingers were curled into her shirt, and his now-soaked wings were curled tightly around him as he sought to protect himself from the cold. The angel gently focused on drying him with her grace, but the sheriff was back at her side within seconds. “Thank you,” Alex murmured.

“Let me take him for you.” Jody gently took the fledgling from Alex, and the young angel watched as she wrapped him in another, darker towel. “Who is he? Is . . . is he yours?”

“W-What? No. I —” Alex shook her head, sighing as her gaze flickered to the soft carpet underfoot. “It’s a long story.”

Alex ran her fingers over the patterns on the thin motel carpet as Ashiel moved about in excited and nonsensical circles, a small stuffed dog tightly gripped in his chubby hands. His small wings flapped wildly behind him as he let out a playful screech, and Alex laughed as he threw himself down onto one of the pillows beside her. “Are you getting tired?” she half-teased as he rolled off of it and onto the floor. “It’s getting to be past your nap-time.”

Ashiel shook his head as he sat up, but he was betrayed by a large yawn. Alex clicked her tongue in disbelief and rose to her feet, bending over as she reached out to pick him up. “I think it’s time for your nap,” she decided.

The fledgling wriggled free of her hold. “No!” he cried, face growing red as tears filled his eyes. His wings pulled in tight as he let out a high-pitched wail, struggling to his feet as he sobbed out his protest.

Alex rolled her eyes, unperturbed by the child’s fuss. “Ashiel,” she repeated, voice taking on a note of parental sternness. “It’s time for your nap.” She stepped forward, but the fledgling ran away, arms flailing as he screamed in frustrated objection. Alex huffed in annoyance, sinking back onto the floor with a shake of her head. Great.

She watched as the child cried and screamed, and only when it seemed to die off did she sigh and dare to speak again. “Ash, come here.”

The fledgling screamed out his answer, and the angel reached out with her grace, wrapping it around him and nudging him forward. The touch seemed to calm the child down, and he sniffled, moving, albeit reluctantly, towards her. “No nap,” he whimpered, the back of his hand going up wipe at his dripping nose.

“Why not? Are you not tired?” Alex guessed, and she stretched one wing forward to brush against the fledgling as he shook his head. “You need to use your words, acaro agi.” She pulled the sleeve of her own shirt down over her fist and reached out to wipe away the rest of the tears.
Acaro agi. Young one. The fledgling sniffled again at the Enochian phrase. “N-No nap,” he repeated, pointing towards his blocks on the floor. “I-I —”

“You want to play with your blocks?” Alex looked over at the clock on the wall before she nodded. “If you ask nicely, I’ll let you play for another few minutes, okay?”

Ashiel rubbed his tearful eyes with the back of his hands. “P-Peas?”

“Okay. A few more minutes.” Alex stood up as Ashiel walked back over to his blocks, shaking her head. Thirteen months, and she was finally understanding the fledgling. She wandered over to the window and pulled back the thin curtain to peer out into the empty street. Pines towered over the pavement, casting their heavy shadows onto the road below, but the summer sun was persistent, climbing ever higher into the blue, cloudless sky.

Something tugged at the back of her mind, but the angel pushed it away. She knew the feeling, and she knew it well; someone was praying to her — Sam Winchester, no doubt; he was the only one left who knew to pray, but it didn’t matter. She was done with him. She was done with the Winchesters, done with that life.

She felt Lucifer’s grace stir slightly within, shifting within its self-made nest, and she instinctively gave it a gentle prod, but it remained curled up sullenly within her stomach. She hadn’t slept since she had found Ashiel that fateful night, and while Lucifer’s grace had been agitated for months, it had finally calmed, retreating to where it now lay dormant inside her. Alex wasn’t sure how he would react if she finally ventured back into her dreams, and to be honest, she didn’t want to find out.

She turned back when she heard Ashiel let out a cranky sob, and she shook her head. “I told you it was time for your nap,” she muttered under her breath as she crossed the room and scooped the fledgling up. “Come on, Ash. Let’s go to bed.”

She felt the fledgling let out a whine, but he rubbed his face into the crook of her shoulder when she soothingly rubbed at his back. She rested a gentle hand on his head as she laid him down on the far bed, and the fledgling wiggled on the mattress until Alex pulled the thin blanket over him. “Quiet,” she hushed, tucking the edges of the blanket in around his body.

She waited at his side until the fledgling’s breathing slowed, her hands gently rubbing small circles into his tiny back. It was only when Ashiel had fallen fast asleep did she move away. She felt the tugging in her mind again as she crossed the room and scooped the fledgling up. “I told you it was time for your nap,” she muttered under her breath as she crossed the room and scooped the fledgling up. “Come on, Ash. Let’s go to bed.”

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Part of her was curious, and she was tempted to pull away the wall she had built up within her mind, but the stronger part of her still refused; it wasn’t her business anymore. Sam could fend for himself. Ashiel could not.

The tugging moved to her gut, stronger and more insistent, and the angel’s wings twitched nervously at the pins and needles within her grace. She looked over her shoulder, but Ashiel remained fast asleep, undisturbed by whatever was affecting her. Alex shifted uncomfortably as the feeling grew, worming its way through her grace and anchoring itself with barbed hooks. And in the next second, the motel room was gone.

Alex looked around in surprise, wings flaring out in alarm as she stood facing a new, dark wall. Her grace flicked out instinctively, taking in her surroundings, and the angel froze at what she felt. Slowly, she turned, feathers ruffling in disbelief. “D-Dean?”
Dean Winchester stood in front of a table, a matchbox in his hand and a smouldering bowl on the table. “Heya, Pip. Long time no see.”

“Clearly.” The angel looked disdainfully down at the spell, and she shook out her wings so her feathers would lay flat as she folded them against her back. “Angel summoning? Really, Winchester.”

“Yeah, well, when praying didn’t work, we moved on to something else.” The hunter’s words were crisp and slightly cold, and Alex huffed at his tone. Her eyes narrowed accusingly, but Dean made no effort to apologize for his manner.

“We thought you were dead,” another voice added, and the angel turned to see Sam standing over by the door. His face was far less stern, and Alex could see distinct lines of worry set into his brow. “Where the hell have you been?”

“Busy.” Alex turned back to Dean. “And I could ask you the same question.” Anger flared up within her, and she stepped forward, eyes flashing. “What the hell, Dean! Where were you? I thought you were dead.”

“Purgatory.” The Winchester didn’t back down, and his arms folded across his chest. “Apparently standing too close to an exploding Dick sends your ass straight there.”

“A-And Cas?” Alex looked around, eyes wide, but there was no sign of her angel. A bright flash of hope stirred in her stomach, and her heart started to race in anticipation. “Where is he? He’s with you, right?” She turned back to Dean when there was no immediate response. “Dean?”

“Cas didn’t make it.” Dean’s words were sharp and harsh, and the angel’s wings drew in tightly against her back as a tremble passed through her. “He’s gone.”

“He — he’s dead?” Alex looked over her shoulder at Sam, looking for some last straw of hope that this was some form of a cruel joke, but when she found nothing but hidden sympathy, she turned back to Dean. “A-Are you sure? You’re alive. Couldn’t he be —”

“He’s not.” The Winchester roughly cut her off. “I saw enough. And it doesn’t matter either way. He can’t get back. Not any more.”

Alex rolled her shoulders back, chin raised as she met Dean’s gaze. “Why am I here?” she demanded, nostrils flaring out as she let out a frustrated breath. “I have more important places to be.”

“Right,” Dean scoffed, something akin to dry humor sparking in his eyes. “Let me guess. You hit a dog, too?”

“What?” The angel narrowed her eyes in confusion, and her head tilted as she got the distinct feeling there was something that she was missing. “What the hell are you talking about?” She looked back at Sam. “What’s he talking about?”

“It’s not important.” Sam cast his brother a dark glance from across the room, and Alex turned back to Dean. There was definitely something she was missing.

She crossed her arms, feathers ruffling in distaste at the cool treatment she was receiving. “Why am I here?” she repeated one last time.

“We need your help.” Sam stepped forward before Dean could respond, and Alex swung her gaze back over to him. She watched as the Winchester blinked, taken aback by her glare, and the angel let her face soften; Sam hadn’t done anything to her. Her silence prompted Sam, and he continued.
“Kevin and Mrs. Tran are in the other room.”

“Yeah, no thanks to you,” Dean added scathingly, and Alex let her wings flare out, grace sparkling through the room in unconfined frustration. The lights flickered, and Sam held out his hand to quiet his brother.

“Kevin found the demon tablet,” Sam explained quietly. “It has a spell that can close the gates of hell. Forever.”

“Mm.” Alex refused to let her surprise show, instead aiming for calm disinterest. “And let me guess. You need something from an angel. Blood? Feathers? What?” Alex looked over at the window. “I really need to be getting back. I shouldn’t be gone.”

“Not quite,” Dean started, but Sam cut him off. The hunter fell silent with a huff.

“Plutus stole the tablet,” Sam told her. “Apparently he’s going to — to auction it off to the highest bidder.” He held out a small, pale blue card. “Kevin was invited, and we’re going with him.”

“Hm.” Alex plucked the card from the Winchester’s hand, turning it to read the black ink scrawled on the back. “A strict ‘leave your weapons at the door’ policy, huh?” She looked up. “Okay. So what do you need me for?”

“We need to get Kevin in so he can memorize the tablet,” Sam explained. “We want you to come with.”

“A little extra muscle couldn’t hurt, right?” Dean added. “I mean —”

“I can’t.” Alex handed the invitation back to Sam with a shake of her head. “You’re going to have to figure this one out on your own.”

She flared her wings, turning to go, but Dean’s voice stopped her. “You leave and we’re just gonna summon you right back again,” he warned, and even though Alex knew it was a bluff, it was still enough to give her pause. “What’s so important that you can’t help family?” the Winchester challenged, and Alex winced. “What happened to you?”

“I lost you,” she snapped, spinning around. “I lost you, and I lost Cas, and I couldn’t take it. You promised me, Dean. You promised that it would be me, but I was still the one left behind. I didn’t think you were coming back, and I moved on. A-And I can’t just drop everything and come running back! Who’s going to take care of Ashiel, huh?” She snatched the invite back out of Sam’s hands. “This auction’s in seven hours. That’s really short notice, Dean!”

“Who’s Ashiel?”

“What?” Alex spun on Sam.

“You said ‘Ashiel,’” Sam repeated, taken aback by her intensity. “Who’s he? Is — Is he your, uh, your mate?”

“What? No.” Alex snorted in half-amusement at the mere suggestion. “Castiel is my mate, Sam. Ashiel, he … he’s my son. Sort of.” She looked down at the dull, merle carpeting as she added, “It’s a long story.”

Alex watched as Jody Mills paced in front of the couch, the fledgling held tight in the sheriff’s arms.
The room was silent, and the angel felt her wings twitch nervously as she waited for a reply.

“So Dean and Castiel are gone,” the sheriff finally recapped, and Alex nodded in agreement. “And you ran away, and that’s where you found this little guy.”

“In the woods off of a highway,” the angel agreed. “Yeah. I . . . had to stop because I couldn’t fly any further. I saw a flash of light and heard a scream, and that’s when I found him. His mother is dead.”

The fledgling shifted in Jody’s arms, and the woman looked down. “Well it’s a good thing you came here,” she eventually said. “You’re always welcome to stay the night.”

“Uh, thanks.” Alex pulled the towel away from her chin, thankful to find that the bleeding had stopped. “I just — I know nothing about kids. I didn’t know what else to do.”

“You came to the right place.” The fledgling started to cry, and Jody turned her attention away from Alex. “Shh shh shhh,” she comforted. “Everything’s okay.” She looked back up at Alex. “I’m going to see if there’s something for him to eat,” she told the angel.

“Okay. I, uh — I should inform heaven about his mother.” Alex stood and took three steps towards the stairs. There she paused, one hand on the wooden banister. “Jody? Don’t tell Sam that I’m here. He’s better off not knowing.”

Alex pulled her wings in tight as she fell from the sky, plummeting down through the motel ceiling until she slowed to a stop at the last second, wings flaring out to bring her to a halt, unharmed. Her feet gingerly came to rest on the soft carpet, and Alex crossed the room, eyes focused on the small, blanketed shape on the far bed. Her grace relieved her fears, and she reached out to draw back the blankets.

Ashiel lay there, still asleep, and the angel let out a deep sigh. She curled her grace around him, and she felt his unconsciously reciprocate, wrapping itself in hers.

After a few seconds Alex pulled away. She returned the thin, white blanket to rest across the child’s shoulders as she stood up and walked to the far side of the room. The sharp stab of paper poked at her hip, and the angel reached into her pocket to retrieve the invitation Sam had given her. How could the Winchesters expect her to go? The angel looked back over at the fledgling curled upon the bed, and her wings drooped as she remembered Dean’s words. What’s more important than family?

“Ash is my family,” she said aloud, but the sound of her voice wasn’t as confident as she had hoped. Just this morning you were talking about giving him away.

The card fluttered to the ground, and the angel stooped to pick it up. It couldn’t hurt, right? She could get Ezekiel to watch Ashiel for the afternoon, and it would be nice . . . it would be nice to see the Winchesters one last time. Alex ran a hand through her blonde hair before she pinched the bridge of her nose, indecision battling within her.

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“Mama.” A soft tug on her t-shirt had the angel looking up in surprise. “Mama,” Ashiel repeated, stretching up on his tiptoes, hands outstretched.

Alex pulled the child up into her arms. “How was your nap?” she asked, running a soothing hand over his head. “Did you miss me?”

The fledgling let out a string of incoherent syllables, but the grin on his face was explanation enough.
Alex set him back down beside the table and pinned the card up upon the fridge. “There,” she began, turning to the cupboard. “You wouldn’t mind if I took a little trip, would you? I won’t be gone long, and Uncle Zeke might be able to watch you.” She looked down at Ashiel, who was watching her every move with wide eyes. “You like Uncle Ezekiel.”

“Anja,” Ashiel confirmed, pointing towards Alex’s wings.

“That’s right, he’s an angel,” Alex praised, flicking him playfully with the long feathers. The fledgling giggled, and she closed the cupboard door. “Some old friends need my help, and I owe them that much after running away.” She crouched down on the floor, wings curling forward to keep the fledgling near. “Promise me you won’t run from your family, okay, Ash?”

The fledgling blinked, confused by the sudden heartfelt change in the atmosphere, and he held up his small hand, flexing his fingers as he made a small noise. “Ahn.”

“Yes, I see your hand,” the angel acknowledged with a small sigh; she hadn’t been expecting anything less. She stood back up and turned to the fridge. “I think it’s time for another snack,” she decided, eyes flickering over to the clock to check the time. “Yogurt, maybe? I could go for some yogurt.”

“Guh,” the fledgling agreed.

“Yogurt it is, then.” Alex dug a small container of yogurt out of the fridge and put it on the table before turning to the fledgling at her side. His arms were up, wings fluttering in excitement, and Alex picked him up with an exaggerated huff before she set him down in his highchair. “There we go,” she teased, turning back to the food on the table. “You’re getting heavy.”

“Guh,” Ashiel repeated, pointing adamantly towards his snack.

Alex rolled her eyes at the child’s impatience. “Yeah, I know, I know,” she chastised gently. “I’m getting there.”

A gentle breeze pushed past Alex’s sleek feathers, and she pulled her wings in closer. The young angel shoved her hands deeper into her pockets as she looked around the dark warehouse parking lot. The only light came from a flickering streetlight high above her head, its incessant buzzing filling the quiet air. Men and women trickled past, one by one, and the air hummed with a supernatural essence.

The young angel shifted uncomfortably in the presence of so many pagan gods, and her eyes scanned the dark and dusty road as her foot tapped impatiently on the cracked concrete.

She heard the engine’s purr before she saw its sleek black frame, and Alex felt some of the tension leave her wings as the Impala glided into view. It died with a throaty growl, and four figures emerged. Alex stepped forward as Sam Winchester gave her a small wave, and she reciprocated the gesture. Her small smile faltered when Dean caught her eye, but his earlier anger seemed to have disappeared.

Her attention was turned to the shorter two, and the angel cocked her head as she recognized them — one of them, at least. “You cut your hair,” she noted to Kevin Tran, eyes focusing on the short black strands. “I like it.”

“Uh, thanks.” Kevin’s eyes darted across her face before looked away, uncomfortable by the angel’s amiable attitude.
Alex opened her mouth to address the woman who must be Kevin’s mom, but the words had barely formed in her throat before a hand came out of nowhere, leaving the angel only enough time to violently reel back. The hand missed, and Alex’s darted out, catching the wrist in a tight grasp as a scowl formed across her face. “Slap me one more time and I’ll break it,” she growled, squeezing the wrist in a warning before she shoved it away.

Mrs. Tran’s scowl matched hers in ferocity. “You abandoned my son!” she hissed. “You left him for the demons —”

The prophet’s mother cut off when the streetlights flickered violently. Alex, however, only raised her head, fixing the light with a calm stare. “Another guest has shown up,” she announced calmly before turning back to Mrs. Tran. “I’m sorry about Kevin,” she began eveny, “but there’s no changing the past, and I don’t regret my actions for a second.” She looked up at Sam. “Should we go inside? I’d like to get this over with as fast as possible.”

Dean huffed. “You don’t seem very happy to be with us.”

The young angel’s eyes narrowed slightly in hurt. “Actually, that’s not it,” she retorted. “Fun fact — angels have no innate sense of parental instincts. They may have four heads and be the size of the Empire State, but give them a child and it’s chaos. So, considering I had to leave my child with one on such short notice, you might be able to understand why I’m in a bit of a hurry.”

Without waiting for Dean’s response, Alex turned around and led the way towards the warehouse door. She felt them follow, and her wings twitched in a silent thanks, even as a cold stream of guilt trickled through her chest. She had no idea why she was acting so tense around the brothers; every mental conversation of Dean’s return had been filled with excitement and relief. Of course, in every single one of those conversations, Dean had never come back alone.

The angel slowed and let Sam take the lead, falling into step behind the prophet and his mother. She followed them through the heavy metal door, and she felt a frown crease her face as she looked about the room. It was large, with high concrete ceilings, and the angel could feel the wardings — painted white on the walls — pressing down upon her, forcing her grace back within the confines of her body. Men and women wandered around the room, gathering around the tables of artifacts and trinkets that were scattered throughout the floor.

A nudge on her shoulder had the angel moving forward through a large metal detector; it remained silent as she passed, reminding the angel of the reason she had left her weapon at home — the invitation had been explicit, and Alex was intent on making it home in one piece.

The scream of the detector behind her informed her Dean was not as concerned about their safety as she was — or perhaps he was, the angel mused as she turned to look back at the Winchester. It must be hard walking into a room full of the very things you hunt, completely unarmed and exposed.

“Now, now, Dean,” a man chastised as he stepped forward. His tongue clicked in disappointment. “The system only works when everyone participates.”

Alex watched as the Winchester slowly began emptying his pockets. Knifes, guns, and flasks filled the plastic bin, and the angel felt Sam’s exasperation grow with each revealed weapon. Finally Dean pulled the demon knife from his jacket pocket. “I’ll be back for this,” he warned when one of the guards tried to take it from his hand. He placed it into the bin, and a frown marred his face as it was quickly carried away. “Son of a bitch,” she heard the Winchester mutter under his breath. “Now I feel naked.”

“Should have brought a wooden stake,” Alex reminded casually as they fell into step beside each
“These are mostly pagan gods, after all. Iron and silver are useless.”

“I like to be prepared.” Dean lengthened his stride to walk next to Sam, and Alex turned her attention back to her surroundings. They passed swords, amulets and rings, a journal with intricate DaVinci-like sketches, and a hammer that Alex swore could only be Mjölnir. “How the hell are we supposed to know who’s who?” she heard Dean mutter.

“It’s pretty simple, Dean,” Sam huffed back. “They’re all monsters.”

“Pagan gods, mostly,” Alex agreed, but her words fell on deaf ears as Dean suddenly perked up. “Hey, hey.” He waved them after him and they crossed the room to stop in front of a glass display case. It was clear to Alex that it was what they were there for; the edges of the tablet could be seen, but the writing was blocked from view by two steel plates. “Great.”

“I guess we’re not as original as we thought.” Kevin’s voice was saturated with disappointment, and the angel flicked her wing in his direction to show her agreement.

“It’s okay, it’s okay.” Sam looked around, gears spinning in his head. “We just got to come up with a plan B.”

“And what, pray tell, could possibly have been plan A?” A snide, thick voice had Alex rolling her eyes, but she turned to face the demon behind her. Crowley’s dark gaze flickered across her wings, surprise passing through his eyes at her presence, but his voice concealed it well, and his words never broke stride. “Bring the prophet to the most dangerous place on Earth, memorize the tablet, and then va-moose?” Humor glinted in his eyes at his pun, and lips curled upwards in a sly grin. “Hello, boys.”

“Crowley.” Dean’s voice conveyed his disgust well.

The demon ignored him. “Kevin,” he started, addressing the prophet. Alex’s feathers ruffled slightly in displeasure at his condescending tone. “What a pleasure to see you. Sorry about your little playdate. Her name?” Crowley paused, thinking, but brushed it off as unimportant. “Ah. Well, if you’re going to make an omelet, you have to break a few spines.” His eyes dropped down to Mrs. Tran, who had moved defensively in front of her son. “And who is this lovely young thing? Must be your sister —”

A resounding smack echoed through the warehouse as Mrs. Tran slapped the King of Hell across the face, and a sharp noise of surprise left his mouth. “Stay away from my son!” she hissed, eyes narrowed and mouth set in a tight line.

“Charming,” Crowley quipped darkly as he rubbed his afflicted cheek. “Defiling her corpse has just made number one on my to-do list.” He held up a hand when both Winchesters moved towards him. “Uh uh uh uh,” he cautioned. “Don’t mind a little love tap, but anything more, and our mookie pals may just throw you out.”

“He’s right, Dean.” Sam put a hand out to stop his brother. “It’s not worth it.”

“Listen to Moose, Squirrel.”

The doors were flung open, and five men strolled through, four wearing dark suits, a sharp contrast to the thickset man in the middle who was wearing a white and blue track suit. “Ah.” Crowley turned to look at the party of five. “Here comes our host.”

“That’s Plutus?” Alex huffed, and her feathers fluttered at the disgusted rise and fall of her shoulders. “And to think I got all dressed up.”
She heard a breath of amusement from the King of Hell. “Don’t flatter yourself, Kitten.”

“Shut your whore mouth, Badger,” the angel quipped back, but she turned away before she saw the demon’s reaction. She could feel his amusement only grow, and the angel took in a deep breath to keep herself calm. Now wasn’t the time to get temperamental; not with Ashiel.

Plutus passed them by, gaze sliding over the five of them and lingering a little too long on Kevin Tran for Alex’s liking, but then he was gone through near door. Sam moved after him, and Alex followed close behind, briskly pushing her way between Dean and Crowley to stay close on the Winchester’s heels.

She paused beside the door to let the Trans through, and confusion trickled through her when Dean didn’t follow. Her eyes turned back to the dim and cluttered room as her lips twitched into a small frown. She spotted the Winchesters within seconds, his back to her as he stood deep in conversation with another young man. Not a man, Alex noted. An angel.

Slim brown and cream wings were curled at the angel’s side, fitting well with the thin vessel. The red and white striped Weiner Hut uniform was clean and bright, starkly contrasted against the muted colors of the warehouse. Alex’s wings rose at the sight of her own kind, and in four quick steps she was standing beside Dean. “Hi,” she began, wings curling out and downwards. “What are you doing here?”

“You’re Alex.” The male angel studied her closely, fascination and awe dancing in his blue eyes. His wings fluttered upwards to complete the greeting before they immediately fell back to his side. “I’m Samandriel. I knew Castiel.”

“Alfie’s here for the tablet,” Dean explained bluntly, and Alex saw his eyes flicker between the two of them before he stepped back. “I’ll let you two be.”

Alex watched the Winchester walk away. “What are you doing here?” she finally repeated once Dean was out of earshot. She quietly noted the small name tag on Samandriel’s shirt that did in fact read ‘Alfie,’ but she made no comment.

“I’m here to protect the Word of God and its keeper,” Samandriel explained, and his wings twitched uncomfortably as he surveyed his surroundings. “We usually don’t come to things like this; they’re immoral, bidding souls for earthly things.”

“Souls, huh?” Alex shoved her hands in her pockets. “That explains why Crowley was acting so suave.” She curiously eyed the angel before adding, “So then what exactly is it that you’re bidding?”

“Anything that heaven holds.” Samandriel’s face remained serious, blue eyes widening slightly as he spoke with the most urgent importance. “I have been given the right to do what I must; the tablet must not fall in the wrong hands.”

“Understandable.” Alex glanced towards behind her, and she motioned after her as she walked towards the heavy set of double doors. “We should probably get in there before the bidding starts.”

Samandriel held the door open as Alex passed through, and she flicked her wings in thanks as she entered the auction room. It was barebones to say the least; metals chairs were line in rows, and the walls were a faded brick and mortar. The most exotic piece of furniture was a leather armchair where Plutus now sat, a newspaper in his hands as he waited for his guests to take their seats.

Alex spotted her friends sitting in the third row back, and she hesitated, deciding where to go. Her decision was made simple as Samandriel moved past her to sit directly behind Sam, and Alex
followed, settling down into the chair beside him. The angel’s thin wings fluttered in a silent acknowledgement as he drew them back to make room.

“Samandriel,” Crowley stopped beside them, and Alex tipped her head to look up at the demon. The demon’s gaze flitted over her before stopping on the other angel. “Slumming it, aren’t we?” Alex frowned at his words, not sure if he was talking about the warehouse or her. She turned back to the angel beside her and was about to speak, but Crowley beat her to it, his next words definitely referring to her. “I’d be careful if I were you,” he added, “This one has a habit of … losing her little pets.”

Alex’s wings flapped in offense, and she turned to snap, but a hand on her shoulder stopped her. She turned back to Samandriel, surprised to find him as calm as ever. In front of her, the Winchesters were still deep in conversation, urgent whispers passing between them as Sam compiled something in his lap.

“Don’t know why you’re so keen on that hunk of dirt,” Crowley commented loudly so the humans in front of him could hear, and Alex disgustedly shifted closer to Samandriel as the King of Hell sat down in the chair beside her. “So it tells you how to blast back a few demons. I’ll make more.” He leaned forward slightly. “Can’t get rid of all of my black-eyed boys, Samantha.”

“Yeah, we’ll see,” Sam shot back under his breath, just loud enough for the three in the back row to hear.

“All right,” Dean muttered, leaning closer to his brother. “How much we got?”

“Uh, well, we got our hacked credit cards, two thousand dollars, and a, uh, Costco membership.” Dean handed Sam each item in turn, who shuffled through them, and Alex gave a slight roll of her eyes; was she seriously the only one who had known going into this that checks weren’t accepted?

“Our first item, the amulet of Hesperus,” the man up front began, holding up a box containing a small golden necklace with a heavy, six-sided star-like pennant hanging from its thin chain. “Let’s start the bidding with, um, three tons of dwarven gold?”

The young angel didn’t miss the way the brothers heads dropped in amazement and disbelief, and she rolled her eyes. “They’re not always the sharpest bulbs in the shed,” she joked as she turned to look at Samandriel. Before he could respond, she added, “So, uh, how’s heaven doing? I know things were in a bit of a shamble there for a while …” She trailed off quietly, folding her legs up under her on the chair. It would probably be awhile before the tablet was up for grabs, and right now she was more interested in the angel beside her than the bidding.

“Thing are slowly getting better,” Samandriel began, but Alex didn’t miss the way his lips turned downwards in uncertainty. “There is still no leader for us, but certain … factions are rising up. It was them that sent me here. Apparently it wasn’t an easy choice; there was some disagreement on my qualifications —”

“But here you are,” Alex finished.

“But here I am,” the angel quietly agreed with a small nod.

“So if you don’t mind me asking, how old are you?” Alex ignored the amused huff from the demon beside her, flicking him in the side with her dark wings in irritation. “I-I mean, you don’t — you seem younger than most of the angels I know.”

“That would be because I am. I was born almost three thousand years ago.” Samandriel ducked his
head at the grin on Alex’s face. “It’s young for an angel,” he half-heartedly insisted.

“Oh, trust me, I know.” Alex reached out and flicked the small wiener name tag. “Your vessel definitely suits you, Alfie.”

The angel looked like he was going to protest, as if there was something wrong about what she had said, but in the next second he decided against it. “How are things here on Earth?” he asked instead, gaze momentarily moving past Alex when Dean got up and walked out of the room. “I’ve heard you’ve been living here since Castiel . . . you know.”

“Yeah.” Alex picked at the rubber sole of her shoe, intently studying where it was coming apart. “I’ve been living here for the past year. How did you know?” She looked up curiously at the angel beside her. “Did you know Cas?”

“Not very well.” Samandriel gave a small shake of his head before he reached up, pulling back his red ball cap to brush a hand through his short, dark hair. “Ezekiel is one of my commanders; I know he’s been coming down to visit you quite often, but I’ve only met Castiel four or five times.” His voice lowered in sympathy. “He was a good angel. You were lucky to have known him so well.”

“Yeah,” Alex echoed quietly, wings pulling in close as she looked away. “Lucky.” She let out a long sigh, fingers drumming on the metal legs of the chair. “It’s been hard without him,” she quietly admitted.

She heard Samandriel make a small noise of sympathy, but her attention was drawn away from the angel when a glint of metal caught her eye. “Our next item up for bid, the hammer of Thor, Mjölnir.”

The man up front held up the large, silver hammer, and Alex perked up, feathers curling forward slightly.

“A-A finger bone from the frost giant Ymir,” a frail old man in the front row offered, holding up the mummified appendage.

Alex saw Plutus give a small shake of his head, and she leaned to her left as her voice dropped to a whisper. “You should get me that,” she murmured to the demon beside her, wings flicking towards the hammer. “It’d be cool.”

Crowley let out a low hum. “Put it on your Christmas list, little mouse.”

Little mouse? That was a new one. Alex shrugged, attention drawn back to the man hunched over in the first row, desperately digging through his worn leather bag. “Uh…the bone and…” He held up a brown paper sack just high enough for Alex to see the bloodstained bottom. “Five eighths of a virgin.”

“Ew.” Alex pulled her lips up in disgust, and she saw the group of humans in front of her recoil as well.

Plutus, however, just gave a small, satisfied nod, and the auctioneer smiled at his boss’ content. “Ah. Sold.”

Her grace picked up movement behind her, and Dean quietly moved into the room. He ducked down as he slid into the row in front of Alex, not so gently knocking Sam in the shoulder to get him to move over a seat. Metal chair legs scraped against the concrete floor as the two hunters got resituated, and then Alex heard Dean mutter, “Plan C tanked.”

“Maybe you should try Plan D for dumbass,” Crowley quipped, and Alex snorted under her breath, unable to help but grin in amusement. She didn’t miss the dark glare Dean cast at the demon, who
remained wholly unperturbed.

“Our next lot, the Word of God.” The auctioneer held up a large, grey tablet, and the room fell silent. “Capital ‘G.’ Very old, very rare.”

Crowley got to his feet, hands sliding into his pockets. “Three billion dollars,” he declared, a smug look across his face when the Winchesters looked up in shock.

On her other side, Samandriel rose as well, the angel’s thin and awkward frame a painful contrast to the demon’s large and confident facade. However, his voice was strong and clear. “The Mona Lisa.”

Alex saw the Winchesters turn in confusion, but Crowley only smugly countered, “The real Mona Lisa. Where she’s topless.”

“That totally doesn’t exist,” Alex huffed under her breath, a roll of her eyes accompanying her words. She saw the demon cock an eyebrow in amusement, accepting her unspoken challenge, but he gave no verbal response.

Samandriel raised his chin. “Vatican City.”

“Alaska.”

“Palin and a bridge to nowhere?” The auctioneer raised his brow at the demon’s audacity. “No thanks.”

Crowley frowned deeply, but within the next second his composure was regained. “Alright,” he said. “The moon.”

“You’re bidding the moon?” Dean turned around in disbelief, and his shocked and unsure expression was mirrored on Sam’s face.

“Yeah. Claimed if for hell. Think a man named Buzz gets to go into space without making a deal?” Crowley cocked an eyebrow before he turned back to the auctioneer, awaiting his answer. Beside her, Samandriel waited, but his nervous impatience hummed through his grace, and Alex saw the tip of his wings twitch with uncertainty.

“Ah. I’m sorry, gentlemen.” The god shook his head, disappointed at their offers. “It seems that our reserve price has not been met. So in order to stimulate the bidding, we’re going to add an item to this lot.” He raised a hand towards the audience pointing directly at the prophet. “Kevin Tran, Prophet of the Lord.”

Alex heard Mrs. Tran gasp in horror, and then energy twisted through the air. Kevin was yanked to the front of the room, too fast for the human eye to see, and large, brown eyes widened even further in surprise as he found himself handcuffed to the metal pipe beside Plutus. He pulled at his bonds as he looked up in desperation at the Winchesters.

“No!” His mother jumped to her feet and Alex follow suit, grace coiling angrily within her. Sam and Dean stood, but two men pushed past Alex and held them down.

“Stop.” Alex’s command was deep and strong, and she tried to push her grace outwards, but the warding prevented her from reaching far. Her demands were ignored as the auctioneer once again spoke, as calm as ever.

“Mr. Tran is the only person on Earth who can read this tablet, which makes them a perfect matching set.” He motioned to the wide-eyed prophet, and Alex let out a low growl. “So, do I hear a bid of,
“No, stop!” Mrs. Tran’s shrill voice cut him off. “I’ll give you whatever you want. I have a 401K, my house—”

“Let him go and I’ll let you live.”

Eyes turned upon Alex, and she ruffled out her feathers, wings raised high as she held the auctioneer’s gaze. She heard Plutus chuckle from where he sat, and she turned her head to see a dark smile on the pagan god’s round face. “Don’t make threats you can’t keep,” he warned lightly.

Alex turned her grace inward, pushing and prodding at Lucifer’s grace, trying to get it to stir, to explode outwards and break the wardings to prove her point, but it refused. It only pulled away and curled up deeper within her.

Plutus chuckled again at the angel’s lack of action and turned back to Mrs. Tran. The auctioneer, seeing his boss’ confidence, did the same. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Tran, but I’m afraid this is a little out of your price range.”

“My soul!”

Alex’s wings flared out in fury, the rustling of her feathers filling the air. She was going to bid her soul? Why were humans so stupid?

“Mom, don’t!” Kevin begged, but his mother didn’t listen.

“I bid my own soul,” she repeated.

Alex let out a frustrated snarl, but Lucifer’s grace refused to stir. The angel looked over at Samandriel, at his wide eyes and fallen face, and without a second’s hesitation she shoved her grace full force into his. “Sorry ‘bout this,” she growled when the angel jumped in surprise, but she didn’t stop. She wrapped her grace tightly around his, and drew it into her, even when the intimacy of the action made her feathers curl uncomfortably. She kept going, ignoring how Samandriel’s grace struggled violently in protest, but in the next second she had what she needed.

Lucifer’s grace sprang to life, exploding outwards in unholy fury at the touch of the other angel’s grace within hers. Bulbs exploded and windows shattered, sending the warehouse into a panicked darkness.

“I said no.” Alex reined Lucifer’s grace back in, and her eyes widened at how violent and crazed it remained, twisting and flailing within her. She tried to wrap it inside her grace, but it only slightly calmed the inner rage. The angel swallowed thickly to regain control of her voice before she spoke. “Release the prophet.”

“Remove her.” Plutus’ order was painfully calm, so strongly contrasted by the panic and uncertainty that gripped the rest of the room.

Alex flicked her wings, a low growl vibrating through her chest as two men gripped her shoulders. She shoved them backwards, the broken wardings no longer ailing her strength. Her confidence faltered when metal glinted in the dim light, the unmistakable shape of the angel blades making her shift backwards.

“Ah ah.” To her complete surprise, Crowley put an arm across her chest. “I don’t recommend trying that.” He cast Plutus a glance over his shoulder and his voice grew scathing. “As much as I would enjoy having you swat one of heaven’s little pests, I happen to know this one — more importantly, I
happen to know that it wasn’t just her responsible for that little show.” The demon dropped his arm, and Alex folded her wings down in confusion to where this was going. “That? That was an archangel.” Anger flashed in the King’s eyes. “Heaven’s most powerful weapon is at her side, and you want to risk that thing coming down here to find her dead? I happen to choose life, thank you very much.”

Alex stared at the demon, jaw slack as she looked for something to say, and their eyes locked for one, long second before she thrust her wings down and took off out of the building. She tumbled to a stop on the other side of town, black feathers curling around her as she misjudged her distance and stumbled on the dirt. Whoa. Did the King of Hell just save her life?

“Stupid.” Her fist connected with a nearby telephone pole, and the angel growled at the pain. “Stupid stupid stupid creature.” She shook her fist as she turned away. “Can’t believe I just got my ass saved by a demon.”

Her back pocket buzzed, and Alex reached back to find her phone. She took a deep breath to compose herself before she answered. “Dean. I’m sorry about that.”

The Winchester didn’t sound “Yeah, I know. Where are you?”

“Uh, other side of town. I might just head back to my place. Listen,” she added before the Winchester could speak. “I know you need my help, and I really hate leaving before you guys are safe, but I think we can both agree there’s no way I’m getting back in there.”

She heard Dean grunt in agreement. “They’re putting up more warding,” he informed her darkly. “Your friend Alfie says it should keep out Michael himself.”

“Yeah, not a surprise.” Alex looked around, and a long breath fell from her pale lips. “Okay. What do you want me to do, Dean? Want me to stick around? If you need me, I can be there in seconds.”

She waited patiently while the two Winchesters on the other line discussed in hushed voices. “Go home,” Dean finally said. “But, uh, we’ll talk later.”

“Sure thing, Winchester.” Alex snapped her phone shut and shoved it back into her pocket. Guilt trickled through her at the idea of leaving the Trans in such a dangerous situation, and the angel’s wings fell back down to her side. She was responsible for them, wasn’t she?

“That was brave what you did.”

Alex spun around at the voice, eyes widening in surprise to find Samandriel standing behind her. “T-Thanks?” she got out. “Why aren’t you at the auction? Is it over? And it wasn’t brave. It was stupid.”

The angel blinked, quietly formulating his response. “I’ll watch over the Trans,” he finally promised. “You should go before anyone comes looking for you.”

Alex hesitated, but reluctantly nodded. “Okay,” she agreed before her wings carried her off into the air. She could trust the Winchesters with this — after all, they had kept her safe for over five years. Yes, they were in danger, but right now, she had something far more important.

Alex pulled her wings in close as she fell from the sky, shoes sinking into the scratchy motel carpet, and the rustling of her feathers drew the attention of the nearby seraph. Grey wings rose in greeting, and Ezekiel stood. “You’re back,” he acknowledged in a low voice as not to wake the sleeping child in the far bed. “How was your evening? Good, I trust.”

Alex let out a small smile. “I got kicked out of the auction,” she admitted quietly. “It’s seriously no
big deal though. Uh, but thanks for watching Ash,” she added, quickly diverting the subject with a quick glance towards her fledgling. “Any trouble?”

Ezekiel shook her head, and Alex nodded.

“Good.” She folded her wings in close and moved to walk past him before she paused. “Oh. I ran into, uh, Samandriel at the auction. He mentioned that he knew you.”

The seraph gave a short dip of his head. “He’s a good kid. I know him and his father well.”

“How. Yeah, he seems pretty nice.” Alex watched as Ezekiel left, frowning as Lucifer’s grace twisted angrily within her. “Settle down,” she chastised under her breath, moving to sit on the bed opposite Ashiel. She pulled her grace in tightly around the archangel’s, a breath leaving her nose as she strained to keep it under control.

The fledgling still slept soundly, undisturbed by her arrival, and Alex reached out to place a gentle hand on his back. “I almost didn’t make it back tonight,” she whispered. “What would you have done then?” Sadness pulled down on her wings, and the angel heaved a sigh. “This is why I can’t keep you. Your Mommy’s reckless; she’s not afraid to die. What happens if I don’t come back one day?” She stroked the child’s soft grey feathers. “You deserve a real family. You deserve better than me.”
Heartache

August 11th, 2012

Sioux Falls, South Dakota

Alex stumbled down the wooden stairs, fingers barely catching on the smooth, polished banister to keep her from falling onto the floor below. “Jody?” she called, running a hand through her messy blonde hair. She was sure she had heard a noise, but her grace told her that there was no one in the house. Where had everyone gone? “Hello?”

The front door clicked open, and the angel’s wings rose, a defensive noise growing in her throat as her feathers bristled. However, it quickly died when she recognized the newcomers; Jody Mills stepped through the front door, the fledgling held securely in her arms. “You’re up,” the sheriff noted, a gruffness to her voice. “About time.”

Alex grunted, not a fan of her tone, but she made no rebuke. “Where did you go?” she asked instead as the sheriff moved into the living room. Alex followed behind, feet dragging slightly on the carpeted floor.

“Shopping,” came the response. “I figured we’d be needing a few things for our little guest.” The sheriff turned to Alex and held out the fledgling, and the young angel hesitated, unsure what to do. “Take him,” Jody insisted, seeing Alex’s reluctance. “He’s your kid, you know.” When Alex did so, tucking the infant delicately against her chest, the sheriff continued her previous thought. “I need to go unpack the trunk. You stay here. Oh and, uh,” the sheriff handed Alex a small, yellowed piece of parchment, “I found this tucked inside his clothes last night. Can’t read it for the life of me.”

“Okay.” Alex sank down onto the couch, fingers toying nervously with the fledgling’s soft feathers as she set the paper down beside her. She heard the door close behind Jody, leaving the two angels alone, and Alex awkwardly cleared her throat. “Okay,” she repeated, and she winced at how unsure her voice sounded.

The fledgling wiggled in her arms at the sound, small hands opening and closing as he stared up at Alex with wide, blue eyes. It let out a jumble of syllables before it stopped, listening, and Alex tipped her own head as the air conditioning kicked in. The whole house began to hum as cold air seeped through the vents, and the fledgling’s eyes widen in fear at the strange and sudden turn of events.

“Whoa whoa whoa.” Alex’s eyes grew with his as she felt him start to tense, and she desperately curled her grace around his, trying to hold him still. “Wait, no- P-Please don’t cry.”

Admittedly, she wasn’t surprised when the infant didn’t listen. Tears filled his eyes, and a wail erupted from his mouth as the fledgling screwed up its small, red face.

“Uh — uh — no. No no no.” Alex pulled her hands away, freezing up as the child screamed out its discomfort. “P-Please don’t do that . . . uh, kid. Oh God.” She gingerly touched his grace with hers, jumping slightly as it grabbed ahold.

Suddenly the fledgling was out of her lap, and Alex looked up to see Jody Mills standing there, coddling the infant in her arms. The infant calmed down almost immediately, its wailing fading into half-choked sobs of slowly fading fear. “You weren’t lying about not being good with kids, huh?” the sheriff half-joked.
“Babies are scary.” Alex fidgeted nervously on the couch as the sheriff slowly calmed the infant down, embarrassed that Jody had come in to see her panicking like that. “I—I don’t know what to do.”

The angel’s wings tensed as Jody Mills returned the fledgling to her lap, and her hands quickly went out to rest on his sides as she looked up in fear. “Calm down.” Jody sat down on the couch beside her, and Alex shifted as the cushions dipped. “He can feel that you’re nervous.”

“L-Like a dog.” The angel tried to crack a joke, but it failed, leaving her to drop her gaze back to the child. She took in a deep breath and focused hard, forcing the tension to leave her body. “O-Okay. Now what?”

No answer came, and the angel looked up to see that the sheriff was gone.

“Hey hey hey!” Alex desperately pushed her grace out. “How — where did you go? Jody!” She looked back down at the infant as it started to squirm, and she folded her wings around it. “No no. Shh.” Alex’s leg started bouncing slightly in agitation, and she folded her grace against his, forcing herself to remain calm, and she felt the fledgling relax slightly at her touch. “Okay.” Alex hesitantly stroked the child’s wings. “Grace is good. He likes grace.”

“He needs a name.” The door swung closed as Jody Mills carried the rest of her things through. “I was thinking something Biblical. Maybe Joseph? Michael?”

Alex shook her head. “After the archangel? No thanks. We didn’t exactly get along.” Her eyes drifted over to the small scroll-like paper, and she reached out, fingers closing around the delicate paper. Inside was a single, carefully scripted word. It was in Hebrew, no doubt, but the word translated in her mind. “Ashiel.”

“What did you say?”

Alex’s head perked up at the sheriff’s voice. “Uh, Ashiel. That’s what this paper says.” Alex looked down at the fledgling, who had fallen silent. “I think that’s his name.”

She was surprised by the dislike in the noise Mills made. “Ashiel? That’s a weird name. Are you sure that’s right?”

“Yeah.” Alex softly played with the fledgling’s grace as she thought, and she felt Lucifer’s grace stir curiously at the strange and foreign feel. The fledgling tipped its head at the archangel’s touch, a soft and confused noise coming from its open mouth. “Ashiel,” she finally said, and the infant let out a soft coo. “That’s your name, huh?” An old memory tugged at the back of her mind, and Alex let out an amused and sorrowful breath of air out of her nose. “Ashiel, angel of the Lord.”

October 26th, 2013

St. Paul, Minnesota

“Ashiel.” Alex folded her arms across her chest, frowning down upon the small fledgling. “What did I just say?”

The fledgling flapped his small grey wings twice as he beamed up at his surrogate mother. His smile slowly faded, and his head tipped as he realized that she was not as pleased at his catch as he was. “Mama.” He clutched the small frog tightly in his hands, reluctant to give his new-found prize up.
“Put the frog down.” Alex’s tone was stern, and she watched in concern as the child gripped the poor creature even tighter. “You’re going to hurt him, sweetheart. You don’t want to do that.” She shook her head as he looked down at his precious treasure. “Ash.”

Ashiel reluctantly dropped the small frog, and Alex watched as it hopped away with a breathless croak.

“Thank you.” She ran a hand across his hair to emphasize her appreciation before nudging him towards the edge of the park where their motel lay on the other side of the street. “Let’s go home.” She shook her head as she watched Ashiel totter off ahead of her. “How did you even catch a frog?” she mumbled after him. “You're like two or something. Freaking angels.”

A black car turned the corner, engine purring gently as it crept down the street in front of them, and Alex’s wings flared out in agitation. “Ash,” she said slowly, so as not to scare the child. “Come here.”

Ashiel, however, didn’t listen, and kept moving towards the street.

Alex pushed herself forward with her wings, ducking down to scoop her son up into her arms before he reached the sidewalk. It was too late, however, and the car pulled to a stop in front of them. Alex took a step backwards as the driver’s side window rolled down to reveal a familiar pair of green eyes, followed by a deep, teasing voice. “Fancy seeing you around here.”

“Winchester.” Alex barely managed to keep the smile off of her face, but somehow she did: she needed to keep up pretenses. “How did you find me?”

“You mentioned you were up in Twin Cities, from there is was simple. Old habits die hard, huh Rockford?” Dean shot her a small wink before his eyes dropped down to the fledgling, who was currently leaning up against the side of the car, trying to peer up into the window. “This the kid?”

“Yeah, this is Ashiel.” Alex flicked him gently with one of her wings as she shook her head. “I can’t believe you found me because of that. I don’t remember why I thought that was smart.” She tossed the thought aside with another, more direct shake of her head, and she asked, “So, what are you guys doing up here? Don’t tell me you came up just to visit.”

“Sort of.” Dean opened the car door and stepped out, and the fledgling immediately retreated to hide behind Alex’s legs. “There’s a case over in Minneapolis.”

“Of course. Hey, Sam.” Alex shot the taller Winchester a small wave as he got out from the passenger side, and he reciprocated the gesture with a quick smile. “What kind of a case?”

“Haven’t you heard?” Dean’s face slipped into a deep frown. “It was like, twenty minutes from here.”

“I don’t watch the news.” Alex scooped up her son and held him against her hip before he could run up to the two brothers. “News means weird stuff, and I don’t do that. Not with him.” Dean’s gaze turned to the fledgling, who shied away and buried his head into Alex’s neck in shyness and embarrassment, and she sighed. “Why don’t we go inside?” she suggested, motioning to her motel room with a flick of her wings before she remembered the hunters couldn’t see it. She led the way across the street without waiting for an answer, and the door swung open in front of her.

“Listen,” she began as she set Ashiel down and nudged him off towards his toys. “I’m really glad you guys swung by, but… I don’t hunt anymore. How many more times do I have to say it?”

She felt the Winchesters exchange looks behind her back, and she turned with a small frown. To her
surprise, Sam looked as if he was to agree with her, but Dean’s adamant face showed no signs of being deterred. “Just hear us out,” he insisted. “You don’t want to fight, that’s okay; I get that. But we could really use another pair of eyes.”

The angel’s frown deepened, and she immediately regretted her next words. “Okay, fine. What’ve you got?”

“No, Sammy’s not an angel.” Alex ushered her son closer to her with a black and gold wing. “He doesn’t have any wings, see? He’s a human.”

“Anja.”

“Hu.” Ashiel reached out and grabbed onto Sam’s jeans, frowning as he did so. Then he hurried away, mumbling to himself as his wings flapped uselessly behind him. Only seconds later he returned holding a small stuffed moose in his hands. He held it up so Alex could see before turning back to Sam. “Hu,” he decided.

Sam looked over at his brother, and Alex pinched the bridge of her nose to keep from smiling. “We may or may not have named that toy Sammy,” she finally admitted as Sam Winchester quizzically accepted the fledgling’s gift. “It’s a long story.”

“We were just on our way down to the police,” Sam said, and Alex slid the phone back over to Dean with a nod of understanding. “We were just wondering if you had heard anything else.”

“Sounds ritualistic,” Alex agreed with a grunt. She sank down into a chair across from Dean and folded her arms. “Alright. What’s the case?” The angel motioned to the table, and the two Winchesters took their seats.

“Last week a jogger in Minneapolis got his heart ripped out,” Dean began, unlocking his phone and sliding it across the table so Alex could see the article on the screen. “Six months ago — exactly six months ago — the exact same thing happened. Same area, same MO.”

“Sounds ritualistic,” Alex agreed with a grunt. She sank down into a chair across from Dean and folded her arms. “Okay, so pagan god, maybe? Why do you need my help? Do you have any sort of leads?”

“We were just on our way down to the police,” Sam said, and Alex slid the phone back over to Dean with a nod of understanding. “We were just wondering if you had heard anything else.”

“And to see if you wanted to come with,” Dean added, and he frowned at the looks both Sam and Alex gave him. “What?”

“Dean, listen. I … I wish I could help,” Alex began, keeping her voice as polite as she could. “But that’s not going to happen. Even if I wanted to go, someone would have to stay behind and babysit. And that someone would have to be me.” She stood up, and her grace unlocked the door behind them with an audible click. “You’re both welcome to come back here if you need a place to crash for
the night, but I’m afraid that’s all I can offer.”

Sam stood up, ready to go, but Dean’s eyes flashed. “I’m sorry, did you hear anything I just said?” he demanded, rising to his feet. “People are dying out there, and you’re just gonna just sit here on your fucking ass—”

“Don’t swear in front of my son.” The lights flickered as Alex’s grace flashed outwards in anger. She felt Ashiel jump, fearful of his mother’s sudden wrath. Guilt rushed through her at her son’s fear, and she curled her grace around him to calm him down as he hurried over and buried his head into her legs. “I know what’s happening out there, Dean,” she said, lowering her voice to a much more respectable level, “but I’m not the only one who can do something about it.”

“No, but you’re one of the best.” Dean’s face softened slightly as Alex picked up the fledgling. “No one else can do the things you can, Pip. I mean, look at you. You’re an angel. Vamps, shifters, gods — they can’t even touch you.”

“No, but demons can,” Alex reminded none-too-gently. “And some pagan gods have the juice to put me in my place — I can’t risk that, Dean. Not with a two year old.” She re-adjusted Ashiel’s weight on her hip. “If I die, what about him?” Her words were met with silence, and Alex nodded. “That’s what I thought.” She motioned towards the front door. “Call me when there’s a simple ghost hunt,” she half-joked, trying to lighten the heavy mood that had fallen over them. “I like those.”

Sam took the hint, and nudged his brother towards the exit. Dean, however, still refused to give up. “We’ll call you if we learn anything new,” he said as he crossed the threshold.

“Yeah, whatever knocks your socks off, Winchester.” Alex closed the door behind the brothers and set Ashiel down. The fledgling, upon being freed, hurried over to the window. “Hooman,” he stated confidently, pointing out the window. “S-Sam.” He slapped his hand against the window. “Yeah, there goes Sam.” Alex watched as Sam turned back at the sound, and he gave the fledgling a small wave. She locked the door with a flick of her grace and sighed, surprised to find herself disappointed at being left behind. However, she firmly shook the feeling off and turned back to her son. “Come on, Ash. Why don’t we go play a game?”

“How do you even play a game with a baby?” Alex shook her head in confusion as she stared down at the fledgling on the floor in front of her. “They can’t do anything. I’m serious.” She looked upwards at Jody, who stood in the kitchen making dinner for herself. “He can kinda just crawl around and flap his wings, but that’s it. It’s so . . . boring.”

“You’re not even giving him a chance,” the sheriff chastised, impatience lining her naturally sharp voice, and Alex watched as Ashiel looked up towards Jody’s voice. “He’s going to be talking soon. You’ve been here over a month. You should know what to do by now. Read him one of the books I pulled down or play a rhyming game with him. Babies love rhymes.” The fledgling started crawling off towards the sheriff, incoherent sounds coming from his lips.

“Why would anyone like rhymes?” Alex grumbled, but leaned over and snagged one of the thick cardboard books Jody had pulled from the attic. “Here,” she said, raising her voice so Jody and the fledgling could hear. “I’ll read him a book. Ash!” She stretched her grace out to grab hold of the fledgling, and he turned with a curious noise. “Come here! This looks like a good book.”

The fledgling cooed, and his bright blue eyes followed Alex’s movements as she settled back down onto the carpet. Ashiel crawled over and sat in front of her, all the while staring up at her with a
wide-eyed, expectant look on his round face.

“Good boy,” Alex joked, unsure what else to say, and Ashiel let out a happy screech when she brushed his stomach with one of her long feathers, hands going out to try and capture one for himself. Alex drew them quickly away, much to the fledgling’s disappointment, but he quickly seemed to remember that he had wings of his own.

“No no no.” Alex reached out and pulled the fledgling into her lap. “Don’t pull on your feathers, little man. That’s going to hurt.” She glanced over her shoulder and plucked out a loose black feather. “Here. You want to play with this?”

Ashiel took it with an excited trill, and he wiggled joyfully in her lap as his fingers dug into the dark, sleek vanes. Alex lay the book down on the floor in front of them, one hand curled around the baby’s stomach while the other went out to turn the pages. “So, uh, we’re going to read this book. Ready, Ash?”

There was a knock on the door, and Alex looked up sharply from the motel table. Ashiel raised his head as well, fingers tightly gripping a slice of banana that was part of his night snack, and Alex felt his small grace try and reach outwards curiously. Alex did the same, her own grace successfully reaching through the door and feeling the souls of the men outside. Winchesters. She shouldn’t have been surprised. “Come in.”

Sam was the first to step through the now unlocked door, and Alex rose to her feet when she saw the half-empty fast food bag in his hands. “Hey,” he greeted.

“Hey yourself.” Alex motioned that he sit next to her, and when he moved further into the room she tipped her head. “Is Dean coming in?”

“He’ll be a few minutes. He went back to get our stuff from the car.” Sam awkwardly stopped beside the table. “Sorry. You’re sure you’re fine with us crashing here? I know you said —”

“Oh, it’s fine. It’s totally fine.” Alex gave a large grin to supplement her words. “I’m actually glad you guys came. Would have been nice if you had called ahead, but whatever.” She once again pointed to the chair beside her. “Sit down. I guess you’ve eaten,” she said, gesturing at the bag before running her hand through the hair near the back of her neck.

“Started to, yeah.” Sam sat down, but his gaze drifted over to the fridge. “You, uh, don’t by any chance have any beer?”

Alex raised her eyebrows at his request, amused. “I may or may not have been expecting you.” She let out a small laugh and a shake of her head as Dean walked through the door, ears perked at the current conversation. “Got your favorite, plus there’s some Johnny Walker on the top shelf.”

Ashiel, upon seeing the arrival of the two brothers, stretched up his hands towards Alex. “Up,” he demanded, and Alex acquiesced, lifting the fledgling out of his highchair and depositing him onto the soft ground. “Sam.” Ashiel tottered over to Sam Winchester, hands held up. “Anja.”

“Hey, buddy.” Dean tossed his bag onto the ground and moved over towards the child, a large grin across his face. “Can you say Dean?”

“Sam,” the fledgling declared adamantly, holding his arms outwards, and Sam picked him up and set him on his lap. “And.” Ashiel held his hand up in front of Sam’s face, pointing proudly towards his palm. When Sam gave no acknowledgement, Ashiel slid out of the hunter’s lap and tottered over to
“I think it’s time for someone’s bedtime.” Alex excused herself from the table and scooped up her son in her arms. “Isn’t that right, Ash? It’s time for the grownups to have a talk.”

“No.” Ashiel crossed his arms, but he rested his chin on Alex’s shoulder to watch the Winchesters as Alex carried him over to the bed. “Sam.”

“I’ll get Sammy for you,” Alex promised gently. “Let’s get you changed, huh?” She stopped beside the dresser and glanced over at Dean and Sam. “Uh, I’ll be with you guys in a couple of minutes. Help yourself to the fridge.” She nodded in its direction.

She waited until the brothers had busied themselves with a bottle of whiskey before she helped Ashiel into his pajamas and carried him over to the bed. “Alright, get yourself tucked in,” she instructed before she crossed the room to pick up the stuffed moose. “Here’s your Sammy.”

She sat down on the bed as Ashiel clutched the toy tight, and she drew the blankets up over his body as she settled into the bed beside him. She waited until the fledgling had settled down into his pillow, his wings folded over his back and over his toy, before she started to sing, her voice no louder than a soft hum.

Waking up and letting go,
To the sound of angels.
Am I alive or just a ghost?
Haunted by my sorrows.
Hope is slipping through my hands,
Gravity is taking hold.
Said I’m not afraid, that I am brave enough.
I will not give up,
Until I see the sun.

Hold me now,
’Til the fear is leaving,
I am barely breathing.
Crying out,
These tired wings are falling,
I need you to catch me.

“Red?” Dean looked up from the table, a half-filled glass in his hands.

Alex blinked, surprised he was able to recognize the song. “You know Red?” she scoffed, a hint of doubt shadowing her voice as she rubbed gentle circles into the fledgling’s back. She felt his breathing slow as he slipped out of consciousness, and she slowly moved to stand up. “That’s something I never would have guessed, Dean.”

The Winchester shrugged. “It was on the radio,” he defended.

“Yeah, but Red?” Alex repeated as she crossed the room and sat down at the table beside Sam. When Dean didn’t answer, she shrugged. “So what did you guys learn?” she asked, purposefully keeping her voice low so the Winchesters would do the same.

“Well, we talked to the guy who last saw the victim alive,” Sam began. “But I’d hardly call him a suspect.”
“More importantly, last Wednesday, same do-it-yourself bypass, different city.” Dean handed her a folded-up newspaper article, and Alex scanned the headlines as he continued to explain. “Ames, Iowa. Same thing happened exactly six months ago, too.”

“It couldn’t have been the same guy, because he was being held for questioning,” Sam added before he took a long swig of his beer.

“Anyways, we’re heading down to Ames in the morning.” Dean poured himself another shot of whiskey before he passed the bottle over to the angel. “You’re welcome to join. Kid, too,” he added before Alex could protest. “Family’s family. He’d probably be safer with us anyways.”

“Right,” Alex echoed, eyes dropping down to the paper in her hands. “Safer.”

Alex stood in the middle of the darkened bedroom, fingers drumming on the sides of the crib as she watched Ashiel sleep. The fledgling lay on its stomach, wings draped over its small, curled body like a soft, thick blanket. “You’re not so bad when you’re sleeping,” she admitted, reaching down to straighten his soft feathers. “If only you were always this easy, huh?” They had been with Jody for ten weeks now, and the young angel was starting to feel that she was finally starting to understand the child that lay before her.

“The two of you seem to be getting along quite well.” A deep, soft voice had Alex turning, and her wings fell open in greeting. Ezekiel approached, flicking the inside of her wings in return before he stopped beside the crib. “It’s good to see you again, Alex.”

“Yeah, same to you.” Alex held the seraph’s gaze for only a second before it fell back down to the child beside her. “How are things back home?”

“They’re slowly coming together.” Ezekiel looked about the dark room, lit only by the yellow moonlight outside, and one wing gently stretched across Alex’s back to direct her attention back to him.”Will you be returning to heaven?”

“I don’t . . .” Alex hesitated, fingers tightening on the side of the crib as she lowered her voice. “No. No, I won’t. There’s nothing there for me anymore.”

She heard the seraph hum out a low note of understanding, and his wing drew away to once again rest against his back. “And have you decided what you’re to do with . . .”

“Ashiel.”

“With Ashiel.” The seraph nodded in approval of the name. “What of him?”

“No idea.” Alex shook her head, teeth toying nervously with the inside of her cheek as she contemplated her answer. “Has . . . has anyone in heaven been looking for him? His father, most likely, since his mother is dead.” Ezekiel didn’t immediately answer, and she looked up. “What?”

“We never found his mother’s body,” he slowly began. “Even after you reported the exact location of her body, it wasn’t there. And there’s been no word of anyone looking for their mate and son.”

“That’s . . . not possible.” Alex pulled her hand away from the fledgling, and she felt his grace shift in protest. “Maybe he just hasn’t come forward. Can — can you try and find him, Zeke?” She reached out and curled her grace around the fledgling’s, ignoring how Lucifer’s grace perked up in curiosity. “He deserves to be with his family.”
“He’s not safe here,” Ezekiel agreed, and Alex looked up in confusion, feathers ruffling out slightly at the assumption that the fledgling was in danger. “There are many dangers for a young angel on Earth,” he explained upon seeing Alex’s face. “Demons especially will take an interest.”

“Yes, I bet they would,” Alex grumbled under her breath. She instinctively curled her grace tightly around the fledgling, wanting to keep it safe. “I know of one in particular that would be very interested. We’ll have to be careful.”

“I’m worried they already know.” Concern heavily lined the seraph’s tone. “That’s actually why I am here. There have been several demons congregating just outside the city limits for the past few days. I don’t know why they’re here, but I think it would be a good idea not to take any chances.”

Alex’s face twisted in worry. “Oh. T-Thanks for telling me.” She paused when she heard footsteps in the room below. “I-I can’t put Jody in danger like this,” she murmured, turning back to the fledgling. “Maybe you’re right.” She reached into the crib and lifted the sleeping fledgling up into her arms. “It’s time for us to go.”

Alex sat at the kitchen table as the sun began to rise from behind the trees, casting the first rays of its yellow light in through the soft curtains and open windows. A gentle breeze stirred her hair, and the angel raised her wings to catch the wind between her feathers as she stretched her chin upwards, eyes falling closed. Behind her, on the nearest bed, she felt the two Winchesters still sleeping soundly; they had finally gone to bed in the early hours of the morning, and Alex didn’t expect them to wake any time soon. Sam was spread out across the bed, and Dean was passed out on the old couch.

She had cleared away the empty bottles long ago, and now the only thing that decorated the wooden table was Dean’s article and a crossword that currently held her attention. She traced the edge of the page with one finger as her front teeth teased the pink eraser on her pencil, letting herself sink deep into her thoughts.

Her gaze drifted over to the newspaper article, and she pulled it closer. Four people dead in the past six months, all within two hundred miles of the small, secluded world she had carved out for herself here. It was all worth it, wasn’t it? There were other hunters out there who would take care of this. She sighed and pushed the article aside.

This wasn’t her life anymore. This couldn’t be her life anymore. Not with Ashiel — with her son. Giving up hunting, it wasn’t a choice she had made; it was something that she had to do to keep them safe. No matter how much the Winchesters promised they could make this work, they didn’t understand what they were getting themselves into.

“Hey.” A hand brushed against her shoulder, and Alex looked up to see Sam slide into the chair beside her. “How are you doing?”

Alex opened her mouth to respond, but she faltered, and her eyes dropped to the table. “I don’t know,” she finally admitted, fingers toying with the puzzle in front of her. “I don’t know, Sam.” She looked up into the hunter’s hazel eyes.

To her surprise, he nodded. “I know what you mean,” he began. “I . . . I found someone too, and I know Dean’s back, but I’m not so sure I want to get back into hunting. I’ve found something else — something more.”

“You found a girl.”
Her name’s Amelia.” Sam looked away, and Alex twitched her wings as she took a moment to study the Winchester. He looked different — not just physically, but spiritually. His soul felt . . . softer. “I think you would like her,” Sam eventually said, drawing Alex’s attention back onto his face.

“I’m sure I would.” Alex glanced back over her shoulder to where Ashiel slept, her view almost blocked by Dean’s large form. “Dean seems pretty insistent about us hunting again.” The angel turned back to Sam, lips twitching downwards as the pencil rolled from her grip and clattered to the floor. “Then again,” she added, ducking down to pick it up, “he probably wants the old gang back together. He doesn’t understand that we found something else that doesn’t involve him.”

She saw the guilt flash across Sam’s face at her words, and he quickly looked away. “It’s not that I don’t want him around,” the Winchester quickly defended. “I just . . .”

“Don’t want to hunt,” Alex finished. “I know, but hunting — it’s all Dean knows.” She looked back over at the sleeping Winchester. “I — I’m torn, Sam. I want to be with you, but I have a kid. I don’t want anything to happen to him, or to you if something comes after him.”

She saw the guilt flash across Sam’s face at her words, and he quickly looked away. “It’s not that I don’t want him around,” the Winchester quickly defended. “I just . . .”

“We can handle anything that comes,” Sam promised quietly, and Alex followed his gaze over towards where her son lay tangled in the light sheets. “It’s your choice; don’t let Dean tell you otherwise. Listen, if you ever need anything — if you ever need someone to watch Ashiel, don’t hesitate to call, okay? Dean and I are both more than willing to help out.”

A warm feeling stirred in the angel’s chest, and she ducked her head. “Oh trust me, I won’t. Thanks, Sam.” Her eyelids drifted downwards, and she shook herself awake with a small snort.

Sam immediately noticed. “You look tired,” he slowly began. “When’s the last time you’ve actually slept?”

The young angel looked away, cheeks flushing. “About a year,” she admitted. “I mean, it’s not like I have to sleep here on earth, a-and I can’t start again now . . .” Her grace hesitantly curled around Lucifer’s, leaving her reasoning unsaid to the younger Winchester.

She was expecting sympathy, or a question, but what she wasn’t expecting was, “That’s stupid.” Sam stood up, one hand extended towards her. “You need rest, Pip. You’re running yourself into the ground. Come on. Two hour nap until the sun comes up.” He helped Alex up before she could even protest. “At least lay down for a bit, okay?” Worry creased the hunter’s face. “I don’t like the idea of you being so tired.”

The angel rolled her eyes at the Winchester’s concern. “Fine. I’ll lay down for a bit,” Alex repeated. “No promises I’ll fall asleep. I’ve held out this long and I’ve been fine.” Without waiting for a response she crawled under the covers, rolling onto her side so she was facing Ashiel. The mattress and pillows were soft, far more comfortable than Alex had ever remembered, and she pulled her wings in tightly around her. This was nice; even if she wasn’t going to fall asleep, it had been months since she had even laid down.

She felt the bed dip as Sam laid down beside her, leaving a respectable amount of space between the both of them, and after a few minutes she heard his breathing slow. She matched his pace, focusing on the way her lungs expanded with each breath, and her eyes fell closed. Yeah, this was pretty nice.

“No. No no no no no.” Alex snapped open her eyes, and her mouth went dry as she stared at the familiar plaster walls. She hadn’t actually meant to fall asleep; how had she fallen asleep? She didn’t
want this; not after so long. The young angel shakily stretched her grace into the house, searching for her companion. Lucifer hadn’t immediately appeared, but there was no doubt in her mind that he was sulking somewhere upstairs; it wouldn’t be long before he found her. The angel squeezed her eyes shut as she played out the archangel’s rage in her mind. If it was anything like the fury in his grace when she had re-awoken it, Alex wasn’t sure how she was going to handle it. Her small hand went out to steady herself on the wall, and she sank to the floor, wings curling in tightly around her.

“Alex.” A low, stolid voice came from behind her, and the young angel scrambled to her feet and spun around. Lucifer stood there, crimson wings held neutrally against his back with an unreadable expression etched into his face. The sight of him had Alex’s heart jumping into her throat, and three steps carried her across the room.

She threw her arms around the archangel and buried her head into his chest. Lucifer didn’t immediately return the gesture, whether out of vexation or surprise, and Alex squeezed her eyes shut, curling her wings around him. He felt solid; he felt … real, and tears welled up at the feeling of him finally being back, a feeling she had been pushing away for far too long.

Crimson wings enveloped her, and Lucifer’s arms wrapped themselves around her back. One hand splayed across the back of her head, keeping her close. Alex felt a deep breath leave his lungs, and along with it the tension that had kept his body stiff and unyielding. An Enochian word fell from his lips, soft and indistinguishable, and Alex pressed herself closer.

“I’m sorry.” The words barely came out, and even then they were muffled by the archangel’s shirt. “I—I didn’t …” She trailed off, pushing her head further into his chest. Several long seconds passed before she finally whispered, “I … I missed you.”

“I thought I lost you.” The chin resting on her head moved as the archangel spoke. “You were gone for so long I thought you had found someone else.” He pulled back slightly to look into her eyes, his own flashing with a frustrated emotion. “What happened? One of the last things I felt from you was extremely distressed.” A hand slipped under her chin, and fingers traced the raised white scar.

“Cas … Cas is gone.” Alex pulled her chin away and her gaze dropped to the ground. “He — He and Dean were pulled into Purgatory when they killed Dick a-and I was all alone. I was scared, Luce. I didn’t have anyone.”

She could hear the displeasure in the archangel’s tone. “That’s not true,” he reminded. “I was here. All you had to do was come.” He, albeit reluctantly, stepped away, and Alex winced at the frown on his face. “You ignored me for so long. Why did you even bother coming back?”

The young angel hesitated, knowing how bad her answer sounded. However, she knew it was impossible to lie to him, and she turned her head away. “I needed you,” she whispered. “I got myself into trouble a-and I couldn’t do it myself —” She turned away, wings curling defensively around her.

To her surprise, the archangel didn’t react angrily; instead, soft feathers brushed against her wings. “Alex. Look at me.” Lucifer patiently waited for her to turn back around before he leaned forward. His forehead pressed up against hers, and for a brief second time seemed to stop as the two stood in silence. “I’m not mad, le mohaoth,” he finally said, pulling away. “My grace is there to protect you.” However, his eyes flashed at his next words, a jarring change from the gentleness he had shown her only a second before. “Of course, I wish you would have found a better way of letting me know instead of just shoving another’s grace into mine.”

“I did what I had to do.” Alex let out a small shrug accompanying her words. “Dean wasn’t —”

“Dean?” Lucifer’s thin lips twitched downwards at the Winchester’s name. “I thought you said he
was in Purgatory.”

“He managed to escape, I guess.” Alex closed her eyes and turned her head away as she hesitantly added, “He said Cas didn’t make it.” Grey eyes flickered upwards, just in time to see a grin flash across the archangel’s face at her words before it was gone. “That’s not a good thing, Luce,” she snapped.

“Of course not.” Lucifer’s voice was as smooth as a snake as he moved forward to stand right in front of her. “You knew this day was coming. With everything Castiel has put you through, it was just a matter of time before he left and didn’t come back.” Cold fingers danced on her jawline, tilting her head upwards. “And you can’t blame me for being happy my competition’s gone.” Alex opened her mouth to protest, but two fingers came to rest on her lips. “Shh. I know, little one,” the archangel rumbled. “I know you can’t see what he’s done to you. That’s why you’re just going to have to trust me. One day you’ll see. And then you’ll understand.” His wings curled around her, their touch as cold as ice. “One day you’ll know exactly what he’s done.”

The Winchesters left that morning, and Alex heard nothing from either of them until two days later. Ashiel had quickly fallen back into his normal routine, the absence of the two brothers of no relevance to him, but Alex couldn’t help but wish one would at least call. But for two days, there was nothing. Then, late that night, the prayer came. Alex was sitting by herself at the kitchen table, watching the flicker of the tv over Ashiel’s shoulder. The angel’s wings twitched as she felt the connection form, and the pencil fell from her hands at the sound of Dean’s voice. Alex? We need backup.

“Dean?” Alex stood up as the prayer cut off, and her feathers rustled nervously.


“You’ve got to be kidding me.” The angel looked over at Ashiel, who was sitting in front of the tv, head tipped as he watched a cartoon bunny run out of a house. Alex squeezed the bridge of her nose. “Okay. Ash? Mommy will be right back, okay?” A push of her wings had her crouching beside her son. “Stay here.”

Ashiel looked up at her, eyes wide, but his nod was all Alex needed. She shoved her wings down and took off into the sky. Time slowed as she pushed her way through the air, crossing the countryside. Boulder lay below, and she pulled in her wings and plummeted towards the ground, grace pinpointing Dean’s soul as it took in his surroundings. Sam, three men, one — something. She stretched her feet out in front of her as she slipped through the brick roof, and her wings flared out as she landed behind the tall, dark-haired woman who sat straddling Dean, who lay pinned below her by two men.

Everything seemed frozen, with not even a breath stirring air until her feet touched the ground, and time fell back into its speedy progression.

”—take my time and enjoy this,” the woman in front of Alex was saying, shoulders rolled back as Dean struggled below her. She traced a line down Dean’s chest with a pointed finger. “I can actually show you your own beating heart—” The woman cut off as she sensed Alex’s intrusion, and the angel raised her head.

The woman rose to her feet and spun around, eyes glowing an angry red, and the angel surged forward, one hand pressing against the creature’s forehead. Her grace exploded into her, even as a hand dug into her chest, searching for her heart. The pain only made Alex’s grace act faster, burning
the woman’s brain and spinal cord until the pressure finally incinerated her internal organs.

The woman was dead before she even hit the ground, but the hand buried deep in Alex’s flesh didn’t give as easily, and Alex was tugged off balance. She fell as the men cried out, stumbling away as red light sparked from their chest before they dropped dead to the ground.

Alex put a hand out to steady herself, letting her grace stitch her chest back together. “Hey, handsome,” she joked with a small wink when she realized had fallen on top of Dean. Dean only grunted, and the angel moved her hand upwards to heal a small cut just below his clavicle. Her hand then moved to her torn shirt, a frown darkening her face. “This is why I don’t like pagan gods,” she muttered as she got to her feet. “Oh, and you’re welcome for saving your sorry asses,” she added, pointing to both Winchesters in turn as Dean got to his feet.

“Yeah, thanks.” Sam looked down at the three dead men that lay on the ground. “Are they —”

“Most definitely.” Alex’s wings twitched disdainfully as she stepped over the woman’s body. “We should probably call the police and get out of here.” She caught herself, and corrected, “You should get out of here. I should go back home.”

She didn’t miss the way the Winchesters exchanged looks, nor the frown on Dean’s face, but Sam finally nodded. “Okay,” he reluctantly agreed. “Thanks once again. We’ll call you later.”

“Yeah.” Alex hesitated as a feeling begged her to stay, but she forcefully pushed it aside. “I… I should be going.” Without waiting for a response, she took to the sky.
Alright, since I've been busy this past week and really busy next week with work, here's two chapters in a row. Merry Christmas!

November 2nd, 2013

St. Paul, Minnesota

A week slowly ticked by, and with each passing day, Alex could feel the air growing colder. She stared up at the bleak, cloudy evening sky, and one wing folded down around Ashiel to herd him closer as they waited to cross the street. A stark, biting wind swept through the trees, forcing the angel to turn up the collar of her jacket to keep it from her ears. The traffic light changed, and Alex took her son’s hand as they crossed the asphalt. It was one of those classic grey days, she mused as they reached the far sidewalk. One of those days that nothing good could ever come of.

Her grace found the motel door unlocked, and the angel paused, a frown clouding her freckled face. “I hate it when I’m right,” she muttered to herself as she pushed the door open, feathers ruffling outwards in wariness as she peered inside.

A pair of golden wings could be seen peeking over the back of the couch, and Alex’s fell back to her side with a low huff of relief. “It’s you.”

“You don’t seem very pleased about that,” came the amused reply, and whiskey-colored eyes glimmered humorously.

“Anja!” Ashiel moved forward, clearly recognizing their guest on the couch, and his own fluffy grey wings stretched towards the archangel.

Gabriel grinned at the sight, and, with a dramatic flourish of his hand, produced a sucker. Ashiel accepted it with a squeal of delight, but Alex only crossed her arms. “You know he’s way too young for that.”

“You’re not a very fun mom,” the archangel teased as the fledgling stared quizzically at the saran wrap, a frustrated sound emanating from his mouth at his lack of success.

Alex quickly crossed the room and extracted the sweet from his hands. She picked up the fledgling before he could protest and balanced him on her hip as she turned back to Gabriel. “Why are you here?” she asked, wings flicking in annoyance that the archangel didn’t call ahead of his arrival. She knew she shouldn’t be frustrated; this happened every month. Sometimes twice.

If Gabriel noticed, he didn’t care. “I just thought I’d stop by,” he said, shoulders rising and falling in an eased nonchalantness. “See how you and the kid were doing.”

“We’re doing fine.” Ashiel squirmed in her arms, and Alex put him down onto the ground. She watched as the fledgling hurried over to his toys and picked up Sam the Moose before he carried it back over to Gabriel.
Ashiel held up the toy. “Sam,” he insisted, waving the stuffed toy by the antlers.

Alex saw Gabriel grin in amusement, and she quickly added, “He’s still pretty fond of that toy.”

“Well, he did get it from his favorite archangel.” Gabriel accepted the gift from the child, waggling his eyebrows at Alex to accompany his words. “Who doesn’t love a moose?”

He handed the toy back to Ashiel when Alex grunted in agreement. “How are things going for you?” she asked, sitting down on the couch and pushing her annoyance aside as she fell back into her more typical amiability. “It’s been awhile since you’ve stopped by. You haven’t had any problems with anyone, right?”

Gabriel joined her on the couch, shrugging. “You know me. I’ve been here and there. Same as every damn year for the past ten thousand years.”

“Your life sounds boring,” Alex teased as she pulled her legs up onto the couch, turning slightly to face him more.

The archangel matched her smile, his eyebrows rising in a hint of amusement. “It has its moments.” Gabriel pulled Ashiel up onto his lap, and the fledgling grasped at his wings, blue eyes open wide. “Any luck on finding his dad?”

“No, not yet. We . . . we’re thinking we might have to find him a new family,” Alex admitted. “I just . . . the Winchesters are back in the game, and I’m not sure how long I can stay away.”

Gabriel didn’t immediately respond, and Ashiel took the opportunity to speak his own mind. “Cacka,” he insisted, and he put a hand on Gabriel’s chest before made another unintelligible sound.

“Are you hungry?” Alex guessed, and Ashiel’s head swung over to look at her, mouth hanging open slightly as he nodded yes. Gabriel chuckled, and Alex walked over to the counter. “You know,” she called over her shoulder, “from the way he eats, anyone would think he was your son.”

She heard the archangel’s wings rustle as he shifted to look over at her. “You say that like it’s a bad thing,” he joked, but a more serious note crept into his tone. “If you’re hinting that I should take him —”

“What? No no no.” Alex shook her head. “I wouldn’t ask you to do that.” She pulled down a box of crackers from the cupboard and counted out four. “No offense, but I wouldn’t trust you with a kid.”

Gabriel didn’t protest, and Alex handed the fledgling a cracker, who had somehow found his way off of the archangel’s lap and into the kitchen.

“Fair enough.” Gabriel turned slightly, golden eyes watching as the fledgling ran off to eat his cracker in peace. He flapped his wings twice as he tried to get more comfortable, and Alex watched as a golden feather drifted down through the air and came to rest on the kitchen table.

“You know,” she slowly began, picking up the soft feather and making her way over to stand by the couch, “I remember the first time I saw your wings. I mean, I had just become an angel, but I remember thinking how beautiful they were.”

Gabriel quirked an eyebrow and leaned back against the couch, one fist propping up his head while a cocky grin played on his lips. He clearly knew what Alex wanted, and so he prompted, “And now?”

“And now?” Alex sank down onto the couch beside him, fingers going to toy with one of his feathers. “Well, after being around so many angels, I’ve come to realize that you must be in a constant state of molt.” She gave a sharp tug, and the feather came out, leaving her to frown
playfully over at the archangel who barely held back an undignified noise at the sudden change. “I’m serious, Gabe. Look at this.” She waved the feather in front of his face, and the archangel batted it away. “You’re like a dog that’s shedding everywhere.”

“I’m not a dog,” Gabriel shot back defensively, a roll of his eyes revealing his lack of amusement at her comment. “And I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He snagged the feather out of her hands and looked down at his wings, almost as if he was contemplating putting the feather back before he gave up and dropped it on the ground. “For your information, I’ve been a bit busy the past few days and haven’t had the time to actually, you know, preen them.”

“You lie like your brother,” Alex ribbed. “Unless by a ‘few days’ you mean a few years.” She ran her fingers through the arches of his wings, teasing out the loose feathers and dirt. She felt the powerful muscles beneath her fingertips twitch at her warm touch, and she looked up into Gabriel’s eyes. “You need to take a day off and just clean the shit out of these, man. Healthy wings means healthy … something, I’m sure.” She ended with a shrug and pulled away, turning her attention to her own wings, black and shiny. Quickly deeming them good enough, she stood and moved back towards the kitchen. “Coffee?”

She knew the archangel was going to accept some offer of a drink. Every time he showed up he sought an excuse to stay longer, and Alex gladly gave him one; he was lonely, she was lonely, and company was a welcome change for both.

“Still got that whiskey from last time?” came the reply, and Alex quirked an eyebrow. A quick glance over her shoulder showed the archangel to be focused on his wings, fingers combing through the bristles, and she quickly turned back to the cupboards lest he notice and stop. Company really was a welcome change.

Sam called in the middle of the night. Alex was startled out of her thoughts by the ringing of her phone, and she scrambled to find it before Ashiel awoke. “What do you want?” she hissed into the receiver as she pulled herself back to her feet, shaking out her wings in frustration. “This better be important. It’s two in the morning.”

“I need your help.” A dark note lined Sam’s voice, dark enough to give the angel pause. “I’m in Enid, Oregon. Dean’s gone. He said he had some ‘personal business’ to take care of, but I don’t trust him.”

Alex rolled her eyes as she sat down on the couch. “If it’s personal business, that means we’re not supposed to get involved,” she reminded tersely. “Dean will be fine on his own.”

“I need your help.” A dark note lined Sam’s voice, dark enough to give the angel pause. “I’m in Enid, Oregon. Dean’s gone. He said he had some ‘personal business’ to take care of, but I don’t trust him.”

Alex rolled her eyes as she sat down on the couch. “If it’s personal business, that means we’re not supposed to get involved,” she reminded tersely. “Dean will be fine on his own.”

“He won’t even tell me who he’s going to see, Pip. We’re in the middle of looking for Kevin and trying to close the gates of Hell, and he just ducks out. And he turned off his GPS. Something’s up. I think he might be in trouble.”

A growl of frustration rumbled in Alex’s chest, but she turned to look back at Ashiel, who lay curled up among the pillows. She snapped her phone closed and got to her feet as she quickly gathered up his things. “Fine,” she muttered to herself. “I’ll watch over Dean. I’m sure he’ll really appreciate it.” She scooped up the sleeping fledgling, who stirred tiredly in her arms, and then her wings carried her after Sam’s soul.

Her grace guided her to him, and she landed in the darkened motel room, lit only by a single lamp on the nightstand. “Fine,” she repeated. “I’ll go after Dean, but you need to babysit.” She set Ashiel down on the empty bed as Sam watched, eyes wide in surprise at her appearance, and she dropped
the duffle bag that contained his things onto the floor. “You said you’d babysit anytime, remember? So put up wardings. I don’t want any demons finding him. He probably doesn’t really need to eat, but if he asks for food, you can feed him. Nothing fried, on a stick, or generally unhealthy, got it?”

“Uh, yeah, I-I guess.” Sam shifted his laptop off of his lap. “I’ll do what I can.”

Alex frowned at his less than enthusiastic promise. “I’m trusting you, Sam Winchester. Now where is Dean?”

“I-I don’t know,” Sam stuttered, gaze focused on the fledging he was now in charge of. “He didn’t say. He, uh, was headed towards I-90.”

Alex turned to kneel in front of Ashiel. “Listen. Mommy has to go away for a while, but Sammy is going to stay with you, okay? I want you to listen to everything he says.” She watched as Ashiel’s small brow furrowed in confusion, and she pressed a quick kiss on his forehead. “I’ll be back very very soon,” she promised. Then her wings carried her into the air.

She found the Impala on the other side of the state. Black feathers brushed her arms as she pulled her wings in tight, plummeting towards the speeding car as the wind whipped in her face. Flying was fun, yes, but something about the drop was exhilarating, and she flared her wings out at the last second, swooping back up to fly alongside the sleek black car. She passed through the metal easily and folded her wings up as she took a seat alongside her friend. “Hello, Dean.”

The Winchester cursed, and the car swerved violently. “Fuck! Don’t do that!” Dean ran a hand through his hair, swearing under his breath once again. “How the hell did you find me, anyways?”

Alex looked over at Dean. “Angel,” she reminded with an emphasizing flick of her wings.

The gesture went unnoticed by the hunter. “Yeah, but Cas carved those wardings into us,” he protested. “They’re suppose to hide us from creeps like you.”

“That ‘kid of mine’ is with Sam.” The angel crossed her arms, lips setting into a tight line. “And I’m here because Sam is worried about you. I’m worried about you,” she emphasized, head turning towards the Winchester. “It’s not like you just to drop everything and run.”

“I’m not running, I — why am I even defending myself to you!” Dean snapped. “It’s none of your damn business. Sam should keep his nose to himself. He took an entire year off; I just need one damn day.”

“We’re just worried.”

“Worried?” Dean scoffed, and the car accelerated harshly. “Like how you were worried when I was in Purgatory? Did you even look for me?”

“I searched the country.”
“Oh, the country. Then what? You just gave up on us and settled down with a kid?” The anger in Dean’s voice was undeniable, and Alex’s temper flared at his insinuation.

“I didn’t give up on you!” she snapped. “I gave up on everything.” She set her jaw, shifting to look out the window, but in the next second she was turning back to him, anger pressing at her chest, burning to get out. “You know what? You have no right to talk to me like this, Dean. Yeah, you were in Purgatory. Whoop dee doo! But you left me after you promised that you wouldn’t. You promised it would be me! Do you know what that did to me? That kid is the only reason I’m still alive! I had the blade against my throat, Dean, and I was seconds away from ending it all.” Her voice cracked, and the angel lowered it to a whisper. “You weren’t the only one who had a bad year.”

Dean didn’t immediately respond, and Alex turned her eyes to the trees flying by. “When we landed in Purgatory, Cas ran,” Dean finally began. “I thought he had been dragged off, but he just . . . ran away.”

“I—I’m sure he had a good reason,” Alex offered as a lame excuse, eyes narrowing in hurt at Dean’s accusation. “It’s not like him to just — to leave you on your own.”

“He was being chased by Leviathans,” Dean explained curtly. “He said he was trying to protect me.”

Alex frowned at the dark undertone in his voice. “You don’t sound very happy about that,” she pointed out, teeth teasing at her bottom lip as she waited for Dean to further insult her mate.

“He left me in Purgatory!” the Winchester snapped. “I prayed, but he didn’t come back, and I had to survive there without him!” When Alex didn’t immediately offer up a response, he added coldly, “That’s where I’m going. I owe this guy my life.”

Silence. “Well. That’s one of the most cryptic things I’ve ever heard,” the angel finally quipped. “You mind explaining that one a bit further, Voynich?”

“No, because it’s none of your damn business.”

Alex sighed, and she pulled her feet up onto the seat as she turned to face Dean. “Alright, let’s get one thing straight, Winchester. I’m not leaving.” She watched as Dean huffed and rolled his eyes, and her voice grew sharp. “Sam asked me to look out for you, so that’s what I’m going to do.”


“I’m being serious, Dean. We both want you to be safe. So either you just accept the fact that I’m coming with, or else I’ll go all Invisible Man on your ass and then you’ll never know if I’m there or not.”

“God that sounds creepy.” Dean wavered, but after a few seconds, he gave in. “Fine. Fine. You can stay … visible. Just stay out of my way, okay?”

“Of course.” Satisfied, Alex turned back so she was facing forward once again. “So. Where are we going and why?”

“Eagle Harbor,” Dean grumbled, and the car accelerated slightly. “We’re going to meet the guy that got me out of Purgatory. His name’s Benny.”

“Wait wait wait.” Alex turned, exhaling sharply in surprise at this revelation. “Benny? There were other humans in Purgatory?”

“Not exactly.”
Eagle Harbor, Washington

They were near the coast before the sun had begun to rise. Alex, true to her word, hadn’t left Dean’s side, but the Winchester hadn’t said a single word about what “not exactly” had meant, no matter how much the young angel had pressed him. Eventually she had just given up, and the rest of the drive had proceeded in silence.

Dean pulled the Impala up to a shipping yard, and as soon as he threw the car into park Alex threw open the door. Her grace pushed outwards to take in what lay ahead, searching for both danger and Dean’s friend. Suddenly, her wings flared out. Four dead bodies, all in pools of blood. One live one. “Dean,” she hissed as the Winchester slammed the car door. “Vampire.”

She thrust down her wings and took off towards the creature, even as she heard Dean yell, “No! Alex, stop!”

She landed on the lower deck of a rusted old cargo ship, her angel blade gripped tightly in her left hand. A low growl rumbled through her chest as the scent of fresh, living blood, and feathers rustled in the small cabin as she crept towards an open metal door.

Inside lay a man, thick set with a strong jaw. Dark eyes glittered warily up at her, and despite the blood staining his button-down, his chin was raised defiantly against the newcomer. “You wouldn’t happen to be here to help?” he asked, his thick southern accent accentuated even more by the scorn in his voice, and a large hand tightened around the bloodied handle of a machete.

“You’re a vampire,” the angel stated calmly, although her eyes carefully watched where his fingers gripped the wooden handle. “I don’t take kindly to your sorts.” She let her wings rustle carelessly as she raised her own chin. “However, I’m willing to make your death painless if you’d just answer me one question.”

The vampire managed a grin at her request. “Depends on the question,” he quipped back.

Alex’s eyes narrowed; his voice hid his pain well, even though she could hear it in every labored breath he took. “I’m looking for someone,” she said simply. “Friend of a hunter. He calls himself Benny.”

To her utmost surprise, the vampire let out a low, throaty laugh. “I’ll be damned. Didn’t know Dean was bringing a friend.” He shifted into a slightly more relaxed position, arms spreading out ever so slightly in a welcoming gesture. “You looking for Benny? You found him.”

“You’re a vampire.” Alex’s wings fell to her side in disbelief. “I . . .”

“And you must be that little angel Dean and that other fellow was always talking about. Or at least that’s what I’d reckon by those wings of yours.” Benny’s head lolled back against the metal wall, and Alex drew her weapon back up into sleeve as she knelt down beside the injured vampire.

“Wings? How -- how do you know I have wings?” she inquired, and caution darkened Alex’s expression. “I . . . that’s not something your kind normally can see.”

The vampire let out a low chuckle. “You’d be surprised what a couple decades in Purgatory can do.” His eyes flickered warily when Alex reached out, and a guarded growl rumbled within his chest. “You mind?”

“Sit still and let me fix you,” the angel snapped. “What the hell happened anyways? You look like
you lost a round with a blender.”

To her surprise, Benny chuckled. “Long story.”

“Yeah, I imagine.” Alex placed a gentle hand over one of the large, bloody cuts as she pushed her grace into the vampire. “How well did you know Cas?” she asked, and her head tipped to one side as she heard Dean yelling for her in the distance.

“Well enough.” Benny grunted as his wounds were stitched back together. “I wouldn’t say we exactly got along.”

“Oh.” Alex pulled her grace back, gaze dropping to the ground. “I just — how did he die? Dean wouldn’t tell me.”

“Die?” A note of scorn rang in the vampire’s tone. “We didn’t see that friend of yours die. He got left behind — although I s’pose that makes him good as dead.”

“Alex!” Dean’s angry voice came from the ladder down into the boat’s hull, and Alex turned her head, echoing back a greeting. Footfalls echoed on the metal stairs, and Dean burst through the door as Benny pulled himself to his feet. The Winchester slid to a stop, eyes going between Alex and the vampire, not sure what to make of it.

“You could have told me he wasn’t human,” Alex finally said, voice both patient and scolding as she rose from the ground. “That would have saved the both of us a lot of trouble.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t think you’d take it so well,” the hunter grumbled back as he eyed the deep, bloody gouges in the vampire’s shirt. “You’re not looking too good, Benny.”

“Up yours,” the vampire quipped back. “Was a hell of a lot worse before she showed.” He gave Alex a small nod, but his gaze didn’t linger long before it turned back to Dean. “That for me?” he asked, motioning to the blue-and-white cooler in the Winchester’s hands.

“Uh, yeah.” Dean held it out, and Alex let her grace push in past the plastic lining as the vampire took it. She frowned at what she found, and her frown deepened as Benny set it on the table and pulled out a bag of human blood.

“Mind telling me where you got that?” she asked, voice tinged with a poorly-disguised accusation. She crossed her arms as Benny turned an eye to her, a thick eyebrow raised as he considered his response.

“Donation truck; I don’t drain people. She’s more short-tempered than I was expecting,” he added to Dean as he brought the IV line in the bag up to his mouth.

“Tell me about it,” Dean agreed, and Alex huffed angrily to see him taking the monster’s side. Her frown deepened even more, but she took it as her cue to fall silent. “Oh, I, uh, brought you this.” Dean held out a small plastic shopping bag, clearly filled with a change of clothes, and Benny grunted, draining the last of the blood from its pouch.

“Thanks, brother.” Without another word he disappeared through a metal door, and Alex watched him go before she turned to Dean.

“Tell me about it?” she growled. “Really? You’re taking his side over mine?” Hurt pulsed through her, hot and sharp like a knife, and her eyebrows turned upwards in childlike distress. “What is that even supposed to mean?”
Dean didn’t seem to understand. “Yeah, well, no offense, but you’ve been a bit pissy recently.” He leaned up against the metal table, crossing his arms. “I’m not taking sides; I was just agreeing.”

“Yeah. With a monster. Since when do you converse with monsters, huh? Two years ago you would have killed him without even blinking, Dean. I just — I don’t mind, really I don’t, it’s just . . . you’re different. And it’s a little uncomfortable, man.”

She was cut short as the door behind her swung open, and her gaze dropped to the ground as Benny stepped out, redressed in a cream henley over a ribbed tank-top. A dark coat hid a pair of suspenders that held up his slacks, and Alex couldn’t help but raise her eyebrows in surprise. An old-fashioned vampire. What were the odds? Dean straightened up, and his arms dropped to his side. “Wow. You look better.”

“Wasn’t much my doing. Wouldn’t mind learning that trick, sister,” he added to Alex, who barely stopped herself from retorting that he, in fact, couldn’t; she thankfully held her tongue — that would have sounded stupid. So she sated herself with a small shrug as the vampire turned back to Dean. “I’ll be one hundred percent before you know it,” he promised as he reached for another bag of blood. “With a little rest and half a cooler of AB negative, most wounds short of an amputation will heal up . . . vampirically speaking.” He put on his dark hat and held out a hand to Dean. “Thank you, brother.”

Dean’s face twisted into a frown as he shook the vampire’s hand. “Benny, what’s going on here?” he demanded.

Benny smiled at his words. “Oh, your work here is done, Dean,” he promised. “You two already saved the day. You know I got my, uh, deal, and you got your — what’d you call it? Family business?”

Dean didn’t budge. “Benny. What’s going on?” he repeated just as firmly.

The vampire sighed and rolled his dark eyes, but his voice didn’t lose its ever-present comradery. “You and that whole ‘friend’ thing, man. Well, it’s good to know you’re still as dumb as ever.”

“Yeah, well some things never change,” Dean retorted. “Now, why you getting into machete fights with your own kind?”

It took a few seconds, but Benny gave in. “Quentin, the one I came for?” he finally said. “We were in the same nest. I’m hunting the vampire that turned me: my maker.”

“Well, now don’t get me wrong,” Dean began. “I’m down with the hunting, but . . . why?”

“Kill him before he kills me . . . again.”

“Again?” Alex echoed, finally speaking up. “You mean this ‘maker’ of yours already killed you?”

“Why else do you think I was in Purgatory?” Benny rebutted amiably, and all Alex could offer up was a shrug, wings fluttering before they settled once again against her back. “Now I get it if you two aren’t up for it, but —”

“Hold up.” Dean held up a hand. “No. We’re definitely in, Benny.” Green eyes flickered over to Alex, almost like they were daring her to protest, but the angel calmly held her ground, nodding in full agreement.

“If Dean’s in I’m in,” she vocalized firmly. “Trust me; you’ll want me there.” She heard a whisper in the back of her mind; Sam’s distant voice, and she hesitated before she let out a long breath. “Dean.”
She waved the hunter over, and Benny spoke in a low voice to the hunter before he slipped out of the ship. Now left alone with the angel, Dean approached. “Sam’s calling,” Alex said quietly. “I’m going to go make sure everything’s okay with him and Ash. I . . . don’t leave, okay? Or if you do, just tell me where you are because I swear to God if you ditch me I’m never letting your ass out of my sight again, got it?”

To her surprise, Dean didn’t even try to offer up a fight. “Yeah, sure thing,” he agreed. “You’re in on this now.” Alex turned to go, but a tight hand on her shoulder stopped her. “Don’t tell Sam,” he warned. “About Benny — about any of this. It’s none of his business.”

The young angel frowned. “He’s going to find out one way or another,” she warned.

“I know.”

“Then okay.” Alex nodded, praying he took her word as promise enough. The second his hand released her shoulder her wings carried her up into the cloudy sky and towards her son.

She landed outside the motel door. Inside she felt the soul of Sam Winchester, and beyond that the agitated grace of Ashiel. It calmed momentarily when Alex brushed against it before it erupted back into distress. “What’s wrong?” A push of her wings had Alex landing between the two motel beds.

“Mama!” The fledgling held out his arms and sniffled, and Alex was quick to scoop him up into her arms, gently rubbing his small back when he pushed his tear-stained face into her neck.

“Hey.” Sam flashed her a quick, nervous smile. “Uh, thanks of coming. I can’t seem to calm him down.”

Alex made a soft, tsking noise as she wrapped her grace comfortingly around the toddler. “I thought I told you to behave, micaelaz,” she chastised gently, and to her surprise, Lucifer’s grace moved forward as well, brushing against the fledgling’s grace in a curious manner, like a wolf examining a new-found pup.

Ashiel cooed softly at the archangel’s cool touch, and Alex slowly drew her grace away. The fledgling sniffed one more time before he pointed towards the ground, an insistent babble making his point clear. Alex obliged.

“How’s Dean?”

Alex looked up at Sam, wings flattening as she contemplated her answer. “He’s fine,” she promised. “We’ll be another day probably, but I’ll keep him safe.”

“What’s going on?”

“Sorry. I’m not allowed to say.” The angel pulled an apologetic face, and her blue-grey eyes flicked over to where Ashiel was pulling himself up onto Sam’s bed. A push of her grace helped him up, and the fledgling crawled over to where Sam sat. “We’re fine, Sam,” she added. “Don’t worry about us.”

It was nightfall by the time Alex returned to Dean and Benny, having spent the afternoon taking care of her son. It was only Dean’s call that they were on the road that drew her back. She was able to track the vampire once she reached Washington, and she landed in the back of the Impala. “Huh.
“Son of a bitch,” Dean cursed, and green eyes locked with hers in the rear view mirror. “A little warning next time.”

“That was my warning,” Alex countered, and she gave the vampire a half-smile in greeting. “Hey, Benny.”

“Hey yourself,” came the low response.

Alex pulled her feet up onto the seat and folded them beneath her. “Alright,” she began, “so where exactly are we going? What did I miss?”

“Prentiss Island,” Dean explained. “That’s where the vampirates are holed up.” He paused, waiting for Alex to speak, and she quickly took the bait.

“Wait wait wait. Vampirates?” The angel leaned forward curiously. “You mean like —”

“Vampire pirates?” Dean finished, a gleam of excitement in his eyes. “Damn straight. Turns out they’ve been overtaking yachts, feeding, and — what was it you said?” He motioned to Benny. “Boarded, burned, —”

“And buried at sea,” Benny chimed in, and Dean nodded, repeating the vampire’s words. Benny turned his large head to look at Alex. “It’s how we fed. Prentiss Island is where my maker is hiding.”

Something about the vampire’s words had Dean snapping his fingers as if something had just occurred to him, and Benny turned his gaze to the hunter. “So,” Dean began, “if you were your maker’s favorite, why did he kill you?”

“When you get turned, its like you’re reborn into a vampire nest,” the Southerner began. “Your maker — he means everything to you.” Alex heard a creak as the vampire reached into the blue cooler that sat between him and Dean, and a frown creased her face as he pulled out another bag of blood. “I mean, you really start believing he’s God,” he continued, unaware of the other’s discomfort. “Now, if your maker happens to believe the same thing, well…” He pulled off the stopper and took a sip through the IV tube.

Alex wrinkled her nose as the scent of chilled blood permeated the car, and Dean turned to watch. “See how that could be a pickle,” he agreed, and the vampire hummed in agreement as he continued to drink. “Well, uh — do you really have to do that?” Dean added with a grimace, motioning to the blood. “I mean, right now?”

The vampire let out a low chuckle, but lowered the bag into his lap. “I’m sorry, brother. I’m better, but still on the mend.”

“Right.”

“Anyways … our father — he was a jealous god.” Benny fell back into his story, and Dean turned back to the road. “He kept the family together but kept us far apart from the rest of the world, always at sea. I always did what was best for the nest… ‘till I met her. Andrea. Andrea Kormos.” Benny’s head tilted so he could look over at Dean. “Beautiful. I mean, words don’t even cut it, you know? Greek heiress.”

Dean looked over at the vampire, a smile playing on his lips. “Come on.”

Benny grinned almost sheepishly, and his gaze fell back into his lap. “She was sailing a forty-two
long sloop to the Canary Islands,” he explained. “Now, I shoulda called in her boat’s destination to my crew, but instead, I joined her on it.”

“Seriously?” The Winchester let out a loud laugh at the cliche scenario. “Was Fabio on the cover of that paperback?”

Alex huffed in light amusement, but Benny’s face remained stoic and serious. “My life changed when she entered it, Dean. Everything I had been or done up to that point just … seemed to vanish into what we had become together. I mean … we found it, man.” He looked over at his friend before he turned his gaze back out the windshield. “Eventually, we settled in Louisiana. And then one night, we were coming home, and the old man — he was just there. Quentin, Sorento, my oldest nestmates. It was only that night I understood what a crime it was to him — me leaving him.” Benny hesitated before concluding, “They pinned me down and beheaded me. Last thing I saw was the old man tearing out Andrea’s throat.”

The last word caught in the vampire’s throat, and Dean waited two long seconds before he looked over at him, his own voice low and quiet. “Well, that’s what payback’s all about — am I right?”

Benny didn’t respond. “Docks are up ahead,” he finally said. “Should be able to find a dinghy we can use.”

“I could fly us across,” Alex offered, but Benny shook his head.

“No offense to you, sister, but I don’t trust you angels.” The vampire’s voice was polite, but it still made Alex’s feathers ruffle disgruntledly. “Nothing personal.”

“I bet not.” Alex shifted backwards in her seat as Dean pulled the Impala down towards the docks. He put the car in park, and all three got out. Alex waited as Dean and Benny circled around to the trunk. Metal clanked against metal as they packed their machetes into Dean’s green duffle bag. Alex took the time to start walking towards the dock, eyes darting over the large speed boats that were tied between the wooden posts. She turned her head to the left as the two men joined her at the edge of the dock. “There.” Benny pointed down below to where a small motor boat was tied to a pier. Alex watched as the two scrambled down there before her own wings carried her down to the sandy beach. Her feet sunk into the sand, and she narrowed her eyes in distaste. Nothing quite like sandy shoes before a hunt.

A hand on her shoulder had Alex turning to see Dean brush past her. Benny was untying the dinghy, and Alex and Dean quickly joined him. “So what’s the plan?” Alex asked as she climbed into the boat.

Dean let out a grunt as he shoved the dinghy into the water, and his feet splashed in the water before he hopped precariously into the boat. Benny reached out to stabilize him. “The old man is mine,” the vampire insisted darkly. “You two are gonna have my back.” He started the motor, and with a rusty hum the boat started towards the island.

Alex nodded. “Sure thing.” She let a minute or two pass, gaze focused on the water beneath, and when no one else spoke she dared to ask, “How many do you think there’s going to be?”

“A lot.” An emotion Alex couldn’t quite place marred the vampire’s expression. “Handful’ll be in the maker’s house, even more will be sleeping in the surrounding cabins.” Blue eyes turned on the angel. “Think you can take care of ‘em all?”

“Yeah, easily.” Alex let her angel blade fall into her hand, and she rested it on her lap, watching as the moonlight glinted off of the sleek, silver metal. “Think you can handle the vamps in the house to
“Start?” she asked Dean, even though the answer was clear.

Dean nodded. “Course.” His gaze turned past Alex’s head, and she glanced over her shoulder at Prentiss Island. Thick, dark trees rose up out of the rock beach, their wood turned silver by the moon, and in between the trunks one could just barely make out the glint of synthetic light. “Think you can handle the others?” he added jokingly.

“Oh please.” Alex turned her attention down to the shimmering, dark water, and she reached out to dip her fingers beneath the waves as her voice filled itself with mock offense. “I’m hurt that you think so little of me. And you,” she added with a finger aimed at the vampire. “You find yourself in trouble, you pray to me, and I’ll help.”

The two fell quiet as Benny killed the motor, and the boat drifted up towards the rocky shore of the island. Dean made his way to the front of the boat, an old coil of rope from the bottom of the dinghy in his hands, and Alex moved back to give him room to maneuver. The Winchester sat himself on the prow, feet hanging off so that when they landed, he could brace himself.

Alex watched as he straightened his legs, stopping the boat from colliding forcefully with the boulders before he jumped off to tie the small motorcraft up. Benny moved to follow him, and Alex slung the duffel bag over her shoulder before she joined them on the island.

She waited until Dean had tied the boat securely to a fallen log before she handed the hunter his bag. “You two know where you’re going?” she asked, her words more directed towards Benny than towards Dean, but both nodded all the same.

“Meet us back at the house when you get done,” Dean added.

Alex nodded and followed the two of them up the rocky shoreline and towards the trees. “How many cabins did you say?” she murmured quietly, grey eyes darting up towards the forest.

“Four, five should be filled,” came the reply. “Depends how many men are out there on boats, I guess.”

Alex grunted in acknowledgment and quickened her pace so she could walk beside Dean. “Better get started then.” She flapped her wings twice before she thrust them down violently, shooting up past the treetops and into the moonlit night. She hovered there, gazing down at the island below. In the middle was a clearing, and a large, bright mansion sat in it, surrounded by a wrought iron fence. Six other cabins were scattered about; four were clumped together just to the right of the clearing, arranged in a loose circle, while the remaining two were several yards off. Alex’s black wings held her in place only a moment longer before they pressed in tight against her back and let her fall.

Wind whipped in her face as she dropped towards the trees, and her grace pushed out. Vampires in the four cabins; the other two were empty. She flared her wings out to slow her descent as she neared the ground, and she rolled through the first cabin’s wall, her speed and grace making the transition painless. She landed on her feet, the rustle of her feathers loud in the dark and heavy silence. All eyes turned to her, and Alex straightened her back under their cold stares, her own eyes narrowing into chips of ice.

“What do you want?” one hissed, surprise flashing in its eyes as his fangs slid down into view.

Alex let her blade fall into her hands. “Take a guess,” she quipped.

To her complete surprise, one of the vampires actually laughed. “You must be that angel hunter,” he sneered. “Thought rumor had it you were retired.” He swiped a hand through his slick, black hair
and sauntered forward from the shadows.

Alex held the creature’s dark gaze. “Well, rumor was right,” she agreed. “But now I’m back in.” She drew Lucifer’s grace up when it stirred in frustration, and she let it swirl through her limbs, taking charge. The air crackled with its presence, and the vampire lunged forward. Alex’s blade was there to meet him, piercing his chest and cutting through his arteries, killing him immediately. She spun out of the way, weapon sliding free with a wet, painful sound. The vampire fell, and the room came alive. Alex let her wings carry her forward; her blade slicing one throat before plunging into a chest. She spun around, leaving her weapon only momentarily to place a hand over another vampire’s forehead. Her other hand muffled the screams as her grace poured into him, and she left the body to crumple to the ground as she retrieved her blade from the vampire’s chest.

One by one they all fell, but it was less than a minute before Alex found herself standing in the middle of the lifeless room. Bodies lay around her, bloody and charred. The angel paid them little attention, boots clicking on the silent wooden floors as she stepped over the corpses to reach the door. One down, four to go.

Alex landed in the foyer of the mansion, head tilting and eyes narrowing as tendrils of her grace stretched out into the house. Two or three dead vampires, seven or eight live ones, one human soul. Very close to a living, breathing vampire that was definitely not Benny. She was there in the next seconds, landing quietly behind the creature. It was stalking Dean, unaware that he himself was being hunted.

“You don’t know him,” Dean hissed from around the corner. “He’s a friend.”

“A friend?” came the indignant and heated response from who could only be Sam Winchester. “You don’t have any — all of your friends are dead.”

“That’s not what I called to talk about!” Dean growled back.

Alex couldn’t help the snort of amusement that forced its way from her throat, and both the vampire and the hunter spun around at the noise. The vampire screamed as Alex’s grace dug its way into his flesh, and the angel reached up to put a hand over his mouth. “Sh sh shhh,” she admonished as the creature died, doing her best to keep the sounds muffled. “Don’t be a sore loser.”

She turned to look at Dean, who had his phone pressed into his chest as he watched her lower the body to the ground. “Dean?” A muffled, concerned voice came from the phone, and Alex tipped her head.

“That Sam?” she asked, strolling over to the hunter. “Give him a kiss for me, huh?” She winked at Dean to let him know she wasn’t being serious before she started leading the way down the hall.

There was a beep as Dean hung up, and then he was walking beside her. “You’re in a surprisingly good mood,” he grumbled, machete swinging at his side.

“Yeah, I guess so.” Alex tipped her head, thinking, before she shrugged. “It’s been a long time since I’ve hunted like this. It’s kind of therapeutic, killing. I feel … good. Energized.” She looked over at the Winchester. “Is that weird? It sounds weird.”

“Not at all.” Dean thumped her on the shoulder and took the lead. His phone rang again, and he answered it. “The hell do you want, Sam?”

“How about an answer?” came Sam’s response, and Dean pulled the screen away from his ear. Alex
watched as he opened up his messenger. “I get the separate-lines thing, but this is a hunting thing, and we need to find that line —”

“Oh my God, stop talking!” Dean brought the phone back up to his ear. “I texted you my 20!”

“Yeah, I got it. I’m on my way —” Sam’s voice was cut off as Dean hung up, and Alex watched as he powered off his phone and shoved it back into his pocket.

“Help me get these vamps into that room,” Dean grumbled, and Alex nodded. She scooped up the head and carried it into what appeared to be a sitting room. She tossed it onto an ornate fabric couch, and her grace tingled uncomfortably. More vampires. She heard a grunt and a struggle, and she ran back out into the room just in time to see a head topple to the floor.

“Nice one.” The angel’s wings fluttered as she quickly searched the rest of the house. “Leave ‘em,” she added when Dean nudged at one of the corpses. “We need to get to Benny. They’re upstairs.” She started down the hall before she drew herself to a complete stop. “Wait wait wait.” She turned back to Dean. “Did Sam say he was coming here?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Son of a bitch.” Alex raised her wings to fly off, but Dean must have sensed it, because then a hand was around her wrist. “Dean.” Alex shook the hunter off. “Sam says he’s coming here. Sam’s also watching my son. So either he’s just going to leave him there, or he’s bringing him here. Into the vampire nest.”

“Seriously? Sam’s not going to leave him,” Dean scoffed. “And we’ll be long done with this before they get here. You know Sam, Pip,” he added when Alex hesitated. “He wouldn’t put anyone in danger.”

“I know, I just …” The angel shifted uncomfortably. “It feels weird leaving him alone for so long.”

“Then let’s finish up this job, huh?” A hand brushed across her shoulder as Dean took the lead. “How’s Benny doing? He still okay?”

Alex stretched out her grace. “He’s upstairs,” she repeated. “Um, apart from him there’s three in the room with him. Two outside the door.” She hesitated, finishing her search. “Three in between you and me. One still downstairs.”

“Go help Benny,” Dean instructed. “I got the rest.”

Alex, however, shook her head. “Benny says he wants to handle them himself,” the angel reminded him. “If he needs me, he’ll pray. I’ll take the two by the door and the one downstairs. You pick up the rest if you can.” Dean’s nod was all the confirmation she needed, and she took off through the house.

She moved towards the basement first, wings curling and extending in graceful ease. Her wingtips brushed against the wooden walls with each stroke as she moved down the hall and dipped down the stairs. The vampire stood around the corner, and Alex let her weapon fall into her hand as she landed in front of him. She didn’t miss the shock across his face, nor the exhilaration that followed because of it, and she lashed out, practice guiding the blade into the vampire’s chest. It died instantly, and then she was on her way.

Her wings carried her up to the third floor. She felt the two vampires guarding the door just around the corner, but the angel held back; she didn’t want to alert those in the room with Benny. Instead, she pursed her lips and let out a short whistle.
She felt the vampires perk up, and after a few seconds one started her way. Alex retreated down the hall, pausing only until the vampire had come into view before she turned the corner. Heavy footfalls signaled his pursuit. Alex led him further away from the door before she spun around, chin raised defiantly as the vampire prowled closer, something dark and malicious sparkling in his blue eyes. “Who do you think you are, girly?” he crowed, pleased at the prey he had cornered.

“I think you know,” the angel quipped, undeterred by his chutzpah. “And doesn’t the answer scare you?” Her angel blade glinted in the moonlight, drawing the vampire’s attention down to it, fangs sliding into view at the threat. He stepped back, but Alex was faster, thrusting her weapon into the creature’s chest. She reached up to grab his shoulder to stabilize her, and she held on for one long second, listening as the vampire convulsed and gasped for air. “I’m your worst nightmare.”

Lucifer’s grace swelled as the vampire grabbed onto her arm, desperately holding on for life, and Alex pushed it forward, burning away the vampire’s last essence. It died with a bloodied scream, the power and force of the archangel’s grace inflicting agony on the creature’s last few moments of life.

Alex pulled away, wings fluttering as she prepared for the second vampire to come charging around the corner any second. It took a few moments, but then it was there. It was dead before it could lay eyes on the angel, its demise too sudden for even a gasp to leave its lips. The angel shook out her feathers, gaze daring over the black and gold feathers to confirm their unmarred condition before she turned and strolled down the hall in search of Dean.

She found him at the bottom of the staircase, bloodied machete gripped in his hand as he stepped over a fallen, headless body. The hunter’s eyes flashed in surprise, and it took him a moment to regain his composure. “Your, uh, your eyes.”

Alex turned to the small, round mirror that hung on the wall, blinking in surprise at the orange light that made her irises glow. “Sorry,” she apologized as she reigned Lucifer’s grace back in under control. The color faded back to their commonplace grey, and she turned back to Dean. “Better?”

“I guess.” Dean blinked, clearly not happy about what he had seen, but more pressing matters were on his mind. “Where’s Benny?”

“Still upstairs.” Alex shrugged. “There was one dead one in there when I left; wasn’t him, so I imagine things are going pretty well. Guess we’ll have to wait and see, though.” She paused. “One more vamp in the foyer. You take her, I’m going to do one more sweep of the island. See if I missed anything.” She patted the Winchester on the shoulder as she stepped away. “You and Benny meet me outside.”

Her search of the island proved to be unsuccessful, and she returned to the asphalt road that led up to the mansion just in time to see the two men step out of the house. She waited patiently for their arrival before asking, “Well? That everyone?”

“Yeah, that’s all,” came the vampire’s quiet response. He led the way back down to the dinghy, Dean close at his heels and Alex following a little further back. She frowned, however, when Benny exchanged looks with Dean as he climbed into the boat.

“Hey, Pip?” Dean seemed to understand the look more than she did, and the angel tipped her head in confusion at his next words. “Meet us back on the shore. I need to talk to Benny for a bit. We’ll be fine,” he added quickly when the angel opened her mouth to protest. “Go.”

Alex took off into the sky, wings slicing through the night air as she grumbled out a “fine.”
spotted a pair of headlights at the dock, and she dropped down beside them, surprised to find Sam Winchester just getting out of the car, a scowl darkening his face as he stared at the Impala. “Hey, Sam.”

The Winchester spun around at her presence, eyes widening just slightly in surprise. “Uh, hey. Where’s Dean?”

“Dinghy.” Alex waved to the water behind her. “They’ll be here in a minute or so.” Her eyes scanned the backseat of the car, and a relieved breath left her lips. “There you are, le micaelaz agi.” She opened the back door and scooped Ashiel into her arms. The fledgling let out a squeal, his grey wings fluttering in excitement to see his mother once again. “I take it Sam took good care of you,” she joked.

Sam rolled his eyes, and Ashiel pointed over at the tall hunter, grunting in agreement with his mother’s statement. “Ab.” He insisted.

“Sh sh sh.” Alex lowered the child’s hands; even though Sam couldn’t understand, Alex knew Ashiel was trying to say Gabriel’s name. “He didn’t cause any trouble, right?”

“No, I, uh — not really. How’d the vampire nest go?”

“No problems on our end. Everything’s taken care of.”

“Okay.” Sam seemed distracted by something in the water, and Alex turned to watch the dinghy pull up to the docks. The Winchester hurried down to greet him, but Alex hung back. She stayed up on the dock, holding her son in her arms as Dean and Benny dismounted the dinghy and approached Sam. The vampire must have noticed Sam’s tense posture, but he held out a large, calloused hand all the same. “I’m Benny,” he said as the taller Winchester shook his hand. “Heard a lot about you, Sam.”

Something must have clicked with Sam, because Alex watched as his free hand went back, fingers tightening on the handle of his knife. She held Ashiel tighter, unsure of what Sam was going to do, until Dean gave a small, almost imperceptible shake of his head.

Sam loosened his grip only slightly, and then Benny withdrew his hand. “I can see the two of you have a lot to talk about.” His words were accompanied with an amiable pat on Dean’s arm, and then the vampire pushed past the two of them and made his way up the docks. Alex watched as the vampire hesitated a few steps beside her, sharp blue eyes flickering down to where Sam and Dean were still staring at each other before coming to rest back on her. “Appreciate the help, sister.”

“Anytime, Benny.” Alex rested one hand on Ashiel’s head when the fledgling cooed in curiosity, and then Benny was gone, disappearing into the shadows.
“So how long are you planning on staying?” Sam looked over at the young angel in the passenger seat, forehead resting against the glass window. They were on their way back into town a few miles away, with Dean already far ahead in the Impala. Ashiel was asleep in Alex’s lap, tightly curled in the worn grey blanket that perfectly matched his wings.

Alex shrugged, turning her head to look at Sam. “I don’t know,” she admitted, fingers brushing through the fledgling’s feathers. “It doesn’t feel right to keep Ash on the road, hunting all the time, but at the same time … it’s not safe for us to stay in one place, you know? God knows what would happen if a demon — if Crowley — got his hands on an angel fledgling.”

“It would be safer to stay with us,” Sam quietly agreed. “Dean and I can help, too, you know.” He turned the car off of the highway, and Alex rested her head against the back of the seat as Ashiel shifted. “We won’t let him get hurt. And we won’t let him get involved.”

“I know.” Alex’s phone dinged, and she looked down at where it lay on her thigh. “It’s Dean,” she announced, unlocking her device and scrolling down to see the whole message. “He says we should keep driving up to Charleston, Arkansas. He wants to put as much distance as possible between us and the vamp nest.” She looked up at Sam, waiting for a response. When one didn’t immediately come, she added, “If you’re not up to driving all night I can tell him that’s not happening.”

Sam firmly shook his head. “No, no, it’s fine. I’m not tired.” He glanced over at the angel, reaching up to brush hair out of his face. “Why don’t you try and grab a few hours?” he suggested after a second or two. “If I need a break, I’ll wake you.”

Alex frowned. “I don’t need to sleep,” she reminded. “I’m an angel. You’re not.”

“Sorry. You just look tired.” Sam shrugged and turned back to the road, leaving the both of them to fall back into their own thoughts.

Alex watched the streetlights pass by, and her fingers stilled in Ashiel’s wings. “Fine,” she finally decided, quietly breaking the growing silence. “I’ll take a nap. But if you even start to get tired, wake me up and I’ll take over. Got it?” When Sam grunted out his agreement she settled further down into the seat, head falling back and wings curling in tightly around her. She focused on her grace, twisting it around Lucifer’s, and it wasn’t long before she fell asleep.

“How’s your day been?” Lucifer was perched at the top of the stairs when Alex opened her eyes. Crimson wings fluttered in a soft greeting, stirring the warm air, before the archangel pulled them tightly against his back. “It felt like you enjoyed it,” he added as he leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “It must have been exciting.”

Alex grinned, but she shrugged in short-lived indifference. “If you call a mass slaughter of a huge vampire nest exciting, then hell yeah. Great day.” The angel bounded up the stairs to sit in front of him, words spilling from her mouth as her excitement grew. “It was so much fun, Luce. I really missed hunting.”
Lucifer chuckled, and his wings curled forward, inviting her to tell more. “Yes. I can tell ,” he agreed, his voice calm and tempered.

Alex quickly brushed her wings against his before they retreated back to curl at her side. “Is that bad?” she queried. “That I found killing all of those vampires fun?”

“No at all.” Lucifer reached out and took her hand, pulling her up the stairs until she sat beside him on the steps. His large crimson wings fluttered back to make room for her, and she settled her own wings against his as he continued. “They’re monsters, le mohaoth. Dangerous, pitiful creatures. You’re making your world safer by killing them.”

“Yeah, for humans, who you hate,” Alex teased.

“And for your sake, I find them tolerable,” came the grumbled response.

Alex laughed at his unwilling admission. “Aww, you’re so sweet.” She pressed a quick kiss on his cheek before she got up and hurried down the stairs. She moved into the living room, Lucifer close on her heels. “I’m back with the Winchesters again, by the way.”

“Hmm.” Arms wrapped around her waist, and the archangel rested his chin on her shoulder. Alex’s wings flattened instinctively, letting him shift closer. “Despicable human beings,” he murmured, but Alex could hear the playfulness in his tone. “But what of that other angel? The one whose grace I’ve been feeling quite a bit of. Now he’s got me curious.”

Alex grinned at the jealousy in his voice. “You can’t possibly be talking about Ashiel, are you?” she teased.

Lucifer’s cold breath brushed past the shell of her ear. “Mm. So Ashiel’s his name.” He hummed again in distaste. “It’s an ugly name. Ugly name for an ugly angel.”

“Ugly?” Alex teasingly pulled her wings back into Lucifer’s chest, but the archangel stubbornly pushed himself closer. “Are you calling my son ugly?”

She felt the archangel freeze, and he pressed a long, lingering kiss on her neck as he gathered his thoughts. “Son?” he finally repeated. “And since when do you have a son? I certainly don’t remember any grace bonding with ours.”

“With mine,” Alex corrected. “And no, it’s not like that. He’s not my son — not really. I kind of … found him.” She turned her head so she could see the archangel’s face. “I’ve been taking care of him for the past year. That’s whose grace you’ve been feeling.”

Lips brushed across her cheek, a soft, barely-there kiss. “A fledgling. I’ll admit, in all of my years I wouldn’t have guessed that one.” He kissed her cheek again, this time more insistently. “Ashiel. What’s he like?”

“Like?” Alex extracted herself from the archangel’s grip and turned around, eyebrows raised. “He’s a two year old, Luce. He’s a winged, whiny, adorable little toddler.” Seeing that the archangel didn’t find her comment amusing, she shrugged, a smile growing across her face. “I’ve been taking care of him for the past year. That’s whose grace you’ve been feeling.”

“I’m sure I would.” Lucifer shifted closer to her, and his crimson wings fluttered as he added, “I wish I could meet him, but …” He motioned to the house around him, leaving Alex to fill in the blank.
It wasn’t hard, and the angel rolled her eyes. “Well, whose fault is it that you ended back up in hell?”

“Hmm, if I remember correctly, it was yours.” Lucifer’s voice was low and teasing, but Alex didn’t miss the dangerous undertone as he backed her up into the wall, hands and wings keeping her close. “You’re the one who lied to me. You’re the one who knew exactly what could happen, yet look what you still did. You landed me back in here.”

The scenery shifted so fast Alex barely had time to blink, and her wings flared wide as the wall melted like hot wax. Fire sprang up all around, flames licking at the black air. The ground beneath her feet was a sandy, red rock, cracked and jagged, and in the distance it rose up into high, fiery mountains. It seemed like an endless cavern, but when Alex tipped her head up all she could see was blackness. “T-This —”

“Yes. This is the Cage. My eternal prison.” Lucifer stepped away from her, and as heat swarmed over her, Alex found herself missing his touch. “Eternally vast, yet eternally small.” He held out his hand, and Alex willingly took it, his skin offering up a comforting chill. “Eons spent in here by myself, with you as my only refuge.”

Alex looked around in awe, eyes narrowed as she tried to peer further into the darkness, but the next second she was back in her living room. She turned back to Lucifer, more than a little disappointed that she hadn’t been able to see more. However, all she said was, “I’m sorry.”

“I know.” Lucifer pushed himself back into her personal space, and her wings fell down as his own crimson feathers wrapped around her. “Maybe now you can appreciate these dreams a little more.”

Alex snorted. “If you want me to come here more often, all you need to do is ask,” she teased. The archangel only hummed in response, moving forward to kiss her. It was playful and just a little rough, and Alex kissed him back for a second or two before she pulled away. “Why is the Cage so big?” she asked. She tried to slip out of the archangel’s grasp, but upon realizing he wasn’t going to let her go, she gave up with a soft breath. When the archangel didn’t answer, she prodded him in the side. “Luce.”

“What?” he grumbled. His wings pulled back, the moment lost, and a frown darkened his face. “Why do you care?”

“Why wouldn’t I care?” the angel countered. “You get to see my home. I want to know more about yours—”

“It’s not my home.” Anger flashed in the archangel gaze, darkening his blue eyes as he cut her off abruptly. “It may be where I am, but it will never be my home.”

Alex blinked in surprise at his sharp tone. “Sorry,” she quickly said, getting her apology out of the way before she returned to her pleading. “But please? Can you take me back?” Lucifer shook his head, once again remaining firm, and Alex crossed her arms with a small pout. “Come on. This is my head, you know.”

Lucifer’s thin lips twisted down into a frown. “Just because this is your head doesn’t mean you’re in charge,” he reminded, tone just barely erring on dangerous. “Not everything is about what you want.”

“Hm.” Alex flicked her wingtip against the archangel’s side before she said, “How does this sound? If you promise to show me more of the Cage next time I dream, we can do anything you want this time.”
The archangel cocked an eyebrow, clearly waiting for a catch. “Anything?” he repeated, teeth flashing in a dark grin as the anger slowly slipped away.

“Anything within reason,” Alex clarified, arms crossed as she stood firm. “Understand?”

Lucifer laughed, wings going out to pin her back against the wall. “You know what?” he asked, and his feathers brushed down her sides. “You are no fun.”

“Yeah, I know.” Alex kept her gaze steady, and she lifted her eyebrow as she awaited his answer, letting a bit of warm humor slip into her voice. “So? Deal or no deal?”

“Deal.”

A knock on the window had Alex jerking awake. Her arms were empty, and she looked around, displaced, before she finally saw Dean Winchester outside the car, a shit-eating grin across his face. “Morning, sunshine,” he joked, and Alex threw open the car door, just barely giving the Winchester enough time to jump out of the way.

“Where’s Ash?” she snapped, looking around the parking lot. They were parked alongside a Fat Mack’s rib joint, and the sun told Alex it was about midday. “Where are they?” she repeated, turning back to Dean.

He was walking back over the Impala, and Alex followed. “Don’t worry, they’re inside,” he promised. “Come on. We’re taking the Impala.” He leaned against the driver’s side door and pulled out his phone, and Alex joined him on the hood of the car. “I might have found us a case, too.”

The young angel opened her mouth, ready to ask what he meant, when two shapes came around the corner of the rib shack. One was tall, the other barely three feet in height. The tall one held a large, white takeout bag and three drinks, while the small one was tightly gripping a tiny red cup. A wide grin broke out across his face when he saw Alex, and she slid off of the hood to meet Sam and her son. “Heads up.” Sam handed Dean one of his drinks before he circled around to the passenger side.

Alex crouched down beside Ashiel, who giggled as he held out his drink. “What’ve you got there?” she teased.

The toddler stated up at her with wide, excited eyes, and when Sam passed, Ash looked up at him with a smile. The red cup in his hands jiggled, and even though a plastic lid was stuck on tight, liquid sloshed out of the hole at the top.

“He was getting restless so I took him with,” the Winchester explained as a small apology. “Figured I should let you sleep.”

Alex stood up and accepted her own drink from Sam. “Thanks,” she said, giving the brother a small smile of appreciation.

“So,” Dean began, drawing the attention back to him, “I, uh, caught wind of a case on the police scanner. Sounds like our kind of thing.” Sam’s face darkened in a frown, and Dean looked over the Impala at his brother, frowning at what he saw. “What?”

“I wasn’t even gone ten minutes,” Sam reminded, disbelief and confusion darkening his face.

“Okay.” Dean glanced over at Alex, unsure as to what his brother meant. “That matters why?”
“I don’t know, Dean. Maybe because you haven’t said a word to me since Prentiss Island?” Sam’s voice rose in frustration. “And now, what? You want me to shut up and act like nothing happened?”

Alex set her and Ashiel’s drink down on the roof the Impala and scooped the fledgling up into her arms, nervous about the argument that was going to go down in front of her son. “Guys…” She shifted her son in her arms and he leaned forward precariously, chubby hands grabbing his small cup of juice.

“You want to talk about Benny?” Dean turned around and rested his forearms on top of the Impala, looking his brother straight in the face. “Fine. Let’s talk.”

“Okay.” Sam mimicked Dean, leaning forward against the car, eyebrows knitted in anger. “How about he’s a **vampire**.”

“He’s also the reason I’m topside and not roasting on a spit in Purgatory. Anything else?”

With a push of her wings, Alex took herself and Ashiel across the parking lot beside a picnic table. “Why don’t we just sit here while they finish talking, huh?” she suggested to her son. She could feel his concern at the Winchester’s argument start to fade as she set him down, and his attention turned back to his juice. “They’ll come find us when they’re done,” she told him, turning her head to look at the two brothers who were still deep in their argument. “Eventually.”

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**November 6th, 2013**

**Kearney, Missouri**

They arrived in Kearney less than five hours later, and Dean was quick to find a motel. “You in or out?” he asked Alex as Sam disappeared into the bathroom, suit in hand. “Crime scene’s just a mile out.” He shrugged off his jacket, and Alex set Ashiel down onto one of the beds.

“Pass.” She sat down beside her son, wings curling around him and drawing him closer. The fledgling let out a small shriek of protest, and Alex let him go. “I’ve got to babysit, remember? You and Sam go and see what you can find. Besides,” she added with a darker undertone, “you and Sam have things you need to work out. Things Ash and I don’t need to be around for.”

Dean just shrugged. “Your call.” He pulled off his t-shirt and tossed it onto the opposite bed before turning back to pull on his white button-down. “Just keep your phone close in case we need you, alright?”

“I *am* an angel, you know.” Alex watched as he buttoned up his shirt as she added, “All you need to do is pray, and I’ll hear.”

“Yeah, but that’s a one-way street. I can’t hear sh— crap.” The hunter carefully eyed the child as he wound his tie around his neck, but the fledgling didn’t even seem to care about his slip up, too busy trying to extract himself from his mother’s grasp. “Just answer the phone.”

“Yeah, sure thing.”

Ashiel slowly climbed off of the bed and hurried over to Dean, blue eyes wide as he stared up at the tall hunter. “S-Sam?” he asked, wings fluttering behind him.

Dean frowned over at Alex before he crouched down in front of the fledgling. “No, I’m Dean. Can you say Dean?” he persisted, and the fledgling tipped his small head, mouth opening and then
closing as if he were deciding whether or not he could talk. “Come on,” Dean encouraged, “say Dean!”

“Bean!” the fledgling finally exclaimed, worked up enough by Dean’s excited persistence to speak. The Winchester grinned proudly, green eyes darting up to meet Alex’s gaze.

“Hey, Ash, can you give Dean a high-five?” Alex asked from the bed, and Ashiel’s face lit up with understanding.

“Come on, Ace. High five.” Dean held up a large hand, and the fledgling slapped his own tiny palm against it, giggling at the sound it made before he tottered away, babbling nonsense to himself as his interest in Dean’s antics was lost.

The bathroom door opened as Sam emerged, and Alex sighed as the two Winchesters left, wings twitching in agitation at the wish that she could go with. Ashiel tugged on her shirt, drawing her attention down to him. “Mama. Cookie.” He pointed upwards to the ceiling, wings flapping as he made his intention clear.

“No, not right now, Ash,” the angel chastised. Then she paused as she considered something. “Maybe we should go get our stuff from our place,” she finally suggested. “How does that sound?”

Ashiel babbled something, the syllables unable to form coherent words, but the look in his eye made it clear he expected his mother to understand.

With a soft roll of her eyes, Alex scooped him up in her arms, then they were off. They quickly landed back in their motel in Minnesota, and Alex set her son down. He repeated his command, and Alex didn’t bother to argue as she retrieved a small, plastic pouch of applesauce. “Here. Be careful,” she instructed as she handed him his food.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” With the fledgling now distracted, Alex set about packing up what they would need. Their clothes, Ashiel’s favorite toys and blanket. Just enough to suffice and nothing more. She had just zipped up the packed bag when a flutter of wings made her jump. She spun around to see Ezekiel standing there, and a sharp breath of relief left her lungs. “You scared me.”

Ashiel let out a shriek of excitement and ran up to the seraph, the almost empty container of applesauce falling to the ground. Ezekiel greeted him with a flick of his wings, and Ashiel giggled as the long feathers brushed his stomach. “Going somewhere?” he asked, motioning towards the duffle bag.

“Back with the Winchesters.” Alex shifted so they lay out of the seraph’s view. “What brings you around?”

“I found a potential family for Ashiel.” Ezekiel watched as the fledgling perked up at his name, and the seraph moved closer, lowering his voice. “Eremiel and Laura. They’re both good angels, and I know Eremiel quite well.”

“Oh. That’s … that’s good, I guess.” Alex couldn’t help the tightness in her chest at those words, and she reached out with her grace to draw the fledgling near.

Ezekiel saw and understood. “If you don’t want to give him up …” he began, but Alex quickly shook her head.

“No no no.” She placed a gentle hand on Ashiel’s head and took a deep breath. “I don’t want to, but
it’s for the best. It isn’t safe for him down here. It — it isn’t right, him living like this.” She looked up at the seraph, eyes burning slightly as she added, “So when …”

“Not today.” Ezekiel’s grey wings twitched, and he shrugged. “If you want to meet them first, I understand, and we can arrange that. But they said they wouldn’t be ready to take him until sometime next week.”

“Oh.” At those words, some of the tightness was relieved. “Okay, yeah, I think we should meet them first.” Alex corralled Ashiel back towards her, a hand on his shoulder to keep him close.

The seraph nodded. “Very well. I’ll speak with the two of them and return in the next few days.” His eyes fell on the bags behind Alex. “I take it you won’t be here, though.”

“Kearney, Missouri.”

Ezekiel dipped his head. “Then I’ll see you soon.” Grey wings flashed, and he took off into the sky. Alex watched him go in silence, and once she had gathered up their things, she did the same.

Alex’s phone ran not long after they had returned to the motel. She answered it, curious as to what Dean had to say about the case. “Dean. What’s up?”

“Hungry?” came the response. “Meet us at the Corner Bar. And, uh, there’s an old friend of yours who wants to meet you.” There was a grin hidden behind his cryptic words, and before Alex could utter a word the Winchester added, “Oh, and bring the kid.”

“Oh.” Alex looked over at Ashiel, who was too busy throwing his blocks against the thinly carpeted floor to pay her any attention. “I guess we’ll be right there.”

“Great. We’re there already.”

“Sounds good. See you in five.” Alex hung up the phone and turned to Ashiel. “Hey, buddy, you hungry for dinner?” The fledgling’s eyes lit up, and in four seconds Alex had grabbed her phone, her bag of toys, and her son. The next second they were standing beside Dean Winchester in the Corner Bar. “Hey.”

Dean jumped in surprise. “Dammit,” he instinctively cursed under his breath, startled at their proximity. “You weren’t joking about being here in five.”

“Not at all.” Alex’s gaze slid over the Winchesters and came to rest on the thin, lanky hunter standing at Sam’s side. Momentary confusion pulsed through her, followed immediately by warm familiarity. “Garth?”

“Alex!” A wide, lopsided grin broke out across Garth’s face, and Alex barely had time to set Ashiel down before she was pulled into a tight hug. “It’s good to see you! Last I heard you were AWOL.”

“Well, I’m back now.” Alex extracted herself from the hunter’s grip to see Ashiel’s hand in Dean’s, blue eyes wide at the sight of the stranger.

“And who’s this little guy?” Garth knelt down in front of the fledgling, and Ashiel hid behind Dean’s leg, wary of the over-excited stranger.

Alex nudged him out with her dark wings. “His name is Ashiel,” she introduced, and the fledgling looked up at his mother at the sound of his name. “He’s my son — well, adopted. It’s why I’ve been
gone for so long.”

“Aw. Hey there, little guy.” Garth grinned at the child. “My name’s Garth.”

“Bean.” Unable to get to his mother without going past Garth, Ashiel tugged on Dean’s pant leg, arms upraised.

Dean understood, and he pulled the fledgling up into his arms. “Come on, Ace, why don’t we go grab ourselves a table, huh?” he asked the child as he carried him off towards the hostess, leaving the other three to follow.

“Bean,” Ashiel agreed, reaching up to tug on Dean’s ear, and his wings flapped in excitement as he caught sight of the flashing neon signs above the bar.

“It’s Dean,” the Winchester corrected, but the fledgling remained firmly distracted by the bright lights. “Hey.” Dean turned his attention to the blonde hostess with a grin. “Uh, can we get a table for four? And a highchair if you have one.” He shifted Ashiel to his other arm, and Alex paused at Dean’s side, reaching up to take her son back.

“Of course. Right this way.”

Alex fell in step behind Sam and Dean as they were led over to a table in the corner. Sam and Dean slid into the two chairs on one side, leaving Alex to sit down next to Garth. She held Ashiel in her lap, patiently waiting for the hostess to bring back one of the wooden highchairs in the corner. “Hey, little man.” Garth leaned close to Ashiel, and the fledgling turned his wide eyes over to the hunter. “How are you doing?”

“No, Ash, he’s a human.” Alex put a finger over her lips as she lowered her voice. “See? He doesn’t have any wings. Can you say human?”

“Hooma.” Ashiel put his own fingers over Alex’s lips, mimicking her action, and Alex blew a soft breath over it as the fledgling giggled. She lifted him up off of her lap as the hostess set the highchair down at her side, and she quickly situated her child in its straps. Ashiel frowned, not fond of his new bonds, but was quickly distracted by a chain of brightly colored, plastic rings that Alex pulled out of her pocket.

“So,” she began as Ashiel became enraptured by his new toy, “how have you been the past year or so? Everything been going okay?”

Garth shrugged, attention still half-focused on the toddler. “Things have been okay,” he started. “I mean, after Bobby died, it was chaos —”

Dean cut in. “Garth is the new Bobby,” he explained, not bothering to keep the blunt disregard out of his voice.

“Hey, somebody had to do his job,” the lanky hunter shot back. “And a lot of folks thought it was gonna be you,” he added to Alex. “I mean, you were his numero uno, you know? He showed you the ropes more than anybody else. And then you … you were just gone.”

Alex dropped her gaze, unable to help the sharp pang of guilt that reverberated within her chest. She hesitated, half prepared to offer up an excuse, but the clatter of toys on the bar floor was all the explanation she needed. The angel turned away, ducking down to pick up her son’s fallen rings.
That guilt melted into sullen anger as her fingers closed around the toy, and her eyes narrowed in a glare. Why should Garth think it was her responsibility? What Bobby had done -- that wasn't her job, her life. Why did so many people think they had the right to tell her what to do with her life?

The arrival of their waitress offered some relief to the tension. Dean, Alex, and Garth all ordered burgers; Sam got a chicken salad, and Alex ordered chicken tenders for Ashiel. The waitress nodded and hurried away, and Alex spoke quickly to change the conversation. “So, what’s up with this case?” she asked the three hunters. “There anything here?”

Dean nodded, but before he could speak Garth cut in. “Oh, this is definitely our thing. Found ecto at the scene, but I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Alex looked over at Dean, eyebrows raised, and he took over the explanation. “Looks like Mrs. Lew came home while her hubby was working under the car. Cops are saying she kicked out the jack and drove the car out of the garage. Took off half his head, and by the looks of it his back was shredded. Oh, and, uh, the coroner said he found the word ‘Alcott’ carved into his chest.”

“With her fingernails,” Garth added. “We talked to her, but she doesn’t remember anything. Just a lot of rage that suddenly came and went. Oh, and it turns out Alcott is another woman; one Chester took to prom thirty seven years ago instead of her.”

Alex blinked, slowly putting the pieces together, but was distracted when Ashiel let out a loud screech and flung his toy back onto the ground. She was quick to bend over and return it to his willing hands before she asked, “Okay, so this is all sort of pointing towards ghost possession. Maybe playing on an ill-harbored grudge?”

“Mama. Mama.” Ashiel pointed towards the brightly colored bar lights, and Alex frowned. “Sorry,” she apologized, moving to stand up. “I’m going to take him over there so he can look at the lights. Gotta keep him busy and all.”

To her surprise, Dean pushed back his chair. “I’ll take him,” he volunteered, scooping up the fledgling. “You guys catch up.” He carried him over to the lights, his voice animated as he pointed out the different colors. Alex watched him go, pleasant surprise passing through her at his eagerness to spend time with her child.

“You know,” she heard Sam say to her, “I think Dean’s got a pretty big soft spot for him.”

Satisfied Dean was doing a good enough job, Alex turned back to Sam and Garth. “You don’t say,” she teased before she turned to the hunter across from her. “How have you been?” she began politely, shifting closer to Garth as the waitress brought out their drinks. She glanced over her shoulder to see Dean and the hostess engaged in conversation. The blonde was smiling down at Ashiel, and Dean wore a similar grin. He glanced over at Alex, and their eyes met. The Winchester winked, flashing her a quick thumbs up, and Alex rolled her eyes as she turned back to the hunters.

Garth set down his glass, and, seeing that he had Alex’s attention once again, said, “Well, apart from the whole world going to hell, it’s been okay.”

The angel barely held back an amused snort. “Seriously? The world’s the safest it’s been in years,” she joked with a look over at Sam. The faint rise and fall of the Winchester’s eyebrows confirmed that he felt the same way.

However, Garth didn’t back down. “Hey, man, it’s chaos out there,” he defended. “I mean, I’ve got people floundering out there without Bobby.”
“And so you filled that hole,” Alex finished.

“No one else stepped up, so yeah.” Garth gave a big shrug, his thin shoulders rising and dropping back into place. “I mean, other than you, I guess I was the best qualified for the job. I mean, I spent some time with Bobby.”

Alex nodded, remembering how Garth had often stopped by and spent the day at Bobby’s. “Yeah,” she admitted. “I guess.” The arrival of their food put a pause in their conversation, and the return of Dean and Ash ended it.

“So, Dean, give me the skinny.” Garth spoke up as their meal was winding down, words muffled by the last of his food, and he paused to swallow. “Where were you this past year?”

Dean shook his head. “Why don’t we save what I did on my summer vacation for another time?” he suggested, taking a large bite of his burger to prevent any more questions.

It didn’t work. “Aw, come on,” the skinny hunter persisted, amusement glittering in his eyes.

Dean looked over at Alex, who shrugged, and he reluctantly set down his food. “Alright,” he caved. “I was in Purgatory.”

Garth stopped chewing. “Wait, like, Purgatory Purgatory?”

Dean blinked in confusion, surprised the hunter needed clarification. “No, the one in Miami.”

A large grin broke out across Garth’s face. “Man, that is balls,” he agreed, wiping his mouth with a napkin before his grin widened even more.

Alex and Sam exchanged looks, confusion passing between the two of them. The gay bar? she mouthed, and Sam gave an exasperated roll of his eyes. Dean somehow managed to look even more impatient and exasperated with the hunter. “That’s not how you say balls.”

Ashiel let out a frustrated noise, and Alex immediately turned her attention to him. She handed him another small portion of his chicken, watching as the fledgling eagerly reached out to take it. He shoved it into his mouth, a smile across his face now that he was occupied, and Alex turned back to see that Garth had completely disregarded Dean’s comment. “So how’d you get out?” he asked instead.

“Mama!” Ashiel pointed out the window towards a passing car, wings flapping excitedly as light flashed off of its side. He turned back to Alex, small hands opening and closing as he declared, “All gone.”

“Are you done eating?” Alex quickly excused herself from the table and stood up, pulling Ashiel up into her arms. The fledgling pointed to the ground, clearly wanting to stretch his legs, and Alex looked back at the table of hunters. “I think we’re going to have to go for a quick walk,” she apologized. She watched as Dean opened his mouth, but quickly cut him off. “Don’t worry, I got this. Call me if you guys leave, okay?” With that, she set Ashiel down and let him lead her away.

He immediately headed towards the door, and Alex took his hand as they stepped out into the bright sun. The fledgling started down the sidewalk, jumping from crack to crack, and Alex matched his pace, dark wings carefully herding him around the occasional passerby. Suddenly Ashiel rushed forward, grey wings flapping in joy as he peered into the window of a toy store. “Sam!” he declared as he pointed towards a huge stuffed giraffe perched in the corner.
Alex laughed at the child’s exclamation, and her wings brushed over his back. “That’s not Sam,” she teased. “That’s a giraffe, micaelaz. Sam is obviously a moose.” She scooped Ashiel up into her arms, and the fledgling threw his arms around her neck, blue eyes wide in pleading as he pointed towards the store. “You want to go in?” Alex deduced. “I don’t know, buddy. You have enough toys as it is —”

“Your mother’s no fun.”

Gabriel’s voice had Alex spinning around in confusion, and in the next second she was shoving Gabriel into the toy store, wings flared out in alarm. “What are you doing here?” she hissed, nudging him away from the window and out of sight. “The Winchesters are literally twenty feet away.”

To her utter annoyance, the archangel just rolled his eyes. “You’re back with Rocky and Bullwinkle? Really, Z.”

Ashiel let out a small squeal of delight at the sight of Gabriel, and Alex handed him over with a roll of her eyes. “Z?” the fledgling mimicked the one syllable word, one hand going out towards the archangel’s wings. “Anja,” he added when Gabriel brought his wing closer for the fledgling to touch.

“That’s right. Her name’s Z because she snores,” Gabriel teased, setting the fledgling down to see that Alex’s arms were crossed. “What?”

“I do not snore,” Alex retorted good-naturedly. “and how would you even know that? Creep.” Before Gabriel could make some sort of witty response, she unfolded her arms and let her wings relax. “Seriously, though, Gabe. What are you doing here? The Winchesters think you’re dead.”

“And they will for years to come,” the archangel promised with playful finesse. “And I wouldn’t have had to come if you had told me you were moving.” Seriousness crept into his voice, and the teasing light in the archangel’s gaze died. “I stopped by your place just now. When’s the last time you were there?”

“Just this morning.” Alex’s eyes narrowed in confusion. “Why?”

“The place was ransacked. Looks like some demons picked up your trail there and tore the place apart.” Gabriel stepped forward, the lines on his face denoting the utmost concern. “You must have just missed them, but they were looking for you. And for him, no doubt.” Golden feathers shone with reflected light as his wings flicked towards the fledgling, who was now occupied with a wooden train set in the middle of the room. “You think …”

“I don’t know.” Alex felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up at the implication. “Sounds like something Crowley would do, but I don’t know how he would even know.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out her cellphone, staring down at the black screen. “I didn’t say anything to him last I saw him, and that’s the only time we’ve talked in the past year.” She looked up at Gabriel. “Could just be a group of demons, you know. They might not even know...” She trailed off, unable to believe her own words.

“Hard to say.” Gabriel shrugged, eyes going back to the fledgling. “Keep a close eye on him. I’ll take care of any demons within a few miles of here, but I just wanted you to know.”

“Yeah. Thanks for telling me, Gabe.”

“Course.” Gabriel’s golden wings fell out to his sides and he took off into the sky just as the bells on the door announced the arrival of visitors. The next second, Sam and Dean stepped into view.

“Uh, h-hey, guys.” Alex blinked in surprise at their sudden arrival, and she swallowed to cover it up.
She looked behind the two brothers as she asked, “Where’s Garth?”

“Waiting outside. We got a call from the chief.” Dean walked over and picked Ashiel up, who protested as his trains were left on the ground. “The son of Mary Lew totally beat a man’s brains out down at the local Gas ‘N Sip. You should come down and check it out. You know, see what you can see, huh?”

Alex hesitated, Gabriel’s warning still quite fresh. “It might be a little suspicious to have four FBI agents in town,” she began. “Besides, I have something I need to do.”

She left her statement intentionally vague so the Winchesters would hopefully know better than to ask questions; they seemed to catch on. “Suit yourself.” Dean set Ashiel down in front of her with a shrug of his broad shoulders. “If you need us, you know where we’ll be.”

“Yeah, okay. We’ll meet you back at the motel.” Alex scooped the fledgling up into her arms and her wings carried them back to the safety of the motel. The angel dug Bobby’s journal out of the bag and dropped down onto one of the beds while Ashiel hurried over his bag of toys. Satisfied he was occupied, she flipped through the old pages. There were demon warding in here somewhere. Powerful ones.

It took a while, but Alex was able to put up strong enough wardings to hide the fledgling within the motel room. “Well, as long as you’re here you’re safe,” she murmured, ruffling Ashiel’s thin hair as she walked back to the bed. “You stay here. I’m going to go check out our old place and see what those demons did.”

A quick prayer to Ezekiel made sure Ashiel wouldn’t be left completely on his own, and then she was standing in front of the motel in Minnesota. Her feathers prickled as she stared at the broken green door, and her nose wrinkled at the stench of sulphur. Gabriel hadn’t been lying. The room inside was a mess; chairs were overturned and the possessions Alex had left behind were strewn about. “Ay caramba.” Alex righted the wooden table with a deep-set frown. “A bit sloppy, even for demons.”

“They’re demons, love. What did you expect?”

Alex jumped at Crowley’s voice, and she turned to see the demon leaning against the doorframe. “Wow,” she joked dryly. “I’m running into all of my old friends today.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” the demon quipped back. “What brings you here, Mouse?”

Alex folded her arms across her chest and fixed him with a cold stare. “I could ask you the same thing.”

“Hmm.” A smile flitted across Crowley’s face, amused by her tongue. “Touché.” He sauntered forward, and Alex let her wings rise as he stopped in front of her, head held high as she matched his height. The demon undoubtedly found her actions amusing, but the only outward reaction was the faint upward quirk of his lips. “I’m looking for someone,” he finally explained. “There’s rumors of a fledgling living here. Rare little creature. Thought I’d check it out.”

“You call this ‘checking it out?’” Alex turned away and picked up one of the chairs that had been violently knocked over, and hot, pulsing anger surged through her. “Your minions practically destroyed the place!”

“They get a bit overeager, yes,” the king admitted, but his voice was lined with an overall sense of
disinterest at her plight. “They were looking for the child.”

“In the dresser?”

Her exclamation managed to elicit an amused snort from the king of hell. “They’re not clever,” he agreed, looking about the room before adding, “I believe it’s your turn to tell why you’re here.”

Alex ignored him. “Don’t you have something better to be doing instead of chasing after a kid?” she challenged, wings flicking in despise. “I mean, aren’t you still trying to track down the prophet you lost?”

“Kevin. That little prat has managed to hide himself.” Crowley’s accent grew thick as his voice rose in scorn, but he managed to recollect himself before he added, “However, I do have a plan.”

“And let me guess. It involves the fledgling.” When she didn’t receive a verbal answer, the angel frowned, and her wings flared out angrily, dark feathers filling the air. “And what’s your plan? You gonna torture a child?”

“I prefer the term ‘cooperating with one hundred nuclear reactors still untainted by heaven’s grimy touch,’” the demon quipped back, a hint of amusement across his face.

“Tell me what you want with the kid.”

Crowley raised an eyebrow, but still refused to answer. “And you’re here … why?” he finally persisted. “I imagine you’re acquainted with the little angel, by the looks of it. Friend of yours?”

Alex crossed her arms, eyes narrowing into chips of grey ice. “Son, actually.” Her grace flashed through the air, twisting and coiling in anger, and she didn’t miss the look of surprise that flashed across the demon’s face, gone as quickly as it had appeared. “His name’s Ashiel.”

“Son?” The demon leaned forward, interest gleaming in his dark eyes. “Who’s the lucky man? Didn’t take you long to move on from … what’s his name again? I forget.” He turned to the cupboards behind him, pausing in thought.

“Top shelf. Glasses to the left.” Alex watched as he pulled down a bottle of whiskey, and, after rolling her eyes at his disgusted huff at the quality, added, “And he’s not actually my son. I found him, and I raised him because no one else would.” She let Lucifer’s grace flicker angrily towards the demon, and she stalked forward, lips pursed and fists clenched, wings stretching high in intimidation.

“And if you so much as touch him I swear to God I will bring Lucifer up myself to deal with you.”

She didn’t miss the hesitancy in his voice, or the fear that darted through his eyes, and it took him a second before he finally said, “Somehow I don’t doubt that, sweetheart. You’re just looking for a way to bring him back, aren’t you?” The demon set the glass down before Alex could respond. “Whatever. Point is, you seem a little unstable, and I believe that you’d follow through with that threat.”

“Just get out of here before I kill you!” Lightning flashed, and Crowley disappeared, leaving Alex standing alone in the ruin of her motel. She ran her hands down her face, drawing in a deep breath to calm the twitching of her wings and the tremble in her limbs. Thirteen months, and now the demon had finally caught on to them.

When she returned to the motel, Ezekiel was gone, but Dean and Garth were there. They were both sitting at the table, one across from the other, Garth’s head buried in an old journal and Dean’s eyes
barely focused on the laptop screen in front of him.

Ashiel was the first to notice her return, hurrying over to her with a large grin. “Mama.”

“Hey, buddy.” Alex scooped him up into her arms upon his insistence, attention turning back to the two hunters. “Hey, guys. What’s new? Anything at the crime scene worth mentioning?”

“Yeah.” Dean pulled his beer closer to him and took a long swig. “Definitely ghost possession. Security footage only showed lines over his face. Also the word ‘Sussex’ written in blood.”

“Oh, yeah. Sort of like, uh, what was it? ‘Alcott’?” When Dean nodded she set Ashiel down. “Awesome. Definitely sounds spirit-ish. Now what are we doing?”

Dean opened his mouth to answer, but at that moment Garth decided to put down the journal and reach for the unopened beer that sat between them. Dean quickly pulled a hand over the bottle, stopping the hunter in his tracks. “Easy there, flyweight,” he warned. “Last time you drank a beer, I had to pick you up off the floor.” He pulled the bottle out of Garth’s hands and put it down on the table.

Alex snorted in amusement, and Garth rolled his eyes. “You’re such an idjit,” he laughed humorously.

Dean stared at the hunter, not sure if he was being serious or not, but when Garth’s smile didn’t fade, he frowned. “Idjits suppose to be used angrily,” he finally said, voice tight and clipped. “Okay? Not happy. If you’re going to butcher it, don’t say it at all.” He brought the glass lip of the bottle up to his mouth and took a drink, gaze falling back down to his screen.

Garth’s eyes narrowed slightly in hurt, but he didn’t protest. “Whoa then. Okay.” After a second he added, “N-None of my business, but … this have anything to do with you and … Sam?”

“Garth —” Alex began.

“No, you’re right.” Dean set his drink down, refusing to make any form of eye contact as he pointedly read the article on his computer. “It’s none of your business.”

“Okay, it just seems you guys are a little tense around each other.”

“We’re fine.” Dean looked up, a smile on his lips but a warning clear in his tone. “Can we get back to work?” He waited until Garth gave a small word of consent before he looked back down at his screen, but Alex could see the tightness in his shoulders as he hunched over.

“All right,” Garth agreed. “Just, uh — just letting you know that I’m here for you, for anything.” He looked down at his journal, and Alex backed away, sitting back down on one of the motel beds just as Garth decided to open up his mouth once again. “I know sometimes Bobby, he would —”

“You’re not Bobby!” Dean slammed his beer bottle down onto the table with a loud thud, and Alex jumped at his sudden outburst. “Okay? You’re never going to be Bobby, so stop!”

Alex watched as Garth looked away, a slight tremble in his jaw, and she spun around to face him. “Dean!” she snapped, wings flaring out at his insensitivity.

“Well he’s not!” the Winchester retorted, green eyes flashing with irritation laced with pain. “He’s not Bobby, Pip, and he’s never going to be!”

Alex didn’t protest, and the room fell silent, leaving the angel and the hunter locked in a cold stare. It
was only Garth that shattered the cold tension. “Bobby belonged to all of us, Dean,” he began, voice strong even though his jaw trembled with pain and grief. “Not just you and Sam. Now I’m just taking what he showed me and trying to do something with it. That’s all!”

Dean stared at Garth, clearly contemplating responding, and Alex took the silence as opportunity to step in. “Dean?” she asked, voice soft but leaving no room for argument. “I think Ashiel left his stuffed moose in the Impala. Can you go get it?” She met Dean’s gaze, silently communicating what her real intentions were, and thankfully the hunter nodded.

“Yeah, sure.” He pushed back his chair and looked over at the fledgling. “Come on, Ace.” He held out his hand to the child, who slowly approached, a little cautious of his earlier outburst, but with a nudge from his mother’s wings, followed the hunter out the door.

Garth didn't meet her gaze, and Alex let her wings fall in close to her side with a sigh. “Hey, man,” she began, sliding into a chair across from him. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m fine.” Garth still didn’t look up from his journal, and Alex rested her elbows on the table, closing Dean’s laptop so she could look at him. Her silence prompted him to speak, and he Shakily began. “It’s just … Bobby was the best hunter I knew. He’s the one who was always there for anyone who needed it and all I want to do is remember that.”

“I know.” The angel curled her wings forward, an invisible offer of comfort, and she waited several seconds before she once again spoke. “Bobby was … like my father, and it’s been hard living without him. Sam and Dean — they’re still really hurting, and as good as your intentions are, you’re just hurting them even more.” She held a finger up to her lips when Garth looked up, ready to protest, and when his mouth closed, she added, “You’re doing a good job, Garth, filling his shoes and helping other hunters, but when you try to act like him …” She looked away and ran a quick hand through her blonde hair. “Dean’s lashing out because he’s hurt,” she finally admitted. “He didn’t mean to yell at you like that.”

“I just wanted to help.”

“I know. And I appreciate it, it’s just … complicated right now.”

The door opened and Dean came back through with Ashiel trailing behind him, happily hugging his toy moose. Alex stood up so Dean could take his spot back, and he sat back down with a soft thump. “I’m back,” he started, opening his laptop and pulling up the most recent of his tabs, “and I think I’ve figured out what this ‘Sussex’ is.”

“Who?” Garth held his head high, and Alex let her shoulders relax as the two fell back into working on the case.

“Not who. What. It’s a business that went belly-up about a year ago. Look at this.” He turned the laptop so Alex and Garth could see the article as he explained, “So the guy that Scott brained? His old business partner — ran the company into the ground.”

“Okay, so revenge again.” Alex sat down in a chair as Dean nodded.

“Looks like,” he agreed just as his phone buzzed. He answered and set the phone onto the table. “You’re on speaker,” he told the person on the other line.

Sam’s voice came through loud and clear. “Sarah Alcott’s clean,” he announced, “if you look past the fact that she and Chester knocked boots on prom night back in the day.”

“Okay, so … Mary has a grudge against Sarah, and Scott has a grudge against Jeff.” Dean’s gaze
flickered between Alex and the phone as he added, “Besides the fact that it’s making my head hurt, how does this add up to ghost?”

“Are we sure it’s a ghost?” Alex asked, leaning forward to get closer to the phone.

Dean nodded. “We found ecto. I mean, it was weird and green, but Garth said it was ecto.” The lanky hunter nodded, but Alex paused, frowning at his words. Dean blinked. “What?”

“You said it was green?”

“Yeah.”

“I know what we’re dealing with.” Alex leaned closer to Garth and flipped through a few pages of Bobby’s journal. “It’s a ghost, kind of.” She pointed to the top of a page. “It’s a spectre.”

“Green goo equals spectre,” Garth confirmed, paraphrasing the first sentence before he looked up. “That’s got to be it.”

Seeing the blank look on Dean’s face, Alex expounded. “Spectres — well they’re ghosts — souls of dead folk with unfinished business and all — but they are nasty. Bobby and I tracked one down when I was just starting out hunting. They’re sort of an avenging-type with a bad attitude and a freaking ton of power. I mean, they can easily possess anyone who even touches whatever it is they’re attached to, and they don’t stop until they’re done.”

“How do we stop one?” Dean asked, while Sam added, “You never told me you hunted a spectre.”

“Saving that story for a rainy day,” the angel joked with a small grin. “It’s a good one, though. Ask me some other time.”

“Same way you stop a ghost,” Garth read at the same time, choosing to answer Dean’s question. “Salt and burn whatever they’re holding on to. Oh, and it says that, uh, the last spectre he encountered rose shortly after someone desecrated a nearby grave, which …” He pulled Dean’s laptop closer and pulled up the Federal Criminal Database that Dean had been searching through earlier. Alex watched as he typed something in before he paused. “Oh. This could get awkward.”

“What?” Dean asked, and Alex leaned closer to the lanky hunter to see what had appeared.

“The tomb of the Unknown Soldier?” she read. “Isn’t that in Virginia?”

“Arlington,” Sam agreed, and Alex echoed him with a nod. “Yeah, that could be a problem,” the Winchester on the phone continued. “Uh, should I just meet you back at the motel?”

“Yes, good idea.” Dean hung up and shoved his phone back into his pocket. Garth pushed the computer back towards Dean, and he turned it around so he could see the screen. “So this means we have to go in and burn the bones of a Confederate soldier, right? Great. That’ll go over real well in this town.”

“You guys going to go tonight?” the angel inquired. She turned her head when there was an insistent tugging on her wings. “Best to get this over with before it happens again,” she added animatedly while looking down at Ashiel. “These types of ghosts like to strike hard and fast, don’t they, buddy?”

Ashiel let out a sound of affirmation and walked over to Dean. “Bean up,” he insisted, stretching out his arms towards the hunter. “Up.”
“He really likes being picked up,” Alex joked when Dean looked over at her, and the Winchester shifted back the chair and pulled the fledgling into his lap. “Almost as much as he likes flying.” Ashiel immediately tried to stand, chubby hands reaching for the keyboard on Dean’s laptop, and his wings flapped as he tried to push himself closer.

Dean slid the computer out of his reach, and the child whined in protest, struggling against the hunter’s grip to reach it. “No way, Ace.” Dean held the fledgling still. “That’s not for you.”

“Maybe it’s time for bed,” Alex suggested when Ashiel’s bottom lip quivered. “It’s almost 8:30, right, buddy?” She got to her feet, and Dean put Ashiel down onto the ground. “Let’s go put our pjs on.” She took the fledgling’s hand and lead him over to the far bed. Ashiel followed obediently, babbling to himself about something Alex couldn’t understand. He kept talking even as Alex helped him change into his green and white dinosaur pajamas, although he paused momentarily when his shirt was pulled over his head.

“Pip.” Chair legs squealed against the linoleum floor as Dean pushed his chair back, drawing all attention onto him. “As soon as Sammy gets back we’re heading out. I’m guessing you’re staying here?”

“Why?” the angel countered teasingly. “You think three grown hunters can’t burn one measly set on bones?”

“Ohs!” Ashiel repeated eagerly before he pulled himself away from his mother. He bent over and picked up a small, plastic turtle on wheels before moving towards the tile floor to play with it. “No!” he protested when Alex stretched out a long wing to steer him back towards her. “No!”

“Ashiel, it’s time to go to bed.” Alex’s voice grew stern as the fledgling kept struggling. “Why don’t you go pick out a book?”

The fledgling perked up at the word ‘book,’ and immediately forgot his other plans. The toy clattered to the ground, and he hurried over to his bag. Alex sat down cross legged on the floor as he dug out one of his favorite books.

The motel door opened and Sam stepped through. “Hey, guys.”

Ashiel perked up and ran over to the tall hunter, book tightly grasped in his hands. “Sam!” he exclaimed, bright blue eyes wide in excitement. “Book!” He held it up to Sam, and Alex clicked her tongue.

“Ash, Sammy’s busy.” Alex stretched out with her grace, curling hers around his. “Sammy’s got to go. Come on. I’ll read to you.” She held out her arms, and Ashiel slowly made his way back to her.

Sam watched him go, a small smile on his face. “I’ll read to you another night,” he promised before he turned to his brother and Garth. “You guys ready?”

“Let’s do this.” Dean lead the way back out the door, and Sam grabbed his jacket off of the hook before he followed Garth out. Ashiel watched them go, a quivering pout on his face to see that all of his new friends were leaving him.

Alex shifted onto her knees, wings uncurling gently. “Come here, micaelaz,” she murmured, black wing tips brushing down the fledgling’s small sides. “They’ll be back in the morning to play with you. But right now it’s time for bed.”
The Winchesters returned late that night, unscathed and promising that they had finally put that spirit down for good. Alex had believed them, but when the phone call came about the untimely death of the county sheriff, the angel couldn’t say she was too surprised. By the looks of it, the Winchesters, though shocked, weren’t wholly unexpecting it. Dean had grumbled all the way out the door, a wave his only acknowledgment when Alex reminded him to call if they needed help tracking the thing down.

He must have taken her offer to heart, though, because an hour later her cell rang. Alex looked up from where she was seated on the floor among Ashiel’s toys, and she reached up onto the bed to answer. “Hey, Dean. What’s up?”

“You still up for hunting this son of a bitch down?” Dean asked, and Alex heard the sound of the Impalas’ door closing as he got in. He kept talking before Alex could speak. “This is definitely that specter again. Sam and Garth are headed down to the library to see if maybe we burned the wrong bones — you can drop Ash off with them, and then you and me are going to find him before he kills again. Meet me at the hospital.”

“Oh, yeah, okay.” Alex barely had time to finish her rushed sentence before Dean hung up, clearly in a hurry to get to his destination. Alex stood up and shoved her phone into her pocket. “Hey, buddy, you want to go see uncle Sam?” she asked animatedly, and Ashiel perked up at the word ‘Sam.’ “Mommy needs to go do some stuff,” she continued, bending over and pulling him up into her arms, “so you’re get to go to the library! Sounds like fun!”

“Ah ma,” Ashiel agreed, small, fluffy wings flapping. “Up up.”

“Yes. We’re going to fly there. Ready?” Alex flared her sleek wings out and thrust them down, taking off into the morning sky. It took her grace only a second or so to locate Sam and Garth, and she hung in the air for another moment longer, feathers catching the chilly breeze before they carried her across town and to the library steps. She landed at the building’s foundation, looking right to see Sam standing on the sidewalk with Garth already ascending the steps. “Sam.”

The Winchester’s gaze swung over to them, and Ashiel wiggled, indicating he wanted to be put down. “Down!” he insisted when his mother hesitated, and Alex quickly complied with his demands, wings corralling him as he ran over to Sam.

“Dean’s heading to the hospital,” the Winchester told her, eyes blinking in a subtle greeting, and Alex nodded in understanding. “The ghost’s possessing someone there and they’ve got a shotgun.”

“I’ll head right over,” Alex promised. “Have fun with Ash.” She didn’t wait for a response before she was back up into the sky. She dipped through a cloud, wings curling in around her as cold moisture surround her, only stretching back out once she was beneath it. The hospital lay directly below, and the angel pulled her black and gold wings tightly against her back as she dropped like a stone. Wind whipped in her face, and the pavement grew closer and closer until at the last minute she thrust her wings back out like a parachute, slowing her descent until her feet touched lightly down on the cracked pavement below.

She could hear the roar of the Impala’s engine down the street, and she hurried up the steps, wiggling her fingers in half-hearted acknowledgment as she heard the car pull up alongside the building and stop. Inside she heard the panicked screams of civilians; behind her was the pounding footsteps of the Winchester. With a shove of her grace the doors flew open, and Alex stalked in, wings flaring out and high above her. A man stood with his back to her with a shotgun in his hands, dressed in the tan outfit of the Kearney Police. The barrel was pointed at a man standing behind the reception desk whose wide, blue eyes were fixed fearfully on the weapon. “Stop.”
The man turned at her voice, and Alex saw the ghost within, hiding just behind the man’s facade. It was a Confederate soldier, no doubt, with anger etched deeply into the lines of its decaying face. It chuckled, wrinkled lips drawing up into a sneer before it turned back to its victim, gun cocked.

Alex stepped forward, but suddenly Dean was quicker, momentum from running inside carrying him past her and onto the back of the possessed man. They both toppled to the ground, struggling with each other, and Alex moved past them to kick the rifle out of the way.

The air suddenly grew cold, and she spun back around, goosebumps rising at the chill. She looked down just in time to see the man pry open Dean’s hands and place a small object into his palm, and in the next second the coldness died.

The man collapsed onto Dean, and the hunter shoved him off, rising to his feet with an air that was not his own. His face flickered, the specter’s own gruesome appearance taking control as Dean’s fist tightened around the flat, copper disk. “Well, well, well,” it sneered. “I like this one.”

“Let him go.” Alex moved to stand in front of him, pinning her wings tightly against her back as she addressed him with the calmest tone she could muster.

The specter laughed a harsh laugh, his voice changing Dean’s ever so slightly, and green eyes flashed in amusement at her command. “What are you?” he queried, letting his disinterested curiosity drive the conversation. “I’ve never seen a little girl with wings before.”

“Let Dean go now.”

“I don’t think so.” The spectre lunged forward, fists swinging at her head, but Alex was faster. Her wings pushed her out of the way, and her fists tightened in Dean’s shirt as she spun the spectre around and pinned him up against the wall as she rested one hand against Dean’s head. The angel pushed a sharp bolt of her grace into the Winchester’s head, driving the spectre out, and metal clattered onto the tile floor as Dean’s hands fell open.

Alex stepped away from Dean, hands holding him up against the wall only long enough to ensure he was able to stand on his own before she bent over and picked up the object. It was a penny. The angel closed her fist and let her grace overwhelm it, burning away the anchor that secured the spectre’s ghost. The spirit disappeared, and Alex let the penny fall back to the ground. “Are you okay?” she asked Dean, worry creeping into her voice. “I didn't hurt you, did I?”

The Winchester was rubbing his temple, and he looked up through squinted eyes as she spoke. “Feels like you hit me with a bat,” he grumbled, but added, “I’ll be fine,” before Alex could apologize. “The hell happened?”

“You were possessed.” Alex toed at the penny on the ground, and it slid across the tile floor. “I took care of it, though; it’s harmless now.” She reached out to steady Dean when he took a step forward, but he shrugged her off as he straightened up. After a second’s pause she added, “I guess we can call Sam and tell him that it’s over now, huh?”

Dean grunted noncommittally but didn’t beyond that didn’t answer as he moved off towards the hospital door, rubbing his head and muttering out a curse. The angel rolled her eyes and followed.

“You sure you don’t want to stay longer?” Alex pressed as Garth lugged his bag out towards his rusty, old sedan. “It’s getting late, man — you may as well stay for the night.” To emphasize her point, she looked upwards at the darkened sky where a handful of stars were barely visible against
the town’s lights.

Garth threw his bag into the backseat with a shake of his head. “Wish I could, but I’ve gotta roll.” He slammed the door before he turned back around. “I’ve got a job to do.”

“Well, thanks for your help.” Dean stopped beside Alex, hands shoved into his jean pockets. “I guess we’ll be seeing you around.”

“Yeah. Oh! Hang on.” Garth dug into his pockets, lips turning upwards as he found what he was looking for. “I went back to the hospital — just to make sure everything was okay and all. Here.” He held out the old penny, and Alex was able to finally see the detailed engravings; it was old, dated 1887 with an Indian head in the center. A small hole was drilled into the top. “People used to wear them around their necks,” the lanky hunter explained, holding it out for Dean. “For good luck.”

Dean slowly took the penny, unsure if it was Garth’s intentions for him to have it. “Thank.”

“Oh, and one more thing.” The hunter’s face lost its grin and set into a hard line. “Stop being an idjit, Dean! With Bobby gone, you three are all each other has. So stop being such an ass.” Dean’s eyes opened slightly in surprise, but Garth’s tone immediately fell back into amiability. “Now, you know what’s coming next, right?” He held open his arms. “Come on.”

“Oh …”

“Come on.”

Dean caved. “Yeah, okay.” He let his arms fall open a little, and Garth wasted no time in pulling the Winchester into a long hug. After a few seconds, Dean returned it, patting the smaller man twice on his back. “Hey, uh …” He waited until Garth stepped back before he reached into his back pocket and pulled out a baseball cap. “Keep on truckin, Garth.”

Alex frowned as he put it on Garth’s head, and she immediately recognized the faded and torn green fabric; it was Bobby’s. Garth reached up and touched the brim. “Thanks.” He looked like he wanted to say more, but a peppy melody filled the cold night air. “Oh, got to go.” Garth pulled a cellphone out of his jacket and climbed into his car. “Yo, Lamar. What do we got? Wendigo?” He closed the car door after him. “You got a flare gun? Flamethrower? No?” He laughed, looking over at Alex and Dean. “Then you better get some sneakers, buddy, cause you’re going to have to run. All right.”

He hung up and tossed his phone onto the seat next to him as he tried to turn the car over. The engine spluttered, barely coming to life, but in the next second failed. “Balls!” Garth slammed his hand against the steering wheel, and Alex barely held back a laugh.

“You know,” she murmured as Garth tried once again and finally got the car to start, “Bobby and I used to place bets on how long that one would live.” She watched as Garth flashed them a thumbs up before driving away, and she added, “I guess he’s just full of surprises.”

Yeah, I guess.” Dean looked down at the Indian head penny in his hands. “You ready to hit the road?” He lead the way back to the Impala, and Alex paused by the motel door, waiting as he dug around in the trunk. “One sec,” he called when Alex let out an impatient noise, and she watched as he shoved something into his pocket before he hurried over to her.

Alex unlocked the motel door with her grace and opened the door, looking around to find Ashiel sitting on one of the beds, but with Sam nowhere in sight. A glance to her left found the bathroom door cracked open, and she could just make out Sam standing by the sink through the mirror.

“Hey, Ace.” Dean crossed the room to crouch in front of the fledgling, and Alex turned to watch
curiously. “I got something for you.” He opened his clenched hand, and the penny fell out, held fast by a black leather rope. Ashiel reached out, grasping at the penny with a soft noise of amazement, and Dean gently pried it loose as Sam entered the room. “It’s for good luck,” Dean told the kid as he slipped the necklace over his head. “Don’t lose it.”

“Is … is that the possessed penny?” Sam snorted in disbelief as he crossed the room to stand beside his brother. “Really?”

“What?” Dean defended. “Everyone needs a little trophy of their first case. Besides,” he added, standing up, “if he’s sticking with us, he’ll need all the good luck he can get.”

“Yeah, a-about that.” Alex looked away when the Winchesters turned to her, her courage failing only for a second. “I don’t think he’s staying much longer.”

“What do you mean?” Dean’s voice was filled with genuine confusion, and he crossed his arms across his chest defensively as his eyebrows tilted inwards in concern. “Where’s he going?”

“It’s not safe for him here, Dean. He deserves a real family and a real life.” Alex reached out with her grace, wrapping it around the fledgling currently distracted by his new gift. “One of the angels managed to track down a family who’s willing to take him in. I just … it’ll be a week or so before they do — I have my reasons, okay?” she finally snapped when she saw the hard expression across Dean’s face. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Mama.” Ashiel walked over to her, the penny tightly clenched in his small hands. “Mama!”

“I see it, baby.” Alex knelt down, doing her best to ignore the look the Winchesters exchanged. “Don’t pull too hard, okay? You might break it.” She carefully pried the penny out of his hands and tucked it under the child’s t shirt.

She looked up to see a dark look across Dean’s face, and his shoulders squared as their eyes met. The next second, however, he spun around and stalked out of the room. Alex flinched as the wooden door slammed close behind him, guilt and anger weaving together in her chest. She felt Sam’s gaze on her cheek, and the angel steeled herself before she turned to face him. “So,” she began, voice tight and clipped as she braced herself against the disappointment written across his face. “Are we leaving tonight or not?”

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, sorry about the delay in chapters. I’ve been working a lot, and I recently found out my grandmother is dying, so life has been hectic to say the least. I’ll still be posting, but at the moment I can’t say if it’ll be as frequently as I usually do.

Thanks for understanding.

casti3l
Okay, here's another chapter. Sorry for the wait.

Um, update on my situation. After about a week of a slow decline, my grandmother died last night. So because of that, I haven't been writing a lot the past few days and I've fallen behind. I'm only about six chapters away from the end, but between that and funeral preparations, I'm sorry to say my posting schedule won't be increasing in frequency.

Give me another week or two, and then I'll try to get back up into the swing of things. Thanks for your patience.

~Elaine

November 15, 2013

Whitefish, Montana

Sunlight danced across the lake, its surface broken only by the waves built up by the gusts of wind. They lapped at the rocky shoreline in a soothing and constant rhythm. Birds sang from the pine trees all around, and the air was sweet with the scent of tree sap. The sounds of nature were interrupted only by the laughter of a young child as he hurried along the shore, feet scattering the pebbles every which way. “More!” he exclaimed, pointing down at the rocks.

“Slow down, Ash!” Alex hurried after the fledgling, carefully eyeing the distance between him and the dark water. “Don’t get too close to the lake.”

“Wada.” Ashiel pointed towards the lake. Before Alex could respond, he bent down, picked up a handful of pebbles, and hurled them into the gentle waves.

“Don’t throw rocks,” his mother chastised gently, herding him away from the lake with her wings. “That’s not very nice.” She guided him back towards the pine trees, ignoring his whines of protest, and once they had enough distance she drew her wings back to her side. “Hey, Ash,” she asked, turning her eyes down to her son. “Do you want to play a game?”

The fledgling looked up at her voice, blue eyes wide at the word ‘game.’ “Yea!” he exclaimed, wings beating in excitement. “Play!”

“Okay.” Alex reached down and ran a hand across his blonde hair, trying to smooth down the messy locks. She pulled out a small pine twig and tossed it aside, shaking her head in teasing dismay. “The game is that we need to get back to Sam and Dean, okay? Do you remember where the cabin is?”

Ashiel looked up at her, confusion flickering through his eyes, but after a second he turned and started off down the path. “Mama! Come!”

“Okay, okay, I’m coming.” Alex strolled after him, hands shoved in her jacket pockets as she looked
around the woods. It was nearing the end of October, one of the first of many cold days of fall, and the air was beginning to show it. “Keep your jacket on, buddy,” she called to the fledgling as he managed to get one of his arms up and out of the sleeve of his coat, and the fledgling paused with a frown. “It’s too cold outside,” Alex continued, leaning down to help him put it back on. “We’ll take it off when we get inside.” She nudged Ashiel back off down the path, and the fledgling continued his journey.

Alex let him take the lead, being careful not to let him lead them too far in the wrong direction. They had returned to Rufus’ old cabin in Whitefish a few days ago, and last she had seen, Dean had gone into town for food, and Sam was stuck on his laptop trying to track down something of a case.

The purr of a familiar engine sounded from their left, and Ashiel let out a shriek of recognition and took off through the woods. Alex followed, breaking into a slight jog to catch up with the eager toddler. They reached the dirt road at the same time, and Alex extended a wing to keep him off to the side as the Impala rolled to a stop in front of them. The window rolled down, and green eyes sparkled down at them. “Going my way?”

Alex snorted at Dean’s joke. “You want a ride?” she asked the fledgling, who was already leaning up against the driver’s side door, hands extending up towards the handle. "I think that’s a yes.”

“Okay, step back.” Dean carefully opened the door so he could help Ashiel into the car. “You get shotgun, okay, Ace?” he added, shifting the fledgling into the passenger seat.

Alex rolled her eyes. “I’ll meet you guys back at the cabin,” she told them, moving forward to peer through the window. “Ash, behave yourself.”

The fledgling didn’t respond, too busy exploring the cabin of the car, but Dean let out a laugh. “We’ll be fine,” he promised, turning the engine over. “See you there.” He threw the Impala into drive and started off down the road, leaving Alex standing in the forest alone.

A cold blast of wind shook the trees and Alex shivered, feathers ruffling out to conserve her heat. However, the hint of a quiet, distant voice on the breeze had her head tipping, ears straining to make out the words. The voice was familiar, soft and comforting, but it was gone before she could make it out. She waited, but it didn’t return. “Great,” the angel muttered, unfolding her wings and pushing herself up into the air. “I’m going crazy.”

She landed in the cabin a second later to find Dean and Ashiel just pulling up to the driveway. “Hey,” Sam said, and he gave her a small nod before repeating his greeting when his brother entered.

“Hey,” Dean echoed back, kicking the door closed behind him and the fledgling. He was carrying a six pack of beer in one hand and a grocery bag in the other, and he brushed past Alex to set it down on the counter. She shifted out of the way, watching as Ashiel stopped to look up at Sam.

The Winchester helped the toddler up into his lap. “You know, you look like you’ve s—” He cut himself off, and with a look of amusement added, “Well, I was gonna say ‘You look like you’ve seen a ghost,’ but you’d probably look stoked. You okay?”

Alex looked over at Dean, surprised that she had missed the slight paleness to his face. “You okay?” she echoed.

“Yeah, I’m cool,” Dean promised a little hesitantly, and Alex and Sam exchanged looks, knowing better than to push it. “What’s up?”

“Well,” Sam began, moving his laptop out of Ashiel’s reach, “there’s this kid that went missing from
“That sucks,” Dean agreed. He stripped off his dark green jacket and moved across the room to dump it on the worn couch as he asked, “And?”

“And at the same time he vanished, a surprise tornado hit, lasted maybe twenty seconds, then, uh, shazam!” Sam’s hands went up to emphasize his words. “Back to perfect weather.”

Ashiel was quick to mimic Sam’s expression, arms moving wildly above his head before he pointed to the wooden floor. “Down,” he decided, and Sam was quick to obliged.

Dean shifted backwards to let the child through before he leaned up over the back of Sam’s chair, eyes taking in the article on the screen. “Hmm,” he finally said, moving away. “And they pooh-pooh climate change.”

“Yeah,” Sam chuckled, glancing over his shoulder to see his brother put the beer into the fridge. “Well, similar wackiness has happened over the past few weeks in other places. Uh, Tulsa, a bus driver vanishes and a river gets overrun with frogs. New Mexico: a mailman disappears, the earth splits open.”

“Sounds very biblical,” Alex concluded, leaning back against the counter. “Demons, then? Or plagues?” she added in jest.

“Yeah, possibly,” Sam agreed as Dean returned to his side, “but … I mean, this stuff is major. These folks have nothing in common — no religious affiliation, different hometowns, all ages. Why would demons want them?”

“Why do demons want anything?” Both Alex and Dean asked at the same time, and Alex snorted at their synchronization. Dean slapped his brother on the shoulder as he added, “So, uh, we on this?”

“Yep.” Sam closed his laptop with a nod. “Uh, the preschooler was just outside of Spokane. I figure we get there in four, five hours tops.”

“I think we’ll stay behind.” Alex walked over and knelt down beside Ashiel. She grabbed him by the arm, briefly keeping him still as she tugged the jacket off. The angel adjusted the collar of his blue plaid shirt before she added, “I mean, call if you need me and all, but my babysitter’s been pretty busy the past few days.”

Sam made a noise of agreement as he moved over to the couch to pack his bag, but Dean just scoffed. “You only have one babysitter? Not even a backup?”

Alex stood and rolled her eyes. “Oh, I have a backup,” she promised, “but, uh, remember how I mentioned angels have no innate sense of paternal instinct? Add to that a total lack of moral judgment and that’s my backup.” She draped the small jacket on the back of the couch in passing as she continued humorously, “So maybe you can understand why I’m trying to avoid using my backup as much as possible.”

“That’s fine.” Sam slung his bag over his shoulder. “We’ll call tonight.”

“Okay, yeah, that sounds good.” Alex watched as the two Winchesters left, and Ashiel ran over to the window when he heard the Impala start.

“They?” he insisted, finger bumping against the dirty glass pane as he pointed after the hunters. “Bean?” The fledgling raised himself up onto his tiptoes, trying to catch a sight of the brothers as they disappeared.
“No no no, we’re not going back outside.” Alex scooped him up and carried him further into the cabin. “We’re going to stay in here for a bit, okay, Ash?” She set him down, wings guiding him towards the corner where his toys were spread across the floor. “Now. Do you want to play with your blocks?”

Sam did end up calling that night, confirming that they were, in fact, dealing with demons. The rest of their conversation had been brief; Alex made sure they were safe for the night, and Sam relayed Dean’s inquiries about Ashiel’s wellbeing — Alex could almost see the grin on his face when she mentioned how badly Ash had wanted to go with them after they left. They hung up shortly after, and that was the last Alex heard from them before the prayer.

It came a little after noon the next day, just as Ashiel had finished his lunch. Alex? Dean’s voice rang in her ears, and the angel tipped her head, listening carefully. You, uh, better come here. You need to see this. Now.

“See what?” Confusion laced her spoken words, even though she knew that Dean couldn’t hear her. She turned to look at Ashiel, who was contentedly sitting on the ground, staring down at his toys as though he were deep in thought. Alex chuckled audibly at the prospect that a toddler could be having such profound thoughts, but then again, that expression seemed to be an angel thing. An image of Castiel making that same face flashed briefly across her mind, but she quickly pushed it away. Castiel was gone, and he wasn’t coming back “Hey, sweetie,” she began, and Ashiel’s gaze turned up onto her. “Mommy’s going to be right back, okay?” She cast a quick look around the cabin; cellar and front door was locked, the fridge’s handle was too high for him to reach, no weapons or sharp objects were lying around — not that any of that could hurt him, but better safe than sorry. Content with what she saw, she crossed the room and knelt down beside him. “I’ll be back in a few minutes,” she promised. “Just sit here and play with your toys, alright?”

“Okay.” Ashiel looked away from his scattered array of colored blocks, and Alex smiled.

“Thanks, baby.” She ruffled his hair and pressed a quick kiss on his temple before standing up. Her wings carried her up through the cabin roof and into the dreary sky above. She hesitated only a moment before taking off towards Spokane, Washington.

It took merely a second to locate the Impala, and even less to find the brother’s souls. She landed in the room, eyes narrowing in confusion as she took in the two brothers seated at the table by the front door. “What’s up?” she asked. “No offense, but you sounded a little spooked, Dean. Everything okay?”

The Winchesters exchanged looks, neither immediately ready to speak. Alex frowned. The bathroom door behind her opened, and the angel whirled around, wings flared to meet the unknown threat that had rendered the brothers speechless. Her grace tightened around her angel blade, feathers ruffling out angrily, but her confidence immediately faltered, and the color drained from her face.

Blue eyes stared at her, hesitation from her reaction darkening their color. Dark, cobalt wings hid behind that ever-tan trench coat from which grace crept slowly forward, nudging against hers in a silent question.

Alex couldn’t breathe. The table bumped against the back of her legs as she stepped away from the angel before her, her mouthing hanging open with no coherent words coming forth. “I—I what?”

“Alex.” Castiel’s low, quiet voice filled the silent room. “I’m sorry —”
Her wings carried her across the room and into his arms before he could even finish. She wrapped her arms around his waist, almost surprised to find that he was solid.

He was real.

Thick wings curled around her, the feathers soft and gentle, and for several long seconds she just stood there, head buried in his chest, eyes screwed shut as held him tight. As she breathed him in. Eventually a gentle hand nudged her chin upwards, forcing her to meet the seraph’s eyes. Emotions flitted through them, disappearing as soon as it appeared, like rain disappearing into the waves of a tempestuous lake. “Alex —”

“No.” The young angel shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. “No.” She pulled herself away from the seraph, whose arms fell back down to her side. “Cas, I —” She shook her head as the tears filled her eyes, and without thinking her wings carried her out of the motel. She could feel Castiel following, and she pushed herself faster, wings beating violently through the grey sky. She landed on the roof of the cabin, spinning around to see Castiel land behind her. “Cas.”

“What’s wrong?” The seraph’s eyes sparkled in confusion, and he hesitated as if he were going to move forward, but thought better of it.

“Please don’t.” Alex stepped away. “I — Cas — oh God, it’s happening all over again.” She curled her wings around her as she squeezed her eyes shut.

She felt Castiel approach. “I … I don’t know what you mean,” he quietly admitted.

“Us, Cas. Every time — every damn time you come back and we finally try to make amends, you leave. Either you die, o-or you sacrifice yourself, or you g-get thrown into Purgatory — I’m sick of it!” Her wings flared out angrily. “I-I can’t do it, Cas. I was so close to —” She cut herself off as her eyes stung and her throat tightened around her words. She turned away, embarrassed at her tears.

Arms wrapped around her, surrounding her with their solid warmth, and the soft thrum of Castiel’s grace encompassed hers. “Alex.” The way his voice rumbled over her name brought that first painful, convulsing sob, and Castiel rested his cheek against her temple. “Shh…” he quieted. “Listen to me. I’m not going to leave you ever again.”

“You can’t promise that.” The young angel felt like screaming the words, but they came out soft and quiet, almost drowned out by her pounding heart.

Silence. Then Castiel sighed, breath warm against her hair. “No,” he agreed. “I can’t. But I am going to try.” He dropped his arms and stepped away, moving around her to stand in her line of vision. “I won’t leave your side. The only time I have and would ever leave you again is to protect you, le pas enay.”

“I don’t need you to protect me!” Alex snapped, anger flaring up inside, and she stepped back. “I’d rather be with you and die than stay behind and live without you. Don’t you understand that? I’m sick and tired of you playing the white knight! You keep saying your job is to protect me, but you weren’t even there when I needed you the most! I almost died because you left, Castiel. I thought you were dead, and I tried to join you!”

She wasn’t sure what she expected; maybe a rebuke or a burst of anger. But she wasn’t prepared from the way Castiel just stared, wings drawing in close as he processed what she just said.

“Just … stop,” Alex finished, lowering her voice and curling her wings forward. “That’s all I want. Cas. Just stop trying to save my life by giving up yours.”
A hawk passed overhead, its watchful eye keeping them in its sight as it landed on a branch overhead. It drew Castiel’s attention, and while Alex pursed her lips, she couldn’t help but be thankful for the distraction which seemed to melt some of the tension. “I’ve missed the beauty of the earth,” Castiel finally admitted, blue eyes watching as the bird took back off into the sky before they turned back to her face. “I’ve missed you.”

Alex opened her mouth to respond, but a confused cry came from below, and Alex’s wings flared out. “Oh God,” she cursed. “I forgot.” Her wings carried her over Castiel’s head and down into the cabin. Ashiel sniffled at the sight of his mother, pointing weakly towards the fridge, but his eyes widened in confusion as he looked behind her. Alex felt Castiel’s grace slide past, carefully examining the fledgling that stood before him, and she took Ashiel’s hand, turning to face Castiel’s hurt expression. “Cas,” the slowly began, “I —”

“Whose is he?” Castiel looked down at Ashiel; the forlorn, pained look didn’t leave the seraph’s face, and the heart-wrenching pain of betrayal weighed his wings down.

Alex loosened her grip on her son’s hand. “Cas, just listen. I found him. He’s not mine. On that night you and Dean went to Purgatory.” She carefully gauged the seraph’s expression. “He’s the reason that I’m still alive. I — I don’t know how it happened, but I just … found him there. In the woods. His mother was dead, and Ezekiel hasn’t been able to find his father, so I guess … I guess I’ve just been caring for him.”

“Anja?” Ashiel looked up at his mother for confirmation, blue eyes flickering back and forth between the two adults. His grey wings flapped in curiosity, emphasizing what he was asking.

Alex watched as Castiel extended one wing down towards the fledgling, azure eyes narrowed in thought, and she dropped Ashiel’s hand. “His name is Ashiel,” she said softly.

Ashiel stepped forward, hand going out to grab at Castiel’s wings. Castiel stared down at him, and after a few seconds Ashiel turned back to his mother, head tipped questioningly. “Anja?” he repeated.

“Yes, Ash, he’s an angel,” Alex quietly confirmed. “That’s Castiel.” She nudged the fledgling closer with a flick of her wings. “Go say hi, micaelaz.”

“Hi.” Ashiel smiled up at the seraph, but after only a second he scurried away to find his toys. Castiel watched him go, a series of unreadable expressions flashing across his face. The next emotion, however, was clear when Alex spoke.

“I’m not keeping him.” She frowned at the confusion on the seraph’s face, and her wings drew in close. “I — He deserves a real family, Cas, a-and ever since the Winchesters came back, it’s … it just hasn’t felt right.”

Ashiel came running back, oblivious to his mother’s words, and he held out his red-and-blue rubber bouncy ball for Castiel to examine. A long, nonsensical string of syllables served as his explanation, interspersed with the words “ball” and “here” as Castiel politely accepted the gift.

“Thank you,” the seraph rumbled, and with a squeal of joy the fledgling hurried off once again. “Alex.”

“Not yet.” Alex flicked her wings as she watched Castiel nod, and she let out a soft sigh, thankful that he wasn’t going to push her any further at the moment. “Thank you.” She jumped slightly as her phone rang, hands going to her pocket to find the device. “Dean.” She turned away from Castiel as she pressed the cellphone against her cheek. “What’s up?”
“Uh, nothing, I guess.” There was a curious note behind Dean’s words, and he added, “Just wondering where you guys got off to.”

“Oh, yeah.” Alex glanced behind her at the seraph; he was watching her carefully. “Uh, yeah, sorry about that. We’ll be back in like — give me one minute, okay? I’m going to pick up Ash and bring him back to you guys.”

“Okay, yeah. Suit yourself.”

Dean hung up, and Alex shoved her phone back into her pocket before turning back to Cas. “We should be getting back to the motel,” she informed him, voice still shaking slightly as she crossed the room to kneel beside Ashiel’s toys. “You head back first, I’ll follow behind once I’ve got Ash’s stuff packed up, okay?”

She pulled the dark blue duffel bag closer as she felt the seraph approach. “I thought you didn’t like it when I left you,” he finally said in what Alex could only suspect of being the closest thing to a joke he had gotten in a long time, and she laughed.

“I think I’ll be fine for a couple of seconds,” she promised, one wing extending up towards him. Castiel brushed his wing along the outside of hers, and Alex shivered at the feeling. Castiel disappeared from the cabin. Alex turned back to Ashiel with a long sigh, head falling back as she finally took a moment to process the upheaval of her whole world. Castiel was back. He was — “Fuck,” she cursed, biting her tongue as the word slipped out of her mouth, and she glanced over at Ashiel; he was too involved with his toys to hear. The angel screwed her eyes shut. Fuck. Lucifer.

“I don’t think he’s going to be too happy,” she murmured as she slowly began packing some of the fledgling’s favorite toys. “He still thinks Castiel is … crap.” She pulled her wings in tightly, grace poking and prodding the ball of ice that sat firmly in her gut; it reacted accordingly, stretching out to entangle itself with her. *Shit balls on a stick,* she whispered towards the wooden floor, and a icy shiver passed up her spine. *He’s going to fucking kill me.*

The second they landed in the Spokane Motel, Ashiel immediately hurried over to Castiel. The seraph was seated on the foot of one of the beds, attention focused on the tv in front of him. The fledgling followed his gaze to the television, head cocking in interest as Castiel flipped through the channels. Alex chuckled as she took in the two angels, heads tipped and eyes slightly narrowed in interest. She glanced behind her to find Sam on his laptop, undoubtedly going over the case. “Where’s Dean?” she inquired, crossing the room to sit down on the bed beside Castiel.

“Out. Getting beer —” Sam was cut off when the door opened and his brother stepped through, a six pack tightly gripped in his right hand.

“What’s the latest?” Dean tossed his keys onto the counter and set the beer down next to the sink as he tugged two of the cans free from its plastic ring.

“The latest is … nothing.” Sam shrugged, looking over all of the scattered papers and articles he had in front of him. “It’s like it all stopped. No freak disappearances linked to any freak natural events.”

His confusion was mimicked on Dean’s face, who set one of the beers down beside Sam and leaned over his shoulder to see for himself. “So how many we got? Seven?” He glanced up briefly to see Ashiel walk up to the large box tv, palms flat against the glass as Castiel continued to flip through the channels.
Sam nodded. “Yeah, uh, Luigi, Justin, Aaron, Maria —”

“Dennis, Kristen, Sven.” Castiel finished, and Alex joined him on the last name, the pieces falling into place as the names flashed through her head. “I missed television,” the seraph finished absent-mindedly, flipping once again to another channel.

Both Winchesters stared at Castiel in confusion and disbelief. “Wait, Cas,” Sam finally said. “How did you know those are the names?”

The seraph didn’t even look up. “Well, they’re prophets,” he explained, tone as if he couldn’t believe the brothers had asked such a stupid question.

Sam and Dean exchanged looks. “Prophets?”

“Well, angels instinctively know the names of every prophet, past, present, and future.” Castiel set the remote down on the bed between him and Alex and finally turned his attention fully to the two brothers.

“So this is the name of every one of ’em that exists?” Dean asked.

“Yes. Until the next generation is born — plus Kevin Tran, of course,” Castiel quickly added, flipping back to a space show only momentarily before continuing his search of the channels. “The other seven are future prophets, since, uh, only one of them can exist at a time.”

“Uh, how is Kevin a prophet if Chuck is a prophet?”

Castiel’s gaze dropped to the ground. “I’m not sure what happened to Chuck,” he admitted, “but, um … he must be dead.”

A short silence fell over the brothers as they took in the seraph’s news. “So the next one comes off the bench when Kevin goes down?” Dean moved away from his brother, leaning against the dividing wall between Sam and the angels. He took a sip of his beer, and Alex glanced up to see the darkness in his green eyes.

The seraph looked up at the Winchester’s approach, blue eyes blinking in agreement with Dean’s statement. “Exactly. And they have no idea who they are.” His wing stretched forward, nudging Ashiel away from the tv’s dial, and the fledgling turned back to look at him, confused as to what the stranger was telling him what to do. Alex beckoned him forward, and Ashiel climbed up into her lap with a pout.

“Crowley.” Sam’s face set into a tight line as he put the pieces together, and he looked up at Dean with pursed lips.

Dean’s eyes darkened, and he turned back to face his brother. “Insurance. Boy, he’s getting desperate.”


Castiel carefully watched the two brothers’ exchange. The tv turned off as he stood up, and he moved past Alex to approach the two brothers “I get the feeling something’s going on,” he finally said, head tipping to one side.

Dean looked like he was going to answer, but the high pitched melody of Sam’s ringtone cut him off. Alex set Ashiel down on the ground and moved over to stand beside Cas. “So we think
Crowley’s kidnapping the prophets, why? So they can read the demon tablet if Kevin dies?”

“Demon tablet?” Castiel echoed, confusion sharpening his voice.

“Hello? Mrs. Tran?” Sam looked over at Dean, eyes narrowing in worry. “Well, where the hell have you — What?” The hunter jumped to his feet and pulled the phone away from his ear. “Crowley’s got Kevin.”

“Dammit.” Dean brought his hand down angrily on the counter.

“Great,” Alex muttered. “So now Crowley has the tablet, the prophet, and every other prophet-to-be. Wow. Bang up job, you guys.”

“Hey,” Dean snapped. “Don’t put this all on us. You didn’t do shit.”

Alex’s wings flared out. “I have been taking care of my son, whom I have told you not to swear around.” She held Dean’s stubborn gaze until he blinked. “Besides,” she added, softening her voice, “I couldn’t find Kevin even if I wanted to. The kid’s smart — he would have put up all kinds of wardings to keep angels and demons away.” She looked over at Sam, who had turned his back to them listening closely to the mother on the phone.

“I’m … confused.” Castiel squinted as he looked between Dean and Alex, sensing the tension between the two of them.

“I’ll explain it all later,” the young angel promised, and her wings twitched impatiently for Sam to finish his call. “What are we going to do?” she finally snapped when Sam hung up. “Cas and I can try and find Crowley. Either we can go in and kick some ass or we can do some recon and regroup.”

She didn’t miss the hesitation on Castiel’s face, nor the slight blink of relief when Sam shook his head. “We’re meeting Mrs. Tran tonight,” he informed his companions. “She said she had something useful to show us. It’s about a four hour drive to the rendezvous spot, so we better get moving,” he added as he crossed the room to find his stuff. Ashiel watched the tall hunter go by with wide eyes before he hurried over to his mother, hands stretching upwards.

Alex pulled him up to rest on her hip. “We’ll catch up with you,” she told the two Winchesters as they both gathered up the things they would need. “Cas, with me.”

The seraph looked hesitant. “I don’t think —”

“Cas. With. Me. We need to talk.”

“Yeah, have fun with your ‘talking.’ ” Dean lightly smacked Alex on the shoulder, drawing her attention back to him so she could see his wink, but before she could snap a retort back at him, he was out the door.

“Butthole,” she muttered after him, and that received a noise of amusement from the younger Winchester.

“We’ll see you in a few hours,” Sam told them as he paused beside the door. “Uh, what about Ash?”

“I’ll … call my backup.” Alex shifted the fledgling to her other hip, prompting him to wave goodbye to Sam before he closed the door behind him. With a sigh she set Ashiel down on the floor and nudged him off towards his bag of toys. “So.”

“So what did you want to talk about?”
“Uh, I don’t know. Everything?” Alex moved further into the motel room, wings twitching as she felt Castiel follow. “I mean, no offense, Cas, but I haven’t really seen you that much since — what? The end of the apocalypse? 2010? That’s three years, Castiel. Three years.” She watched as the seraph opened his mouth, but assuming he was only going to protest she continued, “Let’s see. First year it was just me and Balthazar. Then Sam comes back, and I barely see you at all because you’re too busy working with Crowley! Then you disappear with the Leviathans, come back not being you — being married — and I see you — actual you — for what? Fifteen hours before you go into a coma and wake up insane?”

The seraph didn’t respond, eyes trying to gauge if she was finished.

“I mean, come on, Cas! No offense, but I’ve seen more of Lucifer than I have of you!” Castiel’s grace pushed against hers, curiously searching, and Alex responded by shifting Lucifer’s grace deeper into hers, hiding it from the seraph’s sight. “Dude, he’s still there. Don’t aggravate him,” she warned. “He … he thinks that you’re dead.”

It was faint, but Alex could hear the displeasure rumbling in Castiel’s chest. “You’re still dreaming with him then.”

“Well considering you’ve been slacking a bit in your job of being there for me, yeah, I’d say it’s kind of been necessary,” the angel retorted. She watched as Castiel’s wings rose offensively, and she quickly let hers stretch out towards the ground, not wanting to have any of this escalate in front of Ashiel.

She opened her mouth to apologize, but to her surprise Castiel beat her to it. “I’m sorry.” He let his wings fall back down to his side, carefully pinned against his back. “You’re right; you’re only doing what you have to,” he murmured, and his head turned dejectedly away. “You’re making the best out of what I’ve done to you.”

“Wait wait wait.” It was Alex’s turn to go on the defense, eyes narrowing at the seraph’s pitiful tone. “Cas—”

“I offered grace to you because I thought — perhaps wrongly — that there was something there between us. An angel’s love can last forever, and it isn’t easily lost. I thought that love could exist between the two of us.”

“I’m sure it would have.” Alex dropped her gaze to the floor, grace seeking out the distraction of Ashiel whereabouts. She felt the toddler get to his feet at the brush of their graces, and he hurried across the room to stand beside her. “Listen, Cas, I — I know every human instinct inside me is just screaming at me — telling me otherwise, but … but I’m willing to give you another chance. I’m willing to try and make this — us — work.”

Castiel nodded. “Thank you. I — I promise I’ll do everything I can to stay with you.”

He looked down when Ashiel walked up to him and tugged on the bottom of his trench coat. “Hi,” the fledgling chirped, small grey wings beating happily.

“Hello, Ashiel” The seraph knelt down to greet the toddler. “Here.” He dug into his pocket and pulled out the child’s rubber ball. “I believe this is yours.”

“Tank you.” Ashiel accepted the toy with a wide grin, small fingers tracing over the red swirls. A similar smile formed across Castiel’s face as the fledgling hurried away, and he looked up into Alex’s grey eyes.
“I didn’t know you were so good with kids,” she admitted as Castiel gracefully rose back to his feet. She felt warmth settle in her chest as Ashiel returned with a blue square block and offered it to the seraphim.

“I like children.” Castiel stared down at the block in his hand as Ashiel ran away once again.

“Huh.” Alex watched as the fledgling crossed the room, stooped to pick something up, and returned to Castiel with yet another block, this one red. “Well, Ashiel certainly seems to like you.” She looked over to where his toy bag was lying wide open on the ground. “We should probably get back to the cabin,” she finally said. “And I better see if I can get ahold of my backup babysitter.”

“Is he an angel?”

“Yeah.” Alex grimaced. “Gabriel. I mean, usually Ezekiel is my number one choice, but he’s been pretty busy lately.”

“Gabriel?” Castiel repeated, a frown upon his face. “As in the archangel Gabriel. The trickster.”

“Yeah, that’s the one.” Alex shrugged. “He’s a nice guy, Cas, plus, he’s really good with kids.”

“That’s because he is one,” Castiel muttered, and Alex laughed. The seraph flicked his wing in distaste. “You mean there is no one else — no one at all — who you can trust to watch Ashiel?”

Alex smiled at Castiel’s possessiveness towards the fledgling, so quickly formed, and she rolled her eyes up into her head as she thought. Her, the Winchesters, Ezekiel, Gabriel — “Oh!” The young angel snapped her fingers together as a name came to her, a name that hadn’t crossed her mind in several months. “I have an idea. I don’t know how it’s going to go over, but I think it’s worth a shot.” She hurried over to where Ashiel was unpacking his toys. “Come on, handsome. Let’s get this all packed up.” She turned back to look up at Castiel. “Can you watch him for a few minutes? I have a favor to ask.”

Alex shifted on the leather seats of the Impala, eyes turned out toward the darkened highway. Castiel sat beside her, with the two Winchesters in the front, impatiently awaiting the arrival of Linda Tran. The car had been silent for a few minutes, an almost uncomfortable silence in comparison to the animated atmosphere that had gripped the small company while Alex had — upon Sam’s request — vibrantly relayed the spectre case that she and Bobby had once worked. But now the car was silent again, and she found herself wondering how Ashiel was getting on with Sheriff Jody Mills.

“Where the hell have you been?” Jody Mills stared at the young angel standing on her doorstep. “It’s been months.”

Alex shrugged as heat spread across her cheeks at Jody’s accusation. “We had to go. There were demons in town, and I had to keep you and Ashiel safe.”

“So you couldn’t call?” The sheriff held Alex’s embarrassed gaze for another long second, before she sighed. “Come on in. It’s cold out.” She led Alex into the living room. “How’s Ashiel, by the way?” She motioned for her to sit, and Alex acquiesced.

“He’s doing great.” Alex couldn’t help the smile that grew on her face. “He’s speaking now. Knows quite a few words. That’s, uh … that’s kind of why I’m here.” The smile faded as she became unsure of the woman’s answer. “I … Sam and Dean are back, and I’ve been hanging out with them quite a
“Wait.” Jody’s brown eyes narrowed in surprise. “You’re talking about hunting. What the hell are you thinking, bringing a toddler hunting?”

“Wait wait wait. No, of course not, just — just listen.” Alex held out a hand defensively. “He’s never in harm’s way, Jody. I swear. He stays in the motel, and if he’s not with me, he’s either safe with the Winchesters or he’s being watched by another angel. I would never do anything to put him in danger. I promise. It’s just that … a demon has taken someone that we promised to look after, and we need to get him back. I have to go along, a-and I … I need someone to watch over Ashiel while I’m gone.”

She waited nervously for Jody to speak. “You want me to watch him,” she finally said.

“Just for a little while. I’ll be back before tomorrow night. I swear. I can—”

“Of course I’ll watch him.” Jody Mills stood up briskly, and Alex followed, slightly surprised at how easily she had agreed. “But you and I are going to have a talk when we get back, okay? Because if you think you can just put a kid into that dangerous lifestyle …”

“Oh, yes. I just — I’ll explain it all when I get back. Thank you, though. I, I guess I’ll be right back.”

Alex sighed, resting her forehead against the cold glass. At least Ashiel was safe. Sure Sheriff Mills was human, but Gabriel … Gabriel was Gabriel. Sure he was smart, funny, and a little suave, but neither the terms ‘responsible’ nor ‘parental’ really seemed to fit him.

“Where the hell is she?” Dean’s sudden question drew Alex out of her thoughts, and she turned her head to look at him.

Sam did the same. “She’ll be here,” he promised. “Uh, mile marker 96 was kind of the halfway point.”

The car fell quiet again, and Alex turned her gaze back towards the highway, searching for any sign of a car. They were hidden partly from view by undergrowth along the roadside, but it wouldn’t be hard for Mrs. Tran to find them. Her head tipped in curiosity when Dean spoke again, this time his voice a little sharper than usual. “Cas? Can I talk to you outside?”

Castiel nodded, and Alex felt his gaze linger on the back of her neck for a moment or two before he slid out of the car and closed the door behind him. She listened to their footsteps as they retreated, and then the angel let out a long, deep sigh. “Dude, today’s been weird.”

Sam let out a snort of amusement. “Yeah, tell me about it.”

“No, I mean, like, today’s been fucking weird,” Alex repeated, turning slightly to look at the back of Sam’s head. “Like, Dean said Cas was dead.” She watched as Sam turned to look back at her, mouth opening to offer up some sort of humorous retort that Alex already knew was about how he and Dean had both died and come back, and she shook her head. “You know what? N-Never mind, man. Point taken.”

Headlights lit up the highway, and Alex fell silent as a silver car pulled off of the road and alongside the Impala. She and Sam threw open their car doors and got out, watching as Mrs. Tran did the same. The woman looked pissed, and she slammed the door behind her as she stopped before the
four of them, arms crossed. “You can do this, can’t you?” she asked, unable to hide the worry in her voice. “You can get him back?”

“Forty eight hours, tops,” Alex promised before either Winchester had a chance to speak, and she felt Castiel’s gaze rest upon hers.

Mrs. Tran’s attention turned to the seraph, a guarded look crossing her face at the sight of the stranger. “And who’s he?” she demanded. “Is he on our side?”

Sam nodded. “Yeah. Uh, how did Crowley find you?”

The mother rolled her eyes. “Oh, I hired a witch and she ratted us out.” She shrugged, speaking as if the whole thing were no big deal, and Alex couldn’t help the way her mouth fell open.

“A witch?” she repeated incredulously. “You hired a witch? You know they’ve basically signed away their souls to serve demons, right? Why the hell would you hire one?”

“To make demon bombs, of course!” Mrs. Tran fixed Alex with a cold, defiant stare, and Alex’s wings rose furiously. She snorted in satisfaction as the mother turned away and held out a notebook to Sam. “There are Kevin’s notes.”

“You have any idea where Crowley took him?” Dean chimed in, but Mrs. Tran shook her head.

“No,” she admitted smugly, “but, uh …” She circled around to her small trunk and pulled it open. Alex followed, and her wings curled in surprise to find a demon lying inside, pinned down by a white devil’s trap. “This guy might.”

Atlantic, Iowa

The demon squealed within the hour, and by midday Dean was pulling the Impala up alongside an old, abandoned factory just outside of Atlantic, Iowa. Alex looked up at the old, concrete structure and shook her head. Why is it always an old, abandoned factory? Dean parked the car and got out, followed by the two angels, and together they moved towards the trunk of Mrs. Tran’s silver Toyota. Alex watched as Sam got out of the driver’s seat, leaving a frustrated Mrs. Tran struggling against the handcuffs that locked her to the steering wheel. “Good idea,” she commented when Sam grew close enough to hear.

“Crowley doesn’t need another hostage,” Sam agreed as Dean — after confirming with the demon in the trunk that this was, in fact, the correct place — quickly put the creature out of its misery. It died with a scream, and Alex flicked her wings as its life drained away.

“Fair point,” she agreed. “Alright. Plan? How are we going in?”

“Together.” Dean slammed the trunk shut, hiding the body out of sight. “How many of those, uh, demon bombs did you say we have?”

“Uh, one.” Sam pulled the small, metal canister out of his jacket pocket so his brother could see. “It’s suppose to have a range of twenty feet or so, I think,” he explained as he put it back.
“Huh.” Dean nodded before removing a rag from his back pocket to clean off the demon knife. “Okay, so what about you two? Think you can get us in?” He motioned to Alex and Castiel with the knife before he slipped it back into his pocket.

Castiel once again looked hesitant, as if something strange were eating away at him, but when he didn’t protest, Alex shrugged, mentally reminding herself to ask him about it later when all was said and done. “Course,” she agreed. “Don’t worry, Dean. Kevin’s getting out of there today, whether he likes it or not.” She turned her attention to the high metal fence in front of them, teeth teasing her bottom lip as she looked for the quickest way in. “This way,” she finally decided, and the four started towards the building.

They travelled up to the second floor first building and out onto the open. Alex let her angel blade slip into her hands as sunlight fell upon her face, and she narrowed her eyes until they adjusted, and she took in the network of pipes and steel beams that lined their path. Sam and Dean both took the lead, moving down a short staircase, and as soon as Alex reached the last step she saw Dean wave his hand, urgently motioning them out of sight. Alex hurried after Castiel, squeezing herself up next to him behind a pillar as the soft thuds of footsteps stopped just a short distance ahead of her.

Only a second later did she hear a soft gasp and a thud, and she peered out to see the demon lying dead at Dean’s feet. Sam hurried past his brother. “Alright. I’ll check this way,” he decided as he moved towards the right, and a quick, “Alex,” had her following, somewhat reluctant to leave Castiel’s side.

She stretched out her grace, but something impeded its advance. “The buildings are warded,” she muttered to the Winchester as they moved towards a large concrete building. “They won’t keep us out, but I can’t feel Kevin from very far away.”

Sam nodded and motioned her around a corner, finger coming up to his lips as he urged her to be silent. Alex understood and peered out from behind the Winchester. Four demons stood guarding a door, still unaware of the two’s presence. The angel held up her angel blade, silently asking Sam if he wanted her to go in, but the hunter shook his head, patting his jacket pocket instead. Alex understood.

Sam moved out into the open, and at once all four demons turned to greet him. “Winchester,” one crowed, a smirk curling his cruel, thin lips upwards.

“Looks like you guys got me.” Sam waited only two seconds, and when the demons rushed forward he yanked out the demon bomb and hurled it at their feet. Alex narrowed her eyes as white light burst forth, purifying the area and disintegrating the demons against the far wall.

“We need to learn that recipe,” Alex half-joked as she emerged from her spot behind the wall. With a flick of her grace the door unlocked, and she led Sam down the dark hallway towards an occupied room. “Through here,” she instructed. “I feel humans, not demons.”

“How many?” Sam asked as he lengthened her stride, overtaking her and pushing through the door before Alex even had a chance to answer.

There were five. None were immediately visible, hidden by an octagonal table covered in blood and guts. She heard Sam breath out an “oh no” before four heads appeared from beneath it, dark and wary eyes watching their approach. “Five,” Alex counted, attention towards a young boy hidden behind a box.

“Hey.” Sam awkwardly cleared his throat as four adults rose to their feet. “Uh … we’re here to help?”
“You must be Aaron.” Alex crouched down in front of the boy, no more than five years old. His eyes were brown, wide with fear, and he let out a small nod. “Come on.” Alex gently helped him to his feet. “Sam’s going to get you out of here, okay? We’re going to get you home to your mom. Sam!” She guided the child over to the Winchester. “Take them back the way you came. I’ll clear out any demons between here and there, and then I’m going after Kevin.”

“Okay. Go.”

Alex nodded and took off down the hall, wingtips skimming the stone walls with each powerful stroke. A demon rounded the corner up ahead, and Alex landed only long enough to guide her weapon into his heart before she was once again flying.

“It’s not working.” Dean’s frustrated voice reached her ears when the angel paused to kill yet another creature from hell, and the angel perked up, eyes scanning the halls that lay in every direction to pin down their location.

She pinpointed the direction at Castiel’s words. “Dean, I’m going in.” There was the faintest sound of wings rustling which were quickly drowned out by hers. Alex turned down the hall and landed next to Dean Winchester. He was staring angrily at a door and didn’t hear Alex until she tapped him on the shoulder.

“Fucking hell,” he cursed, spinning around. “I — where’s Sam?”

“We found the other prophets, and he’s getting them out. Where’s Cas?” Alex pushed her grace into the room, but she couldn’t feel far enough to confirm that her mate was in there.

“Inside.” A scowl formed across Dean’s face. “Crowley and Kevin are in there too.”

“Shh.” Alex pushed past Dean and leaned up against the door, ear against the metal as she tried to listen for voices.

“I think not,” Crowley was saying, a smug confidence clear in his tone. “The prophet’s playing on my team now.” That was all the confirmation Alex needed, and her wings carried her into the room in time to see both angel and demon holding up angel blades. Kevin was a few steps back, brown eyes darting between the two supernatural entities.

“So this is how it’s going to —” Castiel cut off, eyes falling on Alex as she landed in front of the party of three. “Alex. What are you doing here?”

“Same thing you’re doing here.” Alex’s grace pushed her weapon down into her hand, and she twisted the blade so light would glint off of the side. “I think me and Crowley have a score to settle, after all.”

“Crowley and I,” the demon quipped, and Alex just stuck out her tongue. “And I can’t imagine what score you’re talking about. Seems there’s quite a few of them, after all.”

Castiel’s wings rose in anger, and he cleared his throat, grace thrumming outwards. “The prophet is coming with me.”

“Please, Castiel.” Crowley turned back to the seraph with a roll of his eyes. “Let’s be logical. You look like hell — and I should know. You’re not up for this.”

Castiel’s grace grew, filling the room as his eyes lit up in a brilliant blue glow. White light emanated from his vessel as the angel let his grace roil within, growing in strength and intensity. Crowley’s eyes narrowed. “Maybe you can get it up, but you can’t keep it up,” he warned fruitlessly, but Alex
could see the hesitation in his eyes.

In response, the seraph’s grace flashed, and his wings unfurled high above his head. Their shadows darkened the wall behind him, each feather starkly outlined against the bright, white glow, and Alex watched as the demon screwed up his eyes against the light. “You’re bluffing!” he demanded.

“Do you really want to take that chance?” Castiel raised an outstretched hand, eyes flashing with holy light, and Crowley caved. He made a grab for the demon tablet lying on the table, but Castiel brought his fist down upon it, smashing the table and the Word all in one blow. Alex screwed up her eyes as the glass shattered, and when all had settled and the light faded, Crowley was gone. So was one half of the demon tablet.

A thud sounded from her left, and Alex looked up in alarm to see Castiel collapse to the ground. “Cas!” The angel threw herself onto the concrete floor beside him, taking the seraph’s head in her hands as he groaned. “Okay okay okay. Not expecting that.”

Dean burst through the door and Alex looked up in surprise; Castiel took her moment of distraction as an opportunity to sit up. “What the hell happened?” the Winchester demanded, staring down at the seraph.

“I’m fine, Dean.” Castiel pulled his legs under him, but Alex held him down by the shoulder, forcing him to take a moment and catch his breath.

“Yo, Kevin, you okay?” she called from where she knelt, finally turning her — mostly — undivided attention onto the prophet. He had stepped away from the wall, and Alex could finally see his condition. His clothing was stained dark brown with blood, and there was a lot on his hair and face, already drying in thick, dark droplets. A rag was wrapped tightly around his left hand, soaked with blood, and Alex could immediately perceive the presence of a serious wound. “What happened?”

“I—I’m fine.” Kevin bent down and picked up the small half of the demon tablet, the fingers on his bad hand tracing some of the engravings. “I — Crowley cut off my finger.”

“Son of a bitch.” Dean looked around the empty room, hand tightening on the handle of the demon knife. “Cas. You good to go?”

“Of course.” Castiel struggled to his feet, shaking off any attempts Alex made to steady him to dissolve any of Dean’s qualms. “Let’s go.”

He started towards the door, but Alex held him back until Dean and Kevin had left. “Can I … can I talk to you for a second?” she asked, folding her wings around the seraph to keep him in place. Without waiting for a yes or a no, she continued, “Cas, what the hell happened right now? I mean, I can do that without collapsing, so what the hell grounded you?”

Castiel reached out, motioning for her to be quiet. “I … there’s something you don’t know.”

“Yeah, no shit, Sherlock.”

“I’m not at full power,” the seraph finally got out. “Okay? I’m still recovering from Purgatory. I can barely fly, I’m not strong enough for any type of combat.” His gaze fell to the concrete ground, and Alex curled her wings around him, resting her grace against his as it quivered in exhaustion.

“Come on.” Alex reached out and took his hand, surprised to feel that it was cold to the touch. “Let’s get you outside. We’ll drive back with the Winchesters, and then we can pick up Ashiel when you’re feeling better, okay?”
Castiel nodded, and Alex led him out of the building and back towards the car. The future prophets were nowhere in sight, and Kevin and his mother were leaning up against her car while the two Winchesters stood off to the side. Alex felt Castiel straighten his back as they stepped into view, and she slowly dropped his hand as he moved off ahead. He headed towards Dean as Sam walked away, and the two exchanged a brief word before they continued their separate ways. Alex joined the younger Winchester by the Trans.

“I called a friend of ours. Garth,” Sam was saying. “He does what we do. Well … in his own way. He’ll keep an eye on you guys. No more going off on your own.” He watched as Mrs. Tran rolled her eyes and frowned. “You got that it was hiring that witch that got you into all this, right?”

“How you doing, Kevin?” Alex turned her attention to the young prophet who was still cradling his injured hand. “Let me see. You still have the finger?” She didn’t miss the disgusted look on his face, but Kevin nodded and slowly unwrapped his makeshift bandage. The pinkie finger was gone, and the blood was mostly coagulated, covering the white bone. He hissed when Alex touched the flesh that remained, and she let her grace sink inwards, soothing and numbing the nerve ends. “There. That should hold you over until someone can help you.”

“Cas thinks he may be able to fix that,” Sam added. “In the meantime, just lay low, okay?”

Alex glanced over her shoulder to see Dean and Cas deep in conversation. Dean didn’t look pleased. Sam tapped her on her shoulder and Alex turned. “Does Cas seem okay to you?” the Winchester’s brow was furrowed in concern as his hazel eyes slid over to the seraph.

“He’s … fine.” Alex sighed and followed Sam over to their friends. “Let’s just get home, okay?”

Alex landed on the front step of Jody Mills’ door, and a second later Castiel joined her, navy wings folding into his side. Alex knocked twice on the door, first hesitantly, but her confidence grew when Castiel’s hand brushed against hers.

It took a second or two, but then footsteps stopped behind the door and the lock clicked as it opened. “Alex.” Sheriff Mills’ gaze darted briefly over the two angels. “Welcome back.”

“Thanks. Uh, you’ve met Castiel, right?” Alex looked over at her mate, and one of his wings extended to rest across her shoulders.

“I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure.” Mills extended a hand, and after a moment Castiel shook it. “I’ve heard a lot about you. Please, come in.” She stepped back, and Alex led the way into the house.

“Mama!” An excited cry came from the living room as Ashiel jumped to his feet and hurried into his mother’s arms.

“Hello, beautiful.” Alex scooped him up into the air and held him tight. “I missed you.” She set the fledgling back down and added, “Did you have fun?”

“He’s a good kid.” Jody watched as Ashiel moved back toward his toys. “Good tempered. Only time he cried was after you left. We lost power for a few hours,” she added, “but otherwise it was smooth sailing.”

“Did you cut the power?” Alex teased when the fledgling looked up at her. “That wasn’t very nice.” She gently flicked the fledgling in the stomach with the tip of her wings as she moved further into the living room, and Ashiel just laughed. “Thanks for watching him, by the way. I really appreciate it.”
She looked up at Sheriff Mills with a grin. “It was either you or this one archangel, and I swear that would have gone badly —”

“Sit down.” Mills motioned towards the couch, and both Alex and Castiel sat. Ashiel walked up to Cas and stretched out his hands, wanting to be picked up. The seraph obliged.

Alex watched as the fledgling buried his hands the seraph’s feathers before she asked, “What’s up?”

“Alex, listen, I know I’m not your mother, but you have to realize that keeping a fledgling and hunting isn’t something you can do.” The sheriff crossed her arms, and Alex shifted uncomfortably in her seat as Jody continued. “You can’t bring a kid up in that kind of life! It — it’s inhumane!”

“He’s not human,” Alex quipped, but her grin faltered when Mills frowned. “Sorry. Listen, Jody. I — I’m not keeping him, okay?”

“What?”

Alex couldn’t decide who was more surprised. Sure the sheriff was surprised, but there was some relief mixed in with it. Castiel, on the other hand, seemed to be feeling pure shock. “What?” she snapped defensively, wings drawn in close. “I can’t keep a kid. I made this decision before I knew you were coming back, Cas, and Ezekiel found him a new family.”

“How could you just get rid of him?” Castiel’s wings folded around the fledgling in his lap, and the seraph’s head tilted in utter confusion.

“I take it the two of you have a lot to talk about.” Jody Mills looked between the two of them and cleared her throat. “Uh, I’ll pack up his things, I guess.”

“Okay. Thanks, Jody.” Alex offered the sheriff a small smile as the human walked away. Wind blew strands of her blonde hair into her face, and the angel turned in surprise. Castiel was gone. Ashiel was too. “Dammit.” Alex jumped to her feet and looked around the empty room. “Cas? Cas!”

Alex returned to Rufus’ cabin, black wings stirring the cold October air as she dipped and rolled through the tall, dark pines. She oriented herself upwards as she dropped down through the roof. She found what she was looking for inside. Castiel was seated at the kitchen table, gaze fixed on Ashiel with one hand resting against his temple. The fledgling was crouched on the wooden floor, rolling a small, plastic car across the rickety boards.

“I’m sorry.” Castiel didn’t turn his head, and Alex leaned up against the counter. “You were right. This is your decision.” His hand dropped down to the table as he turned to look at the angel. “You would be the one to know what’s best.”

“Why are you so invested?” Alex slid into the chair across from him, sending the fledgling a quick look. He was still distracted by his toys. “You’ve known him for less than a day.” The look in Castiel’s eyes answered all of her questions, and her gaze dropped to the ground. “Oh.”

“You told me you never wanted kids.” Castiel turned back to Ashiel with a twitch of his wings. “That you weren’t good with them.”

“After a year of practice you get used to them.” Alex watched how the seraph stared down at the child, and she sighed. “I forgot how much you wanted them.” She pinched the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger before she added, “Listen, Cas, this… this isn’t an easy decision. But you were gone, the Winchesters were back, and demons … and it just — it isn’t safe for him
here.” She swung her chair around so she could look into Castiel’s eyes. “He’s safest in heaven.”

“You’re right,” the seraph reluctantly agreed. “Perhaps that is what’s most important.”

Alex nodded, and the table fell silent. “You know,” she commented off-handedly as the silence began to grow uncomfortable, “most angels have absolutely no parental instincts. It’s kind of weird how … how good you are with Ash. Not in a bad way though,” she hurriedly added, not wanting to offend the angel.

Thankfully, he didn’t take it the wrong way. “Angels were never given those instincts because we were never intended to reproduce,” he agreed. “That’s why, traditionally, it’s the females who care for them.”

“Makes sense.” Alex shrugged, unable to keep amusement out of her voice. “Then again, you angels seem to have a pretty sharp learning curve. You’ll probably pick things up.”

Castiel didn’t look away from Ashiel. “How long will he stay?”

“I don’t know. End of the week.” Alex curled one wing forward to gently brush against the seraph’s shoulder. “It doesn’t have to be this way,” she started. “We don’t have to give him up if…”

“If what?”

“If we go back to heaven with him.”

Alex wasn’t ready for the seraph’s anger. “No.” Castiel’s jaw set into a tight line, and he looked away, wings pinned tightly against his back as his muscles stiffened.

“Cas—”

“I said no!” Castiel’s wings flared out, filling the air with feathers that ruffled unhappily, and Alex flinched at the loud, deep tone. Ashiel looked up, wings pinned tightly against his back in alarm, and his wide, blue eyes stared unhappily at Castiel. The seraph fell silent again, eyes trained on the far wall, and Alex shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

She looked for something to say, but no words came out. “Sam’s wondering where we are and if we’re okay,” she finally relayed when the Winchester’s voice rang through her head, much needed relief from the room’s heavy tension. “He says they’re in Kansas.”

“There are some things I need to take care of.” Castiel stood up, wings shaking out as he got ready to leave. “Will you be okay on your own?”

Alex rolled her eyes. “After a year, I think I’ll be fine for one more night.” She stood up as Castiel disappeared, and her wings drooped slightly to find he left without saying goodbye. Ashiel made a small noise, and the angel sighed. “Getting hungry?” she called, moving over towards her son. “I think it’s time for a snack.”

The air snapped and crackled all around her when Alex opened her eyes, and her wings flared out in alarm as flames licked at the darkness all around. Heat burned her lungs, and the air pushed down upon her from all angles. The angel curled her black wings around her tightly, all of her senses overwhelmed all too quickly. Then there was a sense of comfort, a cold touch of relief, and Alex spun around. “Lucifer.”
“Welcome to hell.” The archangel withdrew his hand from her arm, and the heat returned, burning at her skin. Alex turned into his arms, tucking her face into his cool neck, and the archangel curled his wings around her, his cold feathers offering relief. “I told you you wouldn’t like it.”

“It’s hot,” the angel murmured in agreement. “Just … give me a minute.” She let herself relax into his touch for another few seconds before she reluctantly pulled away, gaze turning out over the jagged landscape. The dark, rocky ceiling vaulted high above her head, and her wings carried her upwards away from the flames. The air grew thicker and hotter the higher she went, but a bubble of cold suddenly surrounded the angel as Lucifer appeared behind her, pushing himself between her wings and pinning them at her side. His own crimson wings kept them up as his arms curled around her waist.

“There’s nothing up here, little one,” he murmured, breath cold on her neck. “However, there might be something of interest over that ridge.” He let her go, and Alex took his advice, dipping down and moving off towards the rocky embers that rose up from the ground.

She kept her wings in tight as she wove between the stalactites, and she felt Lucifer follow below. He rose back up to her side when the ceiling opened up, and when Alex passed over the rise she halted, her beating wings keeping her in one place. “No way.” Her mouth fell open at what lay below.

A lake of fire sat in the foreground, flames licking at the air, but what lay beyond was a building — a massive piece of architecture. It seemed to glow even though the stones were are black. Black flecked with gold. “Pandemonium.” Lucifer appeared behind her, once more pressing himself up behind her to protect her from the burning air. “The city of hell. Built by Mammon when Michael first cast us out.”

“It’s beautiful.” Alex relaxed into the archangel’s grip as she studied the city below her. “Can we go closer?” When Lucifer loosened his hold, she hurried off towards one of the walkways on the city walls. The stone beneath her feet was a black and blue, shimmering with every step, and the angel barely noticed when Lucifer landed behind her. “This is — this is in the Cage?” she asked. “I always thought your cage … I thought it was a literal cage. But this …” She turned to face the archangel behind her.

He was leaning against the half wall, wings draped casually across his back, and at her words he nodded, understanding her unspoken words. “From the outside, it appears as a literal cage -- the physical form of my confining prison. But inside there is what you saw when you first appeared; an expansive desert, eternally big, yet eternally small.” He turned his eyes out over the courtyard, and his wings twitched as a hot wind blew past them. “This is the part of hell I and my brothers were first cast into,” he explained. “Before I was locked up in the Cage. However,” the archangel added as he ran his eyes up and down the angel in front of him, a snide and suggestive note creeping into his voice, “after how … enjoyable our last dream was, I pulled a few strings and manifested this in your mind. I figured a city was much more exciting than just a desolate wasteland.”

Alex felt a blush grow across her face, and she turned away, busying herself by carefully studying the gothic city. A giant dome stood in the center, glowing with a brilliant white light. Like diamonds among the hellfire. “What’s that?”

She flared her wings to go explore, but Lucifer was quick to stop her. “Ah. This way.” He led the way down to the ground below and into a hallway. A push of her wings had Alex at his side. The floor was a beautiful blue and black tile, flecked with gold, and the only thing separating the hall from the sulfurous courtyard was a row of tall, twisted pillars. “It’s a poor rendition of heaven,” Lucifer began, one wing folding across her back, and Alex welcomed the cold blanket. “One day,
when I get out, I’ll take you to heaven’s Great Hall. I’ll show you where I grew up.”

Alex scoffed. “Like you’re ever getting out of here.”

“I will,” the archangel promised darkly. “One day I’ll be free, and I’ll kill whoever stands between you and me.”

Alex rolled her eyes at the devil’s threat, unable to imagine it ever coming true. “Yeah. I’m sure Cas is going to be really pleased about that,” she joked.

The hot, sulfurous air overwhelmed her as Lucifer sharply pulled away. “‘is going to’?” he repeated. “You said Castiel was dead.” Realization sparked in his eyes, followed immediately by hurt, and in a burst of anger he pinned the young angel against one of the pillar, and it creaked under the weight. Alex hissed as sparks flew from the impact against the smoldering stone.

“Ow!” She let out a cry of pain as the glowing embers burned at her skin and wings. “What the hell?” Alex struggled momentarily against the archangel’s grip, but it was no use. “I thought he was dead, okay?” she snapped, voice trembling slightly as she gave up. “He was gone for a whole year, but … he came back. Like just yesterday, so cut me some —” She cut off with a hiss when a particularly large flake of burning stone drifted downwards and landed on her forearm.

Lucifer’s hard, cold hand was over the burn immediately, and Alex felt some of the tension leave his body. “You should be careful,” he warned, voice low and dark, and Alex swallowed nervously when he pulled his hand away. “These things can hurt if they get to close.” He pulled off the extinguished flake of stone and discarded it onto the ground.

Alex watched as the archangel stalked away. “Luce!” she called, shaking out her aching wings and hurrying after him. “Come on! I—”

“You’re choosing Castiel.” The archangel’s crimson wings puffed out in anger. “Castiel. Why?” He turned around, eyes glowing with a ferocity his tone couldn’t express. “Name one time he was there when you needed him. One time.” Alex’s mouth fell open, but the archangel didn’t give her a chance to speak. “I don’t know what he’s telling you, but he’s never been there for you. Not once.”

Alex shook her head. “I’m going to give him a second chance, okay?” she snapped. “He says he’s back for good, and he’s willing to make this work.”

“That’s what they all say,” the archangel hissed. “It’s been three years and he had left you four times. Four.” Wings rose and stretched out furiously, and Alex flinched at his anger. “And who’s been the one who has always been there to pick you up off the ground? Me. Not Castiel. Never Castiel. What kind of an angel would ever leave their mate in such a state?”

“Shut up!” Alex flared out her wings. “You don’t understand!”

“Don’t understand what?” Lucifer stalked forward, power and darkness in his every step as his voice deepened in anger. “I don’t understand how you almost died because he didn’t love you enough to stay?”

“I said shut up!” Alex shouted over the archangel’s words, but he didn't stop.

“I have been here for you the whole time,” he growled, and his low, quiet voice was somehow far more terrifying than anything else Alex had ever heard. “You turned me out, but I was always there ready to take you back —”

“You’re the devil,” Alex spat. “You killed millions, tortured Sam, you broke my wings and you beat
me and you haunted all of my dreams! You’re not better than Cas! At least he has never intentionally hurt me. Yeah, his life’s been shit, but he’s doing the best he can! But things are going to get better. He’s going to be my mate! It’s not going to be you, Luce. It’s never going to be you!”

The archangel’s eyes glittered, but after a few, long seconds of silence, his thin lips turned upwards into a forced smirk. “I’ll be here when you need to come back,” he promised, and Alex wished she couldn’t hear the sincerity in his voice. “And if he hurts you, I will kill him.”

The archangel snapped his fingers, and all went black.
Alright, everyone, I'm back. Sorry for the long wait. Everything's still quite hectic with second semester starting up, and because of the funeral I haven't had time to write a lot, so the updates won't be every other day, but I'll do my best to make them as frequent as possible.

Thanks for waiting, and I hope you enjoy!

November 20, 2013

Joplin, Missouri

Dean stepped out of the grungy, old Gas N Sip, outlined against the cloudy morning sky. Food was held tightly one hand, two beers in the other, and green eyes lit up with delight as he saw Alex standing next to Sam, the fledgling in her arms. “You guys came,” he said with a grin as he set the food down on the Impala. One beer went to Sam who was currently on the phone with Mrs. Tran, and the other was set next to the food on the trunk as Dean took the fledgling into his arms. “Heya, Ace,” he greeted.

“Bean.” Ashiel tugged on Dean’s ear with a grin, one hand feeling for the dips and curves of Dean’s face.

“Sorry we’re a bit late,” Alex apologized. Her attention turned towards the front of the car where Castiel stood, a newspaper in his hands. “Is, uh …” She nodded towards the seraph, but Dean didn't have time to answer before Sam spoke up.

“Yeah. Hey, uh, you know what?” he said into the phone, turning towards the two of them and raising his voice. “Uh, Dean's here. He really wants to talk to you.” He held out the phone towards Dean, who took it with a roll of his eyes.

“Mrs. Tran, hi, uh —” He snapped the phone shut and tossed the phone back to Sam, shifting Ashiel so he sat more comfortably on Dean’s hip. “What’s going on in Tran-Land?”

Sam shrugged and stuck his phone back into his pocket. “Well, uh, Garth finally got them onto his houseboat, but Kevin’s having a lot of trouble reading their half of the tablet,” he explained as he cracked open his beer. “So far, bits and pieces. Nothing about boarding up Hell.”

“Garth has a safe-houseboat?” Dean looked both surprised and impressed, and he set Ashiel down on the ground when the fledgling pointed and babbled insistently.

Sam shook his head with a small chuckle. “Dude, I don’t even ask questions anymore.”

Alex watched as her son hurried around the car towards Castiel, stumbling only once in his eagerness. “Ah!” he exclaimed, reaching up to tug on the seraph’s coat. “H-Hi.”

“Hello.” Castiel’s voice rumbled happily at the child’s greeting, and he folded his newspaper to look
down at him. “How are you doing?”

“G-Good.” The fledgling rocked back and forth on his heels, grinning up at the angel. “I-I ...”

Dean walked up behind the fledgling, one large hand coming to rest on the kid’s blonde head, and the fledgling fell silent. “What’s the word, Cas?” he asked casually, ruffling the child’s hair.

“It’s a shortened version of my name,” came the disinterested response as the angel reached into his pocket. He pulled out a plastic tyrannosaurus rex, and Ashiel’s blue eyes grew wide. He grabbed it with a squeal of excitement and hurried off to show his mom.

“Yes, it is,” Dean agreed as he watched Ashiel go, and Alex knelt down to praise her son on his new treasure. “I meant what’s the word on the Word? Any, uh, tablet chatter on angel radio?”

“Oh, I can’t say.” Castiel looked up from the fledgling with a small shrug. “I turned it off.”

“You can do that?” Sam asked as he moved past Alex to stand by his brother. He looked back at Alex and added, “Uh, what about you?”

“Yeah, um, I’m still figuring how to turn it on,” Alex joked. She circled around the Impala to stand next to Castiel, and Ashiel followed, his new toy clutched dearly in his small hands.

Castiel nodded in understanding. “It’s a simple matter of tuning in or out certain subsonic frequencies,” he explained. “I could draw you a diagram if you want.” The seraph suddenly moved away from the car as Ashiel ran off towards the edge of the parking lot, screeching in excitement as a rabbit dashed away.

Alex watched him go with a grin. “Yeah, that’d be cool,” she said after him. A nudge from Dean had her turning her head. “What?”

‘That’d be cool,’ huh?’ The Winchester cocked his eyebrows teasingly, leaving the rest of his implications unsaid.

The angel blushed, and she turned her gaze to where Castiel was attempting to explain to Ashiel why he needed to return to the car. “Hey, my mate is suddenly back from the dead,” she defended lightheartedly. “I’ll be damned if I’m not hitting that before it walks away again.”

Her statement was meant humorously, but the grin on the Winchester’s face said it all. “Yeah, you go get it.” He thumped Alex on the back, and the angel rolled her eyes. “So why’d you flip the switch?” he asked as Castiel returned, Ashiel sitting high atop his shoulders.

The seraph shrugged, and Ashiel squealed happily at the movement. “Because it’s a direct link to heaven,” he explained, voice probably more terse than anyone anticipated. “And I don’t want anything to do with that place. Not anymore.”

“So what now? Move to Vermont, open up a charming B&B?” The older Winchester elbowed Alex in the ribs, a smirk playing on his lips.

Alex just rolled her eyes, knocking his arm out of the way. “Change our name to Newhart?” she added, playing along with Dean’s joke.

The seraph gave Alex a questioning look, but he brushed it off. “No. I still want — I still need to help people. So...” Castiel let out a small smile, and he lifted Ashiel off of his shoulders and set him on the ground. “I’m going to become a hunter.” He looked over at Alex for approval, and she couldn’t help but mimic his grin.
Sam, however, seemed less enthusiastic. “Really?”

“Yeah.” Castiel’s smile didn’t falter. “I can be your third — technically fourth — wheel.”

“Damn straight,” Alex grinned. “Four wheels are great. Way more stable than only two,” she added with a wink at the two brothers.

“Technically speaking, of course, three wheels are far more stable than four. I even found a case,” the seraph added before anyone could comment. “Oklahoma City. A man’s heart jumped ten feet out of his chest. It sounds like our kind of thing, right?”

Sam and Dean exchanged looks. “He’s got a point,” the younger brother admitted.

“Excellent.” Castiel knocked twice on the Impala’s hood before he turned, shaking out his wings in pleasure of being helpful. “I’ll meet you there.”

“Wait, Cas, Cas!” Dean stepped forward to intercept the angel. The seraph turned, confusion written across his face. “If you want to play cowboys and bloodsuckers, that’s fine. But you’re gonna stick with us, okay? None of this zapping around crap.”

Alex raised her hand. “Can, uh, can I do that ‘zapping around crap’?”


A flash of disappointment and confusion at Alex’s privileges crossed Castiel’s face, but it quickly disappeared. “Yeah, I capiche.”

“Alright then.” Dean nodded and moved towards the driver’s side door.

“Can I, uh, at least ride shotgun?” Castiel moved towards the door opposite Dean, hand going eagerly out towards the handle, but a resounding “No” came from both of the brothers. Sam nudged Castiel out of the way, and the seraph stumbled backwards, brow furrowing. The Winchesters got into the front seat, and Alex watched as Castiel’s wings drooped as he moved towards the back.

“I’ll see you in Oklahoma in a few hours,” she promised teasingly, wing flicking against the seraph’s chest in a warm gesture before he got into the car. “I’ll text you my twenty,” she added to the Winchesters. When they nodded, she turned to Ashiel, who was busy stepping up and off of one of the concrete parking curbs. “Okay, Ashy. Should we go find a park to play at?”

The fledgling perked up at the work ‘park’. “Yeah!” he exclaimed, hurrying over to her. His wings flapped excitedly, and he pointed towards the sky. “Up?”

“Oh yeah.” Alex scooped Ashiel up into her arms and her wings flared out, ready to fly. “We’re going up.”

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

“Why did you kill your husband?!” Dean slammed his hands down on the table, filling the room with a resounding and violent thud as he leaned forward. Alex doubled over in laughter at how the Winchester’s face twisted in mock anger before it broke back down into a grin. “I swear to God,” he insisted, “that’s what happened.”
“I was being the bad cop,” Castiel insisted sullenly from the far bed, and Alex looked over to see that his wings were pressed tightly up against his side. He and the Winchester had just returned from the first day on the job, and Dean was recounting Castiel’s misadventures while they waited for Sam to return.

“You were being bad everything,” Dean deadpanned, and Alex threw her head back, unable to keep herself from laughing.

She couldn’t help but look back over at Castiel, and most of her amusement died when she saw the angel’s crestfallen face. “I’m sorry, Cas,” she apologized, getting up to sit beside him. “I shouldn’t laugh. You’re still new at this, and, I mean, let’s be honest. People aren’t your strong point.” She curled one wing around his shoulder and leaned up against him. “You’ll get ’em next time,” she promised.

“Oh, that’s not even the best part,” Dean insisted from the table. “I haven’t even mentioned about how we took him to the morgue. Dude was actually smelling a corpse.”

Alex laughed, head rolling back onto Castiel’s shoulder even though the seraph seemed less than amused. Before Dean could elaborate, however, the door opened and Sam and Ashiel stepped through the door. The Winchester was carrying Chinese take out, and Ashiel was still hugging that plastic dinosaur that Castiel had given him. “Dude, give him a break.” Sam set the food down across from Dean with a roll of his eyes. “Don’t act like you’ve never botched an interview.”

“I don’t go around sniffing dead people,” the Winchester retorted. He popped open one of the take out boxes, huffing in satisfaction at what he found.

Alex rolled her eyes, and she moved over to the other bed to look at the case folder for the first time. On top were the autopsy photos, and Alex’s eyes were immediately drawn to the hole in the chest. “That’s … not right.” She traced the heart-shaped wound with her finger, confusion darkening her expression. “They say his heart was ripped out?”

“Not ripped out,” Sam corrected. “Ejected from the inside.”

“That … that’s weird, man. That’s like the perfect cartoon heart shape. Perfect. No way an actual heart does that.” Ashiel ran over to her, and Alex flipped through the rest of the file with a shake of her head. “No, you can’t see this,” she scolded gently. “This is not for you.”

Sam’s phone rang, and he jumped to his feet. “Hello?” He crossed to the other side of the room, head bowed in conversation, and Alex returned her attention to the file until she heard the Winchester clear his throat. “We’re eating in the car,” he instructed. “That was Detective Glass. There’s another one.”

Dean grumbled a few words under his breath as he gathered up his meal, and Alex jumped to her feet. “Count me in,” she volunteered. “I can check if Ezekiel is available to come over for a bit and then just meet you guys there.”

“I think I’ll stay behind, too,” Castiel decided.

“No, you’re going with.” Alex stood up and grabbed onto the seraph’s hand, trying to pull him to his feet. “You wanted to be a hunter, so you’re gonna get back up there and try again.” When Castiel didn’t move, she stepped forward, pressing her shins into the seraph’s knees. “I’ll be right there by your side.”

“Adorable.” Dean got to his feet and grabbed the Impala’s keys from Sam. “Alright, Romeo, let’s
go.”

Alex watched as the three men left, and she sat down on the bed. Ashiel walked up to her, babbling some half-melodious tune with words Alex could barely make out — something about a dog, perhaps. Not a song she had taught him. “Ezekiel?” she prayed, turning her head upwards. She felt warm skin as the fledgling decided to grab onto her fingers. “Are you busy? It’s been a while since I’ve heard from you.”

“I’ve been quite busy.” Grey wings filled the room as the angel landed behind them, and Alex turned to greet the seraph. “What do you need?”

Alex ducked her head, embarrassed by what she had to ask. “I was just … wondering if you could spare an hour or two,” she finally admitted. “But if you’re busy, that’s okay. Sorry for bothering you.”

“I can spare all the time you need.” Ezekiel crossed the room to greet Ashiel, and the fledgling hurried to show off his newfound toy to his friend. “That’s very nice,” the seraph praised as he studied the plastic toy before he turned back to Alex. “That’s what friends do, correct? However, I do have news about Eremiel and Laura.” He waited until Alex made a small, curious noise, before he explained. “They said they are willing to meet the day after tomorrow.”

“Oh,” Alex reached out with one wing to guide Ashiel back into her arms, and she ran a hand through his blonde hair as the fledgling bounced his plastic toy up her leg.

Ezekiel noticed. “Are you having second thoughts?” he guessed. “If you want —”

“No. No. Not having second thoughts.” Alex shook the idea off and stood up. “Thank you so much for staying. I promise I’ll be back in an hour.” She leaned down and kissed the side of Ashiel’s head. “Play nice,” she warned. “I’ll be back soon.”

“Looks like a suicide.” Sam half leaned over the edge of the building, one leg hanging back in fear of getting too close to the dizzying fall in front of him. Alex grunted her agreement, peering down towards the street below. The people were the size of ants, all cluttered around the police tape that quarantined a blue sedan. The top was crushed inwards, and even from where she stood, toes up against the lip of the building, Alex could see the blood spatters against the paint.

A tug on her sleeve had her turning, blinking in surprise to find that Sam was motioning her away from the edge. “What?” she asked, stepping off of the ledge. “I like it up there. I feel tall.”

“You look like you’re going to fall.” Sam helped her down, and Alex shook out her wings in frustration.

“It doesn’t matter if I fell,” she pointed out childishly. “I have wings. Don’t say it,” she added under her breath when she saw how Sam’s lips twitched disapprovingly. “I know, I know.” She cleared her throat as she raised her voice. “Agent Brennan.” She dug her badge out of her pocket and held it up to the African-American detective that approached. “You must be Detective Glass.”

“Four feds? For this?” the woman seemed surprised, and her gaze moved over the four hunters. “Sounds like overkill, don’t you think?”

“You’re the one who called about something weird.” Alex retorted good-naturedly, eyes flickering over to Castiel who was carefully watching their exchange. “That’s why they called me in.”
“What?” The detective laughed at Alex’s explanation. “Let me guess. You specialize in weird?”

“Just call me Mulder.” Alex flicked her wing in greeting as Dean approached, Castiel at his heels. “So, suicide’s the call, huh?”

Detective Glass nodded. “It was,” she confirmed. “Guy left a note. He invested everything in Roman Industries and lost it all when they crashed and burned last year.”

‘Makes sense,” Dean agreed. “So why’d you call us?”

“Because I have two witnesses who swear that Madoff here floated in mid-air for a good ten seconds, then he looked down and splat.” The woman’s jaw set firmly in disbelief as she finished relaying the story. “Not sure I buy that, but the way they’re talking, it sounds like something straight out of a —”

“Cartoon,” Alex and Dean finished. The detective nodded, and, when she called away by one of her men, Alex turned to the Winchesters. “Okay, so this is all a little weird.”

“Tell me about it,” the eldest hunter grunted. “I mean, the whole heart jumping out of the guy’s chest, the — the — the delayed fall — that’s straight up Bugs Bunny.”

“So we’re looking for some sort of … insect-rabbit hybrid?” Castiel’s face scrunched up as he thought about it, and his blue eyes sought out Dean. “How do we kill it?”

Alex did her best to hold back a laugh, and her wing flicked out to catch the seraph in the shoulder. “Bugs Bunny isn’t a monster, Cas. He's a cartoon character. Like, uh, Daffy Duck or Wild E. Coyote,” she added when his confusion only seemed to deepen. “I'll, uh, I'll show you when we get back to the motel, okay?”

“Nothing classic. We’ve watched a lot of, uh, nature documentaries.” The hunter paused a moment to laugh, “—the anvil gets dropped on his head.”

Castiel blinked as Sam laughed. “Is that supposed to be funny?”

“No.” Dean’s smile fell away at the seraph’s words. “It’s hilarious.” He looked down at Alex with a shake of his head. “You’ve never showed him a cartoon?”

“Nothing classic. We’ve watched a lot of, uh, nature documentaries.” The angel shrugged. “I always figured we’d work our way up to non-realistic fiction, you know?” Dean stared at her incredulously, and she quickly looked up at Sam. “Anyways. Case folder?”

“Too early,” Sam reported, looking around at the cops. “Said they’ll have a copy ready in the morning. If we have everything we need, we should head back and see if we can find a link between the two vics,” he added to his brother.

“Yeah, good idea.” Dean shoved his hands into his suit pants pockets. “I think we’re done here.”

Alex pulled her legs up onto the bed, shifting so her head rested more comfortably against Castiel’s shoulder. Ashiel stood in front of them, hands pressed up against the tv screen as they watched the last few minutes of a Roadrunner cartoon. It had been upon Dean’s insistence, and Alex had been eager to comply. She chuckled as an anvil fell from the cartoon sky, crushing the coyote one last time before the words That’s All Folks faded from the screen.
Castiel echoed her laugh, shoulders rising and falling slightly before he stopped. “I understand,” he decided as he turned off the television with his grace. “The bird represents God, and coyote is man. Endlessly chasing the divine, yet never able to catch him.” He noticed the strange looks he was receiving and clarified, “It … it’s hilarious.”

Alex rolled her eyes and sat up. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“And I have no idea what we’re hunting,” Dean added from where he sat over by the window. His fingers were drumming on the pages of a book as he shook his head discouragingly. “Maybe it’s a Tulpa. Maybe it’s some — some crazy god who watched too much ‘Robot Chicken.’ ”

“A trickster?” Alex guessed. “Like, uh, like Gabriel … was?”

“Maybe.” Dean kicked his brother from under the table, and Sam looked up from his laptop. “Any link between ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ and ‘Free Fallin’?”

“No that I can find.”

“All right, well I’m going to call it.” Dean closed his book and leaned back in his chair, a hand running down his tired face as he turned to look at Cas and Alex. “Well? You guys gonna book a room or what?”

Alex opened her mouth to suggest that it was a good idea, but Castiel spoke first. “No, we’ll stay here.”

“Oh. Okay.” Dean’s green gaze flitted over Alex before his lips twitched upwards into a small grin. “Yeah. We’ll have a slumber party, braid Sam’s hair.” His grin widened when both Sam and Alex made noises of amusement, but it quickly fell away. “Where are you guys gonna sleep?”

“I don’t sleep,” Castiel insisted.

“But Ashiel does,” Alex reminded the seraph. “And speaking of sleep, I think it’s time for somebody to get ready for bed.” She slid to the ground and took Ashiel’s hand. “Isn’t that right?”

Dean frowned. “Well, I’m not sleeping with Sam, and I need my four hours, so …”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. Don’t worry. I’ll go get us another room.” Alex flicked Cas with her wings as she stood up, confused by how he stood, head tipped as he listened closely to something only he could hear. “What’s up?”

The seraph shook his head. “Something’s coming across the police band,” he informed them, brow furrowed as he listened to the rest of the transmitted message.

“Wait, you can hear that?” Sam looked up from his laptop, both surprised and impressed.

“It’s all waves.” Castiel brushed Sam’s question off as trivial and obvious, and he looked over at Dean. “A bank has been robbed. It sounds loony.”

“Define ‘loony.’ ” Dean stood up, moving a step towards the seraph. “As in our kind of loony?”

“I saw it on that cartoon.” Castiel turned to look down at the black tv screen, only looking back at the hunters when Alex made a noise of confusion. “They said a security guard was crushed. By an anvil.”

“That sounds pretty interesting.” Alex admitted, a little disappointed that she would miss it, and she
looked down at Ashiel; he was standing in front of Castiel, fingers busy investigating the lowest button on his coat. “So I guess you guys will be leaving now.”

Sam and Dean voiced their agreement, but Castiel seemed a little hesitant. “Perhaps I could stay behind,” he offered, sensing the crestfallen look in her eyes. “It seems like you’re better at … talking to people than I am, and it would be nice to spend time with Ashiel before he leaves.”

“That would be great, Cas.” Alex hurried over to where her blazer lay spread across the bed. She let out a soft sigh. “Don’t get too attached,” she added quietly when Dean disappeared into the bathroom. “He’s leaving in the next day or two.”

Soft wings brushed down her back, and Alex closed her eyes. “You’re very much attached yourself,” the seraph reminded before he pulled his feathers away.

Yeah, well, no point in both of us hurting, right?” Alex shrugged her jacket. “And before you ask, I’m fine. What’s a little pain?”

Castiel clearly didn’t find her comment amusing, because a frown clouded his face. Thankfully, however, he made no comment, and Dean’s return from the bathroom ended the conversation for good. “Ready?” he asked Alex and Sam. When they both nodded, he reached down and ruffled Ash’s hair. “See you in the morning, Ace.”

“Say bye, Ash,” Alex prompted as they moved towards the door.

“Bye bye!” Ashiel waved after them, and Alex smiled at the sudden confusion that spread across his face when he saw that his mother was leaving, and the last thing she saw was him looking up at Castiel, eyes wide in a silent question.

Blood was splattered all across the tile floor, spread out in a wide circle that all lead back to the mess of bloody tissue. An anvil stood in the center, black as coal. Alex circled it, black wings twitching in curiosity as she studied the crime scene. “No offense, but this is way cooler than putting a toddler to bed,” she joked quietly to Dean, who followed her path.

She saw Dean roll his eyes, and she stopped next to Sam as she completed her circuit. “That’s looney, alright,” he admitted, hands casually in his pockets as his eyes traced over the anvil.

“Agents.” Alex turned at the sound of Detective Glass’s voice. She was still wearing her dark, thin suit, and her face was set into its typical deep frown. “No offense, but this is way cooler than putting a toddler to bed,” she joked quietly to Dean, who followed her path.

She saw Dean roll his eyes, and she stopped next to Sam as she completed her circuit. “That’s looney, alright,” he admitted, hands casually in his pockets as his eyes traced over the anvil.

“Agents.” Alex turned at the sound of Detective Glass’s voice. She was still wearing her dark, thin suit, and her face was set into its typical deep frown. “I was just about to give you a ring. Got to ask. Do you guys chase crazy, or does the crazy chase you?”

“Depends on the day,” Sam joked.

“Who’s the pancake?” Dean added, motioning down toward the mutilated body.

The detective followed his gaze. “Security guard,” she reported. “He called in reporting a robbery, but by the time we got here —”

“A robbery?” Dean asked.

“Looks like the ‘Black Hole’ was trying to jimmy open a safe-deposit box when Rent-A-Cop found him,” Glass explained, turning her head back towards the far wall, and Alex saw a large, perfectly-circular black mark on the plaster wall as the detective continued, “And well, you know how that story ends.”
“Wait, wait. Black Hole?” Alex repeated, head cocked to one side. “Is that a person?”

The woman nodded. “It’s the name for a burglar that’s been running us ragged. He’s a pro; no fingerprints, never any signs of forced entry, just a pair of those every time. Like he’s signing his work.” The exasperation in her voice faded slightly as she motioned back down towards the anvil. “Perp’s never done anything like that before, though. Obviously.”

“You mind if I take a look at your files on the other break-ins?” Sam asked, and Detective Glass nodded.

“No skin off my nose. I’m headed back to the station now if you want a ride.”

“Perfect.” Sam followed Glass back towards the door, leaving Alex and Dean standing alone with the body. Alex watched as Dean circled around the splatter one more time, stepping carefully to avoid the piles of blood and flesh.

“Hey,” he finally asked, pointing towards the anvil. “Think you can lift this?”

Alex stared at the heavy iron block, and her wings flicked as she considered her options. “I … I can try,” she shrugged. She moved closer, careful to avoid the puddles as she gripped the iron lip and pulled. Her grace, strengthened by Lucifer’s, swirled outwards, through her muscles and into the anvil, and after a moment it shifted. A second later it moved as easily as a suitcase, and Alex set it up on its side as she turned back to Dean. “Boom. Magic.”

Dean didn’t pay her any attention, too busy staring down at what was revealed, and Alex looked down to see a large, black ‘x’ in the center, clearly seen among the flattened remains. “X marks the spot.” Dean put his hands on his hips. “Well, whoever’s doing this is playing by cartoon rules.”

“Yeah, that certainly explains the black hole.” Alex moved over to the dark circle, Dean on her heels, and she reached out to touch the wall. “It’s solid.” She turned back to the hunter, confusion on her face. “Why? If the thief did come through here, why isn’t it working now?”

“I got no clue.” Dean shook his head. “I — maybe Sam will find something, huh? Let’s get back to the room.” He started towards the door, turning on his heels to point back at her as he added, “How does Chinese sound? I’m fucking hungry.”

The motel was softly lit by a far lamp, casting dark and foreign shadows all across the room. Alex stood in the middle, her black and gold wings draped loosely over her back as she stared down at the small shape curled in the center of the bed. Small wings acted like a soft, downy blanket for the fledgling as he lay curled up on his stomach, fast asleep.

Alex let out a quiet sigh, moving forward on silent feet. She sat down on the bed, careful not to disturb the sleeping toddler, and rested a gentle hand on his back. “Don’t worry,” she murmured as the fledgling stirred slightly under her touch. “You don’t even know what’s going on, do you? Your whole world is going to change, micaelaz, and you need to be brave.” She stroked his soft wings, still far too small for flight. “I don’t want you to go,” she finally whispered, voice cracking ever so slightly. “I wish I could go with you to heaven, but I can’t. Not without Cas.” Her hand moved to his blonde head, and she ran her fingers through his hair as she admitted, “I’m not worried about you, though. You’re strong, and you’re going to have a good family and a long life. I … I’m scared about what will happen to me when you’re gone. You’re the reason I’m still alive, darilapa. Now that Castiel’s back, I think I’ll be okay, but if he leaves … again … I’m afraid of what I’ll do.” The angel let out a sigh and reluctantly pulled her hand away. “Good night, Ash. I’m going to go help the
Winchesters, but I’ll see you again when you wake up.”

She pressed a light kiss on his exposed forehead before she drew away from the bed. A push of her wings carried her through the motel wall and into the next-door room where Castiel and Dean sat on opposite beds facing each other, deep in a quiet conversation. Dean was leaning forward on his elbows, face dark with some emotion, and Castiel’s wings were pulled in close, and when Alex heard what he was saying, she understood why. “—I’m afraid I might kill myself,” the seraph admitted. He cut off suddenly when he registered Alex’s appearance, and she didn’t miss the slight widening in his blue eyes.

She moved to sit down next to Castiel, shrugging off his comment best she could. “Well, get in line,” she half-joked, trying to make the tension disappear. When her comment did nothing, she sighed it off. “It’s been a rough year for all of us,” she ended up saying, one wing folding against her mate’s shoulder.

The door opened across the room and Sam walked in, a map and some files tucked under his left arm. He barely looked up to notice the three of them huddled by the beds as he spread the map out across the table. “Hey. Got something,” he announced.

“Good.” Castiel stood up, his movements knocking Alex’s wing off of him. “What?” She followed him over to the younger Winchester, leaving his brother sitting on the bed by himself for a few seconds before he joined them.

“So this ‘Black Hole’ guy. Before he robbed the bank, he robbed a house across from the park where Gary blew a gasket,” the Winchester announced as he put the folders down on the table, referring back to the first victim that had brought them into town.

“So, uh, you think the house heist and Gary’s corpse are connected?”

“According to the file, they happened at pretty much the exact same time,” Sam agreed. “Here. Check this out.” He held down both ends of the map so everyone could see the cluster of ‘x’s drawn in with a thick sharpie. The clusters were circled with the same medium, and Alex watched as Sam pointed to a particular group with two marks. “Here’s the house, and Gary died across the street here. And that building from today — right here. The Black Hole hit that, too.”

“Let me guess — where, uh, what’s his name took a swan dive,” Dean finished as he looked up at his brother. When Sam nodded, he continued, “Alright. I’ll bite. What about the others?”

“Well, those are the places that stuff got stolen. But nobody got dead.” Sam motioned to the other clusters on the map. “Take away the graffiti, and all these look like normal smash-and-grabs. But I made a few phone calls, talked to some people who were nearby —” He held out a file, and Castiel was quick to take it “—neighbors and whatnot — and they reported a whole lot of crazy.”

“Crazy?” Alex repeated. “What kind of crazy?” She peered over the seraph’s shoulder at the robbery reports.

“Like a jogger bumping his head and sprouting a four inch lump. Or a kid walking into the walls and hearing birdies. Basically, for fifty yards around each robbery, people were living in a cartoon. But it didn’t last long — I mean, five, ten, minutes at each place.”

“About the length of time it would take the thief to get in and out,” Castiel estimated, and his answer was met with nods from everyone.

“Exactly,” Sam vocalized. “But whatever power he’s using, it’s — it’s — it’s not targeted. I mean, it
— it’s like of like an area of effect.” He must have seen the confusion on his brother’s face, because he elaborated, “I mean, picture him in a — in a bubble of weird, and anything that touches it gets … daffy.”

“So this ‘Animaniac’ can step through walls, toss an anvil?” Dean asked

“Yeah, but he’s warping reality to do it. So if someone happens to be nearby meeting the girl of his dreams …”

“His heart makes a break for it,” Dean finished, and Sam threw up his hands in agreement. “Okay, so smashing the, uh, the rent-a-cop, that — that was on purpose, but the rest of them — what? Is that just collateral weird?”

“Maybe,” Sam agreed.

“Okay, so then what are we looking for?” Alex took the folder from Cas’ hands and flipped through the pages, skipping through the autopsy photos and skimming the black printed letters, unsure what it was exactly she was looking for. “A thief — the thief.”

“And the safety deposit box he was after,” Sam added. “Now, the house, the office — every place he’s hit belonged to someone living at the Sunset Fields Retirement Home.”

“So you think our guy’s there,” she concluded.

“Worth a shot.”

“Alright.” Dean nodded. “Let’s gear up. It’s wabbit season.” He grinned over at Alex, who mimicked his amusement.

Sam smiled as well, leaving Castiel to frown. “I don’t think you pronounced that correctly,” he informed Dean, leaning towards the hunter as he lowered his voice. The Winchester’s grin faded, and he blinked.

“Uh, I’ll explain it to him.” Alex reached down and took the seraph’s hand as she turned in to face Dean. “Um, I think we’ll let you guys get some sleep, huh? We’ll see you in the morning.” When Dean nodded she flew back to their room, Castiel close on her heels. When she landed, Alex motioned that Cas should sit at the table, and she did the same. “Now what?” she asked.

“Well, I assume you’ll want to talk about what I said,” the seraph answered, and Alex didn’t miss the way he shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

He looked relieved when she shook her head. “I told you,” she replied, leaning forward. “It’s been a bad year for all of us. I know exactly where you are — I’ve been there myself — and if you want to talk about it, I’m here, but I’m not going to make you talk about it.”

“Oh, I’ll explain it to him.” Alex reached down and took the seraph’s hand as she turned in to face Dean. “Um, I think we’ll let you guys get some sleep, huh? We’ll see you in the morning.” When Dean nodded she flew back to their room, Castiel close on her heels. When he landed, Alex motioned that Cas should sit at the table, and she did the same. “Now what?” she asked.

“Well, I assume you’ll want to talk about what I said,” the seraph answered, and Alex didn’t miss the way he shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

He looked relieved when she shook her head. “I told you,” she replied, leaning forward. “It’s been a bad year for all of us. I know exactly where you are — I’ve been there myself — and if you want to talk about it, I’m here, but I’m not going to make you talk about it.”

“Okay,” Castiel nodded. “Thank you. I assume I’ll just sit here while you and Ashiel sleep.” He turned his eyes towards the fledgling, but once again to his surprise, Alex shook her head.

“Strike two, Sherlock. I’m not sleeping ever again.” Her grace carefully poked and prodded at Lucifer’s, but it remained petulantly inactive.

Castiel noticed, and his own grace crept outwards curiously. “You still have his grace,” he murmured, disappointment weighing down his tone. “You’ve been dreaming about him all this time.”
“No, actually.” The young angel shrugged and leaned back, slinging one arm around the top of the chair. “I mean, I stopped sleeping when I found Ash, and I only started dreaming again when Dean came back. It’s just … he wasn’t happy to learn you were back.”

“I imagine not,” the seraph agreed. After a second or two of silence, he added, “I was worried about what he would do to you.”

Alex opened her mouth to point out that she was fine, that Lucifer wouldn’t hurt her, but after a second she shook her head. “He’s different,” she ended up promising. “I’m not afraid of him anymore.”

“I wasn’t worried about that,” Castiel countered, his voice lowered as not to wake the fledgling. “Lucifer is very good at getting what he wants by whatever means he chooses.”

“Cas? I know.” Alex kicked him under the table with a gentle roll of her eyes and a shrug of her shoulders, feathers ruffling as her shoulders rose and fell. “I guess … he’s actually been nice company. It doesn’t matter, though. He knows you’re back and that you’re still my mate, and that’s all that matters.” She paused for three seconds, waiting for Castiel to respond, but when he didn’t she rose to her feet. “Come on.” She held out a hand. “I’ve got some nature documentaries queued up on Netflix. Been making a list ever since you left.”

“That sounds … appealing.” The seraph placed his own, larger hand in hers and rose to his feet. “What did you have in mind?”

“Deep sea exploration.” A huge grin broke out across Alex’s face, and she pulled Castiel towards the empty bed. “Have you seen those fish down there? Those things are creepy.” She grabbed her laptop on the way and flopped down on the mattress, scooting up to rest against the headboard. She tripped on the sheets and fell backwards, head banging against the wall with a sharp huff of disgust.

Castiel joined her on the bed, one hand coming up to rest on her temple. “Are you okay?” he asked, and Alex leaned into his touch.

“I’m fine,” she promised, resituating herself on the bed as she flipped open her laptop. “Here,” she added, untangling a pair of earbuds and handing one to the seraph. “Para ti.”

“Thank you.” Castiel hesitated, waiting until Alex slipped hers into her ear before he did the same. “It’s … nice to be back,” he finally murmured as Alex logged into her account. “I’ve missed you.”

“Shh.” Alex leaned back into the seraph as she clicked on the documentary she wanted to watch. “Quiet, it’s starting.” She rolled her head so it rested against his shoulder, nose brushing just under his jaw. From there she could just barely see Castiel’s blue eyes, their color nearly indiscernible through the darkness of the room, and she smiled. “I missed you too.”

Alex followed Dean and Castiel into the Sunset Fields Retirement Home, wings flicking at the sudden, overwhelming smell of old people. Sam was back at the motel, having volunteered to stay behind and watch Ashiel, and honestly, Alex couldn’t understand why she had been talked into agreeing. Old people were creepy. “I don’t get it,” she muttered to Dean, lengthening her stride to walk side by side with the Winchester. “Why was Sam the one to stay behind? He’s the only one here that’s good with creepy old people.”

“Oh thank God I’m not the only one who gets the heebs and or jeebs from this place.” The hunter kept his voice low as they approached the common area, and Alex only huffed in agreement as a
older man in a suit walked up to them. He seemed younger than everyone else in the building, in his early fifties no doubt, and Alex quickly worked him out to be one of the head of the staff.

“Hello,” he began, stopping the three of them and running a quick eye over their formal appearance. “Can I help you?”

“Yeah.” Dean reached into his suit pocket to produce his identification, and Alex quickly did the same. “Agent Crosby. FBI.” He flashed his badge for only a brief second before he put it away, but Alex held hers out for a little while longer until the man nodded his head.

“Sorry,” he apologized. “I’m Dr. Dwight Mahoney. I run Sunset Fields.”

“We need to question your residents,” Castiel explained, cutting off quickly when Alex flicked her wing back into his chest; she appreciated his attempts to be useful, but right now it was best for all of them to let Dean do the talking.

The doctor looked confused at the seraph’s request, blinking twice before he asked, “Well … why? About what?” When Castiel didn’t immediately answer he turned to Dean,

“Oh, grand larceny,” the Winchester explained.

“Our need to question your residents,” Castiel explained, cutting off quickly when Alex flicked her wing back into his chest; she appreciated his attempts to be useful, but right now it was best for all of them to let Dean do the talking.

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“Uh, grand larceny,” the Winchester explained.

“Of course.” Dr. Mahoney glanced over his shoulder at the residents behind him, and Alex lifted her chin to see past him. There were maybe ten to fifteen men and woman in the commons area, some holding a somewhat intelligible conversation, while others just sat staring off into space. “Um, by all means ask away,” the doctor added. “If there’s anything I can do, just let me know.”

“Great.” Dean waited until Mahoney walked off before he strolled forward a few feet. “Alright, let’s do this,” he decided, turning back to look at the two angels. “No flirting, you two.”

He turned to walk away, and Alex and Castiel exchanged confused looks before the young angel hurried back to Dean’s side. “Wait wait what? Do you really expect such low levels of professionalism from us?” she added humorously.

Dean shrugged. “Well, you know, I just figured after last night…” he joked, green eyes flickering over her head to Castiel, who was already making his way towards one of the residents.

Alex didn’t track with his implications, and she scratched the side of her head. “Last night?” she repeated, an eyebrow cocked. “You mean when Cas and I went back to our room and watched nature documentaries?”

White teeth flashed as the Winchester’s lips lifted upwards in a grin. “Sure,” he ribbed. “‘Nature.’”

“Yeah, actually,” Alex retorted with a good-humored roll of her eyes. “About the deep sea.” She scoffed at how Dean repeated the word ‘deep’ after her, amusement flashing in his eyes, and she reached up to pinch the bridge of her nose. “N-Never mind. Forget I said anything. Nothing happened,” she added.

The Winchester raised an eyebrow. “You sure?” he teased. When Alex rolled her eyes, he persisted, “Sorry, Pip, but banging on the walls usually means one thing.”

“Banging?” the angel repeated. She glanced over her shoulder to see Castiel sitting across from an old man, head bowed in conversation, and she turned back to the Winchester, planning to wrap this visit up as quick as possible. “As in singular? I hit my head on the wall. Once. That’s the only ‘wall banging’ that I remember. I … I didn’t even kiss him, okay?” she admitted, cheeks coloring slightly. “Just … let’s just get these interrogations done. And stop trying to get me to sleep with Cas,” the
“Especially while we’re around old people. That’s weird, De.”

“The only thing that’s weird is that you haven’t hit that,” the hunter retorted, but he gave up on his persistent questions. “Fine. Let’s get this over with.” He clapped Alex on the shoulder, brushing past her with a teasing, “This isn’t over.”

Alex leaned back in the rickety wooden chair, taking in the room that lay out around her. Dean was standing up near a large cork board, probably studying the pictures of the different residents that lived in Sunset Fields as he talked to someone on the phone. Castiel was knelt across the room, arms crossed on top of one knee and face scrunched up in concentration as he stared down at the long-haired orange tom cat that lay on the black coffee table. It flicked its tail every few seconds as the seraph spoke to it in a low, hurried voice, and Alex rolled her eyes.

“Alex.” Dean waved her over, and Alex rose to her feet. Four steps carried her to the hunter, and he stuffed his phone back into his pocket. “Here.” He tapped his pointer finger on the photo of an old, senile man. “Fred Jones. Lived outside of Salt Lake, was one of my dad’s contacts. Uh, he was psychokinetic.”

“Psychokinetic?” Alex repeated. “As in controlling things with his mind?” Dean nodded, and her gaze flickered back onto the photograph. “Wow, okay. So then what’s he doing here?”

“No idea, but he’s in room 114. Cas.” The Winchester raised his voice, drawing the seraph’s attention over to them. “Let’s go.”

Castiel frowned. “I’ve almost cracked him,” he insisted, wings twitching in frustration that he was being called away so close to completing his task.

“Now.”

The seraph rose to his feet, and, with one last glare down at the tom, joined Alex in front of Dean. “What is it?” he asked, and a navy wing hit Alex’s shoulder as it flicked unhappily. He quickly glanced over at her in apology, and a twitch of Alex’s own wings forgave him.

The entire exchange went unnoticed by the Winchester. “Come on. Fred Jones, room 114.” Dean led the way down the hall. “He’s an old friend, and he’s psychokinetic. He could be a part of this.” From the open door they could hear the tell-tale sound of cartoons, and Dean stepped inside.

A man sat in a wheelchair in the center of the room, eyes turned, unblinking, up towards the television. His mouth hung open slightly as he watched, and he didn’t notice their entrance. Dean cleared his throat. “Fred?” When the man didn’t answer he turned off the tv and clapped his hands loudly. “Fred! Hey!”

Fred Jones didn’t respond; he didn’t even look away from the black screen. Alex stretched out her grace towards the man, feeling the energy that spilled from him. “He’s definitely a loose cannon,” Alex slowly agreed. “There’s some serious power there.”

“So, you really think this one man is causing all of these … shenanigans?” Castiel stopped behind the old man, head tipped as he considered the possibility.

“Well, if he is, he’d be surrounded by a circle of crazy, right? Hang on.” Dean looked around, and his hands wrapped around a large, leather-bound book. Before Alex could ask what he was doing, he swung the book up and into his forehead. The room echoed with a loud clang, and the sound of
little birds came from around Dean’s head. They stopped when the Winchester shook his head, clearing them away. “Wow. Bingo.”

“That’s … awesome.” Alex looked down at Mr. Jones. “Okay, so we know he’s got the juice. Now what? Does he have like a — an off-switch or something?”

“Dunno. I don’t even think he knows we’re here,” Dean admitted, and Alex couldn’t help but nod in agreement; the old man hadn’t even acknowledged their presence once.

Castiel’s head tipped slightly to one side as he contemplated their next move. “Do we … kill him?” he finally guessed, looking over at Alex for support.

“Excuse me, agents.” Dr. Mahoney stopped in the doorway, face blank with shock. An orderly stood behind him, the same emotion decorating his own expression. “Did he just … threaten to murder one of my patients?”

“W-What?” Alex forced out a laugh. “Course not. He, uh —” she looked up at Castiel before saying, “ — it’s a code phrase. The higher ups have this really sick sense of humor —”

“I think it’s time for the three of you to leave.” The doctor’s arms folded across his chest, and he and the orderly moved further into the room to leave a clear path to the door. “Unless I need to call the police.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Dean moved towards the door, and a glance behind him had both angels following. “We’ll show ourselves out.” The hunter left the room and started down the hall, and only when they were out of earshot did he mutter, “Real fucking smooth, Cas.”

The seraph’s wings flicked at the Winchester’s harsh words. “Well, we don’t have to leave him,” he offered. “I could teleport him.”

“No way, man.” Dean shook his head. “Dude’s toxic. You zap him somewhere and there’s no telling what he’ll do. No. We’ll circle back tonight, get Fred nice and clean. You go Invisible Girl and keep an eye on him. You hear me?”

Before Dean even finished his last sentence, Castiel’s wings rustled, signalling his disappearance. Dean paused to look behind him, nodding in satisfaction to see that he was gone. “He’ll look after Fred,” Alex promised, and she hesitantly reached up to touch Dean’s arm, drawing his attention back down to her. “Go easy on the poor guy, okay? It’s his first time actually working a case, so stop giving him shit when he screws up.”

“If he can’t do it right, then he shouldn’t do it at all,” the hunter reminded, hands shoved into his pockets as he led them towards the door. “He just got us freaking kicked out. How the hell are we supposed to trust him if he’s gonna keep doing this?”

Alex shook her head, not able to find a good answer. “I don’t know,” she finally admitted. “But he’s Cas, so you gotta be patient. Just … give him a chance.”

Dean got the call from Castiel less than an hour later. “What?” The hunter leaned forward in his chair before nodding earnestly. “Uh, yeah. We’ll be right there. Cas says there was a ‘pastry mishap’ down at Sunset Fields,” he informed Sam and Alex as he hung up. “Don’t know what that means, but he said it was our kind of thing.”

“Great.” Sam closed his laptop and got to his feet. “Then let’s go.”
Alex looked up from the tower of blocks she was almost done constructing, and her wings flicked in menial frustration as Ashiel took her moment of distraction as opportunity to knock it all down. “Go,” she encouraged. “Uh, call me after you’re done, though. Maybe we can meet up for dinner.”

“Course.” Dean shrugged on his jacket and stuffed his wallet into his back pocket with a nod. “See you then.”

Sam and Dean left, and Alex turned back to the pile of colorful blocks that lay at her feet. Her feathers stirred at a sudden breeze, and she heard a squeal of excitement from the fledgling. “Gabriel.” Her grace told her who it was before she even turned around.

“Hey, Pipsqueak.” The archangel dropped down onto the ground next to her, a lopsided grin across his narrow face as Ashiel stood up to greet him. “I was starting to think those boneheads would never leave.”

Alex huffed. “How long have you been waiting?” she teased. “They’ve only been here for like an hour.”

“That’s beside the point.” Gabriel waved her question off with a flick of his wings. With a dramatic flourish of his hands, he produced a large, green bouncy ball, and Ashiel clapped his hands in delight as the archangel held it out.

“He has, like, fifty of those now,” Alex joked as the fledgling forcefully hurled the ball down onto the ground, knees bending in exertion. It barely bounced, the thick carpeting absorbing the impact. “I don’t think he needs a new one every time you come by.”

Gabriel just rolled his eyes at her words, but said nothing about it before he changed the subject. “So any news on you-know-what?” he asked instead, hands going back to prop himself up as he leaned back.

“Ezekiel says two, maybe three days.” Alex leaned forward and scooped the rubber ball up. “Here, buddy. Go try bouncing the ball over by the table, okay?” She waited until Ashiel hurried off before she let her wings droop. “Their names are Eremiel and Laura, and Ezekiel says they’re good angels.”

“So this is probably the last time I’ll be seeing him, huh?”

Alex looked up into his face, trying yet failing to judge the emotion that sat in his golden eyes. Was it sadness? Sympathy? “Why? You gonna miss him?” The young angel watched how the archangel’s shoulders rose and fell in a noncommittal shrug, and she lowered her voice. “Well,” she admitted, “I’m going to miss him.”

Gabriel stayed for another fifteen or so minutes, but soon left claiming he had “important business to attend to.” Alex let him go, but no less than ten minutes later did her phone ring. She scooped it up off of the bed and answered. “Dean? Hey.”

“Hey-a, Pip. Looks like we’re gonna have to cancel dinner.”


“Fred’s missing, and one of the orderlies was caught wearing one of the resident’s jewelry,” Dean relayed, and his voice was tight as he added, “She said her boyfriend gave it to her. I’m with Sam and Cas, and we’re going to go check him out.”
Alex’s wings twitched uncomfortably. “Be careful,” she pleaded. “I—I can be there in five minutes. Maybe less. I don't think you guys should be going in against Fred alone, Dean.”

“No can do. We’re two minutes out, and we got this. You stay there with the kid, okay?” The Winchester’s voice was stern, and the angel’s lips set into a tight frown. “Alright?” he persisted when she didn’t immediately answer. “Watch out for Ash.”

“Yeah, yeah. Alright.” Alex hung up and tossed her phone onto the bed behind her. Great. Why did she have to feel so useless? Her eyes turned onto her son, tracing over the soft outline of his head and wings, and she shook that feeling away. Taking care of Ashiel wasn’t useless. But the Winchesters could be dying out there, that little voice reminded her. Castiel isn’t at full strength. No promises he’ll save them. What is they die tonight because you weren’t there —

“Stop it.” Her own, harsh voice startled her, snapping her out of her mental struggle. Ashiel looked up in surprise, immediately freezing what he had been doing, and Alex sunk to her knees in front of him. “Sorry, baby,” she apologized, running a gentle hand through his hair. “Mommy wasn’t talking to you. But Dean’s right. Somebody needs to watch you,” she added, grace curling forward around the young fledgling. “But if not me, then who?”

“Mama.” Ashiel held out the green rubber ball, a smile growing across his face as his mother took the time to examine his treasure. “Mine.”

“Yes, that’s your ball,” Alex agreed even as the idea came to her. “And that’s a very bad idea, Ash, but right now, I’m willing to go with it. Gabriel?” she added, raising her voice. “How important were those plans of yours?”

“Not very,” came the reply from across the room, and as the mess of golden feathers drew back, the archangel came into view. He landed gracefully on his feet as he added with cocked eyebrows, “Why? You got something better?”

“That depends on how much better babysitting is.” Alex jumped to her feet as her wings stretched out and down in greeting. The archangel didn’t immediately protest, so she launched back into her speech. “I swear I won’t be gone more than an hour, and please try not to do anything stupid. Watch a Disney movie, go out for ice cream, play with the atrocious number of bouncy balls the two of you have amassed. I don’t care. Just take care of him.”

“I’m starting to get the feeling you don’t trust me,” Gabriel joked, golden eyes sparkling with amusement as if he knew something she didn’t. “Fine. I promise. Scout’s honor, half-pint.”

“Thank you. I’ll be right back. If you need anything — anything — you call me.” Her black and gold wings unfolded from her body and carried her up into the sky, leaving the fledgling and the archangel all alone.

It took her grace less than a minute to pinpoint Castiel and the Winchesters, and she took off through the darkening November sky. Her wings brought her to a dark, one story rambler with the front door busted wide open. The angel landed on the front step as her grace did a quick sweep of the inside: three familiar faces, one new. She hurried inside to find the new soul — a man, quite bloody — sitting in a chair and staring up at the hunters. “What happened to him?” she demanded, moving past the overturned kitchen table to stand beside Castiel.

“He was shot,” the seraph explained, squinting down in confusion at her presence.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Dean added, a frown clear in his voice and on his face. “Where the hell is Ash? You didn't just leave him there.”
“Course not,” the angel retorted, and her wings flicked in displeasure at the implications that she was that irresponsible. “He’s back at the motel, and he’s safe. He’s with an angel right now, so it’s okay.”

“Who?” the Winchester demanded, but before Alex could retort that it was nobody he would know — nor was it any of his damn business — Castiel disappeared from the house.

Alex heard the stranger’s gasp of surprise and disbelief, but she only rolled her eyes. “Great,” she muttered under her breath. “Well, I guess we’ll be right back, then. Oh, and, uh, Fred’s not here,” she added.

Dean’s frown only deepened. “Yeah. We know. He’s at the bank with Dr. Mahoney. What do you mean ‘be right back?’ Where the hell did Cas go?”

“After the babysitter.” Alex turned towards the door, wings falling out as she prepared to leave. “And in case you’re wondering,” she added before anyone could ask it, “I’m going after him to make sure they don’t kill each other. So we’ll meet you at the bank.”

Alex landed in the motel room, wings drawing in tight at what lay before her. Castiel was pinned up against the far wall, clearly unable to move even though he surely must be trying with all his might. He was currently glowering over at what held him tight, and Alex stretched out her grace to confirm; Gabriel’s grace held him perfectly still, and Alex traced the tendrils back to the source. The archangel sat lazily on one of the beds, one eye on the seraph and the other on the fledgling.

“Whoa whoa whoa.” Alex snapped out her grace like a whip, drawing all attention to her. “The heck, guys? Seriously?” She swung her head over to Gabriel. “You — just let him go.”

“You said he was gone,” Gabriel reminded; however, he released the seraph, who thankfully had enough sense to stay where he was. “You know,” the archangel continued, unperturbed the the seraph’s anger, “the polite thing to do is to let a guy know when your boyfriend is back in town.”

Castiel’s wings flared out angrily, primaries brushing up against the cracked ceiling, and Gabriel was quick to respond to the challenge. His face remained smug, but his own wings unfolded, spanning the entire length of the room. “Really, hotshot?” he quipped when Castiel’s angel blade slid into his hands. “In front of the kid?”

“Cas!” Alex rounded on the seraph at the sight, mouthing hanging open in disbelief. “No! Put that away.”

“And they say I’m a bad influence.” A golden wing curled inwards, herding Ashiel in closer. The fledgling responded willingly, babbling some monologue about the two rubber balls in his hands as he moved closer to Gabriel until he was completely hidden from view from the others.

“Don’t touch him.” The warning rumbled deep within Castiel’s chest, and Alex put a hand across his sternum to keep him back. “He’s not yours.”

“Last I checked, you weren’t winning any Father of the Year awards yourself.” When his comment got no reply, Gabriel heaved an overly dramatic sigh and rose to his feet. “Listen,” he began, using his wing to guide Ashiel behind him while still keeping him out of sight. “If you’re worried I’m going to take the kid or the girl, you’re wrong. If I wanted either, I’d have had them a long time ago. Understand?”

Castiel didn’t respond, and Alex rolled her eyes, shoulders falling in exasperation. “Yeah. Thanks for that,” she muttered under her breath. “Really helping.”
Feathers rustled as the archangel shrugged. “Just stating the facts, Hot Wings. Look.” Gabriel’s amber gaze swung over to Castiel. “This isn’t the first fledgling I’ve been around,” he said, and when all of the playfulness left his tone Alex got the feeling there was mutual knowledge between the two that she wasn’t aware of. “And I know you don’t trust me after what happened, but I had my reasons for running. I don’t expect you to understand. But that doesn’t change the fact that I was here. I know more about this kid than you ever will.” Gabriel’s eyes flashed as the hardened, and Alex backed up to stand at Castiel’s side. “I was there before he could talk, and I was there when he said his first words. Where were you?”

Castiel raised his chin, and the two angels were locked in a nonverbal contest. Alex’s toes curled uncomfortably, and she stepped forward. “Okay, I think that’s enough conversation for one night.” She stretched out her arms to keep the two apart as she added, “Cas, why don’t we go see how the Winchesters are doing, okay? I think Gabriel will be fine.” She smacked the seraph on the chest when he didn’t look away. “Cas. Now.”

Castiel let out a growl, so low it could barely be perceived, but he thrust his wings down and disappeared. The tension in the room immediately faded, and Alex let out a breath she didn’t know she had been holding. “Is it just me,” Gabriel commented dryly from behind her, “or is he PMSing a little more than usual?”

Alex’s wings flicked in frustration at his wit. “Just don’t kill the kid, okay?” With that, Alex took off after Castiel.

She found him on the roof of the back all the way across town, wings drawn in tightly as he stared down at the street below. The arch twitched slightly as she landed behind him, but he didn’t turn around. “I’m guessing you want to talk about this, huh?” she asked as walked up to the seraph, hands shoved in her jean pockets as she awaited his response.

“No.” To her surprise, Cas shook his head. “Gabriel was right. I … I overreacted.”

“Oh.” The young angel blinked twice in surprise; in every scenario she had played out in her head on the way over, ‘no’ was not a response she had been expecting. “Uh, yeah. Understatement. So … uh … he’s been around fledglings before, huh? I’ll admit I never saw that one coming,” She added a small laugh at the end, hoping to lighten up Castiel’s somber mood.

It didn’t seem to work. “Contrary to … popular belief, our Father didn’t create us the way we are now,” he began quietly, eyes turned out over the street below. “We were young, ingenuous to the ways of heaven, and not fully formed. The archangels, as you know, were created first. It’s … funny, God’s most powerful creations having been first made as innocent as a child.” Castiel stared out over the street in a moment of thought before he added, “The rest of the angels were created later. When he was still in heaven, Gabriel often chose to spend his time caring for some of them — of us. I was one of the fledgling he often spent his time among.”

“I didn’t know you were a kid once.” Alex stretched out her grace to curl against his as she tried to picture it. “That’s pretty cool.”

“It was a long time ago. But yes.” Castiel turned to face her as his grace responded, and his eyes flickered from side to side momentarily, unsure where to rest his gaze. “We weren’t like Ashiel, of course. Our growth was more spiritual in nature as we had no physical form.”

“Okay, well that’s still pretty cool.” Alex reached out to touch Castiel’s arm, and his eyes came to rest on where her palm rested against forearm. She was about to make another comment, but her attention was drawn down towards the street as a familiar car turned the corner. “Speaking of cool, that’s our ride.”
Her wings carried her down to the street, Castiel close at her heels. They landed on the sidewalk as Dean threw the Impala into park and got out. “Glad you made it,” the hunter called as he circled around to the trunk. “Sam was betting you’d ditched.”

“Oh shut up.” Sam slammed the car door as he moved to stand in front of the two angels. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine.” Alex watched as Dean dug around in the trunk before she added, “Alrighty then. What’s the game plan? Two of us after Fred, and two of us after the doc?”

Dean nodded. “Cas, you’re with Sam,” he directed, checking the magazine in his Colt before he tucked it in the waistband of his jeans. “Find Fred Jones and see if you can somehow, uh, snap him out of it or something. Pip, you and me are going in.”

“Great.” The young angel grinned up at Cas, but when he didn’t seem as overjoyed at the prospect of her going in, she teasingly punched him in the arm. “See you on the flip side, then.” She flicked her wings in goodbye as she followed Dean across the street and down one of the alleyways.

“Here.” Dean hurried over to a dark circle on the wall of the bank. He hesitated before he reached out, and both of them grinned to see that Dean’s hand passed through. “Awesome.”

“Women and children first.” Alex bumped Dean out of the way and clambered through. She pinned her wings tightly against her back as not to brush them against the sides of the black hole, and for a second of two the darkness surrounded her, buzzing uncomfortably against her grace. In the next second, however, she was through and standing inside the bank.

A tap on her shoulder had her turning to see Dean, and he pointed off down the hall towards the open vault door. Alex nodded, letting the Winchester take the lead. Inside she could heard the metallic clangs of boxes on steel tables, and the faint and various rustlings as items were hurriedly shifted around. The sound grew louder as they grew nearer, and then one, familiar sound had all the others ceasing. Dean cocked his gun and stepped into the room, barrel pointed straight at Dr. Mahoney. “What’s up, Doc?”

Dr. Mahoney froze in surprise, light blue eyes darting between the two hunters. He straightened up slowly, hands dropping back to his side before he finally spoke. “You let me walk, half of this is yours.”

Alex watched as Dean looked down at the two large bags of money and jewels before he shook his head. “I think I’m gonna pass,” he quipped wryly. “I’m not really into stealing from sweet, old ladies.”

The doctor studied Dean for a few seconds before he shook his head. “I’m not stealing from them,” he retorted. “I’m stealing from their children. Little bastards think they can drop their folks off at a home and visit twice a year, maybe.” His voice rose in indignation. “I took care of all of those old geezers. I think I deserve —”

“I don’t care!” Dean snapped loudly, cutting the doctor off.

The man held his head up high. “Fine,” he finally said. “Have it your way.” He moved before either hunter could react, and then suddenly papers were up in the air, obscuring their vision. Next to her, Dean fell to the ground as a hand came out of nowhere, knocking him over and trying to do the same to the angel. She barely budged and lashed out, knocking the attacker’s arm away and sending him stumbling back towards the door, the extra weight of his bags causing his imbalance.
Alex heard the click of the hammer on Dean’s gun, and she looked down in surprise to find a red and yellow flag sticking out from the barrel, the word BANG! scrawled across in block letters. Dr. Mahoney righted himself with a small smirk. “Welcome to the funhouse.”

He turned and ran, leaving Alex to pull Dean to his feet. “Get after him!” the hunter snapped, knocking her arms away, and the angel nodded.

Black wings unfolded as she pushed them out and down, and she flew out the door and into the main room of the bank. Dr. Mahoney was halfway across the room as she touched down, and she reveled in the surprise and fear that paled his face. “Going somewhere?”

The doctor dropped his bags on the ground and reached into his jacket. The angel reacted accordingly, her own weapon sliding down into her hands before she paused in confusion. Dr. Mahoney pulled out a large, cast iron frying pan. She opened her mouth to ask where exactly he had managed to keep that, but before she could utter a word the doctor swung the frying pan backwards, winding up to swing it at her head, but a loud clang echoed throughout the empty bank as it collided with Dean’s face, who had been running up behind. The frying pan pulled away, Dean’s face clearly imprinted on the metal, and the hunter swayed on his feet for two seconds before he collapsed.

Alex took the second’s hesitation to step forward, blade sliding into the doctor’s chest as he hand came to rest on his forehead. A strangled cry bounced off of the stone walls, and Dr. Mahoney crumpled to the ground. “That’s all, folks,” she muttered under her breath as she stepped over the dead body. She paused beside Dean, who was staring up at the ceiling with a blank expression.

“You okay?” she asked, crouching casually down beside him. When Dean grunted in affirmation, she picked up the frying pan by the handle, twirling it in her hands to examine the imprint of the hunter’s face. “Here.” She dropped it on his stomach, grinning as he let out a sharp breath of surprise and instinctively curled up. “Memento.”

“What the hell happened?” Footsteps signaled the arrival of three men, and Alex looked up. Sam, Cas, and Fred Jones, who was apparently not only walking, but talking, too. “What did you do?”

“Oh, what?” Alex dropped so she was actually sitting on the tile floor. “I, uh, killed him.” She motioned towards the body with a disinterested wave of her weapon. “Stabbed, technically. It’s a … stabby weapon.” She brandished her blade one more time to distract them from the awkward end of her sentence before she let it rest in her lap.

“Fred.” Dean clambered to his feet, leaving Alex alone on the ground for a second or two before she slowly rose to stand beside him. “It’s you.”

“You okay?” Sam placed a shoulder on the old man as he stared down at the body of Dr. Mahoney.

“Now I’m okay,” Fred Jones finally said. “In a month, a year …” He looked up at both of the Winchesters as he sighed. “Nobody gets sharper with age. I’m gonna lose control again, and somebody’s gonna get hurt … again. You gotta make it stop.”

The brothers exchanged looks, both thinking what the other was, and Alex shifted uncomfortably on the ground as the old man’s gaze turned upon her.

“There might be a way,” Castiel eventually said. “The procedure will be painful, and … when it’s over, I’m not sure how much of you will be left.”

Alex watched as Fred hesitated and then drew in a sharp, decisive breath. “Well?” he asked. “What are you waiting for?” He turned to face the seraph, shoulders rolling back slightly as he steeled himself.
Castiel blinked, slightly surprised at the man’s impatience. “I … I don’t think here is a good place,” he informed him. “You won’t want to be standing. It would be far better to proceed back at the retirement home.”

“Alright then. Let’s go.” The old man turned towards the door, looking to go, and Alex saw Castiel’s wings unfurl from his shoulders before the both of them were gone.

“I should probably be getting back to Ash,” she added, drawing the Winchester’s attention down to her. “I promised the babysitter I won’t be gone for very long anyways. See you back at the motel in ten.” When Sam nodded, her wings carried her out through the bank and into the sky.

Gabriel and Ashiel were still in the motel room when she arrived. Gabriel was sitting on the floor, leaning back against the bed, with the fledgling on the mattress above him, flat on his stomach as they both watched Frollo and Quasimodo face off in the final, desperate finale of Disney’s Hunchback of Notre Dame. A bowl of popcorn sat in the archangel’s lap, and every so often he’d set a handful of popped kernels up on the bed for Ashiel to enjoy.

“Are you kidding me?” Alex flopped down onto the ground next to Gabriel, eyes glued to the screen. “How — I wasn’t even gone for an hour. How are you already almost done with the movie?”

The archangel shrugged. “We skipped the boring parts,” he explained, and Ashiel made a loud noise of agreement as he stuffed another piece of popcorn into his mouth.

“Huh.” The young angel fell silent for a moment as she watched, and her wings twitched as she eventually added, “Well, the Winchesters will be back in ten minutes, so you better be gone by then.”

“Yeah, no problemo.” Gabriel didn’t move, and Alex took the opportunity to grab a handful of popcorn from his bowl, ignoring how the archangel’s massive golden wings flicked against her body in protest. “Where’s Cas? Thought he’d be coming back with you.”

“He’s taking care of something.” Alex shrugged, head tipping upwards as Ashiel put his small hand on the top of her head. “Hey, you,” she teased, grace stretching up to curl around his. “So, uh, Cas told me you hung out with a lot of the angels when they were younger, huh?”

Gabriel made a noise of assent. “I suppose he also mentioned he was one of them. He was a strange fledgling,” he added, humor crinkling the edges of his eyes. “One of his heads would always be staring off into the distance. Usually the right one,” he added, motioning to the right side of his head. “Resembles a zebra, sorta. It was creepy.”

Alex laughed, head tipping in curiosity at the archangel’s words. “Zebra head?” she repeated. “You mean Cas has a head that looks like a zebra.”

“I think that’s the best way to describe it, yeah.” Gabriel set the popcorn bowl down onto the ground as he looked thoughtful. “You mean he’s never told you? Four heads. Man facing the front, zebra to the right, ram head in the back, and eagle on the left. Pretty standard look for most angels, although you get a lot of variation among us higher ups.”

“I’ve never heard about this, no.” Alex ran a hand through her hair, turning on the ground to face Gabriel as she leaned forward slightly. “I thought angels didn’t have physical forms.”

“It’s nonphysically physical,” the archangel replied, offering no explanation for his cryptic message.
“You won’t see an angel’s true form outside of heaven.”

“What about you?”

“What about me what?” Gabriel repeated. “What do I look like?” When Alex nodded, he winked. “That’s for me to know, you to find out.” He stretched out his legs, muscles in his wings tensing up and then relaxing along with the rest of his body. “I should be getting.” With a snap of his fingers the tv turned off, and the archangel rose to his feet. “I’ll be seeing you around, I guess, and you,” he added, turning to Ashiel, who had risen to his feet just as the archangel had, “I don’t know.”

He disappeared just as the front door opened, and Alex turned around to see Dean and Sam walk in and flip on the lights. “Hey.” Dean tossed a half-empty fast food bag onto the table as he looked around. “Babysitter gone already?”

“Yeah.” Alex sighed as she rose to her feet. “He’s long gone.” She looked down at Ashiel, who was crushing a piece of popcorn in his small hands, and she pulled him up into her arms, voice softening so only he could hear. “And you … you won’t be here much longer.”

Alex watched her son dashed across the playground, his small, soft wings beating excitedly in time with his footsteps as he followed the older human children. He laughed as they stopped to examine a large, grey boulder that sat just to the side of the play area, moving forward to rest both of his hands on the smooth, cold stone. His face was stretched wide in a grin, unaware of his mother’s own agitation. Alex’s wings twitched nervously as she looked around, and her left leg bounced rapidly. A large, warm hand came to rest on her knee, stilling its anxious movements. “Calm down,” Castiel murmured, and one dark wing curled around her back. “You’re going to upset Ashiel.”

Alex saw how the fledgling stopped, his wings falling down in worry and confusion at the sight of his mother’s nerves. She felt Castiel’s grace stretch out past her and towards the fledgling in reassurance, but she kept hers withheld; it was far too agitated to do any good.

Wings flashed in the corner of her eyes, and Alex turned to see two angels standing at the edge of the park. One man, one woman. Tan and cream wings. “They’re here.” Alex flicked her wings in their general direction and Castiel rose to his feet.

The taller angel dipped his head to whisper something in his mate’s ear, and she nodded. They approached, and Alex reluctantly rose to greet them. “You must be Eremiel and Laura.”

“And you must be Alex.” Eremiel turned to look up at Castiel, and he brushed blond hair from his forehead as he asked, “And you … I can’t say I recognize you, brother.”

The seraph looked uncomfortable for a second or two. “Castiel,” he finally said. “I’m Castiel.”

The blonde angel blinked twice in surprise, and Laura tugged on his hand, her gentle, cream wings twitching confusedly. “I’m sorry,” she began, as much to Alex and Castiel as to her mate, “did you say Castiel? As in the Castiel?”

“You’re suppose to be dead,” Eremiel added, just as confused as his spouse. “After you …” He hesitated, unsure how to continue.

Castiel’s gaze flickered downwards for half a second. “Yes, I know,” he quietly agreed. “I … I don’t know how I’m alive, but I am.”
Alex reached down and took the seraph’s hand, thumb rubbing over his knuckles as she took a few seconds to calm her nerves and find her voice. “I’m glad he’s back,” she admitted, and Castiel’s grace rested against hers, warm and soothing. Alex barely reacted, her own grace too busy trying to control the growing ball of ice that sat in her stomach, chilling and crushing her organs as it grew.

Neither of the angels in front of them noticed. Laura was nodding in sympathy with her statement. “I can’t imagine what it would be like to lose your mate,” she murmured softly. “I lost my brother when I was human, but that was a very long time ago now.”

Alex nodded, able to sympathize, but another question prodded at the back of her mind. “How …” she began hesitantly, “how long have the two of you been together?”

“Since 1786.”

“Mama!” Ashiel ran up to the four angels, both confused and excited at the sight. His foot caught, however, on the plastic barrier that keep the wood chips in, and the fledgling fell to the hard ground with a loud thud.

Alex was at his side in a heartbeat, pulling the toddler up into her arms and brushing away the tears. “Sh, shh,” she soothed, rubbing his back as she held him close. “You’re okay.” She carried him over to the other angels, and all of his pain was forgotten at their presence.

“Huh?” Ashiel looked up into her eyes before his gaze shifted over to Castiel. He stared at the seraph for a second, but Laura’s words had him twisting in Alex’s arms.

“This must be Ashiel.” The female’s face lit up with a bright, warm smile. “He’s adorable.” She held out her hand, and the fledgling stared down at it, unsure what to make of the stranger.

Alex reluctantly put Ashiel down on the grass, and Laura knelt down to see him. “Yeah, this is Ash.” Alex nudged the fledgling towards the angel, and Ashiel looked up at his mother in confusion. “I think he’s about two years, but I don’t know for sure.”

“Yes, I remember Ezekiel mentioning that you had just found him in the woods.” Laura’s face twisted in pity. “And no one was able to even find his father.”

“He must be dead,” Eremiel concluded with a sympathetic flick of his wingtip. “I can’t think of an angel who would just leave their child like that. I assume they weren’t able to identify the mother?”

“They couldn’t even find the body,” Alex admitted. “It was just … gone.”

Ashiel giggled as he grasped at Laura’s wings. “Anja,” he announced, looking back up at his mother. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a green rubber ball, Gabriel’s latest and final gift. “Here.” He held it out to Laura. “Mine.”

“Why thank you.” The angel accepted it with a gentle smile. “It’s lovely.”

The fledgling giggled again before he ran back to his mother. His small brow furrowed in confusion as Alex knelt down in front of him. “Mama?” he asked, the rest of his question hanging in the air.

Why are they here?

“You seem them, Ash? That’s your new family.” Alex reached out and cupped Ashiel’s cheek. “They’re gonna bring you home and take real good care of you, okay?” She felt his grace creep forward, searching for comfort as he felt the disquietude in his mother’s voice.
Ashiel sniffled nervously as he was enveloped in Alex’s unstable grace. “Mama.” He reached out, placing his small hands on either side of her face as he babbled out a soft, worried sentence, wings drawing in tight. Alex drew back her grace, not wanting to upset the young child in front of her. She reached into the collar of his shirt, fingers curling around the warm metal of the copper penny necklace that Dean had given him. “Don’t lose this,” she instructed, pulling it out so it hung in plain view against his light blue t-shirt. “Okay, Ash? Don’t let anyone take this from you.” She straightened the collar of his dark flannel so it lay flat against his jacket, touch lingering on the warm skin of his cheek.

Castiel’s hand came to rest on her shoulder, and Alex reluctantly looked up at him. When the seraph’s grip tightened sympathetically, she dropped her eyes back to the ground, eyes squeezed shut for several seconds as she fought back the tears that stung at her eyes and throat.

The soft, insecure touch of Ashiel’s grace had her opening her eyes once again. “You’re right,” she murmured, loud enough for only herself and the fledgling to hear. “We’re both going to have to be strong. You’re going to be okay, though. I know that. You’re going to be a strong, brave warrior one day, micaelaz, and if I’m lucky, maybe I’ll see you again, huh?” The young angel’s voice failed with a pained crack, and she leaned forward, pressing a long, lingering kiss on his temple as she pulled him into her warm embrace. “I love you,” she rasped, her throat rough and filled with sorrow, “and that’s never going to change, Ashiel. Never.”

A wing brushed against hers, the bristles on their feathers catching gently, and it took Alex several long seconds before she was able to tear herself away. She rose to her feet, wings curling downwards as the fledgling tried to wrap himself around her legs.

“Come along, little one.” Laura reached forward and gently took Ashiel’s wrist in her hand. “It’s time to go.”

Eremiel stepped away from Castiel, head dipped as he finished his murmured promise to the seraph, and a parting, “Brother,” left each’s lips as they separated.

“No.” Ashiel’s wings flapped in agitation as he was led away from Alex. “Mama?” Confusion darkened the fledgling’s face when Alex did nothing, and he stared at her with wide, fearful eyes as as Laura picked him up into her arms. “Mama!” Cream wings fell outwards, and Ashiel stretched his arms out towards his mother, and then he was gone, disappearing into the sky.

Alex watched them disappear, gaze fixed on the sky long after they were out of sight. Her wings quivered, the smaller shaking broken every few seconds by violent tremors as she struggled to keep her grief inside. That was it. Ashiel — her son — he was never coming back.

A hand on hers broke her, the brush of his skin tearing down the dam inside. She turned into the seraph’s arms, burying her face in his coat as the tears blinded her. Castiel held her tight, his chin resting on her head as his arms steadied her. “I’m sorry,” he murmured. “It’s going to be okay, le pas enay.”

Alex shook in his arms, her hands grabbing handfuls of the fabric of his coat to ground her. She stared at the tan stitching, unable to even close her eyes; every time she did, she saw his face, his soft, young features marred by confusion and betrayal as Alex stood by and let him go.

Castiel’s grace curled around her, holding her close and soothing her racing heart. Lucifer’s grace reacted violently, and the young angel felt herself calm slightly as she had to focus on holding him back. His cool touch was comforting, ice on a painful wound, and between the contrasting touches of the two angels’ graces she felt some of the heartbreak ease, even if ever so slightly.
“What … what would you like to do?” Castiel finally asked. “I’m willing to stay for as long as you need me.”

Alex didn’t answer for several seconds. “M-Maybe … maybe you could just stay with me for a while,” she eventually whispered into his coat. “I — I don’t want to be alone.”

“Of course. Are you sure?” Castiel’s wings fluttered against her arms, and she reached up to play mindlessly with the small feathers close to the base. She felt the seraph’s shoulders instinctively stiffen ever so slightly when she accidentally caught one of the sensitive under feathers, and his wings instinctively drew in to protect them.

Alex dropped her arms back down to his waist with another long sigh, and she held him close. “Yeah,” she whispered. “I’m sure.”
Alex leaned back up against the windshield of the Impala, eyes turned up towards the slate grey clouds hidden behind the large neon sign of the Lost in the 50’s Diner. Her knees were pulled up against her chest, arms keeping them close. Sam sat behind her in the passenger seat, voice low and urgent as he discussed something over the phone. Dean wasn’t currently in her sight; the quickly approaching footfalls, however, indicated that he was coming their way.

She had returned to the Winchesters only that morning after having spent several days alone with Castiel; unfortunately, he had felt he was needed elsewhere for his penance, and when Alex had promised that she would be fine, he was gone, leaving Alex to return to the two brothers.

She heard the Impala door open, and Dean got in. “Who is it?” he whispered loudly to Sam, and the angel reluctantly rolled off of the hood and onto the gravel parking lot. She saw how Sam held up his finger, motioning to be quiet, and she slid into the backseat.

“No, listen to me,” the younger brother insisted. “I said hang tight.” He shook his head and snapped his phone shut. “We gotta go.”

Dean looked down at his meal. “C-Can I at least finish my burger?” he asked, and Alex peered over his shoulder, reaching out to grab a fry. Dean didn’t even attempt to slap her hand away, and the angel fell back against the seat as tightness clawed at her chest. He was letting her get away with it because he pitied her. His pity didn’t help; it only made her hurt more.

“We got a vamp kill, Dean.” Sam shifted as he shoved his phone back into his pocket. “Carencro, Louisiana.”

“Huh.” Dean took a bite of his food before he quipped, “It’s been a while since I’ve had some étouffée. Who’s the source?”

“Martin Creaser.”

The car fell silent, and Alex’s wings twitched at the tension that built up within the small space. The name didn’t sound familiar, but then again, a lot of people had passed through both her and the Winchester’s lives.

“Sorry,” Dean finally said, setting down his burger. “For a minute there I thought you said Martin Creaser.” His jaw dropped further in disbelief when Sam didn’t answer. “Crazy Martin from the loony bin?”

“Glendale Springs discharged him last month.”

“Wait wait wait. Martin?” Alex leaned forward, interest suddenly sparkling in her eyes as the name clicked into place. “Martin from Glendale Springs. With the wraith? Are you serious?” She put her hands on the back of the front seat as she looked up into Sam’s face.

“Shouldn’t he be assembling toys in a padded room?” Dean added scathingly. “What’s he doing back on the job?”

Sam looked away, debating what to say before he finally came clean. “I asked him.”

“You what?”
Look, he called me when he got out, asked if he had something that could help ease him back into
the game. He seemed okay — mostly —” Alex snorted, but Sam’s only response was an annoyed
huff “— so I said yes. I’ve had him tracking Benny for the past week."

There was a silent pause. “You put ‘mostly okay’ Martin on Benny?” Dean finally snapped. “What
is ‘mostly okay’ doing hunting at all?”

“Not hunting, Dean. Tracking.” Sam’s voice grew defensive at his brother’s tone. “Observe and
report only. I was crystal clear about that.”

“Yeah,” Alex quipped scornfully. “And I’m sure ‘mostly okay’ Martin was ‘mostly okay’ with that.”

“Hey.” Sam turned his head to give the young angel a glare. “Benny’s a vampire. Any hunter worth
his salt isn’t just gonna let one walk around freely. You know that, right? Don’t tell me you don’t.”
When Alex looked away, uncomfortable lying by saying that she did trust Benny, Sam continued.
“That’s why I’ve had Martin keeping tabs on him. And right now it’s looking like I made the right
call.”

Dean was silent for second. “So Martin’s saying Benny did this?” he finally asked.

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” Dean set his burger back into its cardboard box and folded it shut.

Sam opened his mouth to snap, but he faltered when Dean’s words registered. “O-Okay?” he
repeated, slightly stunned at his brother’s sudden agreement.

“If Benny’s in Louisiana draining folks … we should look into it.” He slid his lunch into the seat
between himself and his brother and started the engine. “Louisiana’s what? Only five hours east? We
clear this up, we get out.”

December 5, 2013
Carencro, Louisiana

Alex stayed with the Winchesters for the entire drive, only leaving the car to follow them into the
diner they stopped at on the way. She stirred when the engine died with a choking whir, and the
doors squeaked as they opened. A push of her wings had her upright and outside the car, a hand
brushing casually through her long, blonde hair to put it back into its place. “We here?” she asked,
eyes narrowing slightly as she took in her decrepit surroundings.

“Martin’s up on the second floor.” Sam led the way up towards a dusty, old stone building. Cracked
window panes garnished the brick, and the wooden door creaked loudly as they pushed their way in.
“Come on.”

“This place is sketchy even for us,” Alex muttered as she followed the two Winchesters up the
dilapidated stairs. “You sure Martin’s ‘mostly okay’?”

Sam stopped beside door number 2 and raised his hand to knock, but the door swung open
immediately, and a man stuck his head out. “You said look for an eruption,” Martin hissed, eyes
darting nervously around the hall. “How’s Mount Vesuvius?” he stepped back, hurriedly motioning
them into the dingy room. He shut the door once the three of them were in, locking it with both the
deadbolt and the chain door lock. “I got into town a week ago,” he began, tripping over his words as
he launched straight into his story. “Up until last night, nothing. He’s been clean.”
“Doing what?” Dean stopped by the bed and turned to face the bald hunter. Alex slipped past him to join Sam against the far wall.

Martin looked taken aback for a fleeting second. “J-Just minding his own business,” he stuttered out, unsure why Dean would ask such an irrelevant question. “Working at the gumbo shack.”

Alex’s eyebrows rose in amusement, and Dean tipped his head. “Benny’s working at the gumbo shack?”

“Yeah.” Martin looked around the room, eyes wider than they should probably be, and Alex was starting to get the feeling that ‘mostly okay’ was a gross overstatement. “Slinging hash, pouring coffee — the whole bit. And he may be Benny to you. Folks around here call him Roy.” He raised his eyebrows, looking at Dean as if that were suppose to incriminate the vampire right then and there.

Dean narrowed his eyes. “Martin, you sure you’re running on full charge?”

“Y-Yeah. L-little shock therapy in the morning, and I-I’m good to go.” The hunter snapped his fingers, but the shakiness in his hands and the stutter in his voice only lent itself to the opposite conclusion. Alex narrowed her eyes, unable to tell for the life of her if Martin was being serious.

Dean looked over at his brother, shoulders dropping in disbelief and a tight line set on his lips, and Sam looked away, not willing to admit the hunter’s incompetence. “Tell us what happened last night,” he prompted.

Martin nodded in earnest. “So, I followed him home,” he began, “just like every night. He turned up a path. I hear a scream. Then boom — there he is. The old coot that Roy was eyeballing at the joint — vamp’d.”

“Wait.” Dean leaned forward, distrust narrowing his eyes. “Did you actually see Benny kill the guy or not?”

Martin shot the Winchester a glare. “I saw enough,” he retorted.

“What even are you?” Martin spun around to face her, anger flaring up in his eyes, but the angel barely flinched. “I-I don’t even know you. What is she doing here?”

“Martin, relax. She’s with us.” Sam reached out to calm the paranoid hunter, but Martin roughly shrugged him off. “That’s Alex. She knew Bobby Singer.”

Martin gave Alex another dubious look, and she crossed her arms, lips pursed when the hunter gave no signs of letting her into his circle of trust. “Hey.” Dean snapped his fingers, drawing Martin’s attention back to him with a sudden jerk of surprise. “Answer the question. How’re you sure it was Benny?”

“B-B-Because I saw Benny turn up the path, and then two seconds later, I trip over a body with its throat ripped out. Look, man.” Martin shook his head. “You ever heard of Occam’s Razor? ‘Keep it simple, stupid’? I-It’s not that complicated.”

“That’s a lot of holes, Martin,” Dean warned, his gaze slipping past the stammering hunter to rest on Alex. She nodded, giving her agreement with Dean’s doubt.

“Holes?” The hunter looked between the two of them in shock. “The only holes we should be
looking at are in the vic’s neck!”

Dean shook his head. “This sound like the Benny you know?” he asked, eyes moving from Alex over to Sam.

His brother stayed where he was against the wall, a frown on his face. “I don’t know Benny,” he replied, voice tight and low. Before he could say anything else, however, Martin jumped in.

“‘The Benny you know?’” he repeated, mouth hanging open as if he couldn’t believe what Dean had just said. “Say what? Why am I getting the distinct impression that your brother is vouching for a vampire?”

“Hey hey hey.” Alex pushed herself off of the wall, her wings flaring wide at the hunter’s blatant disrespect for Dean Winchester. “Watch your tongue.” Something in her eyes must have worried Sam, because the next thing she knew his arm was across her chest, keeping her back. The angel stopped in her tracks, a loud huff leaving her nostrils as at least some of the anger dispersed at his touch. “You want to talk, we’ll talk, but you’ve got no right talking like that.”

“Why don’t you go wait outside?” Sam suggested. “Okay? Just go calm down.”

Alex glared up at Martin, and she shook her wings out, feathers rustling angrily. “Fine,” she relented. “But he better watch his damn tongue.” She stalked off towards the door, shoulders rolling back as she felt their gazes on her.

“Who the hell even is she?” she heard Martin say to Sam. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say that little bitch is —”

The anger was back. “Oh hell no.” Alex spun around at his words, and her grace snapped through the room. Sam was between the two of them in an instant, arms wrapped around her as he struggled to keep the angel from launching herself at the older hunter. “You want to see bitch? I’ll fucking show you bitch!”

“Hey hey hey.” Sam’s words sounded next to her ear, voice strained as he struggled to keep a hold on her. “Stop. Stop it! You want to stay on this case, then the two of you need to get along!” When Alex hesitated, he added, “Don’t make me take you off of this.”

Alex spun around, anger flaring up in her eyes at Sam’s implications. “You’re threatening to take me off the case?” she spat, wings stretching up towards the ceiling in rage. “And how’s that gonna work? You can’t make me do jack shit, Sam.” She jabbed him in the chest with a finger, fire dancing in her pale grey eyes, and she felt Lucifer’s grace stir at her anger.

Sam didn’t answer, taken aback by her outrage, and Alex huffed. “Dean. Come on. Let’s go talk to Benny.” She stalked out of the building, and Dean followed behind.

“Hey.” Footsteps thudded on the pavement behind her as Dean ran to catch up. “Pip. You sure you’re okay? You … you seem a little … touchy.”

“I’m fine, Dean.” Alex stopped by the Impala and reluctantly turned to face him. “That guy’s just being a total douche, you know? What was I supposed to do?”

Her question went unanswered as Dean unlocked the door and got into the front seat. She circled around and joined him, stretching her wings back out over the seat. The engine started, and the Impala pulled out onto the street. “Anyways, I’m glad you’re back,” the Winchester added. “We were getting a bit worried when you didn’t answer any of our calls last week.”
“I didn’t want to talk to you,” came Alex’s terse reply. Her head turned out the window, displaying her discomfort with this particular line of questioning. “Sue me.”

Dean fell quiet, and the rest of the drive was spent in silence.

They pulled up in front of Guidry’s Cajun Cafe fifteen minutes later. Alex slammed the car door behind her, carefully taking in the cabin-like appearance of the shack. Several cars were parked in front of it, hinting that this place was well-liked by the locals even in between meals. She let Dean take the lead as they walked up towards the door, and she hesitated when he held it open. “Go in,” she suggested. “I’ll take a sweep of the surrounding area. See if I can find anything suspicious.”

Dean nodded, and Alex moved off along the side of the cabin. She could feel the lazy movements of the people inside, and she focused her attentions outwards, grace flicking out like a snake’s tongue as she moved into the surrounding woods. There was no immediate sign of anything strange, the trees still and the underbrush silent. Every once and awhile a bird flittered in the canopy above her head, moving away from the stranger below with a call of alarm, but Alex paid them no heed.

She made a large circle, but nothing she felt was important. Lucifer’s grace, however, seemed very curious as to what she was doing, stretching up and curling alongside hers, like fingers dancing along her skin. It was a gentle touch, offering up an unspoken question, wanting to know what was so important that the angel was searching so hard for. Alex did her best to suppress it, but after a while gave up, letting it reach out and search with her.

“Find anything?” Dean’s voice had her jumping, and Alex’s wings flapped in alarm as she turned to face the hunter. He was moving towards her, his phone in one hand. When she shook her head, he frowned. “The waitress in there said that Benny — er, Roy — hasn’t been around for a few days. Used to park his trailer out back, but then just moved it last night; said he was going north to fish or some shit like that.”

“Right after the vamp attack Martin found,” Alex added, stating the obvious for her own benefit. “You think …” When Dean didn’t answer she shrugged. “Well, I didn’t find anything out here. Whatever was here sure as hell ain’t here anymore.”

“Yeah.” Dean turned away and moved back towards the Impala, looking down at his phone as he scrolled through his contacts. He must have found what he was looking for, as he raised his phone to his ear. Alex heard it ring several times before it went to voicemail, and Dean’s voice fell low in frustration. “Benny. I got a body here in Carencro with two holes in it, and I just found out you went fishing. Do I need to tell you what this looks like?”

He snapped his phone shut as he paused by the Impala, and Alex joined him there, hand going out to grab the cool metal handle. “Now where?” she asked. “I bet I can find him in a few minutes if I —”

“Yeah. You do that.” Dean opened the car door with a low curse. “You find him and you come back, you understand? Do not confront him.”

The young angel’s eyes narrowed at the commanding note in his voice, feathers flittering angrily. However, she somehow managed to keep her voice calm. “I’m on your side, Dean Winchester; if I wasn’t, Benny would already be dead. You want to keep it that way, you don’t tell me what to do.”

She saw how offense flashed across Dean’s face, green eyes darkening when he realized Alex was being completely serious, but before he could apologize or snap — or whatever he was planning on doing — Alex took off into the sky. She hovered in the sky for several long seconds, grace sneaking
out through the cold November air. Her wings took her in circles, slowly widening outwards as she scoured the earth below.

She shifted her search more towards the north, remembering Dean’s words about Benny having gone ‘fishing,’ and as she neared a glittering lake, she spotted it. A busted up trailer with a broad-shouldered man below. She could feel that it was a vampire, but she dipped down to just above the tree line to be sure. It was Benny.

A powerful thrust of her wings took her up at a dizzying speed, wind whipping across her face. She paused at a higher altitude, looking down at the small grey dot that was Benny in comparison to the clearing where the gumbo shack — and Dean — waited. The angel pulled her black wings in tight and she dropped.

Wind caught in her feathers as she stretched her wings back out, gliding across the land and down into the clearing where the Winchester waited. “I found him,” she announced as she landed behind Dean. She waited until he had jumped in surprise, cursing under his breath, before she continued. “He’s about twenty miles north of here. There’s a back road that can get us close.”

“Okay, yeah. Sounds good.” Dean slid into the car, pausing with the door half open when Alex didn’t move. “Well?” he finally asked with an impatient frown. “You coming or what?”

“I’ll catch up. Sam and Martin are on their way here, so I’m gonna tell them to lay low for an hour or two.” The angel stepped back, motioning with a wave of her hand that Dean should continue on without her. She watched the Impala drive off, and her wings fell out, primaries brushing the dusty ground. The cold sunlight did nothing to warm her feathers, and with a quick burst of power Alex propelled herself up into the air. She located a tall birch overlooking the clearing, and she landed on a branch. It was thinner than Alex would have liked, and it dipped and swayed under her weight and the wind. Her wings caught on the leaves, still thick and green, and she let out a mumbled string of curses at the strange feeling, corporeal on ethereal.

There she waited, watching the hustle and bustle within the walls of the Cajun Cafe until a dark, dusty truck pulled off of the main road and into the parking lot. The engine died with a croak, and Sam and Martin got out, the former giving the car’s hood a concerned look. Alex jumped from the tree, wings guiding her down to land purposefully right in front of Martin. “Hey.”

The paranoid hunter reacted quickly, drawing his pistol and cocking it with deft yet shaky hands. “W-What the hell?” he exclaimed, eyes wide and breath hitching. “Y-You Winchesters — crazier than I thought — you’re working with demons!”

“Yeah right,” Alex retorted, frowning at the idea of being compared to such a hideous abomination. “I’m an angel, you ass.”

Martin didn’t seem to hear her. “Oh, your father would rip you both a new one if he ever learned you boys were working with ‘em. Vampires and demons —”

“Angel,” Alex correctly flatly.

“Angel,” Alex correctly flatly.

“I’m surprised no one’s come along and ganked you two!” Martin continued scathingly. “You’re crazy if you think you can —”

“Martin? That’s enough.” Sam interceded, pushing the hunter away from Alex, whose wings were rising in anger and offense. “Alex isn’t a demon, she’s an angel.” He turned back to Alex, snapping his fingers in front of her face when she continued to glare at Martin. “Hey. Focus. Where’s Dean?”
“He went after Benny.” Alex reluctantly turned her eyes to Sam. “Which is also why I’m here. Back off,” she snapped when Martin moved forward, her hackles rising. “Give us an hour to get to the bottom of this,” she added to Sam, voice calmer as she spoke to her friend.

“Benny’s a vampire,” Martin growled. “We’re not going to just sit around and let him kill again.” The hunter stepped forward and grabbed the front of Alex’s jacket, eyes narrowing threateningly as he held her. “Now tell us where he is, you black eyed bitch!”

Alex heard Sam expel a sharp breath at the hunter’s actions, and Alex let her anger flare up, Lucifer’s grace making her irises grow red. Martin didn’t have to time to react before she surged forward, grabbing his arms and twisting so he landed with his chest against the car’s hood, one arm pinned painfully behind his back. “I am not a demon,” she hissed in his ear. “I am an angel, and I have just lost my son, so I am not someone you want to piss off right now. So, you are going to give us some time, or I swear I will zap your ass all the way to the Galapagos.”

Sam’s hand on her shoulder had her pulling away, and the angel snorted as she glared up at the Winchester. “Give us an hour,” she repeated. “Meet us back at the motel.” When Sam nodded, she took off into the sky.

—know it’s hard to believe, but I haven’t always been this cute and cuddly.” Benny’s low rumbling voice reached her ears as she landed behind the vampire. Benny’s head turned at the sound of her feet touching down on the leafy ground, eyes flashing in alertness, but, upon recognizing her, the tension in his muscles relaxed slightly. “He’s chasing a memory, Dean. That’s all. He’s crewing up a nest. He’s hoping I can give him so cred. I said no.”

“Wait, what’s going on?” Alex’s eyes turned towards the tin wash bin of bloody water, her lip curling upwards slightly in disgust. “What’s that from?”

“Second body,” Benny huffed. He was leaning against his trailer, still dressed in his old-fashioned clothes, this time with a dark brown jacket and an old, black fisherman’s hat.

“It ain’t him,” Dean added before Alex could speak. “There’s another vamp. One of Benny’s old nestmates. He wants to, uh, start up a new nest, right?”

“Right,” the vampire agreed. “He didn’t want to take no for an answer. He’s trying to roust me, leaving dead bodies in my wake till I sign up. Two bodies in two days.” Benny shook his head. “No amateur is gonna kick me out of my hometown, guys. Not this time.”

“H-Hometown?” Alex repeated. “Wait. So this is where you grew up? In Louisiana? Guess that explains the accent.”

“Mm.” Benny made a noise of reluctant agreement, nodding his head. “Born and bred. With Andrea gone and you hunting again, seemed like the right time for a homecoming — you two being the only ones who keep my ducks in a row. Went back to my old job at the café. Even found someone to hold myself accountable to. Best kind of someone, Dean,” he added, turning back to the Winchester. “Family.”

“Elizabeth.”

“Who?” Alex squinted in confusion as Dean took several steps past Benny to stop by Alex’s side. He face away from the vampire, but sheathed his machete nonetheless.

“My great-grand daughter,” the vampire expounded.

“R-Really?” That face seemed to catch the hunter by surprise, eyes widening as he stuttered out his
Alex watched as Benny processed his words. “Now hold it, now,” he started, voice deepening, and Alex cocked an eyebrow, curious as to both who this girl was and what Dean had done. “You didn’t —”

“Uh, no.” Dean let out a small chuckle as he turned back around to face Benny. “No. She doesn’t —”

“No.” Benny let out a long, regretful sigh. “No, as far as she’s concerned, I’m just another drifter. I’d like to keep it that way. It’s been tough walking the line here after all those years in Purgatory not having to deal with the hunger. But Elizabeth … she keeps me honest. I finally feel like I got a handle on this thing.”

“Yeah, well, clearly you don’t,” Alex snapped. “Cause now you’ve got — what? — two dead bodies on your hands as well as four hunters? And that’s just us. Give it a few days and you’ll get far more passing through.”

“If you’re talking about that half-wit that passed through the cafe, I think I’ll take my chances with him,” the vampire retorted, eyes flitting over the angel’s face, who seemed amused by his description of Martin. “As for the others —”

Dean cut in. “That half-wit was sent by my brother, and trust me — my brother’s not someone you want to mess with.”

Benny brushed him off. “I don’t have time to worry about them, Dean. I didn’t think Desmond had an ounce of steel in his spine, but I was wrong about that. So now I’m gonna do what I should have done two days ago, which is put him back where he belongs.”

“You know there’s only one way to do that, right? And that is for you to sit on the sidelines while Alex and I convince Sam and Martin to go after Desmond. They see you out there, they don’t care if you’re gonna be collecting for the March of Dimes. They are gonna slice first, ask questions later. You know that.”

Benny was silent for several seconds, clearly unhappy with Dean’s proposition. “You really think they’ll go for that?”

Dean sighed, shaking his head. “I don’t know. But we have to give it a shot.” He looked over at Alex, who had retreated a step to leaned her back against a thick oak tree. “What about you? What happened with Sam and Martin?”

“They went back to the motel, and let’s just say,” the angel added elusively, “Martin and I don’t really … get along. He’s a dick, and I’ve lost my patience.” She shrugged when Dean raised an eyebrow, and she looked past him. “So where’s the car at, huh? They’ll be waiting.”

“Go,” Benny advised when Dean seemed to hesitate. “I’ll be fine, brother.” He stepped back, motioning them past, and Alex followed Dean past the vampire and into the woods. She cast a glance over her shoulder to see that the vampire had gone back to whatever it was he had been doing, and with a shake of her head fell in step with Dean.

He seemed surprised when she stayed by his side all the way to the car, and once he had started the engine he finally spoke. “So … are you just going to stay here?”

“What?” Alex turned her head, eyes squinting in surprise and confusion. “Are … Why? Were you expecting me to go somewhere?”
“Don’t get me wrong,” the hunter quickly backtracked, backing the Impala back onto the dirt road. “I’m glad you’re sticking around and all, but it just seems like this is normally the point where you, you know . . .” He waved his hand to try and get his point across, but when Alex didn’t answer, he further enunciated, “Where you fly off and, I don’t know, go do something I don’t know about. You know, whatever you do.”

Alex turned her attention back out the windshield with a small shrug. “Yeah, I don’t know. Cas is off doing penance God-knows-where, and, well, you know, Ashiel’s . . . gone.”

Dean made a sympathetic sound when she trailed off, and the Chevrolet took off down the road. “Yeah. And you’re sure you’re— sorry.” He cut off when Alex shot him a glare, and he adjusted his grip on the leather steering wheel. “Well, if there’s anything you need with you-know-what, all you need to do is ask. Me and Sam, we’re here for you, you know?” He tapped the steering wheel to emphasize his point when Alex didn’t make a sound. “Family and whatnot.”

“Yeah, I know.”

They were back in Martin’s dark, dingy motel room within half an hour. Alex and Sam were seated on the two beds, Alex closer to the door and to Dean, who stood just to her left. Martin had one arm across the top of the fridge as he leaned against it, eyes narrowed as the eldest Winchester finished relaying his conversation with Benny.

“I followed your boy,” he finally began, picking up his drink and moving to pace across the room, “down a fucking path and trip over fresh vamp kill, and then you practically catch him in the act of burying a second body, and you’re still taking his side?” He returned to the fridge and opened the freezer, pulling out the ice cube tray with a disgusted shake of his head.

Dean crossed his arms. “Vampires pick people off from the outside of town okay? Not the cafe where they work with their great-grandkids!” He frowned when Martin huffed, and Alex’s eyes widened slightly in concern when the paranoid hunter stabbed the ice tray with a fork, sending ice chunks everywhere even as the tongs of the fork bent. “In fact,” Dean continued, “killing any human? Not his style.”

“Not his style?” Martin’s voice rose angrily. “Not his style?”

Sam quickly stepped in before it could escalate. “Listen, Dean, we came here on a dead body. You asked for some time, and now there’s another dead body. Are we just going on trust here?”

Alex looked up at Dean, and Martin took a sip of his brandy. Dean’s eyes hardened. “Yes.”

“Okay,” Sam agreed, “because we’ve killed for a lot less, and you know how these things turn on us.”

“Yes, I do,” Dean retorted sharply. “Too well. In fact, every relationship I have ever had has gone to crap at some point. But the one thing I can say about Benny is that he has never let me down.”

“Huh.” Alex turned to see that Sam’s gaze hardened at his brother’s words, and her wings twitched uncomfortably. “Well, good for you, Dean. Must feel great finally having someone you can trust after all these years.”

Dean hesitated, unsure how to respond to his brother’s harsh misinterpretation. He looked down at the ground, and then up at his brother. “All I’m saying is that Benny is innocent.”
“No.” Sam got to his feet with a shake of his head, and Alex rose as well. “You’re too close to this. You both are,” he added to Alex.

The angel let out an offended noise, and Dean shook his head. “You’re not going to find him,” he announced decisively. “And if you do, I’m gonna tell you this. You’ll be lucky to get out of this alive. And you,” he added, turning angrily to Martin, “you go with him, you’re a dead man. Period.”

“Period,” Alex repeated, locking gazes with Martin Creaser. The hunter stared back, gaze only broken when Sam spoke.

“These are innocent lives we’re talking about,” he snapped, looking between Alex and Dean. “You’re willing to bet all of that on Benny’s word alone?”

“Damn right I am —” Dean crumpled to the ground, unconscious, and Alex spun around to see Martin standing there, a kitchen knife in his hand with the handle pointed towards Dean, and she flared her wings angrily. She took two steps forward, but the hunter reacted quickly, snagging a lighter out of his pocket, lighting it in one movement, and hurling it down on the ground. Fire roared into life, surrounding the angel, and she hissed, wings stretching high above her head.

“Hey hey hey!” Sam rushed forward, anger in his eyes. “That was for only when we needed it. What the hell?”

“They’ve made their choices, Sam.” Martin reached down and dragged Dean over towards the window. “They chose the side of a vampire.”

“Sam.” Alex turned to look up at the Winchester. “Let me out of here, dammit! You want the truth if there’s another vampire or not, I’m the only one who can tell you.”

“Sam, don’t listen to her.” Martin stripped off Dean’s jacket and handcuffed him to to the radiator. “Benny’s a vamp. You know what that means.” He straightened up and moved towards the door. “Come on. Let’s go do our job.”

The two left, ignoring Alex’s yells for them to come back. The door closed and locked behind them, and Alex sunk onto the ground, her black wings pulled in tight. The fire made her glossy feathers sparkle, the gold shimmering in the flames, and she sighed. Her head lolled back to stare up at the tile ceiling. “Dean?” she called. “Wakey wake.” When she didn’t get an answer her head fell into her chest. “Dean,” she groaned. “Get the fuck up and get me out of here.”

Dean didn’t wake up for another ten minutes. Alex heard the first signs of his stirring, and she turned in her small, confining circle to face him though the fire. “Dean. Dean. Are you okay?”

A groan answered her, and the Winchester’s eyes fluttered open. “W-What the hell?”

“Mostly-okay Martin.” Alex scowled as she spoke, wings flicking in distaste. “Can you get out of there and free me? It’s getting kind of toasty in here, you know?”

She watched as Dean dug around in his pocket and pulled out a paperclip. “Yeah, yeah, give me a second,” he muttered, doing his best to fold the metal into a workable shape. Alex watched as he struggled to pick the lock, muttering out a, “Come on, come on,” under his breath, and in less than two minutes the lock popped open, and Dean was free.

“Hey, what about me?” Alex frowned when Dean moved over to his bed and pulled out his phone. “Dean.”
“They didn’t go for it,” Dean said into the receiver, pinching the bridge of his nose as he spoke to who Alex was assuming was Benny. “They’re on their way to you. I’d get scarce. Benny, listen to me. Do not underestimate my little brother, okay? He can and will kill you given the chance.” He walked over to the bathroom and returned with a washcloth, using it to wipe the drying blood off of his face.

“Dean,” Alex repeated as she rose to her feet. “Let me out.”

Dean moved over to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of water. He held the phone with his jaw and shoulder as he listened to the vampire and unscrewed the cap, using the purified water to put out enough of the fire for Alex to step through. With the circle broken the magic faded, and within a few seconds the flames died.

“Hey, I just told you — the best thing you can do is lay low.” Dean waved after him as he led the way out into the hall. His voice filled with exasperation as he huffed, “Benny.” Several more seconds passed before he nodded. “We’ll be there in an hour.”

“Where are we going?” Alex demanded as they hurried out to the parking lot. “Is Benny okay? Dean.”

“Benny’s fine. He knows where Desmond is, and we’re going there too. Shipyard east of here. I’m assuming you’re in,” he added as he got into the Impala. “Here.” He handed Alex a phone out of the glove compartment, an old, cheap flip phone. “Open that up, text Sam, ‘Sam, I need your help. Come quick.’”

“Uh, done and done.” Alex pressed send and placed the phone back on her lap. “Why? What’s that all about? And who’s phone is this?” She studied it, rolling it back and forth in her hands. “I don’t recognize it.”

“Burner.” Dean started the car. “Swapped the number out with Amelia’s on Sam’s phone a while back. Hopefully that’ll keep him busy long enough to buy us some time.”

The sky was growing dark when they pulled up outside of the chainlink fence surrounding the shipping yard. Alex waited by the gate as Dean retrieved a machete from the trunk. Benny stood at her side, his arms crossed with a similar machete gripped tightly in his hands. “This is the place, huh?” Dean asked from where he stood, digging through the trunk. “So, what’s the plan? I hang back while you guys do some trust falls and binge-drinking?” He closed the trunk and slipped a syringe of deadman’s blood into his inside jacket pocket.

“Man, if I didn’t know you better, I’d say you had an extremely low opinion of us vamps,” Benny quipped, and Alex hummed in agreement.

Dean scoffed. “Call it a healthy skepticism,” he joked as he approached. “Alright, let’s go.”

Alex unlocked the gate with a push of her grace, falling back to Benny and Dean could take the lead, leaving her for the rear. She snaked her grace out before she slipped forward, pointing towards the left. “That building,” she determined. “There’s a vampire in there.”

Dean nodded, and he motioned towards the far end of the building with a direct wave of his hand. Benny understood and slipped off towards the back door. “See if there’s any more,” Dean murmured as they approached the front door, and that was all Alex needed to hear. Her wings carried her into the air, and she took off around the buildings, grace stretched out to feel the space around her.
She dipped and rolled between the large warehouses, searching each one before searching the cargo ships as well, but there was nothing. Only the two vampires in the building with Dean. Alex’s wings dipped to one side as she made a large turn before she returned to her friends.

She landed just inside the door to see the new vampire — Desmond was his name — and Dean. The vampire was on top of Dean, and the scent of blood was in the air, and a short, hot burst of panic shot through the angel at the side. Two steps brought her close enough to reach him. Her palm found the back of his head, and her grace poured into his skull, twisting down his spine and burning away his inhumanity. The vampire screamed, light pouring from his face, and Dean turn his head away, eyes screwed up against the light.

The vampire keeled to one side, and Alex nudged it all the way off of the hunter with a kick of her boot. “You know,” she began lightly as Dean lolled his head back against the concrete floor, “I was gone for less than thirty seconds.”

“Shut up.”

“The hell?” Benny joined the two of them, blue eyes flitting over the scene. “You okay, brother?”

“I’m fine.” Dean clamped his hand over the side of his neck, trying to stem the bleeding, and Alex watched through narrowed eyes as Benny caught the scent. He stiffened, lips twitching in thirst, but he remained rooted to his spot through pure self-control. Dean noticed, and it was his turn to ask, “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” came the slightly-strained response, and Benny turned away.

Dean rose to his feet, and Alex stepped up close to him, reaching out to slide her palm under his and rest it against the cut. Her grace bled inwards, stitching the wound back together until all that remained was the blood-stained skin. When she pulled away, Benny was gone. “Come on.” She led Dean out of the building and after the vampire, who was quickly making his way back towards the Impala. “Benny, wait.”

“My life here’s over, isn’t it?” the vampire asked, pausing in his tracks to let the two catch up. He didn’t look back at them, just kept staring straight ahead, and Alex and Dean exchanged looks.

“Afraid so,” Dean finally answered. “Once word gets out … the machete swingers that’ll come for you … you can’t take them all. And even if you could …”

“We’d have a problem,” Benny finished, and Dean nodded. The two of them started walking again, and Alex hurried to keep up with their long strides.

“Guys like us, we don’t get a home,” Dean added. “We don’t get family.”

“You have Sam. And Alex.” Benny looked to his left to lock gazes with Alex, and she blinked, agreement and sympathy flashing through her grey eyes until the vampire looked away once again.

Dean paused, hesitant to answer, but he finally agreed. “Yeah.” The Winchester sighed as they stopped by the Impala, and he turned to face his friend. “Benny, you gotta go deep underground where nobody knows who you are.”

Benny nodded, his reluctance obvious, but it was clear he knew what he needed to do. Yeah,” he agreed, voice low and quiet. He was silent for several seconds, lost in his own thoughts, and Alex and Dean stood there quietly, letting his process. “Thanks,” he finally said, stretching out one hand towards Dean. “I really owe you on this one.”
“Course.” Dean shook the vampire’s hand, his voice warm with a deeply-shared companionship. “If anything comes up, you call me.”

“Or me,” Alex added, raising her chin in an attempt to seem taller next to the two large men. “Seriously, Benny. If there’s anything you need, I can be there in seconds. All you gotta do is pray.”

“I’ll keep that in mine, chérie, but no offense, I think I can handle myself.” Benny tipped the brim of his hat to her with a warm nod. “Well, I better be on my way. There’s one last thing I gotta do.”

Alex reclined against the front seat of the Impala, staring mindlessly up at the interior roof. Dean was driving, and Metallica hummed soothingly through the speakers. Alex mouthed along with the words to Nothing Else Matters as her eyes drifted closed, the rock of the car and the melodious tune lulling her towards sleep.

_Alex? I don’t suppose you got your listening ears on._

Alex sat up straight, her seatbelt whirling at the sudden movement. She cocked her head, listening closely for what had definitely been Benny’s voice. Dean seemed to notice, as he reached over to turn the music off. “Everything okay?” he asked slowly, his tone hinting at the fact that everything was most definitely not okay.

_I think I’ll take you up on that offer, the voice in her head continued. That hunter friend of yours? He’s got Elizabeth her at the shack with me. Says he’s not leaving till I’m dead, and well…_

“Get back to the gumbo shack. Now.” Alex unbuckled her seatbelt and took off out of the car, not giving Dean any time to ask any more questions. Her wings carried her into the night sky, beating rapidly as she followed the highway back towards the woods, the pavement speeding by at a dizzying pace. She swooped upwards over the trees before dropping back down into the clearing and rolling into the shack.

The room was dark, but Alex could see perfectly fine. Benny stood by the bar, his hands outstretched in a non-threatening gesture, and Martin stood off to the side, a knife firmly pressed into the throat of a young brunette. She was tied to a chair, tears in her eyes which widened when Alex appeared. “Hey,” she snapped, drawing all attention onto her.

Martin tensed, but Benny let out a long breath, relief flooding through his body at the sight. “Bout time,” he joked, but even his humor seemed forced, his attention too focused on the woman behind Martin’s knife.

Alex approached, wings stretching outwards in fury. “Let her go,” she warned, voice deepening into a growl. “She’s not a part of this.”

“She’s his great-granddaughter,” Martin snapped, and Elizabeth let out a strangled sob as he pushed the knife even further into the soft tissue of her throat. “You know what I want. You know what’s best. Our job is to kill every damn one of those — those things!”

“Let her go,” Alex repeated. “Who do you think’s faster? You or me?” When Martin didn’t respond, she added, “If you don’t step away right now, I swear to my Father that I will not hesitate to kill you.”

“You know what? You’re no better than he is!” Martin angrily gestured to Benny with the knife before he pressed it once again back up against the woman’s throat. His wild eyes darted between the two of them, but for once his voice was steady in his fury. “You’re a monster just like the rest of
them —"

“I’m an angel.” Alex’s anger boiled over, and her grace snapped through the air like firecrackers. Lighting flashed, her the shadows of her wings cast against the far wall, and Elizabeth screamed. Her actions distracted Benny, and though Martin was stunned, he saw his opportunity. He lunged forward, blade raised, and Alex reacted.

Her hand was on the trigger before he mind caught up, and the loud bang of the discharging gun echoed throughout the small room. Martin fell dead at Benny’s feet, a clean hole right between his eyes. His face was still twisted in rage, but he was dead.

Alex lowered her weapon, almost as surprised as the others to find the hunter dead. However, she pushed it all away with a disinterested flick of her wing. Martin was dead; that’s all that mattered.

“Didn’t know you angel type were ones for firearms.” Benny broke the silence as he shifted away from the body, and Alex looked down at her Colt, blinking.

“We — I … I don’t,” she finally admitted. “I don’t — I don’t know. I just … really old instinct, I guess.” She stared down at the dead body with a shake of her head. “I … it’s been a really long week, man.”

“Elizabeth. Are you okay?” Benny crossed the room to kneel in front of his great-granddaughter. She let out a terrified sob, and he hurried to untie her, a soothing noise coming from his mouth as he did so. “I — I gotta go,” he told Alex when Elizabeth stepped away from the two of them and reached for her phone. “Dean’s on his way?”

“Dean’s on his way.”

“Send him my regards.” Benny looked at Elizabeth, shoulders falling as he looked for something to say, but nothing came out. He left without another word, the shack’s door swinging closed behind him, and Alex turned to the other woman. She had just called 911, that much was obvious from the stream of hurried and fearful words that had been uttered when Alex had been speaking to Benny, and now she stood off to the side, a wary and terrified eye on her.

The knife had left a rather large cut on her neck, and Alex approached, slipping the gun into the back of her jeans as not to scare her. “It’s okay,” she began, her words feeling awkward considering all that had just happened. “He hurt you. I can help.”

“Y-You—You—”

“I’m an angel, yes. And I can heal you.” Alex reached out, moving as gently as she could, and rested her fingers against the torn skin. Her grace pulled it back together, mending the wound, and she quickly pulled away as Elizabeth’s hands went up to feel. “You understand you can’t tell anyone about what happened tonight, right?”

The door burst open and Alex spun around to see Dean. He slid to a stop, eyes wide as he took in the sight of Martin, laying in a pool of his own blood. “Did …”

“No. I … it was me.” Alex approached the hunter, casting a disdainful look down at the body. “Come on. The cops are on their way, and Benny’s safe with a good head start. It’s time for us to go.” She led the way out of the shack, shaking out her wings in the night air as Dean followed close behind. “You know …” she slowly began, “I’ve been thinking. Sorry if I’ve been a bit of a bitch today. It’s been hard, but, uh, damn did killing something feel good. I’m sorry it had to be Martin,” she added with a look up at Dean, “but I feel better already.”
Alex followed Dean out of the car and up to the motel door, her black wings twitching as she looked up at the darkened sky. Her grace pinpointed the soul of Sam Winchester just ahead, on the other side of the locked, green door. It was Dean who had insisted on driving down here after Sam had refused to answer any of his calls the day before, and Alex had been hinting at the idea it might be because of that fake text message they had sent to him two days prior. The one to get Sam off of Benny’s tail.

Dean rapped on the door twice, and Alex heard movement inside. The door opened to reveal Sam, and hazel eyes flashed sharply in recognition. Anger darkened the hunter’s face as he moved to close the door, but indecision had him wavering until he finally flung it open, turning around to stalk back inside. Dean and Alex took it as invitation to enter. “Who’d you expect?” Dean half-joked.

Sam ran a hand down his face as he closed the door after them. “Long drive,” he commented, ignoring Dean’s question.

“Well, I wouldn’t have had to make it if you hadn’t hung up on me,” Dean snapped, turning to face his brother. He crossed his arms defensively, and Alex joined him at his side, wings pinned calmly against her back as the two brothers stood off.

Sam scoffed. “Yeah, well, I heard all I needed to hear.”

“No,” Dean retorted, “you didn’t. You heard what you wanted to hear. I told you Benny wasn’t killing. Hell, we even killed the fangbanger that was doing it.”

“How about Martin?” Sam mimicked his brother in folding his arms across his chest. “How’d he end up dead?”

“Stupid — just like I said he would.”

“You told him, right?” Alex looked up at Dean, eyes narrowing in accusation. “You told him who killed Martin?”

“He didn’t give me a chance,” Dean snapped, and Sam’s head tipped in a silent question.

Alex turned to face Sam, shoulders rolling back as she straightened up to meet the hunter’s cold stare. “Benny didn’t kill Martin,” she told him, watching the shock that flashed through his eyes. “I did. He had Benny’s grandkid, Sam, and he called me for help because he didn’t want to hurt anyone. Martin — he hurt Elizabeth and then he went charging after Benny, and I … ” she took a deep breath, “I shot him. Vampire or not, Benny didn’t hurt anybody,” she added when Sam’s face darkened. “Martin was off the rails, and I did what I had to.”

“Really? That’s the story you guys are going with?” Sam shook his head in disgusted disbelief. “That the vampire was the victim here?”

“We’re not making this up,” Alex shot back. “You saw how he treated me! He was crazy, Sam. Unstable. He should have never gotten back into hunting. If I didn't kill him, someone else would have. Like it or not, Sam, it’s the truth.”
“There was a time where that actually meant something,” Dean added pointedly.

“Yeah, no kidding.” Sam muttered.

Dean frowned at his brother’s tone, and he glanced over at Alex to see a similar frown of disappointment across the face of the young angel. “What does that mean?” he challenged.

Sam’s eyes narrowed in accusation, and he took a step towards Dean Winchester, who firmly held his ground. “You think this is just about Benny?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“What the hell do you think this is about?”

“A-Amelia?” Dean blinked, thoroughly confused. “Oh, come on, man. I had Alex send you that text ‘cause I needed you to — to —”

“You needed me to what?” Sam spat, flames dancing in his eyes. “To tear ass to Texas? To be afraid that what happened to Jessica, what happened to … everybody that we care about, might have happened to her?”

“You were gonna kill Benny,” Dean retorted. “What was I supposed to do?”

Alex stepped in between them, hand going out to keep Dean from moving any closer. “Are you two going to fight?” she asked. “I don’t want to be around if you guys are gonna start beating the shit out of each other, because I swear to God I’ll leave if fists start flying.” The two Winchesters didn’t break their cold, tense stares, and Alex stalked past Sam. “Fine. I’m out. Maybe Cas is having a better day.”

She found Castiel standing under a streetlight in Washington State. He was staring across the darkened pavement, standing still as stone, but when she landed behind him, his wing did twitch in soft acknowledgement. “How did you find me?” he asked, his voice slightly rugged from hours of disuse.

“I think I can spot my own mate,” Alex quipped back teasingly. She reached down and took Castiel’s hand, stepping forward to stand at his side. She curled her wings, and their feathers brushed together. “How’s your penance going?” She tightened her grip on his hand, taking in how warm his skin felt in comparison to the cool air surrounding them.

“It’s going quite well,” the seraph began. “I’m starting to feel like I’m atoning for all that I’ve done, but I have a long way to go.” He looked down at Alex when she leaned her head against his shoulder, and his hand squeezed hers questioningly. “Why are you here?”

“You don’t sound happy to see me.” Alex smiled when she felt Castiel start to protest, and a teasing flick of her wings silenced him. “I’m just kidding.” She let out a sigh. “Sam and Dean were fighting, and I … I didn’t want to be there. I missed you.” Her eyes turned to the lights and laughter across the street, and she pressed her temple even further into Castiel’s arm. “What’s that?”

“A party,” the angel stated, and Alex rolled her eyes at his obvious remark. “I don’t know what for, but I enjoy watching it. The music, the people … it never gets old.”

“No, I guess not.” Alex agreed, a small smile on her face as his grace moved outwards to curl around hers. “Cas?” She peered up at the seraph, waiting until their eyes met before her smile widened. “I’m
A hand cupped her cheek, and Alex leaned into the warm, comforting touch, eyes falling shut. Her wings unfurled, exposing the soft inside of her wings, and the rustle of feathers and brushing of grace told her that Castiel had turned to face her, his own wings now curled around the two of them. “So am I.”

The streetlight shone down on his face, illuminating his nose and cheeks, and Alex grabbed the lapels of his coat and leaned up. She pressed her lips against his, shifting closer when the hand on her cheek shifted to the back of her neck. A second hand slid under her jacket and rested on the small of her back, keeping her near.

It was him who pulled away, albeit reluctantly, his forehead resting against hers. “I should get back to my penance,” he murmured, his breath warm against her lips.

The hand on her back shifted but made no signs of moving, the fingers warming her skin, and Alex placed her hands flat on his chest, attention focused on smoothing his coat. “When are you going to be done? I don’t like you being gone like this.”

“I don’t know. Not much longer.” The seraph tipped his head to one side as Alex kissed him again, and though it was chaste and quick, he still hummed his appreciation. “I can be with you soon, but for now I must do this alone. It … wouldn’t be penance if I were to have you at my side.”

Alex smiled. “Ever the romantic,” she teased. She hesitated, reluctant to move from his warm embrace, but eventually she did so. “Then I guess I should get going,” she sighed. “The sooner you get back to work the sooner you can come home.”

Castiel nodded. “I’ll see you soon,” he promised, and Alex smiled before she flew away, leaving Castiel standing alone on the dark street corner.

She found Dean on the road driving north towards Oklahoma, Black Sabbath blaring through the speakers. She landed beside him, quiet as not to startle the hunter. “Where’d you go?” he asked after a minute of silence, reaching out to turn down the music.

“I went to find Cas.” Alex stared out at the road ahead, watching the yellow lines disappear under the hood. “He was up in Washington. He’s doing good.”

“Huh. I thought you’d be gone a little bit longer,” Dean joked, turning his head so Alex could see the lighthearted sparkle in his eyes, and she easily filled in the blanks when he raised an eyebrow.

“You — you’re gross, you know that?” The young angel shook her head as she smiled in disbelief, turning her head to look out the window to hide the flushing of her cheeks. Trees and houses flew by, and the angel took a moment to count a few to bring down her embarrassment. “No. I kissed him, Dean. That’s all.”

“Kissed him? Or kissed him?”

Alex rolled her eyes, and her wings flicked as she settled further down into the Impala’s seat. “I kissed him,” she repeated adamantly.

“Was there tongue?”

“Dean!”

“What?” The hunter retorted, shameless in his blunt statement. “Come on. You two have been
dancing around this whole sex thing for years now.”

“You know —” Alex twisted in her seat to face him, “—you’re kind of like that one gay friend who keeps sticking his nose when it’s not your business.”

Dean scoffed at the absurdity of her words. “It’s totally my business,” he insisted. “I-I mean, with the whispering, a-and that damn eye sex. You made it my business.” The car sped up slightly as he turned back to look at the road, muttering, “And I’m hoping it’ll stop when you guys finally get laid.”

Alex stared the dusty Oklahoma motel wallpaper, watching how the very corner of the faded red paper was starting to peel away from the plaster wall. The sun was up — it had been for several hours — but Dean had only just started to stir. In his defense, of course, they had only stopped to sleep five hours ago. She turned her head to look when the Winchester rolled over, wings twitching as he fell back into his gentle snoring.

He woke up with a sudden snort, and Alex tipped her head, squinting, when his eyes fluttered open. “W-What time is it?” he muttered, rolling over to look out the window.

“Almost nine.” Alex rose to her feet and walked over to the small table where her laptop sat closed. “Want breakfast? I remember there was that cool looking diner when we drove in.” She sat down when Dean groaned and rolled over, head thudding back against the pillows. “So what’s the plan? Are we looking for cases or just lying low for a couple of days?”

She was answered with another loud, prolonged groan and the creaking of the old motel beds. “Why the hell are you even up?” she heard him grumble. “It’s too early.”

“The morning’s half over,” Alex retorted as the Winchester rolled out of bed. “And I don’t need to sleep, hotshot. Remember?” She flipped open her computer and pinched the bridge of her nose when it took several, long seconds to wake up. “Anyways. Plan?”

“Shower.” Dean staggered off towards the bathroom, his movements overdramatized as he muttered under his breath. Alex watched him go. A few seconds later she heard the water running, and only then did she turn her attention back to her laptop.

Dean’s phone rang, and she looked up in surprise. She looked back over towards the shower door, but when Dean gave no signs of even hearing it ring, she stood up and crossed the room. She picked up the cellphone and sat down on Dean’s bed, staring down at the contact name: Garth. “Hello?” she answered.

“Dean?”

“Alex.”

She could hear the grin in the hunter’s voice. “I was about to say,” he joked. “Is Dean there?”

“He’s in the shower.” Alex stretched out on the Winchester’s bed, shrugging her shoulders as she leaned back against the headboard. “Is everything okay? How’re the Trans?” she asked, remembering that Garth had taken both Kevin and his mother to his safe house to keep an eye on the both of them.

“Don’t you worry. I’ve got my eye on both of them when I can. Mrs. Tran’s over in Virginia,” he explained when Alex made a questioning noise. “She’s holed up with the Haywards — you
remember them, right? Good brothers. Duncan’s on the mend from a nasty rougarou, so they both agreed to take a little time off.”

“Well, I’m glad he’s okay.” Alex’s face darkened in worry as she remembered the two brothers. “I haven’t heard from them in ages, though. Why … why’s Mrs. Tran with them? Nothing’s wrong, right?”

“Nah, nothing at all. Kev just needed a little alone time. Listen.” Garth’s voice dropped into a more serious note, finished with their light conversation. “Where are you guys at? Cause I’ve caught wind of a case over in Arkansas, but I’m a little tied up with the prophet and all.”

“What kind of a case?” Alex sat back up, feet swinging over the side of the bed as she cocked an eyebrow. “We’re in Oklahoma. Southeast corner, I think. Dean and I could probably handle it.”

Her words were followed by a short length of silence before Garth asked. “Where’s Sam?”

“Taking some time off; don’t worry about him. Now what about that case?” the young angel prompted. “Come on, man, ever since Ash left I’ve been itching for a hunt.”

“Ashiel’s gone?” Surprise filled the hunter’s voice. “Ah man, I’m sorry. I kinda liked the little guy. Did he —”

“He’s fine, Garth. He just went back to heaven with a new family. Now can we please focus and tell me about this case?” The shower shut off and Alex looked over at the door. “Where is it?”

“Jacksonville, Arkansas. A man was killed two days ago: torn apart in his apartment with no signs of forced entry. Door was deadbolted, windows locked, and it was on the seventh floor. His neighbors said they heard a scream, but security cameras in and outside the building saw nothing.”

“Okay, which will probably rule out your typical, corporeal monster,” Alex finished. “Sounds like our kind of thing, though. Thanks, man. I’ll let Dean know and we’ll get right on it.”

She moved to hang up, but Garth’s voice stopped her. “Yeah, and uh, one more thing. Can I ask a favor?” Alex made a noise of assent, and he began, “Listen. Bobby taught you a lot more than he taught me, and with Kevin and all I don’t have a whole lot of time. Would it be cool if I had some of the hunters call you? You know, with that kind of stuff? You’re the best person I can think of, so …”

“ ‘Course.” Alex smiled a bit at the praise, ducking her head. “Uh, you have my numbers, right? Give them the one that ends in the five eight — they can reach me there. Oh, and, uh, tell them that if any of them need my clearance, they need to give me a heads up beforehand, okay? And I’ll only do FBI — I don’t have twenty phones like Bobby did.” She let out a small laugh. I have two.”

“Sure thing. Thanks a lot.”

“Yeah, no problem, man.” Alex hung up as the bathroom door opened, and Dean stepped out, a towel wrapped haphazardly around his waist. “That was Garth,” she explained when his eyes fell on his phone that still sat in her hands. “He’s got us a case just east of here if you’re interested.”

Dean blinked, processing her words for a quick second before his lips pursed together into a frown. However, he easily relented. “Okay, fine. Let me get dressed, and you can fill me in on the way.”
Alex followed Dean into the Jacksonville Police Station, one hand adjusting the collar of her shirt and the other shoved into her pocket. Their dress shoes clicked on the tile floor as they crossed the room by the front desk, and a woman looked up from where she was signing the last of her paperwork. “Agents Marley and Burnley,” Dean introduced, holding up his identification, and the woman turned to face them.

“Sheriff Kat Wilson.” The woman eyed the two closely. “Let me guess. You’re here about McNelson’s murder, right?” When Dean nodded she picked up her papers and motioned them after her and into her office. “I’ve been waiting for some hunters to show up. You’re Dean Winchester, aren’t you? I thought you looked familiar.”

Dean’s eyes blinked wide in surprise, and he immediately went on the defense. “W-What? No. I — I get that lot actually, but I’m not. I-I mean, if I were Dean Winchester — which I’m not — I’d be with my brother, right? That’s the way they always worked.” He clapped Alex on the shoulder. “Nope. This has been my only partner for the past two years.”

The sheriff watched Dean’s stuttered ramblings with barely-concealed amusement. “Listen,” she began, leaning against her desk, “normally I don’t take kindly to your type in my town, but I’ve got a dead body, my men are stumped, and it’s my job to protect the civilians of this town. So … you have my full cooperation.”

“Uh … thank you.” Alex looked over at Dean, whose face clearly showed he was still processing the sudden change of events, and she turned back to the sheriff with a small, confused shrug. “Um, can I ask —”

“How?” Kat Wilson finished. “Two years back. Some black-blooded creature — Leviathan, the hunters said — came into town. That’s how I got this.” She rolled up her left sleeve to reveal a long, raised scar. “My eyes were opened that night to what’s really out there. You guys have one hell of a job.”

“Tell me about it.” Footsteps sounded in the hall behind her, and Alex glanced over her shoulder, grace stretching out to touch the human soul that passed by. “Okay, so, listen. I noticed that the morgue was attached to this building, so I think I’m going to go check out the vic while you fill Dean in — if that’s cool with you,” she added quickly. She waited until the sheriff nodded before she hurried away.

She found the morgue at the far end of the building. The door was locked, but when she peered through the window she saw the telltale stainless steel tables decorating the tile floor. On the center table was a pristine white sheet covering a large, lumpy body. Alex looked up and down the hall for the doctor, but he was nowhere to be found, so, with a shrug, she unlocked the door with her grace and stepped inside.

She slipped on two rubber gloves and pulled back the sheet to examine the corpse below. The chest was a mess, and the organs were unrecognizable. The man’s skin was pale from lack of blood, but any bloodstains had been meticulously wiped away. Alex leaned down, nose wrinkling up as she took a hesitant sniff.

“Excuse me.” A voice behind her had the young angel jumping in surprise. “You’re not suppose to be in here. How … I locked the door.”

“Clearly you didn’t. Agent Burnley, FBI.” Alex pulled out her ID as she turned to face the older man in a lab coat. “I’m here to examine McNelson’s remains. Sheriff Katherine Wilson sent me.” She folded her identification and stuck it into her pocket as she turned back to the body. “So. Cause of death?”
“It’s what it looks like. Massive blood loss and severe mutilation.” The doctor circled around the table to stand on the other side of the corpse. “I’m Dr. Hall, by the way.” When Alex made no sound of acknowledgment, he cleared his throat and pointed to the torn chest cavity. “The paramedics estimate he lost four and a half liters of blood, the majority of which would have come from the severing of the aorta and the pulmonary arteries.”

“Is anything missing?”

The doctor frowned at her stranger line of questioning and shook his head. “As far as I can tell, everything’s still there. Wait …” Realization lit up his eyes, and he looked up at Alex., the slightest hint of surprise and excitement in his voice. “You’re … you’re a hunter, aren’t you?”

The young angel blinked in surprise.

“Fine, fine. Yes, I’m a hunter. Now what can you tell me about his body? Anything, you know, not normal?”

“Nothing. Whatever did this left everything there, as far as I can tell — everything’s little more than a pulp right now. But it must have had very sharp claws or — or fingernails. Five,” he elaborated, and Alex tipped her head as he pulled the sheet down further to show a segregated set of claw marks, the torn flesh clearly displaying five distinct lines. “Um … I can let you go if anything else turns up, though. Whatever I can do to help.”

“Uh, yeah, that’d be great. Thank you.” A rap on the glass window in the door had Alex turning, one hand rising up in a small wave as Dean peered through. “I should be going. I’ll leave you my card.” She stripped off her gloves and tossed them into the trash before she handed the doctor her card with a nod. “Thanks for your time.”

She stepped out of the lab and closed the door behind her, looking up at Dean as he asked, “Anything?”

“The guy’s chest is hamburger.” Alex motioned him down the hall. “Everything’s there, though. I — the coroner knew I was a hunter, and he … he seemed pretty cooperative, considering. Is everyone in this town in the know?”

Dean only shrugged, less concerned about this fact that his companion. “Well, I’d rather have them with us than against us. Speaking of,” he added, whacking Alex in the shoulder with the back of her hand, “the sheriff’s making us a copy of the case file, then she’s going to take us down to the man’s apartment.” He grinned. “Man, I could get used to the treatment in this town.”

Kat Wilson unlocked the door to McNelson’s apartment, motioning Dean and Alex through. “Security cameras picked up nothing,” she reported as she closed the heavy door behind her. “Whatever it was, it didn’t come through the building or up the fire escape.”

“Which rules out any physical creature,” Alex reiterated as she looked around the neatly catalogued room. “Werewolf, vampire, rougarou. That leaves either some sort of vengeful spirit or a demon,” she added to the sheriff, intent on keeping her up to date as much as was possible; it felt like the least she could do for their partnership.

“Or angel,” Dean added offhandedly as he walked over to the window to check the lock.

Alex huffed in indignation at the Winchester’s words. “That’s not an angel kill.” She knelt down beside the large, brown blood stain parked with a yellow sign, her wings spreading out to measure the length. “The vic was mauled; angels don’t maul, we stab and burn.” She heard the sheriff start to
make a noise of utter confusion, so she cut her off by standing up. “Find anything?” she asked Dean, moving over to where he was standing. “There’s no EMF, but then again it’s been more than twenty four hours.”

“There.” Dean pointed down towards the floor, and Alex dropped to her knees to examine the thin, fine powder between the floor vent and the molding. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Sulphur,” Alex confirmed, her grace flicking in disgust. She rose to her feet and looked at Dean as she decided, “I’ll go interrogate every demon in this town.” Her wings unfolded and she took off into the sky.

Her grace poured out through the town, touching soul after soul of man, woman, and child, and she was beginning to question if there even was a demon in this town before she felt him. The dark, twisted, and battered soul of a demonic entity. She dove down into the alleyway, wings stretching out threateningly as she approached the hooded figure leaning beside the dumpster. “Demon.”

The man looked up, and the wasted butt of a cigarette fell from his pale lips. “Angel,” he spat, concealing his surprise within a second. “What do you want? I’m not causing you any trouble.” He threw back the hood of his faded grey sweatshirt so Alex could look him in the eyes. The crystal blue flashed to black for only a second before he pushed himself off of the wall and crossed his arms.

“Mike McNelson. Name sound familiar? I’m looking for the black-eyed son of a bitch who killed him.” Alex stalked forward, shoulders rolled back and chin tipped up as she stared the demon down. “And, well, only demon in town is you.”

The demon scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Are all you angels this feather-brained?” he taunted. “I haven’t killed anyone. I’m a salesman. I want them alive.”

“Mm.” Alex flicked her wing in disinterest. “Well, either way, you’re a demon. See the problem here?” She stepped forward, angel blade slipping into her hand, and satisfaction flashed through her when the demon shifted backwards, hands going up to protect himself.

“H-Hold up.” The demon’s insouciant facade melted, and he slipped into a defensive posture. The sudden change in demeanor had Alex pausing, his words leaving her curious as to what he had to offer. “Whatever killed that man, it wasn’t me. But maybe I can find out who it was. I-I can talk to my boss and see if any other demon has been in town.”

“Oh, that sounds smart,” Alex sneered. “I won’t believe one demon, so let’s go ask another lying son of a bitch.” She, however, let her weapon slide back up into her sleeve. “Actually, you know what? Yeah, let’s do that. Go get your boss — no, go get your king. Bring Crowley here, okay?” She didn’t miss the fear in his eyes, and that single flash of emotion made her confidence soar. “And if he doesn’t want to come, remind him that he owes Alex a favor.”

The demon took another step back, indecision on his face, but the commanding flick of her wings had the demon fleeing from her sight. With a sharp huff of disgust, Alex took off into the sky.

She found Dean back at the motel, the case file spread across the two beds. He was seated on the floor between them, suit jacket spread across the bed and his tie hanging loosely from his neck. “Hey Dean.” She walked over and joined him on the floor, a hand going up to loosen her own tie as well.

“Hey.” Dean barely glanced up from the coroner’s report that he was skinning. “Well? Find any demons?”

“Only one. Understandably, he said he didn’t do it. Claims he’s a salesman, which means he likes to
keep his clients alive.” Alex reached up onto the bed and pulled one of the crime scene photos down onto the ground in front of her. “Uh, he’s not dead yet. He seemed … a little terrified of me, honestly. Not really the cold hard killer type, I guess.”

“He’s a demon,” Dean reminded, voice sharp, and Alex nodded.

“He is,” she agreed, kicking off her shoes and settling down onto the bed. “He said he’s off to ask if any demons have been in the area. If he doesn’t come back, then boom. Problem solved. And if he does, he’ll have information that’ll be helpful. And then I’ll kill him.”

Lucifer was there when Alex fell asleep, waiting. The young angel found herself in the corner of the bedroom, looking out the darkened windows, and for a moment she narrowed her eyes, trying to make anything out through the darkness, but, like always, there was nothing. Alex turned away from the window, and her grace crept outwards, slow and nervous, unsure why she had decided to take a nap. She found the archangel downstairs, and she winced when his grace instinctively flinched away from hers.

The next second, however, he appeared in the doorway, leaning against the wooden frame as he studied her with his pale blue eyes. “Come crawling back already?” he quipped, one eyebrow cocked suggestively. “I’ll admit, I didn’t think you’d be back this quickly.”

“That’s not what’s going on,” Alex retorted, and her wings folded in defensively. “I decided to sleep, and you happen to be a side effect of napping.”

The archangel’s face twisted in mock hurt, and he pushed himself off the wall and stalked closer. “Is that all I am to you?” he asked, and Alex let him back her up into a wall. “A side effect?” His eyes focused on her lips as she spoke, and Alex felt her wings quiver at his strong, dominant air.

It took a second of building up the resistance, but Alex pushed her way past and out of his personal space. “You know that’s not true, Luce.” She moved towards the center of the room, ignoring the way her cheeks flushed at the curious hum that emanated from the archangel as he followed close behind. “I’m still with Castiel, and I just … can we just … not?”

Arms curled around her waist, and Alex shivered as his cold lips rested against the shell of her ear. “Then what am I?” he pondered. “First I was your tormenter. Then, your lover.” He pressed a lingering kiss on her neck, and Alex closed her eyes. “And now, even though you have insisted you’ve chosen your mate, I’m the one you still come back to.”

Alex let him hold her, rocking gently from side to side. “I still love Castiel,” she began, wings flattening as he pulled her tighter into his embrace. “He’s going to be my mate, Luce. I’m sorry.”

The archangel hummed again, and Alex frowned when she realized that he wasn’t just going to give up hope. He didn’t show any signs of letting her go, and when his wings folded forward around her Alex struggled away.

“Listen,” she began, turning to face him. “Since we’re here … can … can we go back to Pandemonium? I’ve been thinking about it a lot, and I want to see more.”

Lucifer hummed again, this time long and low. “Let me get this straight,” he murmured, stalking forward as his wings spread out to span the room. “You want me to return us to my Cage — to hell — to the place where you informed me that Castiel had come back and that you were once again foolishly returning to him. That place?”
Alex’s eyes dropped down to the ground, hurt and disappointed, and cold fingertips danced on her jawline.

“Tell you what.” The archangel’s soft voice had her looking upwards into his eyes. “Remember the deal we made last time?” he asked. “If you want me to do something, you’ll have to do a little something for me first.”

“If you loved me, you wouldn’t ask me for anything,” Alex quipped, unable to help the blush that spread across her face when the archangel’s face twisted in amusement. “W-What?”

“ ‘If you loved me,’ ” he repeated. “I thought you didn’t want my love, little one.” Something predatory sparkled in his eyes as he stepped closer, and Alex stepped back into the dresser. “All I ask is one tiny thing in return for taking you back to my prison. Is that not fair?” A hand tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, and Alex drew in a short breath at the touch — no matter how familiar it was, every brush of his skin always made her grace tingle.

“Then what do you want?” Alex reached up to feel the stand of hair as she asked, shying away from the archangel’s intense gaze drawing away closer by the second.

“I want you … to tell me … the truth.” The archangel’s forehead rested against hers, and Alex knew he could feel it when hers furrowed. “You’ve been agitated, and I have felt your pain. Tell me what Castiel has done this time.”

“Castiel hasn’t done anything.” Alex put two hands on his chest to push him away, but when the archangel didn’t budge, she kept them there against his jacket. “You … you remember Ashiel, right? The fledgling I’ve been caring for? He’s gone. The angels took him back to heaven.”

The archangel pulled away, eyebrows coming together in confusion. “They took your child?” he asked, but Alex couldn’t pinpoint the reason behind his perplexity — it was between the fact that heaven had taken back the child or that Castiel hadn’t been behind her pain. “Why?”

“Because he wasn’t safe on Earth, and he deserved a real family.” Alex pushed the archangel once again, palms flat against his chest, and this time the celestial being stepped backwards, giving Alex the room to slip away. “And I’m back in hunting because the killing helps … in a weird, twisted way. Any other questions?”

Her own question was answered when the world faded away, only to be replaced by the hot, stifling air of hell. She looked up at the tall, domed ceiling; the dark, seamless stone stretched upwards, only broken by a large oculus in the center. She looked back down to see that the far wall was dark pillars, and beyond that was a hall. The whole place seemed to glow with a holy light with no obvious light source, and Alex turned around to see the devil himself.

He was in the center of the room, on a thick platform. A large, dark, twisted throne sat in the center, the ears curving upwards and stretching towards the ceiling like horns. Lucifer was upon it, one leg thrown casually over an arm of the chair as he reclined, head propped up by his pointer finger as he studied her. “Well?”

“This place is … wow.” Alex approached, head turned upwards in awe. “You lived here?”

“Mammon did an extraordinary job,” Lucifer murmured, voice quiet in thoughtful agreement. Two crooked fingers motioned her forward, and Alex did as he asked, stopping beside the throne. “Although I’m afraid that its state has lost much of its grandeur since the demons took our place.” A scowl darkened his face as he spit out Crowley’s name and added, “I doubt he’s done any good to it.” The hand propping up his head fell away, and the archangel fixed Alex with his intensely icy
gaze. “One day we’ll return,” he promised.

Alex didn’t answer, and Lucifer rose from his throne with all of the prowess and balanced power of a feline. “Come along,” he purred, a hand extended towards the young angel. “There’s much here you have yet to see.”

Dean was the one who woke her up, shaking her awake before the sun was fully up. “Rise and shine, princess,” he called, slapping her thigh under the sheets when the young angel didn’t wake fast enough. “Sheriff called. There’s been another one.”

“‘Nother what?” Alex slurred, rolling onto her side with a whine at the stinging slap. “Why’d you wake me, you butt?”


“Was hell.” Alex sat up as Dean disappeared into the bathroom, voice rising as he closed the door. “What do you mean murder? Who died?” When there wasn’t an answer she threw back the sheets and sat up. “Dean!”

“Don’t know, five minutes north. Get dressed.” The faucet ran, and a few seconds later Dean stepped out, striped tie slung across his shoulder. “I’m leaving, and you can meet me there.” He grabbed his wallet, keys, and suit jacket off of the table before he turned back to Alex. “Sound good?”

“Y-Yeah.” Alex got up, wings shaking out as she pushed away the fog of sleep. “Sounds good. See you in a few.” Dean left, and she hurried to get dressed.

It only took her a minute or two, and once she had finished adjusting one of Sam’s tie around her neck she let her wings fold out and took off after Dean. She found him five minutes north of the motel, just like he had said, and she landed in the front seat of the Impala just as he pulled up alongside a small, brick rambler.

“Hey.” Dean nodded his greeting as he threw the car into park, and Alex followed him out of the car and over towards the police cars. “Took you long enough.”

“I couldn’t get the damn tie to tie,” Alex muttered as she fell in step alongside him. “I got it now,” she added with a roll of her eyes when Dean put a hand on her shoulder to check. “I just —”

“Agents.” Sheriff Kat’s voice had her cutting off, and Alex let her wings draw up close as she returned the smile. “Glad you two could make it — I think this is something right up your alley.” She motioned them past the police tape and up the sidewalk to the front door. “Same cause of death as before, but …” She trailed off, motioning towards the open door, and both Alex and Dean paused at the doorstep.

“That’s not normal.” Alex crouched down in front of the painted devil’s trap, a finger going out to brush the dry strokes. “Question is was this paranoia or a healthy dose of fear?” She looked up at Dean, who shrugged and stepped inside.

“What is it?” Sheriff Wilson whispered down at Alex, and the young angel rose to her feet.

“Devil’s trap,” she explained, lowering her voice to match the woman’s volume. “Used to deter demons. If they step inside, it’s impossible for them to leave until they’re either exorcised or the trap’s continuity is broken.” She stepped inside and paused beside the yellow tape.
The body of a large woman lay on the hardwood floor, blood in a thick puddle around her. Her chest was torn to pieces, just like the victim before, and Alex crouched down beside the corpse. She tipped her head when Dean stopped beside her, wings flicking in acknowledgment. “Can’t be demons,” he announced, and his revelation had Alex rising to her feet in surprise. “All doors are like this one, traps unbroken, and all the windows are salted. There’s no way a demon’s getting in or out.”

“But … sulphur.” Alex pointed down to the thin layering of powder over by the kitchen island. “What the hell? Sulphur but no demons? What does that?”

Dean’s eyes darkened in realization, and he shoved his hands in his pockets. “What comes from hell but isn’t a demon?” he asked back. When Alex blinked in confusion, he expounded, “Hellhounds …”

“Or daevas.” The angel nodded earnestly in agreement. “Of course. Devil’s traps don’t work on them, and salt …”

“So … how do you know which one it is?” the sheriff piped up, drawing the two hunters’ attention to her. “And more importantly, how do we kill them?”

“Hellhounds are sent out by demons,” Alex explained quickly. “They collect souls after their crossroad’s deal is up. Daeva — well, I’ve never hunted one before, but they’re nasty. Can be harnessed and sicced on people like — like demonic pit bulls.”

“We’re going to have to look into the victim’s past,” Dean added. “They’re going to have some sort of connection or one hell of a lucky break ten years ago today. Think you can get us that kind of information?”

“Oh, yeah. Of course.” Wilson nodded. “I can bring it over later today when I get it. Maybe two or three hours with my level of clearance? Is that okay?”

“That’d be great, yeah.” Dean let out a wide grin as the sheriff walked away, but before Alex could make any comment he thumped her on the back. “I love this town. How about breakfast? I’m starving.”

Sheriff Wilson brought the files by later that afternoon, just as promised, and Alex spread the papers out on the ground, doing her best to ignore the murmured conversation between the Kat and Dean near the door. Her wings flicked in disinterest as the door finally closed, and Dean joined her on the floor. “Well? Anything?”

Alex slid one of the folders over to him. “I’ve been here for two minutes,” she retorted. “Give me a chance. Here. You start with McNelson, I’ve got Ms. Brennan.” She reached over to grab her headphones and turned on her metal playlist, drowning out anything Dean had to say. She flipped through the first two pages detailing Emily’s credit card records before she paused, head tilting to one side. Her grace flicked outwards, disgusted by what she felt, and she pulled her earbuds out of her ears.

“What?” Dean immediately noticed her change in attitude, but Alex didn’t answer. She rose to her feet and a push of her wings carried her out of the building.

She landed in the alleyway, wings folding in as she strolled towards the twisted soul in front of her. The demon shoved his hood back, revealing his dark black hair and his ice-cold eyes. “Thought I told you to bring Crowley,” she warned.
“Hmm.” The demon narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms. “Well, I somehow managed to get an audience with the King, who happens to be indisposed at the moment. Said you’d understand. Oh, and, he wanted me to remind you that you owed him, and not the other way around.” He let out a dramatic sigh when he saw Alex’s wings rise. “Look. I didn’t kill anyone — especially not Brennan. Crowley would have my head if I killed one of my customers.”

“Customers?”

“Successful author for ten years, yeah.” The demon spat onto the concrete, growing confident at Alex’s lack of aggressive action. “Why the hell would I kill her? I do that, and our deal gets cancelled, I lose her soul — Crowley’s rule. It wasn’t me.”

Alex tipped her head, eyes squinted as she contemplated the demon’s honesty, but when he didn’t speak again she nodded. “Then that’s all I need to know.” She thrust her wings down and propelled herself forward; one hand shoved the demon back into the brick wall, and the other covered his forehead as her grace spilled into him. The demon died instantly, and Alex let the body crumple to the ground with disdainful settling over her face. It last only a second, however, before she disappeared back into the sky.

“The demon’s dead.” Alex landed behind Dean, sinking to her knees as the hunter jumped with a loud curse. “But it wasn’t him behind any of this.” She settled down at Dean’s side, careful to avoid the meticulous scattering of papers all around her. “Emily Brennan made a deal recently, and apparently any demonic intervention will break the deal.”

“So we’re looking at …”

“Witchcraft, probably.”

“And not hellhounds,” Dean finished. “There’s no evidence McNelson made a deal. I did, however, find a connection.” He looked over at Alex, and she recognized that grin. That grin meant he had found something important. “Credit card records place them both at the same bar on multiple occasions.”

“Okay, so they drank at the same bar.” Alex leaned against the motel wall as she turned to face him. “So? It’s a small town. There’s literally like three bars.”

Dean shook his head. “Yes, well, while you were out demon hunting, I was tracking down this lead,” he retorted. “The Gateway isn’t just a bar. It’s a front for an illegal gambling operation. Sheriff says they’ve been trying to bust that place for years.”

“Okay … it still doesn’t really sound like our kind of thing, though. We deal with monsters, Dean, not loan sharks. I —” She cut off in surprise when Dean snapped his fingers, and she blinked in confusion. “What now?”

“You said loan shark.” Dean turned on the ground to face her, hands going down to spread out the papers between them. “Okay, imagine this.” He slid one sheet over to Alex, a brief history of Mike’s life. “McNelson was a recovering gambler, moved here from Nevada two years ago. He finds this place, he gets hooked in.”

“You said loan shark.” Dean turned on the ground to face her, hands going down to spread out the papers between them. “Okay, imagine this.” He slid one sheet over to Alex, a brief history of Mike’s life. “McNelson was a recovering gambler, moved here from Nevada two years ago. He finds this place, he gets hooked in.”

“Reasonable,” Alex agreed, wings flicking as a way to invite him to continue. She wasn’t sure where this was going, but she was willing to indulge him.

“What if the loan shark’s using a daeva to collect his dues? The vics can’t pay, so he kills them —
“You hear all about it on TV,” Dean added when he saw the young angel raise her eyebrow skeptically. “I mean, but there’s gotta be some truth in it.”

“Dude, I think you’re confusing real life with TV land again.” Alex pushed the papers back towards the hunter. “We’re looking for a powerful wiccan here. Didn’t you find any other connections between them?”

“It’s the bar,” Dean repeated firmly. “That’s the only lead worth investigating here.” He watched as Alex stood up and crossed the room, his own voice rising so she could hear. “How do you think this is not possible?” he called. “Come on.”

“A loan shark sending a demonic pit bull out to settle his scores?” Alex joked. “Come on, man. This isn’t the X-Files. And even for fiction, that’s a stretch.”

“Fine.” Dean rose to his feet. “Then what’s your explanation, huh, Feathers? Let’s hear it.” He turned to face Alex, arms crossed as he waited for her response.

“I don’t know.” Alex pulled a beer out of the fridge and handed it to Dean when she turned back around. “All I’m saying is that your idea is ridiculous.”

Dean set his drink down on the table and grabbed his keys. “Well, there’s one way to settle this,” he decided, shrugging on his thick, dark jacket. “Come on. Let’s go check out the bar.”

Alex followed Dean through the swinging double doors and into the darkened building. Despite it being the middle of the afternoon, there were several people already there, all talking in hushed voices. “Alright, where’s the gambling?” Alex muttered, and quickly Dean elbowed her in the ribs. She huffed, stepping passed the hunter as she let her grace spill outwards.

“Hey.” She heard Dean rap on the bar to draw the attention of the male bartender. “Where’s your boss? I’m looking to talk about one my good friends. Name’s McNelson. Heard of him? He’s got some debts I need to pay off—”

“Dean.” Alex moved off further into the bar, her hurried footsteps nearly silent on the floor, and she pushed her way through a heavy wooden door. Two men sat there, their conversation cut short by the angel’s sudden presence. She felt Dean stop behind her, and she shifted aside to let him through.

“What do you think you’re doing?” one demanded, anger causing color to rise to his cheeks, but the second man reached out to quiet him.

“Can I help you?” he asked, cordiality thick on his voice even though his eyes revealed his displeasure at their arrival.

“Yeah.” Dean pushed his way past Alex, and she pressed herself against the wall, wings flat against her back. “Either of you know a McNelson? Short, mid fifties?” The Winchester’s hand went up to estimate the victim’s height.

The first man shook his head, ready to snap, but his companion spoke first. “Raymond, go wait outside. Now.” He waited silently until his partner complied and left the room before he rose to his feet and held out his hand. “Charles Kotter,” he introduced. “I knew Mike. Is … is everything okay?”

“Agent Marley, FBI. This is my partner Agent Burnley,” Dean held up his identification, and Alex was quick to do the same. “We just need to ask you a few questions.”
“We don’t care about the gambling,” Alex quickly added, not wanting to scare the man away; by the slight paling of his face, he seemed to be one of the few in this town who believed they were actually FBI. “We just want answers — if you cooperate, you won’t be charged with anything related to …” She motioned to the room, leaving the rest of her statement for the man to fill in.

“Oh. Of course. Is Mike in trouble?” The man’s face darkened when Dean and Alex exchanged looks. “What?”

“Mike’s dead.”

Kotter’s eyes widened. “Dead?” he repeated, and the color drained from his cheeks. “As in murdered? That’s why you’re here, right?” He looked between the two, and he drew in a deep breath to regain his composure.

Dean nodded. “How well did you know Mike?”

Charles Kotter shrugged, hands going into his pockets. “You promise you don’t care about this gambling thing?” he asked carefully, and when both hunters nodded he looked up at the ceiling, carefully choosing his next words. “McNelson was a regular,” he reluctantly began. “Addicted to the game, but he recently hit a slump. That didn’t stop him, though.”

Alex frowned, but Dean cocked an eyebrow, playing it cool as he asked, “And how’d he get the money? Who loaned it out to him?”

The young angel rolled her eyes at his stupid question, but to her complete surprise the man readily answered. “You just met him. Raymond Doan. He’s in charge of all gambling loans.” He nodded off towards the door where his partner had disappeared through.

“Doan the loan shark,” Dean added in a low, smug voice, bending slightly towards Alex so she could hear him.

Alex pointedly ignored him, wings twitching as she crossed her arms. “What about Emily Brennan?” she inquired instead, head tipping ever so slightly to one side as she awaited an answer. “Did she owe Raymond money?”

Kotter squinted as he thought, trying hard to place the name with a face. “The name sounds familiar,” he finally admitted. “Large woman, right? Yeah, I think, but she stopped coming here weeks ago. It’s not uncommon around here. Why?” His gaze sharpened. “You think she’s got something to do with Mike’s death?”

Alex felt Dean’s gaze on the side of her head, and she let out a short breath, deciding what to do next. “We’re going to need Raymond’s address,” she finally announced. “He’s not in the bar anymore,” she added to Dean in a low voice when Kotter turned away to write it down. “Looks like he’s fled. Want me to go after him?”

She let her wings stretch out, ready to take off after the man on Dean’s command, but the hunter put a hand on her shoulder with a shake of his head. He accepted a post-it note from Charles Kotter and, after glancing over it, folded it and placed it in his pocket. “Thank you. We’ll be in touch.”

Alex let Dean take the lead, falling in step behind him as they exited the bar. “Don’t say it,” she warned when she saw the wide, cocky grin that was growing across the hunter’s face. “I swear to God if you say I told you so …”

Dean circled around the Impala with a quick shake of his head. “I wasn’t going to, but I totally told you so.”
“No,” the angel countered, “you called the loan shark. We don’t know that he’s the one behind this. Or that he’s a … witch using daeva to get payback.” Alex leaned over the roof of the Impala to look at the Winchester, exasperation heavy on her voice when the grin didn’t fade. “What’s next?”

Dean pulled the post-it note out of his pocket and unfolded it so he could read the scrawled address. “I think we’ll need to pay Raymond a little visit.”

Alex adjusted the collar of her dark jacket as she waited for Raymond’s house to roll into view. They had taken a few detours, one to swing by the motel to change and a second to grab a quick dinner. The angel had to admit that she was feeling much more comfortable in her jeans and t-shirt. Dean had offhandedly commented the same just a few minutes earlier, and Alex reached out to pull a long, blonde hair off that had tucked itself between his jacket and his red flannel. “This it?” she asked when they stopped across the street from a white stucco house.

Dean nodded and got out. “Ever dealt with a daeva before?” he asked as he slammed the door and circled around to the trunk.

Alex followed him, leaning against the bumper as he dug around in the weapon’s compartment. “No,” she admitted, “but I read up about them in Bobby’s journal. We need light, right?” She let her angel blade slide down into her hands as she motioned to herself. “I am a creature of light. I’ll just … I don’t know, flash my grace and boom — they’ll be gone or, even better, they’ll be dead.” She twirled her weapon before it fell back to her side.

Dean slammed the trunk and tucked his gun into the back of his jeans. “Good. Then if those things come after us, you take care of them.” He motioned her after him across the dark street, and Alex bounded up the stairs to rap on the door. “FBI,” Dean called, joining her on the front porch. “Mr. Doan?” He pointed towards the side of the house, and Alex nodded, slipping off of the porch and around the house.

Her grace picked up movements inside the house, and she peered through a window and into the room where the human soul was. It was definitely Raymond Doan. His movements weren’t hurried, so he clearly wasn’t scared by Dean’s presence, but he gave no indication that he was going to even open the door for the hunter. Much to Alex’s dismay, in fact, he seemed to be … preoccupied. The loan shark was facing a tall wooden table, lit candles casting a flickering glow on the walls. Alex pulled away before he could see her, staring up at the dark sky above. Why did Dean have to be right?

She circled back to the Winchester. “He’s inside,” she muttered, not meeting his gaze. “And don’t you dare say it.” A rush of her grace kicked the door in, and her weapon fell into her hands as she led the way inside. Dean followed close behind, his footfalls heavy on the wooden floor, and he pushed his way past the angel and into the dark living room. “Freeze,” he ordered, gun pointed straight at the man in front of them.

Raymond stopped, the room falling silent as his quiet and harsh chanting ceased. “FBI. I didn’t kill those men,” he began, turning to face the two hunters with a cold, fearless look. “I have a perfect, airtight alibi.” His grin was dark and confident as he surveyed his opponents.

Both hunters ignored his statement. “Alter,” Alex pointed out to Dean, speaking aloud to remind him as well as confirm these facts for herself. “And that Zoroastrian sigil on the wall above it. Which means definitely daeva.” She twirled her weapon in her hands, grace swirling through the dark room as she turned back to the loan shark. “Let me guess, Raymond. You summoned those things here?”
Raymond’s face went blank with confused shock for only the quickest of moments before it hardened once again. “Now you two listen to me,” he snapped. “Those people deserved what they got, you understand? I gave them a chance to pay up. McNelson — he threatened to go to the cops if I didn’t clear his debt. You know how much he owed? Almost ten grand.”

“So you killed him,” Dean finished in disgust. “Yeah. That ain’t gonna cut it.” He cocked his gun, but Raymond suddenly flicked his wrist. The gun was yanked out of Dean’s and thrown clear across the room, leaving Dean and Alex to stare at his empty hands in surprise.

Psychic? Dammit.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” the man warned darkly. “And unfortunately, now neither of you get to leave alive.” He took a step forward, shoulders broad and menacing, and Alex slipped in front of Dean, positioning herself between the two of them.

The shadows began to move, and Alex’s grace prickled as the entities’ arrival. Dean shifted closer to Alex, his voice dropping low. “How many are we dealing with?” he muttered.

“How many?”

“Three.”

“Three,” Dean repeated loudly. “Is that all you’ve got?”

“I’ve got three demons at my command,” Raymond retorted, eyes glittering with confidence as he studied the two in front of him. “They’re ready and willing to follow me. What have you got?”

“I’ve got an angel.” Dean thumped Alex on the back, his false sense of confidence seemingly out of place given their situation, and she tore her gaze away from the shadows to look up at him, mouth opened and ready to snap. A retort sat on her tongue, but she decided against it when Dean added, “And those daeva — they’re not real demons, Ray. But they’re a hell of a lot more dangerous —”

He cut off with a sharp and surprised cry as his jacket tore and blood welled up. A similar set of claws tore into Alex’s cheek, and she bit back a hiss as the flesh gave away under the sharp, invisible force. Satisfaction coursed through her, however, softening the sting when she heard the daeva scream as her grace poured through the wound as a bright, white light.

Her wings fluttered as Dean disappeared from her side, thrown across the room as the daeva launched themselves forward. Alex tried to move towards him, but an invisible force blocked her way, and red hot claws dug into her chest.

“Close your eyes,” she ordered as another creature struck at her back, ripping her shirt. She forced her grace outwards, twirling as it spilled out into the room. In the next second, Lucifer’s grace was beside hers, sensing her trouble and exploding into being with the power of an atomic bomb. The shadows screeched in agony as the pure and holy light penetrated even the darkest corners of the house, burning away the evil. Her wings stretched out high over her head, but a cry of pain from Dean had her drawing her grace back inside, locking it deep within her vessel.

The room faded back into darkness, and Alex staggered, unprepared for the sheer force that had come with the archangel’s grace. It had never done that before. Not with that intensity. Her legs wobbled, but each step brought her closer to Dean. “Are you okay?” she asked, worry heavy on her voice as her own pain was forgotten. “Dean?” Had she hurt him?

“I’m fine.” Dean struggled to his feet, wincing at the deep cuts on his arm and side. He picked up his gun with a stifled grunt and cocked it, pointing the barrel at the man crouched in the corner.

Raymond looked up at Dean, the blood trickling down his face evidence that he hadn’t heeded
Alex’s warning quick enough. Alex felt his weak, twisted energy reach outwards towards Dean, and she intercepted it with a growl, grace holding on tightly enough to cause him pain. “Wait!” he begged, bloody hands raised defensively as he stared at Alex with wide, terrified eyes. “Let me —”

Two shots echoed through the neighborhood in quick succession, and Raymond Doan collapsed onto the ground. Dean put his gun away, and turned to leave, but he staggered, and Alex hurried after him, grabbing his arm as he made his way outside. “Dean.” She sat down on the front step and motioned for the hunter to do the same. “Let me look at you. You’re bleeding.”

“Tis but a scratch,” the Winchester quipped, but he sank down the step with a hiss and a groan. Alex reached out to pull the torn fabric out of the way, and her grace flowed towards in a soft glow, gently healing the torn and bleeding flesh. She moved from his arm to his chest, but Dean pushed her hand away when she turned her attention to his face. “I totally called it,” he half-crowed, coughing slightly. His hand went up to cover his mouth, and when he pulled it away, blood was spattered on his palm.

Alex returned her palm to his chest, pushing her grace in further to find and repair the damage. “You didn’t totally call it,” she reminded. “Apparently Raymond was psychic as well as psycho.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Hey,” he defended with a scoff, “nobody saw that coming. Why — why the hell would he summon some — some demonic half-breed when he could off them himself?”

Alex shrugged as she stemmed the bleeding in the hunter’s lungs. “Because people are stupid and unpredictable, remember?” She looked down at her torn clothes, blinking in surprise to find that her wounds hadn’t yet healed. In fact, her whole vessel felt fragile; Lucifer’s grace seemed to have left it weak, and healing Dean’s wounds seemed to be preventing her own repair.

Dean noticed. “Hey, are you okay?” A hand went out to cup her torn cheek; the white light that had first occupied it was gone, leaving only torn flesh and oozing blood. “What the hell?”

“I … I think — I’m fine.” Alex reached up to push Dean’s hand away, but ended up simply wrapping her hand around his wrist when the hunter refused to pull away. “I think Lucifer’s grace was a little more than I could handle this time, but I’m fine. I’ll heal in a little while.”

As if in direct response, Lucifer’s grace bubbled up like a refreshing icy spring, spreading through her body. Alex moved her grace softly alongside it, and she ever so slowly felt her wounds begin to heal from the inside out.

Alex looked up at the sound of police sirens drawing near. “We should probably inform the sheriff what happened,” she decided, wings twitching as the police cars tore around the corner, red and blue lights flashing. They screeched to a stop, and both Alex and Dean rose to their feet as the cops got out of their cars, guns raised and bodies shielded by their vehicles.

“What the hell’s going on?” Sheriff Kat Wilson cleared her gun when she recognized them, displeasure filling her round, pale face. She glanced behind her at the three cop cars with a shake of her head. “The neighbors reported shots being fired as well as a bright light coming from the house. Thanks to you two, we’ve got calls ranging from robbery to aliens.”

Alex raised her eyebrows at the news, and Dean cleared his throat. “Uh, not quite.” He stepped forward, hands going out slightly in an instinctive action of innocence. “We found the guy behind the murders. Uh, I can explain it all tomorrow if you want,” he added, reaching up to wipe the blood off of a cut on his forehead.

Wilson frowned as she took in their torn clothes and bloody stains. “Ray’s dead, isn’t he?” she
asked, her worried eyes pausing when she took in the state of Alex’s wounds. The young angel held her gaze and blinked, silently trying to promise that she was fine.

Dean nodded in reluctant agreement. “Yeah.” He and the sheriff stared at each other, and after a few seconds Kat Wilson nodded, signalling that the two hunters were free to go. “I’ll explain it all to you tomorrow. Promise.” Dean put a hand on Alex’s shoulder as she slowly let him lead her away. “I need a nap.”

The tv screen flickered with color, the soft noise emanating from it the only sound in the entire motel room. Alex sat on the edge of the bed, leaning forward on her elbows as she watched an officer interrogate a suspect. She still wasn’t sure what show she was watching, but it was certainly captivating.

The motel door swung open and close, and Alex looked up to see Dean toss his keys onto the table. “Hey,” she called, reaching for the tv remote. “How’d it go? I wasn’t sure if the sheriff was going to arrest you or not,” she added teasingly.

“It went fine.” Dean’s eyes flickered over to the tv as it was turned off. “Was that a cop show? I hate procedural cop shows.” He dropped down onto the other bed with a small shrug. “She wasn’t too happy, but she understands. Although she did hint that we should get out of town sooner than later.”

“Hm. Not surprising. Well, good thing I don’t really like this town anyways.” Alex got to her feet with a shrug and a look around the room. “Any idea where we’re going go?”

“Whitefish. Thought we’d hold up there for a while until Sam makes his choice.” Dean crossed the room and started shoving his things into his duffle bag. “Why? Some place you want to go?” When Alex shook her head, he slung his bag over his back. “Okay, well, we’re making one stop before we leave town. There’s a Savers attached to the mall. I need new clothes.” He emphasized his point by holding up his shirt from last night, one hand sticking through the large rips.

“Huh. Yeah, fair enough.” Alex looked down at her old and worn jacket. “I guess I could use some new stuff, too. Maybe a sweatshirt. It’s getting super cold out. It’s suppose to snow next week,” she added as she grabbed her bag. “So? We going?”

They arrived at the mall by lunchtime, and after grabbing a bit to eat in the food court, Dean led the way down the escalator and onto the bottom floor. “I thought we were gonna stop at the thrift store,” Alex mumbled around the last few bites of her large soft pretzel.

“So we can’t have a look around?” Dean let out a scoff, eyes sliding through the glass windows. “So, uh, how’s Cas doing? I haven’t seen him in a long time.”

“I haven’t seen him since we last talked about this, Dean,” the young angel reminded. She crumpled up the brown paper that had held her food as she added, “He’s probably still doing penance, and he’s really beating himself up over everything that he’s done. I ... can’t lie and say I think he’s okay.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” Dean promised. “He’s just trying to redeem himself, you know? Don’t tell me you’ve never done the same.”

Alex looked away, unable to lie to the Winchester. “I just want him back,” she finally said with a shrug, and she lightened her voice in an attempt to brighten the mood. “He’s been gone too damn
long and I’m getting impatient.”

The Winchester laughed, pausing beside the darkened doorway of Hot Topic as he turned to look down at the young angel. “Give him a little while. He’ll come crawling back.”

“Huh. I hope not literally.” Alex pulled a face as she tossed her pretzel wrapper into the trash. “A grovelling seraph isn’t exactly a turn on,” she added with a tease.

“Right.” Dean thumped her on the back and continued walking, leaving Alex to let out a grunt of breathless surprise. “I forgot you don’t swing that way. But you guys are thinking about …” He trailed off, leaving the rest of the sentence for Alex to fill it.

It wasn’t hard, and Alex rolled her eyes with a blush when she saw the way the Winchester’s eyebrows moved suggestively. So it was going to be that conversation again. “Yeah, eventually,” she agreed; Dean was going to get the truth one way or another, so it was better just to give it to him now and cut this painfully embarrassing conversation short. “I-I mean, not now, but I don’t know. Maybe when he’s done with his penance. Hard to say.” She gave a dramatic shrug, shoulders rising and falling, and she paused beside a store window. “Ooh. I like that sweatshirt.”

“Come on.” Dean took her by the arm and pulled her to the next store over.

Alex stopped as she glanced up at the sign. “Victoria Secret,” she read, voice flat with disbelief as she looked over at Dean. “Are you shitting me right now?”

She let Dean pull her inside, not sure if she felt more uncomfortable with the mountains of underwear and bras surrounding her or because she was in there with Dean. “Come on,” Dean repeated. “If you’re gonna sleep with Cas, you’re gonna need something, am I right?” When the angel didn’t immediately respond, he added, “Come on. When’s the last time you and me’ve gone shopping?”

“Never,” the angel retorted. “And there’s a reason for that. You are disgusting.” Alex frowned down at the pile of lacy g-strings, and her lips curled upwards unpleasantly. “I would wear literally none of this,” she muttered, half-heartedly poking at the sheer fabric. “I just want my damn sweatshirt, man. Let’s go.”

“Don’t be a spoilsport,” Dean retorted, and even though Alex was expecting it, she couldn’t find any sign of lightheartedness in his eyes. “You want to seduce a guy I’m a guy who likes to be seduced. I know exactly what you need.”

“Yeah, I don’t know if I need anything,” muttered under her breath -- she knew how Dean could take that, and she was careful that he didn’t hear. She added louder, “The dude fell in love with me when I was in that phase of wearing your guys’ clothes. If he fell for someone wearing oversized t-shirts, I don’t think he’s gonna care much what I’m wearing for those few minutes before they come off.” Alex glanced over at the few customers that were scattered throughout the store, ad she shook her head to see a few of the younger woman eyeing Dean curiously. “You know, I think you’re just using me as an excuse to come in here and look at lingerie.”

Dean snorted. “Course not,” he lied. “Orange?” He pointed to a pair of umber panties. “Cas’ favorite color.”

“No,” Alex corrected, “your favorite color is orange. Cas’ favorite is green. Or something like green,” she added, thinking back to that conversation so many years ago. She shoved one hand in her pocket and lifted a pair of underwear up with two fingers, not wanting to fully touch it, yet curious enough to examine it. "You know what? Just put it on my Christmas list, okay? Surprise me. Hey," she added as an idea came to mind, and she glanced out towards the store's exit. "Now that
that's decided, can we get ice cream after this? I’m hungry.”
December 19, 2013

Whitefish, Montana

Alex hurried up the stairs of Rufus’ cabin, wings curling inwards as they brushed against the side of the stairwell. She had just finished reorganizing the piles of folders and weapons that had been haphazardly left on the ground since sometime last year, and, with Dean busy napping on the couch upstairs, she had thought it a good time to start picking up the mess.

She pushed open the heavy wooden door and stepped into the main room. Alarm pulsed through her for half a second, feathers ruffling as she spotted a third figure in the room, standing beside the couch where Dean lay, but the panic passed when she recognized the navy wings that rested casually against a tan coat. “Castiel.” The young angel kept her voice low as not to wake the hunter, and the seraph’s eyes turned onto her. “Hey, uh, what are you doing here? Is everything okay?” She tipped her head, confused as to why the angel hadn’t come to her directly.

Castiel didn’t immediately answer, and his wings fluttered uncomfortably. “I … I’m waiting for Dean to wake up,” he finally admitted. “I require your help, but I understand that he needs to sleep.”

“Huh.” Alex shrugged off his unnatural decision and crossed the room to press a quick kiss on his lips. “Well, I’m going to go and fold the laundry over in the other room, but, uh, if you want to talk, feel free.”

“I’d prefer to tell the both of you at once,” Castiel responded, but Alex couldn’t help but notice the way his lips fell slightly into a frown when she pulled away. “It … won’t take him long to wake, will it?”

“Keep staring,” Alex suggested jokingly. “Remember what I’ve told you? The more you stare, the sooner he’ll wake.” Castiel made a noise of understanding, and Alex moved off into the adjacent room.

She only had to wait four or so minutes before she heard the tell-tale signs of Dean’s return to the waking world. “Dammit, Cas!” came the loud and surprised voice, followed by a thud as Dean slammed his beer bottle down onto the coffee table, and Alex rose to her feet with a grin. “How many times do I gotta tell you — it’s just creepy!”

Castiel looked over at Alex, blinking twice in confusion, but he chose to ignore Dean’s strange comment. “I need your help,” he announced, looking between the two hunters. “Both of yours. The angel Samandriel … He’s been taken.”

_Taken?_ Alex hurried across the room to stand in front of the seraph, eyes wide in surprise. “Samandriel?” she repeated, mind recalling the image of the young, quiet angel. “What? Are you sure?” She looked down at Dean, who was still seated on the couch. “You remember Samandriel from that auction, right?”

“Yeah, I remember,” Dean agreed, and Alex turned back to Castiel.

“You knew him?” The seraph’s head tipped to one side, surprised at that knowledge. “How? Samandriel hasn’t come to earth in a very long time.”
“I saw him — when was it? Late September? At a supernatural auction where we were trying to regain the demon tablet. I … I really liked him,” she admitted. “He was a nice angel — good heart. What do you mean ‘taken’? Where the hell is he?”

“I … I don’t know. I heard his distress call this morning on angel radio.”

“Angel radio?” Dean repeated from where he sat on the couch. “I thought you shut that down.” He looked up at Alex for confirmation, rubbing at his tired eyes, and she nodded; she vaguely remembered hearing something about that.

Castiel seemed slightly taken aback by the question, and his answer seemed a little stuttered. “Well, my penance, it’s going well, and I thought it was time to turn it back on. I’ve been helping people, Dean.”

“Yeah, so I’ve heard. Well, good for you.” Dean rose to his feet, hands on his lower back as he stretched. “Alright, so who snatched heaven’s most adorable angel?”

“Crowley.”

The hunter’s entire countenance darkened, and his hands fell to his side. “I’m listening.”

“Samandriel is being held in the general vicinity of Hastings, Nebraska,” Castiel reported, and Alex flicked her wing in agitated worry; if Crowley had an angel, there was no telling what he would do.

“The general vicinity?” Dean repeated scoffingly. “That’s all you got?”

“Yes, which is why I need your help. The signal cut out before I could pinpoint it,” he added when he saw Alex’s frown. “I would continue on my own, but it seems this is going to involve … talking to people.”

The young angel let out a wordless noise, her mind whirling fast to think up a witty retort, but Dean pushed past her as he made his way to the kitchen table and beat her to a remark. “Come on, Cas, I thought you were a hunter now.” He sat down at the table and pulled his laptop closer.

“Well … I thought so too,” the seraph agreed, following him, “but … it seems I — I lack a certain …”

“Skill?” both Alex and Dean guessed, and Castiel looked away, slightly hurt.

“Hey hey, don’t worry. Talking to people isn’t one of my skills either,” Alex half-joked as Dean pulled up the internet. She reached down and took Castiel’s hand in hers, offering comfort just as much as she was looking to receive it. “We’ll find Samandriel soon, Cas.”

“What am I looking for?” Dean glanced back at the two, eyes landing on their interlocked fingers for only a short moment before they returned to Castiel’s face.

“Well, when you torture an angel, it screams …” Castiel began, and Alex squeezed his hand tighter. “That kind of pain, it creates a ripple effect of strange incidents.” He waited until Dean’s fingers started moving across the keyboard before he looked around the small cabin. “Where’s Sam?”

“Sam’s gone,” Dean explained before Alex could open her mouth. “It’s alright.”

“He’s taking some personal time,” the young angel elaborated. “He’s okay, though. Don’t worry.” She bumped the side of her head gently against Castiel’s shoulder, grace thrumming as the seraph curled his comfortingly around hers.
“It’s alright,” Dean repeated. “We’ll find Alfie ourselves. Here.” He pointed towards his computer screen where an online article read *Tornadoes, Strong Winds Cause Damage Across Nebraska.* “Sound about right?”

“Yes,” Castiel confirmed, concern creeping into his voice. “That sounds correct. That must be him.”

Dean hummed out a noise of acknowledgment before he scrolled down and clicked on a related link, and his hum turned curious. “And what about this one?” he asked.

Alex leaned forward to read the first paragraph. “A man received third degree burns when a bush spontaneously caught on fire in Ingleside,” she paraphrased, and her wings curled forward in interest. “That sounds weird. And rather biblical.” She rested her free hand on Dean’s broad shoulder. “We should definitely check that out.”

“Right.” Dean closed his laptop and tucked it under his right arm. “That’s about a day’s drive from here, so we better get started.” He walked over to the couch where his bag and its contents were scattered across the ground. “You guys coming with, or, uh, will you catch up later?” he asked as he looked back at Alex, the look in his eyes implying that he suggested they do that latter.

Alex frowned and inwardly rolled her eyes. “Even better,” she suggested, dropping Castiel’s hands, “we’ll go down there right now and interrogate the guy and you can catch up later. How about that? I think that’s a good idea. It’ll save us at least half a day.”

Dean cocked an eyebrow, but shrugged indifferently. “If you want,” he began, “but make sure you get all the info you need.”

“Who, what, where, when, why. Got it.” Alex nodded. “Five W’s. See you in — where was it? Ingleside? That sounds right.” She glanced out the window towards the Impala. “I’ll need a few things, and then we’ll be fine. Come on, Cassie.” A push of her wings carried her out to the Impala, and a flick of her grace had the trunk popping open. She glanced inside to see Castiel and Dean talking, and she took their distraction to grab what she needed: a notepad, a pen, a press identification. Then she took off into the sky, hovering up by the cloud as she waited for Castiel to follow. It took him a few seconds, but he soon joined her, his large, navy wings making the air around them thrum with each wide stroke.

“What?” he asked, head tipping to one side when Alex made no move to lead the way.

“Uh … Which way’s Nebraska?”

A low noise rumbled in the seraph’s chest — whether amusement or confusion Alex couldn’t tell — and he pointed south. “Follow me,” he instructed, and he took off through the sky. Alex did as he asked, her strong, sleek wings beating rhythmically through the cold air as she flew slightly below the seraph, and each downstroke of his wings brushed against the upstroke of hers.

Less than a second later, Castiel dipped downwards towards a small town, and Alex followed, wings drawn in tight as she plummeted. She landed on the sidewalk beside her mate, eyes upturned towards the hospital. She shook out her wings so her feathers would lay flat, and she smiled when Castiel’s wing came to rest briefly against her own. “Come on.” She crossed the street with a cautious glance. “Let’s go find this guy.”

“Mr. Hinckley?” Alex knocked firmly on the frame of the hospital doorway, announcing her presence before she and Castiel stepped inside. The seraph stayed behind her; their discussion on the
way up left them agreeing that Alex should do most of the talking. “We’re from the, uh, the Geneva Gazette? We just need to ask you a few questions. Is that alright?”

“Uh … sure.” The man’s eyes flickered over to the two of them, but not much else of him was granted movement. He was covered in burns, and his face and limbs were wrapped in gauze.

Alex nodded, a sign of her gratuity, and she reached into her pocket to retrieve her notepad. “So, you mentioned that the bush … that it talked to you?” she asked, digging around for her pen. She tugged the cap off with her teeth, and pressed the point into the paper, ready to record the man’s answer.

“Yeah,” Hinckley reluctantly agreed, “I know it sounds crazy, but, yeah.”

“What did it say?” Castiel inquired, eyes narrowing as he stepped forward. Alex felt his wings twitch in curiosity, and she nodded in agreement with the question.

“No clue,” Mr. Hinckley admitted. “Sounded like Klingon to me. Why?” He looked between the two angels, a sudden burst of confusion and caution darkening his face.

“Klingon?” Alex repeated skeptically, and her wings flicked in disregard. “Listen, we’re going to need exact words, Mr. Hinckley. Best that you can, alright?”

The man looked between Castiel and Alex, unsure if they were joking. “Is she being serious?” he asked the seraph, squinting in disbelief.

Alex felt Castiel’s eyes come to rest on the side of her face for a brief moment before he turned back to the man in the hospital bed. “Yes,” he confirmed. “That is her serious face.”

Mr. Hinckley was silent for several seconds, but when Alex didn’t back down, he looked up at the ceiling, deep in thought. “I don’t know. Um, something like sol-voc?” he guessed, nodding when the words seemed to ring true. “Yeah. Sol-voc-tay.”

Solvoc-tay. Obey. Alex looked up at Castiel as the Enochian word translated in her mind. “Obey,” she murmured aloud, and the seraph’s wings twitched uncomfortably in agreement.

“What?

“Nothing.” Alex flipped her notepad closed with a quick nod. “Sorry, nothing. Thank you for your time, Mr. Hinckley. If we need anything else, we’ll be in touch.” She nudged Castiel out of the room with a push of her wings, backing up until she was out of the room. “That —”

“Enochian? Yes,” Castiel strolled ahead, taking the lead, but after a second he slowed so Alex could walk at his side. “And you’re right. Solvoc-tay means ‘obey.’ ” His wings drooped as he stopped, feathers brushing against the tile floor. “The amount of pain an angel must be in to manifest himself through shrubbery … but to burn …” He looked up into Alex’s eyes, his own wide with desperation. “We have to find him before it’s too late.”

“Of course.” Alex reached out to take his hand, wings folding forward to brush comfortingly against his arms as she turned to face him. “We’re going to find Samandriel, Cas. I promise you that.” She leaned forward and rested her forehead against his for three, long seconds. “Come on. Let’s go find a motel to crash for the night, and then we can call Dean. He’ll know what to do.”

“Obey?” Dean’s confused voice came over the phone’s speaker, and Alex made a noise of agreement from where she was sat cross-legged on the motel bed. “Obey what?”
“No idea.” Alex looked over at where Castiel was laying on the other mattress, wings spread out and head turned upwards as he stared blankly at the ceiling, clearly deep within his own thoughts. “But whatever’s going on, it’s bad, Dean. Just … hurry up.”

“I’ll be there early tomorrow morning,” the hunter promised. “I’m going as fast as I can. Look. With a sign like that, Alfie can’t be that far away, right? So why don’t you two do a sweep of the area and see what you can find before I get there, okay? Find out where Alfie is, and then we’ll regroup tomorrow.”

“I bet me and Cas can handle it on our own,” Alex suggested, but even as she spoke she knew Dean wasn’t going to have it.

“No. No way. If I know Crowley, that place is going to be swarming with demons and angel sigils. There’s no way you two can handle it on your own? Okay?” When Alex didn’t respond, Dean’s voice grew sharp. “Alex. I said okay?”

“Yeah, Dean. Okay.” Alex reached out and hung up, head falling forward into her chest as she replayed Dean’s instructions in her head. “Cas?” She looked over at the seraph, one wing stretching out to try and reach him. “How are you doing?”

“I’m … worried. Afraid.” Castiel turned his head to look at her, a wing going up to touch hers. “Samandriel … he’s young — too young to be subjected to this. He’s a good angel, Alex, far better than most. He doesn’t deserve this.”

“No. He doesn’t.” Alex got up and joined Castiel on the other bed, laying down beside him with her head resting on his shoulder. She shifted closer to lay one arm across his chest, and she let out a soft, dejected sigh. “We’re going to find him, Cas,” she murmured, her breath warm against his neck. “Samandriel may be young, but he’s strong.”

A hand came to rest on hers, and Alex closed her eyes at the touch. They lay in silence for a minute or so, and the young angel focused on slowing her breathing down to match his. “Dean wanted us to search the area,” Castiel eventually said. “When should we do that?”

Alex heard the urgency in his voice, and she tipped her head up to kiss his cheek. “Soon,” she promised. “We’ll wait till it’s dark. As long as we find it by tomorrow morning, everything’s going to be okay. But Dean was right; we can’t go in there alone.” She readjusted her head so it was back in her original position. “So right now, I just want to stay here. Like this.” She felt the hand on hers squeeze gently, and she let her grace seep out from her vessel to rest against Castiel’s. “This is nice.”

“Mm.” Alex slid her hand out from under his, fingers going to play with the large buttons on his coat. “That’s really cool, Cas. Good for you.” Castiel’s head tipped, and Alex looked up into his eyes. “I’m really happy for you,” she finished, meaning every word.

“Thank you.” Castiel blinked, and Alex shifted so she could better see his face. “I really feel that I’m redeeming myself for all that I have done.” He swallowed, pausing for a second before he added, “For all that I’ve done to you.”

Alex rolled away, the inexplicable weight of sadness pressing down upon her chest, and after a second she heard the bed creak as Castiel shifted. “I’ve said something to upset you.” A warm hand
came to rest on her shoulder. “I’m sorry.” He waited, but when Alex didn’t answer, he let out a soft sigh. “How have you been?” he asked, voice dropping into a soft murmur. “Since Ashiel.”

Alex buried her head in the pillow, eyes stretched open wide as she fought back the tears. “He’s safer where he is,” she insisted, but her voice sounded weak and unconvincing. “I couldn’t keep him, Castiel. I love him too much.” Her own hand went up to cover the seraph’s, her fingers clinging tightly to his wrist. “I couldn’t let him grow up in this life. A-And there’s no way I can ever get out.” She squeezed Castiel’s hand as she drew in a trembling breath. “Not without you.”

Castiel didn’t respond, but Alex felt his wings curl over her. “You don’t deserve this,” the seraph whispered, and Alex almost felt like she wasn’t supposed to hear his quiet and forlorn words. “I’m sorry.”

“I want him back.” Alex let her eyes fall closed at the brush of the seraph’s feathers. “I-I miss him so much, Cas, and I’d do anything — I swear I’d do anything to have him back, but …” She rolled over, grey eyes locking with blue, and she gazed up into Castiel’s face as she whispered, “His safety’s more important than my love.”

The seraph’s hand was warm against her cheek, and Alex closed her eyes as she leaned into his gentle and consoling touch. “You’re stronger than I am,” Castiel murmured. “Perhaps I’m still too selfish to let go.” His thumb moved in soft, small circles against her skin.

Alex returned her head to Castiel’s chest, eyes closing as she let out a long sigh. “I … I just want you back, Cas;” she admitted as she relaxed into the seraph below her. “Just promise me you’ll come back.”

“Of course.” Wings curled up around her, wrapping her in warmth and security. “I’ll always come back to you.”

Alex followed Castiel through the night sky, eyes scanning the darkened land far below. “Cas!” she called, head tipping up toward the seraph above her. “What exactly are we looking for?”

She feared that her voice had been lost on the December wind, but after a second or two Castiel twisted downwards, and before Alex could register what was happening she was in his arms, wings pinned tightly against her back as she found herself face to face with the seraph. His arms were locked tightly around her back, large wings keeping them up. Alex blinked at the suddenness of their close proximity, but Castiel only stared into her eyes with genuine confusion. “Did you say something?”

“Y-Yeah, uh, I asked what we were looking for.” Alex twisted her head to look down at the farmhouses far below that were passing at a frightening speed, and she pulled her wings in closer as not to let them catch on the wind. “I mean, this area is filled with abandoned places.”

“We’ll know it when we see it,” came the quiet response. “Either we’ll spot the demons or the wardings if Crowley has put them up.”

Alex’s gaze darkened. “Oh, he’s put them up,” she promised. “There’s no way he’s going to risk any angel getting in there without his knowing about it.” She put a gentle hand on Castiel’s chest and pushed slightly; the seraph understood and let go, letting the young angel fall a little before she could safely flare out her wings again.

Samandriel? Alex sent out a prayer, eyes scouring the earth below. Can you hear me? We’re
coming — me and Cas. We’re coming for you.

“Alex.” Suddenly Castiel plummeted, and Alex pulled up to a halt before she followed him, wings carrying her down through the air and onto the dark dirt road below. She landed at Castiel’s side, eyes narrowing as she took in the concrete warehouse in front of them. “This is it,” the seraph announced.

Alex took a step closer, head tipping as she saw three men standing around a fire inside a metal barrel. They looked like squatters, but as Alex’s grace slipped outwards she could feel their true presence even from a distance. “Demons,” she agreed. “And something else.” She stepped forward at the strange feeling the surrounded the building. “What is that?” She looked back at Castiel in surprise. “Is … is that the warding? I’ve never felt that before.”

“There are several,” Castiel agreed, moving forward to join her. “You were right — we can’t get in with those in place. We need the Winchesters. We should go tell Dean.” He took off before Alex could respond, and she turned around in surprise to find that the seraph was no longer at her side. She stared up at the night sky, confusion flitting through her face as she took off after him.

She found Castiel in the front seat of the Impala, and she landed in the back with a huff. “— found where Crowley is keeping Samandriel,” Castiel was informing the hunter. “I can show you where, but the wardings are keeping out any and all angels. However, once they’re broken, we should be able to enter.”

“Yeah, except there were also at least five demons outside just from where I could see,” Alex added with a frown, leaning forward to join in the conversation.

Even in the dark, she could see Dean’s displeasure. “If Crowley’s got that many hell monkey’s outside, he’s gonna have at least double inside. Even if I can get in and take down those sigils, the three of us and a demon knife ain’t gonna cut it.”

“Okay.” Castiel gave a curt nod. “I’ll go get Sam.”

“Whoa whoa. No.” Dean reached out to keep the angel from flying away. “We don’t need Sam.”

Alex narrowed her eyes in confusion. “Uh, no, I think Cas might be right on this one,” she decided. “I think we might need Sam here, Dean.”

“We don’t need Sam,” Dean repeated insistently. “Look, if Sam wanted in, he’d be here, okay? Besides I got a better idea. Kevin’s still got the recipe for that demon bomb memorized, right? We’ll drive down to Warsaw and get that —”

“Drive down?” Alex cut him off with a scoff. “Dean, that’ll take days! No. You get into town and we’ll fly down, okay? Who knows how much time Samandriel has left!”

Dean turned his head, and Alex raised her chin defiantly as she held his gaze. After a few seconds, Castiel cut in with a low cough, and the hunter turned his attention back to the road. “We need to rescue Samandriel as quickly as possible,” he said quietly.

“Fine.” Dean pressed down on the accelerator, and the car sped forward. “We’re an hour out. Is that okay?”

Alex nodded, leaning back against the backseat. “Yeah,” she agreed quietly. “Thanks, Dean.”
Alex followed Castiel through the air, careful to keep an eye on where the seraph had one hand gripping Dean’s shoulder, and his grace surrounded the Winchester to protect him as they moved at supersonic speeds. In the next second she was landing on the cold, metal floor of Garth’s boathouse.

“Slow read?” Dean stepped away from Cas and moved towards Kevin Tran; the prophet sat with his back to them at a metal table, his half of the demon tablet in his hands.

“The slowest.” He barely looked up from his project at their sudden presence, and Alex took a moment to appreciate the elaborate keys and diagrams that Kevin had hung haphazardly around the small, metal room.

“Where’s Garth?” she heard Dean ask.

Kevin shrugged. “Supply run?” he surmised. “I don’t know. Sort of lost track of when he comes and goes.” He finally set down his notebook and turned to look at the three of them. “You guys need help with something? I’m working here.”

“You look horrible,” Castiel said, face scrunching up in what Alex assumed to be sympathy.

The prophet clearly didn’t assume the same. “Yeah,” he muttered. “Thanks.”

“He’s right.” Dean moved to stand between Kevin and the seraph, a frown in his face as he took a moment to study the prophet’s unkempt appearance and dark circles. “Are you okay, Kevin?”

“Fine.” Kevin looked down at the scatterings of papers and notes on the table before him. “I’m just …. in the middle of something.”

“And?” Dean prompted, eyes searching the prophet’s face for any sign of hope. “Any luck?”

“Interpreting half a demon tablet?” Kevin shook his head in grim disappointment. “No. I got nothing.”

Alex let out a low hum of sympathy as she finished circling around the small room, and Dean said, “Ah. Alright, well, buck up, cause, uh, we need some more of that demon TNT asap.”

“You used it all?”

“Yeah, so let’s whip up another batch.” Dean clapped his hands together to emphasize how easy the task should be, but the young prophet wasn’t buying it.

“Sure,” he agreed, voice tight and laced with scorn. “West Bank witch hazel, skull of an Egyptian calf, the tale of some random-ass newt that may or may not be extinct —”

Dean cut him off. “Alright alright. I get it — ingredients are hard to come by, huh?”

“That’s just the first three.”

“Give me the list.” Castiel stepped forward, extending a hand towards the prophet, and Alex moved to stand at his side as he promised, “I’ll get what we need.” Kevin stared at the angel from a second, but, realizing the seraph wasn’t joking, quickly turned back around to his table and started scribbling down the list on a piece of scrap paper. Castiel waited patiently, and, when the prophet was done, he looked over at Alex. “Make sure they stay here,” he told her. “I’ll be back soon.”

He disappeared, and Alex turned to look at Dean with a shrug. Kevin turn back to his work without another word, and the houseboat fell into silence.
Alex watched as Dean paced around the rusted room, hands folded behind his back and eyes turned downwards as he lost himself in his own thought. Her own agitation grew with each tense step, and she rolled her neck to try and relieve the tension. “Stop it,” she finally snapped when he turned around for another lap. “You’re not helping, Dean.” She glanced over at Kevin Tran; he was still seated at that metal table, still staring down at the broken half of the demon table with his large, black headphones blocking out all of the outside distractions — also known as Dean.

“What’s taking Cas so long?” Dean snapped back. “H-How long can it take to find a fucking Egyptian calf skull?”

“You’re joking, right?” Alex shook her head in disbelief. “It’s barely been an hour, Dean. Give him some time.” She jumped as her phone rang, its ringtone echoing loudly through the room. “Goddammit,” she cursed, embarrassed at her reaction to such a harmless noise. She didn’t recognize the number, and the angel’s wings twitched cautiously as she answered. “Hello? This is Alex.”

“Garth’s friend, right?” came the gruff answer, voice laced with guarded curiosity. “Name’s Garfield; I’m a hunter down in Arizona. He gave me your number; said you’re some kind of genius like Bobby.”

Alex rolled her eyes as Garth’s undue praise. “I worked with Bobby for a few years, yeah,” she agreed. “I picked up a few things. What’s up? Are you on a case?” She glanced over at Dean to see the hunter’s green eyes locked inquiringly on her phone. Hunter, she mouthed in explanation as Garfield began to relay his situation.

“Yeah. I’m out east near the New Mexican border. Came down here to find two hikers ripped to shreds by … by something. Coroner keeps saying bear attack, but there ain’t a whole lot of bears down here in the plateaus, you know?”

Alex nodded, knowing almost immediately what it was. “Yeah, uh, it sounds like you’ve found our missing Howler. Ozark Howlers,” she explained. “Large, quadrupedal creatures with a taste for any kind of flesh. Bobby and I went down there a couple years ago to help a hunter flesh out a pair of them. We only found one.” She glanced down at her shoes, purposefully choosing to leave out the fact that she hadn’t been allowed to actually hunt the creature. “They’re pretty easy to kill. Silver bullet. Just, don’t get bit, okay? They’ll leave you with a nasty infection that’ll kill you within a week.” The young angel waited until Garfield hung up before she rose to her feet and shook of her wings, a long breath leaving her nose to feel the tension fade from the bunched muscles. “What?”

“You worked the Howler case?” Dean’s voice was skeptical, and Alex shrugged. “I was involved in it,” she retorted. “But no, I didn’t actually do any hunting. I was seventeen, barely one hundred pounds, and had basically no experience,” she added, eyes flashing as she felt the need to justify herself. “Of course Bobby didn’t let me actually hunt.” She flicked her wings, dismissing the conversation in search of a better one. “Want me to go get lunch?” she suggested. “Ribs, maybe? I’m feeling ribs.” She waited until Dean reluctantly nodded in agreement before she walked over to Kevin and tapped him on the shoulder. “Hey,” she began when the prophet reached up to pull back his headphones. “Want something to eat? I’m getting ribs.”

“Uh … sure. That’d be great.” Kevin nodded his assent and returned his headphones to their place, signaling the end off their short conversation. Alex turned to look at Dean with a roll of her eyes, but before she could vocalize any of her thoughts, his phone rang, and the hunter jumped to answer it. With another shake of her head, Alex flew away.
Her wings took her to a local rib shack ten of so miles from the boathouse. The parking lot was less than half full, but the sign in the window flashed ‘open’ in large, neon letters, so the young angel let herself in. There wasn’t a line, and in less than a minute Alex was stepping away from the counter, her receipt held tightly in her hands. She let her senses creep outwards as she waited, taking in the conversations of the families behind her and of the pop and crackle of grease in the back kitchen as feet scuffled on linoleum floors.

The door behind her opened with a soft chime, and the angel turned instinctively at the sound. Her wings rose as she blinked back surprise, and for several long seconds she and the newcomer just stared.

The silence’s spell was broken when Alex’s weapon slid into her hands. The stranger immediately noticed and clicked her tongue. “Ah ah,” she chastised, eyes flashing black as Alex growled. “Big Brother’s watching.”

The angel’s gaze slip upwards to the camera, and although her weapon disappeared, her wings rose even higher. “What are you doing here?” she demanded.

“Getting ribs.” The demon rolled her green eyes and stepped forward; she frowned when Alex moved into her path, stopping her from advancing. “What? Is that a crime now?” she joked, but the teasing faded when Alex held her ground. “Out of the way, Feathers.” The woman tipped her head after a long second, black hair cascading over the shoulder of her black leather jacket. “Hey. I know you, don’t I?” White teeth flashed as the demon grinned down at her. “Alex the wannabe angel, am I right?”

“Ex-wannabe.” The young angel retorted, but backed down, showing her temporary acceptance of the creature’s presence. “You … I don’t recognize you.”

“Mm. I imagine not.” The demon flipped her hair back over her shoulder with a toss of her head. “You never got the chance to see my face before I knocked you out cold.” She waited until Alex cocked her eyebrows, a nonverbal cue to further explain. “Hm. When was that? Must have been three years ago by now. My does time fly.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Alex vocalized, arms folded across her chest. “Where?”

“Well, I’d been tracking you halfway across the country by the time I cornered you in the basement of some old hunter’s place. Don’t look at me like that, honey,” she added when Alex’s eyes narrowed. “I had my orders from the King, and I was just doing my job.”

“You.” Alex’s wings flapped twice in rapid succession as she connected the dots. “You were the one chasing me after Michael and Lucifer fell into the Cage.” Anger swelled up within her, and she stepped forward, barely holding back the urge to pin the demon back up against the wall. “You bitch! You’re the one who turned me into Crowley?”

“Ah ah.” The demon shifted backwards to keep room between herself and the pissed off celestial being. “Think of the children,” she chided condescendingly. “You wouldn’t kill a poor woman in front of such innocent eyes.” When Alex reluctantly backed down, she grinned, ignoring the low growl rumbling in the angel’s chest. “There we go. Good girl.”

“Call me that one more time and I’ll take you out back and rip your tongue out,” Alex warned, the cold flash in her eyes showing that she meant every word. “Don’t think I wouldn’t. Now tell me what the hell you’re doing here.”

“I told you. I’m getting some baby-back ribs.” The demon once again tried to slip by her to show her
intent, but Alex wasn’t having it. “My my.” The woman clicked her tongue against her white teeth. “Look at you. Three years ago you would have turned and ran at the very sight of me. Now you won’t even back down to let me have a decent bite to eat.”

A child pushed its way between them as it ran off to the bathroom, and Alex flicked her grace sharply against the demon when her gaze followed the young kid. “I’m not scared of you anymore,” Alex hissed, purposefully keeping her voice low as one of the families got up to leave. “I’m stronger now. Stronger than you, stronger than Crowley, stronger than any damn thing that walks this earth.” Her wings stretched upwards, feathers brushing against the wall, and she was rewarded when the demon shifted backwards ever so slightly.

A silence fell between them, and before the demon could find something clever to reply with, the ding of a bell and the call of “Order fifty one!” had Alex smiling.

“I believe that’s my cue.” She spun around with a flick of her ebony wings and retrieved her purchase.

She turned back to see the demon standing behind her, hand shoved casually into the pockets of her tight jeans. “Name’s Angela, by the way,” she drawled, her pink lips turned upwards into a cocky smile at her regained composure.

Alex ignored it, turning a cold eye to the demon’s appearance before tracing it back up to her face. “Ironic,” she quipped coldly as she pushed her way past, forcefully knocking the demon out of the way. “Enjoy the ribs.”

The food was greatly appreciated back at the boat house, and it even managed to take Dean’s mind off of Castiel’s prolonged absence. They ate in silence, both watching how Kevin worked in between each bite, head bobbing ever so slightly in time with his music. Alex shifted closer to Dean after a while, voice lowering as not to catch the prophet’s attention. “Hey. Where’s Mrs. Tran?” she inquired with a frown, grace flicking out to confirm for the third time that the mother was not aboard the boat. “She’s not here.”

“Kevin sent her away,” Dean whispered back. “Said she was too distracting and overbearing. Or something like that.”

“Huh. Oh yeah, I think I remember Garth mentioning that last time we talked.” Alex reached over and snagged one of the hunter’s ribs. “I think he said she’s with the Heywards.”

Dean grunted as he picked up the last of his ribs and took a bite, leaving Alex to remember that he most likely had never met Charlie or Duncan. With the conversation over, Alex turned her attention back to the food in her hands. Most of the meat had been stripped away, and with nothing else to do, Alex focused on gnawing off the last bit of meat and fat still attached to the smooth bone. Cas? she prayed after a second or two. Everything okay? You’ve been gone a long time.

Wings fluttered and papers flew as Castiel landed in the corner of the room before Alex could even finish her prayer. She was the first to her feet, tongue poised to make a witty comment, but it faltered when she saw who stood beside him.

“I got all we need,” the seraph announced, and his voice caused Dean to look up in surprise.

“Well it’s about time —” Dean fell silent at the sight of his brother standing at Castiel’s side. “What is he doing here?”
“Don’t worry, Dean.” Sam made a small motion with his hands to show his innocent intentions. “Once we save Alfie, I’m out.”

The bitterness in Dean’s voice was unmistakable. “Oh, once ‘we’ save Alfie,” he repeated scornfully. “Don’t hurt yourself, Sam. The three of us can handle it.”

“Hey.” Alex stepped forward and smacked the hunter in the chest with the back of her hand. “Don’t be such an idiot.”

“We need everything, Dean,” Castiel agreed gravely. “And I need both of you, as you say, to stow your crap.” He looked between the two brothers with a deep-set frown. “Can you do that?” When Sam and Dean exchanged looks he stepped forward, moving to stand in front of the prophet. “Here. I got everything you need.”

“Uh, thanks.” Kevin took the plastic bag and peered inside. “I’ll, uh, I’ll go make the bombs.” He rose from his chair, and, satisfied that he capable of taking care of the project all on his own, Alex turned her attention back to the two Winchesters. They were still facing each other, awkwardly glancing over at each other when the other wasn’t looking.

Alex rolled her eyes and strolled forward. “Sam.” She drew the hunter’s attention onto her. “Hey, man. Long time no see. How’s it going?”

“Uh, everything’s going fine, I guess. Kinda hard to say right now.” The taller Winchester shrugged, not sure what else he thought appropriate to share at the moment, and Alex nodded; pushing him for information would get her nowhere.

“Here.” Kevin returned to the room with two metal canisters in his hands. “That’s I’ll I was able to make. Will this do?” He held them out, and Dean took both of them.


“Sure thing.” The prophet echoed Dean’s nod and stepped back when Castiel moved past him. “See you around.”

The seraph took a hold of both brothers and disappeared into the sky without another word, and Alex glanced over her shoulder at Kevin. “Call if you need anything,” she promised before her own wings carried her up into the sky.

Time seemed to stop as she moved through the open sky, but less than a second later she landed on the hard pavement beside Castiel. Dean had already started moving towards the Impala’s trunk, and Castiel acknowledged her arrival with a flick of his wingtip. “We’re driving in,” Dean announced from the trunk. “How far away is this factory from here?”

Alex looked up at Castiel, eyes squinted as she approximated the distance. “Two, three hours?” she guessed. “Due west on a dirt road off of the highway. It’s pretty hard to miss.”

Castiel made no objection to her estimate, and Dean grunted in acceptance. “Alright then.” He circled around to the driver’s side door and looked at his three other companions. ‘Let’s go then.” He slid into his seat, and Alex joined Castiel in the back as the car started with a purr and pulled out onto the road.

The sky was already beginning to darken by the time Dean pulled the Impala up alongside the back of the warehouse despite the fact that it was only six in the evening. Alex followed the hunters out of
the car, gaze turned upward towards the winter sun that was already moving towards the horizon; a small shake of her head was the only sign of her disapproval.

“At least the dark will hide us.” Sam stopped behind her, and Alex turned to look up at the hunter. She didn’t vocally agree, but the slightest blink of her eyes was enough.

“So, there are four main points of warding.” Castiel began, drawing all attention onto him. “North, south, east, and west, and four Enochian symbols like this.” He reached out and grabbed the nearest hand — which happened to be Sam’s — and drew the sigil with a black marker that he produced from his pocket. Alex leaned over Sam’s arm to see, and the resulting shape reminded her slightly of a disfigured and incomplete star. “You need to destroy them before Alex and I can enter.”

“Okay, so what?” Dean studied the sigil before looking over at Cas. “We go in, take care of the hell mooks, and you two extract the angel?”

The seraph nodded. “Yes,” he agreed. “After killing so many, I need to save at least this one.”

Sam pulled his hand free. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Okay.” Dean reached into his pocket and pulled out the demon knife, twisting it slightly so that the dying light of the sun’s rays reflected off of the gleaming metal. “Let’s do this.”

He turned to move off towards the chain-link fence with Sam on his heels, but Castiel reached out to stop the younger Winchester. “Wait. Here.” He let his angel blade fall down into his hands and held it out to Sam. “This doesn’t just work on angels,” he explained. “It kills demons, too.”

Sam glanced over at Alex, who just shrugged, knowing that that little fact was common knowledge with the Winchesters by now. However, Sam only nodded. “Thanks, Cas.”

He followed after Dean, and Alex stepped forward to stand at Castiel’s side. “I don’t like this,” she began after a second of two, watching as the brothers moved out of sight. “This whole ‘waiting game.’” The young angel let her weapon slide down into her hands as she let out a short huff of impatience.

She felt Castiel’s wing curl around hers, and his grace helped calm her nerves. “The Winchesters will be fine,” he promised her. “They’re both capable of this.”

“Yeah, I know that, I just don’t like feeling so useless.” She shoved her grace against the wardings in frustration, but it was like trying to break down a brick wall with her bare hands. She stuck her hands into her jacket pockets with another impatience breath. “They better hurry up and break those wardings.”

Castiel said nothing, and the two of them waited in silence. The sun crept towards the tree line with every passing minute, and the shadows slowly grew longer, making time seem to stretch into infinity, but eventually Castiel’s wings rose. “Dean broke the last warding,” he said and his wings carried him up over the fence and towards the factory. Alex followed at his heels, each thrust of her wings fueled by her eagerness to get in and finish the job. She landed at Sam’s side, grace flicking excitedly as she felt the telltale surge of adrenaline at the sound of demons on the floors above them. However, her grace felt slightly out of sync, and as she looked around at the graffitied walls, she immediately knew why.

“Cas!” She heard Sam’s exclamation of concern, and she turned in surprise to see Castiel swaying slightly on his feet, chest heaving as if he were out of breath. “Hey! You okay?”

Castiel pushed away Sam’s offered help. “It must be the sigils,” he insisted, drawing in a shaky
breath as he stood up straight. “I’m not at full power.”

Alex was at his side in an instant, eyes narrowed as she put a hand on the side of his face. She felt all eyes turn to her, and she added, “The sigils are definitely messing with my grace, but —” She cut off with wide eyes as a high-pitched scream echoed off of the walls, and she looked at the door behind her as her mouth fell open. “I-I don’t know,” she finally continued, mouth dry as she stared at the heavy metal door. “I-I feel fine. Might have something to do with the gender difference. I know that’s happened before.”

Castiel gently removed her hands from his face, and Alex turned to hear Dean say, “Sam, help me muss this crud.” He turned to the wall and raised his spray can to start destroying the sigils, but Castiel stop them.

“No, wait! There’s no time.” He looked off down the hall, and Alex visibly flinched as another scream filled her ears. “Samandriel won’t last much longer.”

Dean turned to the door, grabbing both handles and shaking violently, but it didn’t give. Sam stepped forward in front of Castiel and held out the seraph’s weapon. “Cas. Here, take this.” Castiel accepted it calmly, but in the next second his eyes flew wide, and his hands came up to cover his ears.

Alex jumped at the sudden change, her own eyes widening even further at Castiel’s distress. “Cas?” She reached out to take his arms, trying to pull his hands away so he could hear her, but the seraph struggled away, backing up into the wall as his eyes narrowed, like he was trying to block out the noise of some invisible, unrelenting force. Samandriel screamed again, and Alex froze, torn between her two choices.

“Dean, hurry up!” Sam yelled, and his voice snapped Alex into action. “Come on!”

She ran over to Castiel as the seraph slid to the ground, knees drawn in tightly in fear. “Cas!” She pushed her grace against his, swallowing her back her own terror as she felt it twisting and popping violently in pain. “Cas, please!” She winced slightly, scared by how desperately his grace latched on before it pulled away in agony, and she took his head in her hands. “What’s going on?” she begged as the seraph screwed his eyes shut. “Please just tell me! What do I do?”

She heard the thud of the metal doors as the brothers threw their bodies into it, and another desperate and agonizing scream had both Alex’s wings shaking violently and Castiel curling up. “Dammit!” she cursed aloud, rising to her feet and spinning around. “Out of my way!”

The Winchesters barely recoiled in time as Alex’s grace twisted outwards, using the full force of Lucifer’s power to throw both doors clear off of their hinges and into the room. She stepped inside to see Crowley standing there, staring down at Samandriel with a combination of shock and amazement across his face. That amazement vanished, however, when the two made eye contact, replaced fully by fear, and he vanished. The Winchesters rushed in past her, and it took Alex only a second to take off after the King of Hell.

She was fast, but the demon was faster. Alex pulled herself to a halt midair, wings flapping angrily as she hesitated, her choices waging war within her mind. However, the stronger option won, and she returned to the factory to see both Sam and Dean battling two demons. Castiel stood in front of a barely-conscious Samandriel, carefully removing long, metal spikes from the angel’s skull.

Alex was at his side in an instant, freeing Samandriel’s bonds with a flick of her grace as she took the angel’s head in her hands. “Hey hey hey,” she murmured, holding his head still so Castiel could work, and her words drew the angel’s dull blue gaze onto her. “Remember me?” She saw the vaguest sense of recognition spark somewhere deep within his eyes, and she did her best to grin.
“Yeah? Good. We’re here for you, okay? You’re going to be fine.” She heard Castiel drop the final metal spike on the ground, and she reached up with her grace to help the young angel heal faster. “There we go.”

Together, Castiel and Alex helped him up, and Castiel’s wings carried them gently out of the factory and to the Impala. Samandriel slumped to the ground, and Castiel fell with him, holding the angel securely in his arms. Alex dropped to her knees beside them as Castiel promised, “It’s okay. You’re safe now. I’m taking you home.”

Samandriel looked up at Castiel, and fear flashed through his eyes at the seraph’s words. “N-No!” he insisted. “You can’t take me back there, Castiel.”

Alex looked sharply over at her mate in confusion, and his eyes narrowed. “Why not?”

“Y-You don’t understand.” Samandriel began, his voice growing stronger with each passing word. “I told Crowley things — things he shouldn’t have known. He got into our coding, our secrets — secrets I didn’t even know we had!”

“Hey. Hey.” Alex reached out to put a soothing hand on his arm, and the angel’s fearful twitching calmed at the warm touch. “It’s okay. What he did to you — that wasn’t your fault, Samandriel. I-I mean, it looks like they were hacking your brain in there.” Her voice softened as Samandriel’s eyes grew wide, and she promised, “No one’s going to hurt you anymore.”

Castiel made a soft noise of agreement before he added, “What secrets?”

“H-Heaven, Naomi.”

“W-Who’s Naomi? And what about heaven?” Alex looked over at her mate, but he shook his head, unable to answer any of her questions.

“Who is —” Samandriel cut himself off, and his voice grew fearful and desperate. “Listen to me. Listen to me closely. I’ve been there. I know! They’re controlling us, Castiel.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re controlling us,” Samandriel repeated, and his gaze swung over to Alex. “You have to believe me! I can’t go back there. Naomi will kill me.” He reached out and gripped Alex’s arm, and the young angel couldn’t help the shiver that ran down her spine at the desperate light in his eyes.

“Okay, okay.” Alex covered his hand with hers, doing what she could to keep her voice calm and soothing as the angel’s frantic rambling continued. “Just calm down, okay? No one’s going to hurt you. Not while we’re around. You’re safe here, Samandriel.”

“You’ll be safer in heaven.” Castiel removed the angel’s hand from beneath hers. “I’ll take you there.”

Samandriel’s eyes went wide, and Alex looked over at her mate in surprise. “We can’t take him back there,” she snapped. “Did you hear what he just said?”

“No one is going to kill him,” Castiel retorted firmly. “Samandriel is delusional — he isn’t thinking straight because of what Crowley did to him. He needs to return to heaven so he can fully recover.” He rose to his feet and pulled Samandriel along with him, and Alex jumped up as the younger angel started struggling violently.

“Cas! Let him go!” She reached out, but Castiel pushed her hands away. “He’s scared, Cas! We
should take him back to the cabin —”

“Hey hey hey!” Sam and Dean ran up, and Alex recoiled with wide eyes. “What’s going on?”

“I need to return Samandriel to heaven,” Castiel explained, his voice as cool and as calm as ever despite the weakly-struggling angel at his side. “He’s delusional and he’s injured, and he needs their care to recover.”

“C-Cas?” Alex’s wings drew in fearfully as a thin drop of blood slid out of the corner of the seraph’s eye. “W-W — What’s going on?”

Castiel reached up, movements slow and slightly confused, and he slowly wiped the blood away. “My vessel must have been damaged in the melee,” he said, voice flat and expressionless. “I have to go. I must return Samandriel to heaven. Thank you … for everything that you have done.” His wings fell out for a brief second, and Alex stared into Samandriel eyes; they shown with terror and desperation. Alex rushed forward, but then both Castiel and Samandriel were gone.

Alex stared at the warped, wooden walls, eyes narrowed as she watched a ladybug slowly make its way up towards the ceiling high above. The Winchesters were off to her left, in the living room of Rufus’ cabin, and from the scuffle of feet and the low drag of chalk she could tell Sam was still putting up angel wardings against Castiel. They had immediately returned up to Whitefish after he and Samandriel had disappeared, and despite all of her prayers, Alex still hadn’t heard a word from either. “Almost done?” she heard Dean ask his brother impatiently, and she could tell he was intentionally keeping his voice low so she couldn’t hear.

“Give me a minute,” came the tempered response. “You want something to do? Go talk to Alex; she’s been staring at the wall since we got here.”

“Dude, no,” Dean hissed back, voice low in a fruitless attempt to remain unheard by the young angel. “You talk to her. You’re the one who’s good with all that talking stuff.”

“Yeah, well, I would, except I’m a little busy at the moment —”

“You both know I can hear you, right?” Alex tore her gaze away from the wall and turned it to the room where both the brothers stood. “Yeah. You don’t whisper as quietly as you think.” She turned back to the wall, eyes carefully tracing every crack and knot as she followed the path back up to the ladybug.

The mattress she was seated on dipped, and a flick of her grace told her it was Dean. “Hey. You want to talk about it?”

“I-I just don’t understand!” The young angel let her anger and her hurt spill outwards at Dean’s words before she could help herself. “What the hell’s going on with Cas? That wasn’t like him, Dean, and now he’s not answering me or anything! This wasn’t suppose to happen. He came back, and everything was suppose to be perfect, b-but now he’s gone again and he’s — he’s wrong and I don’t understand why I can’t just have him! It’s like me and Cas … it’s just one big joke to the universe. He was finally back and he promised — he promised this wouldn’t happen again.” She felt a tentative hand on her shoulder, and snuck a peek up at Dean’s face. “S-Sorry,” she apologized, forcing a small, fake laugh as she looked away. “You’re probably hoping I’d just say ‘no,’ huh?”

The hunter didn’t immediately respond. “Yeah,” he finally admitted. He smiled when Alex managed to force out another laugh, but it quickly faded again when Sam entered the room. “You done?”
“Yeah.” Sam leaned against the doorframe with a nod. “Cas can’t see or hear us now.” He watched as Alex’s shoulders fell, and a sympathetic grimace crossed his face. “Listen, I’m sorry —”

“Forget it. It’s fine. You’re just doing what you have to.” Alex let out a long, disappointed sigh. “Something’s wrong with Cas; I admit it. That blood … I don’t know what that could even be.”

“So, what, you think someone’s messing with him or something?” Sam suggested, but the frown on his face showed his uncertainty. “Maybe … I don’t know. Angels?”

Dean shrugged and rose to his feet. “I dunno, man. This whole thing is just weird —”

The world around her disappeared in the blink of an eye, and Alex’s wings rose defensively as she found herself staring at a glossy, white wall. She turned her head, her confusion and her anger only growing to find herself standing in an office, the walls and the furniture an unnatural and near-blinding white. An angel sat at the desk, hands folded and a smile upon her face. Alex flicked her wings as she took in the angel’s appearance; female vessel wearing a white button down under a grey suit. Ginger hair was pulled tightly back into a bun, and blue-grey eyes watched Alex’s every move. “Welcome.”

“What the hell?” Alex shook out her black and gold wings when the angel rose to her feet and crossed the room to stand in front of her. Wings stretched outwards, the feathers an off-white that faded slowly into grey, and Alex rolled her shoulders back when a hand was extended towards her.

“Not quite. My name is Naomi. Welcome to heaven.”

Alex lifted her head higher at the name, ignoring the extended hand until it dropped back down to the angel’s side. Her grace danced around Naomi’s vessel, trying to determine whether the being in front of her was male or female, but she couldn’t decide. It felt male, then female, familiar then foreign. Alex drew her grace back in confusion. “Naomi,” she repeated. “The Naomi Samandriel was talking about.”

“Ah. So perhaps you have heard of me.” Naomi moved back towards her desk, and a wing flicked towards one of the empty white chairs that sat facing it. “Please. Have a seat and we’ll talk.”

“Where’s Castiel?” Alex demanded as she stepped forward, her feathers ruffling outwards angrily. “And Samandriel. I want to talk to both of them. Now. And where the hell am I?”

“You’re in heaven, dear. And I’m afraid you can’t talk to either of them.” Naomi folded her hands in front of her. “Castiel is no longer in heaven. I’ve sent him back to earth.”

“Where’s Samandriel?” Alex prompted when the silence after her words lengthened. “I want to see Samandriel.”

The angel tipped her head to one side as she studied Alex, almost as if she were deciding what it was she was going to say. “I’m afraid that’s impossible,” she finally said. “Samandriel is dead.”

Dead?

“You killed him.” Alex’s voice came out flat, and her grace snapped violently with anger as her voice grew. “You bitch! He could have been saved — you could have helped him!”

Naomi seemed unperturbed by the young angel’s sudden fury, and her voice remained calm and professional. “He was broken. He gave away very important secrets to Crowley, secrets that any of us would die to protect —”
“And what did killing him do? What the hell did it prove? It already happened! You’re the one Samandriel warned us about! You — you’re the one screwing with Cas, aren’t you?” Alex stalked forward, wings flared out high, but she came to a halt when Naomi’s own wings stretched outwards towards the ceiling in a threatening gesture.

“Careful,” she warned. “Castiel is working for me as part of his penance. He doesn’t know about it, nor does he remember these meetings. The same will go for you. And as for a little incentive to do as I ask,” the angel added, stepping forward, “if you don’t want what happened to Samandriel to happen to your mate —”

“No.” Alex’s grace flashed through the room, cutting Naomi off mid-sentence. “No,” she repeated, voice low and dangerous. “You listen to me. I’m not doing to do a damn thing you say because you are not my boss. I listen to Castiel, but I will never obey you.” She guided Lucifer’s grace to the surface, her eyes glowing a deep orange as it bubbled up and spread outwards. “And you’re not strong enough to make me.” She saw the flash of surprise and fear in Naomi’s eyes as her wings fell down in shock at the presence of the devil himself within her, and Alex stepped forward, voice dropping to near a whisper as she leaned upwards. “Now let me make myself very, very clear,” she began, each word slowly and clearly enunciated to leave no confusion between the two. “If you don’t leave Castiel alone, you will regret it. Because right now, Cas is the only thing holding me back from releasing a very particular archangel, and as my mate he would be very happy to kill anyone who might have caused me any sort of harm. You wouldn’t like that, would you?”

She paused, letting her words sink in before she pulled away, satisfied the Naomi didn't move to follow. She let her wings fall back down to her side as she nodded, reining Lucifer’s grace back deep within her. “I hope I’ve made myself clear, so let’s just consider this meeting a warning.” She turned to go, but a thought made her pause. “Oh,” she added, not even turning back to Naomi, “and if I ever see you again, I’m going to kill you.”
LARPing and the Real Girl

January 5th, 2014

Whitefish, Montana

The cabin was surrounded by the thick, grey darkness of the early morning, and the only source of relief was from the slowly-dying fire that popped and crackled in the stone fireplace. The room was silent bar the rhythmic *thud thud thud* as Alex bounced a small, green bouncy ball off of the floor and wall. It was Ashiel’s, one of few that hadn’t been sent back to heaven with him. She had found it tucked beneath the cushions of the brown couch. The young angel was alone; both of the Winchesters back on the road and out looking for cases, and Castiel was still awol.

An owl screeched from outside the window, and Alex flicked her wing in fleeting annoyance. The bird had been a frequent visitor to oak tree beside the cabin for the past week, and its cry sounded like the scream of a young child. The angel snorted in amusement at the memory of Dean had stormed outside four days ago at three in the morning, gun in his hands as he muttered curses under his breath. He had fired two shots at that wretched bird. The forest had been silent for the next two days, but before long the owl returned. That was when the Winchesters left.

The opening chords of *Welcome to the Family* erupted from her phone, and the bounce of the ball ceased as Alex looked up. That was her personal phone, which meant there was only five people it could possibly be. She dragged herself across the room and over to the couch, grasping up along the cushions for her phone. “Hello?” she answered, falling back onto the ground.

“Hey, it’s Sam.”

“Yeah, I know.” Alex bounced the ball onto the ground and caught it when it returned upwards. “Caller ID. What’s up? Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Listen, we’re in Farmington Hills, Michigan. Garth called us up here on a case.” She heard the sound of an engine coughing to life, followed by the slam of a car door. “I know you said that you wanted a few days to yourself, but this one sounded like something you would like.” He waited until Alex hummed out a note of partially-interested curiosity before he continued, “A man got drawn and quartered last night.”

The angel sat up straight, head cocked. “Drawn and quartered?” she repeated, unable to keep the keen interest out of her voice. “Like torn limb from limb by horses. In Michigan.”

“In his bedroom,” Sam added. “Yeah. If you’re interested, we’re on our way to the police station right now to talk to this guy who threatened to kill the vic last night. He said he was ‘a mage’ and was going to make Ed ‘bleed for his crimes.’ ”

“So witchcraft.” Alex moved so she was sitting up on the couch. “Witch hunts are always pretty interesting,” she admitted as she leaned back against the cushions. “When did you say you guys were gonna interrogate him?”

“In the next fifteen minutes if at all possible.”

“Huh. Okay, yeah, I’ll bite. I’ll meet you guys there.” Alex hung up and shoved her phone into her back pocket. “Witches. Fun fun,” she told the ball in her hands. She rolled it between her fingers for a second or two before she returned it to rest safely in her jacket pocket. “Guess I’ll go get dressed.”
Alex landed in front of the Impala, shaking her wings so the feathers would lay flat as she watched the two brothers get out of the car. She turned her head up towards the sky; the sun was already above the horizon. What a difference a timezone made, the angel mused as she patiently waited for the Winchesters to join her on the sidewalk. Sam gave her a small nod as he straightened his tie, and Alex reciprocated the gesture before she turned to Dean. “Well?” she asked, hands going into her pockets. “So what would you guys like me to do?” She followed them up to the police station. “I can go over the case file or go sweep the crime scene.”

“Done and done. Apartment was spotless; no signs of sulphur, EMF, or hex bags. Come on.” Dean held open the door, and she and Sam entered. “You can tell us if this guy has any mojo.” He stepped inside and raised his hand in greeting towards a man approaching from their left; Alex turned her head to see a tall, heavyset gentleman moving towards them, and a quick look at his badge told her he had to be the sheriff.

“Agents.” The man greeted them with a nod. “Is she one of yours?” he added with a look down at Alex.

“Special agent Lydia Rucker.” Alex pulled out her badge for the sheriff to inspect before she tucked it back inside her jacket.

“Huh. Thought you guys only worked in twos.”

“I think you’ve been watching too much tv.” Alex’s wings flicked as she watched a young, scrawny man in handcuffs disappear down the hall. “I believe we’re here to question one of your suspects?”

“Lance Jacobsen, yes. He’s the best lead we have on Ed Nelson’s death — I figure you’ve heard about it.”

“Drawn and quartered. Yes, I heard.” Alex tipped her head towards the hallway which the scrawny man had gone into. “Was that him by any chance?”

“Yeah, that was him. If you guys are ready to take a crack at him, he’s in the first room on your left.” The sheriff directed them down the hall, and when Alex turned back from where his finger was pointed, the man was gone.

She followed Sam and Dean through the station and into the interrogation room. “Lance Jacobsen?” Sam asked, and he and Dean sat down at the metal table across from the young man. “We’re with the FBI.” Alex nodded in accordance with the hunter’s words, standing off to the side as she crossed her arms.

“The FBI?” Lance’s lip quivered as he looked at the three of them. “I can’t believe this is happening. I can’t believe Ed’s dead.” Tears filled his eyes, and he burst into a loud sob. Alex watched him cry into his hands with barely disguised frustration.

“Lance?” Dean clearly seemed to feel the same. “Lance, just — just breathe. Just breathe. You’re fine.” The man sniffled, trying to stifle his sobs, but a second later he burst back into tears. Dean’s shoulders fell, exasperated, and he reached for his cup of coffee with a shake of his head.

“We just need to ask you a few questions,” Sam explained. “Try to calm down.” Lance wiped his eyes with a hiccup and a sniffle, and Dean took a sip of his drink before he asked,
“We want to know about the, uh — the texts you sent to Ed last night.”

“I told them when they brought me in those text weren’t from me!”

“Yeah, well, your phone says otherwise,” Alex retorted from where she stood, but she immediately regretted her sharp tone when Lance’s eyes watered once again.

His voice wavered, but he firmly stuck to his nonsensical story. “No, I mean they were from me, but they weren’t from me.”

Alex raised her eyebrows, and the two Winchesters exchanged looks. The angel’s eyes flickered over to meet Dean’s for a quick second before the Winchester scoffed. “Did you really think that sentence was going to clear things up?”

“I’m sorry.” The scrawny man let out a sigh, and he chose his next words carefully. “This is all a big misunderstanding. Those text messages were from Greyfox the Mystic to Thargrim the Difficult. Our characters in Moondor,” he insisted when he saw the blank looks on the three hunter’s faces. “Moondor is a game that Ed and I play. We’re LARPers. Live action role playing?”

“Oh, right. LARPing.” Alex nodded as the pieces clicked. “Fun times.” She flicked her grace about the room, unsurprised to find nothing but three ordinary human souls. Back to square one.

“We play Moondor every other weekend at Heritage Park,” Lance explained. “All the info about it is on our website.”

“You guys have a website?”

“Y-Yeah, one of the players designed it. In fact,” he added with a bit more conviction, “if you log onto the site, they should have posted pictures from last night’s feast. I was there all night!”

“What does any of this have to do with the texts?” Sam prompted, while Alex gave a small nod of belief in the man’s statement. He certainly wasn’t a witch.

“I play a character named Greyfox the Mystic. I’m a very, very powerful mage in the game. Ed is … Ed was Thargrim the Difficult of the Elder Forest, son of Hargrim and Bouphin, brother to —” He cut off to see that his words were lost on the two men in front of him, and he sniffled a little before he finally said, “He was the Lancelot to my Merlin.”

“Ah.” Alex leaned down to rest her lips next to Sam’s ear. “I don’t think the guy couldn’t do real magic if he tried,” she murmured. “It’s not him. You two finish up here, and I’ll go out and take a look at this Moondor site. Make sure his story checks out.” She thumped Sam on the shoulder when he nodded and walked out the door.

There was a vacant computer sitting at a desk, and Alex slid into the empty chair and pulled up a search engine. Moondor LARPing Michigan, she entered, and she clicked the first site that came up.

“Welcome to Moondor, Michigan’s largest LARPing game,” she read aloud from the header before her eyes moved on downwards through the site. When she clicked on the picture gallery a series of photos popped up, and Alex tapped the desk when she recognized Lance Jacobsen dressed in what had to be his Moondorian garb.

“This could be ‘Fifty Shades of Greyfox’ for all we know,” she heard Dean mutter, and she felt a hand come to rest on the back of her chair. “Hey-a, Feathers, find anything?”

“Um, Lance’s alibi checks out, but twenty bucks says this place has a clue. Fantasy nuts always seem to stumble onto the crazy.” Alex leaned back in the chair as Sam reached over her shoulder and
clicked on a video.

The screen went black as the video kicked into full screen, and the deep, mysterious voice of a man came through the speakers. “Moondor,” it boomed. “A world of intrigue, honor, passion. Four kingdoms — Followers of the Moon, Elves, Warriors of Yesteryear, and the dreaded Shadow Orcs.” Small clips and images of men and woman flashed across the screen, all dressed in fantastical costumes and masks. “All will fight on the Fields of Never in the biannual Battle of the Kingdoms. Pick up the sword or mace. Take control of Moondor and defend the current ruler; the Queen of Moons.”

“Wait. Is that …” Dean leaned forward over Alex’s head as a very familiar face turned towards the camera. “Charlie?”

“What?” Alex narrowed her eyes as she too recognized the woman. “Wait wait wait. The gay techie?” Her wings flicked as she grinned. “Cool. Charlie was cool.” She heard a sudden, panicked scream followed by the pounding of palms against glass, and she looked up in shock. “What was that?”

She pushed back the chair and ran past the two brothers, grace vibrating uncomfortably as she reached out towards the sound. The coughing and gurgling picked up, and Alex burst through the interrogation room door to see Lance Jacobsen on the floor, blood bubbling from his mouth. It was spattered all across the one-way mirror, and it soaked through his clothing. The air reeked of blood, death, and magic, and the angel’s wings flittered when the man’s soul left his body even as she dropped down to her knees in front of him.

“What the hell?” She heard Dean skid to a stop in the doorway, and she turned to see him and Sam peering inside, eyes wide with disbelief. “What happened?”

“He’s dead.” Alex turned back to the body, and for the first time she noticed something strange on the dead man’s arm; she twisted it slightly to reveal more of the pale skin. “But whatever magic did this, it left this mark behind.” She pointed towards the black-ink tattoo, a small yet detailed shadow of a tree, branches stretching upwards and roots reaching down. “Ever seen anything like this before?”

Dean shook his head, but Sam pushed his way past his brother. “Uh, yeah, actually.” He crouched down beside Alex, and she tipped her head to see confusion in his eyes. “Ed had the exact same tattoo.”

“No, this definitely feels strongly of magic.” Alex flicked her grace against it once more to confirm, grimacing at the pins and needles it brought about. She looked back at Dean and rose to her feet. “Listen, either way, that Moondor festival is the only connection those two have. It’s gotta be something there, Dean.”

“Hm.” Dean still didn’t look convinced, but he reluctantly nodded in agreement. “Okay,” he conceded, stepping back so both Alex and Sam could exit the room. “Well lucky for us, we know the queen.”

Alex adjusted her jacket on her shoulders, wins stretched outwards and angled towards the afternoon sun. For January in Michigan, the day was surprisingly beautiful, and the sun actually managed to
feel warm against her skin. Unusual weather, but truth be told, the angel wasn’t complaining. She stepped up onto the concrete parking curb, eyes turned out over the large park as she waited for the Impala to arrive. She had gone back to the motel to change into her civilian clothes after agreeing that it would be best for her to go in ‘under cover,’ and now she was just waiting for the brothers to appear.

She could hear the Impala’s rumbling purr as the car pulled up into the large asphalt parking lot, and she turned to watch the two Winchesters make their way over towards her. “Hey,” she called with a small wave. “There you are. About time,” she added with an upwards lift of her eyebrows.

“There was an accident on the highway,” Dean grumbled, displeased with her sass. “Sue me, okay?” He stopped beside Alex and looked out over the park. “Alright, so where is this Moondor thing?”

“Um, there’s a bunch of people just over those hills.” Alex pointed towards where one of the paved paths disappeared from sight. “Do you guys want to go in that way, and then I’ll circle around and come from the back? Maybe I’ll learn more than two feds.”

When Sam and Dean nodded, she jumped off of the concrete block and hurried down through the grass and towards the woods. She could feel people within the trees, sneaking around through the shadows, and she slowed down to an ambling stroll as she entered the forest. Her wings flicked at a swift burst of wind that cut through the leaves above her head, and she stuck closely to the natural pine path.

Shadows flickered in the corner of her eyes, and her grace snapped out to confirm their identities. Humans. Weirdos. She shoved her hands into her pockets as she continued onwards. The path took her up and over a rise, and for just a second, she caught a glimpse through the trees. Tents were pitched in the valley below, and smoke rose from several fires. Then the camp disappeared behind the leaves, and the angel continued onwards.

She emerged from the forest and made her way down towards the camp, grace once again flicking out ahead of her to see what she could find. A couple dozen human, along with two very familiar souls. Alex almost thought she could spot the two dark backs of the brothers before she moved down the hill and into the camp.

People moved on either side of her, all dressed in medieval-type garb, and the angel felt slightly out of place among them all. She heard a scuffle up ahead, along with the murmur and cheer of a crowd, and she slipped between two tents to see where they had gathered. She heard the thud of wooden swords, and she moved to find a better view, curious as to what was happening. Two knights were engaged in a mock battle, one slim knight wielding a realistic sword while the second had his weapon wrapped in yellow foam. Alex watched in curiosity as the slimmer knight landed several well-aimed blows upon the other, whose defense was altogether too slow and too blocky. After a minute she felt two presences stop behind her, and she flicked her wings back against the two Winchesters in an unfelt greeting.

The second knight fell to knees after another quick and lethal blow, and his head tilted up as his opponent’s sword pressed up his neck. “Yield!” he cried as he dropped his sword in surrender. “I yield.”

The sword fell away, and the slim knight reached up to remove their helmet. Red hair was shaken free, revealing a smooth, pale face and pale green eyes. Charlie Bradbury tucked her helmet underneath her arm as the crowd applauded, and the other knight stared up at her with wide eyes. “I love you,” he breathed out.

“I know.” Charlie released the swordsman, and he scrambled to his feet. “Take your leave to my
medical tent and attend to your … severed limbs.” She waited until the knight disappeared into the
crowd before she turned to address them, her voice rising so all could hear. “Greyfox and Thorgrim
are missing. We pray to the goddess they have not fallen victim to foul play. In their absence, the
honor guard’s ranks are weakened. To join …”

Charlie’s eyes locked with Alex, and her jaw went slack as she recognized the three of them. “Oh
blerg,” she cursed. “Uh … The queen needs some royal ‘me’ time,” she told her subjects. “Talk
amongst thyselfs.” She spun around and hurried towards a large maroon tent, and murmurs and
laughs rose from the crowd as they began to disperse.

Alex followed Sam across the short-cut grass, flicking her wings as she felt Dean lag behind. Sam
turned around to reprimand his brother when Dean picked up the fallen sword and murmured, “Nice
balance,” but Alex continued on into the tent.

“No.” Charlie cut him off with a finger pointed at his chest. “I buried myself. Then Dick Roman
went down, his company went belly-up, and I figured, ‘hey, it’s all good,’ and I was fine. Now
you’re here, and if you guys are here, monsters are here. Why do I have such bad luck?” she
lamented as she shoved another piece of her costume into her bag. “What am I — a monster
magnet?” The woman paused, and then she turned around, eyes wide. “Is there such thing as a
monster magnet? You know what? Don’t answer that.” She turned back to her things. “What I care
about is not getting my other arm broken … or dying.” She picked up her bag and her crown and
turned back to them. “So, I’m dropping my sword and walking off the stage, bitches.” She put the
golden crown on Dean’s head as she passed by. “Have fun storming the castle.”

“Charlie. Charlie!” Dean’s sharp voice had the woman pausing at the tent entrance. “Greyfox and
Thorgrim — uh, Ed and Lance — they’re not missing. They’re dead.”

“No,” Alex firmly shook her head. “Lance was found dead in the police station from internal
bleeding, and Ed — Ed was, uh, drawn and quartered in his bedroom.” She stepped back as Charlie
moved past, and she followed the woman over to the large round table. Alex sat down alongside the
Winchesters as she added, “Moondor is the only connection they really had, and given the … nature
of this place, we have a hunch whatever’s doing this is here.”

“D-Do you have any idea what’s doing this?”

Dean reached into his suit coat pocket and pulled out a photograph from Ed’s case folder. Alex was
just able to catch a glimpse of the strange tree tattoo before he slid it over to Charlie. “Well, aside
from this, uh, mark, and both of them being LARPers, there’s really not much else to go on.”

“Wait. I’ve seen this before.” Charlie picked up the photograph with a look of intense confusion
before she looked back up at Dean. “It’s a Celtic magic symbol. At least it was in my favorite video
game,” she quickly added. “Does that help? Can I go now?”

Sam shook his head. “It’s a start, but no. Um, listen. What can you tell us about Ed and Lance?”

Charlie shrugged her slim shoulders, clearly not sure what she could say that would be of any use. “Good guys. Two of the best members of the Queen’s ever-shrinking army,” she added with a note of scorn.

“Ever-shrinking?”

Charlie let out a long breath, and her shoulders fell in disappointment. “My kingdom has had a lot of bad luck lately, probably cause of me, but …” She picked up the photograph once again and studied it. “Maybe it’s tied to this.” She set it back down as she looked up at Dean. “A month ago, one of my guards had both her ankles broken before battle. Before that, I had three people have hospital-worthy accidents while at home. You think there’s any connection there?”

“Did they have any enemies in common?” Sam asked.

“In real life? No. Everyone gets along famously. In the game, though … they have tons of enemies.” Charlie rose to her feet and walked over to a rectangular table on the other side of the tent. A paper map was spread across it, with plastic figures aligned into four groups, each a different color. Alex followed the Winchesters as they rose and crossed the room to join her. “Red represents the followers of the Moon — my peeps,” she explained pointing to one of the four groups of figures. “Green’s for Elves, blue for Warriors of Yesteryear, and black’s for the Shadow Orc — total d-bags. This weekend is the Battle of the Kingdoms to see who wears the Forever Crown. This weekend, each faction is definitely an enemy of me and mine.”

Dean leaned past Alex to study the array of plastic men. “You know,” he began quietly. “If you, uh, move your archers back and your broadswordsmen to the west …”

“Huh. Fight the warriors.” Charlie nodded at Dean’s words, his actions making sense to her even though they were lost on both Alex and Sam. “Hey, good call. What about the southern wall?”

“Guys.” Sam spoke up to snap the two out of their planning.

“Yeah?” Dean looked up, and when Sam moved his arms out, he nodded and cleared his throat. “Uh, right. Sorry.”

“So, maybe, uh …” Sam hesitated as he watched his brother pick up one of the plastic trebuchet and move it across the map. “Maybe someone from one of the other kingdoms got ahold of real magic and started using it to weaken your army.”

Charlie looked over at Dean, and he nodded to her, winking discreetly as he drew his hand away from the battle map, and Alex shook her head. “Maybe,” she agreed, turning to Sam, “but why go after those people? Why not go right after the Queen herself? I mean, she’s clearly the one behind these guys’ defense.”

“And why the escalation?” Charlie was quick to add. “Why are they killing people now?”

Dean nodded, finding both of the women’s questions to be good ones. “Alright, we’ll canvass the kingdoms. You should get out of here,” he told Charlie. “We don’t want you to get hurt. Alex can take you someplace far away from here.”

“Whoa, wait.” Sam stepped forward to intercede. “Charlie knows Moondor a lot better than we do. We need her.”
“Sam, I think we can take care of a bunch of accountants with foam swords,” Dean scoffed, and Alex couldn’t help but let out a huff of agreement. Her wings flicked, amused by Dean’s description of the role-players.

Sam, however, still wasn’t backing down. “We need all the help we can get, Dean. People are dying.”

Dean’s voice rose, green eyes flashing in frustration at his brother’s lack of sense. “My point, which is usually yours, is that she should get somewhere safe and get back to a normal life.”

“Hey, I am right here, and I want to leave—” Charlie put in, trying to break the tension bubbling between the two brothers.

Dean motioned towards the woman. “Thank you.”

But Charlie wasn’t finished. “But the queen …” She let out a deep sigh. “She has to stay. I mean, Sam is right. People are dying. That can’t happen on my watch. And you know what? I’m tired of running. I like my life here. I’m gonna stay and fight for it.”

Dean’s lips twisted downwards in disagreement, but before Sam could agree or commend the woman for her choice, his phone rang. He quickly answered it, pressing the receiver close to his ear as he listened carefully. “Mm-hmm. Yeah. Okay. Thanks.” He hung up and shoved the phone back into his pocket. “So, the toxicology report came back on Lance. Nothing. But the medical examiner said his body showed clear signs that he was killed by belladonna.”

“The porn-star?” Dean and Charlie spoke in unison, their voices perfectly matched in pitch as they relayed their confusion to Sam’s news.

There was a long pause, and Alex looked up to see that all eyes were on her. “Hey,” she began, hands going up to defend her innocence, unsure why everyone was so focused on her. “I don’t swing that way. I thought you were talking about the poison.”

“I was.” Sam’s lips were pursed into a tight line as Dean and Charlie let out an ‘oh,’ of understanding, and the younger hunter let out a sharp breath. “But they couldn’t find a trace of it in his system.”

“Just like they couldn’t find ropes in Ed’s apartment,” Dean added helpfully.

Sam nodded. “Charlie,” he began, turning to address the short woman, “I’m going to need to borrow your laptop.”

“There are no laptops here in Moondor. What?” she added defensively at the confused and disappointed looks on the brother’s faces. “There are rules. But there is a tech tent four tents down,” she added to Sam.

“Ohay. How about you three go canvas, and I’ll dig into these accidents and this mark?” When there was no protest, Sam moved past the three of them and left, the heavy canvas tent flap falling into place behind him.

Charlie turned to look up at Dean. “Okay, I’m gonna need a full wiki on where you guys have been. But first, you’re gonna have to ditch the suit if you’re gonna walk and talk with the Queen.” She pointed to Dean. “I think I have something that will fit you here. There’s a costume tent just to the left of here,” she added to Alex. “There’s a lot there to choose from.”

“Uh, yeah. Okay.” Alex took that as the hint to leave, and she pushed her way out of the tent and
It took some doing, but Alex eventually put together something that looked like the apparel of all those around her. She pulled on a dark pair of brown pants and an off-white tunic, and she left the top two buttons unopened as she pulled on a darker vest. A belt around her waist housed a well-crafted wooden longsword, and lastly she pulled out a pair of dark leather boots before drawing her blonde hair up into a tight ponytail.

There was a nice diagram tagged onto one side of the tent’s walls, listing the different requirements and pieces of each type of costume, and Alex returned to the pile of parts to pull a pair of leather armguards. She pulled the leather laces tight and then she stepped out of the tent.

Dean and Charlie were already several paces away, and Alex hurried to catch up to them. “Dean!” she called as she slid to a walk beside them. “Nice.”

The Winchester was clothed in a short-sleeve brown tunic over a lighter long-sleeve shirt. Chainmail was draped across his neck and right shoulder. Black armguards were wrapped tightly on his wrists, and a leather belt and wooden sword hung from his side. She felt Dean run an approving eye over her own costume, but when they started walking again he turned to Charlie. “You always been in to LARPing?” he asked.

“Nah.” Charlie led the way through the tents with a shake of her head. “For role-play, I prefer a tabletop. D&D, Gamma World, Car Wars. That’s why Cthulhu invented multi-sided dice, huh?” She grinned at her own joke, but it faltered when neither Alex nor Dean got it. “But a buddy of mine was into LARPing,” she added. “Went for him, stayed for the chicks.” She smiled when Dean laughed. “It’s not just that, though. It’s an escape. I mean, here I’m a queen, a hero. Out there in the real world, I’m just hacking code and chugging coffee all day long.”

“Your majesty.” A woman passed, curtsying slightly to Charlie as the Queen finished her words.

“Now wait a second.” Dean circled on Charlie, causing both of them to stop, his voice dropped low, insistent and truthful. “If it weren’t for you, we never would have been able to take down Dick Roman. Out there in the real world, you are a hero.”

“My queen.” Another female role-player mimicked the first, dipping her head low in respect with a coy smile as she passed, and Charlie returned her smile.

“I’m noticing a lot of these maidens are checking you out,” Dean added as he watched them walk away. Interest was clear in his gaze, and Alex rolled her eyes, feeling slightly out of place as Dean and Charlie both eyed the woman.

“I’ll go do a sweep of the area and see what I can feel,” she announced, shaking out her wings. “You two … try to get some work done, huh? Preferably case-related.” She didn’t wait for a response before she slipped off through the tents. She moved out of the camp and along the tree line of the thick forest. If she remembered Charlie’s map correctly, that was where the orcs were. The elves were to the right, and the Yesteryear folk just beyond that. The twitching of her wings had Alex making up her mind. Into the woods it was.

She moved into the trees along one of the dirt paths, wings stretching up high above her head as a gust of wind passed through the forest. She flicked her grace out in lazy circles as she searched for
any human souls that could be the Shadow Orcs. As she turned the bend she picked up something strange, and the angel immediately changed paths towards it. She saw a flash of white, maroon, and deep brown as she came over a rise. The brown came from a thick cloak as the man spun around and brandished a large sword.

The white and maroon came from wings.

The angel stilled when Alex came into view, and surprise flashed through his eyes, but the next second it was gone, and he dropped into a deep bow. “My lady.”

“Oh, yeah, Alex is just fine.” The young angel flicked her wings, and the other angel rose gracefully to his feet. She approached, unsure of what lay before her. “Uh…” she began slowly, “you — what are you doing here, uh …?”

“Galavant.” The angel dipped his head with a flash of straight, white teeth. “And what does it look like I’m doing?”

“It, uh, looks like you’re an angel LARPing as a knight. Sorry — is Galavant your real name?” Alex tipped her head perplexingly as she stared up at the tall, handsome figure in front of her.

“Ah. Unfortunately, it is not. I was originally called Sasseel, but Galavant seemed a name much more suited for this, don’t you think?” The angel shoved his sword into the soft earth below and ran a hand through his short black hair. “You’re enaiish, aren’t you?”

Enaiish. A female angel. Alex remembered that word from Lucifer, and she nodded. “Yeah. I’m Castiel’s mate, sorta — right now I’m just working with a pair of hunters.”

Galavant let out a low, interested hum. “Huh. I know of Castiel. He was the superior of our sister garrison. We were both watchers of the earth — guardian angels, call us what you want. I saw a lot of human history pass from above. The Middle Ages,” he added as he pulled his broadsword from the ground, “was one of my favorites to observe, although, granted, perhaps not the best from man’s perspective.”

“Uh, yeah, basically.” Alex let her left hand come to rest on the pommel of her wooden sword as she studied Galavant carefully. “So, uh, let me get this straight,” she began, and when the maroon tips flicked in assent for her to continue, she added, “You’re an angel. Who is also live action role playing as a medieval knight.” She shook her head in complete disbelief. “I mean, I’ve seen a lot of weird stuff, but this …”

“What?” Galavant quipped. “Haven’t you ever seen an angel with a hobby? Plus, my lady,” he added with a flourishing wave, “It seems I’m not the only one who’s taken a fancy to the game.” His gaze fell onto where Alex’s hand rested, and his thick eyebrows rose. “Do you have any practice with that?”

In response, Alex drew her sword, left hand resting just below the guard with her right hand holding the grip tightly below it. She raised it defensively as a blow came down from above, and even though her wrists stung a little from the impact, she deflected his attack and countered with a sweep from above. Galavant sidestepped and returned a quick two-handed jab, and Alex barely had enough time to spin out of the way. Her wings stretched out to keep her balance, and she landed in a defensive position, sword poised and feet firmly planted yet ready to move.

Galavant fell into a more relaxed position, wings flicking in appreciation. “Very good,” he praised. “Not many people here can wield a sword like you can. Where did you learn?”
“Bobby Singer. An old friend. He taught me a lot of … strange stuff.” Alex sheathed her wooden sword, and she tipped her head in confusion when something flashed in the angel’s blue eyes. “What?”

The angel fell into a low bow, wings stretching out so the primaries brushed the ground. “I thought I recognized you,” he rumbled. “The humans who stood up to Lucifer. You look very different now.” He rose back to his feet as he slid his own weapon into his belt. “You were with Bobby Singer and the Winchesters. We watched your progress, you know. But you dropped off the radar before Lucifer and Michael met. We all thought you had died.”

“Yeah, not quite.” Alex flapped her wings to emphasis her unspoken words. “Got an upgrade. Uh, but why are you here? Like … on Earth.”

Bright green eyes crinkled at the corners as the angel grinned, but it quickly fell away. “I left heaven when the civil war began. Me and a few others faked our deaths and bailed on all that chaos. Earth isn’t great, but it’s a hell of a lot better than what’s going on up there. And considering you’re down here as well,” he added, “I figure you’d be able to relate.”

Alex hesitated, unsure what to say, so she eventually just nodded. “I’m not here for the same reason you are, but heaven’s still chaos. Naomi has control, and she’s … well, she’s a total bitch.” Before the angel in front of her could comment, she added, “Wait, so a few of you decided to bail together? So you know Balthazar?”

Familiarity lit up Galavant’s eyes. “He’s the one who planned it all,” he agreed. “I haven’t see him in years, though. How is he?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen him recently either. He ended up in haven’s prison, and I have no way up to even see him.” Alex’s wings drooped slightly as she thought about the older angel. “I knew him well, though. I spent a lot of time with him while Cas fought in the war. But I’m back with the Winchesters now.”

“Ah yes.” Faint recognition sparked deep within the angel’s eyes at the mention of the brothers. “So what exactly brings you to Michigan?”

“There’s something weird going on in this town, and we think we’ve traced it back to, uh, Moondor. You haven’t heard? Two people were killed in the past two days, and it sounds like there’s been some other injuries leading up to it. They were, uh, the Queen’s men.”

“Hmm. That’d be why.” Galavant curled his wings forward slightly as he stepped forward. “I belong to the Kingdom of Yesteryear. I don’t associate much with the Followers of the Moon. I will, however,” he announced with a strong and dramatic tone, “help you on your quest. I know these woods like the back of my hands. If there’s anything strange there, I’ll find it.”

“Uh, sure thing.” Alex trailed off as she heard footsteps approaching, and over the hill appeared two figures. One was clearly recognizable as Dean Winchester; the other LARPer Alex didn’t know. She saw Dean straighten up as he recognized her, and he headed down the hill to stand in front of the two angels. “Hey, Dean.”

The Winchester mostly ignored her question. “Have you seen Charlie?”

“Who?” Galavant inquired.

“Who the fuck are you?” Dean retorted with a disdainful downward twitch of his lips, and green eyes flashed cautiously as he studied the man beside Alex.
“Galavant.” Alex tipped her head towards him, and his wings fluttered when her wingtips brushed against his. “One of Cas’ old friends. Uh, what about Charlie?” she asked before that flash of surprise in Dean’s eyes could form words. “I haven’t seen her — she’s the Queen of the Moon people,” she added to Galavant before turning back to Dean. “She was with you, remember?” She glanced over at the short man beside Dean and added, “And who’s he?”

“I am Boltar the Furious.” The scrawny brunette made a dramatic flourish with his arm even though he eyed Galavant with a look of the upmost distrust. “Warrior of Yesteryear; have you seen any signs of the Shadow Orcs? Or have you been distracted with galavanting with this young maiden?”

“We’ve been discussing current events,” Galavant retorted good-naturedly, his lips curved upwards in a light-hearted grin at the man’s choice of words. “I have no quarrel with the orcs, nor any fidelity towards your queen. However,” he added, turning to Alex, “if what you say is true, then I offer my services towards your cause.”

“Thank you.” Alex looked over to Dean. “Where’s the queen?” she asked. “Where did you last see her?”

“On the far side of the woods. I sent her back to Sam while Bolty and I kept an eye out for the shadow orcs.” Dean ignored Boltar’s indignant, wordless noise, not fond of the hunter’s nickname. “Speaking of, you didn’t find any, right?”

“No. Not a sound. I kind of got distracted.” Alex flicked her grace out to search the immediate vicinity, but there was no one else within the one hundred yard radius. “Nope,” she confirmed. “Maybe Sam’s had some luck though.” She stepped back as Dean walked by and fell into line beside him, motioning with her wing that Galavant was welcome to follow if he so chose.

He did, and the four of them made their way back out of the forest and down into the camp of the Followers of the Moon. “Well, that was a bust,” Dean finally said once they were back among the tents. “How much you want to bet the Shadow Orcs weren’t even out there?”

Alex huffed in amusement, but Boltar looked more than displeased. “For a handmaiden, you certainly ask many questions,” he scoffed. “Yes, I am positive they were out there. They’re just very good at hiding themselves. But,” he added as they stopped, and he put a finger on Dean’s chest, “a plan has sprung to mind that will draw the Shadow King to us. We shall take the Shadow Orc held in stock, offer him up as a prisoner exchange.”

“Draw him out and beat him down.” Dean nodded in appreciation of the plan. “I like your style, Boltar.”

“I shall retrieve the prisoner. You tend to the queen’s laundry and chamber pots and then meet back here.” Boltar walked away, leaving Dean alone with the two angels. The Winchester made a disgusted and displeasing face after him before he turned to Alex.

She beat him to any words. “Handmaiden, huh? Nice.”

“Shut it.” Dean looked over at Galavant, taking a moment to take in the angel’s medieval appearance. “So you’re an angel, too, huh? The hell you doing here?”

Before Galavant could answer, Sam walked up to them, a piece of paper held tightly in his hands. “Hey,” he greeted Dean and Alex. “Nice outfits.”

“You love it,” Dean quipped as he turned to his brother.

Sam rolled his eyes and held up the paper, upon which was the tattoo of the celtic tree in the right-
hand corner. “Right. Well, uh, while you guys were playing dress-up, I found out a few things. First of all, Ed and Lance weren’t the first victims. All those people Charlie said got sick? They had the same tattoo, same medieval-style injuries. This mark —”

“Belongs to the Shadow Orcs,” Dean finished with a grin, and Alex curled her wings forward in interest at the news.

“Yeah, and they’re using it for fairy magic,” Sam finished. He handed the paper to his brother, and Alex leaned up over Dean’s shoulder to look at the article for herself.

“Tree of Pain,” Dean read with a terse nod before he handed it back to Sam. “Awesome. Oh, uh, this is … I don’t remember his name, but he’s an angel, right, Pip?”

“Galavant.” The angel stepped forward towards Sam with an extended hand, amiability lighting up his green eyes. His tongue rolled over his words with a barely noticeable British accent as he added, “One of the finest of the Warriors of Yesteryear at your service.” He gave a deep and flourishing bow as his free hand came to rest on the pommel of his sword.

“He’s an angel,” Alex confirmed. “A friend of Balthazar’s, actually. He’s here hiding from the civil war as well.”

“He’s a LARPer,” Dean added with raised eyebrows towards his brother, and it was immediately clear exactly how he felt about it. Alex glanced over at Galavant, but the angel didn’t seem in the least bit perturbed by Dean’s disapproval.

“I find the whole situation quite appealing,” he began with a casual flick of his wings. “What better way to combine the adventure and chivalry of the Middle Ages with the technological ease of the twenty-first century?” He cleared his throat and motioned towards the paper Sam held, not looking for either brother to respond. “The Tree of Pain is a Celtic symbol dating back to the first century AD, and is used by faeries and those who harness their magic. It’s quite powerful indeed. I was a watcher,” he explained to the brothers when they exchanged looks. “I have seen much of earth’s history.”

“Oh, so then what do we do?” Dean asked. “Find the guy who’s casting the spell and take them out? Simple as that, right? No more whammy, no more marks. No more marks, no more dead bodies.” When there was no protest he nodded. “Okay, then. Perfect. Our, uh, pal Boltar the Chatty is getting the, uh, Shadow Orc prisoner. We’re going to do a little prisoner exchange, try and draw the king out of hiding. It was my idea,” he added with a grin. Sam didn’t respond, so Dean shrugged and looked past him. “So where’s Charlie?”

Sam’s face darkened in confusion. “She was with you.”

“No, I sent her to you.” Dean frowned and pushed past Sam. “Charlie?” he called, voice rising in concern. “Charlie!” He pushed his way through the flaps of the queen’s tent. “Your highness?” There was no response, and Dean stepped back outside and pointed towards Sam. “You know what, she’s got my phone. Try it.”

Sam dug his cell out of his pocket and dialed Dean’s number. Alex heard it ring, then ring again, but there was no answer. Sam tried again, and Alex let her grace sneak out through the camp, searching for the familiar human soul. “Nothing,” she announced as she drew her grace back in. It brushed up against Galavant’s on accident; the two angels’ grace recoiled at the contact, and Alex cleared her throat. “She’s, uh, she’s not in the camp.”

“She’s not answering the phone.” Sam shoved the device back into his pocket. “Now what?”
“Well — she was last seen in the forest, right?” Dean hurried to stand back in front of the two angels. “So the two of you should go search it, okay? You’ve got to be able to find something between the both of you.”

“We can try.” Alex shrugged as she looked up into the sky. The sun was stretching towards the horizon, and the clouds were fading into a dark grey. “You don’t have to help,” she added to the angel beside her. “If you want to … I don’t know — go back to whatever it was you were doing — you can.”

To her surprise, the angel shook his head. “I offered you my services, and you shall have them. I’ll search the northern end of the woods. You start on the south.” His white and maroon wings unfolded, and he took off into the sky.

Alex followed, moving up through the chilly air as she circled around to the forest. She skimmed across the treetops, wings brushing through the leaves with each downstroke. Her grace poured out below her, searching down to the ground, but she couldn’t find Charlie’s soul. However, as she passed over the eastern section she felt something strange, and the angel pulled her wings in tightly as she plummeted towards the ground. What was that? She pulsed her grace out, but it was gone. Where did it go?

She continued on foot, grace stretching out ahead of her as she sought out whatever strange field of energy she had first felt, but it seemed to be hidden from her for some odd reason. Fairy magic, perhaps, she reasoned. It was quite powerful, and strong enough to evade angelic detection.

She moved silently through the forest, wings twitching as the shadows grew longer and longer with each passing minute. She heard voices up ahead, and then the unmistakable discharge of a gun, and a strong push of her wings carried her through the trees and immediately in front of Dean. “What the hell?” she snapped.

“Whoa whoa whoa!” The people behind her flinched away from the gunshot, eyes screwed up. “Hold, hold, geez!” They didn’t seem to notice Alex’s sudden appearance, but Dean’s eyes flashed in momentary surprise when she landed right in front of him.

“They need to focus,” he snapped down at Alex as an explanation, and he pushed past her to point his gun at the chest of the man behind her. “Now start talking! Where’s the queen?”

“I don’t know!” the man cried, voice trembling on the verge of tears, and Alex reached up to lower Dean’s arm.

“What are you doing? He’s not our guy, Dean. Look at him; he’s gonna piss his pants.” She felt Dean’s arm relax, and she pushed it further towards the ground. “Put the gun away. He doesn’t know anything.”

“His family crest says otherwise,” Dean growled, but he thankfully lowered the gun.

“T-This?” The terrified man looked down at his chest, and for the first time Alex noticed the large white celtic tree on his shirt, standing in stark contrast to the rest of his black attire. “Uh, I-I got sick last month after this thing just … appeared on my - my arm.” He pushed the gauntlet off of his forearm and yanked up his sleeve so they could see the small inked tattoo in the light of Boltar’s flashlight. “I-I thought it looked really cool, so I turned it into my family crest. I mean, after my doctor said it wasn’t malignant.”

“See?” Alex stepped away from Dean. “He’s not our guy. He’s just … another victim.”

“My name is Max Hilby,” the Shadow Orc king continued. “I’m an attorney. I have no idea where
the queen is, but if you let me go right now, I won’t press charges. I promise.” He pulled off his fake pointed ears and held them out to Dean along with the golden gauntlet. “Here. Uh, take them. Please.”

“Go,” Dean rubbed his temple. “Go!” he repeated when no one moved. “Go!” The LARPers turned tail and ran away, leaving the hunters standing alone with Boltar and a man Alex noticed for the first time. Another Shadow Orc, judging by the black clothes and the plastic ears; this was was cowering behind Sam. Dean turned back to them, frowning when he saw the disapproval on his brother’s face. “What?” he snapped. “What?”

Sam shook his head, but the Shadow Orc took out his fake teeth and looked up at Dean with wide eyes. “Is … is the queen really in danger?” Dean nodded, and he took a deep breath. “Okay. We got — there was something odd down by the creek,” he began, the only sign of his fear escaping as a slight tremor in his voice. “It’s this weird tent; it’s not one of ours. It’s kind of creepy.”

“There’s something strange there,” Alex agreed. “I felt it, but I couldn’t pinpoint it. I looked for five minutes too, but I didn’t see anything.”

Sam looked down at the orc. “Why are you being so helpful all of a sudden?” he asked, skepticism heavy on his voice.

The orc looked down at the ground bashfully. “Look, I harbor a major crush on the queen,” he admitted, his feet scuffling in the dirt in a small distraction from what he had just admitted. “Maybe you could put in a good word for me when you find her.”

Dean let out a scoffing noise. “I don’t think you’re her type,” he informed the man before he turned around and stalked out into the dark.

Alex hurried after him, wings flicking in confusion and concern, and she heard the man yell after them, hurt on his voice, “What? You mean she’s not into orcs?”

“You seem a little bit pissy,” she commented as she fell into step beside Dean. “More so than usual, I mean. Are you feeling okay?”

“You really gotta ask?” Dean fished a small flashlight out of his jacket pocket and turned it towards the darkened woods. “Charlie could be dead, dammit. If she had just gotten out of here when I said she should, she wouldn’t be missing. Now where the hell is that creek?”

“This way.” Alex lead the way off towards the left. “I can hear it through the trees.” She glanced behind her to see Sam and Boltar close behind, boots crunching through the dirt and pine needles.

“Why don’t you take off, Bolty?” Dean asked when they had finally caught up. “We got it from here.”

“And leave a handmaiden and a time traveller to rescue the queen?” The knight scoffed loudly as he shook his head in disbelief. “I think not, kind lady.”

Sam and Dean exchanged looks over Alex’s head, and the younger Winchester cleared his throat. “Look, this isn’t a game, Boltar,” he insisted. “The queen, our friend, is in real danger. You could get hurt.”

“I will not leave my queen in peril.” Boltar remained firm on his stance, and before either could protest, he pointed off through the trees. “Look there,” he announced with a hint of pride at spotting the strange encampment first. Alex followed his gaze across the small creek to where a tent stood, the exterior lit by a few torches outside. Light could be seen from beneath the tent canvas as well, and
the young angel pushed out her grace to feel it. Definitely something strange.

“That’s it,” a voice from beside her announced, and Alex turned to see Galavant leaning against the trunk of a nearby tree. “Fairy magic. There’s a fairy inside.” He pushed himself off of the tree and walked over to Alex. “I see you brought backup. If there’s anything else you need —”

Alex gave a small shake of her head. “This isn’t your fight,” she decided. “If we need anything, I’ll let you know. Thanks, man.”

“Of course, my lady. Now if you don’t mind, I have a lady of my own to return to.” Galavant gave a deep bow, and then his wings carried him up and away.

Alex turned to see the look of shock and confusion on Boltar’s face, and she couldn’t help the smug grin that grew across her own. “Still think this is just a game?” She jumped across the creek, followed closely by Sam and Dean, and she thrust her way into the tent.

She immediately pulled to a complete stop, wings drawn in closely in surprise to see two woman sitting on the very large and very plush bed. They were kissing, both momentarily unaware of their entrance. They only broke apart when Dean cleared his throat, and the second woman — a darker skinned creature with wide brown eyes, stared up at them in surprise. They locked onto Alex’s wings, which twitched under the intense stare.

Charlie, on the other hand, seemed more frustrated at their sudden appearance than anything else. “Dudes,” she hissed. “If the tent is rockin’, don’t come a-knockin’.”

The second woman’s gaze travelled across all of them, and she jumped to her feet before Charlie could finish her sentence. “No It’s him!” she gasped in fear, and Alex’s wings flared out in alarm, grace spiraling through the tent. It immediately collided with the fairy’s own power, and she yanked it back in. “My master!” the fairy cried. “Run!”

Alex glanced over her shoulder to where Boltar stood. The scrawny man pushed back his hood, his eyes darkening in malice. She rolled her eyes in exasperation as the surprise of the sudden turn of events quickly passed. “You? Are you shitting me?”

The Winchesters reacted quickly, guns drawn and pointed at the LARPer, but he barely flinched, his demeanor sliding into one of dark confidence. “No guns in Moondor, gentleman,” he chided. “Gilda, if you please?”

Alex watched the sadness that passed across the fairy’s face, but with a wave of her hand, the guns exploded into a shower of feathers. She flared her wings out, a growl thrumming through her chest. Dean looked back at his brother to make sure he was okay before turning back to the role player. “Well, now what, Gerry?”

“My name is Boltar the Furious!” Gerry’s voice rose in anger and frustration as he turned on the Winchesters, but he barely flinched, his demeanor sliding into one of dark confidence. “No guns in Moondor, gentleman,” he chided. “Gilda, if you please?”

Alex watched the sadness that passed across the fairy’s face, but with a wave of her hand, the guns exploded into a shower of feathers. She flared her wings out, a growl thrumming through her chest. Dean looked back at his brother to make sure he was okay before turning back to the role player. “Well, now what, Gerry?”

“Oh, God. Do we really have to listen to all of this?” Alex stepped forward with a disinterested twitch of her dark wings. “It’s pathetic, really. You killed two men over a gay queen in a fake game? Jesus, man, you have problems. It’s just a game.”
“There is no game!” Gerry shouted. “There is only Moondor! I came here to be different, to get away from my crappy life, to be a hero, and guess what.”

“What?” Dean quipped. “You were a loser in the real world, and you’re a loser here? Shocker.” He grinned when Alex laughed, but his humor only made the roleplayer more angry.

“Would a loser track down a book of spells and compel a fairy to do his bidding?” he yelled, face turning red.

He took a step towards Dean, and Alex slipped forward, eyes narrowed in warning. “Depends,” she heard Sam say from behind them. “How’d you get the book?”

Gerry faltered. “…eBay.”

“Of course,” Alex scoffed. “What a shock. Hand over the spell book, Gerry. Let’s just get this over with before I have to kill you.”

Gerry laughed, and he drew his longsword. “You? Kill me? Unlikely. Gilda?” He looked over at the fairy, and with a reluctant wave of her hand, his wooden sword melted into one of burnished steel. “Gilda,” he added, “the big one.”

Alex spun around when she heard the clanking of metal and the strangled cry of Sam, and her eyebrows rose when she saw that the hunter was being strangled from behind by a full suit of empty armor. She heard Charlie cry out as she charged at Gerry, but he easily threw her back onto the bed.

“Dean.” Alex slid in front of the hunter, positioning herself between him and the sharp sword. Her own angel blade slipped into her arms, and she flared out her wings in an attempt to look much, much taller. “If you give me the book I won’t kill you,” she warned. “I’ll give you five seconds.”

Gerry’s response was one simple command. “Gilda. Kill her.”

Alex thrust her grace out with a sweeping hand motion, twirling and twisting it alongside Lucifer’s as it collided with Gilda’s own energy, and the force sent the fairy backwards with a surprised cry. Alex tipped her head, staring directly at Gerry as he turned back to her in fear. “You know, you’re really pissing me off,” she warned as Lucifer’s grace thrummed through her vessel, and she let her eyes glow a violent orange. “Give me the book right now or I swear to God I will kill you where to stand.”

Leather binding hit the ground as Alex raised her angel blade, and a hand gripping her wrist was the only thing that stopped her from delivering the fatal wound. “Stop.” Dean’s word sounded in her ear, and Alex felt some of the anger recede deep inside of her at the sound of his voice. “He’s done.”

Alex stared at the man, eyes narrowed at the fearfulness dancing across his features, and she let her arm fall, weapon sliding back into her sleeve. Dean released her arm, and Alex, now free, lashed out. Her fist connected with Gerry’s nose; a satisfying crack echoing through the small tent, and he collapsed onto the bear-skin rug, unconscious.

The fireplace behind the roleplayer roared and crackled as Sam tossed the ancient spell book into the fire, and Alex turned to see Charlie stand in front of Gilda the fairy. “Are you okay?” the woman asked in a soft and tender voice.

“I’m free of the spell,” Gilda murmured, her own reply just as quiet. She looked over at the three hunters, voice solemn with gratitude. “You saved me. The Hollow Forest is forever in your debt.” The fairy let out a slow, thoughtful breath as she turned back to look into the queen’s eyes. “I must return to those green hills now,” she told Charlie before her gaze fell upon the unconscious Gerry. “I
must take my former master with me. He must face the fairy tribunal for his sins.”

“Wait.” Charlie reached up to stop her, and the two’s lips met in a chaste kiss before the fairy’s energy swirled throughout the tent, and Gilda and Gerry faded away into nothingness.

Alex shook her head as the unconscious LARPer disappeared. “Should have just let me kill him,” she muttered to Dean. “Dude got off way too easy if you ask me.” She ran a hand through her hair as she looked around the tent.

Alex. Castiel’s prayer had the young angel jumping in surprise, and she looked up. I’m in Sacramento, Ohio. Please come.

“Got to go.” Alex hurried towards the tent door, pausing at the Winchester’s exclamations of surprise. “Castiel,” she explained, hesitating only long enough to add, “He says he needs me to come to him, so that’s what I’m doing.” She looked down at her apparel with an immediate frown. “My clothes are still in the costume tent, right? Dammit.”

Alex landed at the foot of the old, wooden pier, wings folding in tight as she looked around. Moonlight glittered off of the lake, waves slowly lapping at the rocky shoreline, and against the moonlit air stood the outline of a dark, solemn figure. He was leaning against the railing, staring mindlessly down into the waves, and he only stirred when Alex quietly approached. “You came.”

“Of course I came.” Alex leaned on the railing next to him and looked up into the seraph’s face. “You called, I answered. What’s up?” She curled one wing to rest against his back. “Cas?”

“I’m sorry. I needed to make sure you were okay.” Castiel turned to face her, and for the first time Alex was able to see the concern sparkling in his eyes. “I was worried Naomi would hurt you.”

The young angel stepped into his arms and pressed her grace up against his. “Naomi won’t bother me,” she promised darkly. “She’s afraid of Lucifer and knows I’m the only thing between him and heaven.” She wrapped her arms around his neck, taking the moment to enjoy the closeness between the two of them, the way the air grew warm and heavy when his wings curled around her. “I know you don’t like him, but at least he’s being helpful right now. I’m safe.”

She pressed her lips against Castiel’s, soft and chaste, and she felt him relax against her, even if it was ever so slight. “I’m glad you’re alright,” he murmured as he pulled away, and Alex pressed her forehead into his. “I … I don’t know what to do. I can’t get Naomi out of my head.”

“I was scared she had hurt you.” Alex looked up into his blue eyes. “You just left me without saying another word.”

Something she must have said must have upset him, because Castiel looked away. “I … I haven’t forgotten the promise I made,” he began, “but this isn’t something you should be involved in, Alex. I need you to be safe —”

“You need to me to stay with the Winchesters while you go away,” Alex finished in a flat voice, neither surprised nor delighted at Castiel’s implications. “Cas, you promised!”

“I know what I promised.” A warm hand gripped hers tightly, and Alex clenched her other fist as Castiel’s wings curled around them. “Alex, Naomi is the only thing standing between you and I, and the sooner I am freed from her, the sooner you and I can be together.” The seraph’s voice dropped into a low murmur. “I don’t know what she told you, but she threatened me with your life. I don’t want you involved if it will kill you. Your life … it’s the most important thing. You said the same
thing about Ashiel,” he pressed. “You said that his safety was more important than your love. If keeping you safe you means I have to let you go for the time being, then …” The seraph hesitated, the indecision in his eyes making it clear that he didn’t feel as convinced as he sounded. “Then that’s something I have to do.”

Alex let her shoulders fall, and she let out a sigh. “Fine,” she relented. “Whatever. I guess, what’s another week or two, huh? It’s not like you’ve been missing an entire year and I’ve missed you. But fine.” She tore herself out of Castiel’s grasp, eyes flashing as he opened his mouth to apologize. “Stop it. I get it. Just — you know what, if one of these times you come back and I’m not there for you, it’s not my fault. You hear me? It’s not my fault.”

“Alex—” Alex pushed herself up into the sky, leaving Castiel standing on the pier all alone. She hovered high in the air for a second, but the seraph didn’t follow, and with a confused and reluctant shake of her head, Alex crossed the country and returned to the Winchesters’ motel room. She needed a nap.

Lucifer was there the minute Alex closed her eyes, blue eyes studying her from across the room. “You’re back,” he noted, the rumble in his voice soft without any trace of scorn. “What did Castiel do this time?”

Alex didn’t answer, but she crossed the room and stepped into the archangel’s arms, wings folding as he pulled her close in a comforting embrace. “Thank you,” she murmured, eyes closing as she buried her head into his chest.

“For what?”

“For being here.”
She was alone. The street was dark, lit only by the occasional streetlight, and snowflakes fell through the cold winter air, covering the ground. The young girl pulled her thin jacket tighter around her, suppressing a shiver. She hated life, and she hated living like she did. They had fought again, and now she had been thrown out of the house for the night as punishment. She kicked at a loose stone, sending it clattering down the street. Stupid foster family. Like they gave a damn about her.

Suddenly there was light. A bright, blinding light that was gone as soon as it had appeared. Darkness surrounded the young girl as the ground disappeared beneath her feet, and the next thing she knew she was falling.

Alex's eyes snapped open as her body jerked, and her wings flared out in surprise. The angel jumped to her feet, eyes wide as her heart pounded within her chest as her mind replayed the last seconds over and over again. That feeling of falling, of plummeting to her death and not being able to fly.

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Alex dropped back onto the bed, the butt of her hands digging into her forehead. It was just a dream, she reminded her racing heart. Just a memory. She was here with the Winchesters in El Paso, Illinois. It had been a week since she had heard from Castiel, and a week since the three of them had last found a case to work.

A hand came to rest on her shoulder, and Alex jumped in surprise, head snapping to the side to see Sam Winchester's look of concern. "Hey. You okay?"

"Yeah. I just … had a dream." Alex brushed his hand away and rose to her feet, squinting as she crossed the room to her backpack that lay illuminated in the moonlight. "I mean, it wasn't exactly a dream, more of a … a memory." She pulled out her worn, leather journal and flipped it open to the very first page, fingers tracing the spine as she read the very first date that was scrawled across the top of the page.


The journal slipped from her hands, and Alex stared blankly down at the ground. How had she forgotten? That was last month. Exactly one month ago.

"Alex. Is everything okay?" The floorboards creaked as Sam got up, and Alex looked up at her friend. "What's going on?"

"Nothing. It's nothing." Alex picked up her journal as the Winchester crouched down beside her. "It's just … the day that I fell onto the Impala. It was December 15th, 2013. Just last month." Alex slid off of her knees to sit fully on the ground. "I didn't even think of it until now." She let her journal drop back down to the ground, and she shrugged. "It's really nothing, I just didn't think this day would come." Alex let out a small grin, eyes turning onto Sam. "Just think that in four days I'd be turning eighteen. And yet somehow I'm almost twenty four."

Sam's hand firmly clapped her on the shoulder, and Alex's wings flicked at the touch. "Yeah, that's weird," he agreed. "Um, I'm going to go back to bed, okay?"
"Yeah." Alex shifted so she was leaning up against the wall as the Winchester stood up. "That's fine. I'll see you in the morning."

Alex leaned back against the wall as she watched the two Winchesters move around the room. Dean was sitting just below her to her left, tying his left boot in preparation for their departure to lunch, and Sam was tidying in the mirror, just out of her sight, but Alex could hear the water running as he dried his hands. The morning had passed quickly as the two Winchesters searched for work. The young angel shifted on her crossed legs, eyes flitting over her old journal; she had been flipping through it all day. Currently, she was sitting up on one of the wooden dressers, doing her best to enjoy the height. “I’m thinking maybe pizza,” she suggested from her perch. “I’m feeling pepperoni and sausage. With extra cheese.”

Sam didn't answer, but Dean let out a low, nonverbal noise of agreement. Alex nodded, content, but she closed her book when the room began to hum. She looked around; neither of the brothers seemed to notice anything out of the ordinary, and she tipped her head as her wings twitched in curiosity. That wasn’t normal. It felt … strange. What was it?

Her question was immediately answered as the closet door glowed with a bright and violent white light, and the next second it was flung open, a heavy object falling through to the ground. Alex jumped, eyes wide as the light faded and she took in what lay in front of them.

A man?

The man looked up at the three of them, blue eyes darting across Sam and Dean before he finally spoke, his voice hurried and demanding. “Which of you is John Winchester?” he inquired agitatedly. Sam and Dean exchanged looks of pure confusion, and Alex slid off of the dresser as the man rose to his feet. “Please! Time is of the essence! Which of you is John Winchester?”

“Uh … neither,” Sam stuttered out while his brother only continued to stare.

“Why did a hot man fall out of our closet?” she queried, moving closer as she took in the handsome stranger in a suit. “That’s never happened before.”

“T-That’s impossible.” The man ignored Alex’s comment as he stared at Sam in surprise.

“I wish it’d happen more often,” Alex continued, voice dropping into a mumble as she circled around the man.

“Who the hell are you, mister?” By this time Dean had risen to his feet, but the stranger ignored him with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“Not now,” he insisted, rubbing his chin as he turned away. “I’m thinking.” Alex stepped out of the way as anger flashed across Dean Winchester’s face, and he moved past her to shoved the man forcefully up against the wall. He pinned him against the closet door, one arm firmly across his chest, and the man grunted at the sudden impact. “Please,” he got out, pausing a moment to regain the calm control over his voice. “I can assure you there’s no need for violence. One of you must know John Winchester.”

“Why are you looking for him?” Alex asked, and she folded her arms across her chest as she spoke.

Sam reached out and put a gentle hand on her shoulder, silencing her. “Tell you what,” he challenged instead. “When one of us falls out of your closet, then you can ask the questions.”
For some reason, Sam’s words seemed to ring true with the stranger. “Yes, I apologize,” he conceded before he turned his attention to Dean, who still had the stranger pinned tightly against the door. “Is it absolutely essential, sir, that you keep your hands on me?”

“Let him go, Dean,” Alex agreed. “He’s human; no weapon on him that I can discern. He won’t get far if he tries to run.” Her words were convincing, and Dean stepped back with a low glare. Alex nodded towards the gentleman. “What’s your name?” she inquired.

“Henry.” The man wiped his nose with a handkerchief. “And thank you, but in the absence of any and all other explanations, I’m afraid this has been a marvelous, tragic misunderstanding. I’ll be on my way.” Henry stepped forward, ready to make his way towards the door, but Sam and Dean blocked his way.

“That’s not happening,” Sam warned, and Alex heard the faint clink of metal as Dean removed a pair of handcuffs from the bag laying on the chair.

She wasn’t sure if Henry noticed, because he kept his eyes on Sam’s face as his voice grew stoic. “This is of grave importance,” he insisted. “I do not have the time to with the likes of you.”

Sam reached out and grabbed Henry’s arm, and the man reacted violently. Alex watched the quick skirmish that took place; it wasn’t long before Dean managed to pin one arm behind Henry’s back. “You’re not going anywhere, 007, till we get some answers,” the hunter retorted.

The skirmish started up again, a blur of arms and bodies that lasted merely seconds, and in the midst of it all Alex heard the whir of handcuffs being locked into place. She tipped her head in amusement to find that Henry had escaped unharmed, and now both Winchesters were handcuffed together through the slats of the wooden chair. “You need to teach me that one,” she joked, unable to share in the brother’s dislike and distrust towards the man in front of them. Why get all worked up over a situation she could handle?

“How did he do that?” Sam breathed out as he tried to tug himself free. “You’ve got to be kidding me! Alex!”

The angel stepped in front of the door, a hand held up to keep Henry from leaving. “Uh … no. You’re not going anywhere. This has been fun and all, but why don’t you go sit down so we can talk?”

“Ma’am, you need to get out of my way.” Henry tried to slip by her, but Alex refused, head held high. “You don’t understand,” the stranger added, his tone growing darker and more concerned. “There is something of extreme importance I must do before …”

“Before what?” Alex challenged. “Listen, man. You came through our closet, which makes your little spy mission my damn concern. You know John Winchester, which means this has got something to do with the supernatural, so you’re just in luck. You got a hunting problem, you’re looking at some of the best damn hunters on this side of the planet. You’re not getting out of this door, so why don’t you sit down and tell us what’s going on.”

“What do you know about our dad?” Dean added angrily, and with a grunt he finished picking the handcuff’s lock. It sprung open, and he rubbed his wrist as he stalked up to Henry.

Shock paled the man’s face. “John Winchester is your father?” Henry asked in disbelief. He looked over at Sam, and then down at Alex. “A-All of yours?”

Alex opened her mouth to correct the man, but the closet door began to rattle with a violent force. “Uh … Henry, what’s that?”
“Oh my God.” Henry turned to stare at the closet, and his feet carried him a step back. “Run!”

Light spilled through the room as the door burst open, and a woman stepped through. Bright lipstick, pale skin, brilliantly ginger hair. Blood stained her neat dress, and Sam and Dean shifted closer together as they eyed the new and obvious threat. “Henry.” The woman let out a laugh, her face twisted violently and mercilessly into pain and suffering as her true form flashed in front of Alex’s eyes. “Silly man, you forgot to lock the door. But spells were never your best subject, were they?” She laughed again, this time her voice taking on a much darker and sinister tone. “Why don’t you be a doll and give me what I want? And I promise I will kill you and your friends here quickly.”

“You know I can’t do that.” Henry shifted in front of Alex, moving to protect her from the demon’s gaze, and Alex rolled her wings back, keeping them pinned tightly against her body as she sized up the demon in front of her. Dark energy rolled off of her like waves, a demonic power unlike anything Alex had seen before radiating off her twisted soul. Her feathers ruffled uncomfortably at the touch.

For some reason, the demon either didn’t acknowledge or didn’t recognize Alex for who she was, too focused on the man in front of her. “You’re not a fighter, Henry,” she insisted. Her arms flew out to her sides, and Alex watched as the two Winchester brothers were flung violently across the room, hitting the far walls with a loud, painful thud.

Henry moved back further, his own hands going out to shelter Alex. “Josie,” he pleaded. “I know you’re still in there. You must fight this —”

“Get out of my way.” Alex shoved Henry to the side as the demon stepped closer, and she let her wings rise up into sight. “Who the hell do you think you are?” she challenged, angel blade falling into her fist. She raised her chin and rolled her shoulders back as the demon stopped, curious at the sight of her.

“Well well well.” The demon clicked her tongue. “I haven’t seen your kind in a long, long time. Now what’s an angel like you doing down in a place like this? I thought your Daddy didn’t like you coming down here anymore.”

“Go away.” Alex let her grace rear up, sparking through the room and burning against the demon’s own touch, and she narrowed her eyes in satisfaction as the creature hissed in pain. “I don’t care why you’re here, but if you’re not gone in the next five seconds I swear to God I will kill you where you stand.”

The demon chuckled. “You’re not strong enough, kiddo,” she sneered, and her eyes flashed black. “If you think —” There was a blur of color behind her, and the demon let out a scream as her throat and face flashed with an orange light. Dean yanked the demon knife out of her back, and the demon fell to the ground in agony. “T-That’s not way to treat a lady,” she hissed out, and Alex took a slight step back, her confidence faltering at the sight of the demon still alive. She twirled her weapon in her hand twice before she lunged forward, but then the demon was gone.

The room was dead silent for three seconds, and then Henry pushed past her and ran to the bathroom. Alex heard the sound of wrenching, and she turned to look at the brothers with a shake of her head. “Who is this guy? I’ve never seen a hunter vomit at that before.”

Sam looked just as somber and confused as she felt, but Dean snapped, “Why didn’t you kill her? What the hell?”

“Hey!” Alex immediately fell on the defense, and her grace pulled her weapon back up into her sleeve. “That wasn’t just a demon, Dean. I mean it was, but it wasn’t — I have no idea what the hell that thing was. It was way too powerful to be just one of your everyday black-eyed bitches.”
“She’s right.” Henry stepped back into the room, wiping his mouth with his handkerchief before he addressed the three hunters. “That was Abaddon. She’s a very powerful demon.”

“You okay?” Sam asked, concern lining his voice, and Alex could tell even from across the room that the stranger was still not feeling well.

She moved forward to stand at Dean’s side as Henry nodded. “Yes, I will be,” he agreed, “It’s just that all of the adventures I enjoy are usually of the literary nature.”

“Ah,” Alex expounded, “you’re a nerd. Sorry, I assumed you were a hunter, but, uh, I guess you really don’t have a lot of experience with demons.”

“Yeah. Where’s she from?” Sam added, while Dean followed up with an aggressively-aimed, “Where are you from?”

Henry tucked his handkerchief back into his pocket. “She’s from hell,” he explained, and Alex rolled her eyes at the over-obvious statement, but her interest peaked as he added, “and I’m from Normal, Illinois. 1958.”

“Yeah, right.” Dean let out a loud scoff of disbelief, but Henry’s face remained stoic and honest. “ Seriously?” Dean turned to look at his brother. “Dude’s time-traveling through motel-room closet? That’s what we’ve come to?” He looked back at Alex, expecting some form of correction, but the angel only shrugged.

Henry shook his head, but he didn’t push the topic. “If you could just take me to John, we could clear this all up, I’m sure,” he promised, eyes darting around the room as if he expected the hunter to come through the door at any second.

“I don’t think that’s going to be possible,” Alex began quietly. “Henry, John Winchester has been dead for years.”

No one was prepared for the shock and the sadness that flashed through Henry’s face, and he turned away. “No.”

Sam narrowed his eyes. “What’s it to you?”

“Everything,” Henry turned back to them, blue eyes searching Sam’s face for any sign of deception. “I … I’m his father.”

“Whoa.” Alex stepped forward, leaving the two brothers to absorb the shocking news. “You. You’re Henry Winchester? You’re their grandfather. No way. I-I’m Alex, and that’s Sam and Dean Winchester. John’s boys.”

“Are you not …”

“No, I’m an angel.” Alex flapped her wings twice in emphasis before remembering he couldn’t see them. “No relation to the Winchester line. Speaking of lines,” she added with a glance over her shoulder, “Maybe this could all be discussed over lunch? This definitely seems like an over-a-meal kind of topic, don’t you think? I’m still down for pizza.”

They ended up getting burgers. Alex was left at the table across from Henry Winchester while the brothers stood up by the counter, heads bowed deep in muttered conversation while they waited for their food. The angel leaned back in her seat as she watched how the man stared at an old
photograph in his hand. It had come from his own pocket, and although the angel had only caught a quick glimpse of it, it appeared to be of him and his young son. “How are you doing?” she asked, determined to break the silence that sat between them.

“I’ll be fine,” Henry promised, and he finally looked up. “After all, despite everything, I’ve met my grandsons, haven’t I?” he looked over at the two brothers before he turned back to Alex. “I’m Henry Winchester. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“How are you doing?” she asked, determined to break the silence that sat between them.

“Alex.” Alex reached over the table to shake his hand. “No last name. And ditto. I’ve heard a lot about your son. He was a good man.”

Sadness darkened Henry’s eyes for the shortest of seconds before he nodded. “I can only hope so,” he agreed. “You … you said you were an angel. I didn’t realize your kind worked with legacies.” Before Alex could question his strange wording he looked up at Sam and Dean as they sat down at the table with them. “We got off on the wrong foot,” he began as Sam sat down next to him. “I’m Henry Winchester.”

“Sam.” Sam shook his hand as Dean set their food down and plopped down in the chair next to Alex.

“Hello, Sam.” Henry pulled his hand away and turned to Dean, arm extending in an attempt of a greeting, but Dean ignored it.

“Dinner,” the Winchester announced, firmly distributing the trays to everyone.

Sam’s lips twisted downwards at the disrespect of his brother. “This is Dean,” he introduced, shooting his brother a carefully aimed glare. Dean ignored it and pulled his food closer.

“Well, this has been touching,” he announced scathingly. “How about we figure out how to clean up your mess, huh?”

Henry’s eyes dropped down to his lap. “Abaddon,” he expounded. “Yes. She must be stopped.”

“How come she didn’t die when I stabbed her?” the eldest brother asked sharply, and Alex rolled her eyes at his blatant aggression. She kicked him under the table, and he shot her a dark look.

Their grandfather didn’t seem to notice the exchange, or if he did, he didn’t show it. “Because demons can’t be killed with run-of-the-mill cutlery,” he explained, voice as honest as if he truly believed Dean had just stabbed the woman with a butterknife. “At the very least, you’d need an ancient demon-killing knife of the Kurds.”

Dean pulled his jacket aside to partly pull out the knife from Ruby. “That’s what this is,” he retorted, green eyes flashing in disapproval.

Henry stared at the intricately carved blade in surprise. “Where did you get that?”

“Demon gave it to me.” Dean shoved the knife back into his jacket pocket and let it fall back against his chest. “We’ve been around this block so many times.”

“It’s true,” Alex agreed, fingers playing with a thinly-cut french fry. “We’ve killed a lot of demons in the past few years. We know what we’re doing.”

“Now, this portal,” Sam began as Dean took a large bite of his burger, “or whatever it was you came through — is it still open?”

“I’m just thinking that if we can’t kill this Abaddon —”

“Maybe we can shove her back where she came from,” Dean finished as he dropped his burger down onto his tray, wiping mayonnaise off of his lips with the back of his hand. “How did you do it?”

Henry looked between the two brothers. “It’s a blood sigil,” he finally explained. “Blood leads to blood. Or next of kin.”

“But Abaddon came through it, also, right?” Sam asked, and when Henry gave a small nod, he added, “So can you created the sigil again?”

Their grandfather looked thoughtful. “An angel feather, tears of a dragon, a pinch of the sands of time — I — I would need those things,” he explained, “and a week for my soul to recharge, but yes, it’s possible.”

“Well, I have the feathers.” Alex leaned forward, curiosity lighting up her gaze. “And you used your soul to power it? Wow. I’ve never heard of humans being able to do that. Kudos.”

“You should know this.” Henry’s eyes narrowed in confusion as he looked between the two brothers, but when neither of them seemed to agree with him, his head tipped to one side. “Wait. What level are you three?”

“What level?”


Alex looked up to see Sam and Dean exchange looks, and she shook her head as Dean retorted, “I’m a little rusty on my boy bands. Men of what?”

“Men of Letters. Like your father, who taught you our ways.” The confusion in the Winchester’s eyes grew even more, clouding and darkening the blue sparkle.

“Our father taught us how to be hunters,” Sam began slowly, and Henry looked over at Alex.

“Hunters,” he repeated. “I … I didn’t think you were being quite so serious. Are you?” When Alex nodded, he gave a disappointed shake of his head. “Well, hunters … hunters are apes,” he told Sam and Dean. “You’re suppose to be legacies.”

“Legacies of what?”

“Whoa whoa whoa.” Alex’s wings curled forward as something flickered in the back of her mind. “Wait. Men of Letters as in the Men of Letters? I-I thought that was just a story. B-Bobby mentioned it once a really long time ago,” she added to Sam and Dean. “It … it’s just supposed to be a myth. An underground cult of supernatural nerds. No way.”

“It’s not a myth,” Henry promised. “I was to be initiated before … well, before this. I … where are we?”

“Uh, El Paso, Illinois.” Alex watched as Henry suddenly rose to his feet. “Whoa. What? Where are we go?”

“Normal, Illinois. I can take you to our location right now. Perhaps they’ll be able to explain this all.
Come along,” he urged when Sam and Dean only stared up at them. “Abaddon won’t stay away long.”

His words seemed to convince the brothers, and Dean rose to his feet with a muttered grumble. He grabbed his remaining burger and stuck it into his mouth before he led the way out. Alex followed with a shake of her head.

Alex leaned against the side of a brick building, listening carefully for the familiar purr of the Impala as it rolled down the street. It pulled to a stop, and the engine died as the young angel pushed herself off of the wall and crossed the street to greet the two brothers. “Hey. How was the drive?”

“Take a guess.” Dean watched as Henry hurried off down the street and turned down an alleyway, and Alex moved after him before Dean shook his head and followed.

“What’s going on here?” Henry demanded as he stared up at a worn sign above a door. Alex shrugged as she read it. *Astro Comics.* The Winchester reached out and touched an old, faded symbol carved into the wooden door. “No.”

“Alright, well, this was enlightening.” Dean clapped his hand once, startling Alex into jumping. “Let’s hit the road, huh?”

“Give him a minute, Dean.” Sam’s voice was quiet with sympathy, but Dean wasn’t having it.

“We just spent like an hour driving, okay? All he did was stare out the window and request Pat Boone on the radio.” A low glare at Henry accompanied his words, but the man didn’t seem to notice, so Dean added, “He had his time.”

“It’s just a facade,” Henry insisted, even though he sounded as if he wasn’t convinced himself. “A way to fool our enemies into believing we are housed elsewhere.”

Dean folded his arms angrily. “Okay, enough with the decoder crap,” he snapped, and Alex’s wings flicked uncomfortably at his sharp tone. “How about you tell us what this whole ’Men of Letters’ business is, or you’re on your own.”

Henry shook his head. “It’s none of your concern.”

“Why?” Dean challenged. “Because we’re hunters? What do you have against us?”

Henry turned to face Dean, eyes studying the hunter that stood in front of him. “Aside from the unthinking, unwashed, shoot-first-and-don’t-bother-to-ask-questions-later part, not much, really.”

Alex stepped in between the two men, hands extended to keep them apart — and more importantly, to keep Dean from shooting his grandfather. “Whoa whoa,” she warned. “Dean, maybe you guys should leave. I’ll stay behind and help Henry with all of this. He and I can handle Abaddon on our own.”

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Dean seemed to agree with that statement, but Sam firmly shook his head. “We’re not leaving you guys to deal with that demon by yourselves,” he insisted before he turned to Henry. “No. You know what? We’re also John’s children.”

“You’re more than that, actually.” Henry addressed Sam directly, ignoring the bristling hunter next to him. “My father and his father before him were both Men of Letters, as John and you two should have been. We’re preceptors, beholders, chroniclers for all which man does not understand. We
share our findings with a few trusted hunters — the very elite. They do the rest.”

“So you’re like the Yoda to our Jedi,” Dean half-joked, but his smile faltered when all he received was a blank stare. “Never mind. You’ll get there.”

“Okay.” Sam turned the conversation away from Dean’s quip and back to the case, “but if you guys were such a big deal, then why haven’t we — or anyone know — ever heard of you?”

Henry’s face darkened. “Abaddon.” He pushed open the wooden door and stepped into the comic shop.

Dean and Sam exchanged looks before they followed. “Henry. Why? Why’d she do it?”

The Winchester reached into his pocket of his suit pants and pulled out a small wooden box. “I think for this,” he murmured.

“Uh, okay. What’s in the box?” Alex reached out to trace the circular symbol carved into the wooden lid, but Henry pulled it away from her touch.

“I wish I knew.” He slid the box back into his pocket. “Abaddon attacked me the night of my final initiation. All secrets were to be revealed then.”

“Let me get this straight,” Dean began, stopping in the middle of the hallway in disbelief. “You travelled through time to protect something that does you-don’t-know-what from a demon that you know nothing about?” Henry turned to look back at Dean, but he didn’t answer before he stalked further down the hall towards the main room. Dean threw up his hands. “Good.”

“Dude, maybe you should chill out.” Alex reached out and put a hand on Dean’s chest when he started to move forward. “Why are you so pissed at this guy, huh? He seems like a good man who’s just trying to get some answers.”

“Why am I pissed?” Dean repeated. “I don’t know. Maybe because he abandoned Dad without even saying goodbye. Who the hell does that to their kid?”

“How do you know he chose to do that?” the young angel retorted, wings rising in frustration. “I don’t know about you, but to me he doesn’t seem like a guy who would just leave his family without a good reason. Maybe he never makes it back, huh? Maybe it wasn’t his fault.”

A hand on her shoulder had her falling silent, and she spun around and followed Sam after his grandfather. He had found his way into the main store room, and Alex took a moment to take in the grimy walls. Trashy rock played through the speakers, and Alex frowned at the shady establishment.

“Hand me your walkie-talkie,” Henry requested, hand held out to Sam who stood on the man’s right. He didn’t turn around to look at his grandson, too busy studying the room around him, and Sam and Alex exchanged confused looks.

“You mean my phone?” Sam finally asked as he reached into his pocket.

“Even better.” Henry’s fingers closed around the sleek black device Sam held out and raised it to his mouth. “Operator, I need Delta 457.”

Dean’s voice was flat as he joined them in the room. “Who are you not calling?”

“Our emergency number.”

“Yeah, not anymore.” Dean snatched the phone out of his grandfather’s hands and gave it back to
Sam with a shake of his head.

“They can’t all be gone.” Henry looked around the decrepit store, insistent disbelief lining his voice. “There must be another elder out there who can help us figure out how to stop Abaddon and what to do with the box.”

Alex looked up at Sam with a small shrug, unsure if she could help in any way, but Dean seemed to have an idea. “Hey, uh, hi.” He moved forward with a warm grin towards the goth-like lady who was slouched over the front counter. “Can we hijack your computer for a hot second?”

The lady studied Dean for a second, and Alex heard Henry scoff. “Like you could fit a computer in this room.”

“Yeah, well, welcome to the twenty-first century,” Alex retorted as the woman shrugged and spun her thin laptop towards the hunters. “We also have microwaveable burritos and a black president.” She leaned against the counter as Sam pulled the laptop towards him.

“Uh … alright.” The hunter began before Henry could think of anything to respond with. “Um … give me a name — anybody who, uh, might have been there that night. One of the elders.”

“Uh, Ackers, David. Larry Ganem,” Henry began, and Alex watched as Sam typed the names into the search bar. “Ted —”

“Okay, here it is.” Sam clicked on a link to an old article before Henry could even finish the third name. “Um, August 12, 1958. A tragic fire at a gentleman’s club. Uh, 242 Gaines Street.”

“This is 242 Gaines Street,” Henry added, and Alex nodded in agreement as she remembered the painted numbers by the door. “But there was no fire.”

“Well, the newspaper says there was,” the young angel retorted as she read the article’s headline. *Tragic Fire at Gentleman’s Club, 4 Dead.* “Let’s see. Larry Ganem, David Ackers, Ted Bowen, and Albert Magnus all dead.”

“A Albert Magnus,” Henry repeated, and Alex nodded.

“Friend of yours?” Dean asked, and Henry looked over at his grandson.

“Even better,” he promised before he turned back to Sam. “Where are they buried?”

“Oh, give me a second.” Keys clicked as Sam worked, and less than a minute later he looked up. “All four are buried at a cemetery not far from here.”

“Good.” Henry turned and walked briskly out of the room, and with a shrug, the other three had no choice but to follow.

They arrived at the cemetery a little after 6pm, but thanks to the winter season, the sun was already far below the horizon, clothing the graveyard in heavy darkness. Alex pulled the sleeves of her jacket down further over her hands as Dean parked the Impala and all four got out. Two clicks of flashlights had the landscape bathed in a harsh yellow glow as the two Winchesters took the lead, and Alex trailed close behind Henry, grace flicking out to search for any sign of danger. It wasn’t long before they came upon a group of four headstones tucked away from the rest. Despite the darting flashlight beams, Alex could easily make out the names. “This is them.”
Henry moved past her, and the angel sidestepped to give him space. “These were my friends,” he began, voice solemn, “my mentors, our last defense against the Abbadons of the world.”

“Here’s your buddy Albert Magnus.” Dean’s flashlight beam came to rest on the central tombstone.

“Albertus Magnus,” Henry corrected. “He was hardly a buddy. He was the greatest alchemist of the Middle Ages.”

Alex frowned in confusion. “Uh … okay so why exactly is he buried here?”

“He’s not. His was the alias we’d use when going incognito,” he informed them. “I believe someone planted his name in that article so that if a Man of Letters came looking for answers, he’d know something was amiss.”

“So someone wanted you to come to this grave.”

“The question is why,” Henry finished, and Alex turned her eyes to the gravestone. A symbol was carved below the name, and she moved forward to run her fingers over the carving.

“An unicursal hexagram,” she announced as she looked back up at the hunters.

“An aquarian star,” Henry agreed. “Our crest, representing great magic and power. They say it stood at the gates of Atlantis itself.”

“Huh.” Sam moved forward, flashlight darting over the four stone markers. “It’s on all the tombstones except this one — uh, Larry Ganem.”

He stepped back as Henry knelt down beside his and although Alex recognized the symbol immediately, she let Henry speak first. “The Haitian symbol for speaking to the dead. This is a message.” He rose to his feet and turned to face his grandsons. “You boys ever exhume a body?”

Alex barely held back an amused snort at Dean’s expression, and she shoved her hands into her pockets. “I’ll go get the shovels,” she volunteered. “Give me five seconds.” her wings carried her up into the cold air and she swooped down to land beside the Impala. Her grace twisted the lock and pins, and the trunk popped open with a small click. The young angel dug through the mess of duffle bags and random items until her fingers closed about the handles of the two collapsible shovels. One quick movement closed and locked the trunk behind her, and then she was back beside the Winchesters. “Here.”

“So you’re an angel, huh?” Henry asked as the brothers unfolded their shovels and broke ground. “I thought you stayed in heaven. Why are you working with two hunters?”

Alex shrugged, eyes turning to Sam and Dean as they slowly began their excavation. “It’s a really long story that happens to involve the devil, but the long and short of it is heaven’s unstable right now, and my mate in trouble. I wasn’t created an angel,” she explained when she saw the confusion that sat upon Henry’s face. “I was human. All enaiish — female angels, basically — we were human first.”

“That’s … unusual,” the Winchester said after a second or two. “I wasn’t aware angels were capable of reproduction.”

“Well, they need a human vessel. Apparently our heavenly Father up above didn’t think they would need to, so he didn’t create any angels capable of that. That’s kind of something they had to figure out how to do that after he left. Yeah it’s a little crude, but I guess it’s necessary.”
It wasn’t long before a metal shovel hit something other than dirt, and Alex approached the edge of the ground to see the brothers clear away the last of the soil from the coffin lid. “Here,” she offered, sliding down into the pit besides Sam. “I got the lid.” She gripped it tightly and pulled, lifting it up and tipping it against the dirt wall so the brothers could peer at the skeleton inside. “Anything?”

“Hey, uh, was Larry a World War One vet?” she heard Dean ask.

“No.”

“Well, then, who’s the stiff?”

“No idea.” Henry crouched down at the edge of the grave, and Alex shifted so she could see the remains as Sam knelt down and reached out to study a metal pin attached to the skeleton’s clothing.

“Captain Thomas J Carey III,” he read. “That mean anything to you?”

Henry shook his head, and Alex frowned. “Well, whoever put this guy here did so for a reason, and I’m willing to bet that that someone was Larry, huh?”

“So, what, maybe he, uh, survives the attack and hides out with this guy’s identity?” Sam suggested, straightening back up, and with a look at Dean, Alex let the coffin lid fall back down over the remains.

Henry nodded in agreement with Sam’s theory and stood up. “Okay, what are we waiting for then?” He walked out of sight as he added, “Cover this up. Let’s be on our way.”

Sam and Dean exchanged looks once again, and Dean shook his head as Alex shrugged. “Clearly intellectuals such as him don’t get their hands dirty,” she joked as she climbed out of the grave. “Leave it to the brutish hunters. But hey, the important thing is that your grandfather is pretty damn hot.” She paused, dusting off the knees of her jeans as she thought. “Is that weird? Out loud it sounds a little weird.” Neither Sam nor Dean answered as they pulled themselves out of the pit, and Alex shrugged as she picked up one of the shovels. “Come on. I’ll help you guys fill this in.”

A passing hour found the four of them inside a motel room twenty miles south. The two hunters were at the table; Sam was flipping through John’s journal, and Dean sat beside him on his laptop. Alex couldn’t see the screen from where she lay on one of the beds, her own computer laying in front of her with Spotify open. Henry was lying on the couch off to her left, lips pursed tightly in a whistle, although Alex couldn’t hear the tune through the pulsing bass in her ears.

“What is that?” she heard Dean ask, and she paused her song to hear him add, “I know that tune.”

“As Time Goes By,” Henry explained, turning his head to look at Dean. “And I hope so. It’s from Casablanca.”

“Right,” Sam nodded. “Dad use to whistle it from time to time.”

A small smile formed across Henry’s lips as a memory reached the forefront of his mind. “Your father saw ‘Abbott and Costello Meet the Mummy’ at the drive-in one night. It scared the beeswax out of him. So I got him this little music box that played that song to help him sleep at night. It worked like a charm.”
Sam smile at the story, but Dean acted as if he hadn’t even heard. “Wow. It’s hard to believe Dad was ever scared of anything,” Sam admitted.

Dean just cleared his throat, and Alex turned her attention to him. “Hey, uh, according to county records, Tom Carey lives in Lebanon, Kansas, and is a very happy 127 year old.” He closed his laptop as Alex made a curious noise. “I say we get some shuteye, head over there first thing in the morning.”

“Wait wait wait. Listen to this.” Sam’s finger traced a line in his father’s journal. "According to Dad, he once tortured a demon that said he made his bones working for Abaddon, who, it turns out, is a Knight of Hell.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Knights of Hell are hand-picked by Lucifer himself,” Henry explained, something dark settling across his face. “They are of the first-fallen, first-born demons.”

“So, very pure, very strong,” Sam concluded.

His grandfather nodded as he rose to his feet. “Legend has it that archangels had killed all of them, which as we have witnessed, is not the case.”

“Unless she’s the last of her kind,” Dean suggested.

“I can ask Lucifer,” Alex volunteered from where she lay, drawing all attention onto her. “What?” She frowned defensively at the look on Dean’s face. “As long as I’m dreaming of him, we may as well use it to our advantage. You said he picked them himself,” she added to Henry. “So maybe he’ll know how to stop her.”

“Dreaming of the devil?” Henry repeated, genuine confusion on his face. “What does that mean? Is that something all angels do?”

“No, just me. And it means exactly what it sounds like.” Alex reached out and closed her laptop, tugging her earbuds from her ears. “He’s surprisingly cooperative at times. I think it’s worth a try.” She shrugged and got to her feet, deeming that conversation over.

Henry walked over to stand beside Sam, gaze turned downwards at the journal on the table. “You say that belonged to your father? May I?”

Sam nodded and slid it over towards his grandfather. “It’s a hunter’s journal,” he explained. “I assume Men of Letters — you use journals, too?”

“I intended to,” Henry agreed as he picked up John’s journal. “I sent away for one the day before my initiation.” He turned to the front of it and pulled out what Alex assumed was one of the photographs tucked in the inside cover, and he touched something on the leather. “As a matter of fact, judging by my initials here, this one, I believe.”

Dean looked up in slight puzzlement. “That was yours?”

“It must have arrived after …” Henry’s face darkened, and he looked up at Sam and Dean. “I’m beginning to gather I don’t make it back from this time, do I?”

Sam’s shoulders fell in sympathy. “We don’t know for sure,” he admitted. “All we do know is that Dad never saw you again.”
“What did he think happened to me?”

“He thought you ran out on him,” Dean explained, and Alex’s wings twitched as the harshness that lay beneath his tone.

“John was a legacy.” Henry looked back down at the journal, something heavy and somber in his gaze. “I was supposed to teach him the way of the Letters.”

Dean huffed. “Well, he had to learn things a little differently.”

“How?”

“The hard way. Surviving a lonely childhood, a stinking war … only to get married and have his wife taken by a demon … and later killed by one himself.” Dean’s voice grew angry as he spoke, green eyes flashing darkly. “The man got a bum rap around every turn, but you know what? He kept going. And in the end, he did a hell of a lot more good than he did bad.”

Alex rose to her feet, slipping through the room and towards the bathroom; this didn’t seem like a conversation she needed to be a part of. She heard Dean’s angry voice, followed by the slamming of a door. The door opened and closed again a few seconds later, and then the young angel’s grace told her that Henry was alone.

She waited a minute, and then two, before she stepped back into the main room. Henry was seated at the table, slowly flipping through John’s journal. “Sorry about those two,” she apologized quietly, moving to put her hands on the back of a chair across from the man. “They … they’ve been through a lot.”

“I’m going to fix this.” Henry didn’t look up from the book in front of him, and although his voice was quiet, it was heavy with emotion. “I don’t know how, but I’m going to fix it.” He looked up at Alex, and the angel was surprised by the pain in his eyes. “Do you have any idea what that’s like? Being separated from your child? You would give anything to make it right.”

The young angel looked away. “I … had a son,” she admitted. “And I have a mate. Both … both of them are gone, and … you’re right. You would give anything, wouldn’t you?” She tapped the wooden backing of the chair. “Henry?” She paused when she had the Man of Letters’ attention, and she looked up into his face. “My mate, he once told me that all roads lead to the same destination. So just … be careful, okay? Whatever you do, be careful.” She tapped on the chair one more time before she stepped away. “I’m going to bed. Maybe I’ll find a way to stop Abaddon for good.”

Lucifer was sprawled out across the couch when Alex opened her eyes, and from where she stood, all she could see was a large, crimson wing that was stretched out over the back of the sofa. ‘Hey.” Alex circled around to stand in front of the archangel, and he lifted his head in greeting.

“Hello.” Lucifer sat up, and Alex dropped down onto the couch when he swung his legs out of the way. Cold lips pressed up against hers for a second or two before the archangel pulled away and shook out his wings so the feathers lay flat. “It’s been quite a while since I’ve seen you,” he commented off-handedly.

“It’s only been a week,” the young angel quipped back, and she rested her hands in her lap. “Uh, how’s life been?”

A dry laugh rumbled in the archangel’s chest, and Alex smiled to find his mood so amiable. “Well … it’s been hell.” His wings twitched when his joke caused Alex to hit him on the shoulder. “And
“Working a case. With demons — weird demons. Maybe you can help me?” She shifted closer to the archangel, wings curling forward to brush against his side. “I found this weird demon that not even the demon knife could kill. She calls herself Abaddon.”

“Abaddon?” Lucifer’s eyes lit up with familiarity and curiosity, and his head tipped as he studied Alex’s demeanor. “You mean the Knight of Hell, I assume?”

“Yeah, the Knight of Hell,” Alex repeated with a vigorous nod. “I don’t … what is a Knight of Hell? I know they have something to do with you.”

“More or less, yes.” A cold hand took hers, and Alex blinked as the archangel turned his gaze to the far wall. “Knights of Hell aren’t typical demons,” he began. “Remember when I told you about when I first fell? I wasn’t alone. The angels who fell with me weren’t as lucky as I; they lost their grace while in hell.” His eyes turned back to her, blue eyes darting across her face. “They became demons; very powerful ones. Abaddon was one of the angels who followed me.”

“Wait. So the demon Abaddon was an angel?” Alex squinted as she remembered how the demon had felt. “That would explain why her, uh … energy was weird. Okay, how do we kill one? Angel blade?”

“Not the one you have.” The hand moved to her arm, the gentle cold seeping into her skin. “You’d need an archangel blade.” The couch creaked as Lucifer shifted, and cold lips pressed against her cheek. Alex squirmed playfully, but she firmly pushed him away. “Focus,” she chastised. “I need to know how to kill her. *Luce,*” she admonished when his lips moved back to hers. She put her hands on his chest and pushed, rolling her eyes when the archangel didn’t budge. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Stop talking.”

“You know what? Fight me. Luc— ow!” Alex rolled off of the couch with a shriek of teasing protest. “I said ‘fight me’ not ‘bite me,’ you asshole!” She kicked the archangel in the leg in retaliation, a mock scowl across her face as she rubbed her bitten shoulder and sat up on the floor. “Work first, play later.”

“You’re no fun.” Lucifer slithered down onto the floor beside her. “You can’t kill Abaddon without the Colt or my sword or … never mind.” He dismissed the thought with a wave of his hand before he rattled off the rest of his list. “Holy water won’t work, but a devil’s trap will hold her.”

“Okay.” Alex reached behind her and tugged mindlessly on a crimson feather. “We already tried the knife, but maybe I could my hands on Gabriel’s archangel blade. Henry said the archangels hunted down and killed most of the Knights of Hell —”

“They didn’t.” Lucifer took the hand that was fingering his feather, and Alex paused in confusion. “But that’s not important.” The archangel shifted closer. “If you can’t kill her, you must trap her.”

“How do we keep her trapped long term?” Alex tried to pull her hand free, but when Lucifer didn’t let go, she quickly gave up.

Crimson wings folded around her, and the young angel let her own fall down so their feathers brushed together. “You talk too much,” Lucifer murmured as his wings drew them closer together. “I told you what you needed to know. Now what I want to know is —”
“Hey! Wake up!” Something hard came crashing down on the angel’s shoulder, and she jumped, wings flaring out in alarm and fists curling into a ball as she rolled to face whatever it was that attacked her. “Hey hey hey.” Hands steadied her, and Alex opened her eyes to see Dean sitting beside her. “Calm down.”

“The fuck, dude?” Alex sat up and shook out her rumpled wings, trying to get the glossy feathers to lay flat once again. “I’m gonna kill you.”

“It’s Henry.” Sam was standing beside the bed, a notepad in his hand, and Alex let her glare fade slightly as her grace pulsed through the room. “He’s gone.”

“Yeah, he is,” Alex confirmed with a grumble. “So? The hell did he go?”

“No idea.” Sam tossed the notepad onto the bed between Dean and Alex, and the older Winchester scooped it up before the angel could get her hands on it. “He just left a note saying he was going to fix everything.”

“Yeah, or screw it all up,” Dean muttered. He rose to his feet, stifling a large yawn as he ran a hand through his messy hair. “I swear if he took the damn car …”

Alex watched as the hunter stalked across the room and out the door before she turned to look up at Sam. “He was talking about fixing it all last night,” she admitted when Dean was gone. “I … I dunno. I didn’t think he was going to actually go off on his own. I did talk with Lucifer though,” she added before Sam could comment. “Knights of Hell? They’re not demons — well, they are demons, but more importantly they were angels. They were those who fell with Lucifer. Their grace was ripped away and they became essentially human, and from there Hell twisted them into demons. That’s why they’re so damn powerful.”

“So Abaddon was an angel?” Sam’s forehead wrinkled at the news, and Alex nodded. “Really?”

“Now we know what Henry meant by ‘fix everything’.” The motel door slammed as Dean walked back into room with a dark frown. “He broke into the trunk, stole an angel feather. I’m guessing he’s gonna whip up another one of those blood spells and Marty McFly himself back to the 1950s.”

“To do what?” Sam asked. “Stop Abaddon before she strikes?”

“Or grab Dad and haul ass. Look, point is he’s doing it.”

“How? He still needs two ingredients for the spell. Unless …” Sam hurried over to the table and sat down, “unless there’s some place nearby that sells real hoodoo.” He pulled out his laptop and opened it up.

“I’ll call Garth.” Dean dug into his pocket for his phone, and Alex brushed back her hair into a loose ponytail as she let out a long, loud yawn.

“Hey.” Sam’s voice had her looking up, and she let out a curious hum at what he was going to say. “It just hit the police wires. One dead at Astro Comics.”

“Abaddon?”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed with a dark frown. “Has to be.”

“Okay, so she’s close.” Dean hung up his phone and shoved it back into his pocket. “I’ll go find
Henry. You find Larry. Figure out how to kill this chick. You,” he added with a pointed finger at Alex, “Go see if you can find anything useful back at the comic store. Did Lucifer say any helpful?”

Alex nodded, quickly relaying what she had told Sam. “Knights of Hell are fallen angels, they can’t be killed with the knife or with a typical angel blade. You need an archangel’s blade or something even stronger. Devil’s traps will hold her, though, at least for a little while. Maybe Larry will know something. Lebanon’s pretty far away, so I can drop you off,” she added to Sam before she turned back to Dean. “I’ll drop by the crime scene, then I’ll take a fly around town, see if I can pick up and stall Abaddon.”

Alex landed outside the crime scene, wings folding in tightly as she stepped out from the alley and into the view of the police cars. She straightened her dark tie with one hand and rolled her shoulders in her blazer, doing her best to look taller and more professional as she approached the police tape. “Agent Landau,” she introduced to the police officer in front of her. “I got a call this morning about a violent murder and am looking into the possibility that the killer may have crossed state lines.” She tucked her ID back into her jacket and stepped under the tape before the officer could utter a word. Her brisk and calm lie must have worked, as no resistance came as she entered the front door of Astro Comics.

“Agent Landau,” Alex repeated, flashing her ID with a quick repetition of her earlier statement. “Ma’am? You’re not —”

“Agent Landau,” Alex repeated, flashing her ID with a quick repetition of her earlier statement. “And you are?”

“Officer Martin Keelin.” The policeman glanced behind him at the sheet-covered body, and Alex tipped her head to see past him. “You got her mighty fast, ma’am. She was just discovered about twenty minutes ago.”

“We do our best to work quickly and efficiently,” the young angel lied as she let her grace stretch out and examine the crime scene. “Truth be told, I was spending the night just a block or two west of here. Pure luck. What have we got here?” she asked, doing her best to draw the attention away from her and back onto the victim.

“Ashlee Deem. She worked the closing shift last night and was found by her coworker this morning.” Officer Keelin motioned her after him, and Alex knelt down beside the body and pulled back the bloodied sheet. “If I didn’t know any better, I would say those were claws that did that.”

Alex only grunted as she studied the bloody gashes in the young woman’s throat. “Unilateral lacerations across the trachea,” she announced, “cause of death being a combination of a severed windpipe and massive blood loss. How long ago was time of death?”

“Uh, the techs are estimating about eight hours.” Officer Keelin shifted behind her, and Alex looked up. “You sure know a lot of that … ya know, technical stuff.”

“Well, Officer, that is my job.” Alex rose to her feet, nostrils flaring at the slightest trace of sulphur in the air. “And there was no eye-witnesses?”

“None at all. We’re going to interrogate the other employees as soon as we can round them up, if you’re interested.”

The young angel’s wings flicked in disinterest, but she kept her voice cordial. “I’ll need to speak with my superiors first, of course. If this sounds like a case for the FBI, we’ll be in touch. Have a
good day.” She turned on her heels and exited the building, wings drawing in close and head ducking as she slipped underneath the police tape. Her wings extended once again as soon as she had rounded the alleyway, and then she was in the air.

She worked her way through the state in circles, starting at Astro Comics and slowly working her way outwards and outwards with each passing lap, grace scouring the land below. It searched each building, moving across every human soul, and she pulled to a stop above a small town, fifty miles away, with a curious noise. Two souls resided in a store below, two souls she had come to known rather well. Dean and Henry Winchester. She made a mental note of their location before continuing on, finishing her sweep of Illinois.

Nothing.

With a disappointed shake of her head, Alex returned to the two Winchesters and landed beside Dean. “— by going back an hour before she attacks and making preparations!” Henry was shouting, and Alex drew her wings in tight. She didn’t miss the way the Man of Letters started at her sudden appearance, and she looked up at Dean.

“Abaddon’s not in the state,” she relayed quickly. “I searched every corner, and she’s not here. You and Henry are safe for the time being.”

A brief touch on her shoulder was Dean’s way of thanking her before he turned his head back to his grandfather. “You do know that if you go back and change the past, Sam and I could cease to exist,” he snapped angrily, and Alex narrowed her eyes as she saw the blood sigil on the door behind Henry Winchester.

“I’m aware that time is a delicate mistress,” he began carefully, “but I’m willing to bet on this being for the best.”

Dean took a deep breath, eyes flickering down to Alex, and she nodded, well aware of what he was asking if this were to get out of hand. “Listen,” the Winchester began, “I understand that this is not your idea of a happy ending, okay, and that — that you’re disappointed that me and Sam are mouth-breathing hunters. But you know what? We stopped the Apocalypse!”

“If this works the way I planned, there will never be an Apocalypse to stop.”

Dean’s phone rang, and he jumped to answer it. “Sammy?” he asked, voice tense with the present situation.

“You don’t understand,” Alex began, wings and arms folding outwards in a gesture of harmless amiability. “The angels, they set the entire Apocalypse up. It wasn’t something that just happened by chance; each damn step has been planned out by the guys upstairs, okay? If you go back there, there’s no promises they’ll even let you live long enough to see John. Sam and Dean need to be born, and they’ll do anything in their power to keep it that way.”

Distrust flashed in Henry’s eyes at her words, and his jaw set firmly. “And is that why you’re here? To keep me from going back?”

“No — yes — but not like that, man. I just —”

“Abaddon.” Dean’s cold, flat word had Alex cutting off and turning to look at the hunter in surprise. “Crystal,” he added darkly, and then he hung up his phone.

“Abaddon has Sam?” Henry guessed.
“And she wants to trade you and the key for Sam,” Alex finished, and when Dean nodded she let out an angry huff, grace snapping through the air. “Dammit. I swear I’m going to kill that bitch, Knight or not.”

“If I could just go back, stop all this from happening,” Henry pleaded, and Alex turned back to Dean Winchester, unsure what his call was going to be.

“And what if you can’t?” he snapped. “I can’t take that risk — not with Sam on the hook.”

“I can’t abandon my son, Dean! Not again!” Henry took a step backwards with a quick shake of his head. “I need to do this I’m sorry.” He turned around to face the sigil on the door once more, and it began to glow violently with his words. “Kah-nee-lah poo-gah. Kay-nee-lah … poo —”

Alex swept forward, grace surging into the Man of Letters’ head as she cupped the back of his neck, and he crumpled into her arms, immediately unconscious by the sudden wave of power. The angel caught him, staggering under his weight, and Dean was there in a second to steady the both of them. “Well, I’m sorry, too,” he muttered as he lifted Henry up over his shoulder. “Thanks, Pip.”

“Yeah, no problem. But … what’s the plan now?”

It was getting dark by the time Henry woke up. They were in the Impala, Dean and Henry in the front, and Alex stretched out in the back. She sat up when she heard Henry stir groggily and let out a groan. “Um … sorry about that,” Alex began, leaning forward in her seat. “You’re probably going to have a headache for half an hour or so.”

Henry grumbled out something that sounded insincere, and Dean looked over at him. “Henry, you need to understand something,” the hunter said. “When my dad died, I couldn’t save him … no matter how hard I tried. I never want that to happen to Sam. Ever. If there’s a chance that I can save him, I’m gonna do it. He’s my brother. He’s the only real family I got.” He glanced into the rearview mirror as he turned the Impala off of the highway.

“So … what are you thinking?” Henry slowly inquired.

“Can you slow Abaddon down?” Dean asked, and Alex flicked her wings as she leaned over the seat. “Because if you can, we can do the rest.”

“Something with a devil’s trap,” Alex added. “According to Lucifer, that seems to be one of the few things that’ll hold her still long enough for us to do anything.”

There was a pause as the Man of Letters thought. “I have an idea,” he finally decided. “I’m going to need a bullet.”

“Uh, here.” Alex pulled her Colt out of her duffle bag that lay on the Impala floor and pushed out the magazine. A flick of her thumb had a bullet popping into her palm, and she handed it to Henry. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to carve a devil’s trap into this bullet.” Henry pulled a small leather package out of his jacket pocket and from that removed a small, metal tool. “A small trick I learned from my mentor. It’ll incapacitate any demon unlucky enough to be shot with it.” He looked over at Dean. “How long until we reach the place where Abaddon is holding Sam?”

“Half an hour or so. How much time do you need?”
“That should be plenty.”

“Okay, but you know you’re gonna have to get close, right?” Dean looked over at his grandfather, but Henry didn’t raise his head. “And ‘close’ means it could get ugly.”

“I know,” the Man of Letters quietly agreed. “But you do that for blood.”

Alex stared up at the large abandoned plant, wings drawn in closely as she took in the dark, powerful sigils on the dusty and broken windows. “She’s got the place warded,” she announced as Henry tucked her gun in his pocket and allowed Dean to handcuff his hands behind his back. “I can get in, but I’m basically powerless. You sure you still want me to come with?”

Dean nodded. “We’re better off with you,” he decided as he stepped away from his grandfather. “How you feeling? Ready?”

“Yes. Let’s do this.” Henry stepped forward, and Alex rolled her shoulders back as Dean shoved through the front door and down the hall. “Don’t do this, Dean,” the Man of Letters warned as they entered a large, empty room, falling to their well-rehearsed lies.

“Too late for that now,” Dean snapped back, and Alex followed them through the set of double doors to see Abaddon and Sam, whose hands were bound, standing in the center of the large room. The wardings pressed down upon her, forcing her grace to coil deep within, and she growled at the sight of the demon.

“That’s the problem with you hunters!” Henry spat. “You’re all short-sighted.”

“Yeah, at least we’re not extinct. Abaddon!” Dean raised his voice as he addressed the Knight of Hell, and he held up the old, wooden box with the aquarian star carved on the cover. “I’ll send Henry here over with the box. You do the same with Sam. No tricks.” He put the box into Henry’s jacket pocket, and Alex watched how Abaddon’s eyes followed his every movement.

“My only interest is Henry and the key,” she promised. “You three are free to go.”

Dean gave Henry a shove, but when the man refused to move, Dean drew his gun threateningly. Alex immediately reached out to stop him, not wanting the Winchester to go too far. “You can do this standing, or you can do it crawling,” he threatened. “Your call.”

The young angel’s wings folded downwards as the man slowly began to move forward, and Sam did the same, passing his grandfather in the middle of the room and exchanging three, quiet words. “Henry, I’m sorry.”

“Save it.” Henry continued slowly forward, and Sam hurried to stand at his brother’s side.

“Don’t do this, Dean,” the youngest Winchester whispered as Dean pulled out his knife and cut away Sam’s restraints. “This is a bad idea.”

“Shut your mouth,” Dean whispered as Henry finally reached Abaddon’s side. “Come on.” He pushed Sam ahead of him, and the three hunters bolted towards the door. But Alex suddenly felt it push past them, that dark, twisted energy that could only be from an equally dark and twisted creature, and the metal doors swung shut with a heavy clang. Dean slid to a stop, but Alex knew before they even tried the handle that it was locked. “We had a deal!” Dean snapped, spinning around to face Abaddon with a dark scowl.
The Knight let out a laugh, her eyes flashing with malicious humor. “Surprise,” she chuckled. “I lied.” She turned on Henry and shoved her hand through his chest, and Alex flinched at the sound of tearing flesh and gurgling blood.

“Henry!” Sam rushed forward, but then Alex was at his side, holding him back.

“Stop it!” Alex yelled, and she fought desperately against the wardings, but not even Lucifer’s grace could penetrate the heavy sigils. It bubbled up inside her, frustration forcing her eyes to glow, and Abaddon withdrew her hand from Henry’s stomach in interest.

Blood dripped from the Man of Letter’s mouth, but somehow through the blood and the pain he managed to speak. “You’re not the only one who lied.” Henry moved fast, grabbing the demon and sticking the barrel of Alex’s gun beneath her chin. The resounding gunshot echoed through the room as the bullet was fired into Abaddon’s skull, which momentarily glowed with a bright, orange light as the bullet lodged itself into her brain.

The demon’s eyes went wide, but when it didn’t kill her, she shook her head. “Whoo! What a blast. Now give me the box,” she demanded, eyes turning darkly to Henry. She reached into his jacket pocket where Dean had placed the Men of Letters box, but what she drew out wasn’t the box. The Knight of Hell threw the deck of playing cards onto the ground with a scream, and they scattered across the concrete. “Where is it?!” she screeched, and Alex flared her wings out as energy spiraled through the air, sending objects crashing to the ground and causing the lights to spark violently. The Knight took a deep breath, doing her best to calm herself before she fixed the hunters with a dark, hungry glare. “Okay. We can do this the hard way.”

She twisted and grabbed Henry by the chin, mouth opening as she attempted to flee her current vessel and possess the man in front of her, but nothing happened. The demon threw Henry to the ground, and Alex reached out to try and stop Sam, but he slipped past her to pull Henry out of the way. Abaddon tried to step towards Alex, but her feet refused to move. The demon’s eyes flashed black, mouth stretching open in an ear-piercing scream, and the lights shattered in a shower of sparks. “Why am I stuck?”

“Little trick up Henry’s sleeve.” Alex’s voice was scathing as she stalked up to stand in front of the demon, and she let Lucifer’s grace flare up, eyes glowing orange. “Recognize it?” she growled when something flashed within the demon’s eyes. “Lucifer told me all about you. Told me how to kill you, too.”

“But you haven’t killed me,” Abaddon sneered back.

“No, but you’ll wish we did.” Dean stalked up to Alex’s side, his machete swinging in his hands. The angel stepped back when he swung it, and Abaddon’s head toppled to the floor. “The demon trap in your noggin is gonna keep you from smoking out,” he told her. “We’re gonna cut you into little steaks and bury each strip under cement.”

“My idea,” Alex added, a hint of pride lining her voice. “You might not be dead, but you’re sure as hell gonna wish you were.” She watched the demon’s headless body toppled to the ground, and her attention was drawn down to Henry. “Hey.” She dropped to her knees in front of him, hand going out to press against Sam’s that covered the large wound. “Get him outside,” she ordered. “I can’t help him with all these wardings.”

“No.” Henry reached out to stop the Winchesters from moving him, and Dean knelt down at his grandfather’s side. “I … it’s too late.” His gaze slid past his grandson and onto Abaddon’s body. “We did it.”
“No, you did it,” Dean corrected gently. “For a bookworm, that wasn’t bad, Henry.”

A warm smile crept across Henry’s face. “I’m sorry I judged you two for being hunters. I should have known better.”

Sam frowned. “About?”

“You’re also Winchesters. As long as we’re alive, there’s always hope.” The Man of Letters coughed as Sam and Dean exchanged quiet looks, and Alex’s grace fought against the wardings, but to no avail. “I didn’t know my son as a man, but knowing you two …” He reached out, taking Sam and Dean’s hand in his. “I know I would have been proud of him.”

His breathing slowed and his heart stopped, and out of the corner of her eye Alex saw the dark, flitting shape of a reaper. The light faded from Henry Winchester’s eyes, and the young angel reached out to close his eyelids. “His soul’s going to heaven,” she murmured as the reaper faded away. “He’s at peace now.”

Sam looked down into his hand, and Alex saw the wooden box resting in his palm. The two brothers’ eyes met, silent words passing in mere seconds, and the young angel reluctantly rose to her feet.

“I’ll take care of Abaddon,” she decided, looking down at the headless corpse. “You … you should take care of Henry.” She nudged the head with her feet, watching in dark satisfaction as it rolled away.

She heard Sam and Dean stand behind her, and she rolled her shoulders back. “You sure?” Dean asked. “You don’t want to come?”

“I’ll take care of Abaddon,” Alex repeated, voice firm. “Then I … I need to see if I can find Castiel.” She turned, eyes flitting across the faces of Sam and Dean before they fell onto Henry. “I’ll … catch up with you later.”

Alex landed in the back of the Impala, wings drawing in close to fit inside the car. “Hey,” she announced, eyes turned out towards the rising sun. “How are you guys doing?”

“Fine,” came Sam’s quiet reply. “Uh, did you find Cas?”

“No,” Alex’s face darkened as she shifted forward on her seat. “I searched every state for him, but he’s not here, and he didn’t answer any of my prayers, so, I mean, unless he’s in Australia or something like that …” She trailed off with a small shake of her head. “I’m worried that Naomi got a hold of him, guys. I …” Alex’s shoulders dropped, unsure what else to say on the matter. “Well, either way, Abaddon’s taken care of. Dismembered in concrete in the back of that factory. She won’t be topside any time soon. Where are we going?” she inquired as Dean turned the car off of the main road.

“Larry Ganem gave me coordinates before he died,” Sam explained. “He said the box contains a key to the largest collection of Men of Letters archives in the nation. We’re going there.”

“Is that it?” Alex pointed out the window towards an old, rundown warehouse as Dean veered onto a dirt road. “It looks like no one’s been there in decades.” She frowned at the broken windows and dust-stained glass. “How do we get in?”

Dean parked the car when the road ended in a sharp dirt hill, and Alex rolled out of the backseat,
eyes turning to a short, downwards staircase that ended at a heavy metal door in the hillside. The young angel followed the hunters towards the stairs, her shoes sending a pebble skittering down towards the door. “When’s the last time somebody was in this place?” Dean wondered aloud.

His brother shook his head, unsure. “Sixty-five, maybe seventy years ago,” he estimated as Dean slowly opened Henry’s wooden box and removed the cast-iron key. He lead the way down the stairs, Alex at the rear, and unlocked the heavy door.

The young angel pushed past Sam as he followed his brother through the door, and she leaned over the iron rails to look down into the dark room below. “Whoa,” she breathed out as the hunters’ flashlights darted over the ancient communication equipment below. “Look at this,” she heard Sam say as Dean cursed in amazement under his breath. “Ham radio, telegraph, switchboard. This was their nerve center.”

“Henry did say that they ran dispatch on their own team of hunters,” Dean agreed, and Alex slipped past Sam on her right and hurried down the metal stairs to stand in the first room. She heard him cross to the other side of the catwalk. “Wow,” he continued. “Halfway through their coffee and game of chess — looks like whoever was manning the hub left quick.”

“On the alarm call that ended the Men of Letters,” Sam concluded.

“Is there a fuse box up there?” Alex called. “Because holy damn, guys — you really need to see this.” She reached out and ran her fingers over the glass covering of the table beside her, and even in the dark she could make out the color-coded map of the world. “This place is … amazing.”

She heard the sparks when a switch was pulled, and lights flickered on as footsteps echoed on the stairs. Sam stopped beside her as the lights in the first room turned on, revealing the ancient equipment line against stone walls. In front of them lay another room, still too dark for the human eye to see, but Alex could make out a line of tables stretching far into the back. A second switch and a second spark had the rest of the building bathed in light.

“Son of a bitch,” Sam breathed as Dean joined them, and Alex moved forward, feet carrying her across the concrete floor and up the four stairs to stand in the library. “Whoa,” she breathed as she took in the stone walls lined with bookshelves and archives, at the line of tables and chairs on the polished wooden floors.

“Sammy, I think we found the Bat Cave.” Dean pushed past her, a grin on his face, and Alex’s grace snuck out, stretching forward to examine the room.

“There’s wardings on these columns,” she noticed aloud, pointing to the eight pillars around the room. “Demonic deterrents. This place was a fortress.” An immediate glance to her left and her right showed two hallways, and her wings stretched out in a surge of barely-contained excitement. She turned to grin up at the Winchesters. “Come on. I wanna see what else is here!”

She hurried off down the hall to the left which quickly reached a T with another hallway lined with doors. She took a right; the first door on her right was a large shower room; every other door in the hall lead to a bedroom. Bedroom, bedroom — seven in total in that hall. She followed it down until it turned once again to the right; more bedrooms, and in the center a entryway with two staircases; one up one down. “Guys!” she yelled, and the Winchesters appeared in front of her, apparently having taken the other doorway in the library. “Staircase,” she announced before pointing back the way they had come. “What’s down there?”

“Uh, a kitchen, couple study rooms, and two bedrooms,” Dean relayed. “You?”
“Bedrooms and a communal bathroom with showers. Upstairs or down?” The angel didn’t wait for an answer before she immediately started climbing the flight of stairs. “I vote up,” she called backwards, and she grinned when she heard Dean follow.

The upstairs, while just as large, consisted of only two areas. A staircase that led up to a garage was to the right, full of classic, dusty cars and motorcycles — neither Alex nor the Winchesters could figure out how to get the garage door open — and to the left lay another large room with a polished wooden floor. “Dude. We have a fucking basketball court.” Alex grinned as she looked around the gym; a basketball hoop was mounted on the far wall, and in the corner back by the stairs was a sparring mat and equipment.

“Looks like the Men of Letters weren’t just bookworms,” Dean quipped as he hurried over to the display stands with wooden swords and a variety of other weapons. “This is so cool.”

Alex picked up a basketball; it was flat. “We should move in. I-I mean, there’s bedrooms downstairs, a kitchen — what else do we need? W-We — this can be our Bat Cave, dude.” She tried to dribble, but it landed with a loud thud. “This can be our home.”

“This is nice.” Sam’s voice sounded from the doorway, and Alex grinned over at him. “I, uh — there’s not a lot downstairs. A lot of locked doors, couple store rooms, and a small firing range still stocked with guns. Find anything cool up here?”

“A garage and this awesome place.” Alex bounded across the floor to stand in front of the tall hunter. “Sam, can we please stay here? I-I mean — just look at it. One night,” she begged when Sam and Dean exchanged looks over her shoulder. “It’s free, it’s fucking awesome — one night.”

“We are Legacies,” Sam agreed. “It only seems fair.”

“You had me at guns.” A heavy hand landed on Alex’s shoulder, and she looked up at Dean in surprise. “One night test run, then we see how we like it.” The hand disappeared, and Alex took Sam’s hand as she tugged him towards the door.

“Come on,” she insisted. “Dibs on the room next to yours.” Boots thudded on the concrete steps as she led the way back down the stairs and through the bunker. “Oh God, I can’t wait to sleep in a bed where people haven’t had sex.”

The ceiling was concrete. A light, smooth concrete with darker flecks speckled across; the florescent light that caught on them was captivating. The walls were stone as well, although the wall to her left was brick, each stone a varying shade of red. It was a nice room, even if the floors were bare concrete; the bed was nice, even if the sheets were decades old. The wooden furniture, the incandescent lamp, it was all … nice.

The only problem was that she was alone.

Alex’s wings draped over the sides of the bed as her grace stretched down the halls. Sam was already up and in the library — she could feel him moving around with unfettered excitement. Dean was moving more slowly, and Alex could hear him walking down the hall away from the shower room. She rested her hands on her stomach, fingertips drawing mindless patterns on the smooth skin. She had spent the night staring up at that ceiling, connecting every fleck to its neighbor and seeking out every possible design. She liked the designs that resembled animals the best. A dolphin, a lion. One in the left-hand corner that vaguely resembled an eagle with its wings outstretched.
The angel reluctantly rolled off of bed and left her room, following the hallway right and up into the library where the Winchesters had gathered. “—water pressure in the Letter’s shower room is marvelous,” Dean was saying, and Alex tipped her head to see that he was clothed in a thick, dark grey robe.

Sam didn’t seem to notice. “Yeah,” he agreed, leaning over the middle wooden table, which was cluttered with books and papers. “I still can’t figure out how we even have water. Or electricity.” He turned around and walked over to one of the bookcases, and Dean turned his attention to what Sam was looking at.

“Yep, well, I am putting that under the ‘ain’t broke’ column,” he decided with a uninterested sweep of his eyes over Sam’s research. “Listen, little brother, let’s not go all geek on this stuff, okay?”

Sam turned around, confusion causing his face to scrunch. “Geek?” he repeated, a book in his hand. “Yeah,” Dean agreed as Sam walked back towards him, and he moved over towards where his brother had been. Alex watched as his attention turned to a polished scimitar that was displayed on a wooden stand. “Yeah,” he repeated, “I mean, don’t — don’t get me wrong.” He lifted the sword up, one hand on the hilt and the other supporting the bade. “This stuff is awesome, and it looks like they ran a real tight outfit here, but I’m just saying, you know, don’t, uh, don’t think that they know some big secrets they don’t know.”

“I bet they know a lot of big secrets,” Alex retorted, sliding into one of the wooden chairs across from Sam’s work as she watched Dean extend the curved sword before swinging it downwards in a careful, deliberate arch. “They were a secret society, after all.”

Dean immediately straightened up when he realized that she was watching him, and he blinked innocently when Sam turned around. “Which means they made up crap and wore fezzes and sashes and swung around scimitars,” he retorted sharply, looking down at the weapon so he could run his thumb across the lower blade. “I bet they didn’t even sharp—” He cut off with a short breath, and Alex smirked as he clamped his pointer finger down over his thumb. “That’s very sharp,” he corrected, and placed the sword back onto its stand before he applied pressure to the cut.

“Well it is a sword,” the young angel drawled, and she pulled one of Sam’s books closer so she could examine the ancient and intricate sketches. “Listen, man, secret society or not, they have a lot of useful and important stuff.”

“Right!” Sam agreed. “Dean, look, I think we might have something here — something that can help us, help humanity. Henry certainly thought so. I mean, you know damn well we could use a break,” he added to his brother. “What if we finally got one?” He held Dean’s gaze until his brother looked away, and Sam nodded. “Are you gonna take off the dead-guy robe?” he eventually asked.

Dean looked down at his apparel, a defensive frown growing across his face. “I like this robe,” he muttered. “It’s comfy.” He looked back up at Alex and his brother. “Fine,” he relented. “Fine. You … do your geeky … kinky thing, and I’m going to go get breakfast, okay? It turns out none of the fifty-year old grub in the fridges kept.” He looked down at his bleeding thumb with another deep-set frown, and then with one last glance over at Sam’s mess of papers, he left.

“Think he’s hungry-grumpy or insecure-because-something’s-changed-grumpy?” Alex mused when the hunter was out of earshot, and she smiled at Sam’s snort of amusement. “Because I think it could go either way on this one.”

“Dean’s fine.” Sam returned to the bookcase with a dismissive shake of his head. “I, uh, think he’s a little nervous about the idea of actually settling down.”
“I think it’ll do him some good.” Alex flipped through the book, interest peaking when she read the title of the next chapter. “The symbiotic relationship between rougarous and their dehumanized counterparts,” she read. “Wow. Bobby would have loved this place. I bet there’s stuff in here not even he knew.”

“It’s like everything anyone ever knew about this stuff is here under one roof.” Sam slid into the chair across from her, and Alex looked up at the sound of footsteps on metal stairs to see Dean making his way up towards the exit. “I mean, think of what we could use this for — how much good we can do.”

Alex turned her gaze upwards at the smooth stone ceilings, eyes flickering over the stone pillars that held it high above their heads, and she nodded, fingers drumming definitively on the polished table. “I think …” The young angel trailed off, not sure what it was she was trying to say. “I’m going to go unpack,” she finally said, silently rising to her feet. “I think I’m going to like it here.”
February 2nd, 2014

Lebanon, Kansas

The scuffle of tennis shoes squeaked on the polished wooden floor, almost completely muffled by the echoing thud of a bouncing basketball. Alex dropped down low onto the balls of her feet, shoulders hunched and one hand extended, palm up, ready to flick the ball away from Dean’s grasp. The hunter faked to the right, and the angel reacted immediately, ducking to after him and then immediately back to the left when Dean moved backwards and up, sending the ball curving through the air and into the basket.

“That’s not fair,” the angel protested, only half-joking. “You’re like a foot taller than me.” She hurried to retrieve the ball — no longer flat thanks to the pump she had found in the back of the Impala. “Give the little person a break, huh?”

“You’ll get a break when I get ahead,” Dean huffed as they switched places, green eyes darting across her face as Alex paced along the three-point line.

The angel shook her head in ill-amusement as she squared up with the Winchester, fingertips controlling the ball as she gauged the distance between herself and the basket. She stepped back, putting some room between her and the hunter, and then she moved. She shifted the ball over to her right hand as she slipped past Dean, returning it to her left hand in time for a well-timed layup. She heard the ball bounce around the rim before falling through the net. “That one still gets ya, huh?” she joked. “It’s so … simple.” Dean retrieved the ball with a low grumble, and the angel grinned. “If it makes you feel any better, that one fooled some of the girls on my basketball team back in middle school. And one or two when I played varsity. No one expects a lefty to go right.”

“You played in high school?”

“Yeah, for two years. Then, uh … well, then my foster parents died, and I got moved to Chicago. I was offered an opportunity to play, but my new family said I couldn’t.” Alex held out her hands, and Dean tossed the ball to her. “I wasn’t good, but I loved the sport. Still do.” She brought the ball up above her head and let it go, watching as it curved in a high arc only to bounce off of the far rim and roll over. “Defense was always my best though. I’m quick and tiny.” Dean’s phone rang, and both looked up. “I think I’m going to go shower,” she decided when the hunter moved to answer it. “Ready to call it?”

Dean grabbed his shirt off of the floor and nodded. “I guess. We can call it a draw.” He pulled on his shirt and grabbed his phone as he walked off towards the door. Alex put the ball away and followed.

They had been at the bunker for almost twenty days, but Alex hadn’t ever wanted to leave. Most of the bunker’s appliances, though old, functioned just as well as their state-of-the-art counterparts, and the most expensive thing Dean had bought was a mini-fridge that was now located in the room Sam had dubbed ‘the library.’ Alex herself had gone out and gotten herself new sheets and pillows, and she had set up her books and personal possessions on the desk and dresser in her room. Her own, personal room.

She descended the stairs and entered the library to find Sam seated at the table, his laptop in front of him. “Yo,” she called, running a hand through her sweaty hair. “Did you get the wifi up and running again?”
“Uh, yeah.” Sam looked up from whatever he was doing. “For the most part, I think. It’s still pretty spotty downstairs. Where’s Dean at?”

“He got a call from Garth, I think. Probably just a routine check in.” She glanced over her shoulder as Dean entered the room. “How’s Kevin doing?” she asked.

“You know,” the hunter shrugged. “He’s okay, I guess. In the corner, hacking out his Da Vinci code — nothing actionable yet.” He took a beer out of the mini fridge and cracked it open. “Garth says hi, by the way.” The hunter paused as he looked between Sam and Alex. “Uh … you guys haven’t heard anything from Cas, have you? He’s not answering.”

Alex shook her head, a frown pulling her face downwards. “Nothing. I’m really worried about him, guys. I mean, sure he’s been known to disappear when something’s threatening him or, uh, me, but I don’t know. Usually he tells me. He might just be trying to wait Naomi out, or … or maybe it’s something worse. I honestly don’t know.”

She saw Sam’s face twist with sympathy. “Well, if you guys haven’t heard anything …” He straightened up in his seat as Dean sat down across from him, and his voice grew more professional as he turned his attention back to his laptop. “So, uh, I have been trying to chart out the Letter’s network of hunters, their allies, uh, affiliated groups they worked with, kept files on …”

“Circa 1958?”

“Yeah, true,” his brother admitted as Alex sat down beside him. “Uh, most are dead or defunct, but others — I’m not so sure, and this one … you should definitely check out.” He slid a file over to Dean, and the young angel craned her neck to see as Dean opened up the folder marked with the signature Aquarian Star — Alex had been finding those everywhere.

“The Judah Initiative?” Dean read, skepticism of their legitimacy lining his voice.

“European team — they were active during World War II.”

“Hunters fought in the war?” Alex asked, and her eyes narrowed as she thought. “That’s weird — cool, but weird. Maybe Nazis were actually zombies,” she jested, and she was rewarded by the faintest look of humor on Dean’s face as he continued to scan the folder in front of him.

“I don’t know about that,” Sam started, “but they weren’t exactly hunters, and they didn’t exactly fight …”

“Rabbis?” Dean looked up from the file in surprise and disbelief. “Rabbis? Really?”

Sam nodded. “The Letters’ file on them is — is sketchy, but apparently, they were hardcore saboteurs. So, I ran a search on the Initiative’s entire roster, and I got a hit — one Rabbi Isaac Bass. He was seventeen years old when he joined the Initiative and eighty-five years old when he died.” Sam turned his laptop towards Dean, and Alex frowned when she only got a momentary glance at the article on the screen. “In a college town back east, he was capped.”

“‘Capped?’” Dean repeated, an eyebrow rising as he pulled the computer closer.

“Yeah. He was there doing research, and according to eyewitnesses, he spontaneously combusted.”

Alex’s wings flittered, and she tipped her head to one side. “I thought ‘capped’ always meant ‘shot,’ ” she mused, but didn’t give either brother time to argue before she rose to her feet. “But spontaneous ignition’s always at the top of my list, so I’m in. I’m gonna shower first, of course —”
“Whoa whoa,” Dean protested. “We aren’t agreed that this is a case yet.”

“Dean, a man spontaneously combusted in a college bar.”

“Yeah,” Alex agreed. “You know what that means, right? There’s no ’natural’ in ‘randomly bursting into flames.’ ” She tapped the table before she moved towards the hallway that led to her room. “Give me half an hour to shower and pack. Then we can go.”

**Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania**

A twenty hour drive left room for five hours of sleep, and they still arrived in Wilkes-Barre just before sundown. Dean dropped Sam off at the campus library, and once they had confirmed their plans, Alex took off into the sky towards the local police station. She landed in a foot of snow, cursing loudly as she sunk down to her shins. “Dammit!” she muttered as she stumbled out onto the sidewalk and up the icy stairs. She shook out her wings once she was inside, dislodging the few unfortunate flakes that had stuck to her back.

“Ma’am? Can I help you?” A voice drew the young angel’s attention across the room, and she folded her wings in as she reached into her pocket. “Special Agent Amelia Rowe,” she announced. “I got a call about a death of Rabbi Isaac Bass, and I’d like to see both the file and the remains if possible, Ms …”

“Officer Julia Emerson,” the woman introduced. “That … that case was closed last week, so the remains were released for burial, but I can get you a copy of the closed case file if you want. It should include autopsy photos.”

“That’ll be fine, thank you.” Alex tapped the counter with her ID as the woman walked away before she tucked it back into her pocket. “Two weeks and you’ve already closed a freaking spontaneous combustion case?” she muttered. “Hard-working nerds.”

“Here you are.” The woman returned a minute later with a small folder in her hands. “This is everything we have on the Bass death.”

“This is it?” Alex weighed the file in her hands, unable to help the disapproving frown that crossed her face. “I’ve seen suicide folders bigger than this.”

The officer faltered, unsure what to say, but after a second of two she offered up a small, apologetic smile. “Well, there is quite a bit of psychology involved in suicide cases, right? There’s no psychology in …” She trailed off at the slow, disappointed shake of Alex’s head, and she explained, “I have my minor in criminal psychology.”

“Of course you do.” Alex tucked the folder beneath her arm. “We’ll be in touch if there’s any questions,” she promised, and she turned away and walked out of the building with a muttered, “If there’s any information to ask questions about.”

She landed across the street from the campus pub, and she slid the folder into the backseat of the Impala before she entered the bar. Upon entering, it only took her a moment to locate Dean at a table with two college-aged girls. “Conspiracy stuff,” one was saying. “He was obsessed with Nazis.”

“But he said they were ‘special Nazis,’” the second added with wide eyes, and she leaned in close with a whisper. “You know, necromancers.”

“Necromancers.” Alex circled around to stand beside Dean. “Amelia Rowe. I work here with Agent
Bolan,” she introduced, nudging Dean in the shoulder as she fished her badge out to put the two women at ease. “That’s interesting.”

“Yeah.” The second brunette nodded enthusiastically. “Like from that ‘world of whatever-craft’ that my little brother is always playing.”

“Right …” Alex looked up at Dean; he was staring over her head, and she elbowed him in the ribs to draw his attention back to them. “Nazi necromancers.”

“It’s sad, isn’t it — that old people can go so crazy.”

“I know. It is sad,” the first agreed with a sympathetic look at her friend.

Dean hummed in distant agreement, and Alex looked over to see an awkward, shy man sitting at the bar, hand raised in greeting towards the Winchester. When she caught his eye, he turned down to his drink, seemingly embarrassed by her attention. “I’m sorry,” Dean apologized, turning back to the girls. “You, uh, you both saw the accident?”

Both immediately nodded. “I still hear his screaming,” the first admitted.

“It was like the fire was, alive, like — like it was attacking him,” the second added.

“It was like watching the most awful movie of the most terrifying thing you could possibly see.”

“It was like that.”

Alex kicked Dean under the table, jerking his attention once again away from the strange man at the bar. “Interesting,” she began. “Well, thank you, ladies, for your time. If you remember anything else, don’t hesitate to call.” They left the two women at their table, and Alex glanced up at Dean. “Dude, what the hell? Why do you keep staring at that weird dude over there? This is a bad time to be looking for a lay —”

“What? N-No.” Dean pulled himself away from her and moved towards the guy. “Special Agent Bolan,” he announced, holding up his FBI badge as Alex slowly trailed after him.

The man watched as Dean put his badge onto the table, and he let out an awkward laugh. “Oh, really? Wow. I thought you were like a headhunter or something. Uh … who’s she?”

“Special Agent Rowe. His partner, strictly professional,” Alex said, and she raised her eyebrows innocently when Dean gave her a strange look.

The Winchester shook her comment off. “This is the second, maybe the third time I’m seeing you today?” he demanded. “Why you following me, Gingerbread?”

The young man blinked in confusion. “Oh, so we, um … we didn’t have a think back there, huh?”

“Special Agent Rowe. His partner, strictly professional,” Alex said, and she raised her eyebrows innocently when Dean gave her a strange look.

The Winchester shook her comment off. “This is the second, maybe the third time I’m seeing you today?” he demanded. “Why you following me, Gingerbread?”

The young man blinked in confusion. “Oh, so we, um … we didn’t have a think back there, huh?”

“Back where?” The set, professional line of Dean’s jaw faltered as he echoed the man’s puzzlement. “W-What, now?”

“I’m sorry, man. I—I thought — I thought we had a think back there at the quad. You know — a little ‘eye magic’ moment,” the guy stuttered as Dean picked back up his badge and put it away. “A-And I saw you here, and I figured I’d wait until you were done with your meeting and then maybe we might, uh …”

“Yeah.” Dean cut him off, making it clear he knew what the stranger was getting at. “Uh, okay, but
“Is that supposed to make you less interesting?” There must have been something in Dean’s face that
Alex couldn’t see, because the man quickly added, “No. I—I’m sorry, man. I hope — I hope I didn’t
freak you out or anything.”

“No,” Dean repeated, a forced air of breeziness as he casually waved the apology off. “No. I—I’m
not freaked out. It’s just a, you know …. a federal thing.” He heard Alex, who had been standing
patiently behind him, snort in laughter, but before he could stutter out anything else, his phone rang,
and he jumped to grab it. “Okay … citizen. As … you were.”

He turned away and walked towards Alex, only glancing back when the stranger called, “You have
a good night.”

“You — You …” Dean bumped into a table, and glasses clinked precariously as they clunked
together. “… have a — okay.” Dean hurried towards the pub doors, and Alex followed close at his
heels.

“Slow down there, Romeo,” she called after him, wings flicking humorously in the darkening air.

“Shut up.”

Alex didn’t, skipping alongside the hunter as the grin across her face only grew at her friend’s
embarrassment. “ ‘This is a federal investigation?’ What happened to ‘I don’t swing that way?’”

“I—I didn’t want to embarrass him — shut up.” Dean answered his phone with a dark scowl.
“What?” he snapped at the person on the other end.

“Uh … hey,” Sam greeted, and Alex moved closer to Dean to hear the whole conversation. “So, I,
uh, looked into the rabbi’s research. It doesn’t make a lot of sense. It’s, um, bird watching.”

“Huh,” Dean grunted. “Well, uh, the two very hot — he glanced down at Alex as he emphasized
his words — “co-captains of the women’s volleyball team agree that the rabbi’s death was very
unnatural. I think we still got a case.”

“That would explain why I have something stuck to my shoe.”

Dean stopped on the other side of the street. “You being followed?” he asked, voice lowering into a
whisper.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“That’s weird. I thought I was being followed earlier. Turned out to be a gay thing,” Dean added,
and he cast a warning glare over at Alex when the angel grinned. “Never mind. Uh, you need a
hand? Alex can be there in a second if you do.”

“Yeah, but no. I don’t want to scare this guy off. Got someplace quiet?”

Dean nodded. “Visitor’s parking — the boonies. I’ll park in the back. Fifteen minutes.” He hung up
and circled around to the Impala’s front door. “Sam’s being tailed,” he relayed, even though Alex
already knew. “We’re gonna cut him off. Come on.”

Alex slid into the front seat beside him and reached into the back to retrieve the Bass folder. “The
case was already closed,” she began as Dean started the car. “Apparently randomly exploding into
flames doesn’t warrant more than a ten day investigation — oh, and, uh, the chick at the front desk?
Smart-ass as fuck. Do not approach.”

“Anything in the folder?”

“There barely is a folder,” Alex grumbled as Dean drove the Impala down the street. “Uh, Rabbi Isaac Bass, born in England, 1936, died January 14, 2014. Cause of death: immolation. Cause of fire unknown, no accelerant found. Only known living relative is his grandson Aaron Bass who lives in town.” Alex flipped through the photos of the charred remains and shrugged. “That’s basically all there is.”

“Huh.” Dean parked the car in the visitor’s lot and removed the keys from the ignition. “Can I see?” he asked, holding out his hand.

“Course.” Alex offered up the folder and got out to the car. “I’ll sweep the perimeter while we wait, make sure it’s secure.”

“Hold up.” Dean held out the Impala’s keys, and Alex took them with a small frown of confusion. “Find Sam, give them to him,” he explained. “He’ll know what to do. Give me two minutes and I’ll be out of here.”

“Yeah. Sure thing.” Alex shoved the keys into her back pocket, and when Dean nodded, she slipped away to the edge of the pavement.

She circled the entire parking lot, eyes peeled and grace poised as she searched for Sam. She saw the tall hunter cut across the lawn just ahead of her, and the angel hurried forward to greet him. “Hey,” she began, eyes flickering past him to see if she could spot his stalker, but even though nothing showed, she stayed in character. She pulled out the keys as she continued, “Here. Dean’s just over at the pub, so we can swing by and pick him up there.”

“Sounds good.” Sam took the keys from her, and Alex led the way over to the now-empty car. She flicked her grace out behind her, searching for whatever was tailing them, but nothing immediately jumped out. She kept it trailing behind her as Sam stopped beside the driver’s side door, and the keys jingled and clinked as he purposefully dropped them onto the ground. Footsteps sounded in the bushes them as the hunter knelt, and that sound was all the angel needed to pinpoint their assailant.

Her grace thrummed with pins and needles, and Alex clenched her fists as she forced herself not to spin around and meet this creature face to face. It was humanoid — larger than life in all respects, but she couldn’t understand how it was alive. There was no beating heart, no pumping blood. Just the prickling of her grace that always occurred whenever she touched — “Iron?”

“Hey, pal.” Dean’s voice sounded from the bushes as he confronted the beast, and Alex spun around as the hunter let out a startled yell. She recoiled as he crashed into the side of the Impala, the side window shattering from the impact with his back. 

“Dean?” Sam jumped to his feet, and Alex let her weapon drop into her hand, falling into a defensive stance as the creature rose to his feet.

He was huge — seven feet tall at the least. Muscles strained beneath his clothing, and his dim eyes revealed to the angel the lack of his soul. He wasn’t alive, but he moved with an intent Alex hadn’t seen in any corpse. Sam ran back to the Impala’s trunk, and Alex hurried after him, positioning herself between the hunter and the … whatever it was. The iron man. He definitely had some iron in him, somehow. Her grace told her that much. Her wings flared out, stretching high into the air as she sought to appear larger in hopes of intimidating what stood before her.
A hand came out of nowhere, batting the angel aside as if she were nothing more than a ragdoll, and Alex grunted as she fell to the pavement, her weapon clattering across the ground. Clearly intimidation doesn’t work on dead things. She rolled to her feet, a low growl resonating in her chest as she watched Sam swing the machete down defensively towards the creature. It was a solid hit, the metal blade embedding itself in the large man’s arm, but when Sam yanked the blade free, nothing happened. No blood, no pain.

The creature reached out and took Sam’s throat, and Alex’s wings carried her forward. She landed two solid punches to the creature’s chest, her grace fueling her strength, and the man stumbled back. His eyes, however, remained dim, not even the faintest hint of shock registering across his blank face. Alex tightened her fists as the man approached again, but before either could throw the first punch, a voice brought both of them to a halt.

“Stop.”

Alex spun around, jaw dropping in surprise. “W-What? You …”

“Ah! My spleen.” Dean rolled onto his side with a hiss of pain, and Alex tore her eyes away from the man in front of them, the very same young man who had spoken to Dean at the bar. The very same young man who was supposed to be gay — although at the moment Alex was starting to doubt even that. Another groan of pain, however, had the thoughts fleeing from her mind, and she moved to kneel beside Dean.

“What … the hell … is that?” Sam gasped out, one hand protectively clutching his neck.

The young man held his head high as he answered Sam’s question. “He’s a golem,” he explained curtly. “He’s my golem.”

“Course he is,” Alex muttered as Dean let out another grimace and rolled onto his back. “Shut up, you baby,” she snapped as she reached out and pressed a hand into his abdomen. Her touch was a little harsh, judging by the way Dean curled at the pressure, but she felt him relax as her grace trickled inwards, soothing any frayed or agitated nerves. The angel pulled away and rose to her feet, head held high and shoulders rolled back as she moved forward. “Who the hell are you, and what the hell do you want?” she demanded, grey eyes flashing in the harsh light of the street lamp.

To her surprise, the man only shook his head. “It’s not safe to talk,” he informed her. “The three of you are here about my grandfather Isaac Bass though, correct?” When Alex nodded, he reached into his pocket “Here. Meet us at my house in ten minutes. Then we can talk.” He held out a crumpled post-it note, and when the angel took it, he motioned to the golem, who was standing patiently by the Impala. “Come on.”

“Wait wait wait!” Alex started, but neither turned as they walked away. “Great. Great!” She bent over to retrieve her angel blade before she turned back to the two Winchesters. Sam was leaning up against the car, and Dean had managed to make it to his knees, but he still looked out of breath and in some pain. “What the hell just happened?”

“I-I think … we got our asses kicked,” Sam wheezed out, and he held out a hand when Alex approached. “I’m fine,” he promised. “Don’t … I don’t need help.”

“I think … we got our asses kicked,” Sam wheezed out, and he held out a hand when Alex approached. “I’m fine,” he promised. “Don’t … I don’t need help.”

“Fine.” Alex unfolded the crumpled note. “Well? I guess we just met Bass’ grandson … and a fucking golem, too. That does explain why it wasn’t alive,” the angel mused as she circled around to the driver’s side door, and when neither Winchester spoke she continued on in her ramblings. “And why it felt like iron — golems are crafted from clay, right? Red clay, in this case — lots of iron. I think that’s right. That would explain it.” She looked over at the two Winchesters, surprised that
neither of them had moved. “Well?” she snapped. “You guys coming or not? I’m driving,” she added when Dean started limping towards her, and she rolled his eyes when his mouth fell open in protest.

“Dude, you can’t even stand.” Sam put a hand on his brother’s shoulder, his own voice still slightly hoarse from the golem’s attack. “Go — go lay down in the back or something.”

Dean glared at the both of them, but after a second or two he obliged, and Alex shook her head as she barely made out his muttered words. “Fucking golems.”

It didn’t take the young angel long to find the address that had been scrawled onto the crumpled paper, although, granted, the golem standing in the front yard certainly helped her cause some. Alex pulled the Impala up alongside the curb, and she tossed the keys to Dean as they all got out. “You’re Aaron Bass, right?” she asked as the walked up to the man and his golem. “That’s what the police report said.”

The man nodded as he led the way up the front steps and up to the front door. The golem pushed past him, leaving Aaron to stumble backwards, and Alex cocked an eyebrow at the creature’s strange actions. “The rabbi who was murdered, Isaac Bass,” Aaron began as he followed the golem through, “he was my grandfather. That’s why we’re here. When you guys started to follow up on his case, we started following you.”

Alex watched as the golem started pacing, his heavy footsteps echoing through the small, dim house. She closed the door behind her and joined the men in the living room as Dean asked, “So, wait. What you’re saying is that you and me — we, uh, didn’t have a moment?”

“No, man.” Aaron’s eyebrows turned upwards, slightly smug at his ability to have hidden his motives so well, and his eyes flickered over to Alex. “I was tailing you.”

Dean looked over at his brother. “Told you I was being followed. He was my gay thing.” He turned back to Aaron with an approving nod, ignoring Sam’s surprised double-take. “It was really good,” he admitted quickly with a slight ramble. “You had me there. It was really smooth.”

“Yeah, well, smooth’s just about all I’ve got.” Aaron looked over his shoulder as the golem passed with a dark look, and his shoulders fell. “What?” he snapped. The golem only let out a low, wordless grunt with a shake of his head, and it walked away, leaving Aaron to call after it, “Yeah, that’s right. Keep walking … you Chia Pet.”

“So that’s a golem?”

“Yes.” The rabbi’s grandson nodded in agreement with Sam’s question as he turned back to the hunters and shrugged off his dark coat. “Shaped from clay and brought to life by rabbis to protect the Jewish people in times of — I don’t know — general crappiness.” He laid his jacket over the back of his chair with a disinterested shrug.

“Huh. And I can see the two of you are getting along swimmingly,” Alex half-joked as she listened to the golem moved unseen through the rest of the house. The wooden floors clunked and creaked under each step, fading as he paced further away before growing louder as he returned towards them.

“Hardly,” came the begrudging response. “My grandfather left him to me. I’m the last surviving descendant of this … thing, this … initiative.”

“The Judah Initiative?” Sam guessed, and Alex’s wings flicked uncomfortably as the golem circled
around to stand behind them, a dark frown set into his heavy face as he turned to look out the large front window.

Aaron started to agree with Sam, but the golem was louder. “Who?” he growled, his voice sounding like a clap of thunder, and Alex almost jumped out of her skin. She spun around to stare up at the golem, and he boomed out, “Who are they to know about the men of Judah?”

“It’s okay.” Dean held out his hands non-threateningly, and he took a step away from the massive creature so he look it in the eyes as his voice took on the colorful cadence one would expect when talking to a two year old. “We are the good guys.”

“W-We’re hunters,” Sam added. “Uh — Sam and Dean Winchester. This is Alex. We know about the Judah Initiative because our grandfather was Men of Letters.” He motioned to himself and his brother, and Alex’s wings twitched as the golem’s skeptical eye turned over them, hesitating on the angel for longer than she would have liked.

“Yes,” the creature finally admitted. “The rabbis knew the Men of Letters.” He turned back to gaze out the large window with another, prolonged grunting noise, and Alex swiped a hand through her blonde hair with a shake of her head. She didn’t think she was a fan of the golem.

By the look in Dean’s eyes as he turned back to Aaron, it was clear he was feeling the same. “Hey, uh,” he asked, “any chance you’ve got something to drink?”

“Uh, yeah. Is beer fine?” When both Dean nodded, Aaron stepped back. “I’ll go get some.” He disappeared around the corner, leaving the three hunters alone with the silent golem. Alex shifted uncomfortably, and she focused on Aaron’s footsteps as he moved to and from the fridge before returning with four cans. He handed two to the Winchesters, who mumbled out their thanks. Dean immediately cracked open his drink and took a long swig as Aaron motioned to the couch. “Take a seat,” he offered, and he handed the last drink to Alex before he took his own seat in the armchair across from them. Sam sat down in a wooden chair, and the young angel joined Dean on the couch as Aaron began, “So — your grandfather was into all this supernatural stuff, too?”

Dean nodded. “Yeah. Grandfather, mom, dad, truckload of cousins — the whole family was lousy for it, but we … we never had a golem,” he finished with a wary look up at the clay man as it retraced its circuit around the room.

Alex followed his gaze to back to the watchful creature, and she added, “No one in my family hunted — I think. Pretty sure. I … I just kind of fell into the life.” She cracked open her can with her fingernails and tossed the metal tab onto the coffee table. “It was a hell of a shock, realizing how many … stories were actually real.”

“My grandfather’s adventures, the Initiative, the golem, the war — they were the stories that he told me when I was a kid.” Aaron shifted in barely perceptible discomfort as his eyes flickered over the rabbis’ clay creation. “I thought it was make-believe. So did my parents — you know, fantasies to help him cope with the horrible stuff he’d seen, but every once and awhile, crazy old Grandpa Bass would come back from one of his trips, hand me a twenty dollar savings bond, and say, ‘one day, you’ll inherit the mantle.’” His voice dropped low as he mimicked his grandfather’s voice, and his gaze stayed focused on the floor as he continued. “Sure enough, a few days after he died, this big box shows up at my apartment. He always said I’d know what to do, which was crap because when I opened the box, this big, naked potato-faced lunatic wakes up and goes crazy!”

“I didn’t … go crazy,” the golem corrected, his deep voice rumbling through the small room.

“You trashed my entertainment center!” Aaron retorted angrily. “And my water bed.”
The golem turned away from the window, features dark as he faced the hunters. “This boy knows nothing, observes none of the mitzvahs, labors on the Sabbath, dines on swine,” he growled, and Alex’s wings flicked at the anger in his eyes, her muscles tensing in case things were to suddenly go south.

Aaron didn’t share in her fears. “Everybody loves bacon!” he retorted.

“He’s no rabbi!” the golem boomed. “Laqauch achrayut!”

Aaron’s eyes rolled into the back of his head, and he held up a hand to silence the giant clay guardian. “Oh, don’t start with that stuff again,” he snapped. The golem turned to face him as it repeated its Hebrewic phrase, and the rabbi’s grandson voice rose in anger. “Enough!” he yelled, and he immediately lowered his voice, even though it lost none of its urgent plea. “Please! Quiet time!”

The golem walked away, its heavy footsteps falling ominously as Sam turned to look at Alex. “What was that?” he whispered. “What did it say?”

“Hebrew,” Alex explained, fingers drumming on the aluminum can in her hands. “It means, uh, ‘take responsibility’ or ‘take charge.’ Any idea what he taking about?” she asked Aaron, but the man just shook his head.

“No idea,” he admitted. “You — you speak Hebrew?” When Alex only shrugged cryptically, his shoulders fell. “Look, guys,” he began, “I grew up in Short Hills. I cheated my way through Hebrew school. I — I never really listened to my grandfather, to what he was saying.”

“So, wait.” Dean leaned forward, confusion flitting across his face. “He just sends you this — this golem and expects you to work it out?”

“He didn’t get much chance to prepare me, I guess. My parents — they did everything they could to prevent him from screwing me up with all his crazy talk. See, after the war, my grandfather spent the rest of his life trying to track down something he called the Thule Society.”

“The Thule Society,” Sam repeated with a nod of understanding. “Yeah. They were Nazis.”

“Nazi necromancers,” Dean added with a small rise and fall of his eyebrows. The rabbi’s grandson blinked rapidly. “N-Necro-who?”

“Uh, necromancers,” Sam expounded, and Alex grunted in agreement. “Uh, witches, sorcerers, dark magic, mostly with dead people.”

“Okay.” Aaron’s voice sounded just as unsure as his posture suggested. “All I know about the Thule Societies that they were this twisted, secret fraternity, hell-bent on world domination, that sponsored the early days of the Nazi party. My grandfather said the Judah Initiative was started to fight them.”

"And the Thule murdered your grandfather, boy,” the golem thundered, and Alex, having been too focused on the conversation at hand, startled slightly at his sudden presence behind her. “Find them so I can do my work!” His large hand came down on one of the small wooden tables, and it shattered under his strength, sending its contents crashing to the ground.

Aaron jumped to his feet, eyes wide and hands outstretched angrily. “Hey!” he yelled. “Hey! We’re renting here! Renting!” The golem only glowered and stalked back into the kitchen, and Aaron slouched back into his chair with a defeated shake of his head. “Look,” he reluctantly began, “I think my golem’s right. My grandfather — he left me this message on my machine the day he died, and he said that he had found something that the Thules were willing to kill for. He said he was hiding it
here in plain sight. He left me this weird — I don’t know — equation.” He shifted in his seat as he
dug a crumpled piece of paper out of his pocket and unfolded it. “It’s not a phone number or address
or coordinates — QL673W38?”

He held the paper out to Dean, who took it so both he and Alex could study the strange code. “Is it a
combination?” the eldest Winchester guess fruitlessly before he handed it to Sam.

“Oh. It’s a call number.” Sam looked up at the pieces clicked together. “Library of Congress — their
filing system. They use it in college libraries. Uh, QL673 .. that’s sciences. Uh … birds, I’m
guessing.” The hunter set his beer down onto the coffee table and jumped to his feet. “Let’s go.”

“You know the weirdest things,” Alex muttered as she followed him towards the front door, Dean
and Aaron at her heels. “Are we all going to take the same car?” she quickly added when the golem
followed behind them like a stampede. “Because there is no way we’re all fitting if the Hulk here
wants to tag along.”

She heard the golem grunt disapprovingly at her witty nickname, but Aaron shook his head. “We’ll
drive separately,” he agreed. “We can meet you there.”

“Sounds good. Oh, and, uh,” Alex hesitated as both brothers moved towards the Impala, turning to
the rabbi’s grandson as her voice dropped low in warning. “Be careful. If this is really as important to
the Thules as your grandfather suggested, they won’t be giving up easily. So keep your head up.” A
call from Dean had her hurrying away without another word, leaving the grandson and his golem on
their own.

Alex followed the two Winchesters up to the library door, her grace twitching warily as the golem
and his master trailed behind. Dean crouched in front of the large, glass door, and quickly set to work
on picking the lock while Alex stood guard, eyes and ears on the lookout for anything out of the
ordinary. She heard the pins slide and click into place, but they were quickly drowned out by
Aaron’s voice. “What, do you three just break in wherever you go?”

“Yeah, well, our dad wanted us to have a solid career to fall back on, just in case this hunter thing
didn’t pan out,” Dean quipped, and Alex let out a small laugh at his wit. The door swung open, and
all five entered. Alex was last, and she closed the door behind her.

“Okay,” Sam began, gaze trained on the large sign beside the library stairs, “so if I’m right, then I
think your grandfather switched out manuscript FD113 out of the archives. I’ll be right back.” He
hurried up the white, polished stairs, and Alex glanced over at Dean. When the hunter nodded, she
followed after Sam.

He was already out of sight, and the angel flicked her grace out only far enough to confirm his
identity before she started circling the library, setting up a perimeter around the Winchester. She kept
half of her attention on his even footsteps as she silently moved forward, eyes and grace carefully
checking each rows of shelves for the unnatural.

Sam’s footsteps stopped, and Alex heard pages rustling followed by the soft whistle of a projectile
and a grunt. She heard Sam stagger, and a low, soft voice rumbled through the silent room. “I owe
you thanks. The rabbi took me this far, but you … you took me all the way. Now, give me the ledger —”

Alex’s wings carried her up and over the shelves, and each dip of her wings had a shiver running
through her spine as her appendages passed through the metal. She landed at Sam’s side, and she
blinked in surprise at the sharply-dressed blond in front of them. “Nazi necromancer?” she guessed when the man’s blue eyes flashed at her presence. “You look … less dead than I expected.” Sam stumbled beside her, but the angel didn’t dare take her eyes off of the Nazi. “Sam,” she instructed. “Run.” She could feel a dark, evil sickness swimming through her veins, and she repeated herself, voice growing louder with urgency. “Run!”

Sam staggered away, the ledger held tightly in his hands, and Alex shifted so the man couldn’t run after him. He tipped his head, displeasure darkening his eyes to see his prize getting away. “What are you?” he demanded. “Clearly you’re not human; what kind of creature could possibly be working with the Men of Letters?”

Alex let her wings flare up. “I’m an angel. Now what the hell did you do to Sam?” She let her weapon slide down into her hands when the necromancer stepped closer, and her eyes narrowed at the small blow dart in his right hand. “What’s that? The hell is that?” Footsteps thudded up the stone stairs, and both raised her head. “Hear that?” the angel taunted. “That’s the rabbi’s golem. Now are you going to tell me what you did to my friend, or are we gonna have to beat it out of you?”

The Thule just laughed, and Alex lost her patience. Her angel blade disappeared back into her sleeve, and her fist went out, connecting with the man’s jaw. It cracked under the impact, and his hands went up defensively. Something pricked into Alex’s skin, followed by a sharp, angry pain as evil spilled into her, and the angel’s grace fought back. She yanked the dart out of her wrist and threw it aside as she lashed out again. A sharp jab of the heel of her right palm into his diaphragm sent him backwards, followed by a hook to the jaw, and she dropped her blade into her hand as she grasped the collar of his shirt.

The Nazi held her gaze, jaw set tightly as he spat out, “Long live the Thule.”

He died without another sound, and Alex let his body fall to the ground. “Sorry you missed the show, Clayface.” The angel stepped away as the golem approached, and she didn't look back in apprehension of the mirthless frown on his face. “Do you know what happened to Sam? How’s he doing?”

“He’ll be fine now that this nachash is dead.” The golem looked down at the body, and Alex saw how his fists clenched at his side.

The angel stepped away, lips pulled downwards into a frown. “Bring the body downstairs,” she told him. “We’ll burn and bury him outside of town.” Her wings carried her down the stairs, and she paused to see Sam slumped on the stairs. “You okay?” The angel knelt down beside him, and she reached out to touch the small puncture hole in his neck. Her grace snuck inwards and patched it up, and she turned her head to look at Dean and Aaron. “The big guy’s bringing the Nazi down,” she explained as she pulled herself to her feet. A loud crunch from the floor above had her looking up with a small wince, imagination whirling as she considered what could have made that noise. “Um, yeah. And if there’s a body left to bury, we should get that done before the sun comes up.”

“There’s a wooded area just north of the campus,” Sam said from the stairs, his breath slightly ragged, and Alex turned to look back at him, concern flitting across her face. The Winchester noticed and held up a hand, promising that he was okay. “We can —” He cut off when the golem appeared at the top of the stairs, the Thule’s dead and mangeld body being dragged behind by his ankle.

Alex looked over at Dean with a grimace. “I think I’m gonna fly out of here and start on that grave,” she decided. “You … take care of this and meet me there, okay?” She turned on her heels and hurried out of the library with an unnerved flick of her wings. That golem had … problems.

She dug a shovel out of the Impala’s trunk, and then her wings carried her up into the air. Her innate
compass guided her north, and she easily spotted the wooded area, complete with a lonely, dirt road that ran through the eastern edge. The angel touched down on the grassy side, and, after sending a quick text to Dean so they could easily find her location, she trekked a few meters until she reached the tree line.

Her shovel sunk into the frozen dirt, and the angel turned her mind to the clay monster as her grace sunk down into the earth in an attempt to thaw the ground. She had done some reading about golems back when she had spent time with Bobby in between working with the Winchesters, and if she remembered correctly, golems were warriors, created during times of hardship and violence.

She hit a rock, and the angel dug it out with a loud, drawn out growl. Nothing spelled out fun like digging graves in the winter, but somehow it was better than being around that golem. If Aaron didn’t learn how to take control of it, then they would have to take care of it. Which meant … how could one kill a golem anyways? Sam had taken a fucking machete to its arm and it hadn’t even flinched. It didn’t even bleed. How could anyone kill anything that doesn’t bleed?

The crunching of rocks under tires had the angel looking up from her musings, and she clambered out of the shallow three foot grave she had dug to see the Impala and Aaron’s small pickup pull to a stop. “Hey,” she called as the Winchesters removed the body from the trunk. “I’m thinking this is deep enough for our purposes.” She saw how the golem got out of the car, but he stayed by Aaron, speaking in a low, quiet voice.

“This feels like a bag of Legos,” Dean muttered as he and his brother tossed the sheet-wrapped body into the pit, and Alex watched in disgust as the corpse landed, its joints sticking out at unnatural angles. “The golem destroyed this guy.”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed, and he unscrewed the lid to the accelerant as he added, “So, uh … Thule society necromancers aside, what’s our contingency plan on that?” He glanced over towards the golem, and Alex let out a low hum of distrust.

“I killed this necromancer, guys,” Alex agreed as Sam finished preparing the body. “I stabbed him once. All this … this damage was done after this guy was dead. I don’t like the idea of something capable of the violence walking around without a leash.”

Sam nodded in agreement. “I mean, I’d like to think knew how to stop him if we had to. Unless you think Aaron can get a handle on him.”

Dean pulled his matchbox out of his pocket. “I don’t know,” he admitted, and in one fluid motion he lit the matches and tossed them into the grave. Flames sprung to life, enveloping the sheet, and Dean slid his hands into his pockets.

Alex glanced over at the pickup truck to see Aaron watching them, eyes wide and jaw slack, and Alex turned back to the brothers with a half-amused huff. “He probably thinks that we’re psychopaths,” she joked, and she smiled when Sam reached out, hands extended towards the jumping flames. “And that’s probably not helping,” she added teasingly.

“It’s cold,” the Winchester defended, fingers wiggling slightly. “What am I supposed to do? Freeze?”

Alex looked up as the front door to Aaron’s house swung open, her wings stretching out defensively; they quickly fell back to her side when Dean stepped through, four cups of coffee in a cardboard container. “Hey,” she called, and her voice had the Winchester sitting at the kitchen table next to her looking up. His fingers stopped clacking on the keyboard when Dean echoed back her greeting and
made his way over to them.

“What’d you find out?” he asked his brother, gaze going between the laptop and the ledger that lay in front of Aaron. The rabbi’s grandson had his head in his hands as he stared down at the pages, every word scrawled in almost unreadable German.

“I think it’s a log-book from a Nazi compound in Belarus.” Sam explained while Dean set the drinks down onto the wooden table. “It was run by the Thule.”

“This is the red ledger,” Aaron added when Dean sat down across from Alex, and the young angel took a sniff of her drink to make sure it was what she had ordered before she took a sip. “It was lost in the fire that destroyed the compound, but my grandfather was convinced it had been found after the war.”

“It lists the camp’s populace as well as the horrible experiments that were performed on them,” Alex explained; the ledger had been easy to read with her celestial abilities. Her feathers ruffled out slightly in displeasure as the golem entered the kitchen, but the rest of the humans seemed to ignore him. “There was quite a bit of detail as well. The experiments weren’t just mad scientist shit — it involved black magic.”

“More horrible than words,” the golem rumbled, and all four looked up.

“You were there, weren’t you?” Sam realized. “In the camp.”

The golem nodded its large, broad head. “I was made in the ghetto of Vitsyebsk to tear that hell down,” he explained darkly. “I broke its walls, its men. The commandant burned the place to ash around me.”

Sam hesitated, and Alex took a sip of her hot coffee as he asked slowly, “Okay, um, w-what does it mean when — when you tell Aaron to take charge?”

“The boy would know … if he could consult the pages.” The golem’s words were accompanied by a dark glare in the direction of Aaron Bass, and the man looked away.

“Pages?” Dean looked between the two in confusion. “W-What pages?”

The golem’s glare only intensified, and Aaron’s discomfort grew. “When I was — when I was bar mitzvahed, my — my grandfather gave me a little old book,” he began. “It was in Hebrew. It was like an owner’s manual for a golem.”

“Okay, great,” Dean agreed, leaning back in his chair. “Get that, then.”

I — I can’t, exactly.” Aaron fidgeted in his chair, and Alex glanced up at the angry golem. “When I went to high school, I sort of … drifted. I started getting off the academic track, and, uh, I kind of, um … I kind of smoked it.”

Alex dropped her head into her hands with a low groan, and the golem boomed, “The boy smoked the pages.”

“They were these thin, vellum-y pages. I mean, it was perfect for rolling.” The rabbi’s grandson tried to defend himself before the Winchesters, and Alex let her chair slide backwards as she rested her forehead on the table. Aaron continued his insistent defense. “Look, they were driving instructions for a clay man, okay? It was nonsense! Right?” He looked over at the golem, faltering slightly. “I mean … I … okay. Alright. Look, I’m sorry, right?” he snapped at the creature. “Why can’t you just tell me what I don’t know!”
Alex jumped with a small, surprised squeak as the golem slammed his palms down onto the table next to her. “It’s not my place to guide the rabbi, teach the teacher!” he yelled in anger. “It’s not my place! Laqchauch achrayut!” He stalked out of the room, and Alex lifted her head and let it fall back onto the table.

Sam’s hand came to rest on her back, and Dean joked, “That’s not super comforting, got to say.” Alex heard his chair slide back as Dean rose to his feet, and she huffed in complete agreement. He had smoked the pages — the one thing that could tell him how to control this beast. Wonderful.

Sam’s hand drew away as he began to speak. “So, as far as I can tell, these experiments — the Thules were murdering Jews, gypsies, just about anybody and everybody then trying to magically reanimate them. They were trying to figure out a way to bring their own dead back to life … which I’m guessing they figured out because this.” He pulled the ledger close to him and spun it around, and Alex leaned up against his shoulder to watch as he flipped the page. “The last page is a roster of every dead Thule member who was reanimated.”

“This is why they killed my grandfather?”

“Anything in there on how to kill it?” Dean added from near the sink, and Alex glanced over her shoulder to find him nibbling on the cold pizza they had picked up last night after burning the Thule’s body.

Sam nodded. “Apparently, they experimented with that, too. Um, headshot. But if you don’t burn the body within twelve hours, it reanimates again.”

“Nazi bastards.” Dean shoved the last of the pizza crust into his mouth before he wiped the crumbs off his hands. “Alright. I’ll call Garth — maybe one of his contacts will know something.” He thumped a hand on Alex’s shoulder. “Do the same.”

“Sure thing.” Alex rose to her feet and straightened her shirt. “I’ve got a few trees I can shake. Call if you guys need anything.” When neither Winchester seemed to protest, she took off into the sky.

She ducked and twirled through the thick clouds as she moved through the country, her grace searching the land below until she found what she was looking for. She dropped down and landed among the large, cypress trees beside a large, greenish lake. A Florida swamp.

A group of men stood in front of her, their heads bowed in deep conversation. Only one looked up when she landed, and white and maroon wings flicked both in silent acknowledgement and confusion. Alex waved him over with a twitch of her own black and gold feathers, and the angel nodded. He excused himself from his group, much to their confusion, and joined her by the water.

“Fancy seeing you here,” Galavant quipped, wings rising in greeting as he approached.

Alex let hers fall out in return before she folded them back at her side. “Yeah, it’s not a coincidence. What’s this? I mean, I guess it’s role playing, but —”

“Dystopia Rising,” the angel explained, his clipped voice making his accent even more pronounced. “It’s a post-apocalyptic world focused upon the changing human condition. Quite fascinating, I think.” His hand moved to rest at the machete that hung at his side, and Alex only shook her head with a gentle roll of her eyes. “But I can tell that’s not why you’re here,” Galavant finished. “So then, why?”

“Because you were a watcher.” Alex glanced over to where the group of LARPers were still talking, and she shoved her hands into her jean pockets. “Listen. I need to know what you know about the Thule Society. They were a German group active during World War II, and they dabbled in the
black arts — necromancy, to be more specific. Ever heard of them?"

She watched as Galavant’s eyes narrowed in thought, and after a second or two he nodded. “The Thule Society,” he repeated. “It does ring a bell, yes. Nazi society heavily influenced by the teachings of de Plancy and Nietzsche that supported and flourished under Hitler’s rule. Have you ever heard of the Judah Initiative?” he inquired. “They were —”

“A Jewish society that fought the Thules? Yeah. We’re actually working with one of the descendants … and his golem. Speaking of,” the angel added, wings flicking casually, “You wouldn’t know how to drive one of those, huh? This guy may or may not have … rolled up and smoked the manual.” She frowned when a wide grin spread across the other angel’s face, and she did her best to keep her face straight. “Gal, it really isn’t that funny. I’ve got a clay war machine with a personal vendetta against all things Nazi. Any idea how to shut him down?”

Galavant’s fingers drummed on the handle of his weapon. “Well,” he hummed, “lets see. Golems are clay creatures created by rabbis and passed down generation to generation. Each rabbi writes their name on the golem’s scroll to take charge of him —”

“Wait wait. Scroll?” Alex’s eyes narrowed at his words. “What scroll?”

“Every golem has a scroll in their mouth,” the angel explained. “It’s their life-force. Remove it, and they deactivate. Write your name on it, and you become their master. Burn it, and they die. That’s the only way short of some massive spell work to stop one.”

“Not even this will work?” Alex’s grace dropped her sword into her hands, and she twirled it around twice for emphasis. “That kind of sucks. Although I suppose you can’t kill what can’t bleed—"

Alex? You better get back here.

Alex tipped her head at Sam’s prayer, and her eyes narrowed as Dean’s voice followed, overlapping with his brother’s so it was barely perceptible, and she only caught the words necromancer and ass. “I have to go,” she started, taking a step away from Galavant. “I just — thank you for all your help — really — but there’s trouble back home and I really need to get going. I — we can talk later?”

“Go.” The angel’s wings flicked towards her as he shrugged. “I have things I must get back to.”

Alex didn’t hear the rest of his sentence as she took off upwards into the air. Her flight back to Pennsylvania took her mere seconds, and she landed outside of Aaron’s rental house with a cautious flick of her grace. Inside was three human souls along with the clay golem — he, however, didn’t seem to be moving. There were three other … somethings as well, something dark, something evil that vaguely resembled the soul of men but felt closer to a vengeful spirit that was still attached to its earthly body. Alex could hear conversation, and she took a deep breath to calm herself as she walked up to the front door. Just play it dumb. Play it cool.

“Morning.” She kicked the door closed behind her as she strolled in, one eyebrow raised as she calmly took in deactivated golem in front of her. Its mouth hung slack and its shoulders were hunched as it stared blankly ahead, and the angel gave it a wary look as she moved further into the house. Two of the necromancers had guns pointed at the Winchesters, and the third stood in the center of the room, faced towards the three men as he addressed them. All three were clad in suits, sharply dressed, and Alex tugged slightly on the hem of her open flannel to try and fix her own appearance.

“Ah.” The heavily german accent from the leader had Alex’s looking up from her clothing. “And who might you be? A friend of the rabbi, perhaps?”
“Who? You mean Aaron?” Alex let her shoulders rise and fall nonchalantly, gaze flickering over to where the wide-eyed grandson had fallen back against the plaster wall. “I guess you could say that. Although technically I ride with those two.” She pointed a finger at the Winchesters, a small smirk towards the dark-haired necromancer a deceitful clue that she had no idea how much trouble she was in.

“I-I don’t think Eckhart —”

“Shh.” Alex silenced Aaron with a gentle noise. “No need to talk. I know what I’m doing. You.” She pointed a finger at the German in front of her. “You’re one of those Nazi necromancer douches, aren’t you? Yeah. You know, I killed one of your little friends just last night. In the library. Ring a bell?”

“His name was Torvald.” Eckhart’s eyes glittered darkly, and he added, “And you will suffer for that.”

“Mm. Right.” The angel’s nonchalance was coming easier now, and she shoved her hands into her pockets. She watched as one of the necromancers moved into the kitchen and returned a few seconds later, the red ledger in his hands. “I’ll be needing that back,” she told him before turning back to the leader. “And I’m not scared of you, you Nazi dick.”

Eckhart took the red ledger from his companion and flipped through the pages; only once he had confirmed that it was indeed what he was looking for did he turn his dull, soulless eyes back onto Alex. “Perhaps you should be,” he warned, a perceivable threat lining his voice. “If you knew what you were up against, you wouldn’t be so calm.”

Alex scoffed, eyes rolling dramatically at the Nazi’s egocentric statement. “I’ve got a pretty good idea of what you are,” she retorted. “And why the hell would I be afraid of you? What can you do to me? I could kill you — all it would take is one, single touch.” She snapped her fingers to emphasize her confidence, and her eyes zeroed in on the Nazi who had handed Eckhart the ledger. Cocky disbelief lined his face, and he stepped towards Alex when she raised her eyebrow, an unspoken challenge dancing in her eyes. “I don’t even need a gun,” she taunted. “You Nazis think you’re so tough? You couldn’t —”

Alex ducked a flying fist, and she stepped backwards defensively as she righted and centered herself. Her wings stretched out to balance her, and she took only a mere second to gauge the necromancer in front of her before she slipped forward. A hand on his cheek gave her the physical connection her grace needed, and it flooded his body like a match dropped into gasoline. The brainstem disintegrated, the organs melted, and the eyes burned away into nothing before Alex let go, and the body fell to the ground. Alex didn’t watch it go, too caught up in her satisfaction of the shock and horror on the others’ faces.

There was nothing quite like the exhilarating rush that came from that display of power.

“Perhaps I should introduce myself.” The angel stepped over the corpse, making a show of wiping her dirtied hand off on her jeans. “My name is Alex. I’m an angel of the Lord. And yes, I know who you are. The spawn of Satan’s whore — which is ironic, because I know Satan, and I don’t think even he would stoop so low to bring about you.” She let her angel blade fall down into her hands as she stopped in front of Eckhart, head raised to meet his level gaze. “I think you know what happens next.”

“You fool!” the necromancer spat, and Alex’s wings stretched angrily outwards, her feathers brushing the plaster ceilings. “You can kill me, but you will never kill all the Thule.”
“We’ll see.” Alex braced one hand on the Nazi’s shoulder as she plunged her weapon into his heart, and the necromancer’s eyes flashed violently with light as the evil within him was burned away. There was a scuffle behind him, and as he crumpled to the ground, two gunshots echoed through the living room. Alex looked up to see guns in the Winchester’s hands, and the third and final necromancer lay dead on the floor. “Everyone okay?” she inquired.

“Y-Yeah.” Aaron rose to his feet, wide eyes taking in the carnage that lay all around. “Yeah,” he repeated, his voice more steady and sure.

Alex looked over at the two Winchesters, and Dean nodded. “Well, now we know — paper beats golem, fire beats undead Nazi zombie freaks,” he joked, and Alex rolled her eyes.

“Speaking of,” she said, and she let her grace secure her weapon back up in her sleeve, “I found someone who knew about the Thule Society and the golems. He said that the scroll’s the key, so if you don’t want to keep him …” she added to Aaron.

“Yeah, I know.” The rabbi’s grandson knelt down beside Eckhart’s body and removed a small, paper scroll from the necromancer’s dead hands. “But no thanks. I mean … Eckhart might be dead, but you heard him. The Thule are still out there … hidden, active.” He rose to his feet and unwound the small, thin string that kept the paper in place to look at the last name scrawled onto the parchment. “That’s my grandfather,” he murmured to himself. “He left me something important. Something only I can do.”

Alex watched as he pulled a pen out of his pocket and copied his own name down, and she stepped over Eckhart’s body as Aaron moved towards the deactivated golem. “It looks like I’m in the Judah Initiative now,” he admitted to the golem.

“Laqauch achrayut,” the creature rumbled.

Confusion flickered momentarily across Aaron’s face. “But I thought I did.”

“Yes.” The golem dipped his head to his new master, and Alex let out a long, drawn-out breath as she looked down at the three necromancers that lay on the ground.

“We should start to clean this up,” she decided when Dean and Sam exchanged looks above her head. “I, uh — sorry about the mess,” she added to Aaron, whose attention had now turned back to the three hunters. “I … the blood will come out, especially with the wood here, and the, uh, burning smell shouldn’t last too long. I don’t think.” She looked up at the Winchesters. “I can get us three sheets for the bodies,” she decided. “Let’s just get this over and done with so we can go home.”

She moved off towards the front door, only hesitating when she reached the front steps. No doubt the Winchesters would want to console the young rabbi, and to give him the same warning they gave every new hunter, but Alex wasn’t concerned about that. She had said ‘go home.’ That had a nice ring to it. The angel’s wings fluffed out pleasantly. She had forgotten how good it felt to use that word. Home.
There was music playing in the bunker. Alex didn’t recognize it, but she followed the source through the halls and up into the library. Sam was there, rifling through one of the many drawers full of Men of Letters records. “What are you doing?” she asked as he pulled out a blank card, and she leaned up against one of the pillars curiously.

Dean entered the room and pulled open the small refrigerator, and Sam moved back towards his laptop. “Ordering,” he explained. “I’m making a, uh, card entry for our, uh, copies from the Thule’s red ledger for our collection.”

His brother paused, a beer in his hand, and he slowly put the drinks back into the fridge as he turned to Sam. “So, uh, what? Aaron’s a J.I, and … you’re a Man of Letters now? Is that it?” He poured two glasses of scotch and set one down in front of his brother. Sam looked up, unsure how to answer, and Dean sat down across from him. “Good,” he finally said.

Alex stepped out of the room, leaving the two brothers to drink alone. “Castiel?” She turned her gaze up towards the ceiling as she walked down the empty hall, and her voice dropped into a whisper when her word echoed loudly. “Are you there? I haven’t heard from you in a long time.” The angel paused beside her door, shoulders falling. “I’m sorry if I hurt you, but please just let me know if you’re okay.”

There was no answer, and the young angel sighed. “I’m sorry, Castiel. Just please be okay.”
February 7th, 2014

Lebanon, Kansas

Alex stepped out of the Men of Letters shower room, her towel thrown haphazardly over her shoulder to keep her wet hair off of her — technically Dean’s — faded Led Zeppelin t-shirt. She could hear Dean moving about in his room further down the hall, and she was so focused on listening to his footsteps that she jumped when Sam suddenly stepped out in front of her. “Hey,” she greeted, shaking the surprise out of her wings. “Sorry.”

“Yeah, uh —” Sam looked her up and down. “Are those my shorts?”

The angel glanced down at the black basketball shorts she was wearing and gave a small nod. “Dean stole mine,” she defended with a shrug, and her bare toes wiggled on the cold, polished floor. “What was I supposed to do?” She tipped her head when she heard a thunk coming from Dean’s room, and Sam walked off towards his brother. Alex followed, curious as to what Dean was actually doing.

“Wow,” she heard Sam say as he leaned against the door frame, and Alex pushed past him to stand in the bedroom. “Not bad.”

“Not bad?” Dean glanced back at the guns and weapons hanging on the far wall with a small grin. “I haven’t had my own room. Ever. I’m making this awesome.” He looked over at his desk where several records were on display. “I got my kickass vinyls, I’ve got this killer mattress.” He dropped down on his bed as his grin widened. “Memory foam — it remembers me.”

Alex rolled her eyes with a smile. They had all ordered new mattresses, new kitchen appliances, all kinds of those necessary home accessories. “It’s nice,” she agreed.

“And clean, too. There’s no funky smell. No creepy motel stains.” Dean watched as Sam pulled a stick of gum out of his pocket and tossed the wrapper towards the trash. It missed, and the Winchester looked up at his brother with a shake of his head, both offended and shocked. “Really?”

“Sorry.” Sam’s hands went up in self-defense, and Alex stepped back as Dean rose to his feet.

“I’m gonna fix us some grub,” he told them, clearly annoyed as he left the room, and Sam bent over to pick up his trash.

“Dean really seems to like the idea of his own room.” Alex watched him go as she turned back to Sam, who had stepped further into the bedroom to look around. The young angel did so as well, taking in the array of weapons and the carefully placed photos of the Winchester’s childhood. “I think it’ll do him some good,” she finally admitted. “It’s about time he had some personal space. I’m going to go get dressed,” she announced when Sam let out a very quiet noise of agreement. “Catch you later.”

She hurried down the hall to her own room, closing and locking the door behind her as she tossed her damp towel onto the bed. Her own walls lacked Dean’s display of firearms, but she had arranged her most prized personal belongings around the room. The hunting journal Bobby had given her lay on the desk, pages opened to her drawing of a biembien, and small souvenirs and knick-knacks she had picked up along the way were laid out on it as well. Her first handgun was in the top drawer, and the knife Bobby had given her for her nineteenth birthday was laid delicately with its back to the
She quickly changed into jeans and a grey v-neck before she laced up a pair of dark brown boots and pulled the hem of her pants down over them. She grabbed a black flannel from over her bed, and then she hurried out of the room. Her head tipped back as she sniffed the air — hamburger? Maybe Dean was making good on his promise of food.

The angel waltzed into the library and chucked her plaid over the back of one of the chairs. Sam was there, head bowed as his fingers danced across the typed pages. He looked up when she entered, and she grunted out a greeting as she peered at the books he had scattered about. “Hey. Anything interesting?”

“Uh, yeah. Tons of stuff, actually.” Sam leaned back in his chair to look up at her. “I’m kind of just reading … everything.”

His mouth opened to say more, but Alex held up a hand, cutting him off. “Fascinating,” she lied, regretting that she hadn’t asked a rhetorical question instead. “Well, it’s a good thing you’re reading all of that, cause somebody’s gotta do it, and it’s not going to be me. Or Dean.” She looked off towards the hallway and quickly added, “Speaking of, I’m gonna go see if Dean needs any help in the kitchen.”

She moved away before Sam could respond and followed the hallway down to the large Men of Letters kitchen. Dean was there, and three plates sat on the island behind him, an open hamburger bun on each. “Hey,” he called, glancing over his shoulder. “Come on in. Hungry?”

“Always.” Alex stepped into the room upon his invitation, hand slipping into her back jean pockets as she looked at the culinary masterpiece that was being prepared right before her eyes. “Whatcha making? It smells really good.” She glanced at the stove and saw three hamburger patties, and her eyes lit up as she finally put the two together. “Are these the hamburgers Lisa always made?”

“Even better.” Dean, deeming his creation done, placed the meat patties onto the buns and picked up two of the plates. “Burgers, cooked to perfection, with my own little twist.” He walked out of the kitchen without another word, and Alex scooped up her own plate and hurried after him.

“Wait wait wait.” She followed Dean into the library, a grin growing across her face. “Are … are these jalapeño burgers?” The angel dropped down into the seat across from Sam as she flipped the top of bun onto her burger. She saw the knowing look in Dean’s eyes, and she took a large bite. “I love these,” she told Sam as he looked down at his food with a curious noise. “Dean made these on the fourth of July — back when we were with Lisa and Ben. They’re perfect.”

“You made these?” Sam turned the plate as he studied the hamburger, and Alex nodded.

“We have a real kitchen now.” Dean sat down at Alex’s right, and he looked over at his brother with a large lopsided grin.

“I know. I-I just didn’t think you knew what a kitchen was.”

A brief flash of confusion and light-offense crossed Dean’s face, and he defended, “I’m nesting, okay? Eat.” He motioned to Sam, waiting for his brother to taste what he had prepared, and Sam obliged. “Huh?” Dean asked, a wide smile on his face when Sam looked amazed. “Yeah.”

“Wow,” Sam mumbled around his mouthful, and Alex bobbed her head in complete agreement as she took another large bite.

Dean’s grin shifted into a smug expression. “You’re welcome.” He picked up his burger, ready to
dig in, but his phone rang. The hunter dropped his food back onto his plate and dug out his cell.

“Yo,” he answered, and Alex turned to Sam, ready to point out how the jalapeños had originally been her suggestion, but Dean’s exclamation cut her off. “What? Kevin? Kevin!”

The warm, jovial atmosphere died. “Something wrong?” Sam leaned towards his brother, and Alex’s wings folded forward in concern.

“Take a guess.” Dean hung up his phone and got to his feet, and Alex immediately did the same.

“Get to Kevin now,” the hunter demanded, and Alex nodded hurriedly, her wings falling out as she got ready to leave. “We’ll be there in four hours.”

“Of course. What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know.” Dean hurried up towards the door, and Alex only stuck around only long enough to watch Sam grab his burger before she took off up through the bunker ceiling and into the air. The golden tips of her wings flashed in the cold sunlight with each powerful stroke, and she spiraled downwards through the metal hull of the Fizzles’ Folly. She landed in the center of the room, and her grace pushed outwards, ready to confront whatever Kevin had called them about.

But there was nothing. No demons, no monsters. Only the prophet’s soul.

“Kevin?” Alex crossed the room in four long strides, and she paused beside the bathroom door to hear violent hurling. It swung open when she nudged it with the toe of her boot, and her wings folded in when she saw the prophet bent over the toilet. The stinging stench of vomit and bile filled the air, and Alex grimaced as Kevin gagged. “What’s wrong?”

Kevin sagged against the wall, pressing his forehead into the cold metal. “Where’s Dean?” he mumbled, his violent sickness leaving him momentarily disorientated. “I got … I got …”

Alex knelt down beside him and reached out to place two fingers on his forehead. She let her grace flow inwards, purging his system of the toxins and the drugs that made his stomach roll and his liver strain. She felt the fever fall away, and she directed her grace to his nerves to add a quick, harmless shock.

The prophet jerked in surprise and pain, eyes flying open, and Alex rose to her feet. “Ow!” he cried, staring up at the angel in shock. “W-What the hell did you do?”

“I fixed you,” Alex replied, and as the adrenaline faded away, frustration took hold. “I cleaned your system of whatever painkillers or shit you’ve been shoving into your body before it killed you. Then I shocked you so you wouldn’t do anything to make me heal you like this again.” She stalked back into the main room and blew a harsh breath out of her nostrils, trying to clear her nose of the acidic tang of stomach bile. “Sam and Dean are on their way,” she told him when she heard the prophet stagger after her. “Should I tell them it was a false alarm and they can turn around?”

“W-W-What? No.” Kevin reached up to cradle his head, and Alex took the moment to take in the organized scatter of notes that had taken up almost an entire wall of the small boathouse. “I-I found something. When will they be here?”

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“It’s a five hour drive, so they’ll be here in four.” Alex glanced back at the prophet, and her shoulders fell sympathetically as she took in his ragged and weathered appearance. “When’s the last time you’ve had a good night’s sleep?” she finally asked, turning to face him fully as she crossed her arms. “You look like hell.”

“Yeah, well, I feel like hell,” Kevin mumbled. “And I don’t know. Weeks?” He walked over to his
wall of notes, and his eyes grew distant. “I’ve been busy translating the tablet. It’s been hard, but …”
He turned back to Alex. “I think I finally got it. And it’s big.”

“Well whatever it is, it can wait a few more hours.” Alex stepped forward, and the prophet dropped
his gaze. “The Winchesters will be here soon, and you can tell them then. Until then, I want you to
take a nap and try and sleep off whatever the hell it was that you did to yourself.” She pointed
towards the bed in the other room, barely visible through a half-opened door, and her voice grew
stern when Kevin seemed to hesitate. “Go. We can either do this the easy way or the hard way,
Kevin. It makes no difference to me.”

“Okay,” Kevin reluctantly relented. “Sure.” The prophet moved off towards his room, and Alex
nodded out her thanks.

“I’ll stay here,” she promised as he disappeared from her sight. “I won’t let anything happen. And if
you need anything,” she added, voice rising to ensure that he could hear her, “just say the word. All
that’s important right now is that you rest.” She settled down in the chair at the metal table, hands
going out to push away the empty pill bottles so she could examine the one half of the demon tablet.
“Something big, huh?” she murmured, and her fingers danced over the indecipherable hieroglyphs
carved into the smooth, black stone. “Well, whatever you are, I hope it’s worth it.”

The Winchesters arrived four hours later, true to their word, and their arrival was what woke the
prophet up. “Where’s Kevin?” Dean demanded, slamming the heavy metal door behind him. Sam
stopped by Alex as the angel rose, her wings flicking in frustration when she heard the prophet
stirring in the other room.

“He’s sleeping,” she retorted crossly. “Well, was sleeping until you two came barging in here like a
horde of buffalos. I finally got him to take his first nap in like, forever.”

“Only because you threatened me.” Kevin appeared in the doorway, and both Sam and Dean’s
attention was drawn immediately onto him.

“Wow.” Dean blinked as he took in Kevin’s stained t-shirt and unshaven face, unable to hide his
surprise at the prophet’s unkempt appearance. “You look like hammered crap.”

“Yeah,” Kevin agreed, and Alex turned in concern to hear how nasal his voice sounded, almost as if
both of his nostrils were plugged. “Nosebleed,” he explained, holding up a kleenex. “They just
started up again.”

Alex shook her head, unhappy with this development, and Dean asked in a concerned voice, “Are
you eating?”

Kevin nodded. “Hot dogs, mostly,” he admitted, and he passed Alex to sit down in his chair; the
angel stepped back to give him plenty of room.

“Breakfast of champions,” she heard Dean agree, a note of light sarcasm driving his words. “Look,
I’m gonna feel dirty saying this, but you might want a salad and a shower.”

Alex was far less indirect. “Hot dogs,” she repeated, voice flat. “Are you fucking kidding me? I
thought you were being poisoned, and you mean to tell me all of that shit I cleaned out of your
system was from hot dogs?”

Kevin leaned against the table and put his head in his hands, clearly avoiding her gaze by focusing
instead on the demon tablet. “I know, I know,” he agreed. “I’ve been getting really bad headaches
and nosebleeds, and I think I may have had a small stroke. But it was worth it,” he quickly added, and Alex’s feathers rustled as they puffed out in anger.

“What was worth it?” Sam asked, and metal chair legs scraped against the ground as the prophet rose to his feet and turned to his massive wall of scribbled notes.

“I figured out how to close the gates of hell.”

Stunned silence fell over the boathouse, and Alex stared at Kevin in complete surprise. “You —” Dean cut off, and a small smile formed across Kevin’s face as he turned to face him. That smile was echoed on Sam’s, followed by a small chuckle of surprise and amazement. “Come here, you smelly son of a bitch.” Dean stepped forward and pulled Kevin into a big hug, momentarily lifting him off the ground as the three of them laughed.

Alex, however, didn’t join in, still unsure as to what Kevin was implying. “Close the gates of hell?” she repeated. “You mean you’ve learned how to actually board up hell itself. Nothing comes in or out.” When Kevin nodded, she asked, “How?”

“It’s a spell.” Kevin turned to unpin a scrap of paper with a scribbled mix of vowels and consonants, and he handed it to Dean. “And it’s just a few words in Enochian, but …”

Dean sensed the prophet’s hesitation, and he frowned. “Oh, here we go.”

…but the spell has to be spoken after you finish each of the three trials,” Kevin finished, and Alex brushed a hand through her blonde hair as her head tilted in confusion.

Dean handed the scrap of paper to her, and she ran her eyes over the Enochian hieroglyphs. “In the name of your maker, through the power of your dwelling, I order your occlusion.” The angel translated the spell with ease, and she looked over at Dean as she handed the paper back. “What trials?” she pressed, intent on fully understanding what the tablet was asking.

“Like on Law and Order?” Sam added with a helpful guess.

Kevin firmly shook his head. “More like Hercules,” he corrected. “The tablet says, ‘Whosoever chooses to undertake these tasks should fear not danger, nor death, nor …’ a word I think means getting your spine ripped out through your mouth for all eternity.”

Alex pulled a disgusted face. “Sounds like a lot of fun,” she joked darkly.

The prophet nodded. “Basically, God built a series of tests, and when you’ve done all three, you can slam the gates,” he summarized for the three hunters.

Sam turned his attention away from the mess of notes that hung on the wall. “So, what? God wants us to take the SATs?” he rephrased, confusion darkening his hazel eyes.

“I-I guess,” Kevin stuttered out. “Uh, he works in mysterious ways.”

“Yeah, mysterious, douche-y ways,” Dean muttered, and Alex huffed, her wings twitching uncomfortably in offense. Dean, however, didn’t seem to notice or care. “Alright, so where do we start?”

Kevin frowned. “Well, I’ve only been able to crack one of the tests to far, and it’s gross,” he warned. “You’ve got to kill a hound of hell and bathe in its blood.”

“Ew.” Alex leaned against the metal table and crossed her arms across her chest as she took in the
prophet in front of her. “Hellhound blood? That is gross. Crowley’s not gonna be pleased either,” she warned both brothers, and she let the corners of her lips turn upwards at the thought of doing something to get upset the demon. “If we’re lucky it’ll be one of his favorites,” she added.

Sam gave her a strange look, but Dean didn’t even pause. “Awesome,” he agreed, and he clapped his hands together as if everything was decided.

“Awesome?” Sam repeated, and his look of confusion and concern turned onto Dean.

The Winchester nodded. “Yeah,” he defended. “Hey, if this means icing all demons, I have no problem gutting some devil dog and letting Calgon take me away.”

“Where are you going to find one?”

“Well, hellhounds like to collect on crossroads deals,” Dean explained to the prophet. “So all we got to do is track down some loser who signed over his special sauce ten years ago, get between him and Clifford the big dead dog — easy.”

Kevin looked about convinced as Alex felt. “It doesn’t sound easy.”

“It’s not,” Alex agreed. “No offense, Dean, but I think we’re going to need a hell of a better plan than that. Those things are brutes. Haven’t you ever seen one — oh that’s right. You haven’t. Because you’re human.” She straightened up from the table, doing her best to match Dean’s height. “Don’t get me wrong, because I’m right there on this boat with you, but that plan — it’s suicidal.”

“It’s not.” Dean turned to his brother, brushing Alex’s statement off as if it were nothing. “Look, you get on the net. See what you can dig up. I’m gonna go on a supply run because we need goofer dust, and the kid needs to eat something that’s not ground-up hooves and pig’s anuses — not that there’s anything wrong with that,” he added to Kevin, and both Alex and Sam shook their heads as Dean left.

“It’s suicidal,” Alex repeated as the metal door closed behind the eldest Winchester. “He knows that, right?”

“We’ll figure something out.” Sam rested a hand on her shoulder as he passed by. “I’ll be right back; I’m going to go get my laptop from the car before Dean leaves.”

“Okay.” Alex waited until he disappeared before she turned back to Kevin. “How are you feeling?” she inquired. “Still tired? Sick?” Kevin didn’t respond, and she let out a long breath. “Listen, I’m sorry I zapped you —”

“No, no it isn’t that.” Kevin shook his head, clearing his thoughts as much as emphasizing his words. “It’s just … I hate it here. I can’t leave because every demon on the planet wants to peel my face off. I can’t talk to anyone except you guys or Garth when he swings by, or my mom. Right? And when she calls, all she does is cry.” The prophet circled around to slump into the chair. “I just … need this to be over.”

Alex let out a low hum of sympathy, and she glanced over her shoulder to hear Sam approaching. “That sucks,” she agreed. “I know what it’s like, though. Being forced to stay in a small, dark room. It’s like a cage, and all you can think about is leaving.” She looked off to the side as she felt Kevin’s gaze come to rest on her face, and in the corner of her eye she could see the puzzlement and curiosity that he thankfully held back from speaking upon. “Come on,” she decided, voice loud as she turned back to the prophet. “You know what? We’re going out for lunch.”

The prophet rose to his feet. “But the demons —”
“Screw the demons. You think I can’t take care of a few demons?” Alex rolled her eyes at his implications. “No. You deserve a treat — a break. What is it you want? We can get anything you want, Kev.” She turned her head when Sam entered. “I’m taking him out for a bit to stretch his legs,” she informed him. “He needs some fresh air.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Sam agreed. He took Kevin’s spot at the table and opened up his laptop before adding, “Where are you guys going?”

“Um … I don’t know … maybe just to the park across the street?” Kevin suggested lamely, but the idea was good enough for the angel. “Anywhere that’s outside.”

“Course.” She reached out and took Kevin’s shoulder, and her grace instinctively enveloped the prophet as her wings carried them up into the air. He felt weightless in her arms, her grace supporting him fully even though her grip looked less than secure, and they landed beside the gravel path that ran through the wooded park just a few miles from the boat. “There.”

“Uh, thanks.” Kevin looked around, eyes screwed up against the bright sunlight. “How long …”

“Until Dean gets back.” Alex shoved her hands into her pocket, and her wings fell out slightly, stretching to absorb the warmth of the sun. “By that time Sam will have a case, and we’ll need to leave.” She looked over at the prophet, and her voice softened. “The sooner we wrap this up, the sooner you’ll be done. Then you can finally go home.”

**Shoshone, Idaho**

Alex landed in the backseat of the Impala, wings folding in against her back as she gently cleared her throat to announce her presence to the brothers. “The Cassity’s farm is just up the road,” she informed them, even though judging by the Impala’s current course, the Winchesters were well aware of where they were. She set her duffle on the car floor as she brought her legs up to rest crossed beneath her.

The Cassity Farm, run by the Cassity family who sounded like the modern-day Beverly Hillbillies. Sam had easily ruled them as possible deal suspects: ten years ago, almost to the day, the Cassitys had stuck oil where they shouldn’t have and became millionaires overnight. When Dean had agreed with Sam’s conclusion, the Winchesters had packed up their bags immediately, leaving Alex with the prophet until she was needed.

Which was now.

Dean guided the Impala up a driveway, and they passed through a large, metal gate with the words “Cassity Farms” hung on either side in golden letters. The engine died as Dean turned the keys, and then he looked over at his brother. “Alright, keep an eye out,” he instructed. “Anybody with a hellhound on their ass is going to be showing signs — hallucinating, freaking out — the usual. Think you can pick them out?” he asked Alex.

The angel shrugged. “Hard to say,” she admitted. “I might be able to tell if their soul has been marked, but it’s been awhile since I’ve even tried that, especially on souls that have been marked for so long, so I don’t know how accurate it’s going to be. But if I do find someone … then what? What’s the plan?”

“Sam will get ‘em clear. You’ll be my eyes, and I spike Fido.” Dean pulled the demon knife out of his jacket pocket, holding it up so the light reflected off of the foreign metalwork before he hid it
once again. “Then the crowd goes wild.” He got out of the car, and Alex and Sam followed.

Now that she was out in the open, the angel shook her wings out. A large, green tractor sat in front of them, and beneath it Alex heard steady breathing beneath the metallic ratchet of a wrench. “Hey, pal,” Dean began, stepping forward, “who runs this joint?”

The body on the dolly pushed itself outwards, revealing a small, young Hispanic woman, a deep-set frown across her face to find herself disturbed. She wore a red flannel shirt underneath a warm leather vest well suited for the chill in the air. The woman rose to her feet, and Alex was slightly surprised by the deep, clipped, no nonsense voice. “You’re looking at her.”

Sam blinked. “You own the ranch?”

“Nope, just manage the property.” The woman’s voice carried a slight accent, and she reached up to resituate her dark braid. “You guys here about the job?”

“How’d you guess?”

“We get our share of drifters.” The woman folded her hands across her chest as her dark brown eyes flickered across Dean, then Sam, before finally coming to rest upon Alex. “Ever worked a farm before?”

“Definitely,” Dean said, and the farmhand’s gaze returned to him. It was obvious he was lying, and Alex spoke to draw the attention back to her.

“I did a few years back,” the angel admitted, and she tipped her head upwards as she heard the distant call of cows. “Not a lot of actual farm work, but I helped slaughtered some cows every week —”

Sam cleared his throat. “We’re quick learners.”

A man walked up, and Alex straightened her back to appear taller next to Sam as he studied the three of them. “Ellie,” he began, “who have we got here?”

Dean raised his hand in a small, amiable gesture. “I’m Dean. This is Sam and Alex.” He motioned to the two of them in turn, and Alex offered up a small smile.

“Oh.” A grin broke out across the heavy-set man’s face, and he extended a hand towards Dean. “Carl Granville. A pleasure.”

“Pleasure,” Sam echoed as he also shook Carl’s hand. “So you’re not a Cassity?”

Carl let out a small chuckle. “No, my wife is. Her and her family own this place. I’m just one of those — what do you call ‘em? Trophy husbands.” He patted his stomach teasingly, and both the Winchesters chuckled. Carl laughed, and he turned to Ellie. “So, we, uh, hiring these fellas?”

The woman’s lips set into a tight line. “Not sure yet.”

Alex frowned, but Carl wasn’t affected by her sour mood. “Oh, come on. They seem like swell guys.”

Dean grinned. “Well, he’s right. We’re swell.”

Ellie looked between Dean and Carl, and Alex’s shoes scuffled on the dirt as she awaited for the indecision in the woman’s gaze to go away. “Fine,” Ellie relented. “They can have the work.” She
dropped her wrench down onto her dolly as she motioned the three of them after her. “Come on.” She led them away from Carl and towards the large, brown barn. Alex heard the nicker of horses and the stomping of hooves as they moved along the side, and Ellie stopped beside a door. It swung open with a push, revealing a room that reminded Alex of a motel. “Your bed is down here,” she instructed, and then she pointed at the next door down. “That’s for you,” she added to Alex. “Breakfast is at five, dinner is at eight, and in between, you’re mine. Questions?”

“I miss my room,” Dean mumbled childishly, and Alex’s wings flicked in agreement. At least the room appeared clean, but after having a taste of her own place, going back to lumpy mattresses and stale sheets was painfully disappointing.

“We’re good,” Sam promised when Ellie cocked an eyebrow at Dean, and when Dean didn’t look away from the room, the woman responded with a curt nod.

“Okay. Job is yours if you want it. But I better warn you,” she added. “It’s crap work.” She paused, waiting for any protests or questions, but when none came, she stepped away from the door. “You have five minutes to move in. When you’re done, meet me in the barn.” Ellie walked away and disappeared through the open barn door, and with a shrug Alex looked up at Sam and Dean.

“Alright. Let’s get this over with so we can go home.” Dean led the way back across the grass to the Impala, and Alex followed. She retrieved her duffle bag and slung it over her shoulders as Dean asked, “You sense anything yet?”

“Not really.” Alex shook her head, and she let her shoulders rise and fall as she heaved a sigh. “Maybe we just haven’t found the right person yet — maybe the demonic tag on their soul has contaminated the entire property. Or maybe it’s just been ten years and the mark has buried itself deep within the soul. I really don’t know yet.”

Sam scoffed. “How can you not tell if a soul’s been marked for hell?” He shut the trunk and picked up his backpack.

Alex frowned, not fond of his tone. “Oh, I don’t know, maybe because that’s something only reapers and hellhounds can tell?” she snapped. “I’m celestial, not omniscient.” She lugged her bag back towards her room with a small shake of her head, and after a second or two she heard footsteps following.

She tossed her bag onto her bed before she walked over to where the Winchesters were staying. “Ready?” she called, leaning against the open doorway. “We don’t want to piss off the new boss.” She stepped back and let the two brothers through, and she followed them into the barn.

Ellie was there waiting. “About time.” The woman pointed to one of the stalls that had been converted into a supply area. “The horses’ stalls need to be cleaned. Dirty hay goes into the wheelbarrow and is brought out back. Clean hay is in the corner. Tie the horses up to the posts so they don’t wander off. Understand?” Dark brown eyes studied the three of them, and Alex nodded. “Good.”

Ellie walked away, and Alex felt the brothers exchange looks behind her. “Awesome.” She picked up a shovel and held it out to Dean. “Well, I guess we may as well get started.”

“Crap work.” Dean muttered out the word from the stall across from her, and Alex paused to look up as he raised his voice. “She literally meant crap.” He turned and dumped his shovelful of manure into the wheelbarrow, and Alex’s hand tightened on the horse’s bridle. Dean turned to the mare she
was leading out of the stall, and he muttered, “I hate you.”

“I don’t care!” An approaching woman’s angry voice had Alex looking up. A blonde woman stop at the open barn doors, hands on her hips as she stared at Ellie. “Do I look like a hippie?”

“Organic food is better for the cattle,” Ellie insisted, her accent becoming more pronounced as her agitation grew.

The woman wasn’t having it, and she gripped her riding helmet tightly. “My land, my animals, my money, my way,” she snapped. “End of story.” She stalked away without another word, and Alex watched as Ellie let out a long, frustrated sigh and wheeled her wheelbarrow towards them.

Dean looked up from his work. “She’s a real piece of work, huh?”

“Alice Cassity’s a real piece of something, alright,” Ellie muttered as she paused beside the hunters. “But what are we gonna do? She’s the boss.”

“Drink?” Dean suggested, and Ellie walked away with an amused noise. The hunter leaned his shovel up against the wall as he turned to Sam and Alex. “Well?”

“What are we thinking?” Sam asked.

“What? Deal-wise?” Dean glanced over his shoulder to where Ellie had disappeared to. “Well, Ellie’s the help, so that rules her out.”

“And Carl doesn’t really seem like the sell-your-soul type,” Sam added, and Alex hummed in hesitant agreement with the Winchester’s assessment. “So, Alice?”

“Ding ding ding.”

“Okay.” Alex guided a stallion into a different stall so she and Dean could clean it out, and she asked over her shoulder, “So then what’s the plan? I mean, are we just going to walk up and tell her?”

Dean scoffed. “Why? So she can lie to us and then call the cops? No.” The hunter shook his head as he picked up his shovel. “No, we’re gonna have to go stalker on this one.”

Dinner, like promised, was at eight, and after the three hunters scarfed down a quick meal of meatloaf and potatoes, they gathered in the brothers’ room. Alex sat beside Sam on the furthest bed, legs crossed beneath her as she watched Dean clean the demon knife by the desk. “Almost done?” she queried as he dragged the white cloth over the serrated blade. “It’s dark out, Dean. Hellhounds like the dark.”

“Yes, I’m done.” Dean tossed the handkerchief onto the floor and rose to his feet. “Alright, let’s go. I talked to Ellie,” he added as he moved towards the door, “and she says Alice and Carl are eating out on the back patio.” He led the way out of the barn and across to the house. “Alex, left,” Dean instructed, and the young angler nodded. “Eyes on Alice.” She let her grace flick outwards as she skirted the house’s left perimeter while the two brothers went right. She could feel two souls up ahead: Carl and Alice. As they grew nearer, she began to hear the whispers of their romantic conversation.

A howl split the night, and the couple on the patio quieted. Alex reached the corner of the house and she paused. “Just a wolf,” she heard Carl murmur after a second or two of silence, but his voice sounded unsure of his explanation.
“Yeah,” Alice agreed, and Alex tipped her head at the distant yet unsettled whinny of the stabled horses. “Probably spooked the hell out of the horses,” the Cassity added. “I should go check on them.”

“Well, alright. Hurry back.” Carl’s parting words had Alex peering around the corner to see Alice moving off through the lawn. Remembering her orders, Alex let her wings carry her up into the air and after the woman. She landed by the barn out of Alice’s sight, and her grace flicked outwards in a careful circle in search of the hound from hell.

A beast howled again, a low, mournful noise that reverberated throughout the farm, and Alex glanced over her shoulder to see the two Winchesters moving towards her. She waved her fingers in a silent greeting and pointed up towards the path where Alice Cassity was approaching from. “I can hear the creature, but I can’t pinpoint it,” she murmured.

“Yeah,” Dean agreed darkly. “We heard it, too.” He shifted the knife to his other hand as a horse whinnied in the barn, but Alex didn’t notice as she turned to Dean, confusion sparking in her eyes.

“Wait. You can hear it?” Her head tipped to one side, unsure if she had heard the Winchester correctly. “That’s not right. You shouldn’t be able to hear a hellhound. Only those who have been marked can — and angels, of course. Angels and demons — how can you hear it?”

“I—”

A yell of terror had a shiver running up the young angel’s spine, and she looked up in alarm. It took a moment of bewilderment and panic before all of the pieces clicked. “Shit.” She thrust her wings down and took off into the air, hurrying back to the patio on which she and the Winchesters had left Carl alone.

Carl lay on the ground, chest rising and falling in his last few panicked, bloodied breaths. Above him raged a monstrous creature with eyes that glowed with hellfire. Claws dug into flesh, and muscles rippled beneath a thin, coarse layer of what was best described as fiery fur. The beast looked up as Alex landed in front of it, and large, powerful jaws snapped at the air as it lunged towards her.

Caught by surprise, Alex stumbled away, and her blade fell into her hands as she dropped into a defensive posture, wings drawn in tight against her side. However, the beast had taken her moment of confusion to flee, disappearing back into the moonless night and leaving Alex alone with Carl’s lifeless body. “Shit.” The angel pulled her weapon back up into her sleeve with a growl curse.

“What happened?!?” Alex looked up in shock to see Ellie standing at the edge of the patio, her dark brown eyes stretched wide at the bloody body. “What the hell?”

“I-I don’t know.” The angels stretched her own eyes as wide as possible, voice rising as she sped up her breathing to sound winded. “I—I heard a scream and I …” She stepped away from Carl’s torn and ragged body, forcing a tremble into her jaw and a crack into her voice as she whispered, “I think he’s dead.”

“I need to call an ambulance.” The farmhand somehow managed to gain a semblance of control, even though Alex could see the shake in hands as she pulled out her phone.

Alex hurried across the yard to Sam and Dean, leaving the woman alone with the corpse. “It was Carl.” She glowered back at the patio as a noise of frustration grew in her throat. “We shouldn’t have left him alone — I shouldn’t have left him alone. I should have considered it —”

“It’s not your fault.” Sam’s hand on her shoulder had the angel falling silent. “No one had any reason
to suspect him.”

Alex shrugged him off. “Ellie’s calling the cops,” she muttered. “They should be here in the next five minutes or so. They’ll probably want a statement from me, so I have to stay, but if the two of you want to make yourself scarce …”

Dean looked up as Ellie glanced over at them, and the farmhand waved the three of them over with a grimace. “We’ll stay,” he said. “Running might look more suspicious than not. Besides,” he added with a darker note to his voice. “We don’t have what we’re here for yet.”

“Carl’s dead.” Ellie walked up to them, and Alex was surprised by how formal and collected she sounded. “You three didn’t happen to see anything, did you?”

Dean shook his head, and Sam gave a small shrug. “We heard wolves,” he offered. “But no, nothing out of the ordinary. Why? Do you think —?”

“It’s not my call.” Grief flashed through Ellie’s eyes, so brief that Alex would have missed it had she blinked, but before she could say anything else, the widowng wail of sirens reached the angel’s ears. “They’ll want to know what happened,” Ellie told Alex, and the young angel’s wingtips flicked as she followed the farmhand back up towards the house. “You’re the one who found him.”

“Yeah. Of course.” Alex followed Ellie up the lawn to the house where the sheriff had just pulled up in his car. He greeted Ellie with a curt dip of his head, and his sharp eyes turned to Alex. “What happened here, Ellie?” he asked the woman next to the angel.

Ellie didn’t respond immediately, and Alex spoke up when the farmhand couldn’t seem to find her voice. “It’s Carl. He’s dead. I … I heard him scream, and when I came running, he …” The angel shook her head. “Well, maybe I should just show you.”

She waved the sheriff after her as they circled around the house to where Carl’s body lay, still warm despite the cold February air. Steam rose from the open wounds, and Alex saw how the back of the sheriff’s hand came up to cover his mouth and nose. “God almighty,” he murmured.

“I’m sorry.” Alex turned to Ellie, genuine sympathy in her tone. “Carl … he seemed like a really good person.”

“The best,” Ellie agreed distantly, and her arms folded across her chest as she tried not to look down at Carl’s body.

Alex turned back to the sheriff, who was cautiously scrutinizing the remains. “Whatever happened here, it was brutal,” she began, dropping down to crouch beside the body. “Look at these claw marks. His chest is ribbons, his head is practically decapitated —”

“And you are?” The sheriff rose to his feet, wary skepticism in his eyes, and Alex blinked in surprise at the sudden mistrust.

“Just curious,” she got out, eyebrows knitting together in a momentary pang of offense.

Ellie, however, was quick to stick up for her. “She works here,” she explained, and after second or two, the sheriff nodded.

When he spoke again, his voice had a business-like clip to it. “Carl died bad — let’s leave it at that.” He turned to look out over the lawn, and Alex followed his gaze towards the dark woods beyond. “They’ve been reintroducing wolves round these parts,” he added, “but I never thought …”
“This wasn’t a wolf.” Alex was surprised by the certainty and strength in Ellie’s voice. The farmhand darkly shook her head. “The whole family’s flying in for this.”

The sheriff grimaced, leaving the young angel to raise an eyebrow in confusion. “All the Cassitys under one roof,” he said with a shake of his head. “Good luck.”

“I think we’re going to need it,” the angel half-joked. She shoved her hands into her pockets and turned her gaze upwards towards the back sky. “Can I go? I already told you everything I know and I … I think I need a drink.”

The sheriff gave her a small nod, consenting to her dismissal. “I think this is a cut and dry case,” he said. “I think as long as you don’t skip town, we should be fine.”

Alex nodded and walked back towards the barn without another word, leaving Ellie alone with the sheriff. Her grace picked up the soul of Dean Winchester in his room, and she pulled open the door. “Hey,” she called to announced her arrival. “Where’s Sam?”

“With Alice in the barn. Talking.” The Winchester looked up from where he was sitting on his bed, and his gaze slid past Alex in an attempt to catch sight of the Cassity house. “Carl was definitely killed by a hellhound?” When Alex nodded, he let out a long, frustrated breath. “Great. So Carl signed the deal, and now he’s dog food. Hellhound’s gone, and we were too busy chasing a pile of jack shit to stop it.” He shook his head and rose to his feet. “Let’s grab our stuff and get out of here.”

Alex frowned, not a fan of his plan of such a hasty departure. However, she didn’t argue and moved out of the doorway and into her own room a few feet away. Her bag, still packed, lay on the furthest mattress from the door, and the angel didn’t waste any time in picking it up and slinging it over her shoulder.

Sam was returning to his and Dean’s room as Alex emerged from hers, and their eyes met for a quick second. He gave her a quick nod before stepping through the open door, and Alex followed, curious as to what exactly he had been doing. She returned to her position beside the door frame next to Sam. “Hey, uh, do we have any graveyard dirt?” Dean asked as they entered, and he zipped up his duffel bag.

“We should.” Sam’s lips twisted downwards in confusion at the strange and sudden question. “Why?”

Dean ignored his brother’s query, instead choosing to ask, “Yarrow?”

“Yeah.” Sam’s answer was automatic, but it only took a second for him to piece it all together. “No. Dean, no. We’re not summoning a crossroads demon.”

Dean simply shook his head, and he turned to face Sam and Alex. “Plan A bombed, so welcome to plan B: we get some red-eyed bitch in a trap, then we hold a knife to her until she calls us a pooch — special delivery.”

He looked between his two friends, gaze lingering on Alex as he sought approval, but Alex quickly shook her head, shocked that he would even propose such a plan. “And when Crowley finds out we’re summoning a hellhound?” she retorted. “He wouldn’t just send one. He’d send all of them. Hundreds. That’s suicide, Dean. Not to mention that Crowley’s gonna know something’s up — that means more heat on us, more heat on Kevin, more heat on anyone Crowley can get his hands on that have any connection to us. This is the first trial, man. It’s too early for us to risk him knowing.”

Dean frowned, but the reluctant glint in his eyes told the angel he saw the sense in her words. “Well,
you got a better idea, then?’

‘Yeah. We could stay here,’ Sam suggested, and when both Alex and Dean looked over at him in confusion, he expounded. ‘I just talked to Alice. Carl didn’t sell his soul for oil. He sold it for Alice.’

‘His wife?’

Sam nodded. ‘He loved her, she barely noticed him, so he made a deal. And now that time’s up, it’s like she barely even knew the guy.’

“So what we’re thinking is that the demon made more than one deal while in town?” The young angel’s wing tips flicked thoughtfully at the idea when Sam nodded. ‘That’s totally probably, I guess. Definitely not unheard of.’

Thunder rumbled in the distance, an ominous warning of the storm to come, and the angel tipped her head at the sound. Her silence invited Sam to speak, and he added, “Look, Dean, the family’s rich because someone booked a one-way ticket downstairs. And as of tomorrow, they’re all gonna be right here.”

“And you want to scope them out?” Dean finished, still skeptic of his brother’s plan that was so much better than his own.

Sam stood his ground. “I want to kill a hellhound and not die. How about you?”

Dean held his brother’s gaze for two long seconds, but even he couldn’t deny the sensibility of Sam’s proposition. “Two days,” he relented. He unzipped his bag and glanced over his shoulder as he added, “Then we do it my way.”

“Fine.” Sam shrugged and, having won, disappeared into the bathroom, leaving Alex standing in the doorway alone.

“So we’re staying,” she concluded. Dean nodded, and she adjusted her bag’s strap so it lay more comfortably on her shoulder. “Good. I guess I’ll be in my room then if you guys need me.” Another clap of thunder had the angel stepping out of the doorway, eager to get to the shelter of her own room before the rain began. “Night then,” she called, reaching out to close the door behind her. “See you both in the morning.”

The storm passed by mid-morning, and at sunhigh Ellie pulled them away from their chores. A large, black SUV was pulling up in front of the large Cassity house, and inside Alex could feel three souls: the rest of the Cassity family, no doubt. Alice emerged from the house as the driver’s side door opened, and an older gentleman got out. “Meet Noah Cassity,” Ellie began, and Alex shifted closer to the farmhand so she could hear her murmured introductions. “He’s seventy one, worth a billion, and just married wife number five, a twenty year old lingerie model.”

Alex pulled a disgusted face, and Dean seemed to share in her displeasure. “Cause they have so much in common?” he joked.

Ellie made a noise of amusement, and their attention was drawn to another blonde getting out from the backseat of the large Chevy. She wore a tight, short dress beneath a soft, white fur jacket that did little to protect her from the air’s chill. She moved forward to kiss Alice on the cheek as Ellie once again spoke. “Alice is Noah’s oldest, and that’s Cindy, the middle girl. She had a single on the country charts a few years ago. Then she started hitting the bottle, and well …” Ellie looked over at Dean, eyes glimmering in amusement. “Her last album was a bunch of holiday songs for dogs. My
favorites were ‘Jingle Bark Rock’ and ‘Don’t Pee on This Tree: Happy Arbor Day.’”

Dean made a low, indescribable sound. “So she’s the devil.”

Ellie chuckled. “Pretty much.” Another woman got out of the SUV, small and shy in comparison, and dressed conservatively in tan pants and a thick, warm sweater. “And there’s the baby — Margot. She ran away just before Alice and Carl tied the knot, lives in Paris.”

Sam looked over at Ellie as the Cassitys disappeared into the house. “How do you know all of this?”

The farmhand shrugged. “I’ve been working on this farm since I was thirteen, and I have eyes.” She turned to face the three hunters, her Hispanic accent growing more pronounced as she got down to business. “Okay, tonight is an all-hands on deck situation. I’m gonna need two of you in the house, serving dinner and pouring drinks. A lot of drinks.”

“Okay, well, have fun.” Dean patted Sam and Alex on the shoulders, indicating that they were volunteering for the job. “I won’t wait up.”

“And somebody’s gonna man the grill,” Ellie finished, and Alex couldn’t help the small smirk as Dean paused.

However, the only question that left the hunter’s mouth was, “What kind of grill?”

“He’s really good with a grill,” Alex added, and she reached up to pat Dean on the shoulder, mimicking the gesture he had shared with her only moments before. “Trust me. He is definitely your man.”

Alex rolled up the sleeves of her white button down as she carried the empty salad bowl back into the kitchen, briefly passing Sam as he returned to the dining room with a half-empty wine bottle. The Cassity family had been in there for barely an hour, but Sam had already gone through one and a half bottles — mostly due to Cindy, if the young angel had to take a guess. She quickly and half-heartedly refilled her bowl with the large package of leafy greens before she returned to the dining hall with a long, slow shake of her head to find the family fighting. Again.

“Maybe Alice should take after you and marry a child,” Cindy was saying, one arm casually resting over the back of her chair as she faced her father.

“Ivanka’s not a child,” Noah retorted, and he reached for his wine glass.

“Right.” Cindy did the same, holding up her half-filled glass as she quipped back, “She’s a prostitute who looks like a child.”

“Are you done?” Margot asked sharply, clearly embarrassed at her sister’s words, even though her voice held a sympathetic undertone. “Alice is in mourning.”

“I’m sorry, Margie.” Cindy’s voice grew sharper and snider as she turned to her younger sister. “I didn’t see you there — you’re too far up on your high horse.” She laughed, and Alex let air out of her nose as she removed the woman’s empty plate from the table. “Oh, yes, but you are right. We should all take a minute and say a few words about Carl. You first.” She leaned forward towards her sister, raising her voice so everyone in the room could hear. “Was he a good lay?”

“What?” Alice looked up sharply, and although Alex turned her back away before she could see the other’s reactions, she could feel the shock that settled over the guests.
“Oh, you didn’t know?” she heard Cindy say as Alex moved to place the plate in the kitchen. “Yeah, Daddy caught ‘em going at it in the barn.”

Margot’s face was a deep red as she turned to her sister. “Al, it was before you two got together,” she insisted. “I mean, Carl — he loved you.”

Their father Noah nodded deeply in agreement, but his words were sharp and cold. “Yeah, that was back when Margie was fat and Cin was sober, a lot time ago.”

“Get cancer and die, old man.” Cindy tossed her hair and reached for her drink, and Alex looked up as Ellie entered the room.

“You first, sweetie,” came Noah’s scathing retort, and Sam moved away to join Ellie and Alex at the far end of the room.

“Are they always like this?” he murmured, displeasure with their crass company diffusing from him like heat from a radiator.

Ellie leaned up against the counter and crossed her arms across her chest. “More or less.”

“How can you work here?” Sam placed the empty bottle behind her and reached for another, pulling off the cork and tossing it off to the side with a shake of his head. Alex looked over at the arguing family, a similar frown forming across her lips.

Ellie shrugged. “I love the property, I love the animals, and I tune out the people.” She let her hands fall back down to her side, and the she disappeared out of the door, leaving Alex and Sam alone. The hunter beside her looked down at the wine bottle; clearly he saw something he disliked, as he set it down and disappeared into the backroom. Alex picked up the bottle — white wine, not red like the visiting family preferred. The angel pressed the glass lip up against her own lips and took a long drink; wine was disgusting, but any alcohol at this point was good alcohol.

“I can’t remember the last time we all sat down and had a meal together,” Alice said, drawing Alex’s attention back to the Cassity family. They had all seemed to have quieted down, their latest argument having left them all silent for a good minute or two.

Cindy nodded. “It was back at the old, crappy house, when Daddy invited that traveling salesman to dinner,” she recalled, and those around the table all made noises of remembrance.

“He was so charming,” Alice murmured.

“Yeah, and English,” her sister added.

“What was his name?” Noah looked around the table, eyes squinting as he thought back all those years to that one particular night. “Kenny?”

“Crow—”

“Crowl—”

“Crowley.” The name left Alex’s mouth before she could stop it, and the conversation in the dining room ceased as all eyes turned to her. The angel’s wings drew in close as Sam stopped in the room’s doorway, the realization of their situation crashing down upon her. “Crowley,” she repeated, her mouth going dry around the word.

“Yeah,” Cindy agreed, and she turned back to her family as if Alex’s comment had been nothing
more than a simple guess. “Crowley. That was it. Crowley.”

The back of Sam’s hand hit Alex’s shoulder, and she turned to see the hunter wave her after him. She slipped away as the Cassitys returned to their memories of that night. “Crowley?” she repeated as she followed Sam out of the house. “Crowley was the crossroads demon that made these people sell their souls?”

“That’s what they said,” Sam agreed, and Alex shoved her hands into the pockets of her dark jeans. “Apparently, he swung through town ten years, to the day.”

His brother frowned, and, with a glance towards the Cassity house, asked, “So, what? Do you think ‘tea and crumpets’ made these deals and now he’s collecting?”

“Or he just sent his dog — told it to go fetch.” Sam reached up to brush his dark hair out of his face. “Dude’s the King of Hell. Grabbing a few souls — that’s got to be below his pay grade.”

Alex nodded in agreement, and her wings fluttered as a cold wind blew past. “Hellhounds are capable of seeking out a damned soul on their own,” she said. “And I searched the grounds — there’s no demon anywhere near here.”

“I guess.” Dean’s chest rose and fell as he took in a deep breath, thinking carefully. “Any idea who signed the dotted line?”

Sam looked down at Alex, and the angel met his gaze with a small shrug of her shoulders. “I have no clue,” the Winchester finally said. “It’s brutal in there.”

Dean looked like he was about to respond, but the sudden ringing of his phone stopped him from speaking. He looked down at the caller ID before he held out his phone in between the three of them. “Hey, Kev,” he answered. “What’s up?”

Kevin’s voice came through the speaker, crackling slightly due to the spotty signal. “Hey, Dean, good news, uh, kind of.”

“S-Sorry. Um, I found something on the tablet, uh, about hellhounds,” the prophet began. “Uh, this mean anything to you? ‘The dire creatures may be seen only by the damned or through an object scorched with holy fire’?”

“Holy fire?” Alex repeated, leaning closer to the phone so Kevin could hear her as well. “As in burning holy oil, maybe?”

“It’s got to be. We could use a window,” Dean suggested.

“Or glasses.”

Dean paused at Kevin’s suggestion, but he quickly nodded, agreeing that the prophet’s idea was probably better. “I think we’ve still got some Jesus juice left in the trunk. Alright,” he said, looking up at Sam and Alex. “I’ll take care of the, uh, the x-ray specs. You two stay here. Do not let J.R. and the gang out of your sight, alright?”

Sam spoke for the both of them. “Right.” He leaned forward to say into the phone, “Hey, Kevin, uh,
you did great, man. Get some sleep.”

“Okay. Tha—” The prophet was cut off as Dean hung up, and he shoved his phone back into his pocket.

“Come on.” Sam led the way back into the house, and Alex followed, casting one last glance over her shoulder to see that Dean was moving off back towards the barn. “We need to get back inside.”

Cindy and Alice sat at the table, all alone, and Alex hurried forward to clear the table of all the empty plates. Her grace flicked out as she tried to locate the other members of the family, but they weren’t in the house. “Sam …” The angel moved over to where the Winchester was at the sink. “Where’s Noah and Margot? They’re not in the house.”

Her question was answered when Cindy spoke up. “Oh, look. Daddy’s drunk and armed. Must be Christmas.”

Sam's eyes widened in surprise. “Stay here,” he ordered, and he ran out of the house. Alex watched him go, eyes narrowed at how she was being left alone to babysit. However, she resigned herself to looking out the window. Sam was hurrying after Noah and Margot, the former of which held a large rifle in his hands as he moved off towards the woods.

“Hey! Yeah, you.” Cindy's loud, demanding voice had Alex turning away from the window with a downwards twitch of her lips. The woman shook her empty wine glass. “Keep ‘em coming, sweetheart,” she ordered, her pet name for the angel doing nothing to soften her scathing voice. “It's gonna be a long night.”

“Oh my God!” The door burst open only ten minutes later, and Noah ran into the sitting room, eyes wide open. Sam and Dean followed at his heels, and Alex moved to join them by the door as Alice and Cindy jumped to their feet. “Margot's dead!”

“What happened?” Alex’s wings drew in close at the father's grief-stricken cry, and she stared up at Sam. “What was it? Hellhound? Why the hell didn’t you call —”

“Margot was killed by a hellhound,” Sam told her, cutting the young angel off, and she fell silent with a low, frustrated breath. “I didn’t call you because we couldn’t afford to leave these guys alone. She was already dead, Pip. What could you have done?”

“What was that thing?” Noah seemed to have regained the majority of his composure as he looked over at the three hunters, and Alex followed the Winchester over to where the three remaining Cassitys were gathered around the couch.

“It was a hellhound,” Dean explained, his deep voice tight with anger. “See, when you sell your soul to a demon, they’re the ones that come and rip it out of you.”

“D-Demon,” Alice stuttered out, and Alex nodded.

“Crowley. Bouncy guy, about yea big, mountain of dicks.” Dean’s lips set into a tight line as he paused to let the family take it in, hand going up to estimate the demon’s height. “We know he was here ten years ago, making dreams come true. Now, if you didn’t sign, great. That freak out there won’t touch you. But if you did, I need to know, and I need to know now. So, hands up.”

The two daughters exchanged looks, and Noah lifted his chin, defiant in the face of such danger. “So, wait. T-The British guy was a demon, and now there’s a hellhound after us? A-Are you
“They’re obviously insane,” Cindy agreed, and Alex’s wings rose irritatedly at her continual scorn.

Sam clearly felt the same. “Don’t play dumb,” he snapped.

“Yeah, I’m not playing,” the woman retorted. “I didn’t sell my damn soul.”

“Well, somebody did, and the sooner that idiot owns up, the sooner the rest of you can go.” Dean crossed his arms when the family in front of him looked around, refusing to speak as they waited for someone else to do so. “Alright.” Dean shook his head, giving up. “Seal ‘em in.”

“What?!” Alice jumped to her feet, eyes wide in fear and indignation at Dean’s proposal, and Alex stepped forward, ready to intercept and control the situation.

Sam’s hand went out to grab her shoulder, keeping the angel back. “Look,” he started, and Alex waited while he tried to reason with them, “I’m gonna spread goofer dust around the doors, the windows. That will keep the hellhound out … for a while.”

Noah watched as Sam pulled out the pouch of goofer dust from his jacket. “What is that — for how long?”

“Long enough for me to stab it in the throat.” Dean pulled the demon knife out of his jacket pocket so everyone could see before he once again concealed it from view.

“No way. No way. You can’t do this. You can’t —”

Dean stepped forward, his sharp words cutting the father off as he pulled out his Colt. “Yes, I can. You want to know why? Because it’s what I do. And, buddy, I’m the best. See, I gut old yeller out there, and maybe, just maybe, you walk away. I don’t — you’re meat.” He motioned towards Noah with the barrel of his gun. “So sit down, shut up … and put these on.” He held up a pair of handcuffs.

Noah’s face went blank for only a second as Dean’s orders registered, and then his brow furrowed in indignation. “You can’t be serious!”

“As a heart attack.” Dean looked over at Alex, and the angel looked up, awaiting his orders. “Go get the rest of the goofer dust and some handcuffs from the trunk while Sam and I take care of these three.”

“No sir.” The angel hurried out of the house and down the road to where the Impala was parked. Her grace had it unlocked by the time she reached it, and she propped the false bottom up with Dean’s sawed-off as she dug around for the cloth drawstring bag of goofer dust. Alex lifted it to her nose, nostrils flaring as she confirmed she had grabbed the correct bag of herbs. She grabbed two more pairs of handcuffs before she closed and locked the trunk and walked back up towards the Cassity farm. Her wings twitched in the cold hair, but she refused to fly back to the house — the Cassities were already struggling to wrap their heads around demons and hellhounds; adding angels to the mix didn’t seem very advantageous.

“We’re here to help,” Sam was saying as she reentered the house, and Alex handed the goofer dust to Dean before joining the younger brother in the center of the room. Sam moved forward to handcuff the rest of the Cassities to chairs, and the young angel ignored the glares she received from Cindy.

“Like you helped Margie?” Noah retorted, his attention too focused upon Sam to even acknowledge
Alex’s return.

Sam hesitated, clearly thinking about a response, but after only a second he shook his head. “When the hellhound gets close,” he explained, ignoring Noah’s pointed comment, “you might start seeing things, hearing things. It’s gonna feel like you took the brown acid, and it’s trying to kill you. The handcuffs are so you won’t hurt yourself.”

“And when one of you starts bugging out,” Dean added as he finished his line of goofer dust on the windows, “we’ll know who’s on the tap to be puppy chow.” He crossed the room and started on the doors, and the Cassitys looked at each other in scornful suspicion.

Sam moved after his brother, and Alex tipped her head so she could hear their whispers. “So … what’s our play?” Sam asked.

Dean straightened up and tightened the drawstring on the bag. “Well, you camp here, figure out who whored their soul. I’m gonna go scout the grounds — see if I can’t gank Huckleberry Hound before he makes his next move.”

“Wait.” Sam spoke before Alex could, but the angel did turn in surprise and indignation at his reckless plan. “You’re not going alone, Dean. I’m gonna come with you.”

“Wrong.”

“Uh, they’re on lockdown, and you need backup.” Sam glanced behind him to where the Cassitys were sullenly handcuffed to their chairs. “At least take Alex,” he added as he locked eyes with the angel.

At her name, Alex approached, but Dean still firmly shook his head. “No. I need the both of you to be safe, Sam, okay? That’s what I need.”

“Need?” Alex repeated, and her shoulders and wings rolled backwards as she straightened up. “And what about what we need, Dean? What about how we need you to be safe?”

“This is different,” Dean snapped, and anger flashed in his green eyes at the young angel’s rebuke. “Because of the three trials crap,” he explained when her eyes narrowed, and he turned to Sam. “God’s little obstacle course. We’ve been down roads like this before, man — with Yellow-Eyes, Lucifer, Dick fucking Roman. We both know where this ends. One of us dies … or worse.”

“So, what? You just up and decided it’s gonna be you?” Sam’s voice rose in vexation and offense, but Dean remained firm.

“I’m a grunt, Sam.” An emotion passed across Dean’s face, something dark and sorrowful and gone too quickly for either Sam or Alex to place. “You’re not. You’ve always been the brains of this operation.”

“Dean—”

“And you told me yourself that you see a way out.” The Winchester’s voice grew stronger with each word. “You see a light at the end of this ugly-ass tunnel. I don’t. But I tell you what I do know — it’s that I’m gonna die with a gun in my hand. Cause that’s what I have waiting for me. I want you to get out. I want you to have a life — become a Man of Letters, whatever.”

Alex stepped forward. “Dean, I don’t —”

“No.” Dean turned on her, jaw squared. “No. You in heaven with Cas a-and kids, Sam living the life
he wants — that’s my perfect ending, and it’s the only one that I’m gonna get. So I’m gonna do these trials. I’m gonna do them alone. End of story. You’re staying in here, I’m going out there. If landsk...
Noah’s jaw fell open in anger at his daughter’s blatant accusation. “Why the hell would you think that?”

“Cause you’re a walking corpse, and you’re married to a centerfold.” Cindy rolled her eyes, her answer obvious. “I did the math.”

“She likes money, and I’m rich,” Noah riposted. “Do it again.” He paused only a second, gathering his thoughts, before he threw an accusation of his own. “You sing like crap, so explain the music career.”

“Hello — autotune!”

Alex glanced up at Sam and shook her head. The Winchester glared at the three Cassitys and snapped out, “Alright! That’s enough.”

“Oh, is it, four eyes? Is it enough?” Cindy met Sam’s glare, mockery weighing down her voice, and Alex stepped forward, contempt making her grace prickle.

“Don’t make my blow up something other than that light —” she started to warn, but the firm hand on her shoulder cut her off. “What?” she snapped, turning back to Sam. “They’re fucking annoying.”

“I don’t know why you even think one of us made the deal,” Noah muttered; thankfully, Alex’s threat had shaken them enough to snap them out of their temper.

The young angel snorted at the innocence of his words, and Sam answered impatiently. “Because you struck oil where there was no oil. That didn’t seem weird to you?”

The Cassitys exchanged looks, and Alex rolled her eyes when she realized they seemed to be discovering this for the very first time. Alice, who had been sitting quietly, finally ventured, “Margie. Margie used to say that — that if we were rich, we’d all be happy.”

A sense of sorrow fell over the room at the mention of their dead family member, and Noah let out a low, sad scoff. “Right,” he muttered, staring down at the ground. “We’re the damn Waltons.”

Alex shifted closer to Sam, lowering her voice so only the Winchester could hear. “Maybe Margie was the one responsible,” she murmured. “What if the hellhound’s gone now and we’re just chasing our tails?”

The frown on Sam’s face echoed her concern, but before he could speak his mind, Noah spoke his. “I need to take a leak,” he announced, and Alex rolled her eyes in disgust at his crude manners.

“Hold it,” she advised, not even bothering to glance backwards.

“Yeah, at my age?” Noah retorted, and Alex finally turned to look over at the handcuffed man. “Not really an option, so either you let me go or get me a bottle.”

“Ugh.” Cindy glared scornfully over at her father. “You’re disgusting.”

Alex opened her mouth, ready to snap, but she was distracted by Sam. He hit her on the shoulder with the back of his hand, and the angel turned around to see the Winchester pointing out the window. A creature prowled on the edge of the tree line, eyes glowing bright with hellfire. Hellhound.

Panicked retreating footsteps had both of the hunters spinning around in surprise. One of the chairs was empty, and Alex watched as the door slammed closed behind Alice. “Dammit!” Alex cursed,
and her graze dropped down to the still-cuffed handcuffs on the chair. “How the hell did she do that?” Sam didn’t answer, already across the room and out of the door, and Alex glared down at the two remaining Cassitys. “Don’t even think about leaving,” she warned, and her wings stretched outwards as she took off after Sam and Alice.

Alice was on a trajectory towards her car, Sam close at her heels, and the angel landed in front of them, wings drawing in close as she felt touched asphalt. Alice let out a panicked cry at the angel’s sudden appearance, and her surprise had her tripping. Alex was there to catch her before she hit the ground, and Alice let out a sob. “No! No no, please. Just let me go, please!” She tried to struggle away, but Alex held her still. “No! Please, don’t hurt my family!”

“We’re not going to hurt you —” Alex hissed, but she cut herself off, wings flaring outwards as she saw the approaching hellhound. It broke into a run, and Alex shoved Alice towards the other hunter. “Sam! Get her inside.”

The Winchester’s own gaze was fixed on the hellhound, but at Alex’s words, he pushed Alice ahead of him. “Come on!” he yelled. “Get in the house.” Alex’s weapon fell into her hands as she positioned herself between the humans and the hellish creature. The hellhound stopped at the edge of the driveway, prowling along the thick, dewy grass. Glowing eyes studied the angel, and fangs gleamed in the pale moonlight. Its large, heavy paws thudded on the pavement as it paced back and forth, and its breath hung in the cold, dark air.

Alex held her ground, leaving them in a supernatural standoff. Her wings stretched higher as the hellhound’s hackles rose, and the tension in the air coiled tighter and tighter, threatening to snap.

The hellhound moved first. Dirt and grass sprayed everywhere as it bounded away further into the Cassity farmland, leaving Alex to stare after it. The creature was still on the property, but he was moving away from the house. If he wasn’t going after the Cassity family, then who?

Her wings carried her back to the house, and she landed next to Sam in the middle of the living room. Alice was once again handcuffed to the chair, but her eyes were still wide with fear. “Sam.” Alex’s voice had the hunter turning. “The hellhound isn’t after any of these guys. He didn’t even try to get past me.”

Sam’s eyebrows furrowed as he tried to understand what that meant. “So why did it come after us?” he asked.

Alex shrugged, feathers rustling at the movement. “I don’t know. It seemed more interested in me than you guys. Maybe cause I’m an angel — it thought I was here for the souls, maybe. Point is, it ran off towards the barn, Sam. There’s only one farmhand who lives there.”

“Ellie.” Sam glanced off towards the door, and Alex paused as she let a plan come to his mind. “Go to the car and get a sawed-off,” he ordered. “I’m going to the barn. Bring it to me then find Dean.”

“Sam—”

“Alex, no.” The hunter cut her off before she could speak. “You’re fast. Faster than any of us. Go.”

The angel didn’t hesitate, and she took off into the air. She spiraled through the sky before landing beside the sleek, black hood of the Impala. She brushed her hand over the cold metal as she circled around to stand in front of the trunk. The pins of the lock moved and shifted, clicking into place, and Alex threw open the trunk and false bottom. She dug around for a sawed-off and rock salt shells, making sure to shove two into the barrel and two more into her pocket before she closed and locked the trunk.
Her wings carried her back to Sam, who was already halfway to the barn. “Hellhound’s up ahead,” she informed him as she handed him the extra shells. “Come on.” She ran off towards the side of the barn. The young angel could feel Dean there, and the hellhound as well. There was blood in the air, and Alex slid around the corner to see Dean collapsed against the barn’s wooden side. He let out a groan and gripped his side as blood wet his fingers. The hellhound stood between Dean and Alex, and it spun around when the angel snapped her grace. Teeth flashed, and a snarl cut through the cold air as it launched itself at her.

A shotgun blast sent the hound flying back with a pained and surprised yelp, and Alex looked over her shoulder to see Sam. Seeing her hesitation, he snapped, “Go! Get Dean.”

Alex leapt over the hellhound as it struggled to its feet, and it lunged at her in passing. Jaws snapped at her feet, and even though it missed, the attack caused Alex to stumble. She landed on her knees beside Dean, wings flared out as spun around, ready to face the beast, but Sam moved first, dropping his gun and throwing himself onto the ground. The hellhound leapt towards the hunter, and Sam rolled onto his back in time to catch the creature by the throat. It strained downwards at Sam’s face, snapping and snarling with a vicious fury, and the Winchester struggled against it. Alex rose to her feet, ready to help, but Sam was faster. His fingers closed around the handle of the demon knife that lay in the dirt, long since lost from Dean’s hands.

The knife swung upwards, and with a strained grunt of effort, Sam sunk the blade into the hellhound’s chest and drew it downwards. The knife cut through the creature’s stomach, and blood and organs spilled forth with a wet sound and foul smell. The hellhound collapsed onto Sam, and the hunter went limp with a low groan.

An echoed groan from Dean had Alex dropping back to her knees. “Shut up,” she muttered when she peeled back his shirt and Dean cried out. “You’re fine.” She stretched out her hand, grace moving out ahead to begin the healing process before he hand rested against the healed flesh. Her grace sunk in deeper, healing the inner muscles. She pulled away when the wound was gone, and her attention turned onto Sam. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Sam pushed the hellhound off of him with a low grunt. “Dean?”

“Wonderful,” came the muttered reply. Alex dusted off the knees of her jean as Dean rolled over, and he reached for his own pair of glasses burnished in holy fire that had fallen off in the melee.

“So the hellhound was after Ellie,” Alex concluded as both hunters slowly rose to their feet. Sam’s clothing was dark with blood, and the angel watched in disgust as intestines slithered off of him and landed on the ground with a wet splat. Sam nodded in agreement with her statement, but Dean seemed distracted, hands frozen holding his glasses on his face. Alex flicked her wings, feathers rustling and shimmering in the barn light. “Hey,” she quipped. “My eyes are up here, Winchester. Was it Ellie?”

Dean looked over at Sam, and a quick, silent conversation took place over the angel’s head before the oldest Winchester agreed. “Uh, yeah. Yeah. It was Ellie. Her mother had Parkinson’s — You have wings.”

“Um, yeah. I’ve had them for years,” Alex reminded, turning between Dean and Sam. “I feel like I’ve mentioned this all before.” She shook out her wings, slightly self-conscious about all of the attention they were getting. “Where’s Ellie?”

It took Dean another second or two, but eventually he was able to shake himself out of his amazed stupor. “In her room. This way.” He led the way into the barn, limping slightly. Alex and Sam followed to find Ellie standing in a small circle of goofer dust, a half-empty bottle of whiskey in her
left hand. “Is it gone?” she asked, gaze flickering across the three hunters. It paused on Sam, and her eyes widened slightly at the sight of so much blood.

Dean grunted as he leaned against the dresser, one hand going up to his still-sore side. “It’s gone,” he agreed, and immediately Ellie stepped out of the circle, moving towards Dean.

“Are you okay?” She looked down at Dean’s torn and bloodstained clothes.

“I’m fine.” Dean peeled back the torn fabric to show the unmarred skin. “Alex — she, uh, she took care of it.”

Ellie looked back at the angel, and several seconds of silence ensued as the farmhand tried to find answers to questions she didn’t want to ask. Eventually, she turned back to Dean, as satisfied as she was willing to be. “So now what?”

“Now we make you a hex bag, and you start running,” Dean said, voice firm. “If Crowley can’t find you, then he won’t be able to sic another mutt on you.”

“So I’m not going to hell?”

Dean looked over at Alex. “Not on my watch,” he promised, the look in his eyes reminding Alex to hold her tongue before she corrected him. The same look was given to Sam, and then Dean turned back to Ellie. “Will you give us a minute?”

“The Cassitys are in the house,” Alex added. “You can tell them that it’s safe now.” She held Ellie’s gaze, unsurprised to find a certain level of suspicious distrust still in those brown eyes, but the farmhand did eventually nod in accordance with her plan.

The door closed behind her, and Sam turned to face his brother, arms folded across his chest. “Dean, even if she can dodge Crowley, as soon as Ellie dies, her soul is earmarked for hell,” he reminded, cross that his brother had lied to her.

Dean shook his head. “Not if we shut it down first.” He stepped forward and pulled Sam’s bloody button down out of his brother’s hands, stalking across the room, hand reaching into his right pocket.

Sam’s shoulders fell as he let out a frustrated breath. “The spell’s not going to work for you, Dean.”

Dean didn’t listen, and he pulled out the folded and crumpled spell that Kevin had written. “Ka-nuh-ahm-dahr,” he read, and Alex crossed her arms when absolutely nothing happened. Dean looked around, waiting, but eventually he had to face the truth. “Doesn’t matter.” He shoved the spell back into his pocket. “We’ll track down another hellhound, and I’ll kill it.”

“No.”

Dean turned at the insistence in his brother’s voice. “Sam, I didn’t pass the test.”

“But I did,” Sam Winchester reminded, and he lifted his head as he straightened his back, standing firm as he stepped towards his brother. “And I’m doing the rest of them.”

Anger flashed through Dean’s eyes, darkening his face, and he took a step forward. “My ass you are,” he retorted, and he turned his head to look at Alex. “Tell him,” he prompted shortly.

Alex hesitated, unsure that she wanted to even side with Dean, and Sam cross his arms. “I’m closing the gates. It’s a suicide mission for you.”
“Sam —”

“I want to slam hell shut, too, okay?” Sam cut his brother off, voice sharp as he demanded that his brother listen. “But I want to survive it. I want to live, and so should you. You have friends up here, family. I mean, hell, you’ve even got your own room now. You were right, okay? I see light at the end of this tunnel. And I’m sorry you don’t — I am. But it’s there. And if you come with me, I can take you to it.”

Dean looked over at Alex, his gaze even sharper than before, and the angel lifted her head definitely. “Come on,” Dean half-insisted, half-begged. “Be smart.”

“I am being smart,” Alex retorted. “Why aren’t you?”

Sam held out a hand across Alex’s chest, and she fell silent. “You are smart, Dean,” he insisted, and Alex let out a breath of soft agreement, regretful that she had been so harsh. “You’re not a grunt. You’re a genius. When it comes to lore, to — you’re the best damn hunter I have ever seen. Better than me, better than dad.”

“What about me,” Alex added, fully truthful in her words.

Sam nodded. “I believe in you, Dean. We believe in you. So please — please believe in me, too.” He held out his hand, silently pleading for Dean to hand over the Enochian spell. Dean hesitated, green eyes searching his brother’s face for any sign of weakness, for anything that he could use to keep fighting. But he found nothing. Dean pulled the spell out of his pocket and place it into his brother’s hand, and Alex watched as Sam unfolded it. “Kah-nah-ahm-dahr.”

Energy spiraled through the room like a rushing hurricane, ruffling Alex’s feathers as it twisted into Sam. The hunter turned and dropped to the ground with a strained grunt of pain. “Sam?” Alex dropped to the ground with him, her grace retreating deep within her body at the strength behind the spell.

“Sam!” Dean stepped forward, and Sam planted his right hand on the ground as he tried to stabilize himself. Power surged through the floor beneath Alex’s feet, radiating inwards as it pushed itself up into the Winchester’s hand, beneath the flesh and through the bone. His hand and forearm glowed with its white, powerful light, highlighting veins and tendons as it dissipated up into the hunter.

And then it was gone.

Sam’s pained noises faded into heavy, labored breaths, and Alex finally dared to reach out and stabilize him. “You okay?” she asked, worry sharpening the edge of her voice.

He nodded, and Alex watched as some of the tension left his muscles. “I’m good,” he promised breathily. “I’m okay.” He looked up at Alex and Dean, and the angel watched, startled, as the light swirled through his eyes, making the hazel irises brightened for the most fleeting of moments before it faded away. “I can do this.”
February 10th, 2014

Lebanon, Kansas

Alex stretched out on the bunker floor, wings spread out and pressed into the warm stone. The lights flickered in a soft, comforting fashion above her head, and the young angel felt her eyes drift close. The bunker was quiet; not a single soul marred the emptiness of its hallways. The angel was alone, spread out across the library floor.

The Winchesters were on the road, still returning from Idaho and the first trial. They were destined to arrive at the bunker in the next hour, and Alex had no intention of moving before then. She was comfortable, dozing somewhere between thought and rest, a state of mind she hadn’t been in since … since Castiel.

The angel turned her gaze up towards the ceiling, and her feathers dragged across the stone as she shifted. “Castiel?” Her voice echoed off the barren walls. “Please answer me.” She paused, waiting, but nothing came. Alex closed her eyes, focusing harder on her prayer, forcing it out across the metaphysical plane. “It’s been a month, Cas. Are you okay? Are you even alive?” Her throat tightened around her words, and she blinked back unbidden tears. “Where are you?” The fear of his death suddenly spiked through her, now that it was spoken aloud, reverberated through her chest and wings, gripping at her heart with its icy claws. “Please, Castiel. You promised … and I miss you.”

Alex?

Alex scrambled into a sitting position at the prayer of her name, but her shoulders slumped when she recognized the voice. Dean.

Alex? We’re in St. Louis right now, and we need you ASAP, okay?

The young angel shakily rose to her feet, and, after shaking out her wings, she took off out of the bunker and into the sky. However unhappy she was with Dean’s untimely interruption, she couldn’t help the feeling that he was offering a much needed distraction from Castiel’s absence. Her heart pounded in her chest, still fearful of the sudden and very real thought of the seraph’s death, and she forced her wings to go faster.

Alex found the Winchesters easily, and she landed behind Dean in the parking lot of a small motel. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong.” Dean turned from the trunk, his bag slung over his shoulder, and he shot his brother a disapproving glance. “Sam thinks Shemp was a funnier stooge than Curly.”

“That would be because he was,” the taller Winchester shot back. “I’m sorry, but I thought Curly’s work was too obvious.”

Alex frowned. Dean had called her in to settle an argument about The Three Stooges? “I thought you were in trouble,” she reprimanded before she turned to Sam, arms folded across her chest. “But Dean’s right. Curly was by far the better Stooge.”

Indignation made Sam’s brow furrow, but, faced with the two of them, he only shook his head. “Whatever,” he conceded, not giving in but not willing to keep arguing.
“So why are we in Missouri?” Alex followed the Winchesters into the motel room and took a seat on
the furthest bed. “You were supposed to be in Kansas.”

“Change of plans.” Dean dropped his bag beside the other bed. “An old friend called in a favor.” A
look at his brother accompanied his words, and Alex picked up a note of displeasure in his tone.

Sam frowned over at Dean, and he set his own bag down on the bed next to Alex. “We own him this
much, Dean. It won’t hurt just to check it out.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Why?” he questioned. “The guy saved our lives once, Sammy. It’s not like he
—”

“What, Dean? Not like he saved our lives?” Sam turned to look down at Alex. “James Frampton is
an old friend. A cop. He texted us last night asking for help. I assumed it was work-related.” He
watched as Alex tipped her head, patiently waiting for him to explain the ‘he saved our lives’ part,
and with a nod, he complied. “He worked with us on a case three or so years ago,” he explained. “A,
uh, lunatic alchemist after you were mauled by that werewolf.”

Alex’s hand went up to rest on her side at the painful memory. She remember that case well; the
summer of 2009 down in Texas. The scars on her torso were gone, thanks to Castiel, but a long,
raised line on her left leg still remained. She looked over at Dean, waiting curiously for his response.

“I’m gonna go for a beer run,” he finally announced. “You need anything?”

Sam looked over to see his brother staring straight at him. “No,” he promised. “I’m good.”

“You sure?”

The Winchester blinked in surprise. “Yeah.”

“Cause you did just gank a hellhound,” Dean reminded, “which is no slice of pie, and, uh, there is a
minefield of who knows what shit ahead. Just want to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m good,” Sam repeated, and he frowned when Dean took a step closer. Alex rose to her feet,
ready to leave with Dean, but the hunter wasn’t done.

“Cause you know, we could find another devil dog,” he suggested, voice struggling to stay light with
the weighty subject. “You could tag out, I could snuff the son of a bitch.”

Frustration and annoyance darkened Sam’s face, and he folded his arms across his broad chest.
“Dean, Kevin doesn’t even know what the next trial is yet,” he reminded, his patience wearing thin.
“So whatever it is you’re worried about, stop. I’ll be ready.”

Dean paused, and then he nodded in reluctant acquiescence. He moved off towards the motel door
without another word. It closed behind him, and Sam and Alex exchanged looks. “I’ll go with him,”
the young angel offered. “I’m, um, sure he’s just worried.”

She followed Dean across the parking lot and into the Impala. The car started as she slid into the
front seat, and as Dean started to back out,he said, “You don’t have to stick around, you know. Me
and Sammy can handle this.”

Alex sat silently for several seconds, watching a grey pickup speed by before she shook her head.
“No, no, it’s fine. You called me here, so you’re stuck with me. It’ll be faster and safer if I tag along.
Besides,” she added in a much quieter tone, “I don’t think I want to be alone right now.” She felt
Dean’s gaze on her, waiting for her to explain. “It’s Castiel,” she finally said, and the words spilled
forth. “I tried to give him time to complete his penance in peace, but I started praying to him, and I’m — I’m worried that something’s seriously wrong.” Her voice dropped into a whisper, afraid of speaking too loud, lest her words come true. “I’m scared something bad happened to him.”

A warm hand came to rest on her knee, and Alex cast Dean a surprised look out of the corner of her eye. He was staring straight ahead, watching the road in front of him. Dean’s gaze flickered over to hers after a moment, green eyes meeting grey. “Cas is a big boy,” he finally said. “He can take care of himself.”

Alex turned her eyes back out the front windshield as the hand disappeared, well aware of the unspoken truth hanging behind Dean’s words. They were hardly comforting to ensure her of Castiel’s safety. Dean couldn’t make that promise. Not in their line of work. “He hasn’t answered me, Dean. He made me a promise, and Castiel always keeps his promises.”

Dean didn’t answer, and Alex fell into silence, watching the town go by. Dean pulled the Impala into the parking lot of a nearby gas station. He lead the way into the store and down the back aisle. “Hey, why don’t you go pick out some snacks?” he suggested. “Anything you want.”

Alex’s wings lifted slightly as she momentarily brightened. “Thanks, De.” She disappeared down a different aisle, leaving Dean to seek out the cheapest beer. A sense of fear still gnawed at her rib cage, threatening to grow into panic if the angel let her control slip. She pulled Lucifer’s grace from her stomach up into her chest; the archangel’s cold touch smothered her fraying nerves like ice on an open wound.

She pulled a bag of plain potato chips off of the shelf, and she tucked them under her arm as she grabbed a heat-sealed bag of jerky. On a second thought, the angel scooped up some pork rinds for Dean before she stepped out of the aisle.

The Winchester was in line waiting for her, beer in hand. He gave her — and the pork rinds — an approving look as she joined him in line. “Good choice.”

“Figured you’d enjoy it.” Alex tossed the snacks onto the counter, stepping backwards to let the Winchester put down the beer. “So, do we know anything about this case?”

She looked up at Dean as she waited for a response, but he merely shook his head. “Nope,” he eventually said when the conversation halted. “Nothing except that he needed help.” He pulled out his wallet for the cashier, and Alex slipped past him to start packing up their food. Dean joined her, and together they returned to the car. Alex waited in silence as Dean started the car, and her wings twitched at the pressing darkness that surrounded the Winchester; there was something he wanted to say. A soft exhale from her lips finally had Dean speaking. “I need you to get me a hellhound.”

What? The absurdity of the demand prevented her from connecting the dots for a second. “A hellhound?” she repeated. “Are you insane?”

The car came to a stop, and Dean turned to look her in the eyes. “Closing the gates of hell — this is the biggest thing we’re ever going to do,” he insisted, and Alex was so shocked by the intensity in his gaze that she forgot to point out that that wasn’t true. “We’ve only got one shot at this, and if Sam drops the ball —”

“You want to go behind your brother’s back,” Alex finished, voice flat. “Sam’s strong enough, Dean. He’ll do whatever he has to.”

“And what if he can’t?” Dean’s fingers tightened on the dark steering wheel. “You heard him on that farm, Alex. He said the only difference between me and him was that he wanted to live. What if
“living isn’t part of the deal?”

“We don’t know that it’s going to come to that.”

“We don’t know that it won’t,” Dean retorted. “What — what if some sick, twisted part of the deal is that Sam goes to hell? If someone needs to die and go to hell, it … it should be me.”

Anger surged through the young angel at those words, and she turned in her seat to fully face the Winchester. “Well boo-hoo,” she snapped. “You don’t get to choose if you die, Dean! You went to Purgatory and left me all alone, even though you promised me you wouldn’t! You can sacrificed yourself, put yourself through as much shit as you can, but that doesn’t make you a hero. It makes you stupid.” Her feathers ruffled out angrily. “Sam’s strong enough to complete these trials, no matter what it demands, and hell or not, he’s going to do everything he can to keep you and me safe.”

“That’s not his job!”

“It’s all of our jobs!” Alex yelled, raising her voice over Dean’s booming indignation. “We look out for each other, Dean. It’s my job to look out from you just as much as you look out for me. And I’d rather have Sam maybe die than you needlessly give up your life.”

She watched as Dean frowned, turning his gaze back to the road. “If Sam isn’t strong enough, I’m taking over,” he warned. “And you’re either in or you’re out.”

The young angel’s wings fell as the tension subsided, and she relaxed back into her seat. “If Sam shows that he isn’t strong enough to complete the trials,” she agreed, “I’m in. But only then.”

Their conversation ended as they turned the corner, and the motel came into view. Alex shifted the bags between her feet as they pulled into parking space in front of their room. Dean shut the car off, and Alex gathered up their snacks as they exited the Impala.

The motel door was flung open, and Alex looked up in surprise to see Sam step outside to greet them. He closed the door behind him, all the while positioning himself almost defensively in front of it, and Alex’s eyes narrowed in confusion as they approached. “Hey,” he greeted.

“Hey,” Dean echoed, perplexity deepening his tone. He glanced towards the door, and Sam cleared his throat, hands going out as they stopped in front of him.

“Okay okay okay,” he started defensively to Dean. “Before you get pissed off, I-I just want — you might get pissed,” he quickly backtracked to Dean, before adding to Alex, “I-I don’t think you will — but I just want the both of you to know this isn’t my fault. She just showed up at the door okay? Didn’t track in any mud. Just wanted her belly scratched. I-I figured maybe she could stay tonight, and we’d try and find her a home tomorrow?”

Alex looked up at Dean, and the Winchester met her grey eyes with a downward twitch of his lips. Sam opened the door, a forced half-smile on his lips, and Alex peered inside.

A woman sat on the far bed. A short dress did little to hide the long, dark legs that were stretched out across the sheets, crossed at the ankles, and attractive, round eyes watched them closely. “She can stay the night,” Dean quickly agreed, but Alex just stepped into the room.

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“There’s a woman on my bed.” She turned to face Sam, eyes narrowed in accusation. “Why is there a woman on my bed?”

Sam was staring at the woman, eyes wide and mouth open. “Two seconds ago she was a dog,” he
insisted, eyes turning on Alex. Desperate bewilderment lined his voice, and Alex’s wings flicked in
disgust.

“Why the hell is she on my bed?” she retorted. “I — What did you mean by you didn’t think I’d be
pissed? She better have been a dog, Sam, or Father help me —”

She was cut off as Sam slipped by her, one arm going out to push her aside as he drew a silver knife.
Dean moved just as quickly, setting down the beer and moving between Alex and the woman. Alex
heard the bed creak as the stranger sat up, and the angel threw her head back in a loud, exasperated
groan as she let her bags fall to the ground. “Oh my Father in Heaven,” she deadpanned, turning to
face the three of them. “She’s not a fucking shifter, okay?”

The woman gave a slow nod in Alex’s direction. “I’m a familiar,” she confirmed, and Alex felt her
feather rustle outwards at the words.

“A what?” Dean’s scorn masked his ignorance, and the woman turned her dark eyes onto his face.

“They’re companions to witches,” Alex explained, and she stepped forward to stand beside Sam
with a sharp frown. “Usually in the singular, sometimes they hook up with more than one. They
have both a human and an animal form.” She noticed the diamond-studded collar around the
familiar’s neck as she approached.

“I get a more accurate read on people in my other persona,” the familiar added with a look at Alex;
the angel straightened up under her stare. She held the woman’s stare until she turned back to the
Winchesters. “Approaching guys in a motel room like this,” the familiar finished, “well, it gets
complicated.” Her gaze moved to Sam when the hunter let out a distrustful hum. “My name’s Portia.
I belong to James Frampton.”

“No no no.” Dean made a motion towards the familiar that I will look up later. “See, that — that
doesn’t work for us, cause that would mean that our buddy James is a witch.”

“Wow.” The familiar’s voice dripped with sarcasm. “You’re quick.”

“James is a fucking witch?” The Winchester repeated, his voice growing sharp as he glared down at
the familiar on the bed, as if the very idea was her fault.

Much to Alex’s surprise, Portia didn’t even flinch under his stare. “He wasn’t when you met him,”
she began, “but the last case you worked with him —”

“Uh, lunatic alchemist,” Sam cut in, and Alex nodded in concurrence with his true statement. “It was
nasty.”

The familiar rose to her feet with a relaxed ease and grace, and her heels clicked on the floor as she
approached to stand within a foot of the three hunters. “James wanted to learn more about that
world,” she explained quietly. “The black arts, witchcraft. It became the center of his life.”

Dean cut her off. “Wait, so you’re telling me that James the cop became a witch because of us? Unh-
unh.” He shook his head and laughed, unable to even begin to accept the familiar’s words.

Portia tipped her head, eyes narrowing as she studied him. “You don’t like dogs, do you?” she
deduced. Dean only scoffed.

The tension grew, thickening the air, and Alex shook out her wings in search of a distraction from
the silence. “Wait,” she asked, “So James isn’t a cop anymore?”
The familiar’s gaze swung over to the young angel. “I don’t believe I caught your name,” the familiar said, but before Alex could speak, her question was answered. “He’s still a cop. Homicide detective. His new powers make his work even better. I have a feeling you can relate.”

Alex lifted her chin, slightly wary about the familiar’s comment, and Dean immediately jumped in defensively. “No. No no no, that’s different. She — she’s different.”

“What does James need from us?” Sam asked, cutting his brother off. “What happened?”

Portia turned to the younger Winchester, her dark eyes tracing his features before she spoke. “Something’s been happening to him. It started with excruciating headaches, screaming sounds in his ears, horrible nightmares, unable to sleep or think.” Her gaze slid over to Dean. “He can’t work. It’s — it’s like he’s having a breakdown. Maybe you can find a way to help him.”

Alex scoffed, and all eyes turned onto her. She looked over at Sam, and then Dean, and then finally turned her attention back to the familiar. “Here’s the thing. We’re not really big fans of witches. Understand?”

Portia stepped forward until she was nose to nose with the young angel, eyes flashing with cold anger. “Really?” Her voice was sharp and clear as she held Alex’s gaze, unblinking, and the angel met her frigid stare. “Well, James is a cop with a spotless record. He’s used his skill for nothing but good. Can you honestly say the same?” The familiar’s words had Alex’s eyes narrowing, and her wings stretched outwards in fury. “So why don’t you lose the ignorant bigotry for maybe two seconds and give him a shot?”

The young angel didn’t respond, furious at the disrespect she was being shown. Her grace rumbled within her, stirring up Lucifer’s grace, and it took all of her strength to keep it in. Dean’s voice distracted her before it could explode outwards and into the familiar. “That was incredibly hot.”

Portia rolled her eyes, exasperated, and Alex frowned over at Dean, forehead furrowed angrily. Her head snapped to Sam as the younger Winchester agreed. “That was pretty hot.”

Alex shook her head, and she flattened her wings as Portia turned away. “What kind of dreams has James been having?” she asked the familiar. Portia turned, not immediately speaking, and Alex impatiently prompted, “You said he’s been having nightmares. So what kind?”

The look in Portia’s eyes revealed she still held dislike for the angel, but she answered the question. “He’s having vivid dreams where he’s killing others. When he wakes up, his dreams have come true. The people he dreamed of killing turned up dead the next day exactly as James dreamt it.” She paused, and Alex reached down to pick up the bags of snacks.

The young angel’s movements sparked a similar action in Dean, and he moved over to the table. “Beer?” he offered. “It’s warm, but it’s all we got.”

Portia nodded, and Alex followed Sam over to Dean. The younger Winchester stayed down, straddling one of the chairs and folding his arms across the back as Dean handed the familiar her drink.

“So, these dreams James is having,” Dean started, and Alex took a beer for herself before she sat down on one of the beds. “He thinks they’re real? He thinks that he is actually killing people?”

The familiar nodded. “I think so,” she confirmed, arms folded across her chest. “At least that’s what I picked up before he started blocking me.”

“Blocking you?” Alex’s grace loosened the bottle cap, and she flicked it open with her thumb.
“What does that mean?” The young angel took a small sip of the bitter alcoholic drink.

Portia cast her a glance, and Alex blinked in surprise to find that, despite the release of tension, the familiar still didn’t trust her. “Familiars and their masters — we can communicate telepathically. I can get inside of James’ head anytime I want. But he shut me out.”

“So, what?” Sam queried. “You think there’s something in there he doesn’t want you to see?”

“Probably, yeah.” Portia paced closer to the Winchesters, and Alex pulled her legs up onto the bed, tucking her feet under her thighs. “Something dark, you know, that’s destroying him. He can’t go to the police, and he doesn’t trust other witches.”

“But he trusts us?” Dean crossed his arms and leaned against the table. “You do know who we are, right? We’re the last people that somebody like James needs to be telling his problems to.”

The familiar fixed the Winchester with a keen stare. “This was my idea,” she admitted. “I was the one who sent you the text under James’ name. He doesn’t know you’re here, but … I think you’re all he has.”

Sam and Dean exchanged hesitant looks, but Alex could already see in their eyes that they were reluctantly agreeing. She let out a slight exhale and shifted on the bed, and the familiar’s attention immediately turned to her. Alex met her gaze, voice quiet as she forced herself to stay calm. “Well? Spit it out.”

“What are you?” Portia stepped closer, eyes squinted as she studied her. “You’re not a witch, but you feel very powerful.”

Alex hummed in agreement with the familiar’s assessment, and she rose to her feet. “I’m an angel,” she explained, wingtips flicking in emphasis. “Yes, of the Lord. Yes, we exist.”

The familiar squinted, but she hid her shock well with a lifted chin. “I didn’t think angels spent their time dealing with hunters.”

“We all have our callings.” The young angel quipped, and she took a long drink as she turned back to the Winchesters, interest lost in the familiar’s inquiries. “So what’s our next move?” she asked Dean, and she set her drink down beside Sam’s. “Should we go talk to James? Maybe I could try a little Vulcan mind-melding on him.” She heard a low note of displeasure rumble from Portia, but she chose to ignore it.

“In the morning,” Dean decided with a glance at his watch. “It’s too late now, and I need my four hours.” He looked over at the familiar who was standing in the middle of the room, arms crossed. “You staying or going, sweetheart?”

“I’ll meet you at James’ house tomorrow at ten.” Portia crossed the room to place her beer on the table beside Dean. “You remember the way?”

Dean nodded, and the familiar left. All three hunters watched her go, and when she was finally out of sight, Dean shook his head. “Witches.” He lifted his beer up to his lips, and Alex let out a quiet grunt as she agreed with the Winchester’s assessment. Dean put down his drink and pushed himself off of the table. “Well, I think I’ll hit the head,” he announced, and Alex glanced over at the clock on the nightstand: 1:18. “Maybe take a quick shower. You need to use the bathroom first?” he asked, and Alex looked up, surprised to find him still talking. She quickly shook her head, and Dean shrugged. “Suit yourself.”
Fire licked at the cuffs of her jeans, and Alex jumped in sudden surprise. Her feet carried her forward onto a piece of smoldering sandstone, but thankfully her boots shielded her from the embers. Hell. She was back in hell. “Lucifer?” The young angel looked around, trying to catch a glimpse of those familiar crimson wings through the flames. “Luce?”

She took off into the sulfurous air, and she struggled through the suffocating heat to find the archangel. “Lucifer!” She wove through the stalactites, pulling up short when the cavern stretched even further into darkness. That wasn’t the way to Pandemonium. Where was she? “Lucifer, please!” Why wasn’t he here? Was he hiding from her?

Her wings carried her in desperate circles, like a battered moth straining towards a light. The hellish landscape twisted sickeningly below her, and between the heat and the burning panic building within her, Alex felt blackness push on the edge of her vision.

Coldness enveloped her, a shocking and icy bath, and worried hands held her still. “Shh.” A body pinned her wings down, and Alex shuddered at the cold skin. “Why are you panicking, little one? I’m right here.”

Alex drew her limbs in close, curling up into Lucifer’s arms. “Where were you?” she whispered, her voice hoarse from the burning air. “You weren’t there and I —”

Crimson wings carried her over the ridge and down into Pandemonium, and Lucifer lay the quivering angel on the hot, dark throne. “It’s okay,” he murmured. “Your rest caught me at an inopportune time, but I’m here now.” He pulled the angel back up into his arms when she let out a pained sniffle at the heated stone beneath her wings, and the darkness faded.

The throne below her shifted into a soft, warm mattress, and Alex didn’t have to open her eyes to know that she where she was. They were back in her home in heaven. The air was cool to the touch, and Alex shivered when Lucifer’s fingers brushed down her arm; his cold touch was no longer as pleasant as it had once been. She shifted away, wings curling in to provide warmth, and the archangel let her go. “Better?”

“Yeah.” The young angel sat up on the bed, reaching up to smooth down her hair as she shook out her wings to flatten her feathers. “Sorry, I — I wasn’t expecting to be there alone.”

Lucifer’s eyes narrowed slightly at her implications, but the emotion was gone before Alex could read it. “I wouldn’t ever leave you alone,” he reminded. “You know that.” He rose to his feet, turning his back to the young angel as he stretched; large, crimson wings spanned the entire room, momentarily blocking out the light overhead before they folded back against the archangel’s side. “What brings you here?” he asked, turning back to Alex.

Alex let out a small shrug, not sure where or how to begin. “Nothing,” she finally said. “We’re just working a case, and I got bored while the Winchesters were sleeping.”

Blue eyes studied her closely, looking for any signs of deception. “It’s Castiel, isn’t it?” The bed dipped under the archangel’s weight, and Alex shifted backwards to maintain her personal space. “Why would you think that?” she retorted defensively. “I haven’t seen Cas in weeks, remember?”

“Yes, I remember,” Lucifer mused. “And that’s the problem. You can’t hide anything from me, le mohoath. Not while we’re here.” The archangel’s voice flattened in scorn. “He’s gone and left you alone again, hasn’t he? Are you really so surprised?”

“It’s different this time, Luce. He’s —”
“Different how?” Lucifer cut her off with a snap of his grace; the power jolted through Alex like a whip. “How is this different than the past four years? Because they all appear the same to me.”

Alex hesitated to speak, taking a moment for both of them to take a deep breath. “Why does it even matter to you?” she finally asked, voice low and soft in hopes that it would help curb Lucifer’s anger.

It didn’t. “Why?” he repeated, cold fire flashing in his eyes. “You keep pining after him when I’m the only one who has ever been there for you. Your ‘mate’ hasn’t even been around long enough for the two of you to complete your bond. Your graces are completely separate — I’m closer to being your mate than Castiel has ever been.”

Alex rose to her feet and stalked out of the bedroom, her grace rolling within her as she fumed. “We are not having this conversation again,” she snapped when she heard Lucifer follow. “And he didn’t just leave me, Lucifer. He disappeared, and he can’t even answer my prayers.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

The young angel disregarded his comment with an unhappy flick of her wingtips. “He’d answer if he could.” She jumped down the stairs and stalked into the warm kitchen; the near-silent footsteps behind her told her the archangel was close on her tail. “I know he would. I think … I think Naomi is behind it.”

She could tell from the archangel’s silence that the name was lost upon him, and she turned to face him, leaning back against the marble kitchen island as she did so. “Who is Naomi?” Lucifer finally asked.

“She’s the one controlling the angels,” Alex snapped. “She got into my head, and she got into Castiel’s. She had Samandriel killed for no reason! It wasn’t his fault!” Tears started to blur her vision, and she clenched her fists in anger.

Hands came to rest on her hips, but the look in the archangel’s eyes was unreadable. “She was in your head,” he repeated, careful to make sure he was hearing her right. “In here.”

“I think so, yeah. I don’t know.” The young angel turned her head slightly, unwilling to look up into his face that rested at such a close proximity to hers. “She took me to heaven — she threatened me and Castiel. Heaven’s in complete anarchy, Luce.” She chanced a glance up into his eyes. “They can’t go on without a leader.”

“You can thank your friends for that,” Lucifer reminded, voice growing cross. “Heaven would be under control if the Winchesters and Castiel hadn’t decided to step in.” The fingers on her waist tightened as he remembered that fateful spring day.

They relaxed when Alex covered them with her own. “We’re not getting into that.” She pulled his hands away, and they dropped back to his side. “That’s not the point.” She leaned her back into the marble counter, lifting her chin up as she faced the archangel. “You know, I feel like every time I come here we just fight. I-I don’t know why I even bother. You know what? Maybe I should just go.”

Alex wiggled uncomfortably on the small couch she was sitting on, situated snugly beside Sam. She could hear two voices arguing in the next room: one was Portia, the other was clearly James. Neither sounded happy. The young angel looked about, spreading her knees further to firmly maintain her room as Sam shifted beside her. The whole house was permeated with the stench of magic; it sunk
into the furniture, into the floorboards, the foundation. The land was tainted.

“My life is none of your business!” The loud, booming voice of James Frampton had the angel turning her attention back to the doorway that separated the two parties. A figure appeared in it a second later, a four legged creature with sleek black fur—a Doberman, Alex quickly realized. Portia. The dog paused, looking soulfully up at the three, and Alex saw Dean give her a small, casual wave out of the corner of her eye.

Portia let out soft noise before she scurried off further into the house, and both Winchesters rose to their feet as a man stepped into view. Alex joined them as she studied the new arrival. He was dressed in all black, and his hair was dark and disheveled. The young angel could immediately feel the power that rested beneath his skin, but his unsteady walk and dull, tired eyes gave the appearance of an anything but powerful man. “Sam, Dean.” The dull eyes sharpened as they came to rest on the two hunters, and Alex straightened her back to appear taller when they slid over to her. “Who are you?”

“Oh, we told you about Alex, remember?” Sam jumped in before Alex could speak. The young angel contented herself with an irritated flick of her wings at the Winchester’s words. “She—”

“You were injured in a dog attack,” James finished, the faintest hint of realization sparking somewhere in the darkest depths of his gaze. “Yeah.”

“Werewolf,” Alex corrected somewhat irately. “Not a dog.”

Her statement was met with somewhat of a disinterested noise, but before anyone could continue, Dean spoke, his voice growing deep in his anger. “Witchcraft, James? Really? What the hell are you thinking?”

James turned his dark eyes onto Dean. “You come to help or pile it on?” he asked, but his voice sounded flat with resignation.

The Winchester shook his head, still scornful of the detective’s circumstance. “I’m just saying, you screw with that stuff, you’re gonna fry your wiring.”

He opened his mouth to say more, but Sam spoke up, hoping to diffuse the situation. “Alright, look,” he asked, James, “why don’t you tell us about these dreams? Portia said people were dying in them.”

“‘Dying?’” James scoffed darkly at Sam’s innocence, and he took a step closer to the three. “They were torn to bits. I, uh, I could feel my fingers ripping into their flesh.”

“But they were dreams?” Dean persisted.

“Well, I, uh, woke up in my bed,” the detective admitted, and Alex narrowed her eyes at how his answer barely coincided with the question; that didn’t bode well for the wiccan.

Sam shared in her suspended disbelief. “Okay, so … dreams?”

There was a pause as James hesitated, clearly unwilling to admit whatever was on his mind in front of the three hunters. “I’m not so sure,” he finally said, and Alex’s face darkened.

Dean frowned, not pleased at how cryptic the man’s answers were becoming. “Not helping, James,” he said, and Alex shifted forward ever so slightly, preparing herself for whatever was coming next; whatever it was, it couldn’t be good.

James, however, just sighed. “Those people— they died.” The detective’s voice was low and flat
with defeat, convinced that the Winchesters wouldn’t be able to help him with his dire situation. “I checked with the precinct.”

Alex’s wings twitched as she felt Sam shift slightly beside her. “Alright, well, maybe you heard it, and it stuck in your head,” he suggested, voice straining ever so slightly as he held onto the last bit of hope that everything was okay.

“You’re — you don’t think I-I told myself that?” James retorted, stumbling over his words in a rush of emotion before he once again fell into resignation. “You don’t think I didn’t say, ‘That w-wasn’t me. I couldn’t have done such a thing’?” The detective stepped backwards and reached behind one of the black leather chairs to retrieve a plastic bag. Inside, Alex could make out a folded piece of white fabric soaked with blood. When James pulled it out and unfolded it, it became immediately clear that it was a white oxford shirt.

Alex looked up at the brothers to gauge their reactions. Dean’s face was set tightly in a look of disappointment and anger. Sam simple looked surprised. “Is that yours?” he asked.

In response, James turned the shirt so all could see the black embroidered letters. JMF. “James Martin Frampton.” The man dropped the bloodied shirt onto the coffee table in front of them and sunk down into a chair, a hand running down his face. “What’s happening to me?”

Sam and Dean followed his lead and sat back down. Alex quickly joined them, ignoring how the leather squeaked loudly beneath her. “Well, how about this?” Dean suggested, his demeanor softened slightly by James’ plea. “Um, you pissed off another witch, and he or she hexed you and forced you to …” He trailed off, leaving the rest unspoken.

“It’s possible, I suppose,” the detective reluctantly relented, “but I’ve never heard of it.”

“How many dreams have you had?” Alex asked, finally speaking up as she leaned forward, curious for the answer.

“Four.” James’ eyes turned onto the young angel, and despite herself, Alex felt her cheeks flush slightly under his intense stare. From this close a distance she realized his eyes weren’t as dark as she had originally thought; they were actually closer to a pale green. “The most recent one was last night. I, uh …” He faltered, and the Winchesters exchanged uncertain looks.

Dean spoke when it became clear James couldn’t bring himself to finish his thought. “All right, James, we’re gonna — we’re gonna help you figure this out, but you’re gonna have to do your part.”

“Which is?”

Dean’s responded by reaching down and picking up the duffle bag he had carried in. It clanged when the Winchester dropped it on the table, and Alex watched as he unzipped it and pulled out a thick metal chain. “You’re gonna have to stay put,” he said, never breaking eye contact with the detective as he let the chains fall back into the bag. “House arrest, my friend.”

The look on James’ face confirmed to Alex that he was less than enthusiastic with the idea, but he reluctantly nodded. “Okay,” he agreed. “We could … I think the bed would be most comfortable.” He rose to his feet, and the brothers did the same. Dean slung the bag over his shoulder as they walked further into the house, and after a second Alex followed.

She watched and waited as Sam and Dean secured chains to the bed and the handcuffs to his limbs, padded by washcloths from the bathroom. “Need any help?” she offered, stepping closer to the hunters.
Dean shook his head as he moved away from the bed. “I think we’re done,” he said both to Alex and to James. He turned to look directly at the young angel and added, “Do you want to stay and keep an eye on him?”

Alex looked down at the bound detective, his gaze fixed on the popcorn ceiling. “Maybe tonight?” she suggested. “It only happens when he’s sleeping, so there’s no point in me staying now.”

Thankfully, both Winchesters seemed to agree, and Dean began to gather up the empty duffle bag. Nails clicked on the floor as Portia hurried into the room. The air hummed as the familiar shifted, sleek fur melting into dark, smooth skin, and Portia, now fully human, turned to face them. The studs on her red collar caught in the light, causing them to flash ever so slightly. “I can handle it from here,” she promised the hunters. “I’ll be in contact.”

Dean nodded, and he started to lead the way towards the door. “Call if anything changes,” he instructed, and when Portia nodded, they left the home.

“Hey, Alex, I got a question.” Dean’s voice had the young angel looking up from where she sat. They were back at the motel, and Alex had returned to the bed while the brothers discussed James’ situation.

The angel set aside her laptop as she turned to face him. “What’s up?”

“Have you ever come across a witch-killing spell?” Dean looked over his computer, and even Sam turned his eyes onto his brother at the unusual question. “I know Bobby knew one,” he continued, “but I don’t feel like digging through all his journals, so do you know of it?”

Alex rolled her eyes upwards as she thought, and after a second she finally spoke, slowly at first as the memory returned. “Chicken feet, chicory root, caraway seeds, fennel, and pepperwort,” she recounted. “Mixing it up into a molotov with blood works best. Doesn’t matter what kind of blood. Why? What are you thinking?”

“We’re just being cautious,” the Winchester promised as he rose to his feet. “I’ll be back in an hour or two, okay? Hang tight.” Dean grabbed his coat and left, and when Alex heard the Impala start, she got up and joined Sam at the small wooden table.

“Bobby taught you that?” Sam looked up at her, and the young angel nodded.

“Bobby taught me a lot,” she added, slouching in her seat. “And that was only a fraction of what he knew.” Sadness pressed down upon her at the memory of the old hunter, but she quickly pushed it away before it could grip her too tightly. “Um, how are you doing?” she asked, changing the subject as quickly as she could.

She didn’t miss the frustration that flashed across the Winchester’s features. “Dean put you up to this, didn’t he?”

“What?” Alex narrowed her eyes, surprised at Sam’s accusations. “No! I—I’m just worried about you, Samuel. I know Dean’s just worried too, you know. We don’t know what the trials are going to do to you, and we just want to make sure you’re okay.” The young angel leaned forward, insistently searching Sam’s face. “You’ll tell me if you start feeling different, right? Promise me you will. I can help.”

“Uh … of course.” Sam closed his laptop so he could look at her more directly. “Um, what about you? I—I haven’t seen Cas in a while.” He watched as Alex’s face fell, and he dropped his gaze in
apology. “Oh. Sorry. Has he …”

“No — I don’t know. I just haven’t heard from Cas in a really long time, and I’m getting pretty nervous.” The young angel looked down at her hands, unsure what else to say without sounding pitiful.

Thankfully, Sam seemed to understand. “Oh. I—I’m sorry. Um … If there’s anything I can do …”

Alex looked up into the Winchester’s sympathetic face. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “I don’t know what to do.” Her tennis shoes scuffled on the floor as she moved them back and forth. When Sam didn’t immediately respond, the angel rose to her feet and returned to the bed. “Caddyshack’s playing,” she announced as she flicked on the tv.

Sam Winchester shrugged. “It’s a good movie,” he agreed, his voice relieved and relaxed at the casual topic of conversation. “Not my favorite, but —”

“But you’ve seen it a million times because of Dean?” she finished. “Yeah. Same here.” Alex watched the screen as the judge stepped out onto the green, and she shrugged. “It’s okay. I don’t like golf, though.” The angel settled back into the pillows as she flipped to the Disney channel. There. Much better.

Dean returned an hour and a half later as promised. It took him two trips from the car to carry everything in, and Alex rose to her feet as he closed the door behind him for the last time. “Got the last of it,” he announced, settling the paper bag down beside the other. Alex unpacked the glass jars of ingredients: pepperwort, chicory root, fennel. Good.

“All right.” Sam looked up from his laptop from where he was situated on the far bed. He had relocated to there about an hour ago, but was still looking into the cases James had dreamt about. “Well, I have been looking at the crime scene reports, and they are exactly the same as James told us — vic, dates, locations. The most recent one was a blind man, just like he said.”

Dean frowned at the news. “That’s not good.”

His brother nodded. “Also, I looked into his record on the force. He went from rookie detective to lieutenant basically overnight, and in the last four years, he’s solve rate’s been right at about one hundred percent.”

“Which isn’t really surprising, considering he’s got the magic touch,” Alex added as Dean dumped out the contents of the second bag, and she reached over to poke at the bag of cold chicken feet. “Think this’ll work?”

“Wait. You don’t know?” Sam’s eyebrows knitted together in perplexity at the angel’s musings, and she offered up a small shrug.

“I’ve never heard of it being used,” she confessed. “Bobby said it would work — and I trust his judgement with my life — but I can’t promise anything. It’s not a sure thing.” She ended with another small, helpless shrug.

To her utmost surprise, Sam let out a small chuckle at her words. “Is anything we do a sure thing?”

“No,” she agreed, “but I suppose we want the odds forever in our favor.” Alex sat down on the unoccupied bed between Dean and Sam, and she added, “But either way, I guess it doesn’t matter that much. If something goes wrong, I can take on any witch that gets in our way.”
Sam nodded, but Dean still didn’t look fully convinced. “Well, I’m concerned.”

“Concerned about the, uh — the witch-killing spell … or that I’m going to mess these trials up?” Sam’s voice held a certain sharpness, and, that combined with the sudden change in topics, had both Alex and Dean looking over at him in surprise. Alex only twitched her wings, but Dean took three steps towards his brother, ready to confront him.

“Look,” he started, hands going out in an attempt to keep tempers low. “We get too far down the road with this, we can’t go back, and it’ll be too late for me to jump in.”

Sam scoffed at his brother’s words, eyes rolling up under his heavy brow. “Who says you’re gonna have to?” he challenged, and his gaze darkened as he finally heard his brother’s true thoughts. “You know, maybe I’ll actually pull this one off.”

Alex’s eyes went wide at the pointed glare that was thrown her way, and her mouth fell open in shock and indignation that Sam thought she didn’t think him capable. “Sam, I —”

“No.” The Winchester’s voice was harsh as he abruptly cut her off, and Alex sunk back into her skin. “I know what you’re saying. You said it. You know, I’ve been going over this and over this, asking myself ‘why don’t they trust me?’ and it occurred to me, finally. It’s not that you don’t trust me. It’s that you can only trust you.”

“Hey.” Dean’s green eyes flashed, and he took a step forward in anger. “I get that you’re pissed at me, okay? I get it. But don’t you go taking it out on her.” A finger went out to point at the crestfallen young angel. “She’s not a part of this, Sam; she’s not the one against this. She never was.”

Sam met Dean’s cold stare with one of his own, but he couldn’t find a way to reply. “You done?” he finally asked.

“I’m done if you’re done.” Dean held his brother’s gaze for a moment longer before he turned back to the spell ingredients. “You know,” he said over his shoulder, “once I get this put together, we can’t hesitate. If we got to use it, we use it.”

Sam looked over at Alex, but the young angel turned away. She heard him sigh before asking, “You mean if we find the witch that’s doing this to James?”

“Or … if there’s no other witch,” came the careful response.

“Of if there’s no other witch,” came the careful response.

“Or … if wouldn’t be the first free pass we’ve given, Dean.”

Dean turned away from the table to look his brother in the eye. “Look,” he began, “I like James as much as the next guy, but people are getting ganked here. Besides, Benny, Kate — they were forced to be what they are. James chose this.”

“That’s true,” Alex agreed in a quiet voice. The ringing of a phone filled the small motel room, and Dean moved away to the far corner to answer it in peace before Alex could finish her thought. The young angel heard Sam shift behind her, clearly preparing to speak, but she got to her feet and hurried over to the table before he could utter and word. She busied herself by organizing all of the ingredients in alphabetical order, her wings pressed tightly to her back as Sam’s hurtful words echoed through the back of her mind.

“Hey.” Dean hung up and moved back towards her. “That was Portia. She suggested that we take a look at one of the nightclubs that the witches in this town go to. Maybe someone there will known something. You in?”
“Yeah. Sounds like it could be helpful.” Alex set down the pepperwort in its rightful place as she turned back to Dean with a nod. “Someone’s bound to know something, right?”

The bed creaked as Sam rose to his feet. “I’ll go down to the station and get this blood identified,” he offered, motioned to James’ bloodied shirt that was laying on the table beside all of the ingredients for the spell. “Um, I guess I can pick up dinner, too?”

“Yeah, good idea.” Dean shrugged on his jacket and led the way towards the door, and Alex quickly followed. “See you in a bit.”

Alex followed Dean and Portia down the flowing stairs of what the witches’ club. It had appeared as old, decrepit, and abandoned building from the outside, but when they entered, Alex had felt a shiver run up her spine at the sudden surge of power that had momentarily overtaken her. God, she hated witches. The staircase was wide and made of marble, and people of all ages and races moved around her. The air was filled with the sound of low murmurs and clinking of glasses from up ahead. Alex’s lips set in a tight line at the dark looks they were receiving. “Am I getting the stink eye in here or what?” Dean muttered to the familiar beside him.

“They can tell you’re an outsider,” came the quiet, reply as they reached the bottom floor and turned into the night club.

The Winchester frowned and looked around at the room’s occupants. “Are they all witches?”

“And stuff.” Portia led the way down the center of the room, and Alex kept herself close to Dean’s side as a man pushed past. “But if there’s information out here about James, they’ll know.” Her dark eyes flickered about, and Alex rolled her shoulders back as she watched the familiar. They had picked her up at James’ house; apparently she had convinced Dean that they wanted to peacefully get in, they needed her presence and her guidance — Alex had been reluctant, but not even she could argue with her reasoning.

“How did James find you, anyways?” she heard Dean ask, and she firmly met the gaze of a young brunette witch who was casually lounging in one of the large booths that lined the far wall.

“Not the way it works.” Portia’s voice was quiet, not wanting Dean’s ignorance to be heard by all, but it still retained its usual sharpness. “The familiar finds the master, and they become inseparable.”

“Guess a lot of people feel that way about their pets.” Dean’s joke had Alex looking up in amusement; unsurprisingly, Portia wasn’t pleased at the demeaning comment. She turned sharply and glared up at the Winchester, who quirked an eyebrow in confusion as he came to a stop. “What?”

Portia scoffed, chin held high as she emphasized her dignity and freedom, but the only thing her motion did was expose her collar even more to the two hunters. “I’m not James’ pet,” she retorted, “Well, not all the time.”

Dean stumbled backwards as Portia surged forward angrily, one hand going out to push him in his solid chest, and the quirky smile disappeared from his lips. “Not ever,” she growled out, eyes flashing furiously at the Winchester’s disrespect. “The master and the familiar — there’s an unbreakable bond, like a melding of souls. We would die for each other.”

Alex’s wings stretched out, and her grace poised as she prepared to step in if things grew any more violent towards Dean. However, a voice drew the familiar’s attention away from the tall hunter. “Portia.” The sound of snapping fingers accompanied the sing-song request, and both Alex and
Portia turned towards the sound. A man sat at a booth in the center of the room on a fashionable silver couch. “Over here.”

Portia led the way over, and Alex took a moment to study the thin man through narrowed eyes. His face was round and childish, his hair was dark and short. He was dressed in red velvet pants and shirt underneath a sleek black vest — disgusting. Alex disliked the way his eyes flickered lazily between the three of them, taking them all in in an uncomfortably catlike manner. From the sound of Portia’s voice, she held the man in the same disregard. “Dean, Alex, meet Philippe LeChat. Dean’s a wiccan from Detroit,” she introduced, and the man’s eyes lit up in interest.

“Really?” he purred, and he motioned to the second couch across from them with a wide, sweeping gesture. “Well … sit, sit.” He reclined further against his seat, and he eyed Alex with a curious light in his round eyes. “And who are you?” he inquired. “His familiar, I presume.”

“Um … not quite.” Alex settled down onto the couch beside Dean, wings folded tightly against her back as she carefully formulated her fantastical answer. “I’m his … guardian. It’s similar to a familiar — this is my only form, of course — but Dean and I do share a profound bond,” she explained, remembering and reiterating Castiel’s words. “He is my charge.”

The man let out a low, long, inquisitive hum. “I can’t say that I’ve heard of your type,” he said, head tipping to one side as he blinked slowly.

Alex mimicked his blink. “There’s much you don’t know,” she said calmly, and she let her lips quirk upwards in the smallest hint of a smile. “We’re not as common as familiars are, granted.” Dean sneezed, cutting the angel off, and she glanced over at him. “Gesundheit.”

“That’s weird.” Dean sniffled, reaching up to wipe at his nose. “That only happens around cats.” He glanced around as if he were expecting to see such a cursed animal roaming the floors, but there was nothing.

Portia fixed Philippe with a cold, disdainful stare. “Spencer here?” she asked, voice terse. If the man noticed his companion’s animosity, he simple ignored it. “Somewhere,” he said, brushing off her question as unimportant to anyone but herself. He leaned forward, something sparking in his dark eyes. “Tell me about James,” he requested silkily. “Lots of buzz out there.”

“All gossip,” Portia retorted. “The community has a little attitude going.”

Philippe chuckled, and Alex tipped her head as she studied the man. She had a strange feeling that the man before them was a familiar; he had a similar feeling to Portia, one that was definitely different than many of the witches around her. But she couldn’t be sure. Not yet. “He brings it on himself,” the man reminded, voice calm and relaxed. “The whole cop thing — witch cop — is he nuts?”

“I said the exact same thing,” Dean agreed, doing his best to offer something to the conversation.

Philippe nodded graciously in the Winchester’s direction before his eyes turned back to Portia. “There you go, babe. It isn’t done, Portia, and you know it.” He shifted slowly in his seat, and that movement seemed to cause the last piece in Alex’s mental puzzle to fall into place. Lucifer. His relaxed, feline mannerisms reminded her of the archangel in her dreams. Lucifer acted like that when they weren’t fighting.

“I’m sorry.” Dean was talking again. “Uh, remind me what — what isn’t done?”

“Portia.” Footsteps sounded to Alex’s left, and she looked up to see an older gentleman stop beside
them. His hair was cut close to his scalp, and that only seemed to further emphasize his facial features; his large, hooked nose, his sharp, watchful eyes. They seemed fixed upon Dean, and the Winchester cleared his throat as he met the man’s gaze.

“Uh, I’m a — I’m a wiccan,” he explained, stuttering slightly as he repeated his cover story to the stranger. “I’m from Detroit.” His hand came to rest on Alex’s knee, and that action was enough for the newcomer to understand.

“Spencer’s the man to ask,” Portia said from beside them, and both Alex and Dean nodded. Spencer. That was who stood before them.

“Oh, okay. Uh …” Dean cleared his throat, regaining his composure once and for all. “You ever heard of a-a spell where a witch can control the actions of another witch?” He sneezed violently once more, and Alex reached over and covered his hand with hers. She let her grace seep outwards, doing what she could to ease his discomfort from where she was.

Spencer took a second to think, but he was soon shaking his head. “No,” he decided, “I never heard of a thing like that. I don’t think it’s possible.” He looked over at Portia, and the utmost concern filled his face. “How’s James?”

“Better,” the familiar responded, voice cool and cordial. “I’ll tell him you asked.”

The older man nodded sympathetically, clearly wanting more, but he didn’t press her for any more information. “Philippe,” he said, turning to the man on the couch, “it’s time we were going.”

“Of course.” The man’s gaze swung over to Portia, and he gave a small, smooth nod of departure. “Good night.” He turned to Alex and Dean, and his lips twisted upwards what Alex could only read as a mocking smile. “So nice to meet you,” he purred, and his irises grew yellow, pushing his pupils into a narrow, catlike slit. They smugly held Alex’s gaze, and the angel, not to be bested, summoned up Lucifer’s grace. Her eyes glowed with orange hellfire as she mimicked the familiar’s mocking smile, only letting it die down when Philippe had fully shifted into a sleek black cat.

He climbed up onto the couch’s end table, nuzzling Spencer’s outstretched hand with a loud, resonating purr. His purr only intensified when his master gathered him into his arms, and then the two walked away. Dean watched them go, eyes narrowed. “I knew it,” he muttered after them. His phone rang, and he jumped slightly, digging it out of his pocket and raising it to his ear. “Excuse me,” he told Portia, sniffling slightly even though the feline was gone. “Yeah?” he asked, and Alex could hear Sam’s voice on the other end of the line. She didn’t bother to catch the words, however, too interested in her surroundings. “Some witch bar. Why?” He listened for a second to Sam’s low, displeased voice before he nodded. “Well, that pretty much says it all, doesn’t it?”

“Sam?” Alex guessed when Dean hung up, and the hunter rose to his feet.

“We should get going,” he informed Portia, who was still sitting on the couch. “Do you want a ride back to James’?”

To both of the hunters’ surprise, the familiar shook her head. “There’s still some people I should talk to,” she decided, her dark eyes meeting Dean’s green gaze. “I can find my own way back. Go on without me.” She watched as Alex stood up, and she politely crossed her legs as they stepped away from the couch. “I imagine I’ll see the both of you soon.”

Sam was already back at the motel by the time Alex and Dean arrived there. Takeout bags were
placed on the left side of the table, while all of the ingredients for the spell were pushed to the right. In between the two sat an empty glass bottle; the container that would hold the completed molotov. “Hey.” Dean tossed the motel key onto the table as he greeted his brother. “So, uh …”

“Yeah.” Sam slid his laptop off of his lap and onto his bed before he rose to his feet. “The blood on the shirt’s an exact match for victim number three. There’s no doubt about it.” He let out a long, disappointed breath as his gaze fell onto the table. “Um, I got dinner.” He motioned towards the white paper bags, and Alex slipped past Dean to retrieve her meal. “Did you, uh, learn anything with Portia?”

“I learned that I hate cats,” Dean muttered as he tossed his jacket over the chair. “Uh, no one’s heard of a witch-controlling spell,” he informed his brother as he rolled up the sleeves on his brown flannel shirt, his face dark. “It’s not looking good for James.”

Sam shook his head in solemn agreement, and Alex looked up from where she had perched herself on one of the beds. “That doesn’t mean it’s not possible,” she reminded slowly. “And that doesn’t mean that James is choosing to do this. I — maybe there’s a way to, um, remove the magic that he’s invited in? I can feel it within him, within all witches. There’s got to be a way to remove it, right?”

The Winchesters exchanged hopeless looks, and Dean went over to the fridge to retrieve the chicken feet. “How do you mix this up?” he asked. “I think we’re going to need to finish this tonight.” He dropped them onto the table before he wiped his hands off on his jeans with a disgusted sound.

“I’ll take care of the spell. You two eat.” Alex tossed her still unwrapped burger onto the bed and rose to her feet, running through the spell in her head. Four parts, one part, two part, four parts. Chicory, caraway, fennel, pepperwort. Two chicken feet per spell. She unscrewed the lid of the jar of caraway, laying out a small portion. One part.

She carefully did the same for the other ingredients, laying out twice as much fennel and four times as much chicory and pepperwort. Two parts, four parts. The angel sat down in the chair and reached for the mortar and pestle as the Winchesters started up a quiet conversation. “Maybe there’s another way to help him.” Sam sat down on the far bed, accepting his meal from Dean.

The eldest hunter shook his head. “If this were any other case, we wouldn’t even think twice about putting him down,” he reminded, but Alex could hear the hesitancy in his voice, and his words sounded like he was trying to not only convince Sam, but himself. “James is ganking people, so we gank him. It’s that simple.”

“Is it?”

Dean’s tone sharpened at the sound of his brother’s challenge. “Yeah, Sam, it is.” Paper crinkled as he unwrapped his burger, and Alex expelled air sharply from her nose as the smell of warm, inviting food clashed with the acrid crushed herbs. “Look, I hate this as much as you do,” he continued, “but everything we have points to James.” He took a large bite, and after a second he mumbled out, “What’d else you learn at the station?”

Alex paused, waiting for Sam to respond. It took him a few seconds, but he did eventually speak, giving up on arguing with Dean about the detective’s fate. “Not much. Either their incompetent, or they’re hiding something.” When the young angel glanced over her shoulder, she saw his fingers playing mindlessly with a thinly cut fry. “The lead on the case said that a witness had seen a man in a suit leaving the crime scene, but none of the reports even mentioned an eyewitness.”

The noise made by Dean showed that he found it strange, but he didn’t think much of it. “Huh. Well, that’s cops for you, I guess. They’re way out of their league on this.”
Alex grunted in soft agreement as she finished grinding up the last of the herbs into a low powder, and she carefully poured them into the empty glass jar. “How do you want to cut up these chicken feet?” she called over her shoulder, cutting into the brother’s conversation.

“You’re the one who knows the spell,” Dean countered, and the bed squeaked quietly as he turned to look at the young angel.

“Yes, the spell doesn’t specify, and I don’t really care.” Alex reached into the plastic bag and pulled out one of the slimy feet. “Ugh.” She recoiled at the smell. “I’m just going to stick them in whole. That should be fine.” She shrugged as she pulled the empty jar closer and proceeded to shove the two whole chicken feet into the jar. They barely fit through the tiny neck, but it eventually they slid in and came to rest at the bottom among the crushed herbs. “There.” Alex pushed away the rest of the feet, wiping her hands on her jeans in an attempt to clean her fingers from the smell and the juice.

“Just fill this up two thirds with blood, one third with alcohol, stuff and rag in there, and we’re done. Um, I’ll write out the spell after dinner. It’s pretty basic latin.”

“Okay, good.” Dean nodded from the bed, and Alex slid the spell away from her as she got up to wash her hands. The Winchester turned his eyes out the window, where the darkness was spilling outwards from the shadows, filling the evening air, and his shoulders rose and fell as he drew in a deep breath. “We’ll leave once you’re finished.”

Alex slid on her boots, wings stretching back out across the bed as she listen to Sam murmur the spell over and over to himself. “…Vos caelum et infernum,” he whispered over and over, fingers toying with the motel stationary that he held in his hand. “Ego voco impetu delere, vos caelum et infernum —”

The young angel looked up sharply at his sudden halt, and her wings lifted up in surprise at who she saw. “Ezekiel?” Alex jumped to her feet at the seraph’s presence. “I haven’t seen you in forever! What are you doing here?”

The seraph’s gaze traversed the room, passing over Sam and Dean before coming to rest on the table of spell ingredients. “Am I interrupting something?” he queried, and his head tipped to one side.

“Uh, no, no, not really.” Alex rose to her feet, disregarding the table’s contents with a flick of her wings. “We’re just dealing with a witch. It’ll be taken care of easily enough. Why are you here?” She glanced over at the Winchesters. “Go on ahead,” she told them. “I’ll catch up.”

Ezekiel patiently waited as the two brothers left, and once the door closed behind them, he turned back to Alex. “How have you been?” he asked politely, his grey wings folding forward. “I haven’t spoken to you since November.”

“I’ve been fine.” Alex pushed past him and started clearing the table of the herbs and chicken parts. “Um, Ash is gone, but you’ve probably noticed. Otherwise I’m fine.”

The sharpness that crept into her voice at such a sensitive subject surely showed, but Ezekiel made no comment. “I’ve noticed,” he agreed. “In fact, I’ve been working with Laura and Eremiel to acclimate Ashiel back into heaven.” He quietly picked up the bag of caraway seeds and, following Alex’s example, placed it into one of the bags. “He’s doing quite well, even though he misses you dearly still.”

Alex felt her throat tighten up, keeping her from answer, and she ran over the spell’s recipe to distract herself from the tears. Four parts, one part, two part, four parts. Chicory, caraway, fennel,
pepperwort. Two chicken feet per spell.

Her silence cued the seraph’s apology. “I’m sorry,” he began. “This is still a difficult subject for you. I only came by to let you know that Ashiel is doing well.” He stepped away from the table and let Alex take over the cleaning, unsure how else he could help. “He still insists upon coming to earth on occasion; unfortunately, there’s no good playgrounds for a child in heaven.”

“You … you see him a lot?” The world blurred as unbidden tears came to her eyes. The young angel sniffled, turning away in hopes to wipe the tears away without the seraph knowing.

“Yes.” Ezekiel’s voice was soft with sympathy and quiet with sincerity. “Ashiel is familiar with me, and we hoped that my presence would make his transition easier. The dramatic change hasn’t been easy for him, but what’s important is that he is safe.”

“You’re right.” Alex ran a hand across the top of her hair, and she turned back to the seraph. “As long as he’s safe in heaven. He’s better of with angels who can keep him safe.” She carried the paper bag to the door and set it down against the wall. “Maybe one day I’ll see him again. I should be going,” she added. “We’re in the middle of a case, and knowing the Winchesters, they’re going to screw something up.”

“Of course.” Ezekiel dipped his head in farewell. “I look forward to speaking to you again.” His sleek grey wings stretched outwards, and then they carried him up and far away. Alex waited only a few seconds before she did the same.

She landed in the bedroom of James’ Frampton, and she folded her wings as her head tipped in confusion. “Okay, why is he not dead?”

Portia stood between the Winchesters and James, and her eyes flashed at Alex’s harsh words. “It wasn’t James,” she growled out. “He didn’t kill them. James and I were close,” she added, turning back to the Winchesters. “Without psychological walls — intimate.”

“I don’t —”

“They had sex.” Sam’s blunt explanation answer Dean’s confusion, and his mouths snapped shut. Alex narrowed her eyes, unsure how exactly this pertained to James’ innocence.

“Wow.” Dean chuckled slightly in his own embarrassment. “I, uh, I didn’t expect that.”

“We have an unusual relationship,” Portia admitted unabashedly, and her gaze turned back to her bound master. “Familiars aren’t suppose to be sexually involved with their witches.”

“Understandable,” the eldest Winchester agreed, “you know, considering that you’re a …” He hesitated, unsure how to politely finish his thought. “Well, and that he’s … that’s —” He chuckled awkwardly and looked over at his brother. “A little help here?” Sam firmly shook his head, and Dean frowned. “No?”

Portia’s eyes hardened, but with Dean having nothing useful to say, she continued on with her explanation. “James and I — we hadn’t made love in weeks. His agony ate him up, and he shut me out. But tonight, I saw his thoughts — memories of the murders.”

Alex’s wings flicked impatiently. “Are you supposed to be talking us out of killing James or not?” she snapped. “If you are, you’re doing a great job so far.”

The familiar’s cold gaze swung over to her. “That’s all I saw,” she retorted. “Just the kills. No preparation, no thought process, no anticipation, no motive.” Her eyes travelled over to the
Winchesters as her voice grew loud with insistence. “Just the kills without context.”

“No other awareness of the crime?” Sam persisted.

Portia firmly shook her head. “No. Doesn’t that at least suggest he’s under another’s control?” She looked up at Dean, having already won over Sam, but the older Winchester still looked hesitant.

“Spencer said that wasn’t possible,” he reminded.

“He said he’d never heard of it,” the familiar retorted pointedly before she took a deep breath to calm herself. “James is chained,” she told them with a small sigh. “He’s confined. At least take a shot. Please.” She finally turned back to Alex, and the angel only let out a small blink as she thought it over.

“I know someone I can talk to about the possibility of such a spell,” she finally relented. “I can find him in the morning. Maybe you two can figure out which witch would hold a big enough grudge against James. Forty eight hours,” she added as a warning to the familiar. “And if another person dies and he’s to blame, then there’s nothing we can do.”

Alex rolled above the clouds, wings skimming the thick condensation with each strong downstroke. Her grace stretched out ahead of her in search of her target. The Winchesters had both gotten up early and were already off working. Sam had returned to the police station to see if he could get any more information out of the lead detective about the case. Dean, on the other hand, had gone with Portia to meet Drexyl, James’ informant. But Alex wasn’t interested in him. No. She was looking for Galavant.

She dipped down until she was skimming the treetops, eyes darting across the land. He was close. Tents loomed in the distance, and Alex landed inside the nearest one. Ahead she could feel the grace of her angelic acquaintance, and she beckoned him to her with a quick, short prayer.

The canvas tent flaps rustled as they were pushed aside, and Galavant stepped into view. His white and maroon wings were pinned calmly against his armored back, and a rapier once more hung at his side. “My good friend,” he hailed with a deep, exuberant bow. “Welcome back. What can I thank your presence for? Work or for pleasure?”

“Work, I’m afraid.” Alex looked about the small tent. “Ohio? I never took this state for any sort of role-playing.”

The seraph’s feathers rustled as he chuckled. “Ohio has many surprises, enaiish. It remains perhaps one of my more favorite states. Now,” he started, a hand coming to rest on the hilt of his blade, “what work brings you here? It must have you stumped to bring you all the way to me.” A warm twinkle in his eye let the young angel know he was only teasing, and Alex couldn’t help the small smile that formed upon her lips at his joke.

“We’re on a case that involves witchcraft,” she relayed, “and we need to know if there is a spell where a witch could control another witch’s actions. One of the Winchester’s acquaintances is a wiccan,” Alex explained upon seeing the confusion that slipped down over Galavant’s face. “He’s having dreams where he’s killing people, and they turn up dead the next day. We tested the blood on one of his shirts, and it matched the victim’s.”

“And yet you’re convinced it isn’t him?” Galavant quirked a dark eyebrow at the angel’s unfounded faith in James.
Alex blinked, and when she spoke, she chose her words carefully. “We … we don’t know for sure,” she admitted, “but his familiar has been in his thoughts, and she said she only found memories of the murder and nothing else. No other emotions, no premeditation. It’s like —”

“Like he was present for the murders and nothing more?” the seraph finished. He turned away, deep in thought, and Alex’s toe dug at the grass as she impatiently waited for his response. “There are a few spells that may explain what your friend is experiencing,” he finally said. “I know of a spell where a witch can take control of another’s body, but it was lost in the high middle ages. There are two other spells, though. One allows the witch to persuade another to perform certain actions when exposed to certain stimuli — similar to man’s version of hypnosis — and the other allows him to implant certain images and memories into another’s mind. Do either of those sound like your case?”

“Maybe.” Alex shoved her hands into her pockets, and she nodded as she tucked that information away for later use. “I’ll have to check with the Winchesters; they know more than I do.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Galavant warned lightheartedly. “If I may say so, my lady, I find you quite clever and resourceful.” His fanciful and elegant words carried a line of humor, but his eyes spoke only of solemnity.

“T-Thanks. I … I just meant they know more about this case.” Alex forced a small, little laugh as she felt a flush grow across her cheeks. “Thank you though.” She hesitated, and when Galavant said nothing else, she looked towards the tent door. “I should let you get back to your … life,” she finally said. “Thank you though.” She hesitated, and when Galavant said nothing else, she looked towards the tent door. “I should let you get back to your … life,” she finally said. “You’ve been very helpful, Galavant. Maybe we could get together on some better terms.”

“I would much enjoy that.” White teeth flashed as the seraph grinned, and his soft wings curled down and in towards her. “I hope to hear another prayer from you soon.” He closed with a dramatic bow, and then Galavant walked out of the tent. Alex watched him go, and once the seraph was out of her sight, she let her dark wings carry her up into the sky.

It didn’t take her long to find the Winchesters; they were together in James’ bedroom. Alex landed in the doorway to find the brothers sitting on either side of James, who was unchained and sitting at the foot of his bed. He had his hands on their shoulder, and all eyes were closed as power and magic hummed in the air. Alex stepped forward, ready to interfere with the witchcraft in front of her, but Portia was in front of her in an instant, a hand going out to stop her. “Wait.”

“Why is he free?” The young angel fixed the familiar with a dark glare, chin raised high to meet the taller woman’s gaze. “What’s going on? What is he doing to Sam and Dean? Seriously. I walk away for five minutes —”

“It’s astral projection,” Portia explained, her voice quiet and hurried. “They’re going to the police station to try and find what they’re hiding about James. It isn’t James who is doing this. There’s a spell — one about creating false memories —”

“In the mind of the witch,” Alex finished. “Yes, I know. I have a source who’s very familiar with the Middle Ages and all that took place in it. Particularly with witchcraft. But this — snap them out of it. They —”

She cut off as James violently jumped to his feet, eyes going wide with anger. The Winchesters, snapped out of their spell, broke away, drawing in deep, labored breaths. “James,” Dean snapped, “why don’t you give us a little warning you’re gonna snap us back like that?”

“Stolz — he’s building a case against me.” James pale eyes flashed furiously as he paced back and forth in the small space. Portia let out a exclamation of surprise, and the detective shot her a quick glare. “Ed — he always wanted a breakthrough case,” he muttered. “Nailing a renegade cop? That
“Yeah, especially one he holds a grudge against,” Sam added, and his attention was drawn to Alex when the young angel made a confused noise.

“My first case,” James darkly explained. “They dropped him as lead detective. They went with me.”

“That would probably do it,” Alex agreed, and she stepped away from Portia and moved closer to Sam. “So we think he’s behind this? Payback? He’s the witch now?” She looked down at Dean, her question hanging in her gaze.

To her surprise, the hunter shook his head. No. Stay here.

“He can’t just arrest you,” Portia insisted, reaching out to comfort her master. “He needs evidence. He needs proof.”

“He’s got it! He’s got everything!”

“How?” Alex narrowed her eyes over at James, and her gaze slipped over to Portia. “You said he didn’t do it,” she warned. “How can he have evidence if James didn’t do it?”

“Phil. The cat.” Dean’s voice was scathing, and Alex’s wings flittered in disgust.

James kept pacing, his breathing growing more and more frantic as his steps fell harder and faster in the small room. He was hyperventilating, the true nature of his situation crashing down upon him.

Sam rose to his feet, a hand going out to calm the detective. “Hey, hey, hey,” he said. “Take it easy.”

He frowned as James ignored him, and he added, “Talk this out, buddy —”

With a grunt and a surge of power, James threw a hand out towards Dean, who had just gotten to his feet. The hunter flew back across the room and landed on the nightstand, sending it and him to the ground with a sickening crack. The next second, the same happened to Sam; the glass lamp shattered as the hunter’s head crushed it, and he sunk, unconscious, to the ground.

Alex turned back to James, her grace snapping angrily through the air as the hand turned to point straight at her. The detective’s power had no effect against the angel, and she, with a shove of her own grace, sent the wiccan stumbling back. “We just decided not to kill you,” she warned. “Don’t make me change my mind.”

“James, don’t!” Portia reached out to grab her master’s arm. “You don’t have to do this alone. We can do this together.”

“No, we won’t.” James struggled free of Alex’s hold and turned to face the familiar. “It’s not safe for you. Our time together is over.”

“You’re not going after Philippe on your own,” the young angel warned, and she took a step forward angrily. “Not on my watch.” She took off into the sky, her wings beating furiously as she swerved between the tall stone buildings of town, searching for Philippe LeChat.

Her grace brushed against something, something that pulled her to a halt at its aching familiariness. Was that — no. It couldn’t be. The angel hesitated, wings keeping her steady as she debated reaching out again to confirm what she had felt.

No. A push of her wings carried her higher into the sky, trying to get away from what lay beneath. She couldn’t get distracted. Not now. She was working, and there was no promises she felt what she thought she felt. She had to be mistaken. This — her job — this was more important right now. This was what she had chosen. She needed to find Philippe.
She spiraled down through the ceiling of the nightclub and landed on the wide, marble staircase. She turned the corner and scanned the bar for the feline familiar. There. He was sitting at the bar, quietly conversing with another familiar. “So, you don’t think it’s too late for me to wear braces?” he was asking.

“Won’t even notice them,” the other man promised. “We’ll put them in transparent.” He looked over at Alex, and confusion clouded his brown eyes at the sight of the approaching angel.

His pause drew Philippe’s attention over his shoulder, and he turned to fully face Alex. “The guardian from Detroit,” he drawled, leaning up casually against the bar as she stopped in front of him. “How can I be of service to you?” A sly smile curved up the corners of his lips as he added, “Did Portia send you?”

Alex stretched out a hand to her side, and the other man flew across the room and hit the far wall. People jumped to their feet all around her, surprised and angered at the sudden violence, and Alex opened her mouth to speak, but she never got the chance. A rough hand sent her to the ground, and the young angel grunted as she hit the floor. A second impact sounded above her, and she looked up to see Philippe flat on his back on the bar with James above him. “What …” Alex struggled to her feet, her head spinning slightly from where it had collided with the solid marble floor. “I — How did you get here so fast?”

Her question went unanswered as James grabbed the familiar’s shirt and slammed him once more back into the bar. “Why are you telling lies about me?!” he yelled, and Philippe shrunk back into his skin, scared and confused.

“I-I’m not,” he insisted. “I wouldn’t!”

“I saw the evidence room!” James leaned down into the familiar’s face, and Alex reached forward to pull him away. He struggled as the angel yanked at his shoulder. “I saw the police sketch based on an eyewitness account! Tell me why!”

“I had no choice.” The familiar tried to pull himself free, but with another rush of anger, James pulled free of the young angel and tightened his grip on LeChat.

“What does that mean?!”

“My master made me!” Philippe looked over at Alex, his eyes wide as he begged for help, and the young angel’s wings stretched up and out angrily, but she held her ground, waiting for the familiar to explain himself.

“Liar!” James yelled. “You’re a coward and a liar. Spencer’s my friend.”

“I direct command.” The familiar cringed when the detective raised a fist, ready to strike. “Please,” he begged, “don’t hurt my face.”

“I’m not interested —” James cut off as a crack echoed through the silent bar, and the hairs on the back of Alex’s neck stood up straight as Philippe’s neck turned grotesquely parallel with his shoulders. The light died from his eyes as his head hung limply off the side of the bar.

“He always was spineless.” A low, calm voice sounded behind Alex, and she spun around to see Spencer standing there, eyes turned thoughtfully onto the lifeless body of his familiar. “Now literally.”

“It was you.” James stepped away from Philippe’s body, and he stared up at his friend with wide, disbelieving eyes. “You were behind all this?”
“I humbly accept credit.”

“You made me think I was a killer. Ed Stolz put you up to it. He found out you were a witch, tried to blackmail you.”

Spencer chuckled at James’ ignorance. “You’re not using your thinking cap, Jimmy,” he chided with a disappointed click of his tongue. “It was actually crucial that he didn’t believe in the occult. I’d say he build quite a solid case, don’t you?”

“Why?” Alex stepped forward, positioning herself in front of James to shield him from any harm. “You haven’t explained why you’re doing this — I thought you were his best friend. Why would you — it’s a weird way to go about things, don’t you think? Getting the cops involved? I thought you witches were way above that.” She turned her head over her shoulder to look James in the eyes. “I think there’s something else, wouldn’t you say?” Spencer didn’t immediately respond, and she snapped, “Come on, spit it out. I have other things I need to do today.”

“Can you imagine the insult when she chose you?” Spencer’s voice grew cold as he stepped towards Alex and James. “I wanted her as my soul mate the moment I saw her.”

“P-Portia?” The detective looked up at his friend in hurt and confusion. “This is all about her? She was meant to be my familiar.”

“Oh, she is way more than familiar, isn’t she?” Malice crept into Spencer’s tone as he edged closer, and Alex held out a hand to keep him back. “When she picked you as master, I endured it. But when you two went all Bella and Edward, broke the code, put your passions before the community rules, well, the arrogance, the entitlement was too much. Your total ruination seemed appropriate.” Footsteps echoed off of the marble stairs, and, both Alex and Spencer looked up to see Sam and Dean slide to a stop. “The wiccan from Detroit.”

“So James didn’t kill those —”

Spencer threw out a hand, and the Winchesters flew back into the wall. Tables toppled over as they landed, and Alex’s grace snapped through the air with an audible pop. “Stop it,” she warned. “You killed those people, didn’t you? You killed them, which means —” Energy flooded her body like an icy bath, contracting her lungs, and the young angel let out a strangled breath. “Ow!” she hissed as she pushed the spell away. “That hurt.”

“Seriously, you want to take me on?” The witch rolled his shoulders back as he eyed Alex with the utmost disdain. “A guardian? What can you possibly do against me? You’re no witch, sweetheart.” Energy crackled through the air, manifesting as blue energy that spiraled through the cold air. It hit Alex directly in the chest, and her muscles contracted at its needle-like touch. Her angel blade fell into her hands as her grace fought back, calling upon Lucifer’s to help. It exploded outwards like a firework, sending Spencer stumbling back as the lights flickered above their heads.

“Ego voco impetu delere, vos caelum et infernum.” Sam’s whispered words came only a second before the click of a lighter. Spencer spun around at the sound, and Dean hurled the witch molotov through the air before anyone could react. It hit the man in the stomach, and smoke swirled through the air, surrounding the witch as he cried out in pain. Alex narrowed her eyes as the spell’s power wicked outwards, causing the air to thrum all around them. She could barely see Spencer burst into a cloud of blood and ash, and when the smoke cleared, there was nothing left.

“That was my kill,” she muttered under her breath, and she let her weapon slide back up into her sleeves, unable to help the disappointed twist in Lucifer’s grace, and she looked up at the Winchesters, now on their feet, and added, “At least we know the spell works.”
Nails clicked on the floor as Portia appeared in the doorway, and the familiar shifted as she rushed over to James. “Are you okay?” She looked down at the ash, all that remained of their acquaintance, and Alex turned away.

“I need to go,” she told the brothers. “There’s … something I need to see.”

Alex landed beside a wooden park bench, wings drawing in tight as her feet sunk into the grassy turf. Birds twittered in the bare branches above her head, nearly drowned out by the shrieks and laughs of children on the playground ahead. A junior’s soccer team practiced far off to her right, and the blowing of a whistle pierced the air. But Alex paid them no attention.

She meant to step towards a pair of cream wings, but nerves had her hesitating. However, her presence was quickly noticed by the angel in front of her, and Laura turned to face her. “Alex?” The female angel’s eyes squinted in confusion, and she rose to her feet. “What are you doing here?”

“I—I’m in town. There’s witches that we’re taking care of — took care of,” she quickly corrected. “W-Why are you here?” Her eyes flickered over to the playground, and her chest tightened as she spotted a small, fluffy pair of grey wings. Ashiel. “Why is he here?”

Pity and sympathy lined the angel’s quiet voice. “We take him to playgrounds on Earth to play,” she told Alex. “I think it helps him, being someplace fun and familiar. He’s been having some issues adjusting.”

“So I’ve heard.” Alex watched as Ashiel slowly climbed up the plastic stairs, and she spotted Eremiel at his side, keeping him steady; a fall wouldn’t harm the small fledgling, but it would undoubtedly cause him to cry.

Laura moved in between them, cutting into her line of vision. “You’ve been talking to Ezekiel,” she deduced. “He’s been a great help. You … you shouldn’t be here.”

Alex stepped back, hurt by her words. “I —”

“I’m sorry, Alex. I know how hard this is for you, but we’ve worked so hard to make Ashiel comfortable. He cried for you for days, and kept asking for you for a month. He can’t live with a foot in both worlds; for him to be happy, he needs to move on. You both do.”

Alex’s wings drooped when she heard Ashiel’s shriek of excitement as he slid down the green slide, and her lower lip quivered against her will. “He’s my son,” she pleaded fruitlessly, trying to sidestep the angel in front of her and catch a glimpse of Ashiel. “I found him, I raised him.” She sank down onto the park bench as her legs shook nervously.

Laura repositioned herself between Alex and the fledgling. “What else has Ezekiel told you?” she asked, her tone softening as she changed the subject to more pleasant subjects. “Have you spoken to him a lot?”

“Uh, no. I — I just saw him … uh, last night, actually.” Alex looked up into the face of Ashiel’s new mother, defeat and hurt dulling her gaze. “He just told me that Ashiel was having a hard time acclimating, but he’s doing better now. I didn’t know you guys were in town until I felt your grace while passing by. I’m sorry.” She rose to her feet and shook out her wings, the feathers rustling through the air. “You’re right; I should be on my way. Just … tell him that I love him, okay?”

“I will.” A warm, gentle hand came up to rest on her arm. “If you’re afraid Ashiel will forget you, I promise you he won’t. He still has that penny necklace you gave him; it’s his favorite thing. I don’t
think he knows what it is, but he knows that it’s important.” The hand squeezed sympathetically, and the two angels shared a moment of silence. “You should go,” Laura finally said. “Before he sees you.”

Alex complied.
Remember the Titans

February 25th, 2014

Lebanon, Kansas

Alex pushed her laptop off of her lap and kicked away the soft, white blankets of her bed. Her bed; not a motel bed. Both she and the Winchesters were back at the bunker, and they were once again settling into a comfortable, calm routine. They — upon Alex’s insistence, had even converted one of the rooms directly off to the left of the library into a comfortable sitting room, equipped with a couch and a coffee table; a tv would hopefully be added sometime in the next month.

The young angel straightened her sheets and tossed her black earphones onto her laptop as she tipped her head. She could hear the water running through the pipes as Dean showered; it must be close to 10am. Dean always seemed to shower right after he got up. She listened harder, letting her grace slip out and amplify the sounds around her as she searched for Sam. She could hear the occasional rustle of pages, and she drew her grace back in. The library. Sam must be somewhere in the library. The water shut off as Dean’s shower drew to completion, and Alex pulled on one of the Winchesters’ old, grey sweatshirt over her black tee and exited her room.

She passed by the showers, and her wingtips twitched as she felt warm steam seep out from beneath the closed wooden door, curling around her ankles. She followed the hallway up to the library, her socks silent on the marble floor. Sam was down in the war room, his research spread out across the table with the light-up map. “Hey,” she called, and the Winchester looked up at her voice.

“Uh, morning.” Sam cut off with a short cough, a hand going up to cover his mouth. “Sorry. Um, I got breakfast if you’re interested,” he offered, but his voice rasped slightly. Alex pursed her lips; whatever had been making him cough didn’t seem to be gone. “It’s in the kitchen.”

“Thanks. I guess I could go for food.” Alex turned away, brushing off the Winchester’s condition as unusual but nothing worth her immediate concern. Sam had been overworking himself lately; a small cold was unavoidable. She crossed the library and followed the smell of freshly-brewed coffee to the kitchen to where a white box sat on the counter. Doughnuts. “Breakfast of champions,” the young angel quipped as she picked up one with chocolate frosting and colored sprinkles.

She returned to the warm room to see Sam standing at the sink on the far side of the wall, hands on either side of the ceramic basin and head lowered. Alex watched curiously as he spit something else up before he washed it away with water from the old pipes. “You okay?” she asked.

Sam jumped in surprise, spinning around to stare at her blankly for a second. “Uh, yeah. Yeah, I’m fine. I just … got something in my throat.” He cleared his throat for emphasis and turned back to the sink. He filled a glass with water and swirled it around his mouth before he spit it back out, dipping low so Alex couldn’t see. The young angel frowned, unsure why he was being so defensive.

“Ooh. Doughnuts.” Dean stepped into the room, dressed in the old Men of Letters robe he had commandeered over a white t-shirt and dark boxers. “Any left?”

“There’s a box in the kitchen, and Sam made coffee for you.” Alex listened as Dean walked away, and she turned back to Sam. “Cold, maybe?” she guessed when the Winchester coughed one more time. “Maybe you should take things easy for the day; you’ve kind of been working your ass off.”

Sam looked like he was about to respond, but his lips came back together when Dean reentered the
room, a cup of coffee in one hand and the last bite of a doughnut in the other. “Heard from Kevin?”
the oldest Winchester inquired as he stuffed the rest of his pastry into his mouth.

“Uh, no.” Sam shook his head and set his glass down on the sink. “Nothing yet.”

Dean huffed in disbelief. “What’s it been, like, three weeks? What’s taking that brainiac so long?” He sat down at the table and pushed an open book aside so he could put it down, leaving his hands free to go up in frustration. “It’s a book. Read it.”

Alex snorted, amused by his ignorance, and Sam frowned. “Just a guess,” he retorted humorously, “but translating an ancient language with zero help might be more difficult than we think.”

“I bet Bobby could do it.” Alex walked over to the table and sat down beside Dean, a small smile on her face as she remembered the deceased hunter’s affinity for archaic languages. “Hell, he’d probably have had it done in a week. Too bad I can’t get to heaven and ask him.”

“Yeah, well, you can’t.” Dean sounded grumpy at the mention of their surrogate father, but Alex brushed it off with a flick of her wings. “So, still no word from Cas, Kevin’s taking his sweet little time, and you’re —” he added with a pointed glance at Sam, “— acting cagey. We need a lead before I start climbing these walls.” He pulled his coffee close and took a sip, mumbling another few words under his breath.

Sam walked over to the table and dug through a small pile of newspapers. “Well, um …” he began, searching for the right one, “in that case, I give you zombies.” He tossed the paper to his brother, who straightened up in his seat, interested. “Guy gets hit by a car, left for dead overnight, guts spilled out all over the road, then gets up and walks away from it,” Sam summarized as Alex leaned closer to Dean to read the article’s headline: “Human Roadkill Turns Zombie.”

“I hate zombies,” she complained, pulling away as Dean simultaneously asked, “nothing about brain munching?”

“Remember Bobby’s wife?” Sam asked, answering Dean’s question first. “She didn’t … munch on any brains, and still?” he added, hazel eyes turning to Alex. “Aren’t you like … invincible now?”

“That’s beside the point,” Alex retorted. “I don’t like the reanimated dead, okay? It’s unnatural. Even by our standards.” She crossed her arms as she leaned back in her seat, remaining firm on her viewpoint despite the Winchester’s obvious disagreement.

Sam shook his head, and Dean rolled his eyes as he turned the conversation back to the newspaper article. “You said this guy just got up and walked away?” he asked. “Who saw it? Who was the witness?”

“Montana state trooper, twenty year vet,” Sam replied. “Checked his pulse, saw his insides spilled out all over the place, pronounced him dead with a capital ‘D’.”

“Alright.” Dean slammed a hand down on the table, and Alex jumped at the sound. “I’m sold. Montana it is.” The Winchester rose to his feet, quickly gulping down the rest of his quickly-cooling coffee. “I’ll go put on some pants.”

Great Falls, Montana

Alex followed Sam and Dean inside the red brick building that housed the Montana State Patrol, her hand going up to smooth out the last of the wrinkles in her white blouse. The two Winchesters, both
clothed in their back federal suits, led the way through the front double doors and up to a young man in uniform who stood signing papers outside of his office. “Excuse us,” Sam began, drawing the man’s attention onto them, and the two Winchesters held up their IDs. “Agents Jones and Bonham. FBI. This is Detective Rowe.” He motioned down to Alex, and the young angel held up her identification as well. “We’re looking for Mr. Jack Tresscott. Is he here?”

The man looked between the three of them, his brow furrowing in confusion as to what could have brought the federal agents to such a small town. “Officer Tresscott is out on patrol right now,” he began slowly, “but he should be back in the next half hour if you’re willing to wait. Otherwise I could radio him in. Is …is this about the zombie?” he asked, slightly wide-eyed.

Dean gave no answer. “If you could reach him, that would be great,” he said with a curt, professional nod. “We’ll be in the waiting area.” He lead the way back into the lobby where a handful of chairs were placed in the corner of the room. “Awesome.”

“So what do you think we’re actually dealing with?” Alex sat down on the small wooden table as the brothers sat in two chairs across from her. “I mean, we’re not actually thinking zombies, right? That’s ridiculous.” She rested her elbows on her knees and leaned forward, curiously awaiting their response.

“Bobby’s wife was a zombie,” Sam reminded. “Hell, half of the town came back from the dead.”

“Only because Death, who was under the control of Lucifer, raised them as a sign of the damn apocalypse,” Alex retorted, standing up only long enough to clear away some magazines before she sat back down. “Face it. Bodies don’t just burst forth from the grave without their souls, which have already booked a one-way ticket upstairs — or down. Either they are possessed, or it was some heavy-duty witchcraft.”

“Or a virus,” Dean added, the faintest hint of a teasing grin on his face. “Transmitted through blood or saliva. You’ve seen The Walking Dead, right?”

“No,” Alex retorted, “because I hate zombies! And seriously? That virus stuff — totally science fiction. Get with the real world, Dean.”

The door swung open, and a dark-haired man stepped through, his sharp eyes sweeping over the room before they came to rest on the three federal agents. “I’m Jack Tresscott,” he introduced, crossing the room to stand in front of them. “You must be the feds that Parker called me about.”

“Mr. Tresscott.” Sam rose to his feet and extended a hand in greeting. “Glad to meet you. I’m Agent Jones, this are my partners Agent Burham and Detective Rowe.” Alex and Dean stood up at the mention of their names, and once the officer had shook Sam’s hand he turned to look at them. “We just have a few questions about the John Doe you found on 89.”

Officer Tresscott snorted. “We should talk about this in my office,” he decided, and he lead them down the hall and to the left. He motioned for Alex to close the door behind her, and when she did, he crossed his arms. “Since when have the feds started tracking zombie activity?”

“We don’t track zombies because there is no such thing as zombies,” Alex retorted, her words short and clipped in her best impression of higher disdain. She listened to the officer’s small noise of stubborn disbelief, and she shook her head. “Just … tell us what you saw. In as much detail as possible.”

“Article says it all,” the man said gruffly. “Dead as dog poop, guts pecked out, face frozen. People don’t walk away from that. Zombies do.”
Alex looked up at Dean, meeting his green gaze, and the Winchester understood. “And you don’t think something could have dragged him away?” he asked, doing his best to cover every possible angle.

Jack Tresscott shook his head, remaining firm. “One set of footprints, no drag marks.”

“You didn’t go after him?”

The man fixed Dean with a cold, unbelieving stare. “That’s grizzly country,” he reminded. “You couldn’t pay me enough to hike those woods, not without a bazooka.”

“Uh, Jack?” The young woman sitting at the desk drew the attention of the four onto her, and she pointed down at her desktop. “I got something here. Came across the site from Livingston.” She shifted to the side as Jack and the hunters moved to her side. Alex studied the photo of the mauled and bloodied caucasian male that lay on the frost-covered ground.

“John Doe,” Jack read over the assistant’s shoulder, “presumably mauled by a grizzly. Holy crap. That’s him.”

“That’s the dead guy?” Dean repeated, deeply confused.

“Dead my ass,” the officer retorted. “That’s a zombie, guys.” Jack hurried over to the coat rack and grabbed the thick black belt that housed his black glock. He fastened it around his waist, eyes alight with both excitement and determination. The young angel looked up at Sam and frowned; there was no way they should allow this guy to come along.

“Uh, you know what, trooper?” Sam stepped forward to intercept the state patrolman. “Why don’t you stay here? We’ll take care of this one. We need someone to hold down the fort,” he added when Jack hesitated.

“You sure?” he asked with a disappointed look at all three of them.

“Yeah,” Dean agreed, doing his best to lighten the man’s fallen spirits. “And if things go all Dawn of the Dead on us, you’ll be our first call.” He stepped forward, leading the way towards the door. Sam and Alex followed, pausing when Jack Tresscott spoke.

“Guys … aim for the head.”

Alex bit back a laugh, but she did her best to take his words seriously. “We’ll try to do just that,” she promised. “Thanks, sheriff.” She stepped out of the office, shaking her head as the Winchesters closed the office door behind them. “Zombies,” she scoffed. “Some people are seriously crazy.”

The heavy door of the Park County Medical Examiner and Coroner’s Office squeaked as it swung closed behind Alex. The angel shoved her hands into her pocket, wings fluttering at the building’s chill as people moved all around her, all lost in the hustle and bustle of their day. She stood behind the Winchesters as they introduced themselves to the nice secretary at the front desk, and once she produced her identification, they were pointed through a set of double doors and to the right.

Their approach was momentarily halted by an older gentleman in a lab coat. “May I help you, gentlemen?” he asked, spotting Alex too late to catch himself. “Ma’am.”

Sam and Dean once again flashed their fake badges. “We’re here to inspect the John Doe that was found mauled earlier today,” Dean requested. Seeing the quizzical look on the doctor’s face, he
added as a half-lie, “We have reason to believe he’s a suspect in a recent pseudocide.”

“I’m the coroner assigned to the case,” the man said slowly. “I can show you the remains if you want.”

Sam nodded. “That would be great.” They followed the coroner down the hall and into a cold, stone room. A body adorned with a pristine white sheet lay in the center of a metallic table, and the coroner paused only long enough to put down his clipboard and pull on a pair of gloves before he lifted the sheet away. “John Doe — second this year. No driver’s license, no credit cards, nothing with a serial number we can trace.”

“So no ID on this guy?” Sam concluded.

The doctor shook his head. “Fingerprints came back blank, too.” He looked down at the body, and Alex did the same, taking in the expanse of pale skin marred by large, jagged gashes. She leaned back slightly as Dean reached past her, his hands already gloved, and pulled back on the man’s upper lip. The gums and teeth were stained dark with blood, most likely a result of the lethal chest wound. The young angel retrieved her own set of latex gloves while dean shook his head at his brother; whether he was looking for fangs or brains, Alex didn’t know, but either way, he didn’t find it.

“What’s going on down here?” Sam asked, pointing to a particularly ghastly wound on the corpse’s right side; Alex noted the telltale sign of scavengers.

“Liver was eaten,” came the response. “Best guess is a bird got at it.”

“Crow,” Alex clarified, and she stepped forward to stand at Dean’s side. “It was most likely a raven or a crow, judging by those marks. It could have been another member of the family Corvidae,” she added merely for her own satisfaction, “but they rarely prey on carrion if they can help it.” Her assessment was met with silence, and the young angel cleared her throat. “I’d like a few minutes with the remains,” she informed the coroner, voice taking on a brisk, businesslike tone. “I need to complete an initial, independent examination of my own.” She waited until the coroner nodded and walked away before turning to the two brothers. “What?”

“Crows? Really?” Dean’s eyebrow lifted.

“Or a raven,” Alex repeated defensively. “There’s little physiological difference between the two, but they’re not the same species.” She looked over at Sam’s blank face, adding, “What? It’s pretty common knowledge.”

“Among who?” Dean scoffed. “Bird enthusiasts? Or other birds, right, Feathers? Is that the kind of stuff they teach you upstairs?”

Alex rolled her eyes, amused yet annoyed at Dean’s ribbing. “I’m not a bird, Winchester,” she retorted.

“Yeah, whatever, Birdgirl. See if you can find anything on the body that’s actually useful, okay?” Dean turned away from the corpse, and the young angel let out a low, frustrated breath as she started her examination. “I got to say,” she heard the Winchester admit, “I am a little disappointed.”

Sam snorted. “Yeah, cause you wanted to to shoot zombies.”

“Damn straight I wanted to shoot zombies.” Dean stripped off his gloves and walked over to the metal trash can, Sam at his heels. “Look, man, this is as about as open-and-shut as it gets, okay? Guy gets Mac-trucked, goes down for a nap, wakes up, takes a detour into Mama Bear’s den — end of
Alex frowned, not fond of the holes in his story, and she pulled off her own gloves, shaking out her wings as she tossed the into the bin behind her. Sam seemed to share in her apprehensions, because as she turned back he asked, “Then why did he run? He was injured. The trooper could have helped him.”

Dean shrugged, clearly less concerned that his peers. “I don’t know. Shady past?”

The corpse breathed. It didn’t just breathe, it inhaled, gasping for precious oxygen as its eyes flew wide open. They locked with Alex’s, and white hot terror flashed up her spine. Blue. Blue eyes. That was the only thought that seemed to register before the panic took hold, sending her wings out and her grace snapping through the air. Warm metal slid into her palm, and time sped up as she reacted instinctively. One second those eyes were wide with surprise — the next, panic, as the angel blade slid deep into his chest. The man’s face lit up with a golden glow as he died, his hand rising up from the table as he impulsively curled inwards towards the fatal wound. Then he fell, limp, his blue eyes wide and dull.

Lifeless again.

“What the hell?” The Winchesters had just spun around — had that really just taken a second? The young angel could have sworn it was longer by how vivid the memory remained. “Alex?”

“S-Sorry.” The panic was fading now, even though she could still feel the heat in her spine and her feathers still remained ruffled in fear. “He — he came back to life.” She stared down at the corpse, eyes coming to rest on the hole in his chest. “I-I mean, he’s dead now — for good — but he …” She trailed off, bewildered at what had just transpired. “What is he? — Was he?”

The stupefied looks on the brothers’ faces provided her with no answer. “We could have asked if you hadn’t killed him!” Dean finally snapped.

“Shut up,” Alex retorted. “A dead man came back to life in my face. I panicked. What were you expecting?” She looked back down at the corpse, a deep-set frown forming on her lips. “And now we need to move the fucking body,” she reluctantly admitted. “We need to figure out what this is — and if there’s more — and the coroner won’t keep it for long once he’s closed the case … plus he’ll notice the pretty obvious stab wound in his heart,” she added sourly. “I … I guess I’ll bring it back to the motel?”

The curl of her lips let the Winchesters know how displeased she was with that idea, and thankfully, Sam shook his head, a better plan in mind. “There’s an abandoned lumber mill just north of town,” he recounted, and Alex nodded as she remembered the faded highway marker. “Take him there. It’s cold enough that the body will be fine for a while.”

“Sounds like a good plan.” Alex carefully wrapped the white sheet around the corpse. “I … I guess I’ll meet you guys back at the motel.” Without waiting for confirmation, her wings unfolded, and she and the lifeless body took off into the sky.

Alex stepped through the motel door, wings folding in close as she passed through the narrow wooden frame. Sam and Dean were sitting inside at the table, the remains of their dinner piled in the center. “Find anything?” she asked, kicking the door closed behind her. Both Winchesters looked up at her arrival, and Alex’s gaze dropped to the leftovers from their meal. “And anything left for me?”
In response, Sam slid a small, white takeout bag over to the other chair, and Alex crossed the room and sat down. “Nothing,” he admitted as she pulled out the white styrofoam box that contained what was most likely a burger and some fries. “I haven’t found anything to give us an identity on this guy, and, well, Dean’s been, you know…”

“I’ve been researching zombie lore,” Dean retorted, displeased to find that he was the only one in the room still sticking to the ‘zombie’ theory.

The look Sam gave her indicated how much of a help Dean had really been. “Anyways,” he said, not bothering to comment on Dean’s statement lest an argument start up, “did you find anything with the body? You were gone for a long time.”

Alex shook her head, disappointed. “Nothing. I have no idea what this guy is. He’s clearly not human anymore, but because of both the lack of a body trail and a lack of any distinguishing features on him, he doesn’t seem to be any monster we’ve run across. And he wasn’t possessed; no sign of sulphur. I don’t know. Pagan god? Phoenix? I have absolutely no idea.”

“I considered pagan god,” Sam agreed thoughtfully, “but I don’t know which one.” He turned back to his laptop, scrolling down as he searched a website. “There are literally thousands of them, and a lot of them have similar myths about them.”

“It’s not important,” Dean reminded from where he sat. He closed his laptop as Alex broke a thick fry in half and slid it into her mouth. “He’s dead. End of story. Who cares what he was? I say we forget about it, get some sleep, and leave in the morning, huh? Get back to the bunker where my bed doesn’t have lumps the size of baseballs.”

Sam and Alex exchanged looks. “Yeah, that sounds like a good idea,” Alex agreed. “I… I guess I’ll take care of the body in the morning.” She frowned down at the two pickles that sat within her burger and proceeded to flick them at the oldest Winchester. “You know I don’t like pickles,” she defended when the hunter glared at her. “Get it right.”

The room was dark; moonlight was the only source of light, and even it was carefully tucked away behind the curtains. Beside her, Dean shifted in his sleep, pulling the blankets tighter around his body. Alex shifted to let him take as much as he needed, her attention focused on the ceiling high above her head as she let go of part of her consciousness, slipping back into the dark recesses of her mind. Time seemed to pass without passing at all, the few stray beams of moonlight on the ceiling moving across the bumps and lumps as the hours ticked away. But Alex barely seemed to notice their passing. Her thoughts were on Castiel; it had been almost two months since she had last heard from him — ever since they had fought on that pier in Ohio.

The young angel winced as she replayed that conversation in her head. She knew she had been harsh on him, but Castiel had broken his promise again. All because of Naomi. Alex felt anger roll in her chest, and she went to clench her fists, but her body didn’t move, her nerves and muscles fast asleep. Alex let them remain asleep, too deep into her thoughts to want to come out of them. However, the anger still remained. Anger at Naomi, anger at Castiel. He should have let her stay by his side. He kept treating her like she was helpless. She wasn’t; she had Lucifer’s grace within her, making her stronger than any other creature or angel that stood in her path. But Castiel just didn’t understand.

Or he didn’t want to. A trickle of guilt cut through the anger like water through sand. He probably didn’t even want to acknowledge that Lucifer’s grace rested beside her own. Not when his wanted so badly to take its place. *It must hurt,* the young angel reluctantly relented, *to see another’s grace residing so intimately with your mate’s.* But that still didn’t excuse his actions. *Right?*
The shadows moved beside her, and Alex snapped into consciousness. There was someone else in the room creeping between the two beds; a female presence. Grace pulsed through her limbs, shocking her back into wakefulness. Her wings flapped as she leapt to her feet, grabbed the intruder, and pinned her against the wall. The Winchesters were already on their feet. “Who the hell are you?” Alex snapped, wings stretching out high over their heads.

“What the hell?” Dean added, gun clutched tightly in his hands as he flicked on the bedside lamp, bathing the room in a harsh yellow glow.

Alex screwed up her eyes momentarily, but she quickly repeated her question. “Who are you?” she demanded. “And what the hell are you doing here?”

Her question was partially answered when the woman, clad in black leather, let out a dry laugh. “Westerners,” she scoffed, voice calm and collected, clearly unperturbed by her sudden discovery. “The sheer audacity of your kind … what makes you think I’ll tell you anything? Now where is he?”

“Where is who?” Alex tightened her grasp on the pagan god in front of her, grace flicking angrily through the air. “Who the hell are you looking for?”

“Don’t act like you don’t know.” Sharp, bright eyes stared scornfully down at the angel. “The three of you were at the morgue this afternoon, and now he’s gone. I know you’re hiding him.” Something glinted in the light; a dagger. A sharp, twisted dagger that was suddenly raised above her head.

Alex shifted back, surprised by the weapon’s appearance, but she didn’t lose her grip on the stranger. “Put it down,” she warned, “and tell us who you are.”

Pain shot up her neck, and Alex gasped as the knife sunk deep into her shoulder, its jagged blade cutting through skin and muscle. Her hands let go of the woman as she drew them up to protect herself, surprised at the intensity of the pain and the heat. Then the knife and the woman were gone. Alex’s wings fell back to her side, and she covered the wound with her hand. It … it was bleeding profusely. Her grace felt paralyzed, and Alex stumbled back as the shock took over. She wasn’t healing.

The ground collided with her body, and Alex screwed her eyes up in pain as she felt the Winchesters fall to their knees beside her. “Hey hey hey.” A large, heavy hand slammed down onto her shoulder as Dean tried to stop the bleeding, and Alex’s limbs jerked in agony. “What the hell’s going on?” he snapped. His question was directed toward Alex, but the young angel could only hiss in pain. “Why isn’t your angel mojo working?”

“What the hell was that thing?” Sam added, and Alex felt herself relax ever so slightly as she felt his hand come to rest firmly on her uninjured shoulder and side, a solid yet grounding pressure. “It has to be the blade, Dean. That’s got to be it.” Sam let go of her, and Alex curled into Dean, her own hands going up to cover his as she slowly came to her senses. “I’ll get dad’s kit,” she heard Sam say, and through her pain she managed to grunt out an affirmation of Sam’s plan.

The door opened and slammed closed, and Alex finally opened her eyes. “I-I’m fine,” she promised, but cut off with an agonized hiss as Dean shifted his grip, and fire shot back through her shoulder. Dean didn’t answer; he only scooped her up and carried her over to the beds.

Sam was back in the room and back at her side within seconds. “Here.” He dropped the metallic box onto the bed beside her and nudged his brother out of the way. “Let me take a look.” Her shirt tore as the Winchester cut it away with his knife, intentionally trying not to jostle her, but Alex winced all the same.
“Here.” Dean tossed his brother a towel and a bottle of water, and Sam easily caught them. “Doesn’t look too bad,” the hunter commented as the water cleaned away the blood. “Don’t know what you’re complaining about.”

Alex turned her head to stare at the long, bleeding wound. It was almost as long as her index finger, and the jagged knife had caused the flesh to turn out slightly when it had been forcefully removed, allowing her to see the smooth, red muscle tissue beneath. The sight of it has her muscles tensing instinctively, and Alex looked away in pain when she saw the tissue contract. “Shut up,” she hissed out, but she fell silent as the stinging agony only increased.

“It’s pretty deep,” Sam slowly agreed as he threaded up a needle. “I don’t think this is going to heal overnight, Dean. Whatever that woman stabbed her with, it’s powerful.” He reached down, and Alex gritted her teeth as his fingers pinched the flesh together, and a second later the sharp, located pain of a needle shot up her nerves.

Alex stared up at the ceiling as Sam slowly stitched her back together, counting each needle pull. Fifteen stitches in her shoulder, and it felt like an eternity before he finished, but eventually he did. Sam pulled away, and Alex turned her eyes back to her exposed skin. Blood was still welling up from between the sewn skin, but the Winchester’s work held. The young angel carefully sat up, careful not to put any weight onto her injured arm. “T-Thanks,” she said as Sam covered the wound in gauze. “I … I’ll be fine now.” Goosebumps dotted her skin, and Alex looked down at her torn shirt. “Hey, Dean, c-can you grab me a new shirt? I’m getting cold.” She watched as the hunter nodded and walked away, and she added, determined to sound confident and in control of her situation. “The adrenaline’s wearing off,” she explained as Sam cleared away the bloody towel. “That’s why.”

She accepted the dark shirt from Dean, groaning in pain as she lifted her bad right arm up so she could slide the sleeve on. “Here.” Dean reached up to help. “Don’t tear your stitches.”

Sam stepped back out of the bathroom and hurried over to the kitchen table where his laptop lay. “Not a lot of weapons are powerful enough to do something like that,” he said, pulling on a flannel over his light grey and slightly blood-stained t-shirt before he sat down. “And that was definitely a pagan god.”

“No shit, Sherlock.” Alex maneuvered herself into a sitting position, one hand pressed gingerly against her wound. “From the east, most likely. Greco-Roman, maybe Hindu. She called us Westerners,” she explained when she saw the look on Dean’s face. “They don’t like us — angels especially after the apocalypse and all.”

The two Winchesters exchanged looks. “Get some sleep,” Sam finally suggested to her. “You’re going to need your strength.”

“I said I’ll be fine.” Alex got to her feet and walked over to him, pointedly ignoring the way her legs seemed to shake under her lithe frame. “All I want to do is hunt that bitch down, and I’m not sleeping till we do.” She slid into the chair across from Sam, grimacing as her arm moved. “Where do we start?”

Alex stared blankly at the screen of her laptop as the sun trickled through the curtains. It had been hours since she had moved, and she was sore all over. Her back was sore, her ass was sore, her shoulder was sore as all hell. Everything hurt, and all she wanted to do was go to bed. The door opened, and she flicked out her grace to feel Dean’s soul. Then she pulled it back in with a groan. Even her grace ached. “Here. I found this sling in the trunk.” Dean dropped the makeshift sling into
her lap after he set a small brown bag on the table. “And, uh, here.” He pulled out a bottle of brandy and set it in front of her. “This’ll help.”

Sam answered for her before she could do it herself. “Good idea. I want to take another look at that shoulder,” he added to Alex, and he rose to his feet. “You’re looking pretty stiff.”

“Understatement.” The young angel slowly rose to her feet, steadying herself on the table with her good hand. “Ouch.” She let Sam lead her over to the table and slowly stripped off her shirt so the Winchester could examine the gauze-covered wound. The flesh was still an angry red, but the bleeding had thankfully ceased; it had now dried into a thick, dark scab in between the stitching. “That’s looking better,” she slowly commented, trying her best to stay optimistic in the face of the fact that it still hadn’t healed. “I think I’ll be fine in a couple days.”

“Weeks,” Sam corrected, and he picked up a bottle of brandy that Dean had just returned with. He unscrewed the cap with ease, and before Alex could protest, he poured it onto her shoulder.

“Ow!” Alex jumped at the sudden, intense burn, and she glared up at the younger Winchester. “I thought that was for drinking!” she snapped, a hand going up to cover her injury.

Sam ignored her sharp comment. “We don’t want infections,” he gently reminded as he placed the bottle onto the nightstand. “But you can drink the rest if you want.” With deft hands he redressed the wound, and Alex took a long sip of the brandy while he did.

When he was done, she looked down at her bloody undershirt. “Great.” The young angel rose to her feet, her left arm instinctively drawing up into her chest. Sam finished returned to the table. Alex picked up her duffle bag and slung it over her good shoulder as she crossed the room, kicking the bathroom door opened and closed behind her. Alex slowly but surely peeled off her shirt top, and then tossed it into the shower before reaching into her bag for a bra. It was easy enough to get the straps on her arms, but the trouble came with the clasp. “Dammit.” The angel fumbled around for another second or two before she tipped her head back. “Dean?” she called, wings flicking disgustedly at her helplessness. The movement, however, caused her to hiss in pain, and her wings pinned themselves tightly against her back. “I need help,” she admitted when she heard the door open. “Can you get the clasp?”

Warm fingers brushed against her skin as the Winchester complied. “How are you feeling?” Dean asked as he stepped away, and Alex bent over to pick up a shirt. “That still looks pretty nasty.” He reached around her and took the shirt in his hands. “Here. Let me help.”

“I’m fine, Dean.” Pride and embarrassment had her cheeks flushing, and she tightened her grip on the grey fabric. “I think I can dress myself.”

“Hey. That shoulder needs to rest, and knowing you, you’re going to try and push yourself too fast.” Dean, however, let go of Alex’s shirt and stepped away. “Just be careful.”

Alex waited until Dean had left before she very, very carefully pulled on the grey henley. Her shoulder ached, and the young angel pushed her grace up against the wound, but the flesh refused to heal. The cells just wouldn’t stick back together. Her head fell, and she reluctantly picked up her bag and returned to the room.

“So, I think I know who that woman was.” Sam looked up as she entered, and the angel made a wordless, questioning noise as she stiffly slid into the chair across from him. She ignored the look of concern given to her by the younger Winchester before he continued. “It was easy once I identified the weapon that stabbed you. It was one of Artemis’ blades. They’re nasty and can kill an Immortal dead.”
“Artemis?” Alex pulled her bad arm closer as Dean secured the sling over her shoulder. “Zeus’ daughter?” A knock on the door had the angel cutting off, and she looked up in confusion. “What?” Her grace twitched, curious, but she still it at the pain the movement ethereal caused. Dean and Sam exchanged looks, and the oldest brother picked up his gun and flicked off the safety as he slowly approached the door. Alex let her own weapon fall into her good hand as Dean cautiously peered out the window.

Whatever he saw must have appeared benign, because after a second or two’s pause, he unlocked the door, his gun placed against the wood. “May I help you?”

“Agent Bonham?” That was a woman’s voice. It wasn’t cold and contemptuous like Artemis’; instead, it was soft — uncertain.

Dean’s hand tightened on the handle of his gun. “And you are?” he asked, voice tinged with wary caution.

“T-This is going to sound really strange,” the quiet voice began, “but I’m looking for a corpse that went missing. The coroner said you were the last one to see him.” Alex heard the sound of paper rustling — a newspaper, by it’s distinctive sound — and a second later, Dean stepped aside to reveal the stranger at the door. “I’m Hayley.” The woman was young, not much older than mid-thirties, with light brown hair that barely reached past her shoulders. A boy stood in front of her, her arms wrapped securely across his shoulders.

Alex tipped her head, her angel blade disappearing up into the long sleeve of her henley as she made eye contact with the mother. “Uh, this is Agent Jones and Detective Rowe.” Dean motioned to Sam and Alex in turn, and Sam joined his brother at the door, once more blocking Alex’s view.

“Why are you looking for our John Doe?” Sam asked.

“Well,” Hayley slowly started, “his name is Shane. At least that’s what I called him. I’m the mother of his son.”

“Hey.” Dean’s voice was warm as he bend town a little towards the child and held out his hand. “Why don’t you slap me some skin, huh?” Alex couldn’t see it, but she could almost hear the warm grin that surely decorated his face.

The child’s reaction was hidden by Sam’s broad shoulders, but Hayley’s apology said it all. “He’s shy,” she told the Winchesters as Dean straightened back up, and her tone soften when she added to her son, “It’s okay, Oliver.”

The young angel cleared her throat. “Why don’t you invite them in?” she suggested to Sam. “It sounds like there are some things we need to discuss.”

Sam and Dean stepped back, and the woman slowly ushered her son into the room. Alex stepped away from the beds, her good hand going out to motion that they should sit. Something in her facade must have intimidated them, because in the next moment, Dean’s hand was on her good shoulder. The touch lasted barely a second, and then the Winchesters seated themselves across from their guests on the opposite bed. Alex stayed where she was, slightly miffed about Dean’s touch, and she opted instead to pull one of the kitchen chairs closer.

The young mother looked around the room, almost as if she were expecting to see someone appear at any moment in front of her eyes. “Where is he?” she finally asked Dean. “Where’s Shane?”

The brothers’ eyes turned onto Alex, and were soon followed by the gazes of the newcomers, and
the angel cleared her throat, unsure what to say. The truth sounded harsh, but the woman clearly seemed to know something. She looked over at Sam, and the Winchester reluctantly nodded, understanding her silent plea. “Um, I’m sorry. Shane’s … dead.”

Hayley’s only reason was surprise. “He didn’t …” The woman suddenly rose to her feet, and Alex quickly did the same. “I’m sorry,” she apologized. “It’s just the coroner said you were the last to see him, so I just thought you knew …” She led her son towards the door, but her words clicked within Alex’s head before the woman could reach it.

“Wait wait.” Alex beat her to the door and placed her hand against the wood, keeping it securely closed. “Thought we knew? What do you know?” Her sharp, grey gaze bore into Hayley’s eyes, searching her face for any sign of truth. “You know, don’t you?” Her eyes narrowed as she realized that she was in fact right. “You know who he is.”

Hayley looked back the Winchesters, who had both risen to their feet, and she tightened her grip on her son’s hand for the briefest moment as she carefully chose her next words. “I … I don’t know what he is,” she finally began. “All I know is that he can’t die.” She looked down at Oliver, and she leaned down to smooth down her son’s hair. “Why don’t you go play outside?” she told him, and Alex opened the door for the young child. “Mommy needs to talk with the nice FBI agents for a while.” Hayley waited until her son had hurried over to the swing set that sat in front of the motel room before she turned back to Sam and Dean. “I didn’t know Shane well,” she began, crossing the room to sit back down on the bed, and the brothers joined her. “When I was younger … I had friends that wanted to climb this mountain in Europe, and I thought it sounded exciting, so … I joined them.” Her gaze dropped to the ground, and Alex straddled the chair as she waited as the woman took a few seconds to gather her thoughts. “There was an avalanche while we were climbing — a big one. I managed to pull myself free, but my friends … they were gone. That’s when I found him. His clothes were torn off, his eyes were frozen solid, but he was still alive. I just knew there was something off about him, the way that … that he would —”

“Die?” Dean guessed.

“Yeah. I thought it w-was from the exposure of shock. Maybe he was unconscious. We were both in bad shape. And I knew I couldn’t have made it down that mountain if it weren’t for him. And when we got to the bottom, we, um … realized it had become something else.” Hayley once more diverted her eyes from the hunters before her, and Alex picked up the faintest hint of embarrassment as she continued, “We spend the night together, and while we were, you know … He had a heart attack.”

“Awkward.”

Alex nodded in agreement with Dean’s comment, but Hayley only went on to finish her story. “So I called 911, and they couldn’t save him. I had to go down to the ID the body, and …”

“He came back to life?” Alex concluded, and she leaned forward curiously. “So he … he died two days in a row but always came back to the living? Why? How?”

“I … I don’t know.” The woman looked up into Dean’s green eyes. “I freaked out when I saw him,” she confessed. “I ran. And nine months later, I had Oliver.” Her gaze turned towards the window where her son could just barely be seen through the curtains, swinging on the swing set. “I hired a private investigator. I really tried to find him, but when they gave up, I gave up. Until a couple of months ago.”

“What made you look again?” Sam asked, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees as he awaited the newcomer’s response. Alex shared in his curiosity, and it only grew when Hayley looked reluctant to answer.
“The worse thing,” the young mother finally said, and she looked out the window. Alex followed her gaze, trying to catch a glimpse of the child. He wasn’t on the swings. Alex rose to her feet, her grace flicking fruitlessly from within her body, and she pulled aside the curtain. Oliver wasn’t on the swing set. He was laying on the ground. Unmoving.

Alarm pulsed through the angel, and her wings flared out sharply, followed by a crippling burst of pain. A cry slipped through her lips, and it was immediately mistaken for shock. Hayley and the Winchesters jumped to their feet as Alex threw open the door and ran outside. She tripped over the sidewalk, her feet twisting beneath her, and if it wasn’t for Sam, she surely would have fallen. Hayley ran past her and fell to her knees in front of her unconscious son. “Is he okay?” Alex pushed Sam away, the adrenaline from the sudden turn of events still pumping through her blood.

“He’s fine.” Hayley gathered Oliver up into her arms, but the large, bloody stain on his forehead and the panicked look in his mother’s eyes seemed to proclaim the opposite. The young woman quickly carried her son into the house, and the hunters followed.

“Should we call 911?” Dean asked, and he stepped back as Alex pushed herself in between him and Sam to kneel beside the child. “Hey.” A hand cuffed her over the head. “Do something!”

“I can’t do anything!” Alex pushed her grace outwards, but the pain was too great, and she pulled it back within her skin. She batted Dean’s hand away. “I —”

“It’s okay.” Hayley ran a gentle hand through Oliver’s hair. “He … he’s going to be okay.” She looked up at the Winchesters, and Alex’s shoulders dropped as she realized the woman’s unspoken truth.

“He’s the same as his father.” Alex rose to her feet, her grey eyes narrowing as she stared down at the child. “He … he dies every day.”

She placed a gentle hand on her shoulder as she stepped back, and Hayley sat down on the mattress beside her son. She tipped her head up to meet Sam’s gaze, and he motioned her away.

“I think I know who Shane was,” he murmured, returning to the table where his laptop lay open. “Um, at least from what I can tell, he was Prometheus.”

“Seriously?” Dean joined them at the table, leaning on his brother’s shoulder to look down at the screen. “Didn’t he — he steal fire or something?”

Sam nodded, and Alex cast a glance over her shoulder to where Hayley still sat, preoccupied with her dying son. “Yep. He, uh, ‘Ocean’s Eleven’d Mount Olympus and stole the flames of Olympia.”

Dean scoffed. “For what, kicks?”

“For us, actually.” Sam pulled open one of his many tabs from last night so all could see the archaic image upon the screen. “Zeus decided to revoke humanity’s ability to make fire so we couldn’t cook, couldn’t stay warm, couldn’t see in the dark. Prometheus stole it back, and in return, Zeus decided to strap him to that mountain and make him relive death every day.”

Dean cursed in amazement. “Damn. Every day for how long? No wonder the guy’s hard drive was fried.” He glanced over his shoulder at Hayley and Oliver, and Alex watched as the child’s shallow breathing finally ceased. “And now his son has his curse. Alright.” He clapped his brother on the back. “Well, we’ve never battled a God curse before. Hope we can break it. Especially with one angel down,” he added, and Alex watched how his gaze flickered over to her shoulder.

The young angel purposefully ignored it, instead choosing to focus her attention on the painting of
Prometheus. “His liver was eaten by a bird.” She looked over at Sam and shook her head. “I should have known. I can’t believe I didn’t think of it.” She dropped down into a wooden chair. “Bobby would be pissed.”

“Bobby —”

Alex cut the young Winchester off. “Bobby would chew me a new one,” she promised, the faintest hint of a smile pulling on her lips at how Sam tried to defend the dead hunter. “Don’t deny it. Anyways,” she added, “we need to get back to the bunker. We’ll be safe, and we’ll have everything we need to figure out how to break it.”

“She’s right.” Sam got up and gathered up his computer. “We should go back to Kansas.”

“What about Shane?” Hayley looked over at them, her light eyes darkened by confusion and worry. “Where is he? Has … has he already left? I need to see him.”

“That’s … not going to be possible.” Alex looked back at the Winchesters, but when neither of them spoke up, she let out a long, quiet breath. “Shane’s dead. Forever this time.” She watched the shock followed by bitter realization that settled over the woman’s face, and her good shoulder rose and fell in an apologetic shrug. “I … may or may not have killed Prometheus.”

**Lebanon, Kansas**

Alex heard the bunker door swing open, and she looked up from where she sat at the library table. Sam came through first, Oliver in his arms, Dean and Hayley close at his heels. The child was unconscious again — *dead*, Alex’s grace corrected. It was slowly recovering, and the young angel was now able to extend it out of her body. It was still weak, however, and her shoulder still ached badly; the wound showed little progress of healing. Her wings had carried her back to the bunker, but now her shoulder hurt so badly she barely dared risk moving the right one. “What happened?” Alex rose to her feet, concerned; Dean had called last night to inform her that Oliver was fine.

“He choked on his breakfast.” Dean’s voice was grim as Sam led the way towards a spare bedroom. Alex followed, leaning against the doorframe as Sam lay Oliver down on the bed. “The curse was put on Shane,” he added, voice rough in frustration at the sight of the dying child. “Why the kid?”

“I don’t know,” Alex retorted. “Genetics? How long has this been happening?”

“Since — since he turned seven.” Hayley looked over at Alex as she sat down on the bed beside her son, and Alex watched as an emotion flickered through her gaze — fear, uncertainty? The angel couldn’t tell. “So a few months ago. It started with the dying, and then he stopped talking.”

“Wait, seven?” Sam looked down at the young mother, and when she nodded he turned back to Dean and Alex. “Age seven marks one of the first Greek rites of manhood.”

Dean frowned, clearly unhappy about what that meant. “So, what? Are you saying the curse is hardwired into his programming? How do you know that?”

“It doesn’t matter how he knows, Dean.” Alex’s good wing flittered. “The curse is on Oliver, and there’s only one way we can stop it, okay? We need to get Zeus to break the curse.” She pushed herself off of the doorway and glanced back out into the hall. “Listen. I’ve been digging through the books, and I pulled out the ones that look the most promising, okay?”

She stepped away as Sam and Dean left the room, hesitating when Hayley didn’t leave her son’s
side. “I’m sorry about Shane,” she finally said. “I … I didn’t know he was Oliver’s father, and I —”

“It’s okay.” The woman looked up into the young angel’s eyes. “Sam told me the whole story. He startled you, and you reacted. I remember how … how terrifying it was.” Hayley looked down at Oliver, her hand running through his soft, dark hair. “I think, deep down inside, I knew it would happen one day.”

Alex nodded, and her tongue ran across the inside of her teeth as she tried to think of a response. “If you need anything,” she finally said, “the three of us will be just down the hall in the library. Don’t hesitate to call.”

“So let me get this straight.” Hayley spoke, breaking the silence, and Alex looked up from the large, dusty book she had been skimming through for the past hour. The young mother had been in and out of the library, moving between the Winchesters and her son, and Alex had been ignoring her up until now. “So Ollie’s dad is a Greek god who was cursed to die everyday by Zeus. Except he was killed by an angel —” Her eyes swung over to Alex before returning to the Winchesters, “— and you guys are … Ghostbusters. Am I getting this right?”

Alex and Sam exchanged glances, and Dean retorted, “Well, you know, due to the fact that your son is currently, albeit temporarily, dead, I’m gonna let that one slide.”

The woman fixed Dean with a look of astonishment. “You have to realize that sounds crazy.”

“And that’s just the tip of the iceberg.” Alex leaned back in her seat, her focus on her reading lost, but the motion forced a wordless cry from her lips. Her hand went up to cover her shoulder, and she gritted her teeth to cut the cry short before either Winchester would hear.

“How’s your shoulder doing?”

The deeply-etched worry in Sam’s face showed that she hadn’t been quick enough to cover up her pain. “Is it feeling any better?”

“I’m fine. It’s fine.” Alex brushed off Sam’s concern as she felt her face flush slightly, and she turned her attention to the large book that was laying in front of him. “Have you found anything yet? Because this book is useless.” She pushed her own book away with her good hand, and it slid across the table to hit the binding of Dean’s.

“Watch it,” he rebuked, shoving her book back towards her. Alex stuck out her tongue in retaliation, resilient to Dean’s short temper. Before she could respond verbally, however, a rasping cough drifted from the hallway.

Hayley rose to her feet. “I should go see how Oliver’s doing,” she said, excusing herself from the hunter’s presence. Alex watched her hurry away, and she shook her head.

A hand on her forearm had the young angel jumping, and she looked over to see Sam pull back and stand up. “I want to take a look at that shoulder again,” he explained. “Who knows what that weapon did to you,” he added when he saw protest growing across Alex’s round face. “We just want you back to normal as soon as possible.”

Alex glanced over at Dean at Sam’s use of the word ‘we’; the Winchester glanced up from his text, and green eyes met grey for half a second before they flickered away. “Okay,” the young angel relented. She slowly removed the sling and, with Sam’s help, pulled aside the hem of her grey henley so the Winchester could peel back the bandage and examine the wound. Alex chanced a look herself; the flesh was no longer an angry red, but the outer skin still showed little sign of repair. “It’s
fine,” she decided before reminding, “I’ve had worse, Sam. Remember Baytown?” The angel’s good hand went down instinctively to rub at her thigh where she knew the scars remained. “Like it or not, I’m going to live,” she jested.

Sam clearly didn’t find her humor amusing, but he backed down. “If it gets worse, tell us,” he said as he returned to his seat. “Don’t wait until it’s too late for us to do anything.”

“Concern duly noted.” Alex smoothed down the bandage and pulled her shirt back up over her shoulder, pausing only momentarily to run ginger fingers around the stitching. “Anyone want a drink?” The angel rose to her feet and pushed her chair back into the table. “There’s scotch in the kitchen.” She waited until she heard Dean’s grunt of approval before she exited the library.

She returned to the Winchesters a minute later just in time to see Sam sit back down with a new book in his hands. “Here.” She set the three glasses down on the table and slid the scotch over to Dean. “Find anything yet?” Her inquiries were met with silence, and the angel sunk into her seat. She slowly poured her own drink, but, instead of returning to her reading, she opted to lean back in her chair and watch the Winchesters work.

“Here we go.” Eventually, Dean’s words broke the silence, and all attention was turned onto him.

“What you got?” Sam asked, setting down his own book as he leaned forward slightly, curiously awaiting what it was his brother had found.

The answer they received, however, only seemed to further muddle their understanding. “Dragon penis.”

“What?”

“Ancient Greek hunter by the name of Drakopoulos,” Dean explained, tapping the book’s pages for emphasis. “Near as I can tell, he was a badass whose name, incidentally, is Greek for —”

“No, no, no.” Sam quickly cut him off. “I got that.” He held out his hand, and Dean graciously gave the book over to his brother. “Thanks, Ace.”

“I’m not sure how I’m more surprise,” Alex commented offhandedly to Dean as she leaned closer to his brother. “That you know enough Greek to translate that, or that you actually know those two words in Greek.” She looked up at the sound of footsteps, and after a second, Hayley appeared from the hallway. “How’s Oliver?” she asked.

“He’s fine.” The look the three hunters received was strong enough for them to know she had overheard their current conversation. “Oh, please, keep going.”

“Right.” Dean turned his head back to his companions. “So, uh, Drakopoulos tangled with Zeus back in the day, and the Men of Letters translated his journal. It’s a secret society,” he added to Hayley, a hint of pride in his voice when the young mother made a soft, curious noise. “This is actually their lair. We’re legacies.” He paused, waiting for her astonished response, but when it never came, he reached for his scotch. “No big deal.”

“What does it say about Zeus?” Alex leaned closer to Sam, saving Dean from continuing in his slightly disappointed ramblings. “Does it tell us how to summon him — and how to kill him, preferably?”

“Both.” Dean took a quick sip of his scotch. “He can be killed with wood from a tree struck by lightning.”
“And it says we need two things for the summon,” Sam added, his finger tracing down the page as he paraphrased the ancient hunter’s findings. “Frozen energy from the hand of Zeus, and the bone of a worshipper.”

“Frozen energy,” Dean repeated, “you thinking fulgurite?”

“That’d make sense,” Alex slowly agreed; the last time they had used a fulgurite had been to summon and enslave Death two years ago. Back when Cas — the young angel pushed the thought away, firmly focusing her attention on the present. “The ‘energy’ from Zeus is lightning, after all.”

The Winchester nodded. “Alright. Pip, see if you can find a tree nearby that’s been struck by lightning. Sam, you get on the web, see if there’s any Greeks nearby that are still worshipping the Old Gods,” he told his brother as Hayley wandered closer.

Sam pushed the journal to the other end of the table and reached for his laptop. “On it.” However, he must have noticed the hesitation that was spreading across Alex’s face, because he paused. “What’s up?”

“I …” Alex hesitated, unsure how to phrase what she wanted to say. “I can’t fly. Not with my shoulder this way,” she added, a hand going up to touch the bandage. “I managed to get here, but it hurt so bad. I don’t think I should do it again. Sorry.” She dipped her head, embarrassed, and in the silence that ensued, she knew the Winchesters were exchanging quiet looks.

“Wait.” Hayley’s voice kept either brother from responding. “T-This journal just ends.” She looked up from where she had pulled Drakopoulos’ journal closer, her eyes darting across the two Winchesters.

Dean frowned, unsure what the young mother was trying to express. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, how do we know if Drako-whatever survived?” she persisted, eyes growing wide as she looked over at Alex. “How do we know Zeus didn’t get to him?”

The young angel shrugged. “We don’t,” she replied, her answer short and honest. “But if this works and we summon Zeus, I’ll take care of it if the deal goes sour. That’s my job.”

Hayley still didn’t look convinced, so Dean added, “Listen, we can’t know for sure, but these books — they’re, uh, they’re pretty good.”

“So, we’re hanging our lives on the writings of a dead man who … is named after genitalia.”

“Dragon genitalia,” Alex corrected. “With a name like that, he’s destined for greatness.”

“Alright.” Sam broke into their conversation, and Alex leaned closer to the tall hunter, her attention fully focused on what he was going to say. He looked over at his brother, and, seeing that he had Dean’s attention, continued. “Listen to this. Greek pagans two towns over. Best part? They have an obit page with cemeteries.”

Dean nodded. “Alright. You two are on grave duty.” His eyes flickered over to Alex, effectively relaying who ‘you two’ were, and the angel dipped her head in quiet acquiescence. She knocked Sam in the shoulder as she rose to her feet, but Sam frowned.

“I can handle it by myself,” he promised as he shut his laptop. “There’s no point in dragging Alex along. Your shoulder isn’t well enough to dig up a grave,” he added, clearly sensing Alex’s indignation. “You shouldn’t have to come if you don’t want to.”
“Well I want to,” the angel retorted. “I can be your lookout. Dean can handle the fulgurite,” she added with a quick glance over at other Winchester. “And if he needs help, all he has to do is pray.”

“No.” Dean stood up with a firm shake of his head. “Until that shoulder heals up, you’re grounded. I’ll take Hayley. We can handle the B&E.”

Alex frowned, but both Winchesters remained firm. “Fine.” She shoved her chair back under the table, the screeching of the chair legs and the thud of the impact emphasizing her frustrations. She felt Lucifer’s grace stir within her chest, struggling against the wound’s paralyzing effect. “We’ll need the Impala, though,” she added, and she shoved her hands into her jean pockets. “None of the bunker cars work as far as we know.”

The look on Dean’s face showed his displeasure, but he tossed the keys to Sam. “Fine. We’ll take the mom mobile. Text me when you have the bone,” he finished, speaking directly to Sam. “We’ll get this done tonight.”

Alex followed Sam up the bunker stairs and out to where the Impala was parked beside a old, silver minivan. “I’m not incompetent,” she muttered as she slid into the front seat. Her words seemed hypocritical, however, as he hand went up to steady her shoulder before she buckled herself in. “I can still help.”

“Look.” Sam stuck the keys in the ignition, but he turned to face the angel before he started the engine. “No one thinks you’re incompetent, okay? I know you’re not used to having to heal, but you just have to be patient. Taking a day or two off isn’t a sign of weakness.”

“Maybe not for you.” Alex regretted the words as soon as they left her mouth, and she turned her head away. “Sorry. Never mind.” She waited, but she could feel Sam’s gaze on the back of her head, and when the car didn’t start, she dropped her gaze to her lap. “It’s just … you and Dean … you’re big and strong, and I’m … well, I’m tiny.” The young angel let out a small forced laugh, running her thumb over her thin fingers. “I’ve fought hard to get where I am today, and the consequences — I still have a part of Lucifer within me, you know — but this ….” She gingerly touched her shoulder. “I don’t like feeling powerless.”

Her words were met with a tense, uncomfortable silence, and a second later the Impala’s engine purred to life. Alex looked up into Sam’s face; his lips were pulled tight, clearly uneasy at the mention of the archangel. The young angel rested her forehead against the window as the car rolled away, and the bunker was lost from sight.

Alex slipped out of the Impala, eyes narrowed as she studied the large, dark warehouse that loomed in front of them. The Greek bone had been an easy find, and Dean had texted them the address of a nearby abandoned storehouse that he had chosen to complete the spell. The young angel reached out with one hand, her fingers dragging across the silver paint of Hayley’s van as she passed by and fell into step behind Sam. She stretched her grace out in thin, wiry tendrils, firmly ignoring how the movement tugged painfully at her stitches. “They’re inside,” she confirmed aloud to Sam. “Down the hall and through the door on the left.” She waited for Sam’s response, but when it never came, she fell silent, eyes dropping to the ground as she watched Sam’s long legs carry him inside the building. They found Dean, Hayley and Oliver in a large, open room, and the angel narrowed her eyes at the sight of the young child. “Are we really going to let the kid watch?” she asked, grey eyes flickering up to Dean.

“He’s the one with the curse,” the Winchester quickly reminded before he turned to Sam. “You got the bone?”
“Right here.” The Winchester handed the tibia over to his brother. “It didn’t take you long to get the fulgurite,” he added as Alex peered down at the copper bowl that lay on the concrete ground behind Dean. Beyond that lay a large, white sigil that had been drawn in chalk on the floor; the angel didn’t recognize it, but logic dictated that it could trap the angry deity they were about to summon.

“Apparently they sell it at crystal shops.” Dean broke the bone across his knee. “I guess they use it to make cheap jewelry. Who knew?” He turned around and place several of the fragments of the shattered bone in with the rest of the ingredients and rose to his feet. “Stay calm,” he told Hayley and Oliver, and Alex grunted in agreement. The hiss of a match drew her attention back to Dean. She let her weapon fall into her hands as he dropped the match into the spell and stepped back to Sam’s side. He accepted one of the wooden stakes — Alex had whittled it while Sam had dug up the pagan’s grave — and then they waited.

It didn’t take long. Within seconds the lights started to flicker, and the young angel screwed up her eyes as lightning flashed through the warehouse and struck the copper bowl. The resulting clap of thunder was deafening; it rattled Alex’s bones, and she clenched her teeth as her shoulder protested. Another violent lightning bolt struck the center of the trap, and when the angel’s eyes adjusted, she saw a man standing before them. He wasn’t what Alex had expected. The god was clad in all black, dressed in the suit and tie that seemed to be the typical garb of such beings. Dark eyes calmly moved across his five oppressors, and when he spoke his voice was calm. “Oh come now,” he chastised, hands going out in a gesture of innocence. “Can’t we do this civilized?”

The Winchesters weren’t taken in by his guiltless tone. “Well, it depends on you,” Dean retorted. “All we need is for you to break a curse you put on a little kid.” Alex watched as Zeus’ gaze turned upon Oliver as Dean finished, “So, how about you say ‘yes’ and we all go home?”

“He’s Prometheus’ son,” Alex added when she saw the look of incomprehension upon the pagan god’s face. “You remember Prometheus, right?”

The hum that came from Zeus’ lips confirmed her suspicions. “Ah, yes. And where is he?” His eyes turned out across the the room, clearly searching for his nemesis’ presence. “Don’t tell me he didn’t even come to save his own child.”

“Prometheus is dead.” Alex rolled her shoulders back as Zeus turned to her, holding back the sharp breath that came from the movement. She took a moment to steady herself before she continued. “I’m the one who killed him.”

The deity was silent for a second as he gauged Alex’s face. It was clear he knew she was an angel — Alex saw how his eyes briefly flickered across her dark wings — but he didn’t seem to care. “I see. And now the child has the affliction.” He turned back to Oliver. “Interesting.”

“So what’s it gonna be?” Dean’s sharp, impatient voice broke into Zeus’ musings. “The easy way, or we can do this the hard way.”

Zeus chuckled. “Break the trap, dear man, and I’ll break the curse,” he countered.

“No dice. Fix the kid.”

“Going once …”

“Come on, Don’t be that guy,” Dean warned, jaw setting angrily as his green eyes narrowed. Alex twisted the weapon in her hand, toes curling within her boots as she looked the deity up and down. He showed no consideration of the Winchester’s words. “Going twice …”
Dean shrugged, continuing his facade of calm composure despite the high stakes. “Hey buddy, you can rot here for all I care.”

“Yes, and the child will continue to suffer.” Zeus held Dean’s gaze, and several seconds passed as the two stared at each other, neither intent on backing down.

It was Dean who finally broke away. “Let’s roll.” He turned on his heels and stalked towards the door, and Sam ushered Hayley and Oliver after him. Alex took up the rear, hesitating as she looked at the pagan god up and down. He, however, remained stoic, and so the angel turned her back, ready to leave Zeus all alone in the warehouse.

“He needs me and you know it.” The deity’s voice rose, but only Hayley paused to listen. Alex nudged her on forward, a gentle yet firm hand on the young mother’s shoulder as she tried to direct her after the Winchesters. Suddenly Hayley resisted, and she pulled away and ran back to Zeus, leaving Alex standing by herself, stupefied.

It took her a moment to shake it all off, but by that time it was too late. “Hayley, no!” Alex stumbled back as Dean sprang forward, but the young mother was already at the trap. She drew her foot through the chalk, breaking the line, and Alex drew her wings in close to her body as energy exploded through the room.

“Now save my son,” she demanded.

Zeus’ eyes turned to the Winchesters, and they glinted with dark malice. “What do you say?” His hand went up, and lightning sprang forward, separating into three lines as they surged towards the hunters. Alex barely had time to stretch her wings out, shielding the Winchesters from two prongs of the energy bolt. The lightning hit her wings squarely, and for the briefest second their form became visible to the human eye as the energy rushed through and around her feathers. The force of behind it, however, sent her flying backwards, and she slid across the concrete floor. “Shall we try this the hard way?”

Alex writhed on the ground, her grace burning in protest beneath her skin. She felt a sharp, tearing pain in her shoulder, and the angel screeched. Then hands were on her, trying to keep her still, and the angel clung to them when her grace made her muscles spasm as it tried to absorb the electrical impact.

“Bring forth the child,” she heard Zeus command, and then add in more pleasant voice. “Please.” She opened her eyes to see the deity turn his back to them, attention fully focused upon Hayley and her son.

At the sound of those words, Alex struggled to her feet; they held her, even though her legs quivered. Sam left her side, and the angel watched as the two hunters nodded in silent agreement. Dean crept up towards the god, a stake tightly clutched in his hand, but he barely made it three steps before he was thrown backwards and pinned up against the concrete wall by an invisible force. Sam disappeared from in front of Alex, a violent flash of power pulling him from the young angel’s side and flinging him onto the wall beside Dean. “No!” Alex stumbled forward, but she froze when Zeus turned.

“I trust you’ve met my daughter,” he introduced, and Alex’s wings rose at the sight of the darkly-clad woman that stood beside her father. A twisted, silver blade gleamed in the faint light, and the angel hesitated, well aware of the damage such a weapon could do. Seeing the angel’s uncertainty, Zeus turned back to Oliver. “This is the son of Prometheus,” he told his daughter. “And he’s cursed to suffer death every day. I must admit, I could never have conceived such a horrible fate for such a beautiful child. Just goes to show, we must leave room of happy accidents.”
“What does that mean?” Hayley looked over at Alex, fear dancing in her gaze, but the angel looked away, glowering down at the ground. It had been a stupid idea to let her and Oliver stay. “I don’t understand.”

The two gods exchanged looks, and Artemis stepped towards the Winchesters, and the brothers dropped to the ground. “Move,” she ordered, her blade motioning them towards Alex. The young angel stepped forward, her own weapon slipping into her good as she prepared for a fruitless fight against the goddess. Her footing was unsteady, and her injured limb was hanging low in pain. Despite the uneven stance, fire still glimmered deep with her eyes.

_Do something._ The prayer from Dean had her stopping in her tracks, and Alex looked up into the Winchester’s dark green eyes.

_Do something? Do what?_ The young angel desperately searched his face for a clue, but nothing came. What did he mean? The decision was made when Artemis reached out to shove her back towards the door. Her wings stretched out, and she flew.

The pain was excruciating, and her wings gave out within seconds, but it was long enough for her to get away. Alex collapsed on the cold, dusty floor of the adjacent store room. She couldn’t move. The angel tried to roll over onto her back, but her muscles refused to cooperate, her nervous system so overrun with pain that she could barely find it in her to breathe. Her lungs seemed to give out, and the angel dropped her head onto the cold floor as she felt the oxygen leave her blood; that had to be the feeling — her lungs weren’t moving, gripped too tightly by pain, and her body felt heavy and slow. It felt strange, but somehow she was still conscious. _Of course you don’t need to breathe, you moron, a small voice in the back of her head snapped. You’re a fucking angel._

Somehow that revelation wasn’t funny. Alex closed her eyes, and finally she was able to raise her hand up to her shoulder. Her shirt was wet and sticky with blood, and that feeling coupled with the agony brought on a sudden wave of nausea. Oh she was fucked.

“Castiel.” The name tumbled from her lips in a gasp of pain. “Please, Castiel. I need your help right now. They’re going to kill me, Cas.” Alex’s good wing fluttered as her body convulsed. She tried to roll over yet again, but her hand slipped on the blood-slick ground. “S-Someone please. Cas, G-Gabriel … I feel like I’m dying.” The young angel’s vision began to fade, the darkness crushing down upon her and dragging her down, and one last conscious thought left her lips as little more than a broken whisper. “L-Lucifer, please don’t let me die.”

The archangel’s grace responded in a violent flash of white light, and the agonizing and overwhelming force sent Alex spiraling into blackness.
The shadows were moving, whizzing all about the room like a hive of hornets. They dipped and twisted in vicious circles, and Alex distantly heard a pained groan of protest. It took her a second to realize where that noise had come from. It had come from her. Everything felt disjointed. Her mind felt like it was floating ten feet above her body, but as the shadows slowly came into focus, so did her mind descend back into her head. She was in the bunker; she recognized that wall, that desk. Sam’s room. Another loud whine crept forth when she tipped her head, and then suddenly the angel could feel.

Her shoulder.

“Hey hey hey.” Sam was at her side in an instant — where had he come from? “Don’t move. Alex, stay still.” His voice carried a sharp note of command, and Alex’s first instinct was to simply obey. She stilled, forcing her eyes open wide enough to make out the silhouette of the tall, broad hunter. “Okay.” A warm hand brushed hair out of her face, and the angel let her eyes fall closed at the touch. “You need to stay still, okay? You’re still in really bad shape.”

“How …” The word caught in her parched throat, and Alex couldn’t find the strength to force out another word.

“How long?” the hunter guessed. “Two days. You scared us, Pip.” Worry tinged his voice as the hand disappeared, and Alex felt air push its way up through her mouth in protest, but she wasn’t strong enough to make a sound. “We couldn’t find you after you disappeared from the warehouse. We searched everywhere — all we found was a lot of blood, and we —”

“You’re awake.” The sound of that low, familiar voice had Alex struggling to sit up, eyes wide as she tried to peer behind Sam, but the hunter firmly pressed her down into the bed. Alex let out a small shriek of surprise and pain, and then Sam was abruptly shoved away. “You’re hurting her,” Castiel growled, his large, blue wings stretching out in warning for the hunter to stay away from his injured mate. He held Sam’s gaze until the Winchester finally held up his hands in surrender. His eyebrows lifted, surprised at the seraph’s possession, but he eventually nodded and slipped out of the room.

“Cas?” The name came out as a croak, but it was enough to draw Castiel’s attention back to her. “I…”

“Shh.” Castiel’s grace stretched out to curl comfortingly around hers as he sat down on the side of the bed. “You need to rest.” He looked down as Alex’s hand reached out, trembling under the effort, and he took it in his own. “You’re badly hurt.”

“I’m fine.” Her voice was starting to return, and with it some of her strength, and the young angel looked down at her throbbing shoulder. Her shirt had been removed, allowing her to see the thick white gauze that covered her injury. “I … I don’t remember what happened.” She looked back up at Castiel. “I remember praying to you, but after that …”

“You were unconscious when I found you.” The seraph ran his thumb over the back of Alex’s hand, and his face darkened as he recalled the harrowing memory. “And you were laying in your own blood. The Winchesters told me you were wounded by one of Artemis’ knives,” he added. “You’re lucky; her weapons can kill everything short of an archangel himself.”

“No shit.” Alex’s wings twitched, and she growled out a note of pain through clenched teeth. “But
not even Lucifer’s grace helped—” She cut off abruptly, regretting her words in front of Castiel, but when the seraph didn’t outwardly seem to care, she slowly continued, “I … I think it tried to help b— before I passed out, but … but I think that’s what caused me to black out.”

“I did warn you,” another voice chastised, tone almost on the verge of smugness had worry not been weighing it down, and Castiel’s wings immediately flared up.

“I told you to stay away,” he growled, turning and rising to his feet, and Alex craned her head to see the outline of the archangel.

“Gabriel?” She cleared her throat when the word stuck, and her voice grew sharp. “You shouldn’t be here. The Winchesters —”

“Screw those mud monkeys,” Gabriel retorted, golden eyes glinting in the darkness as he added to Castiel, “And hey. You weren’t the only one she called out to. I have as much right to see her as you do.” When Castiel didn’t protest quick enough, he pushed by the seraph so he could look down at Alex. “Glad to see you’re back in the waking world, kiddo. How you feeling?”

“Like hell.” Alex watched as the archangel’s golden wings fluttered against his back as he took in her words, and she reached up with her good arm to touch the edge of the bandages. “Can’t you do anything?”

“Sorry, half-pint.” Gabriel shook his head, and Alex frowned at his refusal. “No can do. Luci’s grace isn’t letting anyone near the shoulder, and I don’t think it’s doing your vessel any good, either.”

Alex chanced moving her grace about beneath her skin, and she nodded to find that the cold, foreign essence reacted violently by pulling the tendril back in, locking her grace firmly within her body. “It’s been doing that a lot,” she admitted. “I…I don’t know why, but it’s overpowering sometimes.”

“I told you this would be a problem,” the archangel reminded sharply. “His grace is starting to pull away from yours; you can’t control it anymore. It’s going to keep getting worse.”

“It’s not his fault.” Alex’s fingers sunk into the mattress as she struggled to sit up. “He’s not trying to hurt me!” Her eyes flickered over to Castiel, and she dropped her gaze and fell silent at the sight of his barely concealed frustration. “I-Sorry.” She turned to her shoulder and slowly peeled the bandage aside. Sam’s makeshift stitching held her skin together, and the young angel winced at the sight.

The door opened, and wings flittered as Gabriel disappeared. Alex looked up to see Sam standing in the doorway. “Who was that?” he queried, and even though Alex felt her face flush, she remained stoic.

Castiel turned to face the Winchester. “He was an old friend of mine,” the seraph responded, somehow remembering to keep his answer cryptic. “I need to go,” he added, blue eyes returning to Alex. “And you need to rest.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Alex struggled to sit up even further when Castiel’s wings stretched out. “No! I, Cas — where the hell have you been?”

The seraph hesitated. “I’ll tell you everything you need to know once you are well again,” he promised. “You need to focus on recovering.” He crossed the room to stand in front of Alex, his wing curling forward to brush gently across her stomach as his voice lowered. “I’ll come visit as soon as I can.”
Ten days passed, and every day Alex grew stronger. Her grace regained its mobility, and her wound slowly but surely began to heal exponentially. However, the injury was deep, and no matter how much she protested, the Winchesters insisted that she do no physical work. No lifting, no sparring, no, no, no. It felt like every damned word out of the brothers’ mouths was ‘no.’

Alex flopped down onto Sam’s bed, listening to how the plastic bag of chips crinkled at the movement. She knew Sam didn’t like her eating on his bed, but his room had a tv: a big tv. And he was the one who had turned her away from helping him reorganize the sparring equipment the Men of Letters had left behind. He totally had this coming. The young angel flipped on the tv and unrolled the half-empty bag as she scrolled through Sam’s very small Netflix queue; it was kind of sad how short it was. Alex shoved a chip into her mouth as she quickly added a handful of shows she knew Sam would love. Vampire Diaries, Gilmore Girls, that one kid’s show with the weird dancing men.

She pulled another chip out of the bag, but it shattered at the first bite. “Dammit.” The young angel glared down at the crumbs on her shirt as she cursed loudly. “Awesome.” Her eyes flickered up towards the door, and her head cocked, listening for the sound of approaching footsteps. There was none. Alex brushed the crumbs off of her and onto the clean sheets, and, after another second’s hesitation, she shoved the rest of the chip under Sam’s pillow.

The door opened, and Alex immediately straightened up as Sam stepped into the room. “Hey, what did I tell you about eating on my bed?” he snapped, his patience clearly worn thin. “Come on, how old are you?” When Alex only shrugged unapologetically, he shook his head. “Fine. Cas is out in the library, in case you care.”

Alex jumped to her feet at the seraph’s name. “It’s about damn time.” The young angel grabbed the bag of chips and hurried out of the hunter’s room. She smirked when she heard an angry yell follow her departure — whether it was from the crumbs or the queue the angel didn’t know, but it brought about satisfaction all the same.

She stepped into the brightly lit library to find Castiel standing beside one of the tables. He turned as she entered, his wings stretching forward, and Alex stepped closer, her own good wing falling out and down in greeting. Before she could speak, Castiel’s grace pushed against hers affectionately, even though his face remained stoic. “How is your shoulder?” he inquired. “You look much better.”

“Better enough to get an explanation?” Alex frowned in frustration at how the seraph was just blowing off his absence like it was nothing. “Where the hell have you been? You didn’t answer any of my damn prayers —”

“Heya, Cas.” Dean stepped into the room, and Alex fell silent. She watched as the Winchester paused, clearly recognizing that he had interrupted something important.

Castiel nodded his greeting to the hunter. “Hello, Dean. Sam.” His gaze flickered over to the tall hunter who appeared behind his brother. “I … I need your assistance. I’ve been looking for Crowley’s half of the demon tablet, but what I’ve found … he’s been searching for one of Lucifer’s crypt in Lincoln Springs, Missouri.” Castiel hesitated, and his wings twitched slightly when he continued. “It’s believed that it contains a parchment that will allow Crowley to translate the tablet without the prophet.”

Dean frowned. “A demonic ring decoder in Crowley’s hands?” he restated. “Awesome.”
The seraph nodded. “It’s imperative that we get there before him,” he agreed. “That’s why I’ve come for you help. All of yours.” He directed the last sentence directly towards Alex, and the young angel couldn’t help how her feathers puffed out at his vote of confidence.

“Wait,” Sam began, “so you don’t actually know where the crypt was?”

“They were, uh, lost over time,” Castiel explained. “And only those closest to Lucifer knew of their whereabouts. Crowley is only getting close because his demons have been possessing locals who may have some special knowledge.”

“Okay, here we go.” Alex slammed her hand down against the table, drawing all attention onto her. “You guys drive over to Lincoln Springs, and I’ll take a nap. I’ll get Lucifer to tell me the location of the crypt with this parchment of yours, and boom.” She hit the table again, and it echoed through the room with a resounding thud. “Problem solved.”

“No.” Castiel’s voice was louder than anyone expected, and Alex flinched in surprise. “No,” he repeated, his tone quieter but just as firm. “Those dreams will only cause his grace to move out of control even more, and with your injury, it could leave you in worse shape than you were before.”

“I’ll be fine,” Alex retorted. “And if it’ll find us the crypt faster, it’ll be worth —”

“Be worth what? Worth your life?” Castiel’s eyes flashed in anger and — fear? “We can find the crypt on our own, without Lucifer’s help.”

Alex held the seraph’s gaze with narrowed, defiant eyes, and as the silence began to length into awkwardness, Sam finally spoke. “I think Cas may be right,” he admitted. “We can find the crypt without putting you at risk. You said there were demons in the town?” he asked Cas, and the seraph nodded. “Okay, great. We’ll start there.”

The Winchesters walked away, and Alex paused until she heard the bunker door close before she looked away. She waited for the tension to begin to fade, and then she turned back to Castiel, her wings low as she tried to keep the tension down. “Where the hell have you been, Cas?” she demanded. “I’ve been praying for months.”

Castiel looked up at the bunker’s stone ceiling, and when several second passed, Alex opened her mouth to prompt him to speak. “I’ve … been finishing my penance,” he finally said. “It, unfortunately, required complete solitude from those I loved.” His blue eyes focused upon her, and when he spoke next, Alex could feel the blatant honesty in every word. “Hearing your prayers — it was the hardest two months of my life.”

Alex stepped forward, and she stretched out her good wing to brush against against Castiel’s dark feathers. “Cas … I know you lied to the Winchesters.” She ignored the seraph’s surprise, and she turned away. “I don’t care why you’re doing it — just promise me that whatever you’re doing, you’re doing it for the right reason.”

A warm hand came to rest on her uninjured shoulder. “Everything I do is with the right intentions,” he murmured. “I only want to fix the mistakes I’ve made.”

Lincoln Springs, Missouri

Alex eyed the grey suburban house that stood in front of the three hunters. Her good arm was folded across her chest, gripping her bicep to keep it up, and her fingers flexed experimentally as Sam
finished up his call to the local police department. “I really appreciate it. Alright, bye.” The Winchester hung up, and Alex glanced up into his face. “Well, Cas was right about there being demons in this town,” he told Dean and the angel. “Three individuals have turned up dead, eyes burned out and their insides liquified.”

“Those are probably the demons he killed,” Alex agreed. “Alright, so why are we here?” She thumbed back towards the house that stood silently behind them.

“That is the home of Mrs. Wendy Rice,” Sam explained. “She was the last person to speak with the latest victim. The husband confirmed she had been possessed — black eyes and all — and she had been digging for something.”

“Lucifer’s crypt, probably,” the young angel finished. “Alright. So maybe Wendy can tell us a little bit about what the demon had been searching for.”

Sam nodded, and he led the way up the driveway and onto the front stoop. A short and stout woman answered when he knocked, and Alex’s eyebrows rose at the numerous blue and purple plastic curlers in her light hair. “Special Agent Lynne,” Sam introduced, reaching into his pocket to produce his fake identification. “These are my partners Special Agent Tandy and Sheppard. We’d like to ask you a few questions about Ann Morton.”

“Oh.” Wendy let out a small, self-conscious laugh as her hand went up to play with a curler, clearly aware of how underdressed she was for company. However, she still invited the three inside. “Uh, uh, of course. Please come in. I never met her before she called the other night,” she explained as the three hunters stepped into the house and followed her into the living room. The Winchesters took their places on the couch at the woman’s gesture for them to sit, and Alex sunk into a chair across from Sam, while Wendy sat down across from Dean.

“Now, why was she calling you?” the youngest Winchester inquired.

“She was looking to find an original map of the city.” Mrs. Rice explained, and Alex tipped her head as she picked up the undeniable trace of excitement in the woman’s voice.

“Did she say what for?”

“Well, she — she didn’t, but she did mention an — an old orchard that had gone missing.”

“Missing?” Alex repeated, and her eyes narrowed in confusion. The demon was looking for an old orchard? That didn’t seem right.

“This — this town was wiped from the earth by one of the river’s one hundred year floods. It was — it was rebuilt but all the original records were — were lost.” The woman seemed to trip excitedly over her own words, and Alex watched the smile that formed across her face as she reached up to play with one of the curlers. “I’m — I’m a PhD candidate,” she explained. “And this — this is my research. I, uh … my dissertation is — is on the history of the town, and, uh, its connection to the Underground Railroad and — and — and whatnot.” She jumped to her feet and hurried over to the bookshelf, and the hunters exchanged looks as she returned to them with a large, pink binder in her hands. She pulled out a map and laid it down across the coffee table. “I’ve been working to re-create a map for years as part of my research, and this — this is the old Jakubiak orchard there.” She pointed towards the upper left-hand corner. “I found out yesterday it’s where Downey meets Bond Street.”

Alex leaned forward to see better, and Sam asked, “Now, did Ann say why she was looking for the site of an old orchard?”
“No. We — we set a time to meet, and she never showed. Then I read about her in the paper.” Wendy’s voice grew soft and sober. “It’s just tragic. Ann’s assistant called this morning, though, asking if I still had the map.”

“Assistant?” Sam was cut off by three, solid knocks on the wooden front door. Wendy hurried across the room, and Alex jumped to her feet as her grace pushed past the woman and into the three men that stood outside.

“Shit,” she cursed, and her angel blade fell down into her hand. “We got company, guys.”

Wendy screamed as the door was flung off of its hinges, and three demons pushed their way through, eyes flashing an inky black. One shoved Wendy out of the way, and she stumbled back at the inhuman force and crashed through the coffee table. Alex leapt over her, swinging her weapon at the demon, but it deflected her blow, and, without the use of her other arm, the young angel lost her balance and stumbled. The demon darted past her, not interested in the angel in the slightest, and as soon as he grabbed the map, he bolted. Alex hit the wall with a grunt, eyes darting between the retreating demon and the two that were wrestling with the Winchesters. Dean was holding his own, and Alex caught sight of him reaching for the demon knife in his pocket, but Sam seemed to be struggling. Alex rushed past, ducking as the demon Dean was about to stab smoked up into the air; she didn’t stop to see where it was going, too focused on where Sam was being punched in the face. The young angel swung her blade; the demon just barely was able to duck away. It threw its hand up, and it caught against her wrist; the force of the impact sent the weapon out of her grip, and it clattered across the ground.

The demon shoved Sam away and turned to face the angel. Alex balled up her fists and stretched out her wings, grace bubbling beneath her skin as she prepared for the fight.

It never came. The demon died in a flash of light, and it crumpled to the ground to reveal Castiel; he had Wendy by the hair, and Alex could see the twisted, tortured soul that lay behind the face. So that’s where the other demon went. “Careful,” Castiel warned. “You’re not strong enough to smite a demon yet.”

Alex’s eyes flickered over to see Dean kneeling besides Sam, who was gripping his right shoulder in pain. “Let’s get her into the kitchen,” she suggested to Castiel. “Hey.” She slapped the demon lightly on the cheek. “Are there any ice packs in the freezer?” Wendy only growled, and Alex rolled her eyes. “Don’t be such a sore loser.” Castiel pulled the demon away and Alex followed the both of them off into the kitchen. Her eyebrows rose to see a white devil’s trap already on the linoleum floor beneath the table. She, however, shrugged it off and dug an ice pack out of the woman’s freezer while Castiel bound the demon within the trap.

“Here.” Alex returned to the living room and tossed the cold-press to Sam. “Put that on your shoulder.”

The Winchester’s response was to press the ice pack into his skin for only a second before he threw it down onto the ground. “I’m fine,” he promised, but his actions revealed his frustration at being bested by a demon.

“Cas has got the other demon bound in the kitchen,” Alex explained as both Winchesters sank down onto the couch. “Good thing he showed up, huh?”

The brother’s exchanged hesitant looks, and Alex frowned. “Listen,” Dean began slowly, “don’t you think it’s a little strange that he just suddenly showed up, huh? I mean, we were praying for months, and nada. Why now? And you know that he’s acting weird, right? I mean, come on. He’s really putting the ‘ass’ in ‘Cas’ today.”
“He’s definitely been off,” Sam quietly agreed, clearly a little hesitant to speak badly of the seraph in front of Alex.

Dean, however, shared none of his brother’s inhibitions. “Off?” he repeated. “He hasn’t been right since he got back from Purgatory. We still don’t know how he got out of there.”

“You know, I can hear you both.” Castiel’s voice drifted through the kitchen door. “I am a celestial being.”

Alex shrugged as both Winchesters looked up in surprise. “You two don’t talk as quietly as you think,” she half-joked, and she returned to the kitchen, wings flicking as the brothers followed.

“Sam and Dean Winchester.” Wendy’s voice was scathing at the sight of the two hunters, but she outright ignored the angel at their side. She let out a low chuckle as the brothers both leaned against the kitchen counter, and Alex frowned, not fond of how the demon didn’t seem to care about her dire situation. “Oh, the thoughts Wendy’s had about you,” the demon continued, her fingers drumming against the chair arms she was bound to. “Mostly you, Sam. What can I say? She had a thing for smutton chops—”

“Can it, black-eyes,” Alex warned, but before she could continued, Castiel stepped forward. His angel blade flashed, and the demon screamed as the weapon impaled her hand and sunk into the wooden chair arm below. Sparks flew from the wound as the seraph pulled the blade free, leaving the demon to whimper in pain.

“Who told you about the crypts?” he demanded, voice voice deep and grating.

“I thought angels were supposed to be the good cops,” Wendy quipped, but she cut off when Castiel’s blade pierced her other hand. Sparks flew, and Alex narrowed her eyes at the primal scream of agony. “Stop!” the demon begged. “Stop! We have a hostage!” Castiel withdrew his weapon, and her head fell to her chest as she gasped for breath. Alex stepped forward, her wing extending to hold the seraph back while the tortured soul panted in distress. “It’s one of Crowley’s pets,” she finally wheezed out. “She’s at the Murray Hotel, down by the interstate. She knows the towns where all the crypts are buried. She saw them all back in the day.”

“And she told you about the parchment?” Sam pressed, pushing himself off of the counter to address the demon. Alex glanced back at Sam, and in the process, her grace brushed against Castiel’s.

“What parchment?” the demon scoffed, and the young angel frowned; the seraph’s grace was flickering like a candle in the wind.

“Hey. Hey!” Dean stepped forward to stand by his brother. “Think he’s the only bad cop in the room? Stop lying! We know what you’re really looking for,” he warned, but Alex barely heard him. That wasn’t normal, and she squinted her eyes as she felt his grace again. It was like Castiel was flickering in and out of his vessel. Why?

“No, I’m telling you, we’re looking for —” The flickering stopped abruptly, and the demon died with a scream as Castiel’s blade buried itself deep within her heart.

“Cas!” Sam’s eyes flashed in surprise and indignation at the seraph’s uncalled for actions. “What the hell was that?”

Castiel’s grace pulled his weapon back up into his coat, and he stared disdainfully down at the lifeless corpse. “It told us what we needed,” he decided, and in Alex’s opinion, his tone left no room for argument.
Sam, however, made room. “No, she didn’t!” he snapped. “You can’t just —”

The seraph turned on the Winchester, and Alex stepped back as his wings flared angrily, filling the small kitchen. “I started this hunt without you because I didn’t want anything to slow me down,” he growled out, blue eyes flashing with an intensity Alex hadn’t seen in a long time. It felt forced, almost … defensive. “We have to get to the hotel now.”

“Hold on a second —” Castiel was gone before Sam could stop him, and Alex barely hesitated before she took off after him.

Her wings carried her up into the air, and despite the small twinge of pain in her shoulder, they held and carried her down to the hotel by the interstate. It wasn’t difficult to find; the place was swarming with demonic activity. Alex spiraled down into the building, and her angel blade sunk into the back of a demon as she landed. It fell dead at her feet, and Alex drew her wings in close as she spun around. “Cas.”

“Your wings are working again,” the seraph acknowledged, wiping his hands off on his trench coat as he turned away from the body of another demon. “How is your shoulder?”

The young angel’s grace brushed up against Castiel’s in reassurance. “I’m feeling fine,” she promised. “Flying doesn’t hurt anymore if I’m careful.” Alex looked up and down the hotel hallway. “So … where’s this hostage at?” she queried. She pulled her grace back within her vessel, letting Castiel reach out and feel for any remaining demonic entities. Her phone vibrated in her pocket, and she looked down to see that Sam had texted her. “The Winchesters will be here in five minutes,” she relayed. “They want us to wait.”

“There are demons upstairs,” the seraph said. “I’ll go take care of them.” He disappeared, leaving Alex standing alone in the hallway. She frowned, and she started off down the hall with her weapon held tightly at her side.

She slowly made her way upstairs to her mate, and she found him standing in the center of a room in the corner of the third floor. Two demons lay dead at his feet. “Okay.” She looked around the room, eyes settling on the locked bathroom door. “There’s another demon in there,” she warned, her fingers tightening on her angelic weapon. She looked up at Castiel in surprise, however, when the seraph extended a wing to keep her still.

“That’s the hostage.” He turned his head as the door burst open to reveal the two Winchesters. Alex jumped in surprise, and she shook out her wings to try and regain some of her dignity. “You guys got here fast,” she muttered, and she let her grace pull her weapon back into her sleeve.

Sam frowned. “Yeah, uh, Dean drove. Thanks for waiting,” he added to Castiel.

The seraph didn’t acknowledge Sam’s comment. “The hostage is in there.” He pointed towards the door, and the Winchesters moved forward. The door was kicked in and thrown open, and Alex’s wings fluttered angrily at the sound of a very scornful, very familiar voice.

“Aren’t you a little short for a stormtrooper?” Meg drawled, and Alex shifted closer to Castiel, well aware of what had happened last time Meg had been a part of their company. The demon emerged from the bathroom, eyes moving from the dead demons and up onto the two angels. “And I see you brought friends.”

“Great.” Alex pinched the bridge of her nose as she shook her head. “Why did it have to be her?”

“It’s good to see you too, Cupcake,” the demon quipped back. She brushed her hair out of her face,
drawing attention to her bloodied — and blonde — hair and the open wounds all across her body; somehow Alex couldn’t find it in herself to empathize. Meg crossed the room, slightly unsteady on her feet, but she shook off Sam’s help as she sat down on the bed. “I’m surprised you even bothered to come and rescue me.” The smug smile faded slightly when no one responded, and Meg looked over at the Winchesters. “That is why you’re here, of course.” The brothers exchanged almost guilty looks as they pulled up two chairs, and the demon’s shoulders fell in disbelief. “You’re joking. I took how many bullets for you guys, and you weren’t even looking for me?”

Alex shrugged, but not even she could think of anything to say. “So I got to ask,” Dean finally said, breaking the awkward lull. “What’s up with the hair?”

Alex’s eyes moved to the blonde strands stained with blood, and Meg reached up to feel. “Aww. Thanks for noticing, Dean,” she quipped dryly. “But this wasn’t my idea. It was Crowley’s. And it’s just another reason I want to stab him in the face.”

“Wait a second.” Sam leaned forward in his seat. “You’ve been telling Crowley the location of Lucifer’s crypts.”

“What can I say?” The demon shrugged. “I needed a break from the constant torture. And I did visit them all during my time with Yellow Eyes,” she added, gaze flickering only momentarily over to the two angels who stood near the window. “But don’t worry. I haven’t exactly been giving them Glengarry leads.”

“You mean you’ve been lying to them?” Castiel finished, his arms crossed across his chest.

“I just get them in the ballpark.” Meg tipped her head as she looked up at the brooding seraph. “Enough time’s passed and enough’s changed that they bought it.”

“Why lie?”

Meg’s head rolled over to Dean Winchester. “Buy myself some time, dummy,” she retorted, and Alex’s wings rose in displeasure at the demon’s snarky tone. “Try to find a way to get free.”

“Wait,” Sam started, “so …. A bunch of innocent people died so you could … buy yourself some time?” His brow furrowed as he tried to wrap his mind around how she could have so easily allowed such a thing to happen.

Meg scoffed as Sam’s innocence. “Hi. I’m Meg. I’m a demon.”

Alex pushed herself off of the wall, tired of how the demon spoke to the brothers. “So have the demons found the crypt?” she asked, her voice harsher than she had anticipated. “What have they found?”

“Bumpkis.” Meg met her terse question with a smug smile. “Every crypt’s been one Al Capone’s vault after another. And on top of that, someone kept picking up the trail and icing demons. I’m guessing that was you, Castiel,” she added with a glance up at the seraph, her countenance softening from the briefest second before it hardened once again. “But Crowley just keeps sending more. He’s hell-bent on finding that angel tablet.”

“Wait wait wait.” Alex’s wings flared out in offense.

“Well, would you look at that. Something the little angel doesn’t know,” Meg drawled. “Yes, ‘angel tablet.’ Crowley found out Lucifer had it, figures it’s stashed in a crypt. I’m surprised neither of your boy toys told you.” The demon barely batted an eye when Alex’s wings flared out in offense.
Castiel’s hand on her shoulder was the only thing that held her back. “This is news to me as well,” he announced, and Alex huffed at his obvious lie. “The demons I interrogated, they must have been lying about their true intentions.”

Alex saw how the Winchesters exchanged skeptical glances, and Dean finally challenged, “Really? Cause I saw you Zero Dark Thirty that demon. You were more than persuasive.”

Alex opened her mouth to defend Cas, but Meg beat her to any words. “You’re both missing the point,” she snapped. “I lied to them, which means they’re digging in the wrong place. But not for long. They’ll be back here soon. So, who’s up for fleeing?”

“She’s right.” Sam rose to his feet. “We need to find that crypt before they do. Meg, you’re the only one who’s been there.”

Alex felt a growl of displeasure grow within her chest, but she kept her tongue tucked behind her teeth. Unfortunately, Sam was right; they needed her. Meg chuckled, pleased at her new position of importance. “Any of you guys got a map?”

The brothers looked at each other. “Nick Morton does,” Dean finally said. “And he’s spending the week at his sister’s, remember? The place is empty.”

Sam nodded. “That’s a good idea,” he agreed. “It's just up the interstate, too.”

“Great.” Alex reached out and took Castiel’s hand. “We’ll go and secure the house’s perimeter, and you three can meet us there, okay? Okay.” She didn’t wait for a response before she took off into the air. Castiel followed at her heels, and the two of them hovered in midair above the hotel complex.

There was a moment of two of silence as Castiel waited patiently, but before long he asked, “Which way is it to the Morton house?”

“I have absolutely no idea. I’ve never been there before. The Winchesters interviewed the guy earlier, but I didn’t go,” Alex admitted. “I just hate that demon.” She dipped down and landed on the hotel roof. “Cas,” she began when the seraph joined her, “why didn’t you tell the Winchesters about the angel tablet? Why lie?”

Castiel didn’t immediately answer, and Alex allowed him a few moments to gather his thoughts. “The angel tablet belongs in heaven,” he finally said. “The Winchesters wouldn’t see it that way. They would insist the tablet be taken to the prophet. There are secrets on there that humans should never know.” Blue eyes turned to Alex, awaiting her reaction to his explanation.

Alex nodded. “I suppose that makes sense,” the young angel relented. “But I don’t think lying is the way to go about it.” She watched as the Impala sped away down below, and she hesitated, unsure of how to phrase her next thought. “One more thing. When we were interrogating the demon, your grace kept … flickering,” she finally began. “It was weird.” When Castiel didn’t respond, she pushed her grace up against his. “It’s doing it again,” she snapped.

“I … don’t know what you’re talking about.” Castiel’s grace returned to normal as he spoke, but before Alex could protest, his wings stretched out. “We should go find the Winchesters.” He disappeared, and Alex frowned as she took off after him.

She landed beside Sam Winchester in the foyer of a blue suburban house. Dean and Meg were already halfway down the basement stairs, and she followed Sam down, head tipping in surprise as she saw a large 3D map of the town laid out across a wooden table. The buildings were made of various household objects, boxes, and scrap metal. “That’s … cool.” She circled around the table and
poked at the amazingly accurate replica of the hotel they had just come from. “Why exactly is this here?”

“Demons,” was Dean’s simple reply, and Alex looked over to see that his attention was fully focused on Meg.

The demon was standing opposite to Alex, her eyes narrowed as she studied the expansive map. “There.” She pointed to a section on the map closest to her. “That’s where the crypt was.”

“What’s there now?” Sam pressed when Meg fell silent.

The demon’s response was to scoff. “Do I look like Google to you? None of these buildings were here way back in the day. Figure it out genius. Is there any booze in this dump?” She walked back up the stairs, and after a second, Castiel followed.

Dean was the first to speak. “Awesome. Why don’t you and Cas get Meg patched up?” he suggested, and Alex wrinkled her nose in disgust. “I know, I know,” Dean added, “but somebody’s got to do it. Me and Sam are gonna change out of these suits and then figure out where the hell that crypt is.”

“Fine, yeah. Whatever.” Alex bounded up the wooden steps and walked into the living room. Meg was seated on the couch, her legs stretched out across the cushions. Castiel was standing in the entryway to the kitchen. “The Winchester want us to clean up the demon a bit,” she announced, not caring whether or not Meg heard; from the displeased huff that followed her words, Alex assumed that she had.

Castiel put a gentle hand on her shoulder. “I’ll take care of Meg,” he promised; somehow, his words didn’t console Alex in the slightest. He picked up the wooden chair that was pushed up against the wall and carried it over to the demon. “Let me see your hands,” he instructed. Meg complied, and with a shake of her head, Alex moved off further into the house in search of a first aid kit.

She found one in the upstairs bathroom, and her wings carried her back down the stairs. “Here.” She tossed her mate a roll of gauze before she returned to the far wall to watch the proceedings.

“Thank you.” Castiel started to wrap the glue around the demon’s left wrist, badly wounded from the metal handcuffs. “The wounds have festered,” he announced; Alex looked up, but it wasn’t clear whether the seraph was speaking to her or his patient.

Meg, however, took the liberty of responding. “You really know how to make a girl’s nethers quiver, don’t you?” she drawled, taking a quick drink from her open bottle of whiskey.

Alex’s wings flared up, and her muscles tensed in anger, but she curbed her tongue and her grace, waiting impatiently from Castiel’s response. When the seraph spoke, his voice was calm and tempered. “I am aware of how to do that,” he agreed calmly. “Although it doesn’t usually involve cleaning wounds.”

Alex snorted at how calm and professional his answer had been, but Meg kept pushing. “Why are you so sweet on me, Clarence?”

“I don’t know.” Castiel turned his attention to Meg’s other wrist. “And I still don’t know who Clarence is.”

The demon smiled up at the angel, and the corner of Alex’s lip curled upwards in jealousy as she saw the genuine amiability in the demon’s grin. “Would it kill you to watch a movie, read a book?” she teased, and she raised the lip of the bottle up to her mouth.
Alex couldn’t help herself, she stalked forward even as Castiel responded with, “A movie, no. But a book with the proper spells — yes, it could, theoretically, kill me.” A wing stretched out back towards Alex, followed by a thread of comforting and soothing grace, and Alex stopped behind the seraph, reaching out with her own wings to run the tips of her primaries across his.

The demon clearly saw the fire that danced within her gray eyes, but it only seemed to egg her on. “You know, you’re much cuter when you’re shutting up,” she teased, ignoring how Alex’s hands came to rest upon Castiel’s shoulder. “So, which Cas are you now? Original make and model or crazy town?”

The seraph reached up, his warm fingers covering her own as a prayer drifted into her mind. *Please stay calm. She’s only looking to aggravate you.* “I’m just me,” he told Meg, and his hand squeezed hers before he pulled away, attention turning to finishing his work on Meg’s injured hands.

“So your noodle’s back in order?”

“Yeah,” Castiel slowly agreed, “my … noodle remembers everything. I think it’s a pretty good noodle,” he added, and his wings twitched instinctively when Alex drew her feathers across them again. They flicked back against her stomach, a chastising action that had Alex pulling her wings back.

“Really?” Meg’s eyes flickered up to Alex, but it quickly returned to the seraph, and her countenance softened once again. “You remember everything?”

Alex ran her thumb along the ridge of her mate’s shoulder as he hesitated. “If you’re referring to the pizza man …” he finally said, and although Alex couldn’t see his face, she could hear the blush in his voice. “Yes, I remember the pizza man. I … wasn’t as familiar with humans’ customs and values, and it … was out of line.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.” When Castiel didn’t answer, Meg took another long drink from her whiskey. “You ever miss the Apocalypse?” she tried again, and her voice took on almost a wistful note.

Alex tipped her head and scoffed. “What? Why would anyone miss the Apocalypse? It fucking sucked.”

Meg rolled her eyes. “I wasn’t talking to you, feather-brain.”

Then young angel narrowed her eyes, but when Castiel cleared his throat, she forced herself to look away. *Stay calm.* “No,” Castiel said, and Alex felt his wings twitch curiously. “Why would I miss the end of times?”

“I miss the simplicity.” Meg drew her hand out of Castiel’s and rested it on her stomach as she settled further down into the soft couch, her gaze drifting upwards onto the ceiling. “I was bad. You were good. Life was easier. Now it’s all so messy.” Her head rolled to the side to fix Castiel with a soft stare. “I’m kind of good, which sucks. And you’re kind of bad — which is actually all manner of hot.” She ignored how Alex’s fingers tightened on Castiel’s shoulder, and she had the audacity to add, “We survive this … I’m gonna order some pizza and we’re gonna move some furniture around. You understand —”

“Too far.” Alex rushed around Castiel as her wings flared out. Castiel jumped to his feet, and his chair fell backwards, sending a loud, resounding thud echoing through the house as he put a hand on Alex’s chest. “That’s too far!”
“Alex.” Castiel’s voice was soft, but it couldn’t draw her attention away from Meg; the demon had barely reacted, and was still reclined on the couch, unperturbed. “Alex.” The seraph’s tone sharpened, and Alex reluctantly turned to look up into his eyes. She’s only looking for a rise out of you, came the prayer, and the twist of grace against hers brought about a sense of calm and comfort. You’re only giving her what she wants.

You’re mine. The response came out before Alex could stop herself, and she was surprised by how desperate and demanding her voice sounded. “You’re mine,” she repeated aloud, her wings curling down and around Castiel.

Footsteps on the stairs had all three turning towards the basement stairs, and after a second both Winchesters emerged. “Alright. Let’s roll, campers,” Dean announced, his laptop tucked under his arm. “We found the crypt.”

“Oh.” Alex reached up to take the hand that was still resting on her chest in hers, and she threaded her fingers through Castiel’s as she pulled it down to her side. “That didn’t take long.”

“Well, Meg, uh, did kind of point us to the building,” Sam reminded, and his eyes flickered over to the demon, who still hadn’t moved from the couch. “Uh, how are you feeling?”

“Better now that Clarence here has patched me up.” The demon rose to her feet and shifted her whiskey bottle to the other bandaged hand. “We should get moving before Crowley sends even more of his goons after us,” she added, and both the Winchesters nodded in agreement.

“Come on.” Dean led the way towards the back door. “It’s just on the other side of town.”

Alex shifted uncomfortably in the back of the Impala, her arms crossed tightly across her chest as she stared out the windshield, trying to ignore the demon that sat to her immediate right. She was sandwiched in between Meg and Castiel — at her own insistence, regrettably — while the two brothers got the entire front seat to themselves. “Are we there yet?” she repeated for probably the third time that minute. When Dean didn’t answer, she added, “Drive faster, man. I think I’m having an allergic reaction.”

“Calm down, Feathers, we’re almost there.” Dean turned the Impala down another dark road, and Alex huffed. She turned her head to rest her chin on Castiel’s shoulder, closing to fluff out her wings and twisting them into Meg’s personal space. The demon’s response was a noise of indignation, and then hands were shoving her wings out of the way.

“Touch me again and I’ll kill you,” she warned.

“Then keep your wings out of my side,” came the scathing response. Meg leaned forward to peer over Sam’s shoulder, and Alex watched in amusement as Sam leaned forward slightly to distance himself from the demon’s face. “Can’t I sit next to the other angel?” she asked the brothers. “The little one’s getting annoying.”

“I said we’re almost there, okay?” Dean snapped, and the Impala rolled down an alley before it came to a stop. He turned around in his seat to stare back at Alex and Meg. “See? Now get out of the damn car.”

“Gladly.” Alex’s wings carried her out of the crowded Chevrolet and onto the darkened street. She turned her gaze towards the clearly abandoned building that lay before them, and she nodded. “Let
me guess. The crypt is in the dark and creepy building? Typical.” She turned back to face Sam and Castiel. “So what’s the plan?”

“Basement,” Meg announced, and Alex frowned as the demon walked up to stand at Castiel’s side. “That’s your best bet for getting into that crypt.”

Dean nodded in concordance with Meg’s suggestion. “Alright, the angels and I will head in and get our Indiana Jones on. Sam, you stay out here with Meg.”

“What?” Sam stared at his brother, eyes narrowed in surprise.

“We got this,” Dean insisted. “I mean, Meg’s not coming in, and we clearly can’t leave either Cas or Pip alone with her. So that leaves you.”

“What do you mean?” Sam repeated. “Meg can stay by herself, watch our backs.”

Dean scoffed, and Alex shook her head at Sam’s innocent trust in such a black and vile entity. “Really?” she snapped. “Now you trust Meg? Cause I sure don’t.”

“Hey, I got you this far,” Meg protested. In response, Alex flicked her in the head with a wing.

“Shut up, Meg,” Sam added before turning to his brother. “Dean —”

Dean immediately cut him off. “Sam, I saw your bloody rag in the trash can, okay?” Alex let out a noise of surprise, and she looked between Sam and Dean, unsure of what to make of Dean’s accusation.

“That wasn’t —”

“Stop. Just stop.” Dean shook his head, and Alex’s wings fluttered uncomfortably. “Sam, we don’t know what’s in there, okay? And you almost let a demon get the best of you back there,” he added, referencing back to the skirmish that had taken place at Wendy’s.

“I’m fine,” Sam insisted, but Dean wasn’t having it.

“No, you’re not fine,” he snapped. “You haven’t been ‘fine’ since the first trial.”

“Trial?”

“Shut up, Meg.” The Winchesters spoke in unison as they glared over at the demon, and Meg’s shoulders rose and fell in a frustrated shrug. Sam turned his hazel’s eyes back onto his older brother. “Dean,” he began again, voice strained slightly as he realized he wasn’t gaining any ground. “I’m telling you, I’m okay.”

“No, you’re not.” To Alex’s surprise, Castiel stepped up to defend Dean. “Sam … you’re damaged in ways even I can’t heal. Dean’s right. You should stay outside with Meg.”

Alex narrowed her eyes as she stared at Sam, and her grace snuck out to feel his vessel. She couldn’t feel anything bad, although it did seem to be vibrating in a way she had never felt before. Was that what Castiel was talking about? Sam still hadn’t given Castiel a response, so Dean nodded. “Alright, we’ll be back.” He handed Sam the demon knife, and then Alex followed after him and Castiel.

She let the heavy metal door swing closed behind her before she asked, “Cas, what did you mean about Sam?” She followed the two down the stairs, and her weapon fell into her hands as she glanced down the long, dank hallway.
“It’s difficult to say,” was Castiel’s response, and he and Dean took the lead as they moved down the hallway. “It’s something on the subatomic level, and his electromagnetic field —”

Dean quickly cut him off. “Okay, bottom line it for me, Bill Nye. Is it lethal?” He shone his flashlight across the dark stone walls.

A breath leaving Castiel’s nose was the only sign of his frustration at being interrupted. “I don’t know. Wait.” The angel suddenly stopped short, and Alex looked up to see that he had put his hand on the concrete wall. “There’s a draft. There’s something behind here.” His wings stretched out, and he looked back as he ordered, “Stand back.”

Alex obliged, and she pressed herself into the far wall as Castiel’s grace flooded outwards into the wall. The concrete blocks cracked and crumbled under the force, and Alex screwed up her eyes against the dust. When it had settled, there was a large hole, just large enough for a grown man to stoop through. Alex stepped forward and kicked some of the brick fragments aside. “Huh.” She ducked down and passed into the adjacent room. The air was thick and musty, and the young angel coughed. “Ugh,” she wheezed. “I think we definitely found it.” She looked around the dark crypt as Dean and Castiel joined her. There was a large stone altar in the center, and boxes and jars lined the multitude of shelves and ledges. The entire room hummed with a supernatural power.

“Dean.” Castiel broke the silence, and he pointed to the wooden box that sat behind the altar. “That’s it.”

“How do you know?”

“It’s the only thing in here warded against angels,” Castiel answered simply, and Alex pushed out her grace to confirm it; he was right. That was definitely warded against angels.

Dean picked up the box and placed it on the altar, and Alex joined him as he pried the box open with a nearby knife. Inside lay a large, clay rock, and Dean grinned. “Winner winner chicken dinner.” He pulled the concealed tablet out of the box.

“Good.” Castiel extended a hand towards what the Winchester held. “Hand it to me, and I’ll take it to heaven.”

Something in his words gave Dean pause, and he stared up at Castiel. “No,” he reminded, “we will take it to Kevin so he can translate it.”

“Right,” Castiel readily agreed. “Of course. I’ll take it to him right away. No time to waste.” He shifted even closer to Dean, and in response the Winchester stepped away.

“Well, he’s not that far. I’ve been meaning to … go check on him, bringing him supplies.”

Castiel paused, and Alex’s wings fluttered as she felt his grace flicker within his vessel. But it stopped after merely a second, and the seraph’s voice grew pleasant, yet there was an unmistakable dark undertone. “I can resupply the prophet, Dean.”

Dean turned so the clay-enclosed tablet was hidden from Castiel’s view, and he held it out to Alex. “You know, why, uh, why doesn’t Alex take it over to him? Sam and I can meet her there, and you can get back to your mission. Finding the other half of the demon tablet — that is priority, isn’t it?”

Castiel’s gaze swung over to where Alex’s fingers had closed around the rock, and his wings rose. “I can’t let either of you take that, Dean,” he warned.

“Can’t or won’t?” Dean challenged.
“Both.”

The tablet was pulled out of Alex’s hands as Dean stepped away from her. “How did you get out of Purgatory, Cas?” he asked, green eyes narrowed in accusation, and Alex followed after him, her own wings drawing in close in fear of conflict ensuing. “Just tell me how you got out of Purgatory,” he continued. “Be honest with me — for the first time since you’ve been back — and this is yours.” He nodded down to the tablet, and Castiel’s gaze dropped to the stone.

And his angel blade dropped down into his hands.

Alex slid in front of Dean, her wings stretched out. “Cas,” she warned, and her hand reached out towards the seraph’s chest to keep him back. “What are you doing?” She pressed her grace against his. Flickering.

“Cas,” Dean repeated. “Cas, I don’t know what the hell is wrong with you, but if you’re in there and you can hear me, you don’t have to do this.”

Castiel lashed out, and his arm caught Alex in the shoulder and sent her flying. Her wings slowed her down, but her back still collided with the wall, and she let out a pained grunt. Lightning flashed and thunder rumbled as Dean brought the clay stone up to block Castiel’s blow.

“Cas! Fight this! This isn’t you! Fight it!” Dean stumbled back, and Alex scrambled to her feet as Castiel swung his weapon back at Dean. It glanced off of the tablet with another crack of thunder. The seraph’s grace was flickering violently, and Alex’s wings carried her over to stand in front of Dean.

“Cas, stop this,” she begged as the seraph approached. She could see it in his eyes; they were dull and didn’t even seem to be focused on anything in front of him. “What are you doing?” She let her wings fall down, trying to appease the seraph’s anger and snap him out of it, but nothing seemed to work. His movements were slow and mechanical, and Alex stepped backwards as he continued on his advance. “Castiel! C-Can you even hear me? Please, Cas.”

The seraph’s grace stopped flickering momentarily, and he turned, bending slightly as his hands came up to his head. “What have you done to me, Naomi?” he gasped out, but he didn’t even acknowledge the presence of Alex or Dean.

“Who’s Naomi?!” Dean yelled, and his hand found Alex’s shoulder to guide her backwards when Castiel straightened back up and turned back to the two hunters.

“Naomi?” Alex tried to shrug Dean off. “What? No — no, Cas! She promised. Dammit! Cas, listen to me! You have to fight —”

Castiel’s arm came out of nowhere, and the young angel saw stars as she was thrown back into the wall. Jars fragmented under the impact, and she slipped to the ground, her hand coming up to grab at her injured shoulder.

“Cas!” Alex heard the gruesome snap of a bone, and Dean cried out in agony. Lightning flashed throughout the room as the clay stone fell from his open hands, shattering on the ground, and Alex rolled her head back at the painful flash of power that followed the tablet’s revelation. Naomi. The flickering was because of Naomi; it was Castiel going back and forth from heaven. It had to be.

“Please!” she heard Dean challenge. “Take it! But you’re gonna have to kill me first.” She rolled onto her stomach as Dean grunted in pain, and when she raised her head, her blood ran cold. Castiel had Dean on his knees, one hand gripping the Winchester’s broken arm, and the other curled
into a fist around his weapon as he punched Dean squarely in the face. “Come on, you coward!” he yelled. “Do it!” The Winchester’s face was already bloodied under the supernatural being’s assault, and Alex heaved herself to her feet as Dean gasped out, “Cas … this isn’t you. This isn’t you.”

“Castiel … please.” Alex staggered towards the two, wincing as Castiel’s fist connected with Dean’s eye. “You have to fight this. What is she doing to you?” Her wings propelled her towards Castiel, and she barreled him away from the Winchester. She ducked as Castiel’s angel blade swung over her head; whether it was intentional or instinctive she couldn’t tell. A fist caught her in the jaw, and she stumbled away, positioning herself in front of Dean. “If you want to get to him, you’re going to have to go through me.”

The seraph only approached, and his angel blade lifted high in the air. “Alex.” Dean’s hand grabbed onto her wrist, and she felt him fruitlessly try to pull her back. “Don’t.”

“He won’t hurt me.” Alex rolled her shoulders back, and she let her angel blade fall onto the stone. “He won’t hurt me,” she repeated, head held high despite the shakiness of her breathing. “He’s my mate.” She saw it in his eyes; it was just the briefest flicker of recognition, but it was there, and she lifted her chin as her wings fell out to her side; a calm, passive gesture.

“Alex —”

Alex shook Dean off, refusing to turn away from her mate. “Right, Castiel?” she pressed, and the seraph stopped in front of her; his grace flickered violently, and Alex had to draw her own grace away in fear of growing sick. “I know you can hear me.” Her voice trembled as his fingers tightened on the handle of his blade, and she shifted away as the weapon was lifted up, poised to strike. “I need you — please don’t hurt me.”

The angel blade clattered to the ground, and Alex squeezed her eyes closed. She could feel the seraph move in front of her, kneeling down and picking up the exposed angel tablet. She could feel it as the room began to glow, humming with light and power, and she turned her head away even as it faded.

“C-Cas?” she heard Dean’s faint, beaten voice, and she flinched away as a hand came to rest upon her cheek.

*I will never hurt you.* The seraph’s voice was soft, and Alex trembled slightly as she opened her eyes. Castiel stood there, his wings curled forward and grace still, resting just beneath his vessel’s skin. Alex reached up, covering Castiel’s hand with her own, and the seraph’s blue gaze slipped past her.

He stepped past her, and Dean flinched away as Castiel stretched out a hand. “No. Cas. Cas!” Dean cut off with a choked gasp as the seraph’s grace flowed outwards, healing the hunter’s injuries. Alex stepped back, the passing rush of adrenaline causing her legs to shake unstably.

“I’m so sorry, Dean.” Castiel’s words came out as a murmur, and his gaze dropped to the ground as he stepped away to allow the hunter to rise to his feet.

The Winchester did just that. “What the hell just happened?” he demanded, a scowl darkening his features.

“It was Naomi, wasn’t it?” Alex put in sharply; she immediately softened her voice, however, when Castiel’s wings twitched, clearly thinking her harshness was directed at him. “She promised she wouldn’t touch you,” she growled. “I can’t —”
“Wait wait wait.” Dean looked over at her. “Who’s Naomi?”

“Angel.” Alex crossed her arm and leaned back against the stone altar. “She’s … I don’t know. Kind of in charge right now.”

“She’s the one who rescued me from Purgatory,” Castiel explained, his voice low and defeated. “She claimed working for her was part of my penance, but after a while …” His eyes turned up towards the Winchester. “I no longer had a choice. Everything I did, I did because she made me. She …”

“Controlled you,” Dean finished.

“Reprogrammed,” the seraph half-heartedly corrected. “Angels, they aren’t like humans, they aren’t innately endowed with —”

“Cas?” Dean cut him off. “Speak English. So, this Naomi has been controlling you since she got you out of Purgatory?”

Castiel didn’t even bother to correct the Winchester. “Yeah.”

“Well, w-what broke the connection?”

“I don’t know.” Castiel turned his gaze down towards the tablet in his hand, and a shiver passed through Alex’s wings as she remembered the power that had poured forth from the stone when the seraph had picked it up off of the ground. “I just know that I have to protect this tablet now.”

“From Naomi?”

Castiel’s blue eyes turned onto Dean. “Yes,” he agreed. “And from you.”

“From me?” Confusion darkened the Winchester’s face, and he stepped forward. “What are you talking about?” He pulled up short when Castiel’s wings flared out and carried him out of the crypt, and he let out a low curse. “Cas? Cas! Dammit.”

Alex. Castiel’s prayer cut in over the Winchester’s words, and the young angel tipped her head. I ...

Windom, Minnesota

Wind bit through her jacket as Alex landed on the trash-littered roof of the Red Carpet Inn. She pulled her wings in tight as she looked around, grey eyes searching for Castiel. Where they had first began; when he had first asked her if she wanted to be an angel. That had to be on this motel roof almost four and a half years ago.

“You came.” Castiel landed in front of her, his navy wings folding in against his back. The angel tablet was held tightly in his hands, and as Alex watched, he tuck inside his trench coat and stepped forward.

“Of course I came.” Alex let her wings fall out slightly, a little offended at the thought that she wouldn’t. “How … how are you feeling?”

“I’m fine. Alex …” Castiel’s head fell, and it took him a few seconds to gather his thoughts. “You know that these past few months … what I’ve done hasn’t been me. I heard every single one of your
prayers, but I couldn’t do anything. The last thing I remember that was … that was actually me, was when I called you to that pier two months ago. I remember that you stormed off, and I wanted to follow, but …”

“It’s okay.” Alex stepped forward, and she put her hand on Castiel’s forearm, gently cutting him off. “I don’t blame you for anything that happened because of her.” Her hand moved over to his heart, and it rested on the hard stone tablet hidden beneath his coat. “What are you going to do with this?”

“I need to keep it safe.” Castiel placed his hand over hers, and his grace curled against hers, a warm and loving embrace. “I wasn’t lying when I said it can’t fall into the wrong hands; the Winchesters and the prophet included.” He looked down at their entwined hands and added, “Naomi will be looking for this.”

“I suppose she will.” Alex couldn’t help the stab of disappointment that cut through her, but she did her best to keep it out of her voice, instead forcing the faintest hint of cheerfulness into it. “So, I guess you’ll be leaving again for a while, huh?”

“Yes,” the seraph agreed, and when his hand fell away, Alex let hers fall back to her side as well. “I don’t know where or for how long, but I do know that I can’t stay here.” Castiel hesitated only a moment, and then he added, “You should come. With me. I want you to come.”

Alex blinked, taken aback at his sudden offer. “You mean …” she started, and she cleared her throat when she couldn’t think of any way to finish that sentence. “I mean, yes. Of course I’ll go with you. Where are we going?”

“I don’t know yet.” Castiel held out his hand, and Alex took it, fingers closing around his warm palm. “Somewhere far away from here.”
Alex rested her head against Castiel’s shoulder, her gaze turned out over the passing landscape of northern California. The bus lurched back and further over the hole-ridden road, and she glanced over her shoulder at the other passengers as the bus rolled over a pothole the size of a small dog. No one looked up despite the intrusion, and she turned back to face the front. The seraph beside her felt her stir, and blue eyes watched curiously as she returned her cheek to his shoulder. They had been on the road for almost four days now, never staying too long in one place, and, to be honest, after four days of torn seats and musty buses, Alex was starting to miss the Impala. But she had Castiel.

A black bag sat in his lap, within which lay the angel tablet they had taken from Lucifer’s crypt, safely tucked away from prying eyes. The seraph’s hands were holding it tightly, but his face remained emotionless, refusing to give away the presence of such a valuable cargo.

“We should go hiking some time.” Alex closed her eyes, letting the bus’ rocking and swaying lull her towards rest. “I’ve heard there’s wonderful hiking places up here.” She rested her hand on the seraph’s forearm, squeezing gently as she felt him shift.

Castiel didn’t immediately answer, and after a few seconds he mused, “What exactly is the point of hiking? You’re walking in a circle without a true destination … it is the scenery?” he added, and Alex hummed her agreement. “Earth is extremely beautiful, but perhaps I just don’t see the appeal of walking.”

“I don’t think anyone does,” Alex teased. She leaned up and pressed a quick, chaste kiss on his cheek before she sat up straight in her seat, spine arching as she stretched out her back. “I want to see the really big trees,” she insisted, voice taking on a playfully childish tone. “I like big trees.” Her phone rang, and she answered it with a groan as she slumped back in her seat. “Sam, leave me alone.”

“Nice to hear your voice, too,” Sam Winchester retorted lightly. “Where are you at? Are you still with Cas?”

“Yeah. We’re on some undisclosed bus at some undisclosed location.” Alex turned sideways in her seat and leaned back into the seraph’s shoulder. “What’s up? What do you want?”

“We’re in Conway Springs, Kansas, with a case. Sounds vampy, and, we thought you maybe wanted in.” She could hear the shrug in Sam’s tone as he added, “I mean, you like vamp cases.”

“That is true,” the young angel conceded. “But I’m with Cas right now.” The bus rolled to a jolting stop, and she rose to her feet when Castiel nudged her. “We’re, you know, riding the rails, living the high life.” She took the seraph’s hand as they stepped onto the dusty roadside, and the bus rolled off into the distance.

“So that’s it, huh? You’re just gonna stay on the run?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Alex shrugged as Castiel looked up and down the road, and she flicked him with a wing. “I’ll call you back if I change my mind,” she lied, and she hung up before Sam could respond.
“Are you sure this is what you want?” Castiel’s blue eyes turned onto her, and his wing came to rest on her back. “All of this running and hiding, it’s never …”

“I’ll put up with it,” Alex promised. “At least I’m here with you.” She looked up at the setting sun, and despite the warmth of the evening, a shiver ran down her spine. Something didn’t feel right. “We should go. We’ve been here long enough.”

“I think you should stay a little bit longer.” The foreign voice had Alex spinning around, and her wings flared out in surprise at the strangers’ presence. Two men stood before them, dark wings folded calmly against their backs and weapons in hand. “Castiel.” The taller one stepped forward, his face calm and stoic. “You’ve been —”

A hand closed around hers, and then they were flying. Castiel’s wings beat violently as he carried them away, and it took Alex a few seconds to gather her bearings before she rolled out of the seraph’s grasp, wings beating alongside his. She glanced behind her to see the two angels following close behind; they were gaining. The young angel ducked back under the seraph, pressing her chest to his, pulling her wings in tight so they wouldn’t get in Castiel’s way. “Here.” She moved the black bag up in-between them, and she pulled out the tablet. “Take this and run.” She tucked it inside Castiel’s trench coat, and before Castiel could say anything, she dropped away, empty bag in hand. “Hey,” she called, holding the bag out. “Come and get it.”

Her black wings sliced through the dry air as she swerved away, and a look over her shoulder showed that only one of the angels was following her. The other one was still close behind Castiel. “Dammit.” Alex didn’t even think twice before she shot upwards, head tucking in as she barreled into the angelic being. Their wings collided, feathers tangling together as they spiraled towards the earth.

Hands wrapped around her waist, pulling her back, and Alex struggled against the other angel’s grip. “Let me go,” she snapped, and the glint of an angel blade caused her to struggle fervently. Her wing caught against the angel’s face, and then she was free. “You want this?” she yelled, holding up the empty black bag. “Then go get it!” She hurled it down towards the earth and took off, listening to how the air whistled as the shorter of the two swooped down after it.

Her wings carried her down towards the ground, eyes desperately scanning the passing buildings as she ducked and swerved between the brick structures to lose her pursuer. There. She knew those souls. Alex careened into the motel room, crashing into one of the beds. “What the hell?” She heard the Winchesters jump to their feet, and she rolled off of the bed as the second angel landed in front of her.

“Alex.” Dark eyes flashed as the angel’s wings folded in. “Where is the tablet?”

Alex lifted her head, her confidence growing now that she stood beside Sam and Dean. “Why don’t you ask your friend?” she challenged. “He’s the one who went after the bag.”

“It’s empty.” The second angel landed next to his partner, duffel bag in hand. “Mariel, I lost sight of Castiel.”

The tips of Mariel’s dark wings twitched, the only sign of his disappointment, but his eyes stayed focused upon Alex. “That’s alright,” he finally said. “He has something of ours, and we have something of his.”

“Hey hey hey.” Sam stepped forward, anger hardening his gaze and darkening his tone. “I think it’s time you guys left.” Alex shifted closer to him, her weapon falling down into her hands to add to the undisguised threat in the Winchester’s words.
The two angels stared at Alex, and she lifted her head, waiting impatiently for them to make their decision. However, after several long and tense seconds, their wings stretched out, and then they were gone.

Alex fell back onto the motel bed, a hand going up to her chest to try and still her racing heart. “Thanks,” she finally got out, tipping her head up to look at both of the brothers. “You probably saved my ass there.”

“Mind explaining what exactly was that about?” Dean crossed his arms across his broad chest, and Alex reluctantly pulled herself up into a sitting position at his sharp tone.

“They were after the angel tablet,” she explained. “I don’t know how they found us, but they did. I gave it to Castiel, and I took the empty duffel bag and played bait.” Her wings twitched, and she rolled her shoulders back, wincing at the tug on her healing injury.

Alex? Castiel’s worried voice broke into her head. Where are you? Are you okay?

I’m with the Winchesters, Alex quickly prayed back. And I’m fine. I’m safe. Don’t come for me; the angels — Mariel and the other one — they may still be around. Is the tablet safe?

Castiel’s answer was nearly drowned out by Dean’s question of, “Where’s Cas?” He looked around the room, almost as if he were expecting the seraph to appear in front of him right then and there.

Alex could only shrug. “I don’t know. He’s got the tablet, and he’s gone back into hiding.” She rose to her feet, feathers rustling as she shook out her wings. “Which means I’m stuck with you for a while, now that those angels know where I am. So, you were talking about a vamp case?”

“Um, yeah.” Sam exchanged a quick look with Dean; the Winchester was still frowning. “Two young women were found just outside of town on the freeway with their throats ripped out. We talked to the cops, and they said the blood had been drained from their bodies.”

“But that’s not the weirdest part,” Dean added, clearly reluctant to talk about the case with her, but he walked over to the table where his laptop lay open, adding dryly, “You’re gonna love this.”

“That’s encouraging,” Alex muttered, and she followed the Winchesters over to the laptop. She recognized the telltale image of security footage, and she leaned up against Sam’s shoulder as his brother pressed play. A man held a teenage girl tightly in his grasp, and she was struggling as he dragged her away from the car, but another teenager dashed in from the side. Alex saw the flash of a machete, and the vampire’s head toppled to the ground. “What?” Alex leaned in closer, eyes narrowing as she recognized the teenage girl’s face. “Hell no. No.” She looked up at Sam and Dean, jaw falling open. “It — it’s that girl. That child from the vetala case where I had to save Sam’s ass.”

Sam nodded. “Krissy Chambers. We were just about to go out and find her before you crashed in here.”

Alex let a nose rumble angrily in the back of her throat. “I hate teenagers,” she muttered. “They’re idiots who think they know everything in the whole damn world. I’d rather sit in a room of ghouls than teenagers.”

Sam frowned and raised an eyebrow. “You know you were a teenager not long ago, right?”

“Okay, yes, and that’s clearly not the point.” Alex unfolded her wings and heaved a long sigh. “Do you know where they are, or should I go out and find these hunter wannabes?”

“Whoa whoa, hold up.” Dean’s voice had the angel pausing. “Who said you get to work this case?
You left,” he snapped when Alex let out a small, confused noise. “You made your choice, and it wasn’t us.”

Alex looked up at Sam, eyes narrowed in hurt. “That’s not what I meant to do,” she insisted, grey gaze swinging over to Dean. “I just wanted to spend time with my mate.”

Sam shot his brother a dark frown. “It’s fine,” he promised. “Go try and find them, and we’ll catch up.”

“Yeah. Consider it done.” Alex’s wings carried her up into the air, and she drifted across town, grace flicking out and into the buildings below. Using it no longer antagonized her shoulder, and thanks to her time in constant contact with Castiel’s grace, she was feeling stronger than ever. She rolled between two office buildings, and then the angel pulled up short.

She recognized that soul. She couldn’t place it, but she had definitely run into it before. That had to be Krissy Chambers.

Alex spiraled down through the walls of a nearby hotel and landed in the corner of the room, her wings pulled tightly around her to bend the light around her body. Three teens were there with her; one guy, two girls. The one seated on the bed was definitely Krissy Chambers. “Vamp was last seen by an ATM camera checking into this hotel,” she was telling the other two. “I tapped into the hotel’s security cams and found him. Room 215.”

Alex flew off to the Impala. “I found them,” she announced, and both brothers jumped slightly at her sudden appearance. “High Top Hotel, room 210. There’s three of them there. All underage.” Anger pulsed through her, hot and sharp, and her fingernails dug into her palm. “They’re hunting the other vampire. What the hell are they thinking? They’re getting themselves killed.”

“Hey, hey. Don’t do what you’re thinking of doing,” Dean warned. “We’re almost there, so just stay here.”

The car turned, and Alex leaned into it, frowning at Dean’s words. However, she did as he asked; Sam must have convinced him that her presence shouldn’t be shunned, but she didn’t want to push him. Once they had pulled up to the hotel, however, she took off to room 215. There wasn’t a vampire; only a woman. She was tied down to the bed, a gag secured around her tear-streaked face. “Ah dammit.” The angel looked around, grace slowly creeping out as she heard metal sliding into the locks. A lock pick, she quickly determined as she listened to the picks lift one by one.

The vampire wasn’t there.

She heard the sound of Sam and Dean bursting into the teenager’s room down the hall, and she heard the distinct sound of a gun cocking. “Hey, Krissy,” Dean said, and that was all Alex needed to hear.

Her wings propelled her through the hotel. Krissy stood there, a gun pointed at the Winchesters’ heads. The angel thrust her hand out, shoving the gun away, and her hand found its way to the teenager’s throat as she pinned her up against the wall. The teen’s anger snapped into panic, but not matter how much she struggled, Alex remained firm.

A hand squeezed her shoulder, and Alex reluctantly stepped away, loosening her grip on the young girl. “Krissy,” Sam asked as Alex stepped back to his side, “where’s your dad?”

“Dead.” The girl glared at Alex as her hand came up to rub at her neck. “Well, let’s do this again, like, never. Now go. We got this.”
Both brothers made questioning noises, but before they could verbalize them, Alex scoffed. “Your two friends just broke into a room that the vampire isn’t even in. I mean, how old are you? Fifteen?”

“I’m old enough to kick your ass!” Krissy spat, and Alex stepped forward, eyes gleaming at the prospect of her challenge. Dean, however, held her back, and she could only flared out her wings.

“We’re in,” a girl’s voice said, crackling from the nearby walkie-talkie. “Nobody here but the vic.” Alex and the Winchesters turned to the laptop that lay open; it was plugged into some feed that allowed Krissy to see into vampire’s room. The two other teenagers were in there now, standing in front of the unconscious woman. No sooner had she spoken, though, that the door burst open and a man stepped through, fangs bared.

Alex blinked in surprise as suddenly the Winchesters were no longer at her side, and she watched the door slammed closed behind her. Krissy bolted after them. Alex watched the screen to see the vampire throw one of the teens into a wall, and she let a low, frustrated growl before she stalked out after them. She was halfway to the room before she heard a shattering of glass, and before her next foot even touched the ground, her wings were carrying her towards the source. The vampire had jumped through the window. “I don’t think so.” Alex grabbed him by the hem of his hoodie and hauled him back up into the room.

She reveled at the shocked cry of the vampire and the paled faces of the teens as she appeared in front of them, and she shoved the vampire back against the wall. “Stay here,” she warned, and she turned to face the three teenage hunters. “What the hell do you think you were doing?” she hissed, wings flared out angrily. “You think you’re strong enough to take on a vampire?” Her arm snapped out to point back at the quivering creature in the corner. “You’re lucky this guy is more concerned with getting his next fix than killing you!”

Krissy stepped forward, a fire burning in her eyes strong enough to match the angel’s. “We know what we’re doing,” she snapped. “You don’t think we haven’t been training for this for years? Now step aside. This isn’t your kill.”

“It’s my kill if I say it’s my kill,” Alex retorted, her angel blade falling down into her hand, and the sound of her rustling feathers filled the room as her wings reached up towards the ceiling. “If I hadn’t caught him, he’d be on his way out of town by now.”

“What are you talking about?” Dean looked over at Krissy Chambers, but it wasn’t her who answered.

“Three months ago, this blood banger snuck into a house and killed three people in their sleep,” the other teenage girl said, and her voice shook slightly as she addressed the angel. “One was a woman — never hurt anyone. The other two, a brother and sister.”

“W-What?” The vampire’s protest was loud and surprised, and Alex could feel his desperate eyes on her back. “No! I didn’t do that! I-I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The girl’s voice grew stronger, speaking over the bloodthirsty creature. “I came home from a friend’s house, and I found them. They were my family!” She stepped forward, her machete swinging at her side.

“This isn’t happening.” Hands grasped Alex’s coat, and she tensed at the desperate hold. “I didn’t do anything, I swear. Please, help me!”

“I believe you.” Alex reached out to pat the vampire on the shoulder, and when the teenager stepped forward, machete poised, her hand moved to the creature’s forehead.
It died in a burst of light and a cry of pain, and Alex pushed it away as it fell to the ground, not surprised by the wide eyes that followed such a supernatural act.

Krissy was the first to regain her composure. “What the hell did you do?” she snapped, and Alex’s nostrils flare wide as the teen stalked forward to stand toe-to-toe with the angel. “That bitch killed Josie’s family, and she —”

“Let me guess.” Alex cut her off by placing a finger on the girl’s lips, her last bit of patience fleeing with a flick of her wings. “Revenge killing? You really think that’ll make everything better? Because it doesn’t. Take it from personal experience; it only makes things worse.”

“Alex.” Dean beckoned her over with one finger, and Alex felt her wings droop slightly at the frown on his face. There was anger, yes, but the disappointment hurt the most. “Come here.”

Alex brushed past the teenagers, her shoulders hunched defensively as she followed both of the brothers out into the hallway. “What?” she started, leaning up against the wall and crossing her arms. “If you’re gonna take their side —”

“What’s going on?” Sam was the first to speak, and Alex shrugged, slightly guilted by the concern in his hazel eyes.

“I’m fine, Sam.” Alex forced some of the tension to leave her shoulders. “These teens are just pissing me off, a-and I’m not in any mood to deal with it right now, okay?”

“This is about Cas, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it’s about Cas!” Alex snapped, her eyes narrowing at Dean’s unthoughtful words. “And it’s about Sam and the trials and Lucifer and the fact that I almost got myself killed ten minutes ago! And now on top of all of that there are three kids running around playing cowboys and bloodsuckers. So maybe you can understand why I’m a little stressed!”

“Hey.” Krissy Chambers leaned out of the room. “Ambulance is on the way, so it’s time to go.” Her gaze moved coldly between the two brothers, but she firmly ignored Alex’s presence. “Josie’s stabilizing the vic now.”

“No need.” Alex pushed herself off of the wall and moved back into the room. “I’ll take care of her.” Krissy let her in with a glare, and Alex took a deep breath. She needed to calm down. She curled her grace around Lucifer’s, something she hadn’t done in a long, long time, and she felt the coldness bring about a sense of calm.

The two teenagers were standing around the bed that contained the vampire’s victim; both jumped back as Alex approached. “It’s okay,” Alex reassured them. She reached down to place two fingers on the woman’s forehead. Alex let her grace flow out from her fingertips and into the stranger, helping her sores and scars and strengthening her worn limbs. She pulled back when her shoulder ached and her grace trembled, and immediately Lucifer’s grace swelled up to wrap itself around her shaking limbs.

“Who are you?” Josie’s voice quavered slightly as she addressed Alex, and when the young angel turned, the teenager shifted closer to her friend.

Alex frowned at her fear, and she let her shoulders fall. “My name is Alex. I’m an angel.” Alex glanced back at where Krissy and the Winchesters were speaking in the hall. “Sam and Dean Winchester are my friends. We worked a case with Krissy’s father a few years back — sort of.” She turned back to the two teenagers. “Who are you?”
The boy spoke for the both of them. “I’m Aiden. This is Josephine. We’re hunters.”

His words actually caused Alex to laugh. “Like hell you are.” She reined in her tongue, however, when she saw the offense that flared in Aiden’s eyes. “Did you come from hunting families?”

“Our families were all killed by the vamp nest,” Josephine explained, and Aiden nodded. “We just wanted revenge. Are …” The teen hesitated. “Are you a hunter then? I didn’t know …”

“It’s a very long story.” Alex flicked her wings, dismissing the idea of explaining it all. “But I’ve been hunting since I was seventeen years old. And it was the worst mistake of my life.” The sound of ambulance sirens had her turning her head towards the window. “It’s time for us to go,” she announced. “Perhaps I can explain myself later.”

“—You and your little crew got caught!” Dean was saying as Alex led the two teens out of the hotel room. “And if it wasn’t for me, your faces would be splattered all over the news.”

“Well, you know, so what?” Krissy retorted stubbornly. “Maybe it’s time people know the truth about what’s really going bump in the night!”

“Oh please.” Alex’s wings pushed her across the hall to stand right in front of the teen, and Krissy’s eyes widened in surprise. “No one’s going to believe you. All they’re going to see from that security footage is three teens decapitating an innocent man. How are you going to prove he was a vamp? They’re going to think you’re all insane!”

“Alex is right,” Dean agreed when Krissy only glared. “No one’s gonna believe you.”

“Speaking of believing, we need to get out.” Alex turned her head towards the approaching sirens. “The ambulance is almost here. You guys should go, and I’ll take the vamp outside of town and dispose of it.”

“Come on.” Krissy waved her friends after her as she turned to go. “Victor’s going to be wondering where we went.” She stalked away, leaving the three older hunters standing in the hotel hallway.

“Meet up with us afterwards,” Dean ordered, and then he and Sam took off after the teens.

Victor? Alex shrugged off Krissy’s words, and she stepped back into the hotel room, letting the door slam shut behind her. The woman was still unconscious as Alex crossed the room, and the second her hand closed around the vampire’s shoulder, her wings carried them away.

She burned and buried the body in a small field behind a dilapidated barn miles outside of town, and once she was done, she took off in search of the Winchesters. She found the Impala parked outside a Victorian style manor set just outside of Conway Springs. Alex landed on the house’s front porch, and there she took three deep breaths to calm herself. She could do this. “Lord give me strength,” she murmured, and then she knocked thrice on the wooden door.

It took a minute, but a man answered her knocks. Dark eyes sparkled in confused distrust as he took in the angel before. “Can I help you?”

“Hi. Sorry, I’m late.” Alex paused a mere second to take in his homey oxford and v-neck sweater before she pushed her way into the house, her grace guiding her path towards the Winchesters. “I’m Alex, by the way,” she added when she heard the man — she could only presume he was Victor — close the door and followed after her. “You’ve already met my friends.”
“The Winchesters. Yes — we met on a rougarou hunt several years ago. They didn’t mention that anyone else was coming —”

He cut off when Alex waved her hand dismissively. “They probably didn’t expect me to use the front door.” She dropped down onto the couch beside Sam, folding her wings so they rested at her side before she greeted the two brothers. “Hey.”

“Okay, so how does this work?” Dean began when Victor reentered the room. “What, after — after soccer practice and — and the bake sale, they, uh, chop vampires’ heads off?”

“Well, yeah.” Victor Rogers sat down in the chair across from them. “I think a balanced approach is best, don’t you?”

Alex visibly bristled, and Sam put a warning hand on her knee as Dean snapped, “They’re kids. They shouldn’t be hunting at all. You got to break this right now.”

Victor frowned at the three’s obvious displeasure. “When I found them, they were lost, confused, angry. I gave them a family and a purpose. And you want to take all that away? Why?”

“What you should have given them is therapy!” Alex retorted, her voice filling the room. “They’re just children. They deserve a chance at a real life, not this! They’ll be dead before they’re twenty.”

“They know the risks.” Victor’s voice was calm, unperturbed by Alex’s outburst, and the angel’s feathers ruffled furiously.

Sam’s hand squeezed her knee, and he asked, “Yeah, but why take them?”

The man’s answer was simple. “Because the next generation of hunters had to be better.”

“Better than what?”

“Better than us.” Victor leaned forward in his seat when the Winchesters exchanged looks. “Oh, come on, guys. I know your friends. I mean, Martin was insane. And somebody obviously dropped Garth on his head when he was a baby.” Alex’s wings flared out at the blatant disrespect toward her friend, but the man’s next words pushed her over the edge. “And I know that you guys loved that Bobby guy, but he was a barely functional alcoholic.”

“You take that back.” Alex jumped to her feet, her grace snapping in anger, and the lights flickered all around them. “Bobby was the best hunter I knew. He helped stop the damn apocalypse, and he died saving the world, which included your sorry ass. And what the fuck have you done? Killed a couple vamps, shot a couple shifters? Please.”

“How did you do that?” Victor looked around as the lights returned to normal, but he dismissed it when Alex firmly pursed her lips. “I meant no disrespect,” he started, “but Josephine is an all-star athlete and National Merit scholar. Aiden is so fast that he could pick your pocket before you could even blink. And Krissy, oh, she’s a natural-born leader and hunter.”

“So what?” Dean challenged.

“So these kids are the cream of the crop. They are the Beatles. They are the dream team. And once they get their revenge … they’ll be better hunters than any of us ever dreamed.” The clock in the room chimed, marking the arrival of eleven o’clock. “Ah. It’s getting late. If the three of you would like to spend the night, you’re welcome to the guest rooms upstairs.”

Alex opened her mouth to hastily decline, but Sam interrupted. “Um, yeah. That would be great.
Thank you.” He rose to his face, and Dean and Alex did the same. “We just have to go get our stuff out of the trunk.”

Victor dipped his head in acceptance and stood up. “The guest rooms are up the stairs and to the right,” he informed them. “I trust you can find your way.”

“Yeah.” Sam led the way out the front door, and once they were out in the cool night air, Alex shook out her dark wings.

“This is crazy,” Dean muttered as he made his way down to the car, and Alex huffed in agreement. Sam, however, didn’t share in the two’s brooding distrust. “Is it?” he half-heartedly challenged, and then he paused when Dean and Alex turned to face him in shock. “They’ve got a pretty good life.”

“Kids aren’t supposed to hunt,” Dean reminded, his voice sharp with anger.

“We did.”

“Yeah, and that worked out well for all of us,” Alex shot back, and her toes curled at how Sam still didn’t look fully convinced.

“Well, maybe they’re doing it right.” Sam shrugged, clearly unsure about how he felt. “Maybe they can hunt and still have a real life.”

“Come on, Sam. You know that’s not true.” Alex stepped forward. “Name one hunter who was able to do that. Because I can’t think of one. Not a damn one. Once you’re in the game — once they know your face …” Her voice grew quiet as the truth came out, and faces of all those she had lost flickered through her mind. “There’s no way out.”

Sam was silent for several seconds, and his shoulders fell. “Okay, then what do you want to do? Cause Victor’s not gonna stop this.”

“They said they were hunting a nest, right?” Dean began. “Well, let’s hunt it for ‘em. That way, until we can figure out what to do with Victor, they stay safe.”

Alex nodded out her agreement, and Sam asked, “Alright, um … so, what’s your move?”

“I want to talk to that girl who was tied up at the hotel. Something didn’t smell right about that.”

Dean reached into his pocket and dug around for his keys. “Why don’t the two of you stay here and look after the Brady Bunch?”

Sam nodded, and Alex let out a soft breath. “I’ll go back to the motel and get out things,” she told him, and her wings took her through the air and back into the motel across town. Sam’s bag lay against the far wall, nearly packed in stark contrast to Dean’s pile of clothes that lay right next to it. She scooped it up and returned to Sam within five seconds of her departure. “Here.”

“Thanks.” Sam accepted his things and led the way up to the front door. It was unlocked, and Alex gently closed it behind them after they entered. “Victor?” Sam frowned when the hunter didn’t appear, but he shrugged it off. “Better lock the door,” he instructed, and Alex obediently flicked her grace backwards to turn the deadbolt as she moved.

The guest rooms were exactly where Victor Rogers had described them to be, and Alex followed Sam into the first one and sat down on the corner of the double bed. "I'm staying with you," she told him when Sam cast her a confused frown. "There's no point in me lying awake in a room by myself."
Sam visibly rolled his eyes, but as Alex predicted, he didn't protest. "Fine. But I'm actually going to try and get some sleep."

"Of course." Alex rose to her feet and looked around the warm, clean room. "I'm going to take a quick look around the house," she decided. "And I know, I know. I'll be quiet, I'll be safe." She crossed the room and stepped out into the hall. The second floor appeared to be predominantly bedrooms; Alex felt Victor at the far end of the hall, and he three teens were in those across the hall from her and Sam. Aiden and Josephine were both in the room just to her left, murmuring among themselves, and the angel drew in a deep breath. Then she stepped forward and knocked on the door.

The whispering immediately stopped, and Alex took that as her cue to enter. "Hey." The angel let the door swing closed behind her, doing her best to ignore the way the two teens exchange looks. "I, uh … wanted to apologize if I seemed angry earlier. I … I've been under a lot of stress lately, and I suppose finding out that you're hunting at such a young age … well, it didn't help." Alex cracked a half-hearted smile, but when neither teen reacted, her wings drooped. "Sorry."

She turned to go, but Aiden's question stopped her. "How old are you?" Alex blinked at the abrupt question, and he quickly added, "You said that you started hunting when you were seventeen. Since when do angels hunt anyways?"

Josephine nodded in agreement from where she sat at her desk, and Alex leaned up against the wooden bookshelf. "Long story short? I wasn't always an angel — I'm still technically not an 'angel' angel. You know, original make and model. Point is, I was human first. I …" Alex took a deep breath, choosing her next words carefully. "I lost my family when I was young, and I found the Winchesters when I was seventeen. With nowhere else to go, I stayed with them, picked up some tricks of the trade. Biggest mistake of my life."

"Why?" Aiden sunk down onto the bed.

"Why?" Alex repeated. "I've been shot, stabbed, torn to shreds by a werewolf and literally impaled by a leprechaun's cane. I've lost friends, people I've considered family, people I've l-loved." Her words caught in her throat, and Alex swallowed them back down. "I lost the man I considered my father almost two years ago because of this life. And then I lost my son." Alex shook her head, chin tipped upwards towards the ceiling to keep back the tears as she took a moment to regain her composure. "It doesn't matter what you do. This life will always end with you dying alone. I want you to understand," she finished. "I can't stop you from hunting, but just know that once you start down this path, there's no getting off." The angel tapped twice on the bookcase and straightened up. "Alright. I'll leave the two of you alone. See you in the morning."

Alex returned to the guest room to find that Sam was gone. Her grace immediately pinpointed him in the bathroom, and Alex leaned up against the wooden bookshelf. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay," he promised. Don't worry about me. How are you? Are you with Sam and Dean?

Yeah. Alex shifted on the bed, gaze turning out the darkened window as she added, And I'm safe. It's probably not safe for me to come find you yet, right?

No. You'll have to stay with the Winchesters for a while longer. I have to go. Please stay safe. Castiel fell silent, and Alex let out a long, drawn-out breath as the conversation ceased.

"Alright," she agreed out loud. "I'll see what I can do." Her grace twisted within her, and Lucifer's
grace reacted by surging up, drawing Alex’s attention onto it. "Right," she murmured "And then there's you." She poked at her stomach, the approximate area where the archangel's grace resided, and she fell back onto the bed, blonde hair spilling out over the pillows. "Awesome."

Morning came, and Alex stirred as Sam rose to his feet. "Mmmph," she groaned, rolling over onto the warm sheets that Sam had recently occupied. "I smell waffles. Why?" She pulled the blankets up under her chin as she watched Sam run his hands through his dark, sleep-mussed hair. "Sammy, help me up." Alex stretched a hand out towards the hunter, her wings fluttering as she strained towards him.

She was rewarded when Sam’s hand closed around her wrist and dragged her upwards. "Come on. Everyone is already downstairs," he told her. He tugged on his shoes, and Alex smoothed down her ruffled shirt. She snagged Sam’s grey sweatshirt off of the chair and tugged it on before following him out into the hall and down the stairs.

“Ah, just in time.” Victor greeted them from the kitchen, and Alex immediately perked up at the sight of waffles. ‘Grab a seat.”

“Waffles?”

Victor nodded from where he stood behind the kitchen counter. “Yeah. Krissy’s fave.”

“My dad use to make them all the time,” the teen explained as she accepted her breakfast from her father-figure. “I think it was the only thing he knew how to cook.”

Victor put another waffle onto plate, and Alex stepped forward. “Can I …” When Victor nodded, she grabbed the food and hurried to sit down at the last free spot at the table. “Awesome.”

“You eat?” Krissy eyed Alex skeptically, and the angel huffed.

“Just because I’m a celestial being doesn’t mean I can’t enjoy breakfast,” she retorted good-naturedly, searching for the syrup. It lay just in front of Josephine, who had her nose buried deeply in a math book. “Pass the syrup?”

Victor placed the bottle in front of her, and he pulled the textbook away from the dark-skinned teenager. “Interact,” he chastised.

“Well, nerd," Aiden teased, and Victor tapped him where his elbows rested on the table.

“And you — manners.” He waited until Aiden obeyed before he turned to Alex. “Celestial being?”

“Yup. Fluffy wings and halo — well, no halos. These are really good.” Alex shoved another bite into her mouth, attention turned fully onto her breakfast. “You should totally give Dean this recipe. Try some,” she encouraged Sam. “Delicious.”

“We’re gonna be late.” Josephine got up from the table, and immediately the other two teenagers did the same, hurrying to grab their things.

“Come on.” Victor handed Josephine her textbook back as she reached for her backpack. “Grab your stuff. I’ll pick you up after school.”

“See ya,” Krissy called, and Aiden and Josephine echoed her as they ran off the door; Alex watched in amusement as Aiden ducked back into the kitchen to grab his waffle off of his plate. The door
slammed closed behind him, and Alex turned back to her half-eaten breakfast with a shrug.

“Whirlwind, right?” Victor turned to Sam, and when the hunter let out a low noise of agreement, he continued. “It’s always like that with kids. You got any?” Victor cleared the empty plates off of the table and carried them back over to the sink, and Sam followed him.

“Me?” he asked. “Uh, no.” He looked over at Alex, but the angel firmly kept her mouth shut, eyes falling back onto her pancakes.

“Want any?” Victor persisted.

Alex glanced up to see Sam shrug. “Uh, I don’t know.”

“Trust me, the answer’s yes.” Victor reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet; Alex lifted her head to see him holding out a photo for Sam to see. Alex couldn’t see it from where she sat, but she didn’t need to see to know that they were his own children.

Sam most likely assumed the same, but still he asked, “These yours?”

“Yeah.” Victor folded the wallet back up and slid it into his pocket. “Well, until we went camping and a wendigo ripped them to shreds.” He looked up when Alex let out a soft noise of sympathy.

Sam added his own condolences. “I’m sorry. Is that why you’re doing this? Taking all these kids in?”

Victor smiled softly and gave a small nod. “But you know what I realized, Sam, is that these kids, they don’t have to live in the way we have. You know, crappy hotel rooms, always moving, no family, no life. It’s not the only way.”

Alex huffed, finally deciding to speak. “Doesn’t matter. It all ends the same.” She stood up and carried her empty plate over to the sink. “One day, no matter how strong, how fast, how smart these kids are, something someday is going to get the better of them.”

Victor frowned. “These kids aren’t just run of the mill hunters,” he insisted. “They’re the —”

“— cream of the crop,” Alex finished. “Yes, you mentioned.” She let her wingtips flick against Sam’s shins as she stepped back, doing her best not to start any fights. “I’m only stating what I’ve seen time and time again.”

Victor’s phone rang, and he looked over at where it lay on the far counter. “Excuse me. There’s some business I need to attend to.” He picked up his phone and walked away, leaving Alex and Sam standing alone in the kitchen.

“Here.” Alex slid the last plate of waffles over to the Winchester. “Sit down and eat. I’ll clean up and do the dishes.” She turned back to the pile of plates, and she frowned, thinking back to how the three teenagers had interacted just a few minutes ago, at how … normal their life had felt. “Sam…”

“What?” The hunter looked over at her, concern flickering over his face at her hesitation. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong.” Alex turned on the tap and rolled up her sleeves. “It’s just … do you think that’ll ever be us?” She shoved the stopper into the sink. “You know, sitting around the table for breakfast — normal people stuff.”

“I don’t know.” Silverware clinked as Sam’s fork bumped against the plate, and Alex turned to face
“But I mean, you and Cas … that’s what you want, right?”

“Yeah.” A small smile crossed her face as the young angel leaned back against the counter. “Yeah, I do. And we’ll have that one day.” She turned back to the dishes when the water began to fill the sink, clearing her throat as she got down to work. “That’s what keeps me going. We all have that thing that gets us through the day; I guess that’s mine.”

Sam and Alex spent the next hour or so making themselves useful around the house. Victor had left immediately after he had gotten his phone call, and with nothing else to do, Alex had finished cleaning up the entire kitchen. Sam was exploring the living room up near the front of the house. Alex had just finished drying the last of the plates when she heard the familiar sound of a car pulling up into the driveway. “Sam,” she called, hanging the towel back onto the hook, “I think Victor’s back.”

The front door opened, and Alex tipped her head in confusion when four pairs of footsteps entered the house. “Hey. Why happened to school?” she heard Sam ask, and she hurried towards the entryway to see Aiden, Krissy, and Joseph dump their backpacks onto the floor.

“Victor pulled us out,” Aiden explained, but Krissy just ignored the hunter, choosing instead to cast a low glare over at Alex; the angel ignored it.

“Why?” she asked instead, eyes turning onto the other two teenagers.

“Cause we found another target.” Victor stepped into the house and closed the door behind him, a folder held tightly in his hands. “The vamp that killed Krissy’s dad.” He looked over at Krissy, concern growing across his face when the girl’s features tensed. “You ready?” he asked, and Krissy nodded, lips pursed as she followed Victor into the kitchen. “Okay.” Victor spread the folder out across the kitchen table, and Alex moved to stand at Sam’s side as they joined the four at the table.

“Pulled this from a security camera at a nearby gas station,” he explained, sliding a surveillance photo of a young woman over to Krissy.

Alex’s eyes darted over the compilation of photos and composite sketches as Sam asked, “Wait, how do we know this is definitely her?” Skepticism lined his voice, and Alex hummed out her agreement.

Victor wasn’t deterred by Sam’s tone. “Sheriff sketch, victim’s accounts … and this.” He pulled out another photo, a close up of the one now laying in front of Aiden, and he tapped on the thin, silver necklace that hung around the woman’s neck.

“My dad’s necklace.” Krissy pulled the picture closer, tracing over the crescent-shaped pendant. “My mom gave it to him on their anniversary.”

“Are you sure this is a video surveillance pic?” Sam persisted, and Alex frowned, narrowing her eyes to try and see what Sam saw that caused him so much doubt.

Krissy’s voice rose angrily as she glared over at Sam. “It’s her!” she snapped, her tone sharp enough to put an end to any reasoning with her.

Thankfully, the ringing of Sam’s phone meant that he didn’t have to. “Excuse me.” He walked away, and Alex rested her elbows on the table, trying to see for herself what Sam had saw. When nothing came, however, she gave up and moved off to find her friend, leaving the teens to their planning. “— says he has a surveillance photo of the vampire that killed Krissy’s father,” Sam was explaining quietly. “But Dean … I’m not so sure.”
“Why’s that?” she heard Dean ask.

“There’s no time stamp on it.” Sam looked down at Alex when the angel let out an audible groan. Of course. That should have been obvious. Her wings flicked, frustrated at her stupidity, but she pushed it aside.

She heard the rev of the Impala’s engine through the speakers before Dean asked, “Okay. So you think he’s lying?”

“Well, that or he’s just wrong.” Sam cast a glance over his shoulder, but neither Victor nor the teenagers were in sight. “It’s hard to say.”

“Yeah, I never trust a guy who wears a sweater.” Alex let out a small smile at Dean’s words, but he didn’t sound like he was joking. “You want me to head back there?”

Sam shook his head. “No, no. I’m good. Let me do some more digging.” Alex reached up for the phone, intent on adding her own input before Dean hung up, and Sam added, “Hang on. It’s Alex.”

He handed the phone to the young angel, and she cleared her throat before speaking. “Hey, Dean. What’s up? Did you find anything with the chick?”

“I think so. I don’t think that vamp was lying last night when he said he didn’t do it. He was fresh made within the month, but Josephine’s family was murdered three months ago. Sounds a bit fishy. I’m off to the hotel to talk with that clerk.”

“Okay. I’ll be there in a minute. Dean,” she added quickly before the hunter could protest, “I go where I’m needed most, and right now I think that’s with you. Going after a vamp nest alone outweighs babysitting a handful of half-grown teens, right?”

“Fine. I’m pulling up to the hotel now. Get here.”

“Yup.” Alex hung up and handed the phone back to Sam. “I’m going with Dean,” she informed him, even though he clearly already knew. “We’re going to try and get to the bottom of this, but if you need anything, call.”

Her wings carried her out of the house and across town to where the Impala sat in the hotel parking lot. She landed next to Dean, who was dressed in his suit and blue tie, and her wings folded in tightly as she slid into the leather seat. “About time.” Dean threw open the door as soon as she arrived, and Alex followed him out and into the hotel lobby.

The clerk recognized Dean immediately from last night. “Ah. Nice to see you again.”

Dean reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. “Yeah, I bet. I need to know who, uh, checked into room 215 yesterday.” He slid three twenties across the counter, and the clerk slowly picked it up.

“215,” he repeated as he thumbed through the bills. “It was some guy wearing a hoodie, so it was hard to make out his face.”

Alex looked over at Dean at the man’s uncooperative attitude, and her shoulders rolled back as she waited for the okay to take matters into her own hands and get real answers from the clerk. But when the Winchester’s green gaze met hers, he only shook her head. “He drive a blue van, by any chance?” he asked, turning back to the man behind the desk, and Alex frowned, unsure of what Dean was asking.
The clerk snorted. “Do I look like a valet?” he retorted, but he pointed to the rack of brochures over against the wall. “He took one of those,” he told them before he folded up the cash and shoved it into his pocket.

Alex followed Dean over to the rack, and the young angel frowned. “Which one?” she asked, gaze darting over the pamphlets for the various attractions and hiking trails in the town.

“The one that says ‘lodge’ on it,” was the clerk’s response, and Alex rolled her eyes.

“‘Conway Springs Lodge,’” Dean read as he pulled out the brochure the clerk had referred to, and Alex leaned up to examine the picture on the front. It didn’t seem like much. Barely a oversized cabin in the woods, by the look of it.

“Yes,” the clerk agreed, “big during the summer season. But this time of year, it’s closed.”

“Perfect hiding place,” Alex murmured to Dean, and when the hunter nodded, she raised her voice to ask, “Okay. So how far away is this lodge?”

“Oh, it’s a couple miles down the road.” The man waved off towards his left, gesturing in the general direction of where the lodge lay. “Anything else?”

“No. Thanks.” Dean tapped Alex on the shoulder, and she followed him out of the hotel. “How are the kids doing?” he asked as he circled around the Impala, and Alex paused by the passenger side door.

“Fine, I think.” Her face darkened as she tugged open the car door. “Victor’s got them convinced that they’ve found the vamp that killed Krissy’s dad, but Sam’s not so sure. Hopefully he can stop them from getting themselves killed today. Hey, uh, what were you talking about with the blue van?”

She got into the car, and the engine purred to life.

“The woman we found last night said a man in a blue van pulled up to ask her directions, and that was all she remembered before waking up in the hotel room.” Dean backed the car out of the parking space and guided it onto the road. “And I remember seeing a blue van parked out back here when we left last night. It could lead us to whoever’s behind this.”

“Huh.” Alex let her wings hang back over the leather seat as she watched the yellow lines disappear beneath the car. “I can go —”

“No.” Dean’s voice was firm. “We’re going in together, or not at all.” He looked over at Alex when she frowned, and he explained, “Listen, you’ve been a lot more ‘ask questions later’ lately, okay, and there’s a good chance we’ll need to ask questions.”

Alex scoffed. “If you don’t want me to kill them, you just need to say so,” she retorted. “I let you guys take the lead on these cases, Dean. I’m just here to help and to make sure nothing gets out of hand. I’ll wait if you want me to.” She slid down in her seat to emphasize her point, and she watched the mile markers go by.

It wasn’t long before the worn, wooden sign for the Conway Springs Lodge appeared, and Dean guided the car down the unpaved road. They stopped about a hundred yards from the cabin, and the hunter killed the engine. “We’ll go in on foot,” he decided as he got out of the car, and Alex followed him back to the trunk. She looked around as the Winchester retrieved his machete, keeping an eye out for any sign of life. But there was nothing.

She let Dean lead the way up to the cabin. The side wooden door was cracked open, and Alex flicked Dean in his shoulder before motioning towards the opening. He gave a curt nod, and she
skirted the side of the building to reach the doorway. She nudged it open with the toe of her boot, and her weapon slipped into her hands as she stepped into the darkness.

Dean followed close behind, and the angel ducked off into a side room as her grace flickered through the building. There. She moved back after her friend with a hissed, “Dean!”

“What?” A flashlight flashed across her face, and Alex screwed up her face at the sudden light. Her response was to point off to their left where a woman was hidden in the shadows. She was hunched over on the lower mattress of a bunk bed, hiding, and she jumped when Dean’s light turned onto her. “Hey!” he snapped, clearly surprised at her presence. “Who the hell are you?”

The girl’s eyes went wide, and her body convulsed in a frightened sob. Silver caught in Dean’s light, resting against her pale and dirty skin, and Alex stepped closer as she recognized that crescent-shaped necklace. “It’s her.” Alex let her weapon slide back up into her sweatshirt’s sleeve. “That’s the girl Victor said killed Krissy’s father.”

“P-Please make it go away,” the woman whimpered, and her limbs shook with pain and exhaustion. “It hurts so m-much.”

“What?” Dean stepped off to the left, and the room flickered as the lights turned on. The girl reacted immediately, eyes screwing up as she screeched. “No, shut them off!” she begged. “They’re too bright.”

Dean didn’t comply, so Alex reached out with her grace, flicking the switch to bathe the room once more in darkness. “This isn’t right,” she said, coming to crouch in front of the girl. “There’s no way she’s the vamp Krissy’s looking for. She’s recently turned, Dean. The transformation isn’t complete.”

Dean stepped closer, and the girl’s mouth fell open as her fangs pierced through her gums. The woman reached up, gingerly feeling her new, sharp teeth, and she shook in terror as she let out a cry of pain. “W-What’s happening to me?” she pleaded, and desperate blue eyes turned to Alex.

Dean’s machete flashed as he approached, and Alex held out a hand to keep him back; his steady heart and pounding blood wasn’t helping. “Has this ever happened to you before?” she asked, wings spreading out so the feathers just barely brushed the wooden floor.

“No. No.” The newly-turned vamp’s voice grew stronger as Dean stepped away, and her fangs receded back up into her gums. She stared at Alex, doing her best to focus on the angel as she answered the question. “There’s something wrong with me. That — that guy, he did something to me.”

“What guy?” Dean asked, and the woman’s eyes turned onto him.

“Hey, hey, hey.” Alex reached out and put a gentle hand on the woman’s wrist, drawing attention back onto her. “Just ignore him and focus on me. Now, what guy?”

“I don’t know! This guy in a blue van, he — he grabbed me. He took me here —” She cut off and doubled over, hands clutching her abdomen in pain. “My stomach,” she whimpered. “It hurts so much.”

“Dean!” A sharp, angry voice had both hunters spinning around, and Alex’s wings flared out in surprise to find Krissy, Aiden, and Josephine standing in front of them. How had they snuck up on her? All three had guns, cocked and loaded, and pointed right at them.
Dean stepped forward, closing the distance between him and Alex. “Put those away, and we can talk,” he said, voice deep and rough with frustrated authority.

“Why are you with the vampire that killed my dad?” Krissy demanded, and fire danced in her dark brown eyes as she glared over at Alex and the woman.

“Because you’re barking up the wrong tree,” Dean insisted, and his tone grew even deeper and sharper. “She didn’t kill your pops.”

Krissy’s gun swung over to the Winchester. “I don’t want to hurt you, Dean, but I will if you don’t move.” Her finger twitched on the trigger, and Alex immediately rose to her feet, wings rising and a growl growing in her chest at the blatant threat on her friend’s life.

“Hurt him and it’s the last thing you’ll ever do,” she warned, stepping protectively in front of Dean, chin raised as met Krissy’s gaze. When the teen’s cold glare only intensified, Alex drew upon Lucifer’s grace, letting it swell up through her limbs, and her eyes glowed with orange fire. Krissy shifted backwards, and that small gesture of fear was all Alex needed to regain the upper hand. “This vampire’s innocent,” she said, eyes fading as she quelled the archangel’s power. “There’s no way she could have killed your father.”

“And how would you know that?” Josephine spoke from beside Krissy, and Alex turned her gaze onto her, satisfied to find less defiance and more stubborn curiosity.

Dean answered the question. “Because she’s fresh made, a day or two,” he snapped. “Her dad was killed months ago. This whole thing stinks. That vamp that we killed last night? Why was he swearing he didn’t do it?”

“Because he was a liar,” Aiden sneered, but he fell silent when Dean’s green gaze turned onto him.

“Vampires don’t beg for their lives,” the Winchester retorted. “They attack.” His eyes dropped down to the gun in the kid’s hands. “Look, last time I’m gonna ask you nicely. Take the damn guns off me, or somebody’s gonna get hurt.”

Aiden scoffed. “Big talk —”

Dean stepped forward before the teenager could even finish his thought, simultaneously shoving the barrel off to the side and wrenching it out of Aiden’s hand. It came free easily, and Dean let the magazine fall to the ground and pulled the barrel back, clearing the gun. The bullet popped free and clattered to the ground within seconds of his threat, leaving the teen with his mouth hanging open. “I know.” Dean handed the empty gun back to him. “It is, isn’t it?”

Krissy scowled, but overwhelmed by the two, fully grown hunters, she relented. “So, let’s say this isn’t the vamp who killed my dad,” she began, even though her tone clearly showed she still believed the opposite. “She’s still a monster who deserves to die.”

She cast a dark glance down at the vampire sitting behind Alex, and the young angel shifted to hide her from view. “We can save her,” the angel insisted, and her fingers tightened into a fist. “She’s newly turned — hasn’t fed yet. We can still reverse this if we keep her from feeding and get her maker’s blood.”

“And why should we care about her?” Aiden challenged, and Alex looked over at Dean, giving him the option to answer first.

He took it. “Like I said, hunting isn’t always about killing.”
The teen wasn’t having it. “Oh please,” he retorted scornfully. “Preach to some other choir. We’re not buying it.”

Dean’s eyes flashed. “You want to kill an innocent girl?”

“I want the blood sucker who killed my dad to pay!” Krissy raised her gun, and Alex instinctively reacted, her own weapon falling into her awaiting fingertips. She widened her stance, ready for the mule-headed teenager in front of her to lash out. And Alex was fully prepared to retaliate.

A hand on her sternum had her stepping back, and Dean pushed his way in between the two warring women. “And we’re gonna find out who that is,” he promised Krissy. “But let’s not be so bloodthirsty that just anybody will do.”

Krissy looked away, and Alex let her shoulders fall as she stepped back to protect the young vampire. “But Victor says it’s her,” Josephine finally insisted, voice harsh in one last ditch attempt to defend her friend, and Dean turned.

“And I say it ain’t!” he snapped. “So we’re gonna pack her to go, and we’re gonna ask Victor ourselves. Okay?” He looked around at the three teenagers, but there was no longer any protests. “Okay?” he repeated.

“Fine.” Krissy answered for the three of them. She wasn’t pleased, but she lowered her gun, giving in to Dean’s reasonable request. “But if Victor says she’s the one…”

“We’ll see.” Dean looked over at Alex, who was still bristling from her stand off with Krissy Chambers. “Hey. Feathers.” He smacked her in the shoulder, and Alex blinked. “You’re in charge of the girl, okay?”

(Of course.” Alex knelt down in front of the vampire, and her voice and demeanor immediately softened in the face of the terrified girl. “Come on, sweetheart. We’re going to get you help.”)

Alex led the vampire out of the car, letting her lean upon her shoulder to keep herself upright. Dean joined her at her side, followed a few seconds later by the three teenagers. Alex had texted Sam on the ride back to let him know that they were returning with the girl, but he hadn’t responded; the young angel, however, had just shrugged it off. He probably had his nose buried somewhere in a book. The lights of the house were on, meaning that he and Victor were home. Her gaze flickered over to the other side of the street, and she frowned at what lay against the curb.

A blue, battered van.

Dean pushed his way through the door with a call of, “Hey, we’re home,” and Alex let the three teenagers go through first before she followed with the girl.

“What’s going on here?” Josephine’s stunned question was the signal that something was wrong, and the door slammed closed behind her as Alex stopped in surprise. Sam Winchester was tied to a chair, and Victor stood facing them, a gun in his hands. A man was leaning against the far wall, and fangs slipped into view as he snarled over at the teens.

Victor looked between Dean and Alex, and his face grew red in anger, “These three are not to be trusted,” he insisted, waving his gun towards Sam. “They’re trying to destroy us!”

Aiden stared in stunned silence. “Do … do you know that vamp, Victor?” he finally asked, finding his voice.
“Of course he does!” Sam snapped from where he sat duct taped to the armchair. “They’re working together!”

**Working together?** Alex lowered the new vamp onto the stairs, and she stepped forward to stand at Dean’s side, eyeing the two threats in the room as she took in their new situation. Part of her wanted to neutralize the threat immediately, but she held her ground; there were still pieces of the puzzle missing that only they could answer.

Aiden turned to his father-figure. “Is that true?”

Victor faltered. “It’s complicated.”

“No, actually, it’s not,” Dean said, and he stepped forward as he put all of the pieces together. “See, blue van here’s been turning fresh vamps and setting them up for you kids as easy kills.”

Josephine looked up at the hunter, confused by Dean’s explanation. “But why?”

Krissy, on the other hand, seemed to put the pieces together. “Because they didn’t kill our families, did they?” she realized, and Victor took a deep breath.

“No,” he admitted.

Josephine frowned. “Well, then, who did?”

“I did.” The vampire pushed himself off the other wall, dark eyes glittering from beneath the hood of his black sweatshirt, and teeth flashed gleefully. “And they all screamed … and begged for mercy, especially the little ones.”

A growl rumbled in her throat, and Alex lifted her chin. “Dean, may I?”

The nod was all the permission she needed, and then Alex moved forward. A push of her wings put her in front of the vampire, and her grace spiraled outwards and into the vampire. The hood was shoved backwards, but Alex didn’t even stop long enough to see his face before she was in front of Victor, yanking the gun away and shoving him to the ground. A step took her to Sam’s side, and she tore him free from his bonds.

“Why were you working with the vampire?” Krissy demanded.

“You have to understand.” Victor staggered to his feet, eyes flickering warily across Alex. “I saw a way to make the future better. But to get there, I had to do something hard. You — you needed motivation. I scouted each and every one of you. And I knew it was the only way to get you to hunt.”

“So you killed our families?!” Aiden stepped forward, and Victor turned.

“I know, the deaths are tragic,” he admitted, and Alex snorted in disgust at how he brushed off such an atrocious act. “But think of all the future lives that will now be saved because you are now together.”

“This is pathetic.” Alex rolled her shoulders back as she stared at Victor Rogers. “What are we going to do with him?”

“I’ll tell you.” Krissy drew her gun and stepped around the couch to stand in front of the man, gun trained on his head. “We want revenge for our families’ death, and he’s going to give it to us!”
Dean stepped forward. “We don’t kill people,” he reminded. “You don’t kill people.”

“He’s not a person. He’s a monster.” Krissy took another step towards Victor, and he backed up, unsure of whether Krissy would follow through with her threats. But then something in his eyes changed, and he slowly dropped to his knees, lining up his forehead with the teenager’s gun.

“Krissy,” Sam warned, “this ends bad, no matter what we do.”

“Exactly.” Krissy cocked her gun, and Alex looked over at Dean, hesitant to step forward and save the man behind such violent and atrocious crimes. “This is for my dad.” Krissy pulled the trigger, and the hammer sprung with a click. Victor flinched, gasping at the anticipation of death, but it didn’t come. “For Josephine’s family.” She pulled the trigger again, and once more Victor winced. “For Aiden. For me.” Two more empty shots followed her words, and with each blank round, Victor grew more and more distressed. His forehead pressed into the ground and his body shook, and Krissy dropped the gun’s bullets onto the floor, one by one.

For several seconds the room was filled with the sounds of Victor’s terrified snivels, and then Aiden asked, “So, we’re just gonna leave him?”

“Yeah.” Krissy turned to face her friend, voice sharp with authority. “All alone, with himself. No family, no friends. Ask me, that’s not much of anything.” She looked over at Sam and Dean. “Let’s save the girl.” Her eyes flickered across Alex, and the young angel gave a quick, deep nod, slightly proud of the girl’s decision.

She turned to the young vampire, slipping past Dean to help her to her feet, but Josephine’s shouted word had her spinning around. “Gun!”

The warning came too late, and a second later a gunshot resounded through the house. The revolver fell from Victor’s hands, and he crumpled to the ground, a self-inflicted hole blown through the side of his head. The teenagers flinched as blood and brain matter splattered the floor and wall, and Alex’s wings flittered instinctively at the echo of the gun. “Dammit.”

Dean put a hand on her shoulder, and she looked up into his freckled face. “Come on. Let’s take care of the girl.” He nudge her towards the vamp. “I got the ingredients out in the trunk, Sam will get the blood. You get her calmed down, okay?”

Alex looked over at the thin, dirty woman, and she nodded. “On it.” She knelt down in front of the vampire as Dean exited the house, and she reached out, unsurprised when the girl flinched away. “It’s okay,” she soothed. “I won’t hurt you. We’re going to make you feel better, alright?” She looked up at where Josephine stood frozen, staring down at the body of her father-figure. “Josie,” she called, snapping the teen out of her trance with an impatient flick of her wing. “Help me get this girl up into a chair. You too, Aiden,” she added; the kids needed to focus on something else to keep moving forward. “Let’s get her comfortable.”

“Okay.” Her commands were followed quickly and quietly, and Alex relinquished her gentle hold on the vampire’s wrist as the two teenagers guided the woman over to a chair. Krissy had disappeared from sight, and Alex’s grace located her in the kitchen.

“Hey.” She leaned up against the doorframe behind Krissy Chambers, her arms crossed but her muscles lax. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Krissy didn’t look back at her as she rummaged through the cupboards, looking for a bowl to hold the concoction they were about to put together. “What do you want?”
Alex didn’t immediately answer, taking a second to choose her words carefully. “You did the right thing back there,” she finally said. “I know it was hard, but you did good.”

“How was this good?” Krissy slammed the bowl down on the counter and turned to face Alex. “It didn’t matter what I did. Victor’s still dead. And so is my dad, and their families. Why do you even care?”

The young angel turned her head back towards where Victor’s body still lay. “When we first met,” she began, “I had just lost the man I considered a father. I understand what it is you’re feeling right now. Listen.” Alex rested her head against the wooden doorframe, grey eyes flickering over the teen. “I know we’ve never seen eye to eye; part of that’s my fault. But differences or not, if you’re ever in any trouble, pray to me. I’ll come. Okay? Tell Aiden and Josephine, too.”

Their conversation was cut short when Dean entered the kitchen, his arms full with the ingredients that they would need. “Here.” He dumped them onto the counter and began sorting them out. “Mix this up with the vamp blood —” He slid the cup of blood Sam had collected closer to the bowl “— and drink it down. Careful though; it’s a trip.”

Alex left Dean to show Krissy the ropes, and she joined Aiden and Josephine in front of the vampire. “How’s she doing?” she asked, sitting down on the arm of the couch.

“She’s good. She’s slowly calming down.” Josephine looked up from where she was knelt beside the young woman, and Alex nodded. Everything seemed to be under control.

“Alright.” Alex rose to her feet and turned to look back at Sam Winchester. “Looks like you guys have everything taken care of. I’ll be out by the car if you need me.” She crossed the room and let the front door swing closed behind her. “Castiel?” she asked, shoving her hands in her pocket as she skipped down the porch steps. “Everything okay? I’m just checking in.”

Alex. Yes, I’m okay. What’s wrong?

“Nothing’s wrong.” Alex turned her eyes up towards the blue, cloudless sky. “I just want to make sure that you’re okay. There hasn’t been any trouble yet?”

No. Nothing. I need to go. The longer we maintain this connection, the easier it will be for the angels to find us.

Alex kicked at a stone as Castiel fell silent, and she dropped her gaze to the ground. “Okay. Over and out, then.” She looked up as the front door opened, and Sam stepped into view. “Everything okay in there?”

“Yeah, uh, Dean’s just giving Krissy some final instructions.” Sam put his hands into his jacket pockets as Alex approached, and he glanced back towards the house. “I think they’ll be fine on their own.”

“I wish they’d stop hunting,” Alex muttered, but she shook her head. “Anyways, I told them to pray if they ever needed anything. Hopefully they’ll take advantage of that.” She looked up as the door opened and closed one more time, and Dean joined them at the bottom of the steps. “Hey.”

“This is good,” Sam told his brother as Dean led the way to the Impala.

Dean frowned at his brother’s hopeful words. “Is it?” he asked, skeptical of Sam’s optimism.

Sam looked down at Alex, and the angel shrugged, not willing to defend a position she couldn’t stand behind. The younger Winchester sighed. “Could have been a lot worse,” he explained.
Dean looked both ways as he moved across the street, and when he spoke, it was more of a dark thought than a complete sentence. “Will be if we don’t shut those Gates of Hell soon.”

“What do they have to do with any of that?” Sam’s eyebrows knitted together in confusion as he stopped beside the passenger side door, and Dean looked up from where he was digging the keys out of his pocket.

“They’re hunters now,” he reminded. “You don’t just walk away from that. There’s only one way out of that, and you and I both know it ain’t pretty.”

Sam shook his head. “Maybe they’ll be different,” he said, clinging onto the same hope that Victor had shared with them just a few hours before.

“Or maybe if we shut that hell hole once and for all,” Dean countered, “those three can have a real life.” He pulled open the car door and got in, and Alex followed suit.

She watched as Sam shook his head, and when he joined them, Alex heard him whisper one sentence under his breath. “May they won’t be the only ones.”
“Wake up!” The back of a hand smacked against Alex’s thigh, and the angel’s wings flapped in shock, propelling her off of the bed. Alex landed on the hard floor with a cry of surprise, and she leapt to her feet to find Dean standing at her bedside. “What the fuck?!” she snapped, shaking out her wings to hide her clear embarrassment. “Ever heard of knocking?” She cast a look over at the open bedroom door, and the angel frowned. “What do you want, Dean?”

Dean frowned back. “Kevin called. Said there was an emergency at the boathouse, and he needs us there ASAP. Sam and I are just about to leave, so come on.”

Alex stared at the hunter, mouth hanging open in shock. “I’m an angel,” she reminded. “I can fly. You should have let me fucking sleep and I would have caught up later! Dammit, Dean.”

Dean shook his head. “Get dressed and go see what wrong with Kevin. He sounded desperate, okay? Something might be seriously wrong. We’ll meet you there.”

“Fine.” Alex watched Dean leave, and she raised her voice after him. “Next time, send Sam to wake me up! He’s better at it,” she added with a mutter. She listened to the sound of the heavy bunker door slamming shut before she kicked a shoe out of the way and stripped off her t-shirt. “Stupid Winchesters,” she muttered as she dug through her dresser for new clothes. Jeans, a black shirt, and a thick red flannel sufficed, and once she had secured her necklace around her neck and shoved her phone into her back pocket, she exited the room and followed the hallway up towards the door.

Once outside, the young angel spread her wings and took off into the sky. She flew across the Kansas border and spiraled down into Garth’s boathouse. The room holding the prophet was warded against angels — recently, by the feel of it — so she landed outside and rapped on the metal door. “Kevin?” she called when no one immediately answered.

The door unlocked, and Kevin Tran let her in. “What do you want?” he asked guardedly, and Alex stepped inside, eyes going momentarily wide at the sight of the large, iron-cast skillet in his hand. “Whoa. What’s that for?” Alex sidestepped, confused by the heavy weapon. “Is everything okay, Kevin? You seem a little … tense.”

“It’s him.” Kevin closed and locked the door behind him. “Where’s Sam and Dean? They need to be here.”

“Whoa. What’s that for?” Alex sidestepped, confused by the heavy weapon. “Is everything okay, Kevin? You seem a little … tense.”

“It’s him.” Kevin closed and locked the door behind him. “Where’s Sam and Dean? They need to be here.”

“They’ll be here.” Alex looked around the messy room, frowning at the clutter of paper and trash. “Kev … are you feeling okay? Who’s ‘him’?”

“Crowley. Crowley’s in my head.” Kevin paced the room, his brown eyes large with terror. “If he’s in my head, then he knows. He knows about the tablet, a-about the trials, about everything!”

“Whoa whoa whoa.” Alex reached out to calm him down. “Crowley — he’s not in your head, Kevin. I can promise you that. Any news on the tablet?”
“Yeah.” Kevin let the frying pan fall onto the table, and Alex frowned sympathetically at his dark circles and hollow, tired eyes. “I translated the second trial. An innocent soul has to be rescued from hell and delivered unto heaven.”

“What?”

“‘Unto,’” Kevin repeated. “It’s — it’s how God speaks.”

“What? That — that’s not what I meant. I — I know what ‘unto’ means.” Alex shook her head, and her wings flicked curiously at the prophet’s words. “So we have — Sam — has to … actually go to … to hell? How do you get into hell without dying?” she asked, even though she didn’t reasonably expect the prophet to have the answer. “Not to mention actually getting a soul out — sorry.” Alex cut off her stuttered ramblings with a firm shake of her head. “Kevin, listen to me. Crowley’s not in your head. What you need is some sleep. Let me help.”

“I’m fine.” Kevin waved off her offer. “I have to keep working.”

“No, you have to get some rest.” Alex reached out and put a hand on the prophet’s shoulder. “I wasn’t asking, Kev. Let’s get you to bed. Garth will come check up on you.” She nudged him towards the small, dark bedroom. The second he sat down on the bed, she placed her hand on his forehead and let her grace flow into him.

The prophet was asleep before his head hit the mattress, and Alex yanked the sheets up over him before she stepped out of the bedroom and pulled out her phone. “Sam?” she asked when the younger Winchester answered her call. “Hey. Kevin’s fine.” She crossed the room and pulled the large, metal door closed behind her. “Where are you guys?”

“Uh, just outside the city. What was wrong?”

“He was tired.” Alex pushed her grace into the door and locked it, wincing at the contact with the iron. “He thought Crowley was in his head, so I helped him sleep. I’ll text Garth and have him come check up on the kid.” She walked up the stairs and onto the deck of the boathouse, and then her wings carried her up through the air.

She landed in the backseat of the Impala and hung up just as Sam asked, “Is he okay?”

“He’s fine,” Alex promised, ignoring how the Winchesters jumped, and she hung up the phone. “Like I said, he was just tired. He did, however, have something very interesting to say. He cracked the second trial.”

“What?” Both Winchesters looked back at her, and Alex tapped Dean on the shoulder.

“Eyes on the road,” she reminded before she nodded. “Yeah. We have to rescue an innocent soul from hell and ‘deliver it unto heaven.’ I don’t know what that means, but that’s what we have to do.”

“We’re gonna need an expert,” Dean decided, and Sam nodded out his agreement. “Okay. There’s that old warehouse just south of the bunker, remember? Alex, you head over there and get things set up. Me and Sam are going to get ourselves a demon.”

Alex frowned at the hunter’s ambition, but she reluctantly nodded. “Alright. Be careful, and call if things go south.” Her wings unfolded, and she took off into the sky.

Her preparations didn’t take long, and Dean and Sam arrived within the hour with the demon bound
in the trunk. She watched as they pulled him out and shoved him into the building, her wings resting calmly against her back. He was shoved beneath the large, red devil’s trap she had laid onto the ceiling, and he was bound to the rickety wooden chair. “Crossroads?” she guessed.

The demon’s eyes bled red as he looked over at her, and he growled. “Angel. Should have known you were still working with the Winchesters.” He hissed loudly as holy water hit him on the side of the face, and his head snapped over to Dean. “I ain’t got nothing,” he insisted darkly.

Dean only cocked an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Bite me.” The demon held the hunter’s gaze, unblinking and unafraid, but the Winchester wasn’t bothered by his fearless facade.

“Well, then, how about another owie?” He dumped holy water over the demon’s bald scalp, and the flesh sizzled under the onslaught. The demon groaned in pain, but he refused to give in. Alex tipped her head, but she remained in the background; the Winchesters had this under control.

“You know,” Sam began, “wouldn’t it be a lot easier just to tell us how to enter hell, uh, uninvited?”

“It’s … a secret,” the red-eyed soul growled out, but his voice was strained as he tried to hide the searing pain.

“We promise we won’t tell anyone.” Dean raised the flask, ready and willing to continue the torture, and the demon flinched in anticipation.

“No!” he insisted, and Alex leaned forward curiously. “Wait. I can’t. I-It’s forbidden, man. They’re gonna kill me.” He hissed through clenched teeth as holy water rolled down his face, and his eyes screwed up in pain. “Please …” he rasped out. “Alright, look … for a price, y’all can be smuggled across hell’s border.”

“By who?”

“Rogue reapers.” The demon cast Alex a low glare at the angel’s question. “They got secret ways in and out. Not just hell — the veil, heaven. All of it.”

Sam looked back at Alex, and the angel shrugged, moving forward to stand between the two brothers. “Rogue reapers smuggling people?” he asked.

The demon nodded. “People, souls …”

Sam shifted forward, his eyes darkening as he sought clarification. “So, what? They’re like hell coyotes?”

Once again the demon nodded. “Now kill me,” he pleaded, and his eyes turned from Sam, to Dean, and finally onto Alex. “Better death than Crowley.”

Dean hummed out his agreement. “Hmm. Good point.” He stepped forward to put himself in front of the demon, and he shifted the flask to his other hand. “But first you’re gonna tell us … everything.”

The demon’s dark eyes flashed with anger. “What else do you want?” he demanded. “I told you what you wanted to know.”

“We want to know where to find one of those reapers.” Alex’s wings flicked at the demon’s insolence, and she shifted closer to Sam. “We need names and addresses, and we need them now. And then, if you’re lucky, then we’ll kill you.”
Osceola, TN

Alex slammed the car door behind her, wings fluttering as rain soaked through her hair and jacket. They had driven for almost ten hours straight to reach Osceola, and the sun had set; the storm had made the sky even darker, and a cold, stinging wind whipped through the air. Alex curled her wings up and over her head, trying to keep the wind and rain away. She followed the Winchesters down the street, and she felt a flash of guilt to see how Dean had turned his collar up against the weather.

“Ajay.” Dean stopped in front of a parked taxi where a man was leaning up against it, reading a half-soaked newspaper. “Need to talk to you for a sec.”

The driver looked up and removed his bluetooth, and Alex pushed herself between the two Winchesters, wings extending upwards to shelter both brothers from the rain. The man’s eyes flickered over them, following their movement, reminding the angel of who he really was: a reaper. “You know my name.”

Sam nodded. “And what you do. We want to do business.” He shoved his hands in his pocket, but neither brother seemed to notice that the onslaught of rain and wind had begun to cease above them.

The reaper looked between Sam and Dean. “But you are mortal,” he insisted, the hint of an accent creeping into his question. “Flesh and blood.”

“But if we wanted to cross the border into hell …” Sam began, and Dean finished with an added, “Visitor’s pass.”

Ajay frowned, not thoroughly able to understand the three’s motivation. “No one wants to get into hell,” he scoffed, and Alex’s wings twitched at the tone of his voice, sending some rain back down onto the Winchesters.

Sam’s hand immediately went up to brush off the water, and he glanced upwards at the open sky before he asked, “But could a coyote like you do it?”

“It’s possible.” Ajay folded his newspaper and straightened up. “But I have special skills. I have overheard. It will be pricy.”

Dean frowned. “How pricy?”

“You two are resourceful.” The reaper’s eyes sparkled with secrecy. “One day, you will owe me a favor.”

Sam looked over at his brother for only a second before he turned back, and his voice grew stronger as he eyed the reaper carefully. “You say that like you know us.”

The reaper snorted, amused by Sam’s innocence. “Of course,” he retorted. “You’re the Winchesters. And friends,” he added with a glance at the angel.

“Sorry. Have we met?” Dean crossed his arms, and his words drew Ajay’s attention back onto him.

“I am the reaper who took Bobby Singer to hell.” Ajay ignored how Alex’s wings flared up in surprise, and both Winchesters’ eyes widened in shock.

“No no no.” Alex stepped forward, feathers ruffling out angrily. “Bobby’s in hell? Why?” She surged forward and pinned the reaper up against the taxi, eyes flashing with fury. “He was a good
person, and good people go upstairs, understand?"

“Usually, mostly.” Ajay steadily held Alex’s gaze. “Depends on who you know, what palms get greased. If you’re on the King of Hell’s no-fly list, no way you cruise the friendly skies.” His hands came up to gently rest on the front of Alex’s shoulders, pressing gingerly in a passive suggestion that she let him go.

Alex, however, only stepped back when Dean put a hand on her shoulder. “Crowley.” The hunter’s voice was dark as he spat out the demon’s name. “Okay, let’s do this. How much for three tickets down and four back?”

“Dean.”

“What?” Dean turned to face his brother, eyes hardening at the resistance.

“Come here.” Sam stepped away, and Dean and Alex followed, the latter casting a warning glance over her shoulder to make sure the reaper was staying put. “What the hell are you thinking?” Sam hissed, stopping a few feet away.

Dean lowered his voice to match his brother’s tone. “You heard the guy — Bobby’s in hell. We’re gonna spring him.”

“We’ve gone over this, Dean.” Sam shook his head, not willing to put up with Dean’s stubbornness. “I have to do the trials solo.”

“This is Bobby we’re talking about, Sam. Now let’s face it — you haven’t exactly been up to full speed lately, okay? We got one shot at this. We can’t miss.” Dean looked down at Alex for support, and she slowly nodded.

“Dean’s right,” she admitted. “You can’t go in alone. And you can’t come with either,” she added to Dean, ignoring how the Winchester’s eyes narrowed. “Sam and I will go. That way we can make sure this gets done, Sam will have backup, and Dean isn’t tempted to take over the trials.”

Dean opened his mouth to protest, but Sam hurriedly agreed. “Fine. I’ll take Alex with. And I’ll have this, too.” He pulled back his jacket to reveal the handle of the demon knife. “We won’t miss. We’ll bring him back.” He walked back to the reaper. “We’re in. Just me and Alex.”

Ajay nodded. “Follow me.”

“Wait wait wait.” Dean hurried to his brother’s side. “How does this … work?”

“Not to fret,” the reaper promised. “They’ll be back in exactly twenty four hours’ time. Return for him then.” He motioned Sam and Alex after him as he led the way down the alley, and Alex hesitated beside Dean.

“I’ll take care of them,” she promised quietly as Dean looked down at his watch. “I’ll do whatever it takes to bring the both of them back.”

She took off after Sam and the reaper at a brisk pace, and found them standing in front of a brick wall covered in graffiti. A door had been painted onto it, seemingly just a part of the artwork, but the way the reaper faced it had Alex suspecting it was not. “Take my hand,” he instructed to the two.

“And it gets creepier,” the Winchester half-joked, but he did as he was asked. Alex circled around to the reapers other side and did the same, fingers closing around the man’s icy hand. It began to thrum as the reaper drew up his power to open the gateway, and the painted door trembled. The graffiti
bled and swirled across the bricks as it sunk into the door, and a white, blinding light bled out from behind it. It stretched outwards, encompassing the three until it was all that she could see, and Alex looked over at Sam to see that the hunter’s eyes were squeezed tight.

Suddenly the light sucked them in, drawing them up like liquid in a straw in a feeling that lasted barely a second. And then the light faded.

They were in a forest, faded and dark, and the air hummed with a power unlike anything Alex had felt. It scratched at her grace like pins and needles, and the angel frowned at the growing discomfort. “So, this is hell?” Sam asked, brow furrowed as he looked around. Alex drew in a deep breath through her nose; no sulphur, no fire, no human souls.

Ajay’s corrections put her suspicions to rest. “Not at all. This is Purgatory.”

Purgatory. “Great.” Alex looked around, and she shook her wings out, unnerved at their current situation. “You said we were going to hell. Why did you take us here?” She turned on the reaper, and he held up his hands innocently.

“Whoa whoa whoa, angel, detach. This is hell-adjacent. Been down this highway many times before. Follow the stream to where three trees meet as one. Where they meet, there are rocks. Between the rocks is the portal.”

“A portal?” Sam asked.

“A back door to hell,” Ajay reiterated. “Trust me. It’ll work.”

“Whoa. Wait.” Alex stepped forward, and her eyes flickered over to where the stream gurgled down the hill. “Why are you telling us this? You’re coming with us, right?” Her voice carried an obvious threat, but the reaper didn’t seem to care. “Don’t be ridiculous,” he retorted. “Smuggling a moral across the border is risky enough. But gate crashing a Winchester and an angel into hell seriously blows. No. I’ll be back in twenty four hours, precisely. Be here.” He watched as Sam pulled out the demon knife, and his eyebrows quirked. “It’s a good thing you brought that. It is not an easy place.”

The reaper disappeared in a flash of light, and Alex’s grace pushed her weapon down into her hands. “Awesome.” She looked around the forest, eyes narrowed as she searched for any sign of movement. “Alright, we need to get moving. Something tells me an angel in this place is a fucking beacon of light.”

She stepped back to let Sam take the lead, and she took up the rear, eyes scanning the landscape. She kept her grace tightly coiled within her body, the discomfort too much for it to spread outwards.

She watched as the Winchester shifted the knife to his other hand, and she couldn’t help the snort of amusement that came from her nose. “Fat lot of good that’s going to do you around here, “she joked, and she looked around. “How far away do you think this thing is?”

“I don’t know —” Alex didn’t hear the rest of Sam’s sentence before something large and solid plowed into her. The angel fell to the ground with a cry of surprise, and her hands sunk into the creature’s shirt as she struggled to shove it away. There was a weapon in its hand — a big, heavy weapon, and Alex threw her grace out, knocking it away. She scrambled to her feet, eyes narrowed as the creature died in a flash of light.

It fell away to reveal Sam, her angel blade in his hands. “You dropped this.”
“Thanks, Winchester.” Alex took her weapon back before she turned her attention down to the dead creature. “Ghoul?” she guessed, nudging at the weapon in its hands. It looked like to be made out of obsidian, carved and chipped away into a dark, ragged blade. “It’s ugly as hell.”

“No idea.” Sam stooped down and picked up the weapon. He twirled it in his hands, and Alex turned back to their surroundings, eyes flickering over the dead, twisted trees and the grey, overcast sky. She shivered at the still, damp air, and almost jumped out of her skin when Sam stepped up to her side. “Come on. We should keep moving.”

Alex kept close to Sam’s side as they made their way down the stream. Ajay’s words have given her the impression that the portal would be just down the stream, but after almost an hour of hiking, the angel’s patience was growing thin. “Are we there yet?” she muttered under her breath, wings pressed tightly against her back. “Seriously. This stream just keeps going on forever.”

She was hoping Sam hadn’t heard, but from the way he stopped, it sounded like he did. Alex braced herself, ready to be rebuked for her childish whining, but he only pointed to their left. “There. I think that’s it.” He lead the way over the rise to where three trees seemed to grow out of one, thick trunk. He hurried down a small slope, and Alex followed, keeping watch over their surroundings as he ran his hands across the large, grey rocks. His fingers hooked underneath the largest one, and he pulled; the rock easily gave way, and air spiraled into the opening like a vacuum. “It’s a rabbit hole.” He looked back at Alex, disbelief written across his face. “This is nuts.”

“Let’s go.” Alex let Sam step in first, and then she followed, grimacing at how the wind seemed to whip her feathers every which way. Darkness surrounded her, thick and heavy, and in the next second she was stumbling into a dark, grimy corridor. The air burned with sulphur, and the angel coughed as it rushed into her lungs. “Yuck.”

Sam was there to steady her, and Alex shook out her wings as her lungs adjusted. “You okay?” he asked, his voice lowered into a hiss.

“I’m fine.” Alex curled her grace deeply inside of her, fully aware of where they were. “Let’s find Bobby and get out.” Her wings flittered uncomfortably as a scream echoed off of the stone walls, and when it faded, Alex realized that the air was filled with the sounds of distressed souls. Moans, cries, and whimpers thickened the space around them, sending a chill down her spine.

Sam tapped her on the shoulder, and he hurried off down the corridor, leaving Alex to sprint after him. They slowed down as they rounded the corner, and Alex adjusted her grip on her weapon at what lay ahead. The hallway was lined with barred doors, like a picture out of a hellish jail, and hands and moans stretched out into the hallway. Alex stuck close to Sam’s side, eyes hardly daring to peer into the cells even though her morbid curiosity willed her to. “Any idea where Bobby would be?” Sam asked, and Alex curled her toes in her boots as a bloodied arm nearly caught ahold of her sleeve.

“I know how Lucifer designed it …” she began slowly, keeping her voice low, “but I also know Crowley changed it a lot. It used to be straight up Dante, nine layers and all. I don’t know how it is now.”

“Then we’ll just have to keep looking.” Sam turned down another hallway, and Alex jumped as she came face to face with a woman chained to the wall. Her scalp had been peeled away, revealing flesh and skull, and her mouth hung open, too weak and broken to even make a sound. Alex turned away.
“I’m innocent.” Up ahead was another woman, chained within a burning inlet. Flames licked at her cracked and charred skin, and she whimpered. “Help me.”

“Eddy?” Hands stretched out from the adjacent cell, shaking in anguish. “Eddy?” the man asked again as Sam and Alex passed, and his voice grew. “Eddy? Eddy?”

Alex kept close to Sam, and despite it all, she found herself reaching out to take Sam’s free hand. The souls kept reaching forward, grasping and begging for salvation as they wound through the passages. “You came.” A girl in white stood in front of the bars, and blue eyes watched Alex and Sam wistfully. “I knew you would. I’ve been praying for it forever.” Alex stepped forward, curious at the woman’s words, and she repeated herself. “You came. I knew you would. I’ve been praying for it forever.”

“Alex.” Sam pulled on her hand. “We need to keep moving. I’m sorry,” he apologized to the tortured soul. “We’re not who you think you are.”

The girl didn’t seem to hear. “You came. I knew you would. I’ve been praying for it. Forever.” Her mantra continued as Sam led Alex away, and it faded into the distance.

Suddenly Sam stopped, and Alex frowned, wings stretching out cautiously as the Winchester peered into a dark cell near the end of the corridor. A figure stood in there, its back to them and it’s head hung low. The wall was covered in scratches, clearly counting the passing days. Alex swallowed thickly as Sam pushed open the rusty iron door. It squeaked in protest, and the figure stiffened. The head lifted, and Alex hesitated at the sight of the torn and dirty baseball cap. “Bobby?” Sam stepped closer, and the figure turned around. A fist came out of nowhere, and Sam stumbled back.

Bobby Singer’s eyes flashed. “Get the hell out of here, you black-eyed son of a bitch,” he growled at the Winchester, and Alex rushed forward to steady Sam.

“Bobby, stop,” she pleaded. “It’s us.” Her wings spread out, feathers brushing the musty ground.

The old hunter’s mouth opened to snap, but he faltered, and Alex’s wings twitched under his gaze. “No.” His jaw shook, and Bobby Singer stepped back. “No. You can’t be …” Eyes turned up onto Alex’s face, and the angel stepped forward. “It’s you.”

“Yeah, it’s me.” Alex felt a tremble run through her body, and the young angel threw herself into the hunter’s arms. Her hands clung to his jacket as she pushed her face into shoulder, eyes squeezed closed. “You’re okay.” She pulled him tighter, wrapping her wings around the hunter. He felt so … solid. He was real.

“Careful, Feathers. You’re smothering me.” Fingers pushed her wings aside, and Alex pulled back in surprise.

“You — you can still see them?” She drew her wings back to her side, grey eyes squinting in confusion.

“Sure. Probably thanks to being a part of the undead.” Bobby turned to Sam, and the Winchester stepped forward into a hug. “Sorry I clocked you,” he apologized as he stepped away, “but you’re the two hundredth Sam I’ve see today. That’s how they screw with me. Just endless round of you three all wearing the same black eyes. Wait a minute.” Something suddenly seemed to click, and his eyes narrowed as he looked between the two of them. “What the hell are you doing here? Please don’t tell me it’s what I think it is.”

“No no no, Bobby, I’m good,” Sam promised. “I … we’re here to get you. You don’t belong here,
Bobby.” He handed the demon knife over to the old hunter. “We’re getting you out.”

Alex couldn’t help herself. She wrapped her arms back around Bobby Singer. “I missed you so much,” she whispered into his jacket. “I’m sorry, I should have tried harder —”

“It ain’t your fault.” Hands rubbed gentle circles into her back before they slowly pulled away. “But if you don’t mind, think this could wait, till, you know?”

“Yeah — yeah, sure. Right.” Alex stepped back, and she shook out her dark wings. “We need to get out of here before the demons find out.” She back out of the dingy cell and looked up and down the sulphureous corridor.

Sam pushed past her, taking the lead, and Alex motioned that Bobby should walk in between them. “So what tipped you off that I was down under?” he asked in passing, and Alex moved to walk at his side.

“Reaper,” she whispered, wings flicking unhappily as a tortured, deafening scream echoed off the walls. “Same one that reaped you, apparently.”

Footsteps approached, and Alex spun around, wings flaring out in alarm. She heard Sam’s surprised, “Dean?” as Dean Winchester stepped around the corner.

Eyes flashed black as the Winchester smirked down at Alex, and the angel saw the demon’s true, twisted face flicker beneath its mask. “I thought we felt an angel,” he sneered. “You really think you’re going to get out alive?”

He stepped forward, and Alex shifted back. “Sam,” she warned, “take Bobby and go. I’ll catch up later.” She twirled her angel blade in her hands as footsteps retreated, and the demon scoffed. “You can’t escape. You’re in hell now, angel. We’ll find you wherever you go—” The demon cut off when Alex surged forward, and the angel closed her eyes as Dean — the demon — died.

“Sorry about that.” Alex let the demon fall to the ground and bolted after Sam and Bobby. “Hey,” she hissed, sliding to a stop in front of them. “You guys need to run. The demons — they can track me easily. Get back through the portal and wait for the reaper, and if he comes, you go.”

“Alex —”

“There’s more than one way out of hell,” Alex reminded impatiently. “I’ll be fine, but you need to get Bobby out and finish the trial. I’ll catch up with you when I can. Here.” She held out her angel blade. “You should take this. We don’t know if that thing will work,” she reminded, motioning to the strange weapon in his hand. “I don’t need it.”

As soon as Sam’s fingers closed around the angelic handle, she took off down the corridor. Her wings unfolded and she glided forward. Demons stood ahead, guarding a heavy metal door, and Alex swooped through them, grace sparking out to grab their attention. Anything to draw them away from the hunters. Cries of surprise and anger followed her through hell as she spiraled through the hallways.

Her feet hit the ground as she barreled down the halls, wings fluttering behind her. She could hear the pounding of footsteps as demons followed. One appeared in front of her, eyes flashing black, and Alex swerved down another hall.

Dead end.
The angel spun around to face the thick swarm of demons, and her wings stretched out. “Want me?” she taunted, and her grace snapped out through the air, loud as a whip. “Come and get me.”

She took off once again into the air, and a black, swirling cloud rose up after her. The angel led them down through hell, deeper and deeper away from her friends. *Lucifer?* she prayed as she flew down even further. *Are you here? Can you hear me?*

She probed at his grace within her, hoping that her proximity to the archangel would strengthen the connection.

The ground ahead of her suddenly disappeared, dropping off into a black abyss, and Alex landed on the large, flat cliff, eyes narrowed as she stared out into the darkness. There was no bottom, no end, as far as the eye can see, and Alex turned to face the large congregation of demons. She stretched her wings out as they approached, and then the crowd parted. A figure strolled forward, and Alex balled her fists as she raised her head. “Crowley.”

The King of Hell clicked his tongue disparagingly. “You’ve been a bad, bad girl, little mouse. It was Ajay who let you down here, right? Unfortunate.” The wall of demons closed behind him, trapping her against the abyss. “He’s already paid for his … trespasses. But you …”

Alex scoffed. “What are you going to do?” she challenged. “Kill me? Please.” However, she couldn’t help her wings from lowering at Crowley’s words. Did he mean Ajay was dead? How would Sam and Bobby get out of Purgatory?

Crowley stepped forward, and Alex shifted back as an angel blade appeared in his hands. “Kill you?” he repeated. “No. No, not today. No, you, my dear, are collateral. I know you and Sam were here, which means there was something you wanted. Something I would rather keep as my own. What is it?”

“There’s a soul missing from its cell, sir.” A sharply-dressed demon stepped forward, head dipping in respect as he addressed his king. “A Mr. Robert Singer.”

“Ah.” Crowley waved his subject back, and Alex let her shoulders rise and fall in a shrug. “So that’s it. Bobby Singer belongs to me.” He pointed angel blade at her heart, and Alex pulled her wings in tightly. Perhaps giving Sam her weapon had been a bit overconfident.

“He doesn’t belong in hell.” The angel raised her head in defiance, and her grace reached down for Lucifer’s. “Did you really think we wouldn’t find out and come for him? Bobby Singer’s home is in heaven.”

“He belongs where I say he belongs. And you’re going to get him back for me.” The king turned to look back at the demons on his left. “You lot, go find the intruders. Don’t even think about coming back until you have them. You.” He pointed to three demons that stood in front. “Lock down the gates. No one gets in or out without my say so.”

Alex’s muscles relaxed ever so slightly. So he didn’t know that they had come in through Purgatory. Sam and Bobby were safe. “You’re never going to get Bobby back.”

“We’ll see about that.” Crowley turned back to her. “You’ve just become a very valuable bargaining piece. So if the Winchesters want you back, they’ll have to play by my rules.”

“I don’t think so.” Alex drew Lucifer’s grace to the surface, letting it spill through her limbs and wings. Her eyes glowed a violent orange, and she felt the grace expand more than it ever had before. It pushed against hers, and the angel gasped at the searing, tearing pain that shot through her chest.
The ground disappeared from her feet as she collapsed, the breath crushed out of her lungs as the archangel’s grace overwhelmed her small body. Alex squeezed her eyes shut, her attention completely focused on containing the archangel’s overpowering energy.

Footsteps clacked on the stone ground as Crowley approached, and the demon knelt down in front of her. “Hmmm. Maybe you should try plan B.” The sharp, metal tip of the angel blade pressed up beneath her chin, forcing Alex to raise her head. “What makes you think you can just waltz into hell, kill my men, and steal what is rightfully mine?”

“I’ll do what I want.” Alex hissed as the tip flicked up, cutting across her cheek, and she let out a growl as Crowley rose to his feet. She drew in Lucifer’s grace again, this time slowly, carefully, letting it just trickle through her veins.

“Get up.” The demon nudged at her with his foot. “We’re going.”

“Suck my dick,” Alex retorted, and she pulled her wings in close. “I’m not going with you, Crowley. I’m out of here.”

“Not so fast.” The demon reached into his jacket pocket, and Alex scoffed when he pulled out a old western revolver.

Her scoff turned into a scream of pain as the gun discharged, and the bullet tore through her shin. Alex curled forward, fingernails digging into the sulphureous rock. “Son of a bitch!” she screeched as she pressed her forehead into the ground.

She pressed her wings tightly into her back as Crowley once again crouched down in front of her, and she looked up into his dark eyes. “Like it?” He studied the gun in his hands. “A little something I made myself. Melted down one of your weapons and cast it into bullets. Consider yourself my test subject.”

The gun cocked again, and Alex winced as the cold metal pressed into her forehead. With a pained grunt, she lifted up her hand and batted the muzzle away. “Fuck off,” she gasped out, dropping her hand back to the ground. “You’re not going to shoot me, you ass, so get that thing out of my face.”

The slap came out of nowhere, and Alex grit her teeth in both pain and anger. “Don’t forget where you are, kitten.” The demon’s words were sharp and scathing, and a growl rumbled low within Alex’s chest. Crowley ignored it, and, with his admonition over, he rose back to his feet. “We’re going.”

Alex sniffed. “If you wanted me to follow, you shouldn’t have shot me in the damn leg.” She shifted into a more comfortable position, letting her grace circle around the painful wound. A hand went out to apply pressure, stemming the blood, and she glared up at the demon. “You want me to come with? Fine. I give. But you better damn well carry me there.”

Crowley snapped his fingers, and two demons stepped forward. “Bring her to the city,” he instructed. “Don’t let her leave your sight.”

“Hey! Gentle!” Alex shoved away the demon that reached down for her. She struggled to her feet, balancing precariously on her right foot. “Alright. Come here.” She held out her arms so the demons could slip their shoulders beneath them. “Let’s go.”

The demonic transport was crude to say the least, and Alex hopped away from her curriers the moment they landed. “Well, thanks for the ride.” She looked around the room and immediately limped towards the the large throne. She felt both demons behind her exchange worried looks as she
sat down and threw her injured leg up over the arm of the chair. “You mind?”

One demon stepped forward. “Get off of there,” he snapped. “The throne is reserved for the King only.”

“Hm.” Alex reclined against the warm stone, lips twisted downwards in a frown. Two demons? Now that she could handle. “I know the King — the real King. Lucifer.” She beckoned the recalcitrant demon forward. “I think he’d rather have me sitting here than that glorified crossroads —”

The demon’s eyes flashed black as he stepped forward, and Alex reached out, letting the archangel’s grace that she had meticulously stored up flood outwards and into the being. The vessel disintegrated beneath her touch, and Lucifer’s grace dissipated into the air, spiraling back towards the distant Cage.

Her leg ached painfully, and her grace felt weak now that that archangel’s had left, leaving behind only the thin strand that connected his grace to hers. Thankfully, the second demon didn’t challenge her, and retreated to stand beside one of the large stone pillars. Alex settled deeper into her seat and awaited the arrival of the King.

It took Crowley almost an hour to return, but return he did. His face darkened when he saw Alex reclined casually on his throne. “What are you doing?”

Alex lifted her head, surprised by his presence. “My King has finally decided to grace us with his presence,” she quipped dryly. The angel tried to move, but grunted at the stiffness in her leg. “What does it look like I’m doing? The real question is, where the hell were you?”

“Sam and Mr. Singer are no longer in hell.” The displeasure upon the demon’s face was more than evident, and Alex grinned at his frustrations. “Get off of there.”

Crowley stalked forward, but Alex refused to move. “You were gone over an hour,” she reminded. “And you shot me in the leg, Crowley. What were you expecting me to do? Stand?”

The demon’s face flustered as his anger grew, and he took two deep breaths to calm himself down. “If you think I’m above shooting your other leg, you’re wrong,” he warned, and Alex reluctantly swung her leg off of the throne so she could sit up straight. “You.” Crowley turned to the demon at her side. “Where’s the other one?”

“He — He’s dead, sir.” The demon’s gaze flittered, unsure where to rest his eyes, and Alex gave a small shrug. “Disintegrated.”

Crowley turned back to Alex. “I see being so close to Lucifer’s has really given your ego a boost,” he drawled. Alex shrugged again, and the demon strolled forward. “We’re going.”

“Going where?” The young angel’s question was innocent enough, and she leaned over to inspect her wounded leg. The flesh was red, and there was very little bleeding, but the angel still winced as her fingers brushed around the open wound. “And ow. You’re an ass.”

Crowley ignored her last comment. “Sam Winchester has returned to Earth. With Bobby Singer.” The King stopped in front of her, eyes glinting. “Why did you choose now to retrieve Singer?”

Alex’s response was breezy, and she firmly held his gaze. “We just found out.”
“Something is going on.” Crowley firmly cut her off. “My hellhound has been killed, and you and Winchester jumbo size broke into the mothership. And that prophet of yours is madly translating away. I did the math!” His voice grew dark. “Apparently his half has all the juicy stuff, where mine has the acknowledgements and ‘about the author.’”

“Hm. Well, if you want to find out for sure, I can take the tablet up to Kevin right now.” Alex leaned forward, face mere inches from the demon’s. “Maybe we did kill your hellhound. Maybe we didn’t. It could all be tablet-related, sure. Or maybe this is all happening just to throw you off the real trail.” Alex lifted her eyebrows as she leaned back in the throne. “Maybe I just took a knife to your puppy because it was too ugly for its own good.”

“I’m starting to rethink my decision of keeping you alive and well,” Crowley warned. “One more wrong word out of your mouth, and I’ll keep you down here for myself.”

Alex hesitated, wings flicking as she considered his proposition. Her hesitation was taken for compliance, and Crowley nodded. “Now. Rumor on the grapevine says Castiel’s still AWOL with that angel tablet. You seem to be the only person who would know where he’s hiding out.”

The young angel frowned. “What makes you think that I’ll tell you?” she retorted sharply, and her eyes narrowed.

“What did I say about watching your tongue?” the demon quipped. Alex didn’t respond, and Crowley “Let’s go.” His hand closed around her wrist, and then the world spun away from her. Alex grunted as the throne disappeared, and she fell onto the damp, cold grass. “Hello, boys.”

“Ow!” Alex kicked at Crowley’s shins with her good leg. “Warning next time, you ass.” She turned to see both Winchesters standing in the middle of the woods, and above their head swirled the bright life of a soul ensnared in demonic black.

“Let him go, Crowley.” Dean stepped forward, green eyes flashing. “He doesn’t belong in hell.”

“He does if I say he does,” the demon retorted sharply. “He’s inflicted untold damage on my kind. From where I sit, actually, hell’ll too good for him. Really?” He flicked a finger towards the brothers when they charged towards him, and the Winchesters flew back into two large trees. Crowley looked up at the soul, and then down at Alex. “Change of plans. I might just keep you both.”

Alex flared out her wings, and she struggled to stand, but a backhand from Crowley sent her toppling back to the ground.

Bobby’s soul was dragged down towards the ground, pulled along by the demonic smoke, but suddenly it fought back, white streaks of grace pulsing through and against the hellish grip. “What?” Crowley’s eyes flashed in confusion, and he turned around. “Oh, come on!”

Alex lifted herself up to see white and grey wings stretched out assertively through the dark night air. “Let me see if I’ve interpreted the situation correctly.” Naomi strolled forward, and Alex forced herself up into a sitting position. “The Winchesters have freed an innocent from hell, to which you are wrongfully trying to return it.”

“Siding with them, Naomi?” Crowley’s face twisted in displeasure. “You don’t know these three. Before they’re done, we’ll both be locked away.”

The angel’s blue gaze fell onto Alex, and the young angel’s wings flared up angrily at the sight of Naomi. “I’m just hoping they lock you away, dear.” Naomi turned back to Crowley. “The rest I’ll figure out.”
“Bureaucrat.” Crowley spit out the insult. “You’re fighting outside your weight class.”

“Don’t call me a bureaucrat.” Naomi’s eyes flashed angrily in the darkness, and she extended a hand towards the demon, vessel glowing with angelic grace. Crowley immediately fled, and Alex groaned as his departure took place after he had stepped backwards onto his injured leg — purposefully, no doubt.

Naomi turned her gaze upwards to Bobby’s soul, but Alex leaned forward. “Wait!” she called, pushing herself up onto her good foot. “Wait! L-Let me …” She collapsed once again, shouting out a curse as her fists connected with the ground. “Dammit!”

Naomi, however, understood. “One minute.” She allowed the soul to descend and turned her attention to the Winchesters, who, now free from Crowley’s hold, had fallen down onto the ground. “I told you you could trust me,” she told Dean.

Alex didn’t listen, too focused on the man that was kneeling down in front of her. “What the hell happened to you?” Bobby’s face was dark despite its ethereal glow.

“You find a way to spring me from upstairs, and I’ll come back,” Bobby promised. “But until then, you take care of yourself, okay? And those two.” Alex nodded, sniffing as she tried to stop the tears from falling down her face. Bobby’s hand went out to cup her cheek, and, even though she couldn’t feel it, Alex leaned into the touch, eyes falling closed. “Please don’t leave me again.”

“You find a way to spring me from upstairs, and I’ll come back.” Bobby promised. “But until then, you take care of yourself, okay? And those two.” Alex nodded, sniffing as she tried to stop the tears from falling down her face. Bobby’s hand went out to cup her cheek, and, even though she couldn’t feel it, Alex leaned into the touch, eyes falling closed. “Please don’t leave me again.”

“Time’s up.” Bobby disappeared at Naomi’s words, and Alex lunged upwards as his soul shot out of her reach. She cried out in pain, and she fell back to the ground. The young angel lowered her head to hide her watering eyes when Naomi approached. “I’m not the bad guy here,” she murmured in a hushed, hurried voice. “We’re both working towards the same cause.”

Alex lifted up her eyes, and they flashed with grace. “Get out of my sight before I kill you.”

Naomi disappeared in a flash of white, and Alex collapsed onto the ground, her arms shaking as she finally let her pain show. She pressed her forehead into the cool grass and squeezed her eyes shut, but they immediately snapped open when Sam cried out and fell to the ground. “Sam?” Alex’s head snapped up, and she tried to drag herself across the grass towards the fallen hunter. “Sam!”

Sam Winchester grimaced as light pulsed through the ground and into his arms. The second trial. Alex fell back to the ground as the energy dispersed back through the air and the hunter’s breathing slowed. He was okay.

Footsteps approached as Sam staggered over to her, and he dropped down to his knees. “What happened?”

“Crowley shot me.” Alex dragged herself into his lap so her bad leg was stretched out across the grass, her teeth grit in pain. “He — he’s melted down an angel blade into bullets.” She threw her head back into Sam’s chest as Dean put his hands on her legs. “Ow! T-The bullet went through,” she explained. “Just get me to the car.”

“Slight problem. The car’s a mile away.” Dean pulled off his shirt and wrapped it tightly around her
wound before pulling his jacket back over his bare shoulders. “Any chance you can fly?”

“I can if I need to, but it ain’t gonna be pretty.” Alex reached up to wrap a hand around the back of Sam’s neck. “Help me up,” she instructed. “I’ll make it back on my own two — one — foot.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so.” Sam removed her hand, and Alex frowned at his lack of cooperation. “Look, Pip, you can barely stand, let alone walk a whole mile in the dark.” He gently slid her off of his lap and rose to his feet. “We’ll carry you.”

“Whoa whoa.” Dean reached out to stop his brother. “I’ll carry her. You barely look like you can walk yourself,” he reminded sharply.

Sam nodded and stepped away, and Dean knelt down in front of the young angel. Alex grunted out her thanks as she maneuvered herself onto Dean’s back, hissing as she was forced to bend her leg around his waist. The Winchester supported it gently, however, and the young angel rested her head on his shoulder as they started down the path. “Are you okay?” she asked, looking over to see that Sam was walking beside them with a slow, painful limp. “If you’re hurt —”

“I’m fine.” Sam brushed off her concern with a small shake of his head. “Just stop moving and be quiet. We’ll be out of here soon.”

Alex leaned back up against the couch, her bandaged leg stretched out across the cushions. Her wings were stretched out behind her, hanging over the arm of the couch. “That feels a lot better,” she promised when Sam stood up from her side. “Go and get some sleep. You’re probably exhausted.”

Her eyes slid over to the two beds, one of which was occupied with Dean Winchester, already fast asleep. Sam’s gaze followed hers, and he slowly nodded. “If you’re sure you’re okay …”

“Yeah. I’ll be fine. I just need a little rest and relaxation. Maybe I’ll take a nap.” Her point was emphasized by a large yawn, and she let her head fall back against the thin pillow as the Winchester walked away. Maybe she actually needed a nap.

The young angel closed her eyes and drew up Lucifer’s grace, focusing on slowing down her breathing. The world closed in around her, the world and the room disappearing until all that existed was the couch beneath her. Lucifer’s grace moved gently beneath her skin. And then the world was gone.

Alex opened up her eyes, gaze focusing on the white ceilings above. The room was light despite the black emptiness that filled the windows, and the air was warm and comforting, so unlike the harsh and unfamiliar motel she had fallen asleep in. The young angel rose up off the couch, reaching down to feel her left leg. No sign of the bullet hole.

Satisfied, Alex let her grace spill out, searching for the icy touch of Lucifer. But there was nothing. Her confusion forced her mouth into a frown, and the angel peered into the kitchen.

“Luce?” Alex climbed the stairs, wings twitching as she let them hang comfortably against her back. The bedroom door was wide open, but once again the room was empty. Where was he? Alex looked down the hallway, eyes coming to rest on second door. She knew what lay beyond that, but her feet carried her there all the same. The door was ajar, and the young angel nudged it open.

A child’s bed lay against the far wall, a rocking chair at its side. Toys were arranged delicately on the
floor, and Alex rested her head against the doorframe. One hand came to rest across her stomach, gripping her side, and she looked down at the wooden train. Ashiel would have loved that toy.

“What are you doing?” Hands came to rest on her side, a few cold fingers slipping beneath the hem of her shirt, and Alex leaned her head back into Lucifer in a silent gesture of greeting. Crimson wings curled around her, and the young angel reluctantly tore her gaze away from the child’s room. “You know, I was hoping you’d come here after that little trick you played today. It’s been so long,” he added, a note of displeasure creeping into his voice. “Where have you been?”

Alex nudged him away. “I’ve been hanging out with Castiel,” she explained. “Well, until we got split up. Cas’s still got the angel tablet, so he’s running with that until I can find a way to shake the angels on his tail loose.” She slipped under the archangel’s arm that was supporting him against the wall and made her way down the stairs. “We’re trying to close the gates of hell.”

“With the angel tablet?” The devil let out a curious hum as he followed, and Alex paused on the last step, blonde hair flipping over her shoulders as she glanced back up at him.

“Demon tablet,” she corrected with a roll of her eyes. “The prophet has translated two of the three trials. The first was to kill a hellhound, and the second was to rescue an innocent soul from hell.” She stepped down onto the hardwood floor. “Sam’s successfully completed both. We’re one act away from closing hell down forever. Nothing gets in or out.”

“Myself included, I presume.” The devil’s voice was flat, and Alex turned to face him.

“Unfortunate collateral,” she quipped. “Sorry, Luce, but it’s for the greater good. Soon Sam will shut you all in for good.”

“And Sam’s still alive?” The frown on Lucifer’s face had Alex tipping her head in confusion. “Don’t get me wrong, Sam’s strong, but I don’t think Dad would have made that task something you could just walk away from.”

“Sam’s fine.” Alex mirrored his frown and crossed her arms. “I won’t let anything happen to him. Even if it costs me my own life.”

Her wings flicked as the archangel moved forward, his own wings curling towards her. “Speaking of, I still want to know why your grace was so close to mine. Why were you in hell? Come to visit? Or come to get me out before it’s too late?” His pale lips twisted in a smirk, but Alex could easily see the darker undertone in his eyes.

“You wish.” She leaned up against the back of the couch and shook her head. “I went with Sam to rescue Bobby Singer. Crowley had his soul sent to hell instead of heaven.”

“And?” Lucifer pressed, and a wingtip brushed against her feathers. “Details. I felt you draw on my grace. A lot.” To emphasize his point, his grace surrounded them, enveloping her completely in cold.

“The demons found us, so I had to play decoy.” Alex gently pressed her grace up against his, pushing it away. “Crowley and his minions cornered me, and I tried to fight. I don’t know what I did wrong, but your grace knocked me flat on my back.” The young angel snorted at the memory. “Not the first time that’s happened.”

“What do you mean?” All of the playfulness died in Lucifer’s eyes, and Alex shifted backwards, unnerved by the uncomfortable change in mood.

“Your grace — it’s been harder to control lately,” she explained, but her tongue felt thick and lame around her words. Alex took a moment to calm herself before speaking again. “Gabriel told me it
was because our graces are pulling apart. Because we’re not mates.”

“And who’s fault is that?”

“Neither of ours.” Alex stepped away from Lucifer and turned her back. “We’re not mates, Luce. We shouldn’t be connected like this. Hell, we don’t even know how our graces got like this in the first place!”

Lucifer didn’t respond, and Alex looked over her shoulder. His face was dark yet pensive, teeth teasing a thumbnail that was propped up by folded arms. His eyes had narrowed, and Alex pressed her wings tightly against her back as he studied her. It was the way a wolf would stare at its meal. The young angel shifted uncomfortably, and the archangel’s fingers fell from his lips. “Ever consider that our Dad had a hand in it?” he finally asked, but his eyes sparkled with gravity despite his casual phrasing.

“Why would your Father ever do anything for you?” The words came out before Alex could stop herself, and she clamped her jaw shut as they filled the air. Lucifer didn’t react, and the young angel immediately found herself continuing. “You’re the devil, Luce. Our Father doesn’t love you. Nobody loves you.”

The archangel’s eyebrow lifted, the only sign that her words were heard. “Nobody,” he repeated. “Nobody.” Alex voice was firm, and she let her wings lift up slightly, feathers ruffling out. “Especially not me.”

“Of course not.” Lucifer stalked forward, eyes narrowed. Alex’s wings fell back down to her side, unnerved by the power in his step and the lack of anger burning in his eyes. “So then why do you come here, little angel? Is this a game?” Alex didn’t respond, and the archangel chuckled, dark and low, her silence all the answer he needed. “Of course. It’s happened again, hasn’t it? Castiel’s promised you something, and you believed him. You never seem to learn, do you?”

“That’s not what’s going on.” Alex stretched out a wing to keep the archangel from moving any closer.

“I know exactly what’s going on.” Lucifer pushed past her wings, backing Alex up into the bookcase. “It’s the same thing that happens every time we have this conversation. It plays like a broken record; Castiel returns, and he tells you that he’ll do everything in what little power he has to stay with you and be your mate, and you fall for his lies head over heels. And then do you know what happens?” The devil’s hands planted themselves on the shelf on either side of her head. “Then he leaves or he dies or he drops all of his marbles once again.” A thumb came to rest underneath her jaw, pushing up against the soft tissue. “And you remember how it ended last time.”

“It’s better than the alternative.” Alex sharply pushed his hand away as his fingers traced the small scar inflicted by her own blade. “One of these times, Castiel isn’t going to have to leave. Once we seal the Gates of Hell, then we’re out. No more hunting, no more saving the world. Castiel and I are done with it all.”

Something glittered in Lucifer’s eyes, something dark and dangerous and so cold that it sent a shiver down her spine. “I’ll be waiting right here when you come crawling back,” he promised. “Unlike Castiel, I’m not going anywhere. And I am patient.”

“Maybe you are.” Alex lifted up her chin. “But I’m not. I have to choose, and my choice is Castiel.” She pushed the archangel away and walked off towards the front door. “I’m sorry if you can’t accept that.”
“He’s the wrong choice.” The archangel’s dark tone had the angel hesitating, but she refused to turn around. “Don’t forget that I know you, Alex. I know what you want, what you need. Castiel can’t give you any of it.” He paused, letting his words sink in. “I’ll see you next time, le mohoath.”

Alex closed her eyes, chest tightening. Castiel was her mate, so why was walking away so hard? “No,” she finally got out. “No, Lucifer, you won’t. You won’t ever see me ever again.”

Chapter End Notes

Alright, update. There's about four chapters left, but, depending on my betas, I want to get them all up before the end of May (my finals).

Also, I put up a few of these stupid comics I drew on wattled (_casti3l_) about this story that I drew to procrastinate, so if you want, check them out. They're really short and really stupid.

Thanks for reading!
April 16th, 2014

Lebanon, Kansas

Alex hobbled down the bunker stairs, tightly gripping the railing to keep herself steady. Her wings dragged behind her, and even though the feathers dragging against the cold stone ground brought about discomfort, the angel was too exhausted to draw them up to her side. “I can’t believe it.” Dean slammed the door behind him, and Alex jumped ever so slightly at the sound. “Where the fuck could Kevin be?”

“I don’t know, Dean.” Alex limped over to the table and dropped into the nearest chair. They had swung by the boathouse on the way back, but Kevin Tran was gone. His things, his notes, the tablet. Everything.

The prophet was gone.

“He couldn’t have gotten too far.” Sam dropped both his and Alex’s duffle bag onto the ground. “We were barely gone for two days.”

Dean’s own bag thudded upon the hard ground, and he stalked into the library. “Can’t you do something?” he snapped at Alex as he pulled a beer out of the mini fridge. “You’re the angel.”

“Sure,” Alex retorted sharply, her pain and exhaustion fueling her anger. “Because it’s not like Kevin Tran has hid himself from angels before. But, since I’m clearly at full strength right now, let me just fly around the entire damn country—”

“Alright, that’s enough.” Sam held out his hand, stepping forward to position himself between the two’s fight. “Dean, it’s not her fault. We’ll find Kevin, and we’ll find him soon. We’ll spread the word for other hunters to keep an eye out for him.” He frowned when Dean only scoffed. “Kevin will be fine. Don’t forget he survived an entire year on his own.”

Dean grumbled under his breath, and Alex groaned as a twinge of pain shot up her leg. “Sam, help me to my room,” she half instructed, half begged. “I need a nap.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Sam turned back to her. “Come on. I want to have a look at your leg anyways.” He helped the young angel up onto her feet, supporting her as she limped towards the bedroom. “Careful.”

“I’m fine.” Alex pushed Sam away and hopped over towards her bed, collapsing on top of the sheets with a tired groan. “It’s not a bad wound. The bullet just took off a good chunk of flesh.” She twisted so she could look back at the Winchester, her face twisting in sympathy at his tired and ragged appearance. “Go get some sleep,” she told him. “I’ll clean it and wrap it up on my own. You need to rest.”

Sam nodded and walked away without argument, and the young angel began the difficult task of peeling off her bloodied jeans. They clung to her legs, and she dug her teeth into her bottom lip as she carefully worked them off from around her wound. She hobbled over to her dresser to pull on a pair of small black shorts before she slowly made her way across the hall to the showers.

It took some doing, but Alex was able to clean off the dried blood and finally get a good look at the
bullet wound. She could see the bullet’s track across her shin, like a valley of blood and flesh. She wrung the wet washcloth out over it, wincing as the water fell and washed away the blood. The tiled shower floor was red as her cleaning reopened the wound, and once the angel was finished, she hurriedly pressed a sheet of gauze against the open flesh. It stung, but Alex only grit her teeth and wrapped the roll of bandages around her leg to hold the thick, absorbent sheet in place.

There was a knock on the door, and Alex looked up in surprise. “Um, hey.”

“How’s the leg?” Dean stepped into the room, and Alex shrugged, dropping her gaze down onto her blood-stained fingers. “Doesn’t look too bad.”

“I’ll be fine.” Alex wiped her hands off on the washcloth before she tossed it aside and reached up to turn on the shower spray to wash away the blood. She stepped away before the water could reach her and limped over to the Winchester. “What’s up? Did Sam go to bed?”

“He’s passed out in his room, yeah.” Dean moved past her to shut the water off. “I put out the word to keep an eye out for Kevin, and Garth’s already out looking. By tomorrow morning every hunter in the country will know.”

“There’s not much else we can do,” Alex agreed. She reached out to grab Dean’s shoulder as her leg quivered, threatening to collapse, and the angel frowned, “Now what are you going to do?”

“See if I can get access to the security footage around the boathouse. Maybe we’ll get lucky and see which way Kevin went.”

“Good. I’ll come with you.” Alex hobbled out the shower door, Dean at her side to support her, and the angel paused beside her room. “I’ll meet you out in the library. I need to change first.” She motioned down at the jacket and athletic shorts to emphasize her point.

Dean nodded and walked away, and Alex limped over to her bed. The angel carefully pulled on a pair of thick, grey sweatpants and a plain white shirt before she slowly made her way back down the hall.

Dean was seated at the far table when Alex hopped into the room. “Thanks,” she said as the Winchester slid a beer across the tablet. Her grace loosened the bottle cap, and the angel took a long sip. The alcohol burned going down, and Alex cleared her throat as she set the bottle back down. “Hey, do we have any books on Enochian spells?” she inquired, and she limped over to the filing cabinet created by the Men of Letters.

“Damned if I know,” came the distant response -- Dean’s attention was fully on his laptop. “Why?”

“Cas has been off on his own for a while now, and I’m getting worried.” Alex flipped through the alphabetical cards starting with ‘A’ for angel and then skipping to ‘E’ for Enochian. “Maybe there’s something I can do to help.” She pulled out a card labelled, ‘Spells, Enochian,’ and turned her eyes to the massive shelves of books. “Both Naomi and Crowley are after him, so I think he’ll appreciate any help that he can get.”

The bunker door swung open and closed with a protesting squeak, and Alex looked up as warm, fresh air rushed into the library. The young angel watched Dean make his way down the stairs, groceries in one hand and a six-pack of beer in the other. “Hey,” she greeted. “Feels like a nice day outside.”

“Yeah.” Dean put his purchases on the library table. “Beautiful morning. Sam up yet?”
“No, not that I’ve seen. He’s probably still sleeping like a champ.” Alex turned the page of her book, fingers tracing over the gold-plated letters that marked the heading of the page.

Dean sat down across from her. “Find anything?”

“Nothing yet.” Alex flipped the book shut and slumped down in her chair, “This book’s interesting, sure, but not what I’m looking for.” Her hands came up to cover her eyes, and the angel groaned.

She didn’t hear the younger Winchester enter the room, and dropped her hands when Dean said, “Man, I’m telling you, give me five minutes with some clippers, and …”

“Oh, shut up.” Sam ran both his hands through his hair like a crude brush, combing his messy locks back against his head. “Uh, what time did I lay down?”

“You took a siesta around noon,” Dean told him. “Yesterday.”

“It’s almost ten a.m. now,” Alex added, and she frowned at his flushed cheeks and dark circles. “Are you feeling okay? You look a little … off.”

“I’m fine.” A beer bottle sailed through the air as Sam spoke, having left Dean’s hands a moment before, and it passed right beside Sam’s shoulder before it shattered on the concrete ground. Sam watched it go, color darkening his cheeks as he turned back to them. “I’m sorry,” he started.

“This is why we don’t have nice things, Sam.” Dean frowned as his brother stumbled on the steps leading up to the library. “Whoa. You okay?”

“I’m fine.” A beer bottle sailed through the air as Sam spoke, having left Dean’s hands a moment before, and it passed right beside Sam’s shoulder before it shattered on the concrete ground. Sam watched it go, color darkening his cheeks as he turned back to them. “I’m fine, I’m fine, I just …” The hunter leaned against the table and ran a hand down his face. “Uh, you know what, I’m gonna get dressed. We should go find Kevin.”

He stumbled as he straightened up, and Dean reached out to steady him. “Hey hey hey hey, easy, easy, sleeping beauty. Look, man, I’ve hacked into every security camera around Garth’s houseboat, Kevin’s hometown, where Mrs. Tran lived…”

“And?”

Dean’s eyes turned onto Alex, and the young angel shrugged, “Well, nothing so far,” he admitted.

“Dean, we have to find him.”

“I know, I know,” Dean agreed, “but Garth is out looking for him, we got a hunter APB out on Kevin, we’ll do what we can from here while you get better.”

“I’m fine, Dean,” Sam repeated, and his voice rose in pitch as his insistence grew. “I can still go out there, I can still hunt.”

“Really?” Dean rose to his feet, and Sam nodded. “Okay, come on. Let’s see.” He waved his brother after him, and Alex lifted herself out of her chair and followed after the two Winchesters, her curiosity driving her every step despite the stiffness in her muscles and the pain in her leg.

The Winchester led the way through the hallways and down the concrete stairs, and the young angel’s head tipped as they stopped inside the Men of Letter’s shooting range. Dean picked up his Colt that was laying on the concrete shelf and popped out the magazine, counting the bullets inside. Sam clearly understood what was going on. “This is stupid.”

Dean stepped forward and pointed the muzzle of the handgun towards one of the targets. Two shots
echoed off of the concrete walls as the gun discharged, and the bullets ripped through the chest of the outlined man. “Alright.” Dean turned back to his brother and held out the gun. “You hit that target, we’ll talk about getting you back out there.”

“No problem.” Sam stepped forward and lifted the gun with one hand. His arm shook, and he reached up with his left hand to steady the shaking weapon. He fired two shots, and Alex narrowed her eyes to see each bullet go wide and hit the concrete pillars on either side of the target.

The Winchester’s shoulders fell, and Dean stepped forward to take his gun back. “Look, man,” he began, “this second trial hit you a lot harder than the first one. I don’t know whether it was just more intense of what.”

“It felt the same,” Sam mumbled. “Till the next day.”

Dean looked over at Alex, and the angel’s shoulders fell. “So, we’re gonna sit tight,” the eldest Winchester decided. “Keep an eye out until you get better. Come on.” Dean cleared his weapon and brushed past his brother. “Let’s get some coffee into you.”

Sam trailed after his brother, head hung, and Alex let her wings carry her up and into the kitchen. Balancing delicately on her good leg and leaning up against the fridge door, the angel peered into the open appliance. Her head tipped when she heard Dean enter, and she asked, “Do we have anything to eat? I’m bored.”

The fridge door was pressed closed, and Alex looked up. “What the hell is wrong with Sam?” Dean’s green eyes glittered in frustrated concern, and the angel glanced towards the kitchen doorway; Sam was nowhere to be found.

“I don’t know,” she finally said. “The trials are having a negative effect on him, but I don’t know exactly what they’re doing.” 

I don’t think Daddy would have made that task something you walk away from.

Lucifer’s words rang through her head, but the angel purposefully pushed them away with a shake of her wings. “I think the sooner we finish the trials, the sooner Sam will be back on his own two feet.” She nodded towards the far counter. “There should be enough coffee left for a cup or two. I’ll go talk to Sam.”

The young angels made her ways out into the library to find the youngest Winchester sitting at the table, his laptop open in front of him. He didn’t look up when she entered, and Alex dropped down in the seat across from him. “Hey. How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine.” Sam glanced up, the annoyance in his voice in stark contrast to his sunken and pale face. Alex fixed him with a disbelieving stare, and after a second, Sam dropped his gaze. “I don’t know what’s wrong,” he finally admitted. “I feel…”

“Groggy?” Alex guessed. “Displaced? Like your body isn’t listening when you tell it to do something?”

Sam nodded. “Yeah. Sort of. It’s like I’ve been drugged.” He fell silent as footsteps approached, and Alex looked back at Dean. He set the coffee mug down in front of his brother.

“Here.” Dean sat down beside Alex.

“Thanks.” Sam reached for the cup, but the ding of his laptop had him pausing. “It’s an email from Charlie,” the younger Winchester announced. “In the neighborhood, found you guys a case.” He looked up, confusion slightly darkening his face. “Found us a case?”

“Dean frowned. “In the neighborhood?” he repeated. “How the hell does she know where we are?”
“Uh, well, she doesn’t,” Sam explained as he finished reading the email. “Not exactly, at least. It says she traced our cells to a twenty mile radius, then the signal went out. Huh.” Sam looked over at his brother. “This place must be in some kind of, like, Bermuda Triangle.”

“What, are you saying we can make and receive calls from here and nobody can track us?” Dean let out a wide grin. “Man, I love this place.”

Fingers clacked on the keyboard as Sam typed out a response. “I’m sending her our location,” he told them, but he cut off with a wet cough. Alex leaned forward, eyebrows knitting together in concern, but Sam just continued as if nothing had happened “Uh, she should be here in fifteen minutes if she’s nearby.”

“Great.” Dean stood up and walked over to the bottle of whiskey that sat upon the Men of Letter’s cabinet. He looked around at the high arches of the bunker, and he smiled. “This place is awesome.”

Alex looked up as the bunker door opened, and Sam and Dean stepped through, followed closely by Charlie Bradbury. True to Sam’s estimation, the redheaded geek had arrived within fifteen minutes, and the two Winchesters had gone outside to greet her. Alex, however, had stayed inside. “Hey,” she called, leaning back in her seat. “I would have come up to meet you, but, uh …” She motioned to her leg that was propped up on the table to finish her thought. “What are you doing in town?”

“Comic convention in Topeka.” The woman’s eyes came to rest on her leg. “What happened to you?”

“King of Hell. He shot me.” Alex spread out her arms, motioning to the entire building. “Welcome to the Men of Letters bunker.”

“Yea, I got the low-down outside.” Charlie walked into the library and looked around. “Holy awesome. Too mad they got wiped out, though that is what they get for the sexist name.”

Alex let out a noise of amusement and rolled her eyes. “Yeah, well, ‘Human of Letters’ just didn’t have the same ring to it.”

Her wit was rewarded by a smile from Sam. “Well, anyways,” he said, “that’s our skinny. How about you?”

“Um, made a deal with the yesteryear weirdos, we’re gonna team up to stomp the shadow orcs. You guys are still coming to the mid-year jubilee, right?” Charlie looked between the three of them as the Winchesters took a seat at the table.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Dean promised.

Sam nodded in agreement. “So what about this case you brought us? “He asked.

Charlie cleared her throat. “When I was in Topeka, I saw this pop up over the wire. Tom Blake, a checkout clerk in Saliva who went missing on his way home from work. He was found dead yesterday, his insides liquefied. Locals have no idea what happened. They tried to bury the report so people wouldn’t freak, but I flagged it. I have eliminated the following things that go bump in the night —”

“Wait a second.” Sam cut into the redhead’s speedy ramblings. “When did you become such an expert?”
Charlie immediately went on the defense. “Well, after you guys left, I dug into all things monster. I’m a wee bit obsessive — if ‘wee bit’ means completely. I also found this series of books, by a Carver Edlund?” She watched as the brothers exchanged dark looks. “Did those books really happen?”

Alex grinned. “Damn straight they did. Have you read them? What about the whole ‘apocalypse’ thing? I knew he was going to write it down . . .”

“Wow.” Charlie looked over at Dean. “That is some meta madness. Thanks for saving the world and stuff. Sorry you have zero luck with the ladies,” she added to Sam.

“Wha—” Sam cut off with a short breath through his nose, and he turned to his brother. “We need to find every single copy of those books and burn them.”

“They’re online now. So good luck with that.”

Dean frowned at Charlie’s words. “Awesome.” He rose to his feet. “Well, you three can deal with that, I’ll go see if there’s anything to this, uh, case of yours.”

“I’m coming with you.” Sam started to stand, but his legs crumpled beneath his weight, and he stumbled. Charlie jumped up to steady him, and even Alex dropped her leg onto the ground as she instinctively moved to help.

“Whoa, are you okay?” Charlie asked as Sam regained his balance.

“Yes.”

“No,” Dean corrected sharply. “You’re taking a knee as long as you’re off your game. You’re not coming either,” he added to Alex. “In fact, neither of you are going anywhere until you’re both back to one hundred percent.”

“I’ll go with you,” Charlie volunteered.

“No disrespect, okay,” Dean started, holding out a hand, “but there’s a big difference between reading about hunting and actually hunting.”

“Make her take the gun test,” Alex suggested as she leaned back in her chair. “Like the one you gave Sam. And then when she fails, I’ll take it and pass. Then I’ll go get dressed and we can leave. Perfect plan.”

“Not a chance.” Dean frowned and crossed his arms. “You can’t even walk. There’s no damn way you can hunt.” He turned to Charlie. “Come on.”

Alex watched as the two of them disappeared down the hallway. “It’s fucking stupid,” she muttered, and she glared down at her bandaged leg. “I hate you.” She looked up at Sam; the Winchester had reached for his laptop the minute Dean and Charlie had left and was now furiously typing away. “What are you doing?”

“Looking into the case.” Sam fell silent once again, and Alex rolled her head back, her eyes tracing the seams in the brick wall in front of her.

Charlie somehow miraculously managed to pass Dean’s test, and the two of them had left Sam and Alex alone in the bunker. Frustrated, the angel had retired to Sam’s room to watch a single episode
of Person of Interest. That single episode turned into two, which turned into three, and the next thing the angel knew, it was ten hours later.

“Alex? Hey.” Sam’s urgent voice rang through the hallway, and the angel paused her show as rapid footsteps approached. “There’s a body down in Topeka. Call just came in.” The Winchester hurried over to his closet and pulled out his grey suit. “I’m going there now.”

“Wait, what? No.” Alex scrambled to her feet, wincing at the weight on her leg. “Sam, there’s no way you’re going alone. I’m coming with you.”

The angel hurried out of the room as fast as she could to get to her own bedroom and her wardrobe. It took her longer than she would have wished to pull on her slacks, but as soon as she was dressed she limped off after Sam.

The Winchester was waiting in the library, and his eyes dropped down to her leg as she entered. “You sure you’re well enough to come along?” he asked.

Alex’s wings ruffled despite the genuine concern in his voice. “At least I’m well enough to shoot a damn gun,” she retorted. “Come on, we don’t want to be late.” She followed Sam up the bunker stairs and out into the darkening night. “Oh. Great.” The angel looked around; the only car in sight was Charlie’s. The pastel yellow paint glowed in the sun’s dying rays. “Okay, so now what, genius? We gonna ‘Grand Theft Auto’ our way out of here?”

“Yeah.” Sam moved off towards the small car; Alex followed close behind, her grace going out to unlock the car door to speed up their progress.

They arrived at the crime scene within twenty minutes. Alex followed Sam down off of the road and onto the dark grass, damp with the night’s condensation. She ducked beneath the police tape, teeth grit as she forced herself to walk evenly despite her injured leg. “Agents Reese and Finch,” Sam told the officer. “What have we got?”

The woman barely glanced over their badges before she pointed towards where two men were carefully maneuvering a black body bag into an ambulance. “Jack Hill. He was a librarian down near the public high school. His wife reported him missing yesterday, and he was found by those two over there.” She motioned off in the direction of two teenage boys who were giving their statement to the police.

“Where’s the body going?” Alex watched as the ambulance doors closed. “The call came in less than half an hour ago. Don’t tell me your squints were able to document everything that quickly.”

The officer shrugged. “Jennifer ordered that it be taken back to her lab as soon as possible,” she relayed.

“Who?”

“The local coroner. She works with us under these types of circumstances. I’m sure she’d be more than welcome to lend a hand if you need anything from her. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” The officer dismissed herself and walked away, leaving Sam and Alex on their own.

“That’s weird.” Alex frowned as the ambulance drove away with the cadaver. “I’ve never seen a body removed so quickly — especially this late at night. Workaholic freaks.”

Sam nodded in distant agreement, but he turned away from her to face someone else. “What took
you guys so long?”

Dean and Charlie approached, dressed in suits and ties, and the former also wore a deep, dark frown. “What the hell are you guys doing here?” he asked, voice sharp with anger and disappointment at their blatant disobedience.

Sam, however, wasn’t perturbed. “Working the case, same as you.” He motioned over his shoulder towards where the ambulance had once been. “Jake Hill, librarian. Went missing yesterday, no relation to the other vic. Coroner already scooped up what was left of him.”

“Yeah, we met her, bit of a stickler,” Dean told them begrudgingly. “Well, if there’s not a body, there’s nothing else to see here, so why don’t you guys head on home?”

“Well, we still have to talk to the witnesses,” Alex put in, pointing over towards the two boys. “They might be able to tell us what the body looked like. Why don’t we —”

Dean abruptly cut her off. “We can handle that. Charlie, why don’t you go talk to the witnesses.”

The redhead’s eyes went wide at Dean’s suggestion, but she tried to play it cool. “But I don’t want to miss the broman—”

“Charlie.” Dean’s stern voice had the woman’s shoulders dropping, and she slowly moved off towards the teenagers. “Look, man,” Dean began, “I know you’re frustrated, but you’re also sick.”

“I’m not leaving, Dean.”

“And neither am I,” Alex put in stubbornly. “I’m perfectly capable of hunting, bar this stupid leg.”

She looked over at Charlie, who was shifting nervously as she spoke to the two boys. “How’s she working out, anyways? First case jitters?”

The Winchester looked over at the redhead as well. “You have no idea,” he grumbled, his tone promising to explain later as he turned back to them. “Listen. I know you want to help, I do, but —”

“Dean, you cannot take care of all of us,” Sam insisted, and he motioned to himself and to Alex. “I — we — we need to be out there. Play through the pain, right?”

“Come on, man, don’t quote me to me.”

Charlie walked back up to them, and Dean fell silent. “So the boys said they noticed something on the body’s arm before it covered them in years of future therapy. Said it looked like a blue handprint.”

“Djinn?” Alex offered, and she frowned when the brothers looked down at her. “What? Come on. What other creature is fucking blue, guys?”

“Angels?”

“We’re not blue,” Alex retorted at Dean. “And we certainly don’t leave behind blue handprints.”

“And neither do djinn.” Sam put a hand on her shoulder. “Look. The best thing to do is get a look at the body. Maybe the handprint was a tattoo, o-or, uh—”

“Something kinky,” Dean added. “You know.” He shrugged, but Sam only rolled his eyes. “Fine. It sounds like something you should read about. In a book. Back home,” he ordered. “See what you can dig up. I’ll go down to the coroner’s.” He walked away, and Alex watched him go with a frown.
Charlie hung back, taking the opportunity to say to Sam, “You guys fight like an old married couple.”

“Charlie…”

“Does this mean we don’t have to break into the coroner’s office anymore?” she continued, ignoring Sam’s warning.

Alex shook her head. “I’m afraid it means quite the opposite.” She looked up as the Impala started, and the tires dug into the mud as he sped away.

“Is he leaving?” Charlie took two hurried steps after Dean, eyes wide in confusion. “He’s leaving!”

Sam watched his brother go. “That’s alright,” he promised. “We stole your car. Come on.”

Charlie turned back to them. “Cool — wait, you stole my car?”

“Yup.” Alex flicked a wing back up towards the road upon which it was parked. “Sam drove us here. In record time, too.” She led the way away from the crime scene as she added, “Although maybe you should drive this time, seeing that you’re the only one who’s not … dying. Plus you actually have the keys.”

The look Charlie gave them was one of exasperation and disbelief at their reckless actions, but faced with the angel and the giant of a hunter, she kept her mouth shut.

They pulled into the parking lot in record time — thanks to Sam’s instructions — and when Alex stepped out of the car, her grace found no sign of Dean Winchester. “I think we beat him here,” she announced as they walked up to the dark, empty building; Sam’s tug on the locked door confirmed her words. “I got it.” Her grace unlocked it with ease, and Sam led the way inside.

The door had just swung closed behind them when the parking lot lit up momentarily with headlights, and the young angel tipped her head as she listened to the engine. “It’s Dean.” Sam recognized the familiar sound too, and Alex hummed her confirmation. She followed Sam and Charlie further into the building, pausing outside the morgue when they heard the back door open and close behind Dean. Footsteps approached, and when the Winchester stepped into view, he stopped dead. “What took you so long?” Sam asked, and Alex gave a small wave.


Another set of headlights lit up the wall following the Winchesters words, and Alex frowned, confused as to who would be here at such an hour. “What the hell?” she hissed, and the angel slid forward, weapon falling into her hands. “Go. I got this.”

“No.” Charlie ran off down the hall, and Alex’s wings fluttered in frustration and confusion. The redhead disappeared only to pop her head back around the corner a second later. “It’s the coroner,” she whispered loudly so the hunters could hear. “I got this.” She ducked back out of sight once again, and Alex let her weapon retract as Sam and Dean stepped into the morgue.

The angel took up her position near the door, eyes and ears open for trouble as the Winchesters began their search. Dean pulled open the lockers as Sam flipped through the paperwork that way sitting on the counter. “The hell?” the oldest Winchester exclaimed. “It’s empty.”

“Uh … they burned the bodies,” Sam told them, and both Dean and Alex looked up in surprise.
“What?” Ale stepped forward, remembering at the last second to keep her voice low. “Already? That’s impossible. They found him less than an hour ago.”

Sam shrugged. “Yeah, but they think it’s some kinda, like, uh, outbreak scenario. Even got the CDC to sign off on it,” he read.

Dean frowned and closed the metal door. “These folks run a tight shift,” he grumbled as he turned back to Sam and Alex. “So does this mean we need to take Silkwood showers now, or is this still a case?”

“Well, something about that mark the kid saw does ring a bell,” his brother said, and he pulled out his phone to take a few quick photos of the documents. “Probably have to check the lore, or maybe Dad’s journal.” He turned the pages over to take a few more pictures.

“Hurry up,” Dean instructed, and Alex peered out the door.

“I hear voices down the hall,” she warned. “We should get out.” She watched as Sam put the papers back, and she led the way out through the door and towards the exit. They turned the corner just as the click of heels on the tile floor reached their ears. The tap on her shoulder had Alex moving down the hall after Sam and Dean. Charlie would just have to catch up with them later.

The night drifted on into the early hours of the morning, and Alex once again found herself slumped in one of the library chairs, leg propped up as she flipped through her journal things that went bump in the night. The Winchesters and Charlie were sitting all around her, and right now they were all reaching the end of their ropes.

“Leviathan,” Sam suggested from beside her, the flatness in his voice and the sag in his shoulders conveying his tiredness and frustration.

“No, they consume their prey,” Charlie reminded.

“Well, maybe the vics were Leviathan,” Sam tried again, sounding as if the idea was preposterous even to himself.

Alex shook her head. “No black goo,” she said. “We would have seen it at the crime scene. Plus Crowley had them all hunted down once we brought down Dick.” She turned the pages of her journal. “Uh, what about korrigan. Or, I don’t know. Undine.”

Sam barked out a dry note of laughter, brushing a hand through his hair to get it out of his eyes. “An undine? Really? How does that fit the case at all?”

“Well, it’s better than a fucking Leviathan,” Alex shot back, her patience wearing thin. “At least undines are water-oriented, which is blue just like the handprint. So there.”

Charlie looked between the two of them. “I’ve … never heard of that one, but I’ll assume that it’s a no-go.” She tapped on the screen of her iPad, crossing ‘Leviathan’ off of the list of monsters she had created as one of her fancy apps.

Sam watched and frowned. “I hate that thing,” he muttered, but after a second begrudgingly added, “I want one.”

“Wait a second.” Dean had been sitting quietly across from Sam for awhile now, and Alex looked up when he finally decided to speak. “Djinn.”
Alex scoffed. “Wow. It’s not like that was the very first thing I suggest before you brutally shot me down.”

“Djinn vics don’t get liquified,” Sam reminded both of them, and Alex huffed.

“No no no, not the regular djinn,” Dean insisted, putting down the Men of Letters book he had been reading. “According to this, there’s a bastard offshoot — of the blue-type, not the, uh, the shaitan like we worked before. Uh, there eyes light up blue, they pass as humans, all of that regular jazz, except they leave their victims with jelly-like insides, and supposedly, when they poison their victims, they leave behind a blue handprint.” He slammed his palm down on the book and couldn’t help himself when he added smugly, “A lot closer than a mermaid, don’t you think?”

“Undine aren’t fucking mermaids,” Alex slammed her own palms down on the tablet, the pain in her leg and the indignation at Dean’s previous dismissal at her suggestion fueling her anger. Lucifer’s grace flared up unexpectedly in response, and the angel fell back into her seat with a wince of pain.

Dean just shrugged with a small, victorious grin, and Sam asked, “So these things die like regular djinn?”

“Silver blade dipped in lamb’s blood, yeah,” Dean agreed. “And now we just got to find the asshat.”

Charlie suddenly got to her feet, and Alex pressed down on Lucifer’s grace as she looked up. “Alright, well, breakthrough means snack time to me, and I wanna just stretch my legs.” The redhead grabbed her iPad and slowly started backing away from the table. “I’ll pick us up some grub, and, unlike you, Sam, I will not forget the pie.”

Charlie scurried up the bunker stairs, and when the heavy door swung closed behind her, Alex blinked slowly. “Is it just me, or has she been acting a little strange?”

“Since the second she got here,” Sam agreed. “Think it’s any of our business?”

Dean’s face darkened, but after a second he shook his head. “No,” he relented. “Probably not.” He got to his feet and circled around the table. “Well, I’m down for a break, too. I’ll go see what we’ve got to drink in the fridge. Two beers, and, uh, let me guess. A coke for the mermaid girl.”

The angel glared up at him, and the Winchester patted Alex on the shoulder with a small grin before disappearing towards the kitchen. “Asshole,” Alex muttered after him. “I totally called djinn first.”

Charlie didn’t return, and after three hours, even Alex was growing worried. She looked up from her laptop when Sam once more picked up his phone and dialed a number. “Charlie?” he asked into it, “it’s Sam. Um, again. Call us, okay?”

The Winchester hung up with a violent cough, and Alex frowned. “Maybe she’s sleeping,” she eventually suggested. “Or, I dunno, in the middle of a movie.”

“Still no word from Charlie, huh?” Dean stepped into the library, a beer bottle in his hand. He had changed into jeans and a jacket, and the remaining dampness in his hair told Alex he had managed to find time to shower.

Sam shook his head. “Uh, no. And there was no comic convention in Topeka. I don’t know why … I mean, why would she lie to us?” He looked up at his brother, and Dean frowned.

“One way to find out.” The Winchester pulled out his phone from his back pocket. “When I called
you from her phone yesterday, I turned on her GPS."

“You are the exemplar of trust, Dean,” Alex joked as he handed his phone over to Sam, and she and
the younger Winchester rose to their feet.

The young angel’s wings flittered as Dean’s hand lightly smacked her in the head. “She was acting
off from the moment she showed up,” he defended. “And it’s a good thing I did, huh?”

Sam’s words stopped her from responding. “Come on. I got a signal. She’s just a few miles south of
here.” He and Dean hurried off towards the bunker stairs, and Alex looked down at her plain grey t-
shirt before grabbing Sam’s blue plaid off of the back of his chair and following them up and out. A
second later she backtracked and snagged her angelic weapon off of the table; that could be useful
later on.

She rolled into the back of the Impala as Sam locked the bunker door behind them, and Dean started
up the engine. “What’s that for?” he asked, looking back over the seat to where Alex was polishing
the handle of her blade with the hem of her shirt.

Alex barely looked up at the ridiculous question. “Protection, numbskull. I carry it everywhere.” She
held it up to the early morning sun, eyes narrowing as she searched for any sign of tarnish.

“Okay.” Dean’s lips twitched downwards in the hint of a frown, but he let her wit slide. “Why’s it
out?”

“Because it’s summer.” Alex let the weapon fall back into her lap as Sam got into the passenger seat.
“Summer means warm weather — too warm for a jacket, which means I don’t really have long
sleeves to keep it up. Gotta start keeping it somewhere else.”

“Like?”

“Dunno yet. Between my wings, maybe. Maybe get some samurai shit going on.” Alex shrugged,
leaving her answer vague as she continued her much needed inspection.

Dean shrugged. “Whatever. Where we headed?” he asked as his brother got into the front seat, and
the Chevy rolled back while Sam pulled up the directions.

“Get on 281 and head south,” Sam instructed. “Then head east on 36. She should be at one of the
motels in Smith Center. Ten or so minutes away.”

Alex’s wings rustled as she adjusted her position on the leather seat. “If you want, I can try and find
out where she’s staying,” she offered. “My leg may still be shot, but my wings work as well as ever.”
She waited only until Dean’s assent before she took off out of the cab of the Impala and into the sky.

Smith Center stood out like a beacon from the flat, striped farmland that surrounded it, and the angel
soared downwards, black and gold wings catching on the breeze as she drifted from side to side. Her
grey eyes narrowed as she sought out the telltale yellow paint of Charlie’s AMC Gremlin.

It wasn’t difficult to spot, and Alex swooped down to land at its side. “Gotcha.” She reached up and
slid her angel blade in place between her wings, letting her grace easily lock it into place even as her
muscles twitched, unused to its new location. Alex pushed the discomfort aside and reached for her
phone. Prairie Woods Motel & Apartments, she texted to Sam before shoving her cell back into her
pocket. “Now which room?”

Her eyes scanned the row of doors; all looked intact, no sign of any trouble, and with a small shrug,
Alex crossed the parking lot and pushed her way into the front office. “Hey, can I ask a question?”
she called to the man leaning up against the counter. “I’m here looking for a friend. Uh, green eyes, bright red hair. About yea tall, awkward, but friendly.” The angel’s hand went up a few inches above her head to estimate Charlie’s height before it fell back down to her side. “She said she was staying here, but didn’t say what room.”

The man studied her for a second, he soon nodded. “Yeah, I think I know who you’re talking about. Corinne Bromley, right? Checked into room 17 a few days ago.”

“Thank you so much.” Alex hurried out of the office before the man could ask any more questions. Room seventeen was just down the way here. She stopped beside the heavy oak door, pausing only to text the room number to Sam Winchester before she tried the knob. Unlocked. The angel pushed open the door and stepped inside, eyes narrowing in worry as she took in the overturned furniture. The room looked like a hurricane had struck, sending tables, chairs and papers scattered all across the room.

“Charlie?” Alex closed the door behind her, reaching for her weapon as her grace stretched out through the room. “Charlie!” She circled around the fallen table, feathers prickling in fear to find that the room was completely empty. “Shitballs.”

The door flew open, and Alex spun around, grace snapping out in alarm. The light above their heads shattered, and Sam and Dean ducked in surprise. Alex’s wings drew in, and she let the tension fall from her shoulders. “Dammit!” Dean snapped as his hands went up to cover his head. “It’s us!”

“No shit, Sherlock.” Alex looked up at the broken light. “Sorry. Next time, maybe try knocking.” She slid her blade back down her shirt as the two Winchesters moved further into the room, taking in the chaotic state of the room. “Charlie’s gone. Door was unlocked but still intact. And whatever happened here, she sure put up a hell of a fight.”

“The hell?” Sam stooped and picked up the paper contents of an overturned black box. “These definitely belong to Charlie. Or some variation of her,” he corrected as he thumbed through the fake IDs.

“Who the hell is she, Jason Bourne?” Dean muttered. “Okay, so we got no forced entry, so either it was somebody she knew, or …”

“Djinn,” Sam finished, and Alex’s eyebrows knitted together at his implication. She stepped back as Sam moved over to her laptop, and the angel quickly righted the table so the hunters could work.

Dean bent down and picked up Charlie’s cell. “Here’s all our missed calls,” he announced, holding up the screen so Alex could see. “You got anything on her laptop?”

“Give me a second.” Sam slid into a chair and opened it up. It didn’t take him long to get in, and he immediately started scrolling through the web pages that had been left open. “Um, she’s been making donations through her aliases to Shawnee County General in Topeka.”

Dean circled around to stand behind his brother. “What, a charity?”

“A patient,” Sam corrected as he further scrutinized the transactions. “Gertrude Middleton.”

“We need answers.” Dean shoved his phone into his pocket and took two steps towards the door. “I’ll take Gertrude, you two keep djinn-digging.”

Alex stepped forward, eyes narrowed. “You sure? Topeka’s over three hours away. Charlie might not have that long.” She held out her hand. “Let Sam figure out who this djinn could be. I can get you to Topeka and back in less than a heartbeat.”
Dean didn’t hesitate. “Good idea.” He looked over the angel’s shoulder and added to his brother, “Call if you come up with anything, okay? We’ll be back soon.” He put his hand on Alex’s shoulder, and the angel reached up to wrap her fingers around his wrist as her wings fell out. Her grace instinctively enveloped the Winchester, grip strengthened by Lucifer’s tight hold, and she took off through the skies.

They landed outside the Shawnee County General Hospital, and Alex stepped aside. “Go find out what you can about Mrs. Middleton,” she told him. “I’m going to grab some coffee. Want any?”

“No. You’re not coming in?”

Alex shrugged. “Charlie’s private life is none of my concern. I don’t care what happened to her before she became Charlie Bradbury; I know a thing or two about having an old life, and I know enough when to step back. Text me when you’re done.” Alex waved Dean goodbye and stepped down onto the sidewalk.

She made her way down the street, eyes scanning the buildings for food. There. A Biggerson’s sign on the other side of the street. She darted through traffic and ducked through the glass double doors, wings shaking out as she looked about the interior. It was pretty empty, not that the angel was surprised.

She crossed the room and sat down in one of the tables, pulling the empty close with a disinterested frown. “Hi. I’ll just take a caffe latte,” she told the young waitress who walked up to her. “That’ll be it.” She set the menu back down and pulled out her phone, scrolling through her messages as she awaited her drink.

Wings flittered, and Alex looked up in surprise. “W-What?” Her phone clattered onto the table in surprise, and she jumped to scoop it back up. “S-Sorry. Hey, Ezekiel. You startled me.”

“Sorry.” The seraph’s grey wings folded in behind his seat. “There were two angels following you, but I sent them away. I hope they weren’t causing you any trouble.”

Alex shrugged and lined up the edge of her phone with one of the stripes on the tablecloth. “Those were probably Naomi’s goons. Castiel … well, he found something she wants, and she’s been hunting him down. We got separated, and now those two have probably been tailing me since in case we meet back up.”

The angel leaned back in her seat as her drink was slid onto the table in front of her, and the waitress turned to Ezekiel. “Anything I can get for you today, sir?”

The seraph politely shook his head, and Alex added, “He’s good. Thank you.”

Ezekiel watched as the waitress walked away before he turned his gaze back onto Alex. “I sent the two back to heaven,” he told her. “They didn’t cause me much trouble; I outrank them, after all.” The seraph’s wings unfolded, hinting at their true size to emphasize his point. “You said Naomi was after you?”

“Yeah. You know her?” Alex took a sip of her drink, feathers prickling at the sudden wariness that coursed through her.

Ezekiel noticed, but he remained calm and cordial. “When you’re the son of an archangel, you’re well acquainted with many of the angels who are higher up. Especially one as notable as Naomi.”

“I’ve met her once,” Alex admitted. “Four or so months back. She — her grace felt weird. I didn’t know what to make of it.” She stirred a packet of sugar into her drink. “Why was that?”
The seraph nodded in understanding. “What you felt was centuries of bonded grace. Naomi was one of the first females chosen, back when humanity was still young. She and Raphael —” Ezekiel paused when Alex choked on her drink in surprise “—were mates for nearly ten thousand years. Are you okay?”


“They didn’t share the same partnership most mates do,” the seraph conceded, “but yes. They operated primarily in a professional relationship; I don’t think either of them had any offspring. When Raphael died, Naomi started recruiting some of her mate’s most loyal. I don’t think it was difficult — she was already well respected enough. I’m sorry you’ve had the bad luck of working against her.”

Alex gave a small shrug. “We’ve been up against worse,” she promised. “We’ll figure this one out. Hey … how … how’s Ash doing?”

The twitch in Ezekiel’s wings conveyed his willingness to abandon their old conversation. “He’s doing very well. Laura told me that you stopped by a little while ago,” he added in a casual tone. “She was a little worried that Ashiel had spotted you.”

“I just wanted to see him. I thought I deserved that much. But hey.” Alex slapped her palm down onto the table, wings fluttering as she shot the seraph a grin. “Once Cas and I get this ‘angel tablet’ thing figured out, we’re getting out of the game. Hell, if we’re lucky, we’ll even get back into heaven. Then I’ll get to see Ashiel all I want.”

Dean called her back to the hospital twenty minutes later, and Alex’s wings carried the both of them back to the bunker to find the Impala waiting outside the door. She followed Dean down the stairs to find Sam sitting at the library table; the brother looked up at their entrance. “Well? Did you find out who Gertrude Middleton is?”

“Yeah. She’s a patient at Shawnee County General; been in a vegetative state ever since she and her husband were hit by a drunk driver sixteen years ago. The nurse says they were on their way to pick up their daughter from a sleepover.”


“Charlie?” Dean finished. “Yeah. Mrs. Middleton’s never had any visitors, but someone’s been donating money to the hospital to keep her alive ever since. Truth is, the nurse says she’s already gone.”

Sam frowned. “So, no chance of a recovery, huh?”

“No.” Dean shook his head and joined his brother at the table. “No. Gertrude seemed like a cool mom, too. Kind, strong, taken from her family way too young — remind you of anybody?” He looked up at Sam, who didn’t respond. “Anyways. Did you find anything?”

“I think so.” Sam’s gaze slid over to Alex, and the angel limped over to sit down beside him. “A John Doe from nine years ago. The original coroner wanted the body sent to the CDC, but the coroner’s new assistant ‘accidentally’ ordered the body to be burned.”

“New assistant?” Alex repeated, and Sam nodded.

“Jennifer O’Brien.”
Alex watched as Dean’s eyebrows lifted, and she filled in the gaps. “Let me guess. Same name as the current coroner. Hm. Well, I suppose that job’s one hell of a cover for hiding your kills.”

Dean grunted out his agreement, and Sam nodded. “Now get this,” he continued, shuffling through some of his notes. “CDC never heard from Jennifer this time, either. She faked the reports, burned the bodies to cover her tracks.”

“So why does she get sloppy again after nine years and start leaving the bodies where they can be found?” Dean asked, and his head tipped slightly to the left as he awaited his brother’s answer.

Sam could only shrug. “Well, let’s go ask her. According to this, she owns two pieces of property in town, one two-bedroom house about ten minutes from here, and an abandoned shipping warehouse.”

“Oh course she does.” Dean and Alex spoke in unison — Alex added a roll of her eyes to accompany her words, but the Winchester only rose to his feet. “Alright. Let’s go. Alex, start the house, me and Sam will take the warehouse.”

“Uh, yeah. Sure thing.” Alex pushed back her chair and stood up, reaching for the paper that held Jennifer O’Brien’s addresses. “Call if there’s any trouble.” The young angel spread her wings out and took off, eyes narrowing as she passed through the warded ceiling and into the sky.

She landed on roof of the city hall, wings folding in against her back as she unfolded the paper. 5617 Fleetwood Ave. That couldn’t be too far away. The young angel looked up and down the street below, a frown darkening her face before she reached into her pocket and pulled out her cell. Google Maps would have to solve this one.

The angel settled herself down onto the roof as she waited for the device to find a signal, and her wings stretched out across the stone-covered roof. “Come on,” she muttered as she watched the spinning circle on the application. “If I’ve broken another damn phone …” She trailed off as Maps finally loaded, her frustrations short lived, and she quickly typed in the address Sam had scrawled down.

Her wings carried her back into the air, and she sped off towards the coroner’s home, eyes tracing her path as she soared high above the streets. There. Her wings pulled in tight, and the angel fell, plummeting down towards the small, two bedroom home with a brown picket fence. She landed on the front step, and her grace pulsed into the home even as she lifted a fist to knock on the door.

Nothing.

She knocked again, just for the sake of it, but when there was no movement from within, the angel’s wings fell. She pulled back out her phone and dialed Sam’s number. “Hey.” She leaned up against the porch railings as she peered in through the living room window. “There’s no one at the house here. I think I’ll go have a look at her office, and then I’ll meet you guys at the warehouse, okay? Keep me updated.”

She could hear the terseness in Sam’s voice, the stress of Charlie’s disappearance wearing down on his patience. “Sounds good. Make it quick.” The Winchester hung up, and Alex quickly did the same.

Her wings carried her up and across town to the coroner’s building. Police sirens reached her ears the moment she landed, and the young angel wrinkled her nose at the smell of gasoline as a large truck rumbled by, overpowering the damp spring air. Alex pushed her way in through the front door, eyes low and wings drawn in close as she moved down the halls towards Jennifer’s office.
She snagged a stack of files off of a card and held them up against her chest as she slipped between two women, doing her best to blend in with the rest of the employees. She ducked down the hall and stepped inside the coroner’s office, grace unlocking and locking the door behind her. “Alright. What can you tell me?” The angel pulled down the blinds before she turned her attention onto the coroner’s desk. Papers were stacked on every surface, bound with paperclips and staples. The faked CDC report was on top, and Alex flipped through the pages. “Useless.” The angel dropped the report, wingtips flicking in frustration. “Shitballs. Nothing here is going to help.”

Charlie’s at the warehouse. Sam’s prayer came through, and the young angel looked up. Get here fast—

Alex was there before the Winchester finished his thought. “Office was empty,” she relayed, barely sparing the brother’s a glance as she limped across the room to stand in front of the unconscious redhead strapped to a wooden chair. “How is she?” The angel reached out and touched the bright blue handprint burned onto Charlie’s arm.

“Alive.” Sam knelt down in front of the woman, a syringe in his hands, and Alex frowned at the blue liquid that was contained within in the plastic barrel. She looked over her shoulder, searching for the body of the djinn to whom that blue blood belonged. “Hopefully this should do the trick.”

“If it’s from the djinn that fed, then yeah,” Alex confirmed, and her eyes narrowed as she spotted a pair of legs partially hidden behind a crate. There. The dead djinn. “Are you two okay? Did she hurt you?”

“We’re fine,” Dean promised, but his voice was distant, fully focused on Charlie. “Why isn’t it working?” he snapped after a second, and Alex turned back to the brothers. “What the hell’s going on?”

Sam stood up, confusion darkening his face. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “Different djinn, maybe she needs a different antidote?”

“Charlie?” Dean leaned down, one large hand pressing up against the woman’s forehead. “She’s burning up, man,” he fretted, and he straightened back up, voice growing sharp as he turned to Sam and Alex. “We’re not letting her turn into jello.”

“Okay, okay, uh …” Sam paused, grasping for straws in his mind as he looked for a solution. “Okay. Djinn poison puts your brain in something like a feedback loop while your blood boils, right?”

“Right,” Dean confirmed.

“Um, if the antidote didn’t break the loop, then maybe we can find a way to break it from the inside.”

“Okay, perfect,” Dean interrupted and turned to Alex. “Just do your — you know — your Vulcan mind-meld and snap her out of it.”

Alex frowned at the Winchester’s tone. “We don’t know if that’ll work,” she retorted. “Hell, I’ve never actually done that before because you guys won’t let me fucking try it on anyone!”

“Then what good are you?” Dean snapped, and Alex’s flapped in offense before she pulled them back in. “I mean, no offense, but if you can’t even —”

“Hey, hey.” Sam stretched out his hand to stop his brother. “It’s not her fault. We’ll figure out another way. I mean, if Djinn take you to your happy place, your happy place is like a dream —”
“African dream root,” both he and Dean finished at the same time. “Perfect,” the oldest Winchester continued. “We have everything we need in the trunk.” He shoved his hand into his pocket, fumbling for the keys. “Wait here, okay? Keep her cool.”

Alex watched as Dean sprinted away. “Are you hurt?” she asked, turning back to Sam. When he shook his head, she knelt down in front of Charlie. “Dean’s right,” the young angel confirmed, reaching out to put a hand on the redhead’s flushed cheek. “She’s really warm. If we don’t do something soon, her brain’s going to fry itself. Along with every other organ in her body.” Her grace flowed forth, trying to cool Charlie down, but it barely seemed to slow the poison.

“Dean didn’t mean it.”

Alex looked up at Sam, searching his hazel eyes for any sign of apology. “Of course not,” she begrudgingly admitted. “He’s just worried about her. We all are — the antidote’s never not worked before. He’s right, though. Cas would be able to fix it. I … I just don’t want to try in case I screw up.”

“The dream root will work,” Sam promised, and wooden chair legs screeched as he dragged a chair over to Charlie. “Let’s focus on that, alright?”

Footsteps announced Dean’s rapid return, and Alex rose to her feet. “Here. Hold this.” Dean held out a jar of opaque yellowish liquid in which three roots were submerged. Sam took the jar and unscrewed the cap, and Dean removed a vial of what the young angel’s nose told her to be ginger. He poured it into the jar before reaching out and pulling a few hairs from Charlie’s head. “There.” He dropped them into the drink and took the jar back from Sam before his brother could even offer to drink it himself. “Alright, let’s do this.” Dean brought the jar up to his lips and drank it down, eyes screwed up against the bitter taste. “Ugh,” he spat. “Okay.” He handed the empty jar to Alex, and the angel set it down on the ground. “Alright, I’m gonna need to go to sleep fast, so, punch me.” Dean turned to his brother, hands going out in open invitation.

“Yes please.” Alex stepped forward, fists curled into a ball. “So is there a line, or —”

“Oh shut up.” Dean brushed off her eagerness with an unamused role his eyes. “Don’t act so excited, alright? Just — just someone hit me —” Sam’s fist flew out, catching his brother in the jaw, and Dean stumbled back at the force. However, he remained conscious. Sam shook out his hand, grunting in pain, and the Winchester reached up to feel his chin. “Well, you’re a little off your game there, cause I was — that was pretty —”

Sam lashed out again, and Dean fell down into the empty chair, eyes rolling into the back of his head as he fell unconscious. “Nice.” Alex watched as Sam clenched and unclenched his fists, massaging his knuckles, and she looked down at Charlie; a sheen of sweat made her pale skin shine in the harsh warehouse light. “Now let’s hope Dean can snap her out of it.”

“Yeah —” Sam cut off, letting out a loud, wet cough, and Alex turned to face him.

“Dude. You okay?” She watched as he pulled away his hand, lips pursed tightly at the faint spattering of blood upon his palm. “Sam.” She reached up and pulled his hand close before he could wipe it away on his jeans, and grey eyes flashed angrily. “Since when are you coughing up blood?”

Something rattled on the warehouse shelves behind them, and both hunters spun around. Alex’s wings flared out, dropping Sam’s hand as her eyes sought out the source of the noise. A second later it made itself known; a teenage boy stepped into view, small fists clenched at his sides as his eyes burned blue. “You killed my mom.”
Alex looked the boy up and down. He was young — the oversized grey sweatshirt only seemed to further his adolescent stature. “You must be O’Brien’s son,” she guessed, stepping to one side to stand between the djinn and Charlie Bradbury. “I didn’t know she had a kid, but that certainly explains the messy kills.” She lifted her chin, confidence growing as she sized up her small opponent.

“I came of age,” the coroner’s son insisted; his voice shook with grief and rage. “I had to feed. I screwed up.”

“That doesn’t matter.” Alex’s voice was cold, her relaxed yet composed stance in stark contrast to the teenager’s enraged tremblings. “And you know how this ends, don’t you?”

The boy’s eyes flashed with a violent light, and his skin began to glow as blue swirled across his arms. “Yeah,” he yelled. “It ends with you dead!”

The teenager never stood a chance. Even with his unnatural strength, he was inexperienced, and he was dead at the angel’s hands before he had taken three steps forward. Alex withdrew her blade from the boy’s chest, shoving the body off and onto the floor in a motion perfected through years of practice, and her grace cleaned her weapon of the djinn’s blue blood.

Sam watched as she slid it down the back of her shirt. “How’s that working for you?”

“Meh.” The young angel’s wings fluttered as the metal nestled itself between the base of her feathers. “It’s a fucking pain for a quick draw, but it looks hella cool, right? Very ninja.” She nudged at the dead djinn’s body before adding, “Anyways. Blood, antidote. Hopefully it’ll work this time.”

She stepped back as Sam dropped down in front of the dead djinn and slid the empty syringe into the creature’s arm. Blue blood spilled forth as the plunger was drawn back, and the Winchester hurried to inject the new antidote into Charlie’s arm.

Charlie didn’t immediately stir, but Dean did, and Sam’s attention immediately swung over to his brother. “Dean? Dean!” He reached out to steady his waking brother, who let out a low groan. “Hey! C’mere. You okay? What happened?”

Dean slowly lifted himself out of his chair, helped by his brother. “I’m okay,” he insisted when Sam repeated his question. “Charlie?”

“She’s coming out of it.” Alex knelt down beside the redhead, a hand feeling the woman’s forehead. “She’s still burning up, but it’ll come down in a minute or two.” She pulled away when Charlie’s head rolled to one side, and green eyes fluttered open. A choked out, tearful cry came from her mouth, and she jumped to her feet.

Dean looked down at her, face softening. “I’m sorry,” he murmured, pulling her into a tight hug as tears welled up in the woman’s eyes. “I had to.” He held her close, and Alex stepped aside, unsure what had caused such an upheaval of shared emotions.

“It was the coroner’s son,” she explained after a second or two, drawing Dean’s gaze onto her. “He’s the djinn who fed on the vics and on Charlie. Are you guys okay?”

“We’re fine.” Dean patted Charlie on the back as the redhead buried her face into his shoulder. “Come on. Let’s get you out of here.”

Alex and Sam exchanged looks, and the angel nodded, understanding what those hazel eyes were asking. “Go, get her out of here. I’ll clean up this mess.” She waved them off with a flick of her wings, turning to look down at the young djinn’s body as the three walked away. “Sucks to suck, I
guess,” she muttered. “Enjoy Purgatory.”

She dumped the bodies in a valley at the top of the Rockies mountains, pausing only momentarily at the top of a cliff to watch as a few lone snowflakes drifted down settle upon their pale skin. A strange mix of empathy flashed through her, but the angel pushed it away with a flick of her wings. Monsters were monsters, after all. They didn’t deserve empathy.

Black wings carried her back down the mountain and towards Kansas. She stopped only once, at a convenience store near Wheatland, Wyoming, for some food for the three humans back at home — Charlie especially needed some sugar.

She landed in the bunker library and looked around, surprised to find that only Sam sat before her. “Hey,” she greeted, dropping the bag of treats onto the table. “Where’s Charlie? I bought her a slushie.”

“Gone, I think.” Sam glanced up towards the bunker stairs. “Dean was just seeing her off.”

“Hm.” The young angel set down the frozen drink with a disappointed frown. “Didn’t even want to say goodbye, huh? And here I was thinking she’d be sticking around a bit longer. How’s she holding up?”

“I think she’ll be okay. Going off to visit her mom, actually. Whatever she dreamt about really got her thinking, I guess.” Sam pulled the plastic bag closer and peered inside. “She knows she’s welcome here anytime —” He cut off with a violent cough, curling forward as his ribs contracted. “Careful.” Alex reached out to steady him, humor masking her concern “You want your lungs *inside* your body, not out.”

The bunker door swung open and closed, and Sam got to his feet as Dean made his way down the stairs. “Okay, look,” Sam began before his brother could open his mouth. “You were right. I should have —”

Dean pulled Sam into a tight hug, cutting off his words. Sam’s eyes widened momentarily in surprise, and Alex tipped her head, confused at Dean’s strange and sudden surge of affection. “Are you okay?” she queried. “Is this some sort of, uh, weird dream root side effect?”

“What?” Dean turned to look down at her, and he shook his head. “No — no. I just … what do you say we find our prophet, huh?” He cast a glance towards Alex, and after a second he added, “Hey, uh … good work today.”

Dean flashed her a thumbs up and walked away, and Alex and Sam exchanged looks. “Oh, there’s definitely something weird going on with him,” the young angel muttered. “Either that or Charlie’s dream got to him, too.” She looked down at the neglected slushie on the table. “Here.” She pushed it over towards Sam. “You can have it. I’m going to go see if I can find something to help Castiel. Maybe there’s something downstairs that I can do before it’s too late.”
Wings flittered through the air as Alex spun around, shoes squeaking against the wooden floor as her fingers gripped the basketball tightly. A foot went out to stop her turn, and once her eyes found the basket, the ball was in the air. It hit the backboard with a thud before rolling around the rim and falling off to the side, thudding against the wooden floorboards, and Alex’s shoulders dropped.

"Strike one, Bryant." Dean’s voice had her turning to find the Winchester leaning up against the doorway, arms folded across his plain black shirt, and heat flushed across the angel’s cheeks at his teasing.

“My leg almost buckled,” she lied in an attempt at some defense. “Shut up.”

Dean flashed her a grin, noticing her obvious deceit, but he refrained from calling her out. “Speaking of,” he asked instead, “how’s it holding up? You look pretty steady out there.”

“It’s healing up really well.” Alex let the ball roll over to the far wall, and she crossed the gym to stand in front of Dean. “It just aches a little bit now and then. Looks like melting down an angel blade cuts back on some of its bite. How … how’s Sam doing?”

“He’s getting worse.” Dean’s face darkened, and he glanced over his shoulder towards the stairs leading downwards. ‘I’ve got some soup on the stove — an old recipe of Dad’s. It’s probably done by now if you want some.”

“You know, I could go for some food right about now. And my leg could probably do with some rest.” Alex followed Dean out of the gym and down towards the kitchen. She heard Sam cough from within the library, and she cast a sympathetic glance towards the direction in which he lay. They hadn’t taken a case since the family of djinns, too busy searching for Kevin Tran, and even though they had only been looking for barely more a week, Sam’s condition had worsened exponentially.

The hot tang of warm cayenne pepper burned at her nose the minute she stepped into the kitchen, and the angel hummed in delight. “That smells really good,” she praised, pawing through the spices that decorated the kitchen counter. “When did you go out and get all this stuff?”

“A couple hours ago when you were buried in that book downstairs.” Dean filled up a white ceramic bowl before he handed the large wooden spoon over to Alex. “Soup’s a fix-all for sickness, right?”

Alex quickly ladled the thin orange liquid into her own dish, letting out a wordless noise of agreement. She followed Dean out through the library to find Sam hunched over in one of the chairs surrounding the large, plexiform table with the map of the world. A coarse, green Men of Letters blanket was draped across his shoulders, and despite his flushed cheeks, the hair on his arms stood on end. “Alright, here we go.” Dean set the tray of soup down in front of his brother. “John Winchester’s famous cure-all kitchen sink stew. There you go. Enough cayenne pepper in there to burn your lips off, just like Dad use to make.”

Alex sat down across from the younger Winchester, but Sam didn’t even look up. He only pushed the tray away and pawed through the pile of documents in front of him with glazed eyes.
Dean frowned, but he picked up the spoon. “Yeah, we gonna do the whole airplane thing with the spoon?” he asked, forced humor in his voice in an attempt to elicit any response from his brother, but when nothing came, he dropped the spoon back down onto the tray. “When was the last time you ate?”

“I-I don’t …”

Dean cut him off impatiently. “Days, Sam. It’s been three days,” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a thermometer.

Sam looked up, immediately going on the defense. “When’d you get that?”

“When you started throwing off heat waves,” his brother retorted and held it out. “Here.”

Sam threw off the blanket and rose to his feet, stumbling on his shaking legs. “Enough, Dean,” he snapped as he regained his footing. “Please.”

“Sam, sit back down,” Alex pleaded as the Winchester’s body trembled. “You should be resting, not working. Just try and eat a little bit, okay? You can’t keep going long without food.”

“The bloody handkerchiefs, the fever, the shaky legs,” Dean added. “This is not good.”

Sam’s eyes hardened. “Well, I’m not good. And I’m not going to be good until we can start moving again. Until I can start the third trial.”

“Trial?” Dean let out a scoff. “I wouldn’t let you start a moped. We’re on the rails with this thing, okay, and the only way out of it is through it, believe me, I know. And you know how bad I wanna slam the doors on all those sons of bitches. But you gotta let me take care of you, man.” He looked down at Alex, and the angel nodded, so he added, “You gotta let us help you get your strength back.”

“This isn’t a cold,” Sam insisted, voice cracking. “Or a fever, or whatever it is you’re supposed to feed. This is part of it all. Those first two trials … they’re not just things I did. They’re doing something to me. They’re changing me, Dean.”

Dean opened his mouth to respond, but a from within the library came a loud ding, the sound of a notification on Dean’s laptop. The Winchester looked up, hand going to his back pocket to check his phone for the same notification. “It’s Kevin,” he told them, hurrying up the few concrete stairs to where his laptop lay open on the table. Sam and Alex followed close on his heels, and the Winchester quickly pulled up the email sent from the prophet.

It was a link to a video, and Kevin Tran appeared upon the screen, unshaven and unkempt. “Sam, Dean. Alex. I’ve set up this message with some software on a remote server so it’d send itself to you if I didn’t reset it with a command once a week,” he began, voice slow and flat, like he barely could bring himself to speak. “Which means I didn’t reset it this week. And there’s only one reason I wouldn’t. Which means if you’re watching this, then I … then I — I’m dead.” The prophet’s hands slammed down on the table, and Alex jumped at his sudden burst of fury. “I’m dead, you bastards!” he screamed. “So screw you, screw God and everybody in between.”

“No.” Alex’s wings trembled, and she looked up at Dean, disbelief hardening her face. “No, no that’s not possible, Dean. I —”

“Crowley must have gotten to me,” Kevin continued quietly, and the angel fell silent when Dean stiffly held up his hand, motioning for her to be quiet. “And the one thing I know is that I won’t break this time.” His voice hardened in resolution, and something flashed momentarily in his dull
brown eyes. “Not sure how I know but — but I do. I’ve been uploading all my notes, my translations, I’m sending you the links so you can get all of this. You guys are gonna have to try and figure out the rest. I’m sorry.” Tears welled up in the prophet’s eyes, and Alex struggled to blink away her own. “I know it was my job, but I — but I couldn’t … I’m sorry.”

The video ended, and Alex flinched as Dean spun away, hands going out to knock a large stack of books off of the table. “Damn it!” he yelled, and the angel stepped away from him.

“He’s not dead. H-He can’t be dead,” she begged as the Winchester rounded on her. “He — he would prayed to me if he were in trouble, Dean. He promised that he would. He can’t be dead. This has to be a trick of Crowley’s. Right?”

“It’s not your fault,” Sam promised, and Alex’s shoulders fell.

“Of course it’s not.” Dean leaned against the table, hands planted firmly on the wooden surface. “It’s not your fault. We — I — should have moved him here.” He fell silent, and for several seconds, nobody spoke.

It was Sam who finally dared to break the silence. “I guess I’ll go get started on Kevin’s notes,” he said. Neither Dean nor Alex responded, and the youngest Winchester quietly walked away.

The minute Sam was gone, Dean turned to the angel. “Go find Crowley.” Green eyes flashed in rage, and his voice was deep and sharp. “Find that bastard and put a bullet in his head.”

“That might be a bit extreme,” Alex cautioned, holding up a hand to calm the hunter down. “We don’t know that Kevin’s really dead — maybe he just couldn’t get to a computer, right? That’s a possibility. I’ll try and find him, okay, I will, but if something happens here, like if Sam gets worse, you call me immediately.”

“Of course.”

“Of course,” Alex echoed, and she reached up to pinch the bridge of her nose. “Okay. Let me put on some jeans and I’ll go see what I can find. I’ll be in touch.” She glanced back at the table where her soup lay, and on a second thought added, “And put that back in the fridge. I’m saving it for dinner.”

**Shasta County, California**

Alex landed on the dusty concrete floor of the abandoned shipping warehouse in upper California, knees bending slightly to brace herself for the stop. “Alright, Crowley,” she muttered, setting a duffle bag down onto the ground as she looked around the poorly-lit interior; the cracked, opaque windows did little to let in the sun’s light. “We need to talk, and we can do this two ways. The easy way, or the hard way.” She reached into her back pocket and pulled out her phone, which was already open to Crowley’s contact. “Easy way first.”

She dialed the King’s number and pressed the device up against her ear, waiting patiently as it rang once, then twice. It cut off mid-third ring, however, and the angel’s wings dropped in flat disbelief to find that he had sent her to his voicemail. “Alright, asshat. You asked for it.”

The angel shoved her phone back into her pocket and knelt down to unpack the bag she had brought. A wooden bowl, three candles, rosemary, cumin, and wormwood. Her wings flapped twice to clear away some of the thick dirt that decorated the floor so she could set about drawing a simplistic demon summoning sigil. Three candles on each each points of the triangle, and the bowl in
the center of the circle within. The spellwork was weak and crude, but it should do the trick.

“Ad constringendum, ad ligandum eos pariter et solvendum: Et ad congregandum eos coram me;” she recited, dropping in a slip of parchment upon which ‘Crowley’ was scrawled in messy handwriting, and she rose to her feet. A flick of her grace ignited the paper and dried herbs, and the bowl’s contents burst into flames.

Alex lifted her head, looking around the empty warehouse as she waited for the King of Hell’s appearance. Her wings flicked impatiently as the fire died, and for a second she contemplated redoing the spell with a stronger sigil, but the rushing of cold air dismissed that thought immediately. “Really, Feathers. A summoning spell?”

“All you had to do was answer the phone and this would have been a hell of a lot easier.” Her eyes hardened, and she reached up, drawing her weapon from her back as her wings spread wide. “I think we need to have a talk.”

The shadows moved, and Alex’s wings rose to find demons lining the edge of the warehouse, eyes black and faces cold. “A talk about what, pray tell?” Crowley’s gaze turned out across the mass of demonic souls that surrounded them. “Don’t mind them; a little insurance policy in case you try to do anything stupid.”

Alex watched as the King of Hell produced a small, black pistol, and her wings flittered as she recognized the barrel. “You really know how to kill the mood, don’t you,” she joked dryly, fingers tightening on the hilt of her sword. “I just recovered from the last bullet, thank you.” She slowly reached up and let her weapon slide back down her shirt. “I just want to talk.”

“About?”

“Kevin Tran.” The demons disappeared, and Alex looked around in confusion. Why were they leaving? “What did you think this was about?”

The demon didn’t answer. “And what exactly do you want to discuss?” Crowley strolled forward, brown eyes flashing in guarded curiosity. “Let me guess — here to bargain for my half of the tablet?”

The angel huffed, amused at his misled assumptions, but she let her anger spill forth. “Where’s the prophet, Crowley?”

Surprise flitted behind the demon’s gaze, so quickly covered by blasé composure that it was almost as if it had never existed. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I haven’t seen the little twit since Iowa.”

Alex frowned, not buying into his story. “You’ve had how many demons out scoring the earth, and you haven’t found him in six months?”

Crowley’s lips pursed together in a frown. “What do you want?”

“How about the truth?” Alex suggested, stepping forward, and her grace snapped through the air. “We got a message from Kevin — the only reason we’d get it is if Kevin were unable to reset the software. And the only reason he’d do that was if he were dead.” Her eyes narrowed in accusation, but Crowley barely batted an eye. “You’re the only person who was after him,” she finished angrily. “See the problem?”

“You think I kidnapped him and … what? Killed the only person who could read the tablet?” The demon let out a loud scoff. “I haven’t seen him. You’re up the wrong tree, kitten. You want to point
“fingers, point them towards your own kind.”

“The angels wouldn’t to this.” Alex retorted, and her fingers tightened into fists as she found herself getting nowhere in this conversation. “We’re going to find him, and if you or any of your demons have touched him —”

“You’ll kill me,” Crowley finished. “Trust me, I know.” A flutter of feathers had both angel and demon turning, and Alex’s feathers ruffled defensively at the skinny, brown-eyed angel. Copper wings rose as the newcomer spotted her, but Crowley remained unperturbed. “Tremiel,” he greeted, and his voice took on a note of displeasure. “Can’t you see I’m in the middle of something?”

“Sorry, sir, but Ion sent me,” the angel quickly apologized. “It’s about Castiel,” he added with a side glance towards Alex; her wings perked up at his name, and she took two steps forward.

Crowley followed his gaze. “Bet you didn’t know I had angels on the payroll,” he crowed, dark eyes gleaming at the stupefied horror across Alex’s face. “You’d be surprised how little it takes nowadays.”

Alex reached up and drew her weapon, grace coiling angrily through the air. “How many?” she demanded, lifting her chin up in defiance as Tremiel’s own blade appeared in his hands.

“Now that’s none of your business.” Crowley turned to go, but on a second thought he paused, “Kill her,” he instructed. “Or die trying.”

“Really?” Alex yelled after the demon as he disappeared. Her wings flapped twice furiously, confused and betrayed by the demon’s death sentence. “I’m going to fucking kill you, Crowley!” She swung her head over to to Tremiel, lips pursed. “Alright. How do you want to do this —”

She barely ducked out of the way as the angel lunged forward, blade swinging over her head. She threw out a leg as she spun around, knocking the angel’s feet out from under him and sending him toppling to the ground. Her wings steadied her as she dropped into a defensive posture. “Hey,” she snapped. “Stop. You don’t have to do this. How old are you?”

“None of your business,” Tremiel spat, wings pushing him back to his feet. “And you heard Crowley. There’s only one side that’s going to win this war, and it’s not the angels.”

“You’re just a kid,” Alex insisted. “I’m enaiish. You don’t think I don’t know a fledgling when I see one?”

“I’m not a fledgling!” Tremiel launched himself forward, and Alex backpedalled to avoid the flash of metal, but she refused to deal a blow of her own.

“Your wings are still smaller than mine, and your grace is underdeveloped,” she retorted angrily. “Don’t lie to me! I’m not killing a kid. Now let’s just talk this out, okay? You ever worked with Crowley before? He’ll keep you around until you stop being useful, and then he’ll have you killed. I’ve seen it happen. So why don’t we both just walk away. Just tell me what you know about my mate — about Castiel.”

The angel’s small copper wings fell down to his side, and Alex cautiously did the same. “Castiel is your mate?” Tremiel stepped forward, brown eyes stretched wide.

“Yeah.” Alex muscles relaxed as Tremiel’s weapon disappeared back up into his suit coat. “I’ve known him for almost six years. Do you know where he is? I need to find him before Crowley kills him.”
“Yeah, yeah. I don’t know where he is exactly, but …” Copper wings flittered as Tremiel moved to stand in front of her, his eyes flickering nervously around the room. “Listen. I really shouldn’t be telling you this, okay? We’ve figured out Castiel’s pattern — he’s been moving between Biggerson’s. They all look identical, but we have a plan to make him stop.”

“How?” Alex’s wings curled forward as Tremiel’s voice dropped into a whisper. “Come on. You can still do the right —”

She cut off with a screech of pain as metal flashed through the air, and she twisted just in time so the weapon pierced through her side, missing her lungs by mere centimeters. Tremiel’s eyes hardened in hatred, but they widened in shock when Alex grabbed his shoulder and pulled him closer. His mouth fell open as his grace exploded in a flash of hot, blinding light, and wings burned away as the angel died.

Tremiel’s body fell to the ground, limp and lifeless, and Alex staggered, pulling her blade out as she did. She pressed her hand into her bloodied side, wincing in pain. It didn’t feel deep. The blade must have just graze through the flesh between her ribs. She looked down at the angel, and grief and sympathy pushed through her, making her wings tremble. He was just a kid. He shouldn’t have had to die.

“And he’s so young.” She stepped away from the body, wings drawn in tight. “You should take him back to heaven. His family — they deserve closure.”

“Ezekiel.” Alex tilted her eyes upwards. “I — I need your help.” She pressed her hand even more tightly against her wound to stem the bleeding, turning around at the fluttering of wings that announced the seraph’s arrival. “I’m sorry,” she began as Ezekiel’s blue gaze fell on the fallen angel. “Crowley … Crowley has angels on his side. Tremiel tried to kill me, and I … I couldn’t … He was so young.” She stepped away from the body, wings drawn in tight. “You should take him back to heaven. His family — they deserve closure.”

“Your help.” Ezekiel’s eyes found her bloodied shirt. “Did he do this?”

“I’m fine.” Alex extended a wing, keeping the seraph at bay. “But they’re hunting Castiel, Zeke. Tremiel said they’re close. I have to warn him.” She slide her blade back down between her wings with a low, pain groan. “Before — before —” She sunk to the ground, teeth grit. “Before they find him.”

“What you need to do is rest.” Ezekiel knelt down in front of her, but Alex pushed his grace away. “You can warn him, but if you want to help, you need to get somewhere safe. Go back to those friends of yours. They’ll keep you from harm’s way.” The seraph’s gaze turned back to Tremiel. “I’ll take our fallen brother home.”

Alex nodded, and with Ezekiel’s help, she rose to her feet. “Okay. Stay in touch.” Her wings unfolded, and she took off into the air. Her flight felt clumsy, her wings numb and uncoordinated, and she finally slithered to a stop in the Men of Letters’ shower room. She peeled back her shirt to see the damage — it wasn’t deep, and the bleeding was slowing down. Alex fished around for gauze in the first aid kit and pressed it into her side, a noise of mingled discomfort and relief making its way up her throat. She would live, no doubt about that one.

She applied a crude bandage before she made her way down to her room, tossing her bloodied, torn shirt towards the trash can; one more shirt rendered useless, she thought, and pulled on one of Dean’s black tees and an oversized sweatshirt.

“Castiel?” she repeated aloud, her prayer bouncing off the bare bedroom walls. “Are you there? You need to run. Crowley — Crowley’s got angels, and he’s onto you.”

There was no answer, and the young angel’s wings trembled at the implications. “Please be okay,” she whispered as she stepped out into the hallway. “You have to be okay.”
Sam and Dean were sitting at the table; the former was pouring over Kevin’s notes with a fervor he hadn’t expressed in a long time. “Hey.” Dean looked up at her as she entered. “How’d it go? You find Crowley?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Alex slumped into the chair next to Sam with a pained whine as she felt blood trickle from her side and into the gauze. “Did you guys find anything in Kevin’s notes?”

“Nothing.” Dean watched his brother flip through several pages with a shake of his head. “Hell, I can’t even understand half of it. I’m about ready to quit and get some lunch. Right, Sammy?” He frowned when Sam didn’t even look up. “Sam.”

“Hmm.” Sam let out a low, interested hum, and when he flipped to another page, Alex got the feeling he hadn’t heard Dean’s words at all. “There it is again, every time.”

“What?”

“This symbol?” Sam pointed to a mark at the top of Kevin’s notes, four circles linked in a triangular pattern. “I know it. Now, Kevin has it down as — as sort of like a signature, for the Scribe of God. It appears every time Metatron makes one of his, uh, like, editor’s notes.”

Dean blinked. “Okay …?”

“But I think I’ve seen it before,” Sam finished, voice rising in barely contained excitement. “I mean, it was a long time ago, it was one of my, uh, humanities courses at Stanford.”

“They taught Word of God at Stanford?” Dean’s eyebrows rose, and Alex mimicked his expression of disbelief.

Sam shook his head and got to his feet. “No, uh, it was an overview of Native American art — I think it’s a petroglyph.” He turned to the bookshelves behind them, hazel eyes searching desperately for the familiar binding of one of his books.

Dean looked over at Alex, and the young angel shrugged. “A petro-what-now?” she asked.

She jumped as Sam slammed a heavy book onto the table, and she winced as her muscles tightened, pulling on her torn side. “Here.” The Winchester opened up to a page where the circular symbol was sketched. “This one belonged to a tiny tribe in Colorado, more of a — a clan, really,” he read. “It says here they held onto their scrap of mountains when all the other tribes fell to the white men. So this glyph was a territorial marker — closest translation: ‘messenger of God.’ Messenger of God.” Sam looked up with wide eyes as all the pieces fell into place. “Dean, we have to go there!”

“Hold up.” Alex got to her feet as Sam stumbled. “We can’t just leave on a half-ass hunch like that. No offense, Sam, but you’re barely functioning right now. What if it’s just a coincidence? Or, hell, it could be talking about Gabriel. He gallivanted with the pagan gods for a while, after all.”

“We can’t wait,” Sam insisted. “Listen, I’m only gonna get worse. I mean, until we can get back to the real job, until we find the third trial — we’re out of prophets! We’re not gonna figure out what Kevin couldn’t! I say we go to this messenger of God who wrote it in the first place!”

Dean looked between Sam and Alex; the angel only shrugged, backing down from this argument. “So you think this Metatron is hiding out in the mountains with a bunch of Indians,” he finally said, voice flat.

“Yeah! Yeah, I do.” Sam hesitated, and then he quietly added, “You’re not — you’re not really supposed to stay ‘Indians,’ it’s …” The hunter trailed off. “We should go.” He hurried off down the
hall towards his room — to pack, no doubt, and Alex frowned after him.

“He’s delirious,” Dean muttered as he turned back to the mess of notes. “Help me pack this stuff up.” He waited until the young angel started gathering up the prophet’s writings before he asked, “So what happened with Crowley? You’ve been really quiet.”

Alex glanced down the hall that Sam had disappeared down, and she lowered her voice as she lifted up her shirt for Dean to see her side. “I don’t know about Kevin, but Crowley’s looking for Castiel and the angel tablet,” she murmured. “And now he’s got angels on his side. He had one of them try and kill me — probably so that I wouldn’t warn Cas.” She let her shirt fall back down. “I can’t reach him, Dean. I don’t even know if my prayers are getting through.” She lifted her head when she heard Sam’s door slam closed, and she let out a long, drawn-out breath through her nose. “Come on. The sooner we find Metatron, the sooner we can close those gates of hell forever. And then we can focus on finding Cas.”

**Santa Fe, Colorado**

Alex stepped out of the Impala, her wings flicking curiously as she gazed around the cold, empty streets. The Two Rivers Hotel loomed in front of them, its exterior as dark and as gloomy as the grey, rainy skies above their heads. Alex waited for the brothers to gather their bags from the trunk before she followed them through the swinging double doors and into the lobby. Slot machines lay off to the right, but apart from the three of them, there wasn’t another soul in sight. Dean walked up to the front desk and rung the bell, and after a second or two a man answered. Alex ran an eye over him for only a brief moment before she turned her attention onwards; he was clearly of Native American heritage, with his darker skin, broad nose, and dark, braided hair.

“Morning,” Dean began. “Hi, uh, we’d like a room? Here, please,” he added impatiently when the man’s blank expression didn’t leave his face.

Sam wandered deeper into the lobby, eyes squinted as he stared at the neon signs that hung on the wall, and Alex tipped her head in concern when called back to them, “D-Did you hear that?”

He continued to stare at the signs, even when Dean asked. “Hear what?” The Winchester turned back to the man at the desk. “He has the flu,” he lied, and Alex crossed the room to put a hand on Sam’s arm.

“What do you hear?” she asked quietly, ears straining to pick up any noise out of the ordinary, but there was nothing. Only the hum of the lights and the swirl of the furnace downstairs.

“T-The ringing,” Sam insisted, and he looked down at Alex. “You — you don’t hear any of that?”

“No.” The angel glanced back to Dean. He was holding the keys to their room, but was still waiting for the manager to come up with the paperwork. “Come on.” She stepped back towards the eldest Winchester. “Let’s go put our stuff down and then we can talk about it, okay? Then maybe some food. It’s been a long drive.”

She accepted the keys from Dean and led Sam up the stairs to the second floor. The keychain said 214, so she led the way down to the end of the hallway where room 214 lay. The key fit snugly in the lock, and the door swung open. “There.” She stepped into the musty room and crossed over to the nearest bed. “We’ll figure out a game plan as soon as Dean gets up.” She pulled her feet up onto the mattress as Sam moved past and sat down on the other bed. “How are you feeling?”
“I’m fine.” Sam reclined against the pillows, eyes focused on the ceiling. “Tired. I kind of feel like shit.”

“Probably doesn’t help that you have a high-grade fever,” Alex added, voice pointed, but thankfully Sam didn’t take offense at her tone. “We need to get the third trial done with soon before you get any worse.”

Sam hummed out something of an agreement, then he let out a little laugh. “I’m fine,” he repeated. “Fine fine fine.”

“Sam?” Alex turned, confused by his sudden change in mood. “You … you okay?” She reached out and put a hand on his hot forehead. “Um, okay. Let me get you some water, okay? You should drink.” She got to her feet and grabbed one of the styrofoam cups on the nightstand before hurrying over to the sink. “Here.” She handed the cold water to the Winchester, who took it but made no move to taste it.

The door opened, and Alex looked up. “Regular tourist mecca we got here,” Dean muttered, kicking the door closed behind him. “We’re the only guests in this whole place. Last entry in the registry was in ’06.”

“Hey, you remember when, uh … when Dad took us to the bottom of the Grand Canyon, on that pack-mule ride?” Sam suddenly asked, looking up at his brother.

Dean paused, green eyes flashing in confusion. “The what?”

“A-And your, uh … your mule kept farting, just — l-letting go, like, gale force?” Sam continued, a wide grin across his face at the memory.

Dean looked down at Alex; the angel only shrugged, just as confused at Sam’s behavior as he was. “Dude, you were like, four years old,” Dean finally said, moving to sit down on the bed beside Alex. “I barely remember that.”

Sam let out a loud laugh. “You rode a farty donkey,” he repeated, and his arm came up to cover his eyes.

“Okay.” Dean got back to his feet, and Alex watched as he dug into his pocket and pulled out his phone to check the time. “Uh, I’m gonna go check out the Two Rivers Tribal Museum and Trading Post,” he told them.

“Yeah. Yeah!” Sam sat up. “I’m gonna — I’m gonna, uh.” He stopped, unsure of what he was going to do. “I’m gonna follow the hotel manager, D-Dr. Scowley-scowl. He’s like a villain from Scooby-Doo.”

Despite herself, Alex laughed. “He totally is,” she agreed, but Dean only frowned.

“No, hey, uh, little big man?” He stretched out a hand to keep his brother from getting up. “You should get some rest.”

Sam paused. “Yea, I can do that, too.” He fell back down onto the bed, eyes closing as soon as his head hit the pillow.

“I can tail the manager,” Alex suggested. “Sam can stay here and rest, and if he needs anything he’ll just pray. Right, Sam?” The hunter didn’t answer, and she looked down at him. “Sam. Right?”

“Right,” the hunter echoed, but the angel doubted he understood what he was agreeing to. “I think
— I think I’m gonna take a nap.”

Alex leaned up against the wall, wings flicking impatiently as she watched the hotel manager through the open doorway. He was sitting with his back to her, and he hadn’t moved anytime in the past hour. He was just … reading. Reading some dusty old novel he had pulled out of a cabinet.

The angel rested her head back against the wall as she waited for the man to do something. Whoever he was, he certainly wasn’t the angelic mastermind behind the tablets of God, and he didn’t seem to have any connection to it.

The front doors to the hotel opened, announcing the arrival of the post man, and Alex turned her head to watch a man wheel several white boxes into lobby. The manager stirred, and Alex took that as her cue to slip away. Maybe she should just search the town.

She made her way out the front doors in search of Dean; last she had seen him, he was one his way across the street to the Two Rivers Tribal Museum to see what he could find out about the town. She stretched her grace out in search of him, but she paused in confusion when the museum doors flung open.

Dean ran out, charging across the street without even bothering to look for cars. “Have you seen Sam?” he asked, voice rough with worry.

“No. Why?” Alex looked back towards their hotel. “I was in the lobby watching the manager —”

“He’s not picking up his cell.” Dean looked down at his phone. “He called me, but he didn’t respond when I answered. Find him.”

Alex barely waited for him to finish his sentence before she thrust out her wings and propelled herself up into the air. She dove into their motel room, landing in between the beds as her wings drew in close. “Sam?” She dropped down in front of the collapse hunter; it looked like he had just barely made it to the door before he had fallen. His phone lay at his side, contact open to Dean’s, and she pushed it aside so she could kneel closer to him. “Sam!”

She tried to shake the hunter into consciousness, but Sam Winchester didn’t stir. Alex put a hand on his forehead, wincing in sympathetic pain at how hot his skin burned. “He’s burning up,” she said when the door flew open. “I —”

“Go fill the bathtub with water. Cold as you can.” Dean knelt down beside his brother and pulled him up into his arms. Alex hesitated, and green eyes flashed. “Go!”

The angel jumped to her feet and tore into the bathroom. She shoved the stopper into the bottom the white, porcelain tub and turned on the cold water. Dean carried his brother after her, grunting slightly at the weight, and Alex helped him slide Sam into the water, clothes and all. “He’s alive,” she finally said, the words the only thing she could think of to say.

“This isn’t enough.” Dean reached down to feel the water with a dark shake of his head. “Go get some ice. We need to bring his temperature down fast.”

Alex nodded and hurried away.

It took several trips, but before long she had filled the bathtub with ice. Unable to do anything else,
the angel stepped back and waited. A minute passed, and then two before Sam’s eyes suddenly jerked open, and he lunged upwards, emerging from the icy bath with a cry of surprise. “Get off!” He pushed Dean away and scrambled free, falling out of the tub. Alex jumped back in surprise.

“Take it easy, Sam,” Dean started as he regained his balance. “Hey, whoa whoa whoa, take it easy, take it …” Dean pulled a dark towel from the sink and wrapped it tightly around his brother’s shivering shoulders as he steadied him on his feet. “Found you on the floor, passed out, your temperature was a 107. We had to force it down or you were toast.”

Sam didn’t seem to hear any of Dean’s words. “He’s here, Dean,” he gasped out, eyes wide as he looked up at his brother “Metatron is here, I know it, I can hear him.”

“Here? What are you talking about?” Dean looked back ago Alex. “Is he here?”

“I don’t know,” Alex retorted, her voice still sharp from the fear of Sam’s condition. “You said we were the only visitors, so I didn’t bother to look. How do you know?” she asked. “What you you mean you can hear him?”

Sam shook his head. “All I know is that I’m connected to it somehow,” he insisted.

“What, like you got a link to him, like a prophet?” Dean guessed.

“I don’t know!” Sam tried to straighten up, and his hazel eyes flashed to find Dean and Alex’s lack of trust in him. “I just know he’s here. Metatron is here.”

Dean’s shoulders fell, and he caved. “Okay, ‘here’ where?” he asked.

“I can show you.” Sam took two shaky steps towards the main room, drawing the towel tighter around his soaked body before he repeated himself. “I can show you. The manager. He was delivering books to him.”

“Books?” Alex repeated, and she thought back to all of those packages that had come in the mail. “You mean books books?”


“Stories.” Dean stopped in his tracks, and Alex reached out to steady Sam Winchester. “The man at the museum — he said that the messenger demanded stories as an offering, and in return the tribe received blessings. And I think those blessings were immortality.”

“Okay, why do you think that?” Alex guided Sam out into the main room. “Put on some dry clothes,” she suggested, and then she turned back to Dean.

Dean watched as his brother sat down onto the bed and began to towel off his wet hair. “The manager that runs this joint? He was in one of the old photos from the early 1900’s.”

“Come on.” Sam dropped his towel on the floor and staggered towards the door. “Come on. We have to find him.” He moved out into the hall, leaning only momentarily against the doorpost to support him before continuing on.

Dean and Alex followed. “I should be taking you to the ER,” Dean insisted, but Sam didn’t slow down in the slightest.

“They can’t do anything for me,” Sam retorted, one hand resting against the wall as he led the way around the corner. “You know, I’ve been remembering things,” he said after a few seconds. “Little
things, so clearly —”

Dean huffed. “What, donkey rides?”

Sam nodded. “You used to read to me, um, when I was little. I — I mean, really little, from that — from that old, uh … Classics Illustrated comic book. You remember that?”

“What?”

Sam stopped, turning to face his brother. “Knights of the Round Table,” he clarified. “Had all of King Arthur’s knights, and they were all on the quest for the Holy Grail. And I remember looking at this picture of — of Sir Galahad, and, and, and he was kneeling and — and light streaming over his face.” Sam’s eyebrows turned upwards in hurt. “And I remember thinking, uh, I could never go on a quest like that. Because I’m not clean. I mean, I was — was just a kid.” He looked over at Dean, and then his gaze slid over to Alex. “You think … maybe I knew? I mean, deep down that I had … demon blood in me, and about the evil in it, and that I’m — wasn’t pure?”

Alex’s wings flicked, and she opened her mouth as she sought to find a response, but Dean spoke before she could. “Sam, it’s not your fault.”

Sam Winchester shook his head. “It doesn’t matter anymore. Because these trials … they’re purifying me.” His voice cracked, but he shook off whatever it was he wanted to say and moved back off down the hallway.

Dean looked down at Alex, and the young angel shook his head. “Part of it’s the fever talking,” she murmured. “Let’s find Metatron so he can get some rest.”

“They were here!” Sam exclaimed, and Alex and Dean turned to find Sam standing in front of a door near the elevator, staring down at the ground in shock. “The — the — the books, the boxes!” He looked over at them, eyes wide. “They — they’re gone.”

Dean walked up to his brother and gently pushed on the door. It swung open under his touch, and Dean looked over at the angel. His eyebrows rose, and Alex reached up to draw her weapon, but she kept her grace drawn in tight; if there was an angel in the room, she didn’t want to announce her presence. She glanced over her shoulder as Sam and Dean stepped into the room, and she followed on their tail, closing the door behind her.

The room was a maze of books, stacked so high that they reached the ceiling. Alex followed them between the piles, wings flicking in worry as she took in the precarious towers that surrounded them. She paused beside one pile, head tipping as she read over the titles of the books. Moby Dick, Last of the Mohicans. Novels. Stories.

Her head snapped up at the sound of a cocking of a shotgun, and a wary voice snapped, “Who are you?”

Alex pulled her wings in tight as she tore around the books and almost ran straight into a short, stout man. Wings flared up, and black and white feathers tangled together. Alex stumbled back, eyes wide as a shotgun was pointed straight at her chest. “Whoa. Careful there. You’ll put an eye out with that.”

The man’s pale eyes went wide at the sight of her, and the shotgun fell from his hands as an angelic weapon took its place. His white wings carried him backwards so he could face all three of them, and they drew in tightly as he landed. “Who sent you?” he demanded, glaring over at Alex.

Alex slowly reached up to put her own weapon away, hands spreading out in a soft gesture of
innocence. “Metatron?” she asked, taking in the angel’s appearance. His vessel was short and stout, dressed in a pale button-down and a tan sweater; very casual for the scribe of God.

Pale green eyes flashed suspiciously as Alex spoke his name. “Who sent you?” he repeated.

“We came on our own!” Sam yelled. Alex looked over at the Winchester in confusion. Sam winced, hands coming up to cover his ears as he stared at the scribe. “W-We’re the Winchesters!”

“I’m Dean, this is Sam,” Dean added with a glance at his brother. “And that’s Alex.”

“You work for Michael?” Metatron’s grace slunk outwards, dancing warily along Alex’s. “Or Lucifer?” he added, snapping his grace back, and Alex curled her own grace more tightly around the archangel’s, hiding it from the scribe’s curious touch.

“What, you really haven’t heard of us?” Sam yelled. “What kind of angel are you, we’re — we’re the freaking Winchesters.”

“Michael and Lucifer?” Dean repeated. “T-Those — those dudes are in the deep fryer.”

Metatron frowned. “What about Gabriel?” he persisted, eyes flitting over to Alex. “And Raphael? And why does she have Lucifer’s grace?”

Alex shrugged. “Its … it’s a long story,” she half-lied. “And Raphael and Gabriel … they’re both dead. Cassiel and Remiel are the only archangels left, and they’ve done shit for ruling heaven. You don’t know?” She tipped her head in confusion. “How long have you been away from heaven?”

“Hey,” Sam added loudly, “can you — can you turn that down?”

“Turn what down — oh.” Metatron lowered his weapon as he turned his attention to Sam. “You’re resonating.”

“Resonating?” Dean and Alex repeated simultaneously. “What — what do you mean, resonating?” Dean added.

“You’ve undertaken the trials. You’re trying to pull one of the great levers, aren’t you?” Metatron’s gaze was focused purely on Sam. “You’re pretty far along, too. You get that far along, you start resonating with the Word — or with its source on the material plane. With me.”

“So then what are you doing down here?” Alex stepped forward, nudging Sam towards a wooden chair in front of some of the books. “Sit down and rest,” she told the hunter before turning back to the scribe. “What made you leave heaven?”

“I’m not one of them,” Metatron began. “I’m not an archangel. Really more run-of-the-mill. I worked in the secretarial pool before God chose me to take down the Word. Anyways, he … seemed very worried about his work, what would happen to it when he left, so he had me write down instructions. Then, he was gone.” The scribe shrugged. “After that, the archangel’s took over.” He crossed the room and pulled up a chair so he could sit, and Dean sat down on some books next to his brother as Metatron continued with his tale. “And they cried, and they wailed. They wanted their father back. I mean, we all did. But then … then they started to scheme.” His voice lost its soft undertone and grew sharp. “The archangels decided if they couldn’t have Dad, they’d take over the universe themselves. But they couldn’t do anything that big with the Word of God. So I began to realize, maybe they would realize … they needed me.” He let his weapon disappear back up into his sleeve, and he pulled the shotgun up into his lap.

“So you got a ruffle in your fathers and just decided to disappear? Go stick your head into the sand
forever?” Dean scoffed, and he looked up at Alex. She shrugged, not having heard any of this before. “You have no idea what’s been going on out there.”

“Nope. That’s the whole point.”

“So you have been holed up here, or, or, or, in a wigwam, or before that some cave, listening to stories, reading books?” Dean’s voice was scathing, angry, and Alex stretched out a wing to calm him down; the gesture went unnoticed by the hunter.

Metatron grinned. “And it was something to watch,” he agreed. “What you brought to His Earth, all the mayhem, the murder. Just the raw, wild invention of God’s naked apes … it was mind blowing. But really … really it was your storytelling. The true flower of free will. At least as you’ve mastered it so far,” he added quickly. “When you create stories, you become gods of time, intricate dimensions unto themselves. So many world! I have read … as much as it’s possible for an angel to read, and I haven’t caught up.”

“It is quite amazing,” Alex slowly admitted. “A talent angels haven’t been endowed with.”

Metatron hummed in agreement, but Sam shifted agitatedly beside her. “You know what?” he finally snapped. “Pull the fucking trigger.”

“What?”

“Pull the fucking trigger, you cowardly piece of garbage!” Sam repeated, jumping to his feet. Three steps carried him across the room, and Metatron stood up defensively, rifle raised to keep the Winchester back.

“Sam! Hey!” Dean hurried to hold his brother back but was roughly shaken off.

Sam grabbed the end of the rifle and pressed it into his broad chest, eyes sparkling furiously. “All this time you’ve been hiding here, how much suffering have you read over?” he yelled. “Humanity’s suffering! And how much of it has been at the hands of your kind!”

“Hey!” Alex pushed Sam away from the gun, and the younger Winchester stumbled back. She positioned herself between the rifle and the brother, wings flared out to keep him back. “Stop it! It’s not his fault; let him be.”

“You want a story?” Dean stepped up to his brother’s side. “Try Kevin Tran’s story. He was just a kid. He was a good, straight A kid, and then he got sucked into all of this — this angel crap. He became a prophet of the Word of God. Your prophet. Now, you should’ve been looking out for him, but no! Instead, you’re here, holed up, reading books.”

“He’s dead now,” Sam added angrily. “Because of you.”

Metatron disappeared. His wings unfolded, and the shotgun fell from his hand, and then he was just … gone. “Dammit.” Alex stepped forward, gazing up towards where he had passed through the ceiling. “You scared him off.” She turned back to the Winchesters, feathers rustling out in fury. “We had one shot at this, one shot at figuring out what the third trial was, and you fucking scared him off.”

“Hey, we —”

Metatron was back. And Kevin Tran was with him. Alex shoved her way past the Winchesters as the scribe placed the unconscious prophet into the empty chair Sam had occupied. “This is the prophet you were talking about, right?” he asked. “Kevin Tran?”
“Yeah!” Alex placed a hand on Kevin’s forehead. “How — where was he?”

“With the demons.” Metatron’s grace spilled outwards, and the palm of his hand glowed as he placed it on Kevin’s chest. The bruises on the prophet’s neck faded away as he was healed, and then Metatron stepped away.

“Is that it?” Dean asked when Kevin didn’t stir. “Is he good?”

The scribe didn’t look up at the Winchester. “Give him a minute.” Metatron walked away, and after a second, Dean followed.

“How did you get past Crowley’s angel-warding?” Dean pressed, and Alex glanced over her shoulder at him, curiously awaiting the answer herself.

“I’m the Scribe of God,” Metatron reminded, finally turning to face Sam and Dean. “I erased it.”

Alex chuckled, but it appeared she was the only one who found his statement amusing. “But you saw, right?” Dean continued. “I mean, you’re — you’re caught up on everything that’s been going on. All that crap that your brethren’s been doing to humanity all this time?”

The young angel tipped her head, unsure of how the scribe would have gained that much information in such a short time. Metatron’s own answer was indirect. “I saved the boy, didn’t I?” he retorted.

“But are you in? With us, I mean.”

Metatron’s eyes squinted as he studied both Dean and Sam for several long seconds. “You really intend on closing the doors of Hell?” he finally asked.

Alex hummed in agreement, and Dean added, “Seems like the thing to do, don’t it?”

Metatron shrugged. “It’s your choice,” he reminded. “And that’s what this has all been about, the choices your kind make. But you’re gonna have to weigh that choice. Ask yourself: what is it going to take to do this, and what will the world be like after it’s done?”

His words were met with silence, but before long Alex’s attention was drawn back to the prophet in front of her. He was stirring. “Dean?” she called, drawing the hunter’s attention away from the scribe. “Dean!”

“Kevin?” Dean hurried over to stand over the prophet, whose brown eyes blinked, startled to find the Winchesters in front of him. “Hey. I thought we lost you, kiddo.”

“I-I’m good.” Kevin looked between Dean, and then Alex, and then back to Dean, and he reached into the pocket of his thick jacket, and Alex stood up as he revealed the smooth, black stone of the Word of God. “Second half of the tablet. And I got it. Third trial. I didn’t tell Crowley.”

“So what is it?” Sam pressed, voice shaking anxiously in anticipation.

Metatron answered before the prophet got a change. “To cure a demon.”

“Yeah.” Kevin Tran leaned to one side, peering around Sam to meet Metatron’s gaze. “Who are you?”

“Metatron. Same guy who wrote on that rock of yours.” Alex slowly helped Kevin Tran to his feet, ignoring the noise of confusion that burst forth from his lips. “How are you feeling? We — we all
thought you were dead.”

“I’m fine.” Kevin gently brushed off her health, and he slid the half of the tablet back into his jacket. “You mean you’re the Metatron. The archangel.”

“Not exactly.” Metatron’s eyes dropped down to the ground only momentarily. “It’s a bit of a long story,” he started, but Sam cut him off.

“Hey. Any idea how we cure this demon?” he asked, and the scribe’s gaze flickered up to the hunter.

“No. Listen, I only wrote down what I was told,” he added defensively when Sam’s face twisted in confusion. “That’s all I know, and nothing more. God liked his secrets.”

“Come on. We have to get back to the bunker.” Sam hurried towards the door, tripping over his own feet in his illness and eagerness, and Dean barely had time to reach out and steady him. “We have to finish this, Dean,” he insisted.

“I know, I know. Just hang on.” Dean turned to Kevin. “Alright. You feeling ready enough to hit the road? We got all your notes back at our place. No need to swing back by the boathouse, and now that you’ve got that …” He motioned to the demon tablet, but trailed off when Kevin adamantly shook his head.

“I can’t. That email I sent you … you weren’t the only ones who got it. I have to go fix this —”

Dean cut him off impatiently. “You can do it back at the bunker,” he promised hurriedly. “Come on.”

“Dean, no. I —”

“It’s fine.” Metatron spoke up, and Dean and Kevin fell silent. “You three can go and … do whatever it is that you do. I’ll keep an eye on the prophet.” His eyes turned to Kevin, and he added, “There’s a lot we have to discuss.”

The brothers looked hesitant, but Alex nodded. “I think that’s a good plan,” she agreed. “If you need anything, Kev, just pray to me, okay? I’ll come and get you or … or whatever.”

Alex adjusted the folded blanket beneath her head, eyes closed and wings curled tightly around her as she focused on the thrum of the Impala beneath her body. She had been stirred out of thoughts by a deep sigh from Sam, the sign of a conversation brewing in his mind. Dean, however, beat him to it. “Cure a demon,” he began, breaking the silence that had gripped the car for hours. “Okay, ignoring the fact that I have no idea what that actually means, if we — if we do this, you get better, right?”

“Yeah, okay, I feel better, um, just having a direction to move in,” Sam admitted.

Dean’s fingers drummed on the steering wheel, and Alex shifted as quietly as she could on the Impala’s leather seats. “Well, good, cause where we’re headed doesn’t sound like a picnic.”

“But we’re heading somewhere,” his brother added. “The end —”

The car jerked as Dean threw on the brakes, and Alex cried out in surprise as she rolled forward in a
tangle of feathers and limbs. She righted herself, ready to snap, but her mouth went dry as she spotted the reason for their sudden halt. A figure lay in the middle of the road, outlined by the car’s headlights. Dark blue wings hid the rest of the figure, but those wings were all Alex needed to see. She threw open the car door, and her shoes slipped on the pavement in her haste. “Cas!” She fell to her knees in front of the angel.

“A little help here?” Castiel looked up, blinking in surprise when he recognized her. “Alex.” He drew his hand away from his stomach, and the young angel’s wings trembled at the sight of so much blood.

“No no no. What happened?” Alex took his head in her hands, staring into his dull blue eyes. “Cas? Come on, stay with me.” She pressed a hand into his stomach, trying to stem the blood flow as Sam and Dean knelt down beside her. “Guys, he’s bleeding really badly.”

“Here. Out of the way.” Dean nudged her off to the side, and he and Sam helped Castiel roll onto his back. “What the fuck happened to you, man?” he asked the seraph, drawing back the hem of his white oxford to look at the large hole in his stomach.

“C-Crowley.” Castiel grit his teeth in pain. “He … he was working with some of the angels …”

“We know,” Dean interrupted, and Sam looked up in surprise.

“We do?” he asked, eyebrows cocking as he looked between Alex and Dean. “Wait, what?”

“Crowley’s got angels on the payroll,” Alex explained hurriedly. “One of them tried to kill me, but …” She trailed off, and her teeth dug into her lower lip. “Anyways. How did this happen?” she asked Castiel, and Dean hurried back to the Impala.

“He … he shot me.” Dean returned, a towel in hand, and the seraph hissed as Sam pressed it into his side. “Crowley … he melted down a—”

“Angel blade,” Alex finished, and her wings flared out furiously. “I know. He shot you too?”

“T-Too?” Castiel looked up in surprise, all of the pain disappearing from his face as it was replaced with shock immediately followed by anger.

’Ssh sh sh sh sh.” Alex put a hand on his shoulder as her wings against his, a promise to explain everything later. “We need to get him back to the bunker now,” she told the brothers. “Once you say the word, I’ll take him there myself.”

“You can go now.” Sam reached over and took one of Castiel’s hands and placed it on the towel. “Hold this there,” he instructed the seraph. “It’ll help stop the bleeding.”

The seraph gave a grunt of affirmation, and Alex and Dean helped him to his feet. Alex wrapped her arms around his waist, and her black wings thrust downwards, propelling her and Castiel up into the air. “You’re heavy,” she grunted as her wings strained under the effort. “And pull your damn wings in; they’re catching on the wind.”

Castiel pulled his large wings tighter against his back, and within seconds Alex carried them down through the bunker ceiling and into her room. “There.” She shook out her dark wings as Castiel sank down onto his bed. “Lay back.”

“What do you mean ‘too’?” Castiel persisted as he obeyed, but Alex didn’t immediately answer. She tugged his tie off of his neck and started unbuttoning his bloodied shirt. “Alex.” Castiel reached up, taking her hands to stop her, and the angel’s shoulders dropped.
“Let me take a look at your wound, and then I’ll explain whatever you want,” she insisted, and grey eyes met blue until Castiel dropped his hands back down to his side. Alex finished the last few buttons and carefully slid the white oxford away so she could see the deep wound in the seraph’s right abdomen. “It’s deep,” she fretted as her grace stretched forward, dancing alongside Castiel’s. “Why did Crowley shoot you? And where’s the angel tablet?”

“Crowley has it. I …” Castiel’s gaze dropped down to his bloodied side. “I hid it within my vessel. Touching the tablet, it seemed to keep Naomi out, and I thought … I figured that as long as my grace was in contact with it, I could keep her from controlling me. Crowley — he somehow figured it out.”

Alex grunted, unsurprised by the demon’s cleverness. “I’m going to go get some gauze from the bathroom,” she informed him after a second, and she straightened up, wincing as the movement pulled on her own wound.

“What’s wrong?” Castiel sat up, his grace stretching outwards, but Alex pushed it away.

“Wound first, questions later.” Alex hurried out of the room before Castiel could answer any questions. She grabbed a package of gauze and tape off of the top shelf before wetting a washcloth and hurrying back across the hall to her room. “Here.” She sank down onto the bed beside Castiel. “This may hurt a bit,” she warned before she slowly began to clear away the blood. Castiel winced beneath her, and Alex cleared her throat. “We completed the second trial while you were gone,” she began, hoping her story would be a distraction from the pain. “We, uh, had to rescue an innocent soul from hell.”

“You —” Castiel cut off with a huff of pain. “You went to hell?”

“Yup. I went with Sam. We, uh … Bobby was in hell.” Alex paused, face twisting sorrowfully at the memory. “Crowley dragged his soul to hell, even though it was earmarked for heaven. So we pulled him out. The demons found out, though,” she added, and she slowly began cleaning the blood away once again. “So I … I went off on my own as bait.” She didn’t look up, waiting for Castiel’s anger, but it didn’t come; the twitch of his wings and the furrowing of his forehead were the only signs of his displeasure. “I thought I’d be safe,” Alex continued as she reached for the gauze. “After all, they’re only demons, and Crowley seems to like me more than most angels.”

“But …”

“But we fought, and he shot me in the leg with that damn gun of his.” Alex firmly pressed the gauze into Castiel’s side and picked up the tape. “He didn’t want to kill me; he only wanted to subdue me. Hell, he didn’t even know if the gun would work yet. But it fucking hurt. And it took me like two weeks before I could walk again. Oh, and then this morning, I got this.” She paused in her endeavors to lift up her shirt, showing off her own bandaged side before letting her shirt fall back down. “I … Cas, did you ever know of an angel named Tremiel?”

She finished applying the last of the tape and waited as the seraph thought. “No,” he finally said. “Who is he?”

“He is — was — one of the angels working for Crowley.” Alex’s wings drooped as she pictured his face. “He was young, Castiel. Crowley ordered him to kill me, and I had no choice …” She closed her eyes, and a warm hand covered hers, a small, quiet gesture of sympathy. “He was working with another angel — Eon or something.”

“Ion,” Castiel repeated, “yes, I learned of Ion’s treachery myself. He was one of the angels Naomi had searching for me. He must have tipped Crowley off when they found me.” His face darkened sorrowfully. “The people that they needlessly killed, all in the name of finding me, is that really what
our species have come to? We were supposed to be their shepherds, not their murderers.”

Alex sighed, and she shifted to lay down beside her mate. “Sometimes it makes me wonder if hell is really the realm we should be sealing,” she quietly admitted, and she looked over into Castiel’s eyes. “Humans are getting caught in the crossfires left and right, and our brothers …” She closed her eyes and looked away. “So many angels are needlessly dying nowadays. Our Father never intended for us to fight.”

Castiel didn’t respond, and Alex shook off her melancholy thoughts. “Alright. Let me get you a change of clothes,” she decided. “I think I have some of Dean’s stuff that’ll fit you here.” She rolled off of the bed and hurried over to her dresser and pulled out a pair of black sweatpants and a faded grey t-shirt. “Here. Think you can get changed yourself?”

“Yes, I believe I can manage.” Castiel slowly pulled himself up into a sitting position as Alex deposited the clothes onto the bed. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” Alex scooped up her own change of clothes. “I’ll be right back.” She hurried over to the bathroom to change, shucking off her shirt and making sure to check her own wound while she had the chance. The bleeding had stopped, but the skin was still ragged with little signs of healing yet. With a grimace, Alex replaced the bandage and finished changing.

When she returned to the room, Castiel was still part way through struggling to pull the t-shirt over his head. He winced in pain as he lowered his arms, and Alex tossed her old clothes into the corner of the room before she placed Castiel’s bloodied clothes over the back of the chair. “I’ve missed you,” she admitted as Castiel sat back down on the bed, and she moved to join him. “I-I mean, I’m sorry you lost the angel tablet, but I’m glad you’re back.”

Castiel didn’t answer, and Alex flicked him in the side with her wings, prompting him to finally speak. “I’m afraid of what would have happened if you had been there,” he finally admitted, and his gaze fell to his lap. “Crowley and Naomi would have done anything — anything — to get that tablet. You …” Blue eyes sparkled with fear as they turned up onto his mate. “You could have died.”

Alex kicked back the sheets and slid under the covers. “We can talk about it in the morning,” she promised, “but the way I see it … as long as we’re in this life, we both can die at any moment. And I … I don’t want that anymore.” She turned on her side as Castiel laid down beside her, head propped up with one hand. “Once Sam finishes these trials, we should get out. No more hunting, no more civil war. Just you and me in heaven, living our own life.”

Castiel let out a small smile. “I would like that,” he murmured, and one wing curled forward, resting across her side. “I would like that a lot.”

Alex grinned, and she leaned over, pressing a soft kiss onto the seraph’s lips. After a second, his hand came to rest on her cheek, and she pulled away. “Good,” she hummed, laying down and resting her head on Cas’ shoulder as her grace flicked off the lights. “Because I’d like that, too.”
The bunker door slammed closed, announcing the arrival of Sam and Dean Winchester, and Alex stirred at the sound. She was laying on her side, tucked softly into Castiel’s warm, sturdy chest. She lifted her head, grace stretching out in search of the brothers, and Castiel shifted behind her. His heavy arm resting across her stomach drew her in closer, and the seraph let out a low, pained groan.

“How are you feeling?” Alex leaned her head back, and the seraph’s lips came to rest against her neck for a brief moment. She hummed in delight, grace reaching back to curl around his.

“I’m healing,” Castiel finally rumbled out. “Not as fast as I wished, but I have improved.”

His fingers moved, tracing the outline of her own bandage, and he asked, “And you?”

“I’m fine.” Alex rolled over and sat up, running a hand through her messy blonde hair. “Oh!” She looked around the room, and a grin spread across her face. “You’ve never been here before.” She tossed back the covers and stood up, pulling on a black and white plaid shirt over her white tee and sweatpants. “Come on. I have to show you the bunker. This place is sick — awesome,” she corrected before Castiel could question her phrasing.

The seraph slowly rose to his feet. “I remember you mentioned the Men of Letters bunker,” he recalled. “You were quite excited about it.”

“You bet I was.” Alex walked over to Castiel and took his hand, leading him out into the hallway. “Come on. Let’s go find the Winchesters, and then I’ll give you the grand tour.”

She could feel the Winchesters in the library, so she took him the long way around towards the kitchen. “There’s an upstairs and a downstairs,” she explained, pointing towards the two staircases. “Upstairs is my favorite. We have a gym and a sparring area. And downstairs there’s a shooting range,” she added, tugging him along. “This floor is mostly bedrooms, some archives, and the kitchen. Ooh and the library.” They stepped out into the library to find Sam seated at the war room table. “Morning,” she called, and the younger Winchester looked up.

“Morning,” Castiel echoed, and Alex frowned when Dean brushed past them without a word and disappeared off towards the kitchen. “I like this bunker,” Castiel continued, but Alex could see the hurt in his eyes at Dean’s cold shoulder. “It’s orderly.”

Sam chuckled. “Oh, give us a few months. Dean and Alex want to get a ping pong table.”

“Damn straight we do,” Alex quipped. She moved down to lean against the chair across from Sam. The table was covered with Men of Letters archives.

Castiel followed. “I’ve heard of that. It’s a game, right?” He let out a groan of pain, leaning against a metal chair for support, and Alex stretched out a worried wing.

Sam looked up in concern. “Are you okay?”

“My wound isn’t healing as quickly as I’d hope,” the seraph admitted, “but I am getting better. And you’re getting worse,” he added with a deep frown.
The Winchester shrugged. “Well, two trials down, one to go.” His eyes dried down to the folders piled in front of him.

“And the final test, do you — do you know what it is?” Castiel pressed.

Sam nodded, and Alex answered, “Sure do. We have to cure a demon.” She watched as her mate’s face twisted in confusion. “Yeah, I know,” she agreed. “It’s weird. And I don’t think we know how to do that yet, right?” she added to Sam.

“Right,” the Winchester agreed, and he motioned to the mass of folders that lay in front of him. “So that’s why we’re looking through every file the Men of Letters have on demonic possession. All three hundred years worth.”

Alex winced sympathetically. “Ouch. That’s a lot.”

“Soup’s on.” Dean returned to the room carrying a tray, and he put it down in front of his brother. Alex raised an eyebrow at the meager portions that lay on the plate. “There we go. I think this is, uh …” Dean picked up the open beer bottle and raised it to his lips to have a taste. “Oh, it’s still good.”

Sam stared down at his so-proclaimed ‘meal.’ “A half-drunk beer, jerky, and three peanut butter cups?” he finally asked in disbelief.

“Youh,” Dean defended, “we’re — we’re running a little low …” He trailed off at the puppy-like look on Sam’s face, and he caved. “I’ll make a run.” He crossed the room to grab his jacket and keys.

“I can go with you,” Castiel quickly volunteered, but Dean gathered up his things like the seraph hadn’t spoken. “Dean,” Cas began again, “I’m sorry.”

Dean shrugged on his jacket, and he finally turned to speak to the seraph. “For what?”

Castiel hesitated, at a loss for words, until he finally admitted, “For everything.”

“Everything?” the Winchester repeated, his voice flat with anger and disbelief. “Like, uh … like ignoring us?”

“Yes.”

“Or bolting off with the angel tablet, then losing it cause you didn’t trust me?” Dean continued. “You didn’t trust me.” His voice was calm, which somehow was worse than his anger.

The seraph’s shoulders fell, but he didn’t even attempt to argue. “Yes,” he agreed as he tried to appease the hunter in front of him.

Dean wasn’t having it. “Yeah,” he repeated. “Nah, that’s not gonna cut it. Not this time. So you can take your apology and you cram it up your ass.”

Alex finally stepped forward. “Dean, that’s not what happened,” she began, and the Winchester rounded on her.

“You shut it,” he snapped, a finger pointed at her chest, and the angel’s feathers ruffled angrily. “Don’t forget you left, too. You don’t get to defend him.”

Castiel’s wings stretched out, resting against Alex’s back. “Dean,” he started, and the Winchester’s gaze swung back over to him. “I thought I was doing the right thing.”
“Yeah, you always do.”

Sam, who had been sitting quietly behind them, awkwardly cleared his throat, and Alex turned to look at him, thankful for the interruption. “Hey, uh, do we have a room 7B?” he asked, finger tapping the folder he had been reading through.

Dean stalked back down the hall without another word, heading towards the staircase in the back of the bunker, and Sam followed, casting an apologetic shrug in the two angels’ direction as he left. Alex watched them go with a shake of her head. “Ignore Dean,” she finally said when the brothers were out of earshot. “He doesn’t understand.” She reached out and took the seraph’s hand in hers, wings brushing comfortably against his. “Come on. Room 7B should be downstairs. I’ll show you the upstairs.”

Alex tugged him after her, and they made their way up to the gym. “This bunker is very large,” the seraph commented, eyes turned upwards at the high ceiling. “It must be nice to finally have a place to stay.”

“It’s wonderful, yeah. At least until we get back to heaven.” Alex looked up into Castiel’s eyes, a small smile across her lips. “That’s our true home, right?”

The seraph’s eyes softened, and his voice dropped into a soft murmur. “My home is wherever you are,” he promised.

Alex’s wings flittered gently, and she leaned up, palms resting against Castiel’s chest as she pressed a kiss on his lips. Warm hands came to rest on her hips, and Alex reached up to curl her fingers in his dark hair. “I missed you,” she whispered, as her heart skipped a joyful beat as the seraph’s wings curled around her.

“I missed you as well.” Castiel’s eyes moved to look back at the hallway from which they had come from. “What else is there in this bunker?” he inquired, and he followed when Alex hurried back towards the stairs.

“Up here.” The young angel bounded up a separate staircase and stepped out into the Men of Letters garage. “We haven’t figured out how to get the door open yet,” she began, motioning towards the ramp at the far end of the room. “Something’s broken in the electronics or mechanics — I don’t know — that’s why the Impala’s still outside.” She flicked her wings towards the motorcycles. “As far as I know, every vehicle here should still work.”

She watched as the seraph took in the room with careful, contemplative gaze, and then she pulled him after her as she went back down the stairs. She heard dialogue coming from the library, and curiosity got the better of her. Her wings carried her down the hall, leaving Castiel to follow, and she landed at Sam’s side.

The Winchesters were standing in front of an old 8mm projector, faces twisted into frowns as they studied the machine. “What’s going on?” Dean asked, head tipping to find an old reel resting on the lower spoke. “And what’s with the old Keystone?”

“What?” Sam asked, and Dean echoed him from across the table. Alex’s head tipped up at the scent of salt and butter. Popcorn. Dean had made popcorn.

“Keystone.” The angel pointed to the projector. “Also why is the film on the take-up reel? Is that on purpose, or do you just have no idea what you’re doing?” She flicked her wings back at Castiel, a small twinge of satisfaction passing through her to find the Winchesters speechless. “My dad used to collect these,” she explained with a small shrug, looking between Sam and Dean. “What? I seriously
never mentioned it? We used to watch cartoons all the time.” She quickly switched the two reels, putting the empty one on the bottom before she deftly threaded the film into the machine.

The projector came to life when she flicked the switch, and the reels whirred as the film caught. “Thanks.” Sam moved out of the way so the bulb could illuminate the screen he had set up in the doorway between the war room and the library.

“Yeah, no problem.” Alex sat down to the left of the projector, and the two brothers pulled up chairs on the right. “Can I ask why we’ve suddenly decided to watch a movie? And where we found this — I didn’t know we had a working projector here,” she added as she grabbed a handful of popcorn.

The leader ran out, it’s black-and-white numbers counting down to two, and then a man was on screen, sitting at the bottom of a small flight of stairs. “Simon, we’re filming,” a woman began, and the man looked up in surprise.

He was young, barely older than twenty five, with thick dark hair. “Um … hello, world,” he said, and Alex let out a *humph* of curiosity when the camera moved to show the man’s white priestly collar. A cigarette rested between his middle and index finger, the white smoke drifting up into frame even as the camera zoomed in on his face.

“So, this new ritual we’re going to see,” the woman behind the camera continued, “this new type of exorcism, how — how does it work?”

“So, Simon, come,” a man boomed in the distance, and Simon looked back up the stairs towards its source.

The young priest quickly put out his cigarette in the crystal ashtray he was holding. “I-I don’t know,” he admitted. “It’s my first time.” He rose to his feet, and the camera dipped down, and for a few seconds Alex couldn’t make out anything until it rose back up. It was pointed towards a mirror, giving the hunters a clear view of the woman behind the camera.

“Wait, is that Abaddon?” Sam leaned forward towards his brother, and Alex flicked a wing in disgust at the memory of the Knight of Hell.

Dean shook his head. “It’s not killy enough.”

“It’s probably the woman she possessed, then,” Alex concluded with a glanced back at them. “Uh, Henry called her ‘Josie,’ remember?” When she turned back to the screen, the scene had shifted to another room. She could hear a woman, crying and grunting in distress, and the angel narrowed her eyes as the camera followed Simon.

Another priest stood there, behind a table cluttered with books and spellwork. “Hurry, we must do it now,” he insisted, and before Alex could vocalize her confusion, the camera panned. A woman knelt in between two pillars; chains kept her there, one end tethered to the pillars and the other attached to handcuffs around her wrist. She was dressed in an old, dingy dress, and her white hair and wrinkled face were dirty.

“Dead!” she screeched wildly, and her eyes flashed black as the camera zoomed in. “They’re all dead! Everyone you ever loved —”

The rest of her sentence was drowned out by Sam. “Hey, those chains look exactly like the ones in our dungeon,” he insisted.

Castiel’s head turned to look back at the Winchester. “In your what?” he asked, face momentarily blank with surprise.
“Wait, we have a dungeon?” Alex faced Sam, eyebrows lifted as she wrapped her head around this revelation. “Kinky.” She immediately regretted her words when Dean’s green gaze turned onto her, and she rolled her eyes. “Not for me,” she retorted. “Just … in general.”

The Winchester shrugged, and his attention turned back to the bound and screaming demon. “Demon on a leash,” he said instead. “Cool.”

The older priest had stepped forward so that he now stood in front of the possessed woman, and she screamed when she was doused in holy water. “Exorcizamus the,” he began, and Simon shakily joined in, a rosary extended towards the demonic entity, “omnis immundus spiritus … hanc animam redintegra … lustra!”

*We exorcise you, every unclean spirit … you be restored to this life … be clean!* The words translated in the young angel’s mind, and Alex leaned forward; those weren’t the typical words to an exorcism.

The older priest drew a knife across his palm to complete the ritual, and he reached out and placed the bloody wound across the demon’s lips. She let out a muffled scream, and light exploded from her eyes, overexposing the film and causing it to grow white for several seconds. When the light finally faded, Josie was peering down into the camera, a confused frown across her face. She tipped it back towards the scene in front of her; the demon lay on the ground, clearly dead. A gaping hole was in the center of her chest, and Alex squinted as she tried to make out the mess of ribs and flesh; the heart seemed to have been completely ripped out from the body. “She’s dead,” Josie said, and Alex heard the two priests coughing in the background. “Where’s the demon?”

“Stop filming,” the oldest priest said.

Josie didn’t listen. “What happened —”

“Will you just stop?!?” The priest moved towards the woman, hands stretched outwards to stop her himself.

Any response was lost as the camera was shut off, and the whipping of the end of the film against the projector was heard as the movie ended. Sam reached over and turned it off. “Well, that was weird …” Dean finally remarked. “With three exclamation points.”

“That … wasn’t a normal exorcism,” Sam added, still staring at the empty screen. “They changed the words.”

“Yeah,” Alex agreed. “They commanded the demon to be clean. *Lustra* — it means to be washed or cleansed.”

Dean huffed. “Oh yeah, cause the most freaky thing was the vocabulary,” he retorted, and he turned in his seat so he now sat facing the angels across the table. “What about the bloody high-five or the chest burster? Anything else on the film, like director’s commentary, sequel, maybe?” he asked his brother.

Sam nodded. “Yeah, listen to this. The older priest, Max Thompson, bit the dust in ’58, but the younger one is still alive and still in St. Louis.”

The Winchester frowned. “Is this kind of weird is worth the drive?”

“Dean, everything in those folders — the possessions, the deals, all of it — we’ve seen that before, but this,” he motioned towards the film “— that was all new. Yeah, it’s worth the drive.”
Dean nodded; clearly he needed little convincing himself. “Alright. Let’s roll.” He hit the table with the palm of his hand, and Castiel immediately stood. Dean frowned. “Not you.”

Cas tilted his head as he stared increduously down at Dean. “Sam is more damaged than I am,” he pointed out.

“Yes, well, you know, even banged up, Sammy comes through,” Dean said, and Alex rose to her feet to stand beside her mate.

“Dean, I just want to help,” the seraph insisted, and his wings fell when Dean Winchester shook his head.

“We don’t need your help. Just stay here and — and get better.” He rose to his feet with a glance towards Alex. “And you stay here with him. Sam and I’ve got this. We’ll call if we need any help.”

Alex watched as Dean Winchester grabbed a handful of popcorn and left the room, and she turned onto Sam, her shoulders falling as she turned her eyebrows up in a face of hurt innocence. “I’ll talk to him,” Sam promised. “He … he’s just under a lot of stress right now, and you know how he gets.” He moved back after Dean, and Alex grunted out a low noise of affirmation: that didn’t feel like it excused his behavior towards Castiel.

“Well, I guess it’s just going to be you and me for the day,” she said when the door opened and closed after the Winchesters. “So. What do you want to do?”

Alex drummed her fingers on Castiel’s chest in time with the music emanating from the tv. They were laying on the couch in the room Alex and Dean had converted to a tv room, watching an old Disney movie that Alex had found on Hulu. Castiel hadn’t protested, but Alex could feel his confusion. “I don’t think I understand,” he finally said, and Alex hummed, wordlessly asking him to continue. “How is the elephant able to fly? That’s not possible if you take into account its body mass and the size of its unnaturally large ears —”

“It’s not supposed to be possible, it’s a cartoon.” Alex let out a groan as the seraph shifted beneath her. “Don’t go,” she whined, and she sat up to look down at Castiel. “How’s your stomach?” she inquired, placing a gentle hand beside where she knew the bandage lay.

The seraph’s wings flicked as Alex drew back his shirt. “I’m healing,” he promised, grace reaching up to curl around hers. “I should be well in the next few days.”

Alex peeled the bandage aside to examine the bullet hole; it was closing up nicely. She pressed the tape back into place and pulled Castiel’s shirt back down, leaning over to press a quick kiss upon his lips. “Looks good,” she agreed. “Why are you healing so quickly? I was limping for like, a week.”

“A seraph’s grace is stronger,” Castiel explained. “Yours is much weaker — it has no need to be very powerful,” he reminded as he slowly sat up. “You’re not supposed to be involved in such conflict.”

“Well, I guess we both just like to be rebels,” the young angel teased, but her smile faded when Castiel’s face fell. “Sorry,” she apologized, “insensitive.” She paused the movie and reached over to check her phone. “The Winchesters will be back in a few hours. What do you want to do?”

Castiel’s brow furrowed as he thought. “Dean said you were almost out of food,” he finally said. “Perhaps we should go buy some for when they return.”
Alex shrugged. “Uh, sure. Why not?” She got up off of the couch and shook out her dark wings. “There’s a couple of convenience stores in town — Dean usually only shops at the Gas ’N Sips, though, but —”

“We’ll go there.” Castiel’s wings unfurled, and he took off into the air, leaving Alex to hurriedly follow. She caught a glimpse of navy wings disappearing over the city of Lebanon, and she propelled herself after him. The angel dropped down in front of the local Gas N’ Sip and stepped inside, feathers fluffing out then smoothing back down as she was blasted with warm air above the automatic double doors. She flicked her grace out, curling around Castiel’s as she walked over to join her mate. “Hello,” he greeted.

“Hey,” Alex echoed back. “Thanks for just taking off like that.” She glanced over at the teen that stood behind the counter, and she lowered her voice. “Little warning next time.” She looked down at the basket in Castiel’s right hand; a air-tight pack of off-brand jerky sat in the bottom. In the seraph’s hand was a Busty Asians magazine. “What’s with the porn?” she asked. “Porn’s not food.”

Castiel looked down at the skin mag. “I know,” he agreed, “but Dean enjoys them.”

“Put it back.”

The seraph did as Alex requested, but the slight furrowing of his brow showed his confusion at what she had found so disagreeable about it. However, he added a quiet, “My apologies,” before turning to look at the rows of food that lay in front of them. “What do the Winchesters eat?” he inquired.

Alex snorted in amusement. “Beer mostly.” She watched as Castiel walked away towards the back of the store, and the angel followed with a roll of her eyes. With Castiel in the lead, this expedition was bound to be exciting.

The seraph paused on his way back to the freezer, and his hands went out to rest on a package of generic toilet paper. He squinted, thinking carefully, before he finally asked, “This … this is a necessity, right?”

Alex only shrugged. “People use it a lot, yeah,” she agreed, with a small, amused grin. “You’re the one who wanted to go shopping, so I’m going to let you shop.”

The frown on Castiel’s face conveyed his displeasure at being put in charge of such a difficult task, but he only flicked his wings before he tucked the toilet paper into his wire basket and continued on to the refrigerators in the far wall. He opened the door and pulled out a six-pack of beer, struggling only momentarily to fit the beer into the basket before he walked away. The store’s clerk turned the corner, and he shook his head when he saw the open fridge door. “Dude.”

“Sorry,” Alex apologized, moving to shut the glass door. “He’s a little spaced out —”

“Dude.” The clerk’s attention was drawn back to Castiel, and Alex let out a grimace to see the seraph standing with a carton of eggs in one hand, a crushed eggshell in the other.

“Sorry, we’ll, uh, we’ll pay for that.” Alex hurried to stand in front of Castiel, and she took the eggs from his hands. “I don’t think we need any of these,” she told him. “Sam and Dean — they usually go for the, uh … canned stuff, you know?”

Castiel’s eyes lit up in understanding, and he nodded. Alex set the carton of eggs down on a nearby shelf so the cashier running the store could easily find them when he cleaned up the mess — poor kid — and then she moved off after her mate. He had meandered over to the small produce section, and a bunch of bananas now sat beside the beer in his wire basket. “It’s not canned,” he began when she
approached, “but I saw them sitting in the kitchen of the bunker.”

Alex shrugged, and a wing went out to flick against his. “That’s fine,” she assured. “Sam likes them, so they’ll get eaten.”

Satisfied with her answer, Castiel moved down the next aisle. Alex followed patiently, only pausing to grab a bag of chips off of the shelf for herself. She could hear the clerk cleaning up the mess in the back aisle, and she moved to walk at Castiel’s side, dropping her chips in beside the bananas.

Castiel stopped at the end cap where cans of chili had been stacked in a neat triangle. He picked up a can, head tipping to one side as he read the label. His wings flittered in confusion, and Alex winced as they bumped into the rack of chips as he backed up. The metal shelf hit the ground with a loud crash, and the seraph spun around.

“Dude!” The clerk appeared around the corner, brown eyes wide.

“I — I have money,” Castiel offered, and his wings drew in close, careful not to knock anything else over.

“I’ll pick this up. You … just go pay.” Alex motioned off towards the counter. “And don’t break anything while you’re up there, okay?” She hauled the rack back up onto its feet while Castiel and the clerk walked over to the register.

“Where’s the pie?” she heard Castiel ask, and Alex rolled her eye at the request; clearly he was trying to worm his way back into Dean’s good graces.

She started arranging the chip bags back onto the shelf as the cashier shrugged. “I think we’re out.”

“You don’t understand.” Castiel’s voice grew low and sharp, and Alex looked up in shock to see that he had the clerk by the shirt collar, wings flared up as he demanded, “I need pie.”

“Whoa!” Alex jumped forward to stop him, but another voice had her freezing in place.

“Put the virgin down, Castiel.” Metatron appeared at the seraph’s side, and Alex skidded to a stop. “We need to talk.”

“Metatron?” Alex stepped forward, and Castiel dropped the clerk as he turned to face the new arrival. “What are you doing here?”

“I need to speak with Castiel.” The scribe motioned to the seraph, and Castiel’s head tipped as Metatron walked out the door. He immediately moved after him.

Alex followed, casting an apologetic smile back at the clerk, who was staring after her mate, his mouth hanging open. She paused beside the counter to picked up the white plastic bags of food. “Here.” The young angel dug forty dollars out of her pocket and handed it to the teen. “I … I hope this covers your troubles … and all.”

She stepped out of the Gas N Sip to find the two angels making their way across the street. “You’re Metatron?” Castiel asked the scribe. “The Metatron?”

“Yes,” Metatron agreed, and he lowered his voice as he cast a wary look around. “In public, it’s Marv.”

“Marv?” Castiel repeated, and Alex snorted, moving to walk at her mate’s side.
Metatron nodded. “And you’re Castiel,” he finished, and his white wings fluttered as a car sped by. “Kevin Tran told me about you.”

“He did?” Alex moved forward to stand in front of them, effectively stopping the angels in their tracks. “How’s Kevin doing? He’s recovering well, right?”

“Kevin Tran is fine,” the scribe promised. “And he’s had many great stories to tell,” he added, turning back to Castiel. “According to him, you and I have a lot in common. We’re both free thinkers. We’re both on heaven’s most wanted list. I thought maybe we could talk in private. Maybe socialize, grab a bite.”

“I—I’m sorry, we can — what?” Castiel looked between the scribe and his mate, confusion flitting through his blue eyes.

“That sounds like a great idea,” Alex agreed, and she stretched her black wings out. “A little bonding time between brothers — I think that would do you good.” She flicked Castiel in the arm with a wingtip. “I’ll meet you back at the bunker, alright?”

She didn’t wait for an answer before she took off into the air.

The bunker door slammed closed, and Alex looked up as footsteps thudded on the stairs. She reluctantly rose to her feet and moved off down the hall in search of the Winchesters. The young angel’s wings flared in surprise as she turned the corner and walked straight into Sam’s broad chest. “Whoa!” she jumped back and let out a loud breath. “You scared me.”

“Oh, sorry.” Sam glanced behind her, clearly looking for someone. “Um, where’s Cas?”

“Out. He’ll be back soon.” Alex brushed off the question, more curious in what news the Winchesters had to offer. “Did you find the priest? What did he say?”

“Well, uh, this demon-curing thing is looking really promising,” Sam began. “Father Simon said Father Thompson kept working on that cure — Dean’s pulling the record out of the archives now. If we’re lucky there’ll be an answer in there.”

“Hopefully,” Alex agreed. “The sooner we cure a demon or whatnot, the sooner you’ll be back on your feet. Right, Sam?” The Winchester didn’t immediately respond, and the angel frowned. “Sam. Right?” she pressed.

“Yeah, uh, right.” Sam shook himself out of his thoughts. “I, um, I’m gonna grab a change of clothes, but, uh, Dean should be out in the library.”

“I’ll go find him, then.” Alex stepped back and let Sam pass, frowning at his slow and unsteady steps. She watched until he disappeared into his room before she finally turned and made her way into the library. She found the eldest Winchester standing there, pawing through a brown box, and she cleared her throat to draw his attention onto her. “Hey. Heard your trip was successful.”

“In a way, yeah.” Dean paused, waiting for something, but when nothing came, he asked, “Where’s Cas? He blow town again?” The Winchester’s voice grew scornful as he added, “Sounds like him.”

Alex’s wings flared up in offense, and she stalked into the room. “That’s not what’s going on here,” she snapped. “What’s your fucking problem, man? Cas did what was best, which was to keep the angel tablet out of your grubby hands. You have no right to read what’s on it!”
Dean slammed his hand down on the table. “My problem is that you didn’t trust us,” he yelled. “Instead, you just left, and look where that got us! Now Crowley has the angel tablet, and we could have prevented all of it had you just trusted me! We’re three steps away from closing down hell for good. We don’t need any distractions, and we sure as hell don’t need you guys suddenly going AWOL!” His green eyes flashed with fire, and Alex looked away, unable to hold his gaze.

Footsteps announced Sam’s arrival, and Alex slunk over to stand behind him. The younger Winchester must have heard their fight, but he didn’t comment on it. “Find anything?” he asked instead, and Dean turned his attention back onto the brown box.

“So it turns out that, uh, Father Thompson recorded all of his demon-cure tests,” he explained curtly. “This one here?” He held out a reel of film. “This was the last one — two days before he died.”

Sam stepped forward to take it. “Huh.” He moved off down towards the war room table where an old reel to reel lay from a few days before. He threaded it up and flipped the switch, and Alex sat down next to Sam, making sure to stay on the far side from Dean.

“The date is August 3rd, 1958,” a voice began, filling the room, and Alex settled into her seat. “This is trial nineteen, hour one. My subject is Peter Kent. Mr. Kent is the father of two young sons, and three weeks ago, he was possessed by a demon. I’m going to ask you a question now. When you crawled into Mr. Kent and ate his children, how did it feel?”

A voice answered, low and rough and inhuman in comparison. “Orgasmic,” it snarled, but it cut off with a second later in a groan of pain.

“The first dose has been administered,” Father Thompson reported, and Alex tipped her head, confused.

“Do we know what padre was dosing number one dad up with?” Dean asked, motioning towards the recording as he reclined back in his chair.

Sam flipped through the notes that accompanied the recording and nodded. “Uh, yeah, his own purified blood,” he read.

“Purified?” Alex repeated. “Purified how?”

Sam’s fingers traced the page as he skimmed for the answer. “Before he started, Father Thompson went to confession.”

The recording clicked, signaling a splice in the film, and a second later Father Thompson’s voice returned. “This is trial nineteen, hour two,” the priest reported, and Alex’s wings twitched as she picked up the sounds of the demon in the background. “When you ate your children …” he repeated, “how did it feel?”

“Stringy — aah!” The demon let out another sharp cry of pain, and he hissed as it slowly faded away.

Father Thompson’s voice grew louder as he approached the microphone he was using. “The second dose has been administered.”

The recording kept going, reporting hour after hour. Hour four, five, six and seven. Each time the same question was asked, and a dose was administered. And as the hours passed, the demon slowly began to change. It was subtle at first; Alex could hear a difference in tone, so slight she wondered if she imagined it. But by the sixth hour the demon had begun to break. “Stop,” he had begged. “Please.”
“Hour eight, the subject is prepped.” Father Thompson sounded weary, exhausted from this trial almost as much as his test subject. The demon could be heard in the background, its noises of pain drowned out by the priest’s words. “Exorcismus the, omnis immundus spiritus,” he began, and Alex sat up in her chair at the exorcism. “Hanc animam redintegrà, lustra! Lustra!” He demon let out a muffled cry, and then all fell silent. “When you ate his children …” Father Thompson asked, “how did it feel?”

The demon spoke. “They were screaming … and I laughed. Why did I laugh?” His voice quavered and cracked in torment. “I’m sorry — I’m so sorry. God, I … I was a monster.”

The priest’s voice was soft. “But now you are a man again. And you have been saved.”

The tape ended, and Alex looked up at Sam. What had they just heard? “Did he just … cure a demon?” Sam asked, the disbelief in his voice strong enough to match the angel’s own feelings.

Dean was staring at the reel-to-reel. “Maybe,” he slowly admitted, and Sam let out a soft breath. “Could we take this hoodoo for a test drive?” he asked.

“Um, I mean, I have the exorcism right here.” Sam tapped the notes, and he looked up as he went over the list of necessary items. “All we need is the blood, consecrated ground, and a demon.”

“Or — or we use one that we’ve already tagged,” Dean finished, and Alex let out a hum of confusion at his cryptic phrasing. “Do we still have dad’s old army field surgeon kit?” Dean asked his brother.

“It’s in the trunk,” Sam confirmed, and hazel eyes sparkled in guarded curiosity. “Why?”

“Yeah, I think it’s time we put humpty dumpty back together again.” Dean slapped the table and rose to his feet, and Alex glanced over at Sam as he walked back up into the library.

The young angel leaned closer to Sam, voice dropping into a whisper. “Yeah, uh, so what’s he talking about exactly?”

Sam frowned, and Alex glanced over at Dean; whatever he was planning, it certainly wasn’t sounding like a good one at the moment. “Abaddon,” he finally told her. “He wants to dig up Abaddon.”

“What?” Alex rose to her feet, wing stretching out in disbelief. “Abaddon? Are you shitting me, Dean? We’re going to cure Abaddon?”

“We,” Dean corrected sharply, motioning to himself and Sam. “Not you. You’re still benched.”

“Are you serious?” The angel’s grace flicked through the air in outrage. “Dean! You said it yourself — we’re three steps away from closing the gates. You don’t pull some of your only players when you’re this close!” She stepped forward, and Dean’s eyes flashed.

Sam moved to stand in between them, and Alex turned her head away, lips curling into a snarl. “Dean, she’s right,” Sam insisted. “So whatever your problem is, you have to put it aside until we finish this!”

Dean didn’t immediately respond, but he looked away, and Alex stretched out her wings. “Text me when you get to the warehouse,” she growled out. “Until then, I’ll be in my room.”
She got the prayer a few hours later, sudden and desperate and seemingly from out of nowhere. And it certainly wasn’t the prayer the young angel had been hoping that she’d get. “Alex?” Sam’s desperate voice rang through her head, and Alex sat up straight, head tipping in worry. “Get here now. Abaddon’s escaped.”

Escaped? The young angel shoved her laptop off of her lap, and her wings carried her up into the air and towards the Winchesters. “Escaped?” she repeated as she landed in behind Sam and Dean. The brothers spun around, and the angel drew her wings in as she took in the empty chair that lay behind them. “What the fuck do you mean by escaped?”

“She dug the bullet out of her freaking mouth.” Dean threw the bloodied and warped round down on the ground, and it bounced over to Alex’s boot.

The angel kicked it aside. “You were supposed to call me before you reassembled her!” she yelled, stalking forward to glare up at the eldest brother. “Why didn’t you? This wouldn’t have fucking happened if you had just trusted me!”

“What, like you and Cas trusted us —”

“Hey hey hey! Not the time, okay?” Sam cut in sharply, and Alex bit back a sharp retort, finding a sharp glare directed at Dean Winchester sufficient for the time being. “We should have called you, okay? But right now, you need to find Abaddon, and we’ll go to Prosperity, Indiana.”

“Like hell I’ll — wait, what?” Alex’s anger suddenly disappeared at Sam’s words, replaced by pure confusion, and she tipped her head. “Why Prosperity?” Her head tipped even further as she placed the town. “That — didn’t we work a witch case there like, forever ago? What the hell’s so important about there?”

Sam held up his phone so Alex could see his most recent text message. “It’s from Crowley,” the Winchester explained.

“Okay … so? Why are you dropping everything and running there?” The angel’s wings twitched in utter bewilderment. “Who gives a damn what Crowley wants? If anything, it’s just another fucking trap.”

“Yeah, and a trap means demons,” Sam retorted. “So if you can’t find Abaddon, at least we have a backup plan.” He shoved his phone back into his pocket. “It’s only a few hours drive, okay? And it’s the only thing we can do.”

“Fine.” Alex let out a scoff, and she pointed a finger straight at Dean. “You two are complete idiots, you know that? Call me when you find a fucking demon.”

She thrust her wings down and took off into air, grace pricking with fury and worry. Why hadn’t the Winchesters called her? They let — “Son of a bitch!” The angel spiraled up sharply through the clouds, and her wings snapped out, feathers puffed out as she grit her teeth. They had let Abaddon loose.

She dropped down to fly just above the treetops and started her search, grace stretching out and exploring every inch of the land below. She started in small circles, working her way around the warehouse before making progressively larger and larger circles. “Castiel?” she prayed aloud, barely able to keep the snarl from her voice. “Where are you? The Winchesters let Abaddon escape.”

Who? The prayer reached her immediately, and Alex hooked a right around a tall office building before she responded.
“Abaddon,” she repeated. “She’s a Knight of Hell — one of the angels that lost their grace and became demons. She’s strong, Castiel — the demon knife barely slowed her down. We had to trap her with a devil’s trap and I ended up dismembering —” Alex swerved suddenly to avoid a radio tower, too distracted on her prayer, “— sorry — dismembering her to keep her down.”

**Alex. Get away from there. Where are you?**

Alex pulled to a stop in mid air, wings beating to keep her up as she shook her head. “I’m nowhere near Abaddon,” she promised, voice flat with barely disguised frustration. “I have fifty states to search, and I don’t even know where to start. Go back to the bunker, and I’ll meet you there soon, okay?”

There were a moment or two’s pause before her prayer was answered.

*Call me if you run into any trouble.*

“Of course.” Alex took off through the air, black wings cutting through the spring air. “Over and out.”

The demon died with a screech, his lifeless body hitting the concrete ground with a sickening thud. The angel in front of him drew her wing in close against her back, turning her back to the mass of twisted and burnt bodies that were strewn throughout the dark parking garage. She stalked out into the street, grey eyes flickering up to the setting sun; she had been searching for Abaddon for almost two hours, and all she had found were run of the mill demon scum.

Her wings carried her upwards and further on her path. Abaddon had felt different against her grace, but so did ten demons all at once — they felt so similar that not even she could tell them apart, and as a result, she had been forced to stop in every major city within the United States.

Alex landed gently on top of the skyscraper, reaching up to tuck back her blonde hair as wind whipped it across her face. Her hand moved down to her face, and she let out a groan of pain as she pinched the bridge of her nose. That was it. If she hadn’t found the Knight of Hell by now, then she simply wasn’t going to.

She extended her wings, ready to return to the bunker where Castiel would be waiting for her, but a reluctant second thought had her taking off towards Prosperity, Indiana. She hadn’t heard a peep from either Winchester, and Sam had explicitly promised to let her know when they found a demon. A quick checkup wouldn’t hurt to make sure they weren’t dead.

She easily located their souls, not in Prosperity, but in Indianapolis, and she dropped though the motel roof to land in the middle of the room. Her wings drew in tight at the scene that greeted her. Sigils covered the windows; some were in red spray paint, but others glimmered on the walls, flickering in and out of sight like a pulsing heart. A body lay on the ground — a woman, lying in a pool of blood. Sam and Dean were near the door, heads bowed and shoulders fallen.

“What happened here?”

Her voice had the Winchesters looking up, and Alex blinked back surprise at their dull, defeated eyes. Sam looked away, too hurt to speak, but Dean’s face twisted in anger. “Where were you?” he boomed, and Alex backpedaled as he surged forward. “Where the hell were you?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Alex’s wings carried her over to Sam, and she reached up, poised to draw her weapon. “I came looking for you because you promised to pray when you found
a demon, and I hadn’t heard bumpkis. What happened here? And who is she?”

“Sarah Blake.” Sam exchanged a forlorn look with his brother. “We, uh, saved her a long, long time ago.”

“And Crowley killed her!” Dean sharply interrupted his brother. “Somehow, he has a list of people we’ve saved, and he’s going to kill them until we give up the trials and the tablets.” He stalked over to the window, his back to them, and Alex narrowed her eyes in sympathy at his crestfallen figure.

“So he must have been the ones who put the wardings up,” she murmured to herself, but somehow, both Winchesters heard. “The wardings on the walls,” the angel explained when all eyes turned onto her. “I doubt you can see them — they’re Enochian. They must have been what kept your prayers from leaving this room, right?” She watched as the brothers once more exchanged looks, and Alex sighed. “If there’s anything I can do, let me know,” she finally said. “Otherwise I should get back to the bunker.”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Dean begrudgingly agreed, but something in his tone had Alex doubting he truly meant what he was saying. “Go.”

“Dean, are you sure?” she pressed. “I can —”

“I said go!”

Alex went. She took off into the sky, leaving the two Winchesters behind as she flew towards the bunker. Dean was hurt — he was pissed. It couldn’t be personal this time. She hadn’t done anything wrong.

Then again, she hadn’t done anything right either.

The angel dropped down into the library, shoulders hunched as she dug her teeth into her lips, fighting back tears that shouldn’t have been in her eyes. She just needed a minute; that was all it was. A minute to take in the day and fight back that overwhelming pressure that was pushing on her chest. God, she hated it when Dean yelled at her.

No. Alex pushed away the thought. If she thought about it, she’d cry. And if she started, she wouldn’t be able to stop. She shook out her wings, a physical attempt to shake the memories out of her mind. “This is stupid,” she muttered under her breath. “I’m fine. You’re fine.”

“You’re back.” Castiel stepped into the library, navy blue wings stretching outwards as he met her gaze. “I thought I felt your grace.”

“Yeah, it’s me. H-How was your day? You …” Alex trailed off, lips lifting into a small smile as her voice failed.

Castiel must have seen the way her jaw trembled, because his face softened with sympathy. “Something happened.” He crossed the room, wings extending out, and Alex stepped into his embrace, pressing her face into his neck. Wings enveloped her, holding her close, and the young angel squeezed her eyes shut as Castiel’s grace curled around hers. “It’s okay,” the seraph murmured, and his hands rubbed gentle circles into her back as Alex trembled. “You’re okay.”

“I’m fine,” Alex lied through a tight throat.

Castiel’s wings flapped twice, and Alex felt the air shift around them. The seraph stepped backwards, and Alex’s grace trailed after him, wishing he was close once again. “You should sit,” he instructed, motioning down to the brown couch before he sat down himself.
Alex crawled into his lap, pulling her wings in tight as she once more burrowed her face into his chest. She felt the seraph’s surprise, but he said nothing, and his arms came to rest around her waist.

Several seconds of quiet passed until Castiel prompted, “What happened? Did you find Abaddon? Where are Sam and Dean?”

“I didn’t find her.” Alex sniffled, and her voice was muffled by her mate’s trench coat as she shifted closer to him. “Sam a-and … Dean … they’re in Indianapolis. Crowley’s killing people they once saved until — until they give up on the trials and give him the tablets.” She looked up into Castiel’s blue eyes, watching the concern that flickered within them until she couldn’t bring herself to look anymore. “Dean hates me,” she finally said, eyes downcast. “He …”

She curled back up into Castiel’s chest, shaking her head as she trailed off, and Castiel’s hand moved to the base of her wings, stroking her soft feathers. “I’ve noticed that Dean often gets … ill-tempered when he’s stressed,” the seraph eventually responded. “I doubt his anger was anything personal.”

“It wasn’t,” Alex agreed softly — that was something she had known herself, but that knowledge didn’t seem to lessen the pain. “A-At least Sam’s still kind to me,” she added under her breath, but before Castiel could reply, she sat up, hands going up to brush away the tears. “What, uh, what did Metatron want?”

It was Castiel’s turn to seem hesitant, and Alex flicked a wingtip against his chest when the silence dragged on. “He wants to close heaven’s gates,” the seraph finally said. “Just like how Sam and Dean are going to close the gates to hell.”

*What?* Alex looked down at him in stunned silence, trying to wrap her mind around what Castiel had just said. “What?” she ultimately vocalized. “Why?”

“Heaven is divided and at war,” Castiel reminded. “Closing the gates — it will keep the fighting from spilling down to earth, at least until they can work out their differences.” His hand came up to rest against her cheek, and Alex leaned into his touch. “This is my fault; I should be the one to fix it.”

“By shutting the gates … that will draw all of the angels back unto heaven?” She blinked, confused by what Castiel was trying to say.

The seraph nodded. “Yes. And I don’t know how long we will have to stay there, but …” His grace rested against hers. “If this is something you don’t want, then I won’t do it.”

“I never said I didn’t want it,” Alex retorted lightly. “You’re right, Cas. Closing heaven’s gates — it’s the best thing we can do. With heaven and hell closed, earth will be safe again. Plus,” she added, finger toying with one of the large buttons on his coat, “going back to heaven, starting a new life — that’s what we wanted, right?”

“It is,” Castiel agreed. “And you … you want this as well?”

“Yeah.” Alex pressed a gentle kiss on his lips. “I’ve had enough of this life, Cas. I’m tired of the fighting and the death. Sure, I’m going to miss earth, Sam and — and Dean, but I’d rather be with you.” She moved so she was straddling his thighs, a small smile on her face as she looked down at Castiel. “You’re my mate. And I actually want to be yours.” She dropped her gaze when Castiel’s wings twitched with careful curiosity. “I just … we’ve waited long enough.”

A warm hand lifted up her chin, and Alex felt her face flush. “I promised you a long time ago that I would never push you until you were ready,” Castiel murmured. “But if you’re sure this is what you want …”
“Yeah, I, uh, I’ve been sure for a while now.” The young angel out a small smile, and she added, “And now that we’re going home … it just feels right.” She leaned down to kiss him, and Castiel’s wings folded across her back as his hands came up to cup her face.

“And what about the Winchesters?” Castiel pulled back slightly, and his head tipped when Alex scoffed teasingly.

“Why?” she laughed, and her eyes sparkled with mirth as she added, “You want them to join in? They’re eight hours away,” she promised when Castiel’s head tipped even further. “They won’t be here anytime soon.” She ran a hand through his hair, watching how the strands stick up in every which way. “So don’t worry.”

“I wasn’t worrying,” the seraph rumbled, and he reached up to smooth down her hair. His wings flicked against her neck in retaliation. “I was only curious.” He reached up to catch her wrist when Alex reached for his hair again. “Why do you keep doing that?”

“I like it.” Alex let out a small smile, and she leaned down to press her lips up against his. “And I like you.” She rose to her feet, wings dropping low as she held out her hands. “Come on. Bedroom.”
Sacrifice

Chapter Notes

Alright, last chapter of season 8!

I'll be working on season 9, but in the mean time, I also be rewriting the first installment because I find the writing really painful, so if you want to reread it, it'll be better.

Thank you so much for sticking with this story!

May 17th, 2014

Lebanon, Kansas

Alex pulled her blonde hair back from her face as she peered into the Men of Letters mirror, trying to brush back the tangles the best she could. Goosebumps dotted her skin, and the angel momentarily regretted only putting on a thin tank-top and a pair of running shorts. Her fingers dropped down to trace the mark on her neck, left by Castiel’s teeth only a few hours before, and she frowned slightly.

“Alex?” Arms enveloped her waist, and Alex leaned back into Castiel’s bare chest. His grace brushed against hers, and Alex closed her eyes as she felt it twist beneath her skin, moving alongside hers.

The young angel hummed out her own greeting. “How long will this stay visible?” she asked softly.

Castiel ran light fingers over the mark, and it faded under his touch. “There.” His hand returned to her stomach, and Alex leaned her cheek up against his. “Is that better?”

The young angel reached up to feel her skin, but any physical trace of its presence was gone. “Much, I think.” Her wings twitched slightly, feathers crushed against the seraph’s chest, and her hand dropped to cover his. “And then it’s just … gone? Just like that?”

In response, Castiel’s grace pushed up against her shoulder, and Alex watched in the mirror as the mark glowed a bright blue. His fingers brushed along her skin, and Alex’s eyes fell closed as she remembered.

She remembered how his hands had moved down her sides, soft and hesitant at first, but gaining confidence with each passing minute.

She remembered how his warm lips had peppered kisses across her skin, light, barely-there whispers across her stomach followed by a sharp, teasing nip that had the angel squeaking in surprise.

She remembered the way his skin had felt against hers, warm and soft beneath her fingertips, a sharp contrast to the coarse brush of his long, blue feathers on her back as they wrapped around her, sheltering them from the outside world.

And she remembered how his teeth had dug sharply into her skin, breaking through her vessel to her grace beneath, and how their graces had collided in an explosion of pure warmth, twisting and melting together until they were one.
The seraph’s voice drew her back into the present. “This is an open portal to your — to our — grace. Don’t let any other angel near it, understand?”

“Yeah, I understand.” Alex looked up into the mirror and smiled at their reflection, and she tipped her head to bump it against her mate’s. Her mate’s — for real this time. He was her mate, and she was his. “And it just stays … open like that?”

“It’s only complete when we are one.” To prove his point, Castiel dipped his head, his teeth brushing across her shoulder. The mark lit up, her grace sparking up through her skin, and Alex wiggled playfully at the feeling as his grace swirling within her. Lucifer’s grace was no more, vanquished the moment Castiel’s grace had swept through hers, burning away the devil’s touch.

She was pulled out of her thoughts when Castiel pressed a kiss on her neck, and she let out a hum. “Yes? What do you want?”

“I have what I want.” Blue and black wings folded around her, filling her vision, and Alex leaned back into him, curling her fingers around his wrists as the seraph’s hands slipped under the hem of her tank top to rest against her stomach. Gold now flecked his feathers, and Alex knew that her own vanes had patches of blue mingled in near the gold.

Alex? Where are you?

Alex let out a loud groan as Sam’s voice broke through her head, and she tipped her head back to rest on Castiel’s warm shoulder as she stared up at the stone ceiling. “Sam’s praying to me,” she muttered.

“I know.” Castiel’s wings dragged across her bare arms, and he brushed his lips across her temple. “I feel what you feel now, don’t forget.”

Alex hummed, and then she reached up and batted his wings away. “That tickles,” she chastised lightly. “And I haven’t forgotten. I was stating the obvious.” Her phone vibrated loudly from where it was resting on the edge of the sink, and Alex reached out to read her new text message. It was from Sam — no surprise there. “He wants me down in St. Louis,” she read.

Castiel pushed her phone away from her. “Ignore it,” he rumbled as he pressed his face into her neck, and Alex squirmed in his arms as his stubble dragged across her sensitive skin.

“I can’t ignore it,” she reluctantly protested. “People are dying.” She looked up at the clock in the top right corner of the room before she turned in Castiel’s arms, leaning up to press a light, short kiss on his lips. “I’ll be back within the hour,” she promised. “Don’t go far.”

“I won’t.” Castiel pulled his wings away and exited the bathroom. Alex watched him go; their graces were combined, coiled and tangled so tightly together they felt like one. She could feel her own grace swirling through her mate’s vessel, connected by a thin tendril that stretched from her heart to his.

Her phone buzzed again, this time with a call, and the young angel reluctantly turned her attention onto it. “Hey, Sam, what do you want?” She leaned back against the porcelain sink, wings twitching in frustration at his interruption.

The youngest Winchester didn’t seem to hear the irritation in her voice. “Where are you at?”

“I’m back at the bunker. With Castiel. And so I repeat myself; what do you want?” Alex moved out of the bathroom and towards her bedroom, wings curling around her bare skin to keep her warm; now that Castiel was gone, the cold air was nipping at her back. “Now’s not the best time, so this
better be important.”

“W-Why?” Sam stuttered slightly in confusion, and Alex could almost hear his squint in his tone.

“How can it be more important than someone dying?” she heard Dean retort in the background, and her wings fluffed out instinctively in indignation; however, she forced them to lay flat. Dean was right.

“I was just getting comfortable,” she half-lied as she stepped into her bedroom, “but if someone’s in trouble, then they come first. Do you have a name?”

“No,” Sam admitted discouragingly. “Crowley isn’t telling. Hey, so we’re at the Budget Inn in St. Louis —”

Alex cut him off. “Yeah, I read your text. Okay, just — just let me get dressed. I’ll be there in three minutes.” She hung up and tossed her phone onto her bed before she started to change; jeans, black v-neck, and a red and black flannel with a convenient hood would have to do. She was fastening her necklace around her neck when the door opened, and Alex felt Castiel step though. “Hey,” she called over her shoulder.

“So you are leaving,” the seraph confirmed. He was once more wearing his typical suit and trench coat, and Alex stretched out a wing to greet him. “I wish you luck.” He walked up behind her, wings curling forward to brush down her sides.

“Yeah.” Alex tucked her pendants beneath her shirt. “See you in a bit.” She turned around to kiss her mate, and then her wings carried her up into the air. She followed the highway down to to St. Louis and dropped down through the roof of the Budget Inn to stand beside Sam Winchester.

“About time.” Dean was seated at the table, and he let out a disgruntled huff as he brought his beer up to his lips.

Alex rolled her eyes. “Stick it up your ass,” she retorted lightly; Castiel had left her in too good a mood to be bothered by Dean’s stress-anger. “So what do you want with me? If we don’t have a name or a location, I don’t see what I can do to help.”

“We’re going to summon Crowley. Here.” Dean motioned towards the bowl and chalk beside him. “You’re our backup — angel protection. Think you can see it now?”

Alex’s only response was to flick the Winchester in the back of the head with a wing. “When’s this going down?” she inquired of Sam, smirking in amusement as Dean reached up to touch hair in slight confusion. “Cause I promised Cas I’d be back in half an hour, so …”

“Why?” Dean let out a dry laugh from where he sat. “Let me guess — you’re finally gonna try and get laid.” A grin accompanied his words, and Alex watched as his tongue swiped over his top lip before it disappeared back into his mouth as he reached for his beer.

The young angel rolled her eyes. “Been there, done that,” she quipped. “Was actually thinking about going back for seconds — thirds, technically.” Her boldness was rewarded when Dean choked on his drink, and it was the angel’s turn to grin. “Anyways.” She clapped her hands. “Crowley. You were, uh, really going to try that, huh?”

“Course.” Dean got to his feet. “How else are we going to get that son of a bitch to stop? I say we hold a knife to him until he calls off his dogs.” He looked over at the angel, and when she remained silent, he frowned deeply. “What?”
“Nothing.” Alex shook her head innocently. “It’s just … are you sure that’s a good idea? How do you know that he won’t just kill the next victim straight up — or worse? Or how do we even know that he could stop it from here? That, plus then Crowley will know exactly where the two of you are and could send in all of hell’s army after you. It just doesn’t seem like a good idea.”

“Okay, then what's your big idea?” Dean’s voice grew sharp at her criticism. “Because someone else going to die tonight if we don’t do something now!”

“There’s nothing we can do!” Alex’s wings stretched out, brushing up against the ceiling. “Go back to the bunker, and then we’ll come up with a plan to stop Crowley. But running headfirst into this — even for you that’s reckless.” She looked down at her watch: 2pm. “Listen. We still have, like, eight hours before Crowley kills the next person, guys. I say get back to the bunker, and we’ll brainstorm, okay? We can’t do anything to save anyone until he gives us a name, and everything we need to stop him is back at home. I’ll meet you there.”

Dean’s eyes flashed, but the angel spread her wings and took off into the air before he could say anything.

The Winchesters returned to the bunker at just before 9pm, and Alex looked up from the library table as footsteps echoed off of the stairs. “You’re back,” she greeted, glancing down at the clock on her computer. “And you made good time.”

Dean grunted, but didn’t respond to her comment. “Where’s Cas?” he asked instead.

“Um, not here.” Alex took a second to focus, and she felt her grace moving alongside Castiel’s within his vessel. She closed her eyes, and she saw what he saw, felt what he felt. “ ‘Doc Marley’s Cocktails,’ ” she read. “He’s sitting across the street from a bar. At a bus stop.” She reopened her eyes. “And he’s with Metatron. That’s all I can see.”

Sam squinted in confusion. “See?” he repeated.

The young angel nodded. “We’re mates now — actual mates. Our graces, they’re … entwined. Some of his is in my vessel, and some of mine is in his, so I can see and feel everything he does whenever I want.”

“Huh.” The Sam’s eyebrows lifted. “That’s pretty cool.”

“Yeah, it is.” Alex closed her laptop and turned fully to face the two brothers. “Alright. You two have any great brainstorms on the drive? Preferably on how to stop Crowley and shut down hell?”

“Yeah, actually.” Sam slid into the seat across from him, and his hazel eyes gleamed excitedly at the prospect of a solution. “The third trial — it’s curing a demon, and Crowley —”

“Is a demon,” Dean finished impatiently. “We bag the King of Hell, we cure him, and he stops killing.”

“Yeah, I gathered that.” Alex flicked her wings crossly, and she felt Castiel’s grace twitch, clearly aware of her displeasure. “I was actually thinking the same thing.” She reached back and hooked her fingers around the demonic handcuffs she had taken from the the dungeon behind room 7B. “So, we’re probably going to need these.” She tossed them over to Dean, and the Winchester caught them with his left hand. “Okay, so how do we get Crowley to us? I’ve been thinking, and fifty bucks says that if he’s working heavy spellwork like the stuff that killed Sarah, he’s warded himself against our demon summoning spells.”
“Yeah.” Dean dropped the handcuffs down on the table and circled around to stand beside his brother. “We thought about that too.”

“Hmm. Congratulations.” Alex shook out her wings as she rose to her feet, and she asked, “Alright, so then how are we going to get his attention? Just give him a call?” She picked up her phone, and her eyes darted down to check the time.

Dean nodded. “We have his number,” he reminded.

“So do I.” Alex shook her phone for emphasis. “I’ve had it for years, actually.” The ding of a cellphone had her looking over at the brothers in confusion. “Wasn’t me.”

Sam pulled out his cell, and he rose to his feet as his face darkened. “It’s Crowley,” he announced. “It’s the next address.” He held it out so Dean could see, and Alex watched as the hunter’s eyes flashed.

“What?” she demanded. “What is it? And what the hell?” The phone dinged again, and she added, “It’s an hour early! We still have an hour.”

“Not anymore.” Sam handed the phone to Alex, and the angel read over the two text messages from the King of Hell. The first and most recent was short. You have two minutes. The second was an address, and although Alex didn’t recognize it specifically, she knew that city.

Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

The angel’s gaze flickered up to the brothers, grey eyes hardening into stone. “Who have we saved in Sioux Falls?” she asked, voice flat and cold. “Because only one name is coming to mind.” She handed Sam back his phone. “Get Crowley and tell him to call it off now.”

Dean took the phone from his brother’s hand and dialed Crowley’s number. He set it down on the table, and Alex leaned forward as she listened to the ring. The demon answered after two seconds. “You less than one minute before a very dear, attractive, and slightly tipsy friend of yours snuffs it.”

“Call it off, Crowley.” Dean slammed his hand down on the table, and Alex jumped slightly at the boom in his voice.

“Because?”

“Because it’s over, you son of a bitch!” Dean’s dark eyes turned onto his brother, and Sam nodded. “We want a deal.”

“Who is it?” Alex leaned over the table, and her feathers ruffled outwards. “Who are you with? Is it Jody Mills?”

There was a moment of silence before Crowley once again spoke. “Thirty seconds.”

Alex took off into the sky. Black feathers sliced through the air as she crossed the country, and she dove down into the city of Sioux Falls. She found Jody’s soul at the Crow Bar, and she dropped down through the roof to land in the bathroom.

Sheriff Mills was collapsed on the tile floor. Blood dripped off of her lips as she shuddered in pain, and Alex fell to her knees in front of her. “I’m here, I’m here,” the angel whispered, and her grace pushed into the sheriff’s convulsing body. It was met with a cold, dark energy — spellwork — and the angel’s eyes came to rest on the hex bag that lay near her head. “Son of a bitch.”
The angel scooped the bag up, and her fist closed around the small leather pouch as her grace poured into it. The bag burned away in her hands in a flash of blue flames, and Alex’s eyes narrowed into chips of ice as she dropped the bag onto the floor.

“Crowley.” The angel’s wings pushed her through the bathroom door. She saw Crowley sitting at a booth, and her hand closed around his neck as she landed, heaving the demon up into the air and pinning him against the wall.

Everyone around them jumped to their feet with cries of surprise, and underneath that all, Alex picked up the sharp tone of Dean’s voice emanating from the phone that had fallen onto the ground at her feet. “On the grounds that you’re a douchebag, and no douchebag should have that much power!” the Winchester snapped.

Alex glared up into the King’s eyes, and her wings rose threateningly, feathers puffing out in fury. Her grace spilled into her fingertips, burning her grip into the demon’s throat. “Give me one reason why I shouldn’t kill you right now,” she growled out, and she tightened her hold around Crowley’s neck.

The demon opened his mouth, but no sound came out. However, he met the angel’s glare, and Alex’s wings rose even higher at the faintest hint of a challenge in his eyes.

“Hello?” she heard Dean ask over the phone. “Crowley? Alex? What the hell’s going on?”

Alex reached down with her free hand, and her grace pulled the phone up into her fingertips. “I’m here,” she growled. “And do we want Crowley dead or alive, because right now I’m banking on dead.” She sharply tightened her grip to emphasize her point, and Crowley gasped for air.

“Alive.” Dean’s voice was firm, and Alex reluctantly loosened her hold. “We talked about this — don’t blow it.”

Alex let the demon go, and he collapsed to the ground. “It’s your lucky day.” She tossed the phone onto the demon’s chest. “The Winchesters want to do things the hard way, apparently.” She took a step back, shaking out her wings so her sleek black feathers would lay flat before she warned, “Double cross them, and next time, I won’t let you go.”

Crowley fled, disappearing into thin air, and Alex ignored the sharp gasps of surprise as she hurried back into the bathroom. Jody Mills had moved, now reclined against the wall, and blue eyes turned onto the angel as she entered. “Hey.” The sheriff’s voice was rough and dry, and the faint hint of a smile crossed her lips. “How’d you find me?”

“Crowley likes to gloat.” Alex knelt down in front of the sheriff, and her gray eyes flickered with concern. “Lucky for you, his pride sometimes backfires on him. How are you feeling?” She reached out to place a hand on Jody’s sternum, and her grace flowed inwards, searching for any lingering damage.

Mills’ eyes fell closed. “Crowley?” she asked as she leaned her head back against the wall.

“Yeah, demon. Dark, stocky fellow. Brown eyes, tie, overall pain in the ass.” Alex pulled her hand and grace away. Jody Mills was going to be fine.

“Rodrick.” Jody’s shoulders fell, and she opened her eyes when Alex made a bewildered noise. “He was my date,” the sheriff reluctantly explained. “Of course he was a demon. You know, I finally decided to — to get back up on that horse … he was attractive though. Kinda hot.”

Hot? Alex tipped her head. “I … I’m not sure what I should say that,” she finally admitted. “Let’s …
just get you home.” She helped Jody to her feet. “I can fly you there,” the angel offered, but Mills brushed her help off.

“I’ll be fine,” she promised, and she knelt down to pick up her purse. “Some Netflix and a bottle of Four Roses, and I’ll be out like a light.”

“If you say so,” Alex stepped aside so the sheriff could leave. “Let me at least stay with you for a while. Crowley might try something to get us back.”

Jody thankfully nodded, and Alex let out a breath of relief at her assent. “Alright. I still have the guest room made up for you.”

The young angel shook her head. “I haven’t slept in over a month,” she explained quietly. “So that won’t be necessary. I’ll meet you out in the car.” Her wings carried her out of the bar and into the front seat of Sheriff Mills’ rusty pickup. She pulled out her phone and dialed Dean’s number. “Hey,” she greeted. “Mills is okay.”

“Good.” Dean’s voice was still sharp, but Alex picked up a note of relief. “Sam’s calling Kevin to go dig up the tablet — Crowley wants to meet up in Bobby’s salvage yard tomorrow at ten am sharp.”

“Works for me.” Alex watched Mills exist the bar and make her way towards the truck. “I’m going to spend the night with Jody, just to make sure she’s okay. If you need anything, just give a holler.” She hung up as the driver’s side door opened, and Jody climbed in. “Are you sure you’re feeling well enough to drive?” Alex asked as she slid her phone back into her pocket.

“I’m fine.” The sheriff brushed off Alex’s question with a sharp shake of her head. “Were those the Winchesters?” When Alex nodded, she started the truck. “Alright. You owe me an explanation.” The car pulled out into the road and rumbled off down the street as she added, “And you better start with where the hell you’ve been these last six months.”

Alex stirred on the couch, blinking as she tore her gaze away from the flickering tv screen. Jody Mills had passed out almost four hours ago, and a half empty bottle of Four Roses sat on the coffee table. Alex’s own glass was only a quarter full; after an hour of persistent rejection, she had finally caved and accepted the drink from a very tipsy Jody Mills.

Wings fluttered, and Alex leaned back in her seat, eyes closed as a hum of warm greeting rumbled in her throat. Hands reached over the back of the chair, squeezing her shoulders. “Hello.”

“Hey, Cas.” Alex stretched her wings up to brush them against her mate’s, and she felt her grace stir warmly beside his. “How is Metatron doing?” she inquired, and she let out another hum as she leaned her head back to accept a kiss. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too. And the scribe is fine.” Castiel circled around to stand in front of her. “Tomorrow we intend on completing the second trial. I spoke with Kevin Tran this morning,” he added, and Alex reached out her hands to take his.

“Oh. How’s the prophet doing?” She rose to her feet, and Castiel’s wings curled around her, drawing her in close. “I haven’t spoken to him since Metatron took him under his protection.”

“He’s fine,” the seraph promised. “The two of them seem to be getting along just fine.” His blue eyes wandered over to where Jody Mills lay unconscious. “Is everything alright here?”

“Crowley.” Alex spat out the name, and she stepped away from her mate as anger rushed through
her. “I’m watching over her tonight to make sure he doesn’t try anything again.”

Her statement was intentionally vague, curious as to whether the seraph would be able to stitch together the pieces, and from the way his grace swelled up calmly against hers, it felt that he did. “I felt what happened,” Castiel murmured. “I was ready to come if you needed, but that didn’t seem necessary.”


“Of course.” The seraph’s gaze flickered onto the sheriff as she stirred ever so slightly, and his voice dropped. “As I said, tomorrow we’re going to complete the second trial, so I may not be available to come help if something goes astray. You should be careful.”

“I’ll be fine.” Alex leaned up to press a kiss on Castiel’s lips. “I’ve spent six years on my own, so I think I should be able to handle one more day.” She pulled away and walked over to the coffee table. “So what’s the second trial?” she inquired as she put the stopper back into the half-empty bottle of bourbon. “You never told me the first one, either.”

She watched how the seraph’s countenance fell slightly. “The first trial was to kill a nephilim,” he said, and Alex picked up a note of sorrow and regret in his voice. “The second trial will require no death,” he added after a second, following Alex into the kitchen. “Metatron promised me that much.”

“That’s good.” Alex tucked the bottle back into the top cupboard shelf. “What is it?”

“We have to retrieve the bow from a cupid.”

Alex grimaced, the memory of the last cupid they had encountered still vivid in her mind. “Ew. Hopefully they’ll be a little more clothed this time,” she joked. The angel leaned back against the counter as she turned to face her mate. “And then after the second trial is complete — that’s when we’ll go back to heaven? So we’ll be there when the third one’s finished?”

“That’s the plan,” Castiel agreed. He stepped forward, and Alex stretched out a wing to flick him in the stomach. “The spell should pull all angels who are on earth back into heaven, but we’ll return before then. Are the Winchesters close to completing the third trial of their own?”

“All we need is a demon, and we’re …” Alex trailed off, looking over at the clock on the microwave, “…six hours away from getting one.” She grinned as Castiel came to stop in front of her. “I’m excited, man. Like, I can’t even begin to describe it.” She let out a small laugh as she reached out to pull Castiel close. “Maybe this will be our happily ever after.”

May 18th, 2014

Singer’s Salvage Yard

Alex ran her fingers across the hood of a rusted old Chevelle — her Chevelle, damaged in the fire and left abandoned and forgotten in the Singer Salvage Yard. Weeds grew rampant all around her, and a tree was beginning to make its way through the open engine of a rusted old pick-up. The young angel’s shoulders fell. So much destruction and decay. Bobby never would have let it get this way.

The sound of the Impala had her looking up, and Alex reluctantly turned away from her first car to face the brothers. “Hey,” she greeted as Sam and Dean approached. “I never thought I’d come here again.” Her eyes turned onto the blackened ground where her home had once stood, and she fell
“Hello, boys.” Crowley’s voice had Alex spinning around, and her wings rose angrily. “And Alex,” he finished darkly. The demon lifted his hand to snap his fingers, and demons appeared at the young angel’s side, hands gripping her arms to keep her still.

Alex struggled, and she let out an inhuman snarl as she drew on her grace. She searched for Lucifer’s as her anger grew, but it was nowhere to be found. Only Castiel’s, soft and calming, and it refused to move when Alex tried to push it out into the demons. She drew it in, but even its strength was no match to the power that had come with just the small fraction of the archangel’s grace that had resided within her.

Her eyes snapped open in alarm at this new realization, and her wings drew in close. “What’s the matter?” Crowley’s brown eyes glinted with cold mirth. “Can’t get it up?”

The two brothers started walking towards the King of Hell, but the demons held the angel back. “Screw you,” Alex retorted, and she let her grace roil beneath her skin.

The demon only laughed. “What’s that old expression?” Crowley mused. “Success has many fathers. Failure is a Winchester.” His dark eyes turned to Alex, whose lip had curled upward to reveal teeth in the hint of a snarl. She tried to take a step forward, but the demons held her back. “Ah ah.” Crowley clicked his tongue. “I think it’s best if you stay back.” He let out a chuckle, and he turned back to the brothers. “Where’s the stone?”

Sam and Dean stopped ten feet in front of the demons. “You show us yours, and we’ll show you ours,” Dean retorted.

“Really, Dean? I’m trying to conduct a professional negotiation here, and you want to talk dangly bits? The stone,” he demanded, but quickly added, “Whoa whoa whoa whoa,” when Sam hurriedly reached into his own jacket. “Slowly.”

Alex couldn’t see it, but judging by the way the Winchesters shoulders fell in exasperation, she was certain they were rolling their eyes. Sam moved much more carefully as he pulled free the demon tablet, somehow miraculously back in one piece.

The way Crowley lifted his eyebrows mimicked Alex’s own confusion, but he made no comment. “There she is,” was all he said. He drew back the lapels of his own coat to reveal the angel tablet tucked within an inside pocket.

“And the contract?” Dean asked.

In response, Crowley reached into his other pocket to pull out a scroll, and it rolled out across the ground, almost reaching to Dean’s feet six feet away. Alex snorted at the length of it — demon contracts. “How about a kiss?” she jested scornfully. “That way we won’t be here all day, huh?”

She received a glare from both brothers. Sam’s lingered longer, while Dean’s quickly turned back down to the contract that lay in front of him. “And I’m sure there’s no hidden agendas in that,” he scoffed.

“The highlights? We swap tablets, you stand down from the trials forever.”

“You stop killing everyone we’ve ever saved,” Sam finished sharply.

Crowley’s gaze flickered over to Alex for the briefest second, and the angel cocked an eyebrow as she remembered their encounter last night. “Agreed,” the demon agreed, turning back to Sam. “Uh
uh uh.” He yanked the contract back a few feet when Dean pulled out a pen. “Nice try, squirrel. Moose is doing these trials; Moose signs.”

“No, no,” Dean retorted. “He’s not signing anything until I read the fine print.”

“I can read it.” Sam stepped forward and snatched the pen away from his older brother.

Dean frowned. “Hey, you wanted me here,” he snapped. “I’m here. But I’ll be damned if I’m gonna let him screw us even more.”

“What’s this?” Crowley looked between the two brothers, interest gleaming in his eyes. “Trouble in paradise, boys?” He let out a low chuckle at his own joke, but the Winchesters only frowned.

“I’m reading it or there’s no deal,” he reiterated, and his jaw set into a firm line. When Crowley only shrugged, he knelt down to pick up the end of the contract.

Alex watched impatiently as Dean slowly worked his way up the scroll, and she flicked her wings as the rising sun was caught on the hood of an old car. She wasn’t sure how long the Winchester were going to detain the King, especially with the two demons beside her.

“You’re gonna move your lips the whole way up here, aren’t you?” Crowley finally drawled as Dean made his way towards the top of the contract. “You know why I always defeat you?” he continued when Dean ignored him, lips moving as he silently and quickly scanned the deal. “It’s your humanity; it’s a built in handicap. You always put emotion ahead of good, old-fashioned common sense. Let’s have the big galoot sign it now, shall we?”

Dean finally reached the end of the contract, leaving himself standing directly in front of the demon. Sam moved forward, pen in hand, and when Crowley’s gaze strayed, Dean made his move. The chink of handcuffs filled the air, and Alex reacted immediately. She threw her elbow into the demon on her left, and her free hand came up to the other entity’s forehead as her grace spilled inwards, Castiel’s right alongside hers. It died with a screech, and the angel lunged at the second demon to finish it off.

Both demons fell to the ground, and Alex staggered. She heard Crowley chuckle, and she turned to face him. “No so easy anymore, is it?” he scorned. He turned back to the Winchesters, and Alex leaned up against the rusty car to catch her breath as the demon began, “This is a joke, right?” He lifted his hand to show off the handcuffs and added, “You do realize that all I have to do is …” He snapped his fingers to complete his thought, and Alex let out a harsh laugh as his grin faded into a frown. The handcuffs remained firmly attached to his wrist.

“Uh uh uh.” It was Dean’s turn to chide. “Demonic handcuffs, jackass. No flicking, no teleporting, no smoking out — oh, and, uh, no deal. Which pretty much means that you’re our bitch.”

Anger darkened Crowley’s face, and he scowled. “Fine. You want to play chain gang? Let’s.” The demon butted Dean in the nose violently with his forehead, and Alex involuntarily winced at the loud crack. “You saddled the wrong bull, mate!” Crowley yelled, and the angel pushed herself off of the car, ready to intervene.

Dean, however, didn’t need her help. He punched Crowley square in the mouth, and when the demon staggered back, he pulled the angel tablet free and handed it back to Sam. He then grabbed the demon by the coat and shook him roughly. Crowley spit out a mouthful of blood, and he glared up at Dean as the Winchester’s eyes flashed. “I can do this all day, cause you know what? Damn, it feels good. But sooner or later, you’re gonna have to face it — you’re ours. Which means that your demon ass is going to be a mortal ass pretty damn quick.”
Crowley looked over at Sam and Alex, and his anger faded slightly as confusion took hold. “What’s he mouthing on about?”

“You’re the third trial.” Alex stepped forward, and her wings twitched in satisfaction at the barely controlled surprise and terror that flashed across the King’s face. She turned to Sam and held out her hands. “Here. I’ll take the tablet to Kevin.”

“No.” Dean turned to face her, and Alex’s face twisted in confusion and offense. “You’re not getting your hands anywhere near them. You had your chance, and you blew it.”

Alex set her jaw, but she refused to start a fight with Crowley present; he’d only be amused by their disfunction, that smug bastard. So instead, she let her feathers ruffled angrily and cast the Winchester a sullen glare. “Fine then,” she finally huffed. “If you don’t need anything, I’m going to go find Castiel. Text me your 20.”

She flipped off Dean and took off into the air, leaving the brothers and Crowley by themselves. She closed her eyes briefly as she focused on her mate, bringing the image playing in the back of her mind to the front. She could see Metatron sitting on the other side of a booth, and she followed the thin thread of grace connecting her to Castiel.

She landed in the booth beside her mate, wings drawing in close. “Hi.” She flashed a quick smile at the scribe, and she pressed her grace tightly against her mate’s as she scooted into his side. “How are you doing?”

“Oh, fine?” Metatron glanced over at Castiel, a silent note of displeasure passing between them before he turned back to Alex. “What are you doing here?”

“We got Crowley for the third trial, but Dean was being a butt, so I thought I’d come check up on you two. You guys working on the second trial still?” She looked at the newspaper in the seraph’s hands and added, “Also, what’s that?”

“Personal ads.” Castiel dragged a finger down the page as he read it. “The faster that man finds love, the faster the cupid will come. Trust me,” he added when Metatron looked skeptical. “I’m friends with friends who do this for a living.”

He fell silent as a man walked up to them, and brilliant blue eyes swept over the three of them. “Help you three?” he inquired.

“Yes.” Castiel looked up at the gentleman, and somehow he managed to keep a very straight and very serious face as he asked, “Would you say you’re looking for, uh, a partner in crime …” he checked the paper quickly, “… or, uh, someone who’s into nurse role-play and light domination?”

Alex dug her teeth into her bottom lip, and she looked away, trying to maintain her composure. The man, clearly, wasn’t as amused as she was. “Brother, it’s 10am on a Tuesday.”

“Uh, we’ll have three drafts, please.” Metatron turned to Castiel as the man walked away, and Alex let her head fall onto the table as her sides convulsed with laughter. “You’re not the most subtle tool in the shed,” the scribe dryly began, “are you?”

Alex lifted her head to respond, but her words died in her throat. The scribe was yanked out of his seat in a flurry of wings, and Alex jumped to her feet at the sight of the four foreign angels. She recognized the leader immediately. “Naomi.”

“Kill them.” Naomi flicked a wing towards Castiel and Alex, and two angels stepped forward. Castiel’s weapon fell into his hands, and Alex reached to do the same. Before either side could make
the first move, however, the air was filled with the sound of the discharge of a shotgun, and buckshot tore into one of the angel’s arm. They stumbled back, and all eyes turned onto the bartender.

A shotgun gleamed in his hands, and his eyes flashed with fire. “Next one won’t wing you,” he warned. “Take it someplace else.”

Brown wings flashed through the air, and then the angel that the bartender had shot was behind him. He grabbed the man and slammed his head back in through one of the glass coolers, and the man collapsed to the ground. Alex’s wings stretched even higher in anger. “Stop it!” she demanded, and she slipped over to stand on the other side of Castiel.

“Let him go,” Castiel added, and his voice dropped an octave as his own wings reached up towards the ceiling, feathers puffed out to make them look twice the size that they truly were.

Naomi fixed the seraph with a level stare. “Haven’t you caused enough harm already, Castiel?” She frowned when Castiel took a menacing step forward. “Stop. Please, Castiel, don’t make this any worse. Please.”

Wings fluttered, and then all four angels were gone. “Dammit!” Alex’s grace snapped angrily, and immediately Castiel’s covered it, calming it down. “Sorry.” Alex pulled her grace back in where it swirled angrily within her. Her wings carried her over the bar to where the man was on the floor, unconscious. “Who is he?”

“Dwight Charles.” Castiel landed beside her. “Metatron said he was next on the list to be targeted by a cupid.” The seraph knelt down and touched Dwight on the forehead, and Alex felt their grace pour forward into the man and heal his injuries.

She glanced up towards the sky, off towards where the squad of angels had disappeared. “Now what?” she finally asked. “We can finish the second trial, yeah, but what about the third? Do you even know what that is?”

Castiel shook his head. “We have to get Metatron back.” Blue eyes fixed Alex with an intense stare, and the young angel watched as they darkened with worry.

Before he could speak again and suggest what Alex assumed to include fighting their way through heaven’s gates, she flicked him in the shoulder with a wingtip. “How about we go talk to Dean?” she suggested. “We don’t need the scribe if we have the scribe’s writings, right?”

“The angel tablet.” Castiel rose to his feet, and Alex nodded. “You have it?”

“We have Crowley, remember? And we have Kevin back on our side.” Alex dug her phone out of her pocket to read the address Sam had texted her. “I don’t know what you were going to say, but anything that involves getting Metatron back from heaven sounds suicidal, don’t you agree?”

“Yes, I agree.” Feathers rustled as Castiel’s navy wings curled forward in urgent curiosity. “Where are they now?”

“Follow me.” Alex took off into the sky, her dark wings beating in long, powerful strokes as she crossed the country. She spotted the Impala parked beside an old abandoned church, and she plummeted towards the ground.

Castiel passed her and landed beside Dean a heartbeat before she did. “Dean, we need your help,” he announced.

Dean jumped, almost hitting his head against the trunk that was propped up, and Alex watched as he
dropped a sawed-off back into the trunk. “Little busy, Cas. Take a number.”

Castiel glanced back at Alex, and the young angel urged him on with a nod. “I’m afraid this can’t wait. Naomi has taken Metatron.”

Dean glanced over his shoulder at the two angels, and Alex flashed him a small smile. “Yeah, Alex mentioned you two had become pretty good pals.”

The fainted cock of the seraph’s head was the only sign of his confusion. “I’ve been working with him on the angel trials,” he informed the Winchester.

“The what?”

“Angel trials,” Alex repeated. “Just like the demon trials. Heaven, hell — we’re going to shut it all down. Metatron knows the trials, and he agrees that all of this angelic fight on earth — it needs to stop.”

“Wait, so, Metatron, the guy who was full-on crazy-cat-lady-hoarder angel yesterday, now he wants to save heaven?” Dean crossed his arms, clearly skeptical of the two’s story.

“Yes,” Castiel agreed, “he wants to. But I’m the only one who can. I can’t fail, Dean, not on this one. I need your help.”

Dean frowned. “Look, Cas, that’s all well and good, okay, but you’re asking me to leave Sam, and we’ve got Crowley in there now, tired and trussed. If anyone needs a chaperone while doing heavy lifting, it’s Sam.”

“You should go.”

Alex blinked in surprise as she spun around to face Sam Winchester. His brother turned more slowly, a roll of his eyes accompanying his actions. “Oh, what, and leave you here with the King of Hell? Come on.”

“Then leave Alex with me.” Sam looked over at the young angel, and she nodded her assent. “I got this. And if you guys can lock up the angels too … that’s a good day.”

Thunder boomed in the distance, as if the heavens themselves were voicing their agreement. “Look…” Dean began slowly, “I … I’m down with sending the angels back to heaven cause they’re dicks. But the demons? This is on us.” He glanced back at Castiel, and his shoulders dropped a fraction of an inch as he caved. “Start the injections now,” he instructed. “If I’m not back in eight hours, finish it, no questions, no hesitation.”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed, and Dean’s green eyes turned onto Alex. The message in his eyes was painfully clear, and so was the threat, and the young angel blinked to show that she understood. Satisfied, Dean gathered his things out of the trunk, and then he and Castiel were gone.

Alex followed Sam into the old wooden church, and she flicked her wings distastefully at the sight of the King of Hell who was chained to a rickety wooden chair set in the center of a devil’s trap. He strained his head at the sound of two sets of footsteps, and Alex stopped just out of his line of view. Sam moved across the room to where he had set up his things, and Alex could hear the smirk in the demon’s voice as the Winchester picked up a syringe and drew blood from his own arm. “You really think injecting me with human blood is gonna make me human?” he challenged as the Winchester walked up to him. “Did you read that on the back of a cereal box?” Crowley grunted in pain as Sam pushed his head off to the side and shoved the needle into his neck. Sam pulled back, and the demon let out a low chuckle. “You’re miles out of your league, Moose. See you in an hour.”
Sam walked back to the tablet, and Alex moved forward, smacking Crowley over the back of the head in the process. “Morning,” she added when Crowley scowled after her, and she walked up to stand at Sam’s side. “Alright, now what?”

“Now I go back to confession.” Sam picked up a stopwatch and glanced down at his watch. “I’ll be back in an hour.”

“Sure thing.” Alex watched the Winchester walk off through a door to the back of the church, and she finally turned to face Crowley. The demon was staring at her, and Alex leaned up against the table as she stared back. “Yes?”

“I knew there was something different about you,” the demon began, and Alex’s wings twitched as his brown gaze flickered across her feathers. “Three weeks ago I bet you could have killed twenty demons without breaking a sweat. Of course, that was when a certain archangel was helping you.” Crowley’s eyes glinted when Alex cocked an eyebrow, and he furthered his explanation. “What’s the matter, kitten? Think I wouldn’t notice? The blue in your wings is a dead give away. So where is he, hmm? Never struck me as the ‘fuck and chuck’ kind of angel.”

Alex crossed her arms. “Alright. First of all? Language. We’re in the house of my Father. And secondly, Crowls — can I call you that?”

“No.”

“Secondly, Crowls, Castiel is busy with stuff that is none of your business. I’m just babysitting because Dean doesn’t trust you.” The young angel’s wings flicked distastefully when the demon let out a low chuckle. However, he didn’t offer up a verbal response, and the two fell into silence.

Three hours passed. Three times Sam had emerged from the back of the church, and three times he had injected his blood into Crowley. Alex stood guard, listening to the demon’s curses as the Winchester had walked away. The fourth time, however, was different.

Sam stepped through the black door at the back of the church, and Alex flicked a wings in greeting. Crowley sat quietly — sullenly — and he stared down at the wooden floor as Sam drew his own blood and moved towards the demon. He didn’t stir when Sam pulled his head off to the side. Crowley didn’t even blink until Sam had pushed the needle deep into his neck. Alex couldn’t see what happened, but suddenly there was a flurry of movement, and Sam wrenched his arm away with a sharp cry of pain. “What the hell, Crowley!” he yelled as Alex sprang forward. The Winchester punched the demon squarely in the mouth before he wrapped his fingers around his bleeding arm. “Biting?! Seriously?”

Sam hurried out of the church, and Alex ran out after him, glaring down at the demon as she passed. Sam was out by the Impala, and the young angel moved to stand beside him with a push of her wings. “Let me see.”

Sam peeled his fingers away from the bloody injury. “He fucking bit me,” he cursed, and Alex reached out to cover the wound with her palm.

Hers and Castiel’s grace flowed inwards, healing the bite mark and replacing the missing flesh. “There.” Alex pulled away after two seconds and cast a dark glare back towards the church. “I’ll pull out his teeth if you want me to,” she offered, and she was rewarded when Sam let out a small chuckle.
Alex? The young angel tipped her head at the sound of Castiel’s voice. *Sam was injured. Is everything okay?*

*Everything’s fine, Alex* prayed back as she followed Sam away from the car. *He just got bitten by Crowley. How’s the second trial going?*

We have Kevin Tran working on translating the third trial, and Dean and I are keeping a close eye on Dwight Charles.

Alex paused on the church steps, and she let the images in the back of her mind move forward until she was seeing through Castiel’s eyes. He was sitting across from Dean in the same booth that he and Metatron had occupied several hours before. *Okay. Keep me updated. Tell Dean hi for me.* She let the image drift back into the far corner of her thoughts as she stepped back into the church.

Crowley had turned his head, and Alex scowled at the smirk across his face. Sam had already returned to the back of the church, and the young angel shook out her wings as she circled around to stand in front of the demon. “Alright, here’s the deal.” Alex leaned down over him, and her grey eyes flashed angrily. “You bite Sam one more time, and I’m pulling out all of your teeth. Lucifer’s grace might be gone, but the anger’s still here. Are we clear?”

The King of Hell didn’t bat an eye. “Crystal,” he promised, and Alex studied his face through narrowed eyes for any sign of trickery or deceit. “You know, I like you,” he added when the angel stalked away. “It’s almost a shame that one day I’ll kill you.”

Three more hours ticked away with no other issues from the demon. Castiel had been silent — bar the short, quiet answers in response to Alex’s small talk — and the sky slowly had grown dark. Crowley hadn’t spoken a word since the biting incident, and the trial had progressed smoothly ever since Alex had threatened to pull out all his teeth.

Sam emerged from the back, and finally Crowley opened his mouth. “How are you doing, Moose?” he inquired, and Alex frowned at his cheerfulness. “Ain’t it about time for the next love injection? Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes turn and face the strange,” he sung, and Sam and Alex exchanged looks. The demon kept singing as Sam turned back to the table, and Alex moved to his side as his forearms began to glow with a bright light. The trials.

“Are you okay?” she murmured over Crowley’s acapella, and concern flickered in her eyes when Sam clenched his teeth. Before the Winchester could respond though, the ground shook. Alex spun around at the unholy and unnatural rumbling, and her wings flared out as she drew her weapon. The ground heaved again, and the floorboards beneath them cracked and splintered.

“Did you really think you could kidnap the King of Hell and no one was gonna notice?” Crowley boomed, and triumph gleamed in his eyes as the devil’s trap around him was broken.

The church doors flew open, and Alex narrowed her eyes as her wings whipped through the room. A figure stepped through the door. “Hello, boys,” the stranger crowed, and Alex tightened her grip on her blade as she recognized the red hair and scathing voice.

“That’s my line.” Crowley craned her head, trying to see behind him. “Abaddon? They told me you were dead.”

The Knight of Hell chuckled. “So not.”

“And the rest of the calvary?”
Abaddon strolled forward. “Oh no, it’s just little, old, unkillable me.” Her eyes turned onto Alex, and white teeth flashed as she looked the angel up and down. “Well look who it is.” Her hand flew out to her side and Alex jumped as a gunshot echoed off of the walls. Sam flew across the room, and he hit the far wall with a thud before he slumped to the ground, dazed.

“Brilliant,” Crowley praised, and Sam slowly pulled himself up on shaky legs. “Why send in a few grunts when you can send in a knight?” The demon grinned. “Say your prayers.”

Glass shattered as Sam flew through a window, and Alex’s eyes went wide in surprise. “Sam?” she yelled. “Sam!”

“That’ll do.” Crowley tapped the armrests of the chair to which he was bound. “Undo these. You can kill the angel, but I want to kill Sam myself.”

“Ouch,” Alex ribbed scornfully as the demon’s eyes turned thoughtfully onto her. “I thought you promised me you’d be the one to kill me.”

Abaddon turned to look down at Crowley, and Alex shifted backwards, too afraid to face the knight face on by herself. “That was an order, wasn’t it?” Abaddon purred.

Crowley frowned. “I am your king,” he reminded.

“About that.” Abaddon circled around to stand in front of Crowley, and the demon grunted in pain as she punched him in the face. She turned back to the angel, leaving the King of Hell in his chair, stunned. “And as you for you …” Abaddon’s eyes flashed black as she stepped toward Alex, and the angel shifted back. “I’ve been waiting for a rematch, but it hardly seems fair now, doesn’t it? Not without our good old King’s help. The real King,” she corrected when Crowley let out a huff. “Our mutual friend Lucifer.”

“I don’t need Lucifer’s help.” Alex let her grace swell up, and Castiel’s grew with it, causing her eyes to glow a bright, brilliant blue. “I’m perfectly capable on my own.”

Abaddon flew across the room with a cry of surprise, and Alex jumped as Castiel’s grace swirled through the air. The seraph appeared beside her, navy wings stretched high over his head as he faced the demon. “Abaddon.”

The demon rose to her feet with a scowl. “Castiel. As I live and breathe.” She rolled her head to crack her neck, and a flash of lightning illuminated the crude needlework that held her head onto her body. “It’s been a long, long time.”

Castiel didn’t respond, and as the demon stalked closer, Alex lifted up her chin in defiance. She heard Crowley spout out a mouthful of blood, followed by a sharp inhale as he readied himself to speak, but Abaddon’s hand flew out, and the King, chair and all, tipped over and toppled to the ground. The demon continued forward, and Alex twisted her weapon in her hand.

“Hey!”

Abaddon spun around at Sam’s exclamation, her eye widening in surprise to find the Winchester immediately behind her. Liquid splashed across her head and torso as he dumped a jar of oil all over the Knight of Hell. Holy oil. “I love the suit.”

Sam reached for a match, but Alex was faster. Her grace snapped out in a burst of energy, and the oil exploded into flames. Abaddon screeched in agony, and black smoke poured out of her mouth, fleeing out through the broken window and into the dark night. The empty corpse collapsed to the ground, and the flames slowly died.
A hand clasped hers, and Alex looked up into Castiel’s eyes. “Thanks for coming,” she began, and her grace hummed warmly against his. “I mean, we would have been fine, but uh, it’s probably a good thing you showed up anyways, huh?”

“I felt that you were in trouble, so I came.” The seraph’s wingtips brushed comfortably down her sides. “If you need me to stay —”

“No, no. Go …” Alex cast a glance down towards where Sam was tipping Crowley back up, and she kept her words cryptic lest the demon overhear. “Go finish what you were doing. Call me when you need me. And if any more demons come a-knockin, I’ll give you a call.”

Castiel disappeared, and Alex made her way down to Crowley and Sam. “You did good there, Moose,” the King was saying, his voice breathless. “I’ll deny it if you ever quote me, but I’m a proud man. I’m proud of you. Of both of you.”

Alex lifted an eyebrow, confused, and she watched as Sam knelt down to fix the devil’s trap with black spray paint. “Thanks,” was all he said.

“Hold on.” Crowley’s eyes went wide as Sam shook the can. “Uh, w-what’s that?”

“It’s what it looks like,” came Sam’s even response, and he started to reconnect the broken lines to once again secure the demon.

“Are you joking?” Crowley’s voice grew high in indignation and — panic? Alex tilted her head as Crowley’s wide eyes turned onto her. “Is he joking? I — I just saved your life!”

Sam let out a harsh laugh of disbelief, and Alex let out a similar scoff. “You saved us? Seriously?”

“Seriously?” Crowley repeated. “Me, seriously? We just shared a foxhole, you and I. We beat back the Tet Offensive, outran the — the Rape of Nanking together! And you’re still gonna do me like this!” The demon’s voice cracked. “‘Band of Brothers’? ‘The Pacific’?” the demon rambled pleadingly. “None of this means anything to you? All those motels, you never once watched HBO, not once? ‘Girls’? You’re my Marrie, Moose. A-And Hannah … she just — she needs to be loved. She deserves it. Don’t we all — you, me — we deserve to be loved.” Crowley’s voice rose in one last desperate and heartbroken cry as Sam turned away. “I deserve to be loved!” His voice fell into a soft plea. “I just want to be loved.”

Alex felt pity tug on her heart, a foreign feeling in the presence of such a notorious demon, and even Sam had to pause. “What?”

“What?” Crowley repeated, and his face furrowed, looking almost surprised at what he had just said. His brown eyes followed Sam as the Winchester pulled aside the bandage on his arm and slid the needle into his vein. Alex watched how the Winchester flinched, and she frowned sympathetically at his stiff, tired movements. But they were approaching the end. It would all be over soon.

Crowley began to speak once again, so soft and quiet that Alex almost didn’t hear him at first. “Would it be possible, Moose … I’d like … to ask you a favor. Earlier, when you were confessing back there … what did you say? I only ask because, given my history … it raised the question …” The demon looked up, and his voice cracked in his throat. “Where do I start … to even look for forgiveness? I mean…”

Sam turned back to face Crowley, and he held up the syringe. “How about we start with this?”

Crowley tilted his head to one side, a sign of willing submission, and Alex let out a soft breath of awe at his complete and sudden turn around. The demon’s eyes fell shut as the needle disappeared.
into his skin. Sam let out a shaky breath when he had finished, and his eyes turned onto Alex. “That was number eight.”

“The last one.” Alex watched as Sam crossed over to the table on the far side of the room, wobbling slightly with each step, and she reached out to steady him. “You’re almost done,” she murmured, and the Winchester nodded.

He picked up his book, flipping to the earmarked page. “Exorcizamus te, omnis immundus spiritus,” he read, “hand animam redintegra, lustra.”

Alex? Come outside.

The young angel looked up in surprise at the prayer, and her wings carried her out of the church and into the cold night air. Castiel was standing next to the Impala, and Alex landed beside him, tilting her head as Dean threw open the church doors and ran inside. “What’s going on?” she inquired, glancing up at Castiel with a frown. “Sam’s just about to finish the third trial.”

“I doubt Dean is going to let that happen.” Castiel’s wing curled around her shoulder. “Naomi has convinced him that Sam will not survive.” The seraph reached out and took Alex’s hand. “Come. It’s time to go to heaven. The second trial is complete, and once I free Metatron, the third trial will be done within the hour.”

“Now?” Alex’s frown deepened. “What about saying goodbye?” She cut off when she heard Dean yelling, and her wings fell. Now didn’t sound like the appropriate time for goodbyes. “I … fine. Okay.” She turned to Castiel. “Then you’re right. Let’s go home.”

Castiel’s fingers entwined with hers, and his wings carried the both of them into the sky. The dark sky whipped through her hair, and then suddenly they were standing in the center of a living room. A very familiar living room.

“I never thought I would be back here,” the seraph murmured as his wings drew in against his sides, and his face grew pensive as it took in his surroundings, untouched since their last visit.

Alex hummed in agreement, and her eyes fell onto the staircase behind them. She knew where they were; the home in the empty heaven that they had claimed as their own. She had been here only a month ago in her dreams. “I haven’t been back to heaven since we first left,” she admitted. Unlike her dreams, she was definitely in heaven now; she could feel it in the soft, welcoming thrum in the air.

“I have to go now.” Wings encircled her, and Alex turned back to Castiel. “The sooner I free the scribe, the better. Stay here. Have Ezekiel come and stand watch with you in case Naomi’s men come.” His grace rose up within her, and Alex frowned to find herself being left behind. Castiel sensed her frustrations, and his hands went out to rest on her hips. “I have to get into Naomi’s base and find Metatron on my own,” he explained quietly. “It will be difficult getting myself in. If I run into trouble, you will know within the second. Just follow our grace.”

Alex nodded as the thin tendril of grace that stretched between them swayed slightly. “Okay. I understand. I’ll be watching.” She leaned up, fingers grasping Castiel’s coat to steady herself as she kissed him. The seraph’s hands came up to her head, and warm fingertips pressed into the back of her neck as his wings curled around her and held her tight. He only let go when the young angel slowly pulled back. “Go save the world.”

Castiel disappeared, and Alex’s wings drew in tight as she felt him fly away. She waited a second, and then two, and then she turned her eyes up towards the ceiling. “Ezekiel?” she prayed aloud. “If
you’re not busy, I need your assistance.”

There was no immediate answer, and Alex’s curiosity was drawn to the window. In her dreams, the house had been surrounded in a darkness not even the angel’s eyes could penetrate. But now, there was light. Alex drew back the thin curtain and peered out into the front yard. There was grass everywhere, gardens of flowers and an orchards of trees, as far as the eye could see.

On the window sill sat a picture frame, and Alex delicately picked it up. She had almost forgotten about all of the things she had been forced to leave behind. She opened up the back and pulled free the two photographs she had placed inside. Her eyes drifted over the familiar faces of her friends. Sam, Dean, Bobby. The first photograph was from the day they had gathered together to first stop the devil -- the day before Ellen and Jo had died. Alex pushed away a pang of sadness at the memory; it didn’t matter now. She could visit them whenever she wanted.

The second photo was older, and the top corner had been ripped away, but the faces were still clear. The first was Bobby Singer and the second her own, young and round with child-like innocent. She was bent over the desk, pointing insistently at a book. They had been caught off-guard by Garth, evident by the surprise in their eyes as they looked up at the camera.

“You’re back in heaven.” Ezekiel’s voice had Alex jumping, and she tucked the photos into her jacket as she turned around. “I didn’t think it would be so soon.” His light grey wings stretched out in a greeting, and Alex’s instinctively responded by falling low.

“We just got back,” she explained. “Castiel’s going to close down heaven.” The words spilled from Alex’s mouth as she hurried forward to stand in front of her friend. “All the angels will be locked up in heaven until they can sort everything out. No more fighting on earth, no more human deaths because of us. Can you believe it?” Alex looked around the room, and she let out a soft laugh as she slowed down her voice. “We’re finally back in heaven. Where’s Ashiel?”

“I’m not sure,” came the seraph’s slow, even response. “I haven’t spoken to Laura or Eremiel in several days.” Ezekiel’s grace stretched forward, brushing against hers in curious and comforting fashion. Alex felt hers and Castiel’s grace swell up in response, and the mark on her shoulder began to glow through her shirt. Ezekiel immediately withdrew his grace. “You’re mated. Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” Alex reached up cover the mark until her grace settled. “Can … can you stay for a while? Naomi has Metatron, and Cas has to —”

“Metatron?” Ezekiel cut her off, and his blue eyes widened a fraction of an inch, the only outward sign of his shock. “The scribe Metatron? No one has seen him since … since our Father left. He’s a story.”

Alex shrugged. “We found him in Idaho. He’s helping Castiel with the spell.” She let out a small smile as she recalled the scribe’s face. “He seems like a nice guy. A little awkward and skittish, but I think he has a good heart.” She reached out and took Ezekiel’s hands, chuckling at the seraph’s confusion at her actions. “Anyways, I’m excited to be back. I’ll get to see you a lot more, now, won’t I? You or your brother — one of you promised to take me to the Great Hall.”

“Heaven’s greatest creation.” Ezekiel looked down at where there hands were joined. “I believe that was my brother, but he rarely leaves the garrison anymore. I will gladly accompany you, though. I know it well; it’s where I grew up, after all.” Ezekiel let out a low chuckle, and Alex lifted her eyebrows; she had never heard the seraph make that noise before. “My brothers and I knew every corridor as fledglings. We were quite the handful.” He shook of the memories with a flick of his wings. “Anyways. You were telling me about Castiel?”
“Yeah. He’s going in to rescue the scribe. We’re his back up — and you’re here also to watch my back in case Naomi’s men come after —”

Alex! Get out of here!

The sudden and panicked prayer had Alex freezing, mouth hanging open around her last word. “What’s wrong?” Ezekiel dropped her hands, but the young angel didn’t immediately respond, too shocked and confused to even comprehend the desperation in the prayer.

Cas? she prayed back, and her wings flittered uncomfortably. What? What’s going on? What are you talking about? She turned away from Ezekiel, and she reached into the back of her mind and drew Castiel’s sight up to the forefront.

She squinted at the bright, blinding white light, and as her eyes grew accustomed, she recognized Naomi’s office. Above them leaned Metatron, his white wings just barely visible behind his shoulders. “Shh, Castiel, I want you to stop thinking about master plans,” the scribe was saying. “Heaven and angels, all of this doesn’t concern you anymore.”

“Cas?” Alex spoke the word aloud, and in the distance she vaguely heard Ezekiel’s sharp inquiry. Her wings flared out in a flurry of feathers when Metatron slammed Castiel’s head back on — what was he on? A chair? Alex winced as she felt the dull pain in the back of her skull, but that disappeared as an angel blade fell into the scribe’s hands. “NO!”

Her wings carried her into the air as the scribe lifted the weapon, but the breath was immediately knocked out of her, and she fell back onto the floor. Castiel’s grace spiraled out of her body, and it dragged hers with it, a brilliant blue light that fled through the window. Alex struggled to hold on, and the next thing she knew, Ezekiel was there on the ground beside her, wings curling around her as she pulled her close. “What’s going on?” he demanded, and Alex looked up into his eyes to see her own panic and desperation reflected deep within them.

Alex opened her mouth, but all that emerged was a scream as the ground disappeared. Her stomach dropped sickeningly as she plummeted into nothingness. She tried to flap her wings to slow down, but they refused to move, and the young angel felt panic numb her body.

Hands were gripping her jacket, and Alex looked up to see Ezekiel. His grey wings beat violently as he kept them airborne. “Hold on to me,” he hissed through gritted teeth. “Don’t let go.”

Alex reached up and gripped his arm. “Cas!” she yelled, but she couldn’t feel her mate. She couldn’t feel anything. Her grace was still draining away, leaving her weak and shaking. Only a tendril remained, anchored in her chest, but even that was beginning to slip away.

A hand pressed into her stomach, and Alex’s eyes went wide as foreign grace jolted through her limbs, shocking her back into the waking world, and her wings flapped twice in surprise.

And then the heavens opened up.

Lighting flashed, and the air shook with power. Dark shapes plummeted from the clouds, hundreds upon thousands. Ezekiel’s wings trembled. “Hold onto me,” he pleaded. “I’ve got you.”

His wings exploded in a burst of flames, and the seraph fell away. “No! No no no!” Alex hovered in mid-air as he plummeted away, his grace and her adrenaline giving her wings the strength. She dove after him.

The burning started in the tips of her wings. The flames spread in the blink of an eye, and the angel screamed in agony. Her feathers shriveled away as the fire enveloped her, and Alex writhed as she
fell towards the earth below. She could hear the screams over hers, tens upon thousands of other angels all around her. *The angels are falling.* The words split through her mind like a bolt of lightning.

That was the last thought that passed through her mind as the ground rushed closer. She hit the black dirt with a sickening thud, and the impact sent blackness crashing into her.
Devil May Care

Chapter Notes

Back for season 9. Merry Christmas, everyone!

She was alone. The street was dark, lit only by the occasional streetlight, and snowflakes fell through the cold winter air, covering the ground. The young girl pulled her thin jacket tighter around her body, suppressing a shiver. She hated life, and she hated living like she did. They had fought again, and now she had been thrown out of the house for the night as punishment. She kicked at a loose stone, sending it clattering down the street. Stupid foster family. Like they gave a damn about her.

Suddenly there was light. A bright, blinding light that was gone as soon as it had appeared. Darkness surrounded the young girl as the ground vanished from beneath her feet, and the next thing she knew, she was falling.

There was screaming. Fire flashed across her eyes and singed at her back as the screaming grew, a chorus of deafening cries, growing louder and louder with each passing second —

“The soul has escaped.”

Alex's eyes flew open, and all she could see was a blinding light that burned her vision. She flinched away, a silent cry catching in her parched throat. The screaming was coming from machines; they surrounded her, and their cold, monotoned shrieks chilled her to the bone. There were voices too, two, three, four, but the garbled and slurred words didn't make any sense. They were drowned out by the ringing. The world spun and jolted beneath her, and suddenly Alex felt nauseous. A voice rose above the rest, desperate and insistent, and a hand gripped her arm, but her limbs felt heavy and distant. Darkness pressed down on the edges of her vision, and Alex welcomed the comforting emptiness.

Princeton, New Jersey

The light was back, but not as harsh and unwelcoming as before. Alex cracked open her eyes; part of her was curious as to its source — the rest of her didn't care. The world still spun, but the nausea and the ringing were gone. "You're awake." There was a voice in the room, a woman. But Alex didn't respond. She only let her eyes fall closed as the pain took hold. Everything hurt, from her head to her toes, and her heart raced within her chest. A hand came to rest on her arm. “Can you talk? How are you feeling?”

What? Alex groaned, and her fingers, stiff and sore, curled in her sheets.

“Ma’am, can you understand me?” The woman spoke again, and Alex turned her head away, finding the voice loud and grating to her ears. “Ma’am?”

Footsteps retreated, but Alex barely noticed, her toes curling at the pain that raged through her body. “Doctor? She’s awake again.” She could hear the woman speaking to someone outside the room, but the response was too quiet for Alex to hear. “No,” the nurse said, “she hasn’t. You should try -- she
always listens when you talk."

"You're awake." Footsteps approached, and then there was those same words again, but this time the voice was low. Soft. Male. Alex forced open her eyes to look up into the newcomer's face. "There you go." Warm blue eyes sparkled, and crow's feet appeared in the corners of the man's eyes as he smiled, glancing back at the nurse who stood outside of Alex's line of sight. "You gave us quite a scare, you know. It's good to see that you're finally with us. Now, what's your name?"

_Her name?_ Alex blinked. _What was her name?_ "I …" Events were coming back, slowly yet surely, random flashes in time with familiar yet nameless faces. "Alex." Her voice rasped around the word, and she tried to swallow, but her mouth was dry.

"Alex," the doctor repeated, and the girl managed to nod. "Well, Alex, my name is Dr. Chase. You're in Princeton Plainsboro Hospital because you had a very bad accident. Do you remember what happened?"

_An accident?_ Alex dug deeper into her mind. A face kept reappearing, over and over again in her memories. Dark hair, blue eyes -- who was he? He was the key to it all. What was his name?

A warm hand touched her cold arm in a gesture of comfort. "I need you to think if you can," the doctor encouraged. "Your injuries suggest a great fall, but you —"

_Fall._ That word opened up the dam, and memories spilled forth. Sam. Dean. Ezekiel. The angels. "Cas!" Alex shot up in her bed, grey eyes wide with panic. Castiel. She was an angel. Her wings — "No, no, no!" Alex grasped at her shoulders, expecting stumps, _anything_, but the limbs were gone. "Where are they?!" she shrieked. "Why are they gone?!" A tremor passed through her. "Castiel, please!" She ripped off the tubing around her nose, drawing in deep, panicked breaths that fueled the agony in her chest.

"Alex, you need to calm down!" Machines screamed out their panic, and Dr. Chase forced her back on the bed. "You need to relax," he repeated firmly. "Your heart can't take the strain." He relinquished his hold when Alex trembled beneath him but went lax. "Whatever happened to you, it has caused several problems. You have fractured ribs and a small hemorrhage. You underwent surgery to remove a small sliver of your rib that had dislodged and nicked your pericardium, and it's vital that your don't strain your heart." A hand squeezed hers gently. "The long and short of it is that you're quite lucky to be alive — a miracle, if you could call it that."

Alex could only groan in response. She knew the words that he was saying, but their meaning felt jumbled in her mind. "Mm-kay," she finally agreed. She licked at her parched lips, but her tongue felt heavy and dry within her mouth. She reached up with a hand, gingerly resting it on her bruised and battered chest where the coarse fabric of bandages constricted her ribs.

Dr. Chase's eyes moved upwards to one of the IV bags that hung from its stand. "Now that you're awake, I've given you some morphine, but we're going to closely monitor your vitals in case the opiates have any negative effects on your condition. Do you understand?" Alex echoed her earlier agreement, and the doctor frowned. "Now Alex, I need you to think. Do you have any family that I can contact? Parents or siblings?"

"Dean." Alex closed her eyes. "My … my phone …"

"Was destroyed in your accident."

"Number …" Alex clenched her fist and dug her nails into the palm of her hand as she recited the digits to Dean's backup cell. "Seven … f-four two, seven seven two …." She squeezed her eyes shut.
as a spasm passed through her chest. "Six four n-n-nine one."

She heard the phone ring as the doctor put it on speaker and held it between them. It rang once, twice, three times, and then it clicked. "Hello?" came the low, guarded response.

"D-Dean." Alex let out a soft, pained whine at the sound of his voice. "Dean, I —"

Dr. Chase cleared his throat. "Dean, do you have a moment to talk?"

"Who is this?" Dean's voice grew sharp, but it immediately fell back into worry. "Alex? Sam — Sammy's dying, girl. So get over here and lay your magic fingers on him, okay?"

"I-I …"

"Dean, this is Dr. Chase from Plainsboro Hospital in Princeton, New Jersey. Alex had a very serious accident and has been in our care for the past seventy two hours. Can you please direct me to her primary care physician or her closest living relative? A guardian or spouse, perhaps?

Alex let out a mumbled, "Cas," and did her best to roll on her side to get closer to the phone. Dean, however, cleared his throat. "Yes, that — that would be me. And she doesn't have a doctor. Alex? What happened?"

"I-I fell, Dean." Alex felt her jaw tremble. "I fell, and I don't know what to do. My grace is gone, m-my wings burned away, where's Cas? I-I need Cas! Where is he?!"

Dr. Chase pulled the phone closer to himself. "I'm sorry. The trauma and the sedatives are making her a little delusional. She needs to rest now, but she will come around soon enough. How soon can you be here? We need to discuss treatments and costs."

"I-I can't. I gotta look out for my brother. He … he's in really bad shape, Pip." Dean's voice cracked, and Alex's chest tightened as she heard the barely-concealed pain in his voice. "The docs … they don't think he's gonna make it. Can you transfer her?" the Winchester asked Dr. Chase. "We're at Linwood Memorial Hospital in Randolph, New York."

The doctor frowned. "I don't think that's a good idea," he warned. "Not until she's stable."

Dean was silent, and Alex could hear the pain and sorrow weighing down the quiet. Sam was dying. The trials — their attempt to close the gates of Hell — they were killing him. "Dean, I'm fine." Her voice shook as she projected it through the air. "Don't … don't worry about me."

Dr. Chase hung up the phone. "You need to rest." He stood up and reached for one of the buttons in the side of a machine. "I'm going to give you a sedative so you'll sleep soundly. The nurses will keep checking up on you, but if you wake and need anything, you can press this button here."

"No, no, you can’t!" Alex reached up to stop him, and her eyes went wide. "You — you can’t," she repeated. "I have to — I have to go." She ripped off the sheets and threw her feet over the side of the bed. They gave out under her, and she slithered to the floor, hissing as monitors and needles were ripped from her skin.

Dr. Chase was kneeling at her side in an instant. "Alex, listen to me. You’re not well enough to leave yet." He reached out to help her back to her feet. "You need to stay until we can make sure you’re alright."

Alex struggled, trying to throw the larger man off of her. "I have to go to them," she hissed, and her heart raced in her chest as adrenaline flooded through her veins. "I have to find Cas — this is all my
fault! Let me go!

Her heart raced, and her chest tightened in agony. Alex gasped for breath, falling into the doctor as all notions of fight vanished from her mind. She could feel her heart against her lungs, a painful and irregular thud that echoed throughout her chest. She could distantly hear Dr. Chase’s voice, and she managed to stumble back one step.

Then she was moving — she could feel hands moving her onto the bed, but she was too focused on her chest. Her hands were splayed across her sternum, and her panic only spurred on the pain. Blackness clouded her vision, pressing down on her lungs until she couldn’t breathe.

The next thing she knew was that her eyes were closed, but she didn’t remember closing them. The pain was gone, her heart was slow, and Alex hesitantly opened her eyes. Dr. Chase stood in front of her, and there were others in the room — nurses, by the looks. She distantly had the feeling that time had passed, but everything looked the same.

“It’s okay.” Dr. Chase leaned down, and Alex let her eyes fall close. She felt exhausted. The doctor’s hand closed around hers, and his voice softened. “Everything is okay now. Do you remember what happened?”

Alex gave a soft shake of her head; she remembered the panic and the pain, but anything outside of that had disappeared from her mind.

“You got agitated and strained your heart. We had to bring in the crash cart to stabilize you.” The hand around hers squeezed gently. “You don’t remember, but this has happened before. I’m worried that the repeated tachycardia may be caused by the damage, so we’re going to run some more tests. Until then, I’m going to give you a light sedative to help you sleep. Another episode could tear open your heart again.”

Most of the words were lost on Alex, but she gave a small nod at the word ‘sleep.’ Sleep sounded good. Dr. Chase reached over to push one of the blue buttons, and Alex closed her eyes as a gentle darkness pulled her beneath.

A day passed, then two and three. Alex spent the time drifting in and out of consciousness, first pulled out of it by light, and then by pain. Nurses came in and out, here and there — Alex had lost track. She hadn’t heard from Sam or Dean or Castiel. She was alone.

On the fourth day there was a knock. Alex looked up, expecting Dr. Chase, but instead, two men stepped through. Her heart melted in relief, but her voice was sharp. "It's about time, you two," she snapped. "It's been five fucking days."

"How — how are you feeling?" Concern lined Sam's voice as he moved to her side. "What happened?"

Alex glared over at Dean, refusing to answer in light of a more pressing question. "I thought Dean said you were dying, What? You just decided to get up and walk around? Man, wish I could do the same." She motioned around to the mess of machines and wires that surrounded her bed.

"Alex —"

"Seriously, what the fuck, dude?"

Sam's face wrinkled in confusion. "W-What? No, no, I'm fine." He glanced back at his brother.
"What did you tell her?" Dean looked away, and Sam turned his attention back to Alex. "What happened?" he repeated. "The last thing I remember was the sky —"

"The angels fell." Alex's shoulders dropped as she recalled what she had seen through Castiel's eyes. "I think … Metatron betrayed us." She shifted on her bed, wincing at the pain her movements brought. "He stole Cas' grace — our grace, and the angels fell." She turned her eyes up onto Sam. "I lost my wings, m-my grace, my mate!" Her voice rose, and her cheeks flushed as her heart raced. "We were supposed to have a family. I was happy — happier than I've been in years. And now I've lost everything."

"Alex …" Dean began.

"Don't 'Alex' me!" Alex's temper rose. "You weren't here when I needed you. I thought we were family, Dean! I'd sacrifice myself myself for you in a heartbeat. The least you could do is pick up the damn phone!"

The door opened, and Alex grit her teeth and turned away as Dr. Chase stepped into the room. The doctor's eyes narrowed as he took in Alex's distraught appearance, and in two long strides he stood at her bed. "Alex, calm down," he warned, and Alex felt his warm hand come to rest on her forearm. "You need to relax for me, okay?" he continued as the young girl drew in a deep, shaking breath. "We don't want anything to happen."

"What do you mean?"

Sam's words had the doctor turning to acknowledge her visitors. "Alex has had some complications with her recovery," he began, and he extended a hand towards the two brothers. "My name is Dr. Chase. I'm Alex's attending physician."

Sam reached out to shake his hand. "Hi. I'm Sam, this is my brother Dean. What, uh, what do you mean by complications?" His hazel eyes sought out Alex, and she pursed her lips. "Is everything okay?"

"Boys, Alex had a very bad accident." Dr. Chase stuck one hand into his coat pocket. "The severity of the trauma suggests that she was hit by a car — how, we don't know, considering she was found someone’s backyard. She was lucky the family found her in time, because without immediate medical attention, she would have most likely died within minutes." He cast a look back at Alex; she didn't meet his gaze, choosing to stare down at her hands instead; her left palm had a laceration along the edge, held together with dark blue stitches.

"And?" she heard Dean prompt.

"And it's been an uphill battle. We almost lost her several times during her first few days of recovery, but she's been healing incredibly well now that she’s been stabilized. However, we've had to keep a close monitor on her heart activity in case something happens again."

The tightening of her jaw was the only outward sign of Alex's frustration, and she turned her eyes out the window when she felt Sam and Dean's gaze rest upon her. "Do you know what's causing it?" Dean demanded, his voice sharp with worry.

"We believe it's a result of one of her initial injuries. A piece of bone from one of her fractured ribs was dislodged in the trauma and nicked the pericardium over her left atrium; we were able to remove it with little problem, but she's had three fairly severe episodes of atrial tachycardia since then. However," he added quickly, "like I've said, she's been recovering at an incredible rate. She's a fighter."
"Yeah," Sam distantly agreed, and he cleared his throat as he pulled himself out of his thoughts. Alex cast a quick look in his direction; his eyes were narrowed in concern, and his eyebrows twisted up in sympathy. "Uh, when do you think she'll be able to leave?"

The doctor shook his head. "Of course, I can’t prevent her from leaving, but, at her rate of recovery, I would deeply stress that she stay under close surveillance for another few weeks at the very least. And even after that, she will have to be careful to make sure she doesn’t have another severe episode. However," he added when the Winchesters frowned, "at this stage, I would feel comfortable having her transferred to another accredited hospital closer to home, if that’s what you’d prefer."

"There’s the, uh, the Smith Memorial Hospital on 36," Sam said to his brother. "It’s small, but it’s close to where we are."

"Yeah," Dean agreed, "we’re, uh, heading down that way now, so we can take her if you want to, you know, handle the paperwork and whatnot."

Dr. Chase frowned. "That’s not standard procedure …" he began, and he turned his head back to Alex, "and I can’t recommend it, but it’s ultimately her decision."

"I’ll go down with them." Alex looked back over at Sam and Dean and gave a reluctant nod of her head. She still had many questions for the brothers that didn’t feel like they could wait. "I haven’t had any problems in the past day and a half," she reminded Dr. Chase, "and I promise to watch my heart rate." She looked up into Sam’s eyes, comforted by the warm concern that lingered there. "I’ll be okay."

Lebanon, Kansas

Twenty hours later, Alex was curled up in the backseat of the Impala. They were almost to their destination, judging by how slow the car was moving, but Alex was too comfortable to open her eyes. Dr. Chase had given her some medication that had her drifting in and out of consciousness, and all of the questions she had from the brothers had fallen out of her mind.

"Alex?" The car door opened, and Alex felt Sam reach out to put his hand on her shoulder. "We’re here. How are you feeling?"

"Fine," the ex-angel slurred out. She reluctantly opened her eyes, and she blinked as Sam’s face came into focus. "We’re here?" The girl struggled to sit up, and she narrowed her eyes as she took in their surroundings. "This isn’t the hospital."

Sam helped her out of the car. "Dean thought you’d be better off back home. You know how much he hates hospitals."

Alex nodded; she had heard Dean’s hospital horror stories, ranging from the thirty stitches to his close brush with death. "Dean’s a pussy," she scoffed, eyes opening wide as she almost tripped over her own feet. "Ow."

"Careful." Sam steadied her by pulling her into his large frame. "You’re still a little woozy."

"Understatement." Alex let Sam lead her down to the bunker entrance, leaning upon his support as she made her way down the steps. Sam helped her through the door and down the stairs, his arms tightly wrapped around her shoulder to keep her from falling and sustaining any more injuries from
the metal railings and cold concrete.

“Oh my God. You’re alive.”

Alex looked up at Kevin Tran’s voice, almost stumbling on the last step. Sam was there to catch her, a solid, immovable force, and the young girl grunted out her thanks as she made her way over to the map table. Her legs shook from exhaustion, a grim reminder of her condition, but she still managed to smile over at the prophet. “Yeah,” she agreed as Kevin hurried across the room to stand beside her. “Welcome to the bunker. You’re looking … good.”

She let out a breathless noise of surprise and pain as the prophet pulled her into a tight and sudden hug. “I’ve been here for almost a week,” he explained as he stepped away. “The equipment here started freaking out when the angels fell.” His brown eyes went wide as he looked down at her. “Are they okay?”

Names and faces flashed across Alex’s mind, and her chest constricted as their fate struck her. Ezekiel. Ashiel. The world spun as she pictured her son falling through the air, fire lapping at his small, downy wings, and throat closed as her body ached for oxygen.

Hands were on her, keeping her on her feet, and she drew in a deep, desperate breath as she returned to the present. “Sorry. She’s still a little unsteady from her meds,” Sam told Kevin Tran before promising, “We’ll fill you in once we get her situated, alright?”

“She should probably stay in one of our rooms.” Dean appeared at the library stairs, and Alex squinted as she made out the concern across his freckled face. “My room is closest.”

“She can stay in mine.” Sam slowly guided her towards the hallway, but when Alex protested with a groan, he suddenly scooped her up in his arms like a child. “You have errands you need to run, and I can stay with her in case she needs anything.”

Alex buried her head into Sam’s broad chest as Dean responded, but his words didn’t register as a coherent sentence. Her world had dissolved into only what she could feel, and right now, that was Sam Winchester. She curled deeper into his touch, eyelids heavy with sleep, and she barely noticed as they began to move. In fact, she was only jolted out of her trance at the soft, cool touch of the sheets. “Sam.”

“I’m right here.” The hunter’s voice sounded from across the room, and Alex buried herself deep into the comforter before reluctantly opening her eyes. The hunter was on the other side of the room, removing his laptop from the drawer of his desk. “What do you need?”

“You.” Alex murmured out the word as she felt sleep tug on her limbs, and that murmur turned into a throaty purr as the bed dipped under Sam’s weight. She curled into the hunter’s side, and, comforted by his warm and solid presence, she finally let sleep pull her under its waves.

When she awoke, Sam Winchester was gone. The medication had all but worn off, and Alex slowly sat up with a pained groan. Her muscles ached, and her head pounded with every beat of her heart. “Sam?” She looked around the empty room with a frown. She remembered bits and pieces of walking into the bunker, but her memories were muddled with a heavy fog. The Winchesters had brought her back, and Kevin Tran was here too. Somewhere, at least.

She slowly made her way out of the bedroom, wincing with every step as her legs protested in agony, but she pushed herself forward until the pain began to fade. “Sam?” she called. “Dean?
“Where are you?” Her hand went out to feel her pockets, but they were empty; her phone was nowhere in sight. She reached into her jacket, and she paused when her fingers brushed against paper.

She pulled out the photograph of her and Bobby that she had so hastily shoved into her pocket while in heaven. That day had felt like a lifetime ago, even though it had barely been a week. So much had changed that it hardly felt real. “Castiel?” she murmured. “Please be okay. I’m back at the bunker with the Winchesters, and I … please come. I need you.”

There was no answer, and the girl’s shoulders fell as she reluctantly continued down the hall. She peered into the library, but there was no sign of the Winchesters? “Dean?” she called, hoping her voice would carry to the kitchen, and her words rang through the empty hallways. “Sam?”

She circled around the back of the library, pausing by the staircase as she listened for any sign of life. There. Alex could have sworn she heard the faintest hint of a voice coming from downstairs. “Sam?” she called again as she slowly made her way down the concrete stairs, hands tightly gripping the railing as her legs wobbled beneath her. “Anyone?”

She reached the bottom floor and plodded down the hall, eyes narrowed against the harsh iridescent lighting. A door was cracked open — to room 7B. The archive room, if the ex-angel remembered correctly. This was where the brothers had found the dungeon.

Her memories were confirmed as she pushed the door open and stepped inside. Two metal shelves and their respective portions of the wall had been pulled out and open to reveal a room behind; however, Alex couldn’t see past the figure that stood in the doorway. Even with his back turned to her, the short stature and skinny build gave away the fact that it was Kevin Tran. “Kevin.” Alex wove through the maze of shelves to stand behind the prophet. “What are you doing here?”

“Alex.” A thick accent came from behind the prophet, and Alex narrowed her eyes as she immediately recognized the voice. “I thought ET had gone home.” Kevin stepped away, revealing the King of Hell. He was chained to a chair in the middle of the large devil’s trap that spanned the entire room. Blood stained his hair, but brown eyes glittered defiantly. They narrowed as they came to rest on the girl’s small and bedraggled appearance, and curiosity that Alex almost took for concern flashed through his face before it quickly settled back into its stoic lines. “What happened to you?”

Alex didn’t respond, and she let her eyes wander from his bloodstained hair down to the demon-etched chains that held him in his metal tomb.

“What’s the matter?” Crowley prompted. “Cat got your tongue?”

“W-What are you doing here?” Alex finally got out. She looked up at Kevin, eyes wide, but when the prophet didn’t respond, she turned back to the demon. “Sam —”

“Fumbled on the one yard line?” Crowley finished, and his eyes flashed red, confirming that he was uncurled. “That’s not important. Now. Where are you wings, little mouse?”

“It’s none of your business,” Alex retorted weakly.

“None of my business why one of the greatest thorns in my side has lost her halo?” The demon scoffed loudly at the very idea. “Something made you human, and I want to know what.”

“I said it’s none of your damn business!” Alex’s fists clenched at her side, and she stepped forward, forgetting how weak her limbs really were in the heat of the moment. She was reminded of it the next second, however, when they threatened to buckle beneath her, and she leaned up against the
Crowley smirked. “Oh how mighty have fallen. You don't have it in you anymore, darling. You couldn’t even take down God’s toothpick.” He jerked his head towards Kevin Tran, his dark eyes flashing with fury.

“Hey, hey, hey.” Heavy footsteps sounded on the floor, and Alex turned to look at Dean. “I told you not to talk to him,” the Winchester snapped at Kevin Tran, and then his gaze turned onto Alex. “And you. You’re supposed to be resting.”

“I came looking for you.” Alex pointedly turned away from the demon, ignoring how his gaze burned into her back. “And I’m fine, Dean. I’ve rested enough.”

“Yeah, well, the doctors said otherwise, so you’re benched until your heart stops fritzing.” Dean motioned Kevin out of the way, and he pushed the two shelves closed, locking Crowley away. “No one goes near him unless I say so, okay?”

Kevin nodded, and Alex echoed his sentiment with a reluctant mumble.

Dean turned towards the prophet. “Have you found anything in here about reversing Metatron’s spell?” he inquired, but when Kevin shook his head, he frowned. “Well, keep looking. Alex, with me.”

The two hunters left Kevin Tran in the archive room and made their way up to the library. Sam was leaning against one of the tables, and his hazel eyes went wide as they entered. “You found her.”

“She and Kev were have a chat with you-know-who.” Dean moved over to where a half-empty bottle of beer was sitting open on the table, and he took a long swig.

Alex looked between Sam and Dean, and a frown formed across her face. “Okay, so what is it?” she finally asked, moving over so she could slump in one of the wooden chairs. “You’re both here, so there’s got to be something you want to tell me.”

“How’s the leg?” Sam looked down in concern. “You’re limping pretty badly. There’s crutches in the spare bedroom if you need them.”

Alex followed his gaze down to her limb. “Doctor said I tore some muscles or some shit like that. I don’t know. I’ll be fine, though.” She looked back up at the Winchesters. “Now what’s up? Spit it out.”

“Sam and I are going to Wyoming.” Dean folded his arms across his chest when Alex’s face went momentarily blank with shock, and he added, “Freak thunderstorms and dead cows within a three mile radius of a military base. The whole thing reeks of demons.”

“Okay, so? There are a dozen other hunters who can look into that, Dean. I mean, don’t we have bigger issues? Saving the angels, finding Cas?” Alex looked between the two brothers, her grey eyes going wide as she brought up her mate. “We have to find him, Dean! Before anyone else does.”

“Relax.” Sam’s hand on her shoulder had Alex falling silent, and she took three deep breaths as she let her heart race within her chest. “Cas got a hold of Dean just a little while ago, right, Dean?” Dean nodded, and Sam mimicked him. “He’s safe, and he’s alive. Dean told him to make his way to the bunker as quickly as possible.”

“Me and Sam are going to go look into the demon thing,” Dean added, “and you and Kevin will stay here in case Cas comes back while we’re gone. Besides, the quicker you rest up, the sooner you can
be back on your feet and out in the game, alright?”

“I … I guess. You won’t be gone long, right?” Alex looked up into Sam’s eyes, and her voice cracked slightly as she faced the prospect of being left in the bunker alone. Her body still ached with tremendous force, and that level of prolonged, widespread pain was one she hadn’t experienced in a long, long time. And she didn’t want to struggle through the feeling by herself.

“If we leave now we can be back by midnight.” Sam moved to stand beside her, and Alex looked away; that wasn’t what she wanted to hear, but it was better than what it could have been. However, she still let out a grunt of displeasure.

Sam and Dean exchanged looks over her head, and Dean downed the last of his beer. “We’re leaving now,” he said. “If you take a nosedive, Kevin’s got a car outside. He’ll take you where you need to go.”

Alex nodded despite the twinge of fear deep within her gut. Kevin Tran may be the Lord’s chosen prophet, but somehow she couldn’t fully bring herself to trust him with her life. “Okay, fine,” she relented. “Be careful, I guess.” She rose to her feet, stifling a yawn. “I guess I’ll go back to bed. I need some more sleep.” She didn’t wait for a response before she limped back to her bed.

Nine hours later, Alex found herself sitting at one of the library’s tables, a bowl of cereal in her hands. \textit{Eating was strange}, the half angel mused as she lifted another spoonful to her mouth. True, she had eaten as an angel, but back then it had been a pastime, not a necessity, and she certainly hadn’t had to deal with the hunger pains or any sort of the digestive process that had followed consumption. It made her question how she had managed to stay sane back before her wings.

A phone rang, and Alex looked over at Kevin Tran. The prophet sat across from her, doing who-knows-what on his laptop. He looked up in surprise, brown eyes locking with hers before he answered. “Hey?”

Alex strained her ears to hear, but she couldn’t pick up anything. Her fists balled in a sudden rush of anger at how dull her senses had become. She couldn’t hear, couldn’t smell — she couldn’t even stretch out her grace to feel the world round her. It felt like she was flying blind.

“Boss?” The prophet’s brow furrowed, and Alex shook herself out of her darkened thoughts. She tapped the table twice with a finger before she got up and circled around to sit down beside Kevin.

He understood, and set the phone down on the table. “— local badge needs confirmation we’re supposed to be here.” Dean’s voice came through as the phone was put on speaker. “How the word came down from FBI headquarters in DC.”

"Wait, w-what?” the prophet stammered, blindsided and confused by the Winchester’s words. However, before he could get any answers, the phone was handed over to someone else.

“This is Sergeant Miranda Bates.” A female voice came across the phone, crisp and guarded — a standard military clip. “Who am I talking to?”

“Uh … Kevin. Solo.”

“Give me that.” Alex pulled the phone away from the stumbling prophet. “Sergeant Bates. This is Agent Coleman with the FBI. I’m the handler of the two agents we dispatched.”

“How old was that kid?” The woman’s voice grew sharp, and Alex rolled her shoulders back.
Beside her, Kevin reached for his laptop.

“Old enough,” she replied, her words accompanied by a displeased glare towards the prophet. “What he’s doing in my office, however, is another matter entirely. Now, what is it you want?”

“He sound like he’s fifteen. You both do.” The sergeant’s voice hardened, and Alex’s eyes narrowed at the insult. “Listen, kid, I don’t have to do anything, and I don’t take orders from Feebs.” Alex shot Kevin another deep-set frown as the woman continued. “So unless you can give me one good reason you got a couple of pretty-boy agents poking around my crime scene, I’m gonna put them in cuffs and spake your ass raw, understand?”

Alex opened her mouth to snap out an ill-conceived response, but Kevin Tran spoke first. “Cabo, last June.”

“What?”

“That’s my reason.” The prophet pulled the phone closer and turned his laptop so Alex could see the pornographic pictures on the screen. “My favorite is you in a sombrero doing body shots off of some naked guy in a Luchador mask. Super classy.”

“H-how did you find that?” Sergeant Bates’ voice shook slightly in surprise.

“Because I’m Kevin fucking Solo. So unless you want this forwarded to your commanding officer, Major Velasquez, I suggest you give my guys anything they want, understand?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, sir,” Kevin corrected.

“Yes, sir.”

The phone rustled, a clear sign that it was being handed back to the Winchesters, and Alex looked over at Kevin. “Wow. That was impressive. How the hell did you find that?”

“All military computers are linked to the same network,” the prophet explained when Dean voiced his own confusion. “And I hacked it.”

Alex lifted her eyebrows, and Dean cleared his throat. “Hey, Kevin? Good job, buddy.”

He went to hang up, but Alex leaned forward to speak before he left. “Hey, Dean! Quick question. Why the hell — and no offense, man —” she added to Kevin, “but why’d you call him? I’m right here.”

Dean’s answer came quick and simple, a well-rehearsed response to an anticipated question. “We didn’t know if you’d be up. Kevin was the safest bet. Listen, we have to go. Sam’ll call you later. Kev, keep working on reversing that spell, and stay away from Crowley.” Dean hurriedly hung, and Alex pushed the phone back to Kevin.

The prophet picked it up. “Sorry if I …”

“No, no, it’s fine.” Alex brushed off his apology. “You did fine. Quick thinking, Kojak. It’s always good to have a computer genius on the team.” She rose to her feet, wincing at the pain in her muscles. “Anyways, you heard Dean. Keep looking for something that’ll get me my wings back. I’m going to have a chat with Crowley. Maybe he’ll know something useful.”
“Wait, but didn’t Dean say —”

“Dean told you to stay away because you’re young and malleable.” She ignored Kevin’s voice of objection. “Me, on the other hand … I’ve tangled with this guy more times than the Winchesters themselves. I’ll be fine.” She turned and made her way out of the library, limping as her left leg refused to hold her full weight.

She slowly made her way down the stairs and into the archive room, pausing beside the shelves that opened up the dungeon. She rolled her shoulders back, intending to shake out her wings, and the pain of their absence struck her heart like a crack of lightning.

“Hello? I can hear you out there, little mouse.” Crowley’s voice drifted through the door, and Alex took a deep breath before she pulled the shelves open. The demon was sitting there in the dark, and Alex stepped forward to flick on the lights. “Your footsteps sounded different,” the demon remarked casually as Alex limped over to pull up a chair. “Almost thought you were that prophet. Now.” He leaned forward, brown eyes gleaming in curiosity. “What is it you want?”

“To talk.” Alex sat down in the metal chair and mimicked him, leaning forward and resting her chin on a closed fist. “I wasn’t invited on the latest hunt, so I thought we chat. We’ve a lot of catching up to do. So. I’ve been in the hospital. Where’ve you been for the past week?”

“You’d like to know that, wouldn’t you?” The demon spit his sentence out, tone unusually defensive, and Alex let out a small frown. “You think you had it bad? I’ve been in the bloody trunk of that infernal car for five whole days.”

“Wow.” Alex let out a snort. “That sounds awful. And to think that I only lost everything -- from my grace to my mate … but a ‘bloody trunk’?” The girl scornfully mimicked the demon’s intonation. “That sounds like hell itself.”

The glint in the demon’s eyes displayed his ill-amusement at her snark, but his only response was to lift his eyebrows. “Lost your mate, huh?” he repeated. “What’s that mean? Is that holy terror finally dead, or has he just run away from you again?” When Alex didn’t respond, he let out a small huff of laughter. “Alright, I see how it is. So then how about telling me what happened to the angels? A little birdie mentioned something about a spell.”

“You should learn to keep your ears shut,” Alex quipped back, cutting off as a large yawn split her mouth. “Sorry. You know, I forgot how important sleep is to humans. Don’t get me wrong,” she quickly added, “I love sleeping, but the whole concept of feeling tired? Awful. It’s so — so debilitating. Be lucky Sam never finished the trials on you.” Crowley chuckled, and Alex tipped her head, a frown on her face. “What?”

“You.” The demon’s lips twisted upwards in the faint hint of a smirk. “You’re reminding me of the first time that I saw you. You were human back then, too — for the most part, at least. You were so … small, dare I say, almost adorable.” The smirk grew as Alex narrowed her eyes, and the demon’s own eyes sparkled in amusement at her indigence, and chains clicked together as he leaned back in his seat. “Then of course came the wings and the unholy sense of entitlement. What is that saying?” His voice took on a sing-song quality as he mocked her. "Pride comes before a fall.”

The ex-angel ignored his last statement, and her voice grew wistful as she let her eyes fall to the cold stone floor. “That feels like a lifetime again. I was young back then. Young and eager to live like a hunter. I thought … I thought that was the life, you know? The Winchesters at my side, living on the road with guns and monsters … I thought I could avoid the death and the pain that Sam and Dean were facing because I knew — because I was smarter — but I …” A long sigh fell from her lips, and despair tugged at her heart, a deep, dull pain that spread throughout her chest. “Now I don’t know
how anyone could think this life is good.”

She raised her head to look up at the demon, and for several seconds neither said anything. “How long have I known you? Four years?” Crowley finally asked, handcuffs clanging together as he shifted. “Four whole years, and I think that was the first time we’ve connected.”

“Shut up.”

“I think we just had a moment,” Crowley continued scathingly as Alex rose to her feet. “What’s next? Good morning texts? Spooning, maybe —”

“You ruined it.” Alex rolled her shoulders back, unconsciously going to raise her ruffled feathers. “If there was a moment, you fucking ruined it.” She stalked out of the dungeon and shoved the doors closed, strain to move the heavy shelves. “Forget it. This was a stupid idea.”

The day came and went. Alex had slept through the afternoon, and when she finally emerged back into the library, the clock read that it was almost ten at night. If all had gone as promised, the Winchesters would be returning soon. And the sooner they returned, the sooner they could find Castiel and bring him home. At the thought, the girl’s eyes closed as she sent a quick prayer to her mate, a plea for him to be okay.

She felt her heart begin to race within her chest, and she paused, drawing in deep breaths through her nose until it slowed once again. The possibility of her heart racing to an abnormal pulse again was low, but she vividly remembered panic that her last attack had caused her, and Dr. Chase’s warning rang through her head.

She waited another minute until she was positive that her heart rate was as low as she could bring it, and then she continued on down the hall. She could hear Kevin Tran’s voice, and her curiosity peaked. She couldn’t make out words, but he sounded agitated.

“Kevin?” She stepped out into the library to see the prophet hanging up the phone, his face blank with … surprise? Horror? The girl couldn’t quite place the emotion. “What’s wrong?” Her eyes fell onto the phone, and she recognized it immediately. “Is that Dean’s backup?”

“You … you know Abaddon, right?” Kevin looked up from the table, and Alex’s eyes grew wide at the mention of the Knight. She limped over to the table as quickly as she could and sat down across from the prophet.

“Why?” she demanded. “Did she — did Abaddon just call you?” Her fists balled up angrily, fingernails digging into her palm, and she set her jaw into a tight line. “Why?”

“She wanted me to give Sam and Dean a message.” Kevin reached for his phone and dialed Dean’s number, and Alex bit down on her tongue to keep herself from asking a hundred questions all at once. Whatever Abaddon had said to the prophet, there was clearly a sense of urgency in his actions; her questions could wait until the Winchesters answered.

“Hello?” Dean’s voice was lined with confusion, and Alex leaned forward, ears strained to pick up the sound of the Impala. “Kevin?”

“Dean, we have a problem. It’s Abaddon — she called and she told me — she told me that she —”

“Kevin, wait wait wait.” Sam broke into Kevin’s’ hurried ramblings, and Alex reached out to slow him down. “Slow down,” the younger Winchester finished.
“She gave me these coordinates.” Kevin took in a deep breath. “44.053051 by -123.127860 and two names. Irv Franklin and Tracy Bell.”

“Irv?” Alex leaned forward, her eyes widening in surprise. “She has Irv?” Panic flashed through her chest; Irv was one of the first hunters she had met, and she knew him well.

“Irv’s a friend,” Dean added. “Don’t know Tracy.”

Alex shook her head. “Me neither, but they have to be a hunter.”

“Abaddon said that if you didn’t go to save them, she would kill them,” Kevin finished, and Alex grimaced at the prospect. The prophet looked up at Alex. “Who is she?”

“Knight of Hell.” Alex spit out the phrase, anger glittering in her grey eyes. “They’re angels that fell into hell with Lucifer; they lost their grace and became human. Then they became demons. Powerful ones.”

“Alright, new job.” Dean’s voice came through the phone. “You two need to dig up everything the Men of Letters have on Knights of Hell. If you find a way to kill one — I mean permanently — drop a dime.”

“Whoa whoa.” Alex leaned forward, eyes narrowed. “No, no, not me. I’m coming with you. I mean — you guys can’t take on Abaddon on your own.”

“Not a chance.” Dean’s voice was firm. “You’re human now, Pip, and a barely functioning one. No way we’re putting you in.” He ignored Alex’s beginning of a protest and added sharply, “No. We don’t have time to babysit you. You’re staying with Kevin.”

The phone crackled as Sam took over. “Dude, not cool,” he warned, and Alex felt her heart swell with hope to find the younger brother on her side. However, that hope was dashed against the rocks. “Alex, Dean’s right. You’re not well enough to come with. Not with that heart. If you want to help, you can figure out how to kill Abaddon.”

“The sooner we stop her the sooner we can find Cas —”

“We’ll find Cas,” Sam gently cut in, and Alex’s head fell. “I know you want to help, but Dean and I have got this. We’ll find Castiel as soon as this is over with.” The phone line went dead, and Alex glared sullenly down at the screen. They thought she was useless.

“I’m sure they don’t mean to —” Kevin started, but Alex had heard enough.

“Shut up.” She rose to her feet and stalked off into the kitchen, unsure what was worse; the fact that she was still sidelined, or how the Winchesters wouldn’t be back for another twenty four hours. She yanked open the fridge and stared inside, not really seeing what lay in front of her. She hunted back when she was human, didn’t she? Why couldn’t she hunt now? She felt fine.

Her stomach rumbled, and the ex-angel reluctantly pulled out a half-empty bag of beef jerky. It felt like she was hungry every twenty minutes nowadays. Stupid body; it would only be satisfied if she ate all of the food in the fridge all at once.

Footsteps behind her had her jumping, and she spun around to see Kevin Tran. “You scared me.” Her gaze dropped down to the bag of jerky, and she clenched it tighter in her fist. “What’s up?”

“I was on my way down to the archives.” Kevin’s voice was soft and quiet with an emotion the ex-angel couldn’t quite place, so she firmly chose to ignore it. “Thought I’d get a snack first.”
“Go for it.” Alex sidestepped the prophet and started making her way out of the kitchen, but she stumbled, and pain shot up her ankle. With a wince, she leaned up against the metal island. Kevin shot her a concerned glance, but the ex-angel ignored it, tearing open the bag of jerky as she lifted herself up onto the island to sit.

“I broke my arm when I was in eighth grade,” Kevin offered tentatively.

“Congratulations,” Alex muttered, wholly unimpressed with the prophet’s story.

“I-I broke it from flipping over the handlebars on my bike. It was right before the start of baseball season,” Kevin continued, stuttering slightly at the pointed interruption. “I played second base. The doctor said the cast wouldn’t come off for six weeks, so I would miss tryouts. When tryouts came, I cut the cast off of my arm with wire cutters. I ended up at the hospital and had six pins put in.”

Alex tore off a piece of dried meat with her teeth, head flicking back as she wolfed it down. “Your point?”

“My point is that Sam and Dean are right.” The prophet crossed his arms, but Alex could hear the trepidation in his voice from standing up to the ex-angel. “You need to let your body heal before you start hunting again. I-I know it’s hard, okay, but you’re going to end up hurting yourself even more, and it’s going to take you a lot longer to get better.”

Alex frowned, but she couldn’t look past the obvious sense in his words. So she dropped her gaze to the bag in her hands. “I’ll be in Sam’s room,” she finally said. “If you need help with anything, come and get me.” She rolled up the bag and tucked it under her arm before she limped out of the room.

She must have fallen asleep, because the next thing she knew was that she was opening her eyes. Her body woke more slowly, pained and stiff, and she momentarily winced at the thought of how hunting was going to feel on her body. Alex rolled over to look at the clock: it was almost noon. She had slept for over twelve hours.

She buried her head into Sam’s pillow, breathing in through her nose. She liked the smell of Sam Winchester; it had a comforting scent, softer than Dean’s. She missed Sam.

Alex tipped her head, momentarily forgetting her humanity as she listened for Kevin Tran. The sudden rush of panic had her bolting upwards, suddenly awake. Oh right. She was human. She could hear nothing.

She reluctantly pulled herself out of bed, her mind now wide awake even though her body was still slow with exhaustion, and hobbled over to pull on one of Sam’s large blue flannels. A pair of old crutches leaned against the wall, and she pulled them close, balancing on her good leg until they were situated under her arm. She had decided to take Kevin Tran’s advice, and she had to admit that her leg already felt better. She rolled up the sleeves of her overshirt before she limped down the hallway, her sock-covered feet silent in comparison to the click of the crutches. Up ahead, she could hear voices.

The Winchesters.

“So, are you ready for it?” Sam’s voice was soft, despondent almost, and Alex quickened her pace towards the library. Dean let out a low hum of confusion, so quiet the girl wondered if she made it up, but Sam expounded, “The fallen angels? Abaddon? Cas losing his halo, Crowley in our basement?”
“Crap.” Dean let out a grunt of dismay, followed immediately by a muttered, “We’re living in a fucking sitcom.” Alex stepped out into view, and Dean looked up. “Morning, Champ,” he greeted. “How’s the ticker?”

“Can’t be too bad given that it’s still kicking.” Alex made her way over to Sam, teeth clenched to keep the pain from her face. “The rest of me isn’t exactly healed yet. How, uh, how’s Irv?” she asked quickly, distracting the Winchester from her previous comment. “And, um — what was her name? Tracy?”

Sadness flashed through Dean’s eyes, but his voice was blunt. “Irv’s dead.”

Alex’s face fell as grief rippled through her chest, and a warm hand came to rest upon hers. “I’m sorry,” Sam began. Dean opened her mouth to say something, but it fell shut when Sam shot him a cautious look. Alex blinked, painfully aware that there was something the two weren’t telling her. “I know you two were friends,” Sam finished. “He died helping us.”

“I should have been there.” Alex kicked at the floor, the soft heel of her shoe scuffling against the wood. “He might still be alive if I —” She cut off as her throat closed up with tears, and she turned her head away.

“There was nothing you could have done. What happened to you, that wasn’t your fault.” Sam’s eyes sparkled with concern. “And after your accident — falling from that height as a human — you’re lucky you’re alive.”

“Lucky, I guess,” Alex replied, parroting the Winchester’s words before adding her own. “I wasn’t completely human when I fell. I managed to hold onto my grace — not for long, but long enough — thanks to Ezekiel. He probably saved my life.” She looked up, watching the emotions that flickered across the brother’s faces. Sam looked sympathetic, sadness and exhaustion hidden behind his hazel eyes. Dean … Dean almost looked guilty, but his face grew passive when their eyes met, and he looked away.

“I should go look in on Kevin,” he said, setting his glass down upon the table. “Poor kid’s exhausted.”

“Yeah, I, uh, I should start looking through those archives he pulled.” Sam got to his feet and brushed his hands off on his worn jeans. He hurried away without another word, and Alex turned her head away.

“Here.” Dean handed her a phone. “Picked this up for you on the way back. SIM card’s different, but it’s got the same number. You’ve got a few voicemails, I think.” He disappeared off towards the kitchen, and Alex sank back down into the chair.

Dean was right. There were two voicemails, and Alex set the phone on speaker as she placed it on the table in front of her. “You have two new messages,” the automated voice chirped. “Message one of two.”

“Alex.” The voice was Castiel’s, and the ex-angel leaned forward, heart skipping a beat at the sound of the low, rumbling voice. “Alex? I — Metatron betrayed us. He delivered me to earth before completing the spell, but you …” The seraph’s voice trembled, and he took a second to steady it. “I’m in Colorado. If you get this, contact the Winchesters. They’ll tell you what to do.”

The message ended, and there was a moment of silence before the second one began, dated back only two days. “Alex?” It was Castiel again. “I don’t know where you are, but don’t come looking for me. Find the Winchesters and get out of sight. The angels — they’re hunting me down, and
they’ll come after you.” There was a pause as Castiel hesitated. “I won’t call you again,” he finally said. “If this is the last time you hear from me, I want you to know to … I want you to know that I’m sorry. This is my fault. If I hadn’t fallen for Metatron’s lies, the angels wouldn’t have been cast out, and I wouldn’t have placed you in danger like this.” Castiel fell silent again, his despair painfully clear. “I love you.”

The line went dead, and Alex let her eyes fall closed as his voice disappeared. She drew in a deep breath through her nose, and her head lifted towards the ceiling as she opened her eyes.

She needed to find her mate.
Alex heaved a large sigh, flicking her wrist to send a tennis ball hurling across the small room. It bounced off the slick stone wall and careened back into her waiting hand, and the ex-angel couldn’t help but appreciate the noise that it made. It was the only sound in the room, the steady *thump thump thump* against the stone.

She could feel Crowley’s gaze resting upon the side of her face, unblinking, but the demon said nothing. *As per usual,* she thought with a roll of her eyes. The young girl had taken up spending her time in the dungeon with the King of Hell, despite his unwillingness to speak. Even without his witty conversation, being with him … it made her feel a little less human.

She threw the ball off of the wall again and listened to the satisfying and rhythmic thud. Crowley grunted as the ball landed close to his foot, and Alex shot him a quick glance out of the corner of her eye. Blood stained the demon’s hair, and his bottom lip was swollen, but the defiance and amusement that sparkled in his eyes couldn’t be hidden by his injuries.

They were the result of yesterday’s run-in with Kevin Tran. While Alex had been sleeping off her pain, the prophet had apparently come down and beaten what Dean had colorfully described as ‘the absolute shit out of him.’ The reason behind it still wasn’t clear, but not only had Crowley started giving the names of demons to the two brothers, but he had even let it slip that Mrs. Tran was still alive.

And yet, in spite of his talkative manner with the Winchesters, he had still yet to utter a word to her.

“Alex?” Dean appeared in the doorway, a frown growing across his face as he saw the two of them together. However, all he said was, “Come on. Sam’s found something.”

Alex stiffly rose to her feet and reached for the pair of old crutches that leaned against the wall before she stepped out of the dungeon, leaving Dean to cast Crowley a low glare and push the bookshelves back into place. She let him take the lead as they made their way up the flight of brightly-lit stone stairs until they reached the library. Sam was sitting at one of the sleek wooden tables, and his head lifted as they entered. “Hey,” he greeted. “You found her.”

“What’s up?” Alex slid into a chair next to Sam, wincing as she rested her left arm against the table. A deep bruise still marred her forearm, painful evidence of her fall from grace. “Is everything okay?” Her eyes moved over a large map of Colorado that was laid out across the table. “What’s this?”

“This is where Cas called us on Tuesday.” Dean pointed towards the center of the map. “From Longmont, Colorado. The circles on here are how far he could have gotten in one, two, and three days of moving.” He pointed to the three red rings in order, and Alex nodded in understanding. “Sam?”

“The same day Castiel called us, there was a weird murder in that same town. Cops said it was like the vic was blasted from the inside out.”

“Angel kill.” Alex’s brow furrowed in confusion. “So the other angels — they fell, but they’re not human? It’s just me and Castiel who lost their grace.” Her eyes locked with Sam’s. “Guys — they’re
“Don’t worry.” Dean’s warm hand came to rest upon her shoulder. “Finding him is top on our list.”

“Yesterday, two priest were murdered in Emory Park, Iowa,” Sam said, pulling up the newspaper articles. “Their eyes were burned out, and there was evidence of torture. They were found impaled on posts.”

“It sounds like the angels are looking for info,” Dean added, and deep concern slid across his face. “Sam and I are heading there now, so we’ll keep you updated.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Alex jumped to her feet, grey eyes narrowed in chips of ice. “No. You’re not going without me. Cas — he’s my mate.”

“You’re staying here.” Dean crossed his arms, voice firm. “The last thing we need is you breaking down on us out there. You can barely walk — there’s no way in hell we’re letting you hunt down angels.”

Alex’s mouth fell open, and she turned to Sam for support, but the brother shook his head. “Dean’s right. The angels will do anything they can to get to Cas, and they won’t hesitate to go through you. We’ll let you know the minute we learn anything,” he promised when Alex’s eyes teared up.

Alex lowered her head onto the table, squeezing her eyes shut. But she couldn’t argue. She couldn’t win this fight because she knew the brothers were right. “Fine.” She lifted her head, running a hand down her face to brush away the tears. “Then what are you waiting for? Go get him.”

The hum of the tv rippled through the room, the faint whisper of voices barely audible over the crackle of static. Alex lay stretched out across the couch, eyes half-closed as she watched Frodo and Sam argue over the creature Golem, but despite the gravity of the hobbits’ situation, her mind was wandering elsewhere. Somewhere out there, Castiel was alone. He was probably scared — she was scared for him. He was scared and alone, and the Winchesters had left her here to sit on her ass and worry.

She reached out towards the coffee table to tip her phone towards her so she could see the screen. No new texts. No news from Sam, from Dean, or from Castiel. She could call Sam again, but he still hadn’t responded to her first five messages.

This was agonizing.

Golem let out a screech of distress, and Alex responded with a groan. She couldn’t focus on the movie, she couldn’t focus on anything except her mate. She rolled onto her stomach, burying her head into the pillow and kicking out with her legs to disentangle herself from the blankets.

“Ouch!” Her foot knocked against Kevin Tran’s ribs, and the prophet let out a noise of surprise. He shoved her foot away in retaliation, and Alex let out a stronger, more direct groan of displeasure. “Stop it.” Kevin rose to his feet, and Alex’s legs immediately stretched out into the space he had once occupied. “Go … go take a walk or something, okay? This is getting ridiculous.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.” Alex lifted her face up out of the pillow only long enough to utter those words.

“Then stop following me around!” the prophet immediately retorted, his voice rising in anger before it fell back into a disapproving tone. “You know, it’s bad enough being stuck here without you...
following me into every room and then just lying there and —” Silence followed his words, and even though the ex-angel couldn’t see it, she knew he was motioning to what she was doing now.

She heard footsteps retreating as the prophet stormed out to walk off his rage, and she had the intense urge to follow him — being on her own even like this had all of the panic and fear for Castiel swelling up within her chest — but she forced herself to stay still.

Her phone rang, and the ex-angel jumped out of her seat. She scrambled for her phone, knocking it off of the table in her haste and following it onto the floor. Pain shot up her leg, but she shoved it aside as she answered. “Dean? Did you find him? Is he okay?”

Dean cut into her rush of her words. “Whoa whoa, slow down. We haven’t found Cas, but we think we found where he was. I talked with a guy at a homeless shelter near the church where the priests were found. A guy matching Cas’ description disappeared the day before they turned up. He went by the name Clarence.”

“That’s the name Meg gave him.” The sentence came out like a growl, rumbling through her chest, and her hand tightened around the phone, surprised to find anger at the news.

“Told you you shouldn’t have said that,” she heard Sam say from beside his brother.

Dean sighed. “Listen, Pip. The point is that Cas ditched town before the angels got here, so he’s a step ahead of them for now. We’re going to keep looking, and we’ll keep you updated. A body turned up in Dayton, Ohio, which is about a day’s travel, so we’re on our way there now. If he calls you again, let us know, alright?”

“Yeah.” Alex hung up and tossed the phone across the room where it hit the ground with a satisfying thud. There had to be someone she could call. Gabriel hadn’t responded, neither had Ezekiel. She closed her eyes, pretending that her grace was still within her, but there was nothing but emptiness.

She had never felt so alone in her life.

Alex pulled herself up into a sitting position and opened up her laptop. A body had been found in Dayton. Whose body? An angel, or just an unfortunate, unrelated accident? She found the official police report, and her eyes narrowed as she read through it. The victim was an angel, killed by an angel blade. There was no doubt about it.

“They’re catching up,” she murmured, and her hands trembled in a sudden rush of fear. The angels were catching up to Castiel, and if they were even half as powerful as they had once been, he didn’t stand a chance.

Alex looked over at the clock on the wall: 8pm. It would still be light outside, but inside the bunker, the days felt timeless. And her body still felt utterly exhausted. So after only a moment of laying on the cold bunker floor, she rose to her feet, gathered up her phone, and slowly made her way down to her room.

The lights were off, but the ex-angel didn’t bother to turn them back on. Instead, she blindly stumbled over to the bed and collapsed on top of the sheets, eyes falling shut the moment her head hit the pillow.

She wormed her way under the covers and pulled the blankets tight, but sleep evaded every toss and turn. Worry permeated every corner of her mind, chasing away every possibility of rest, and with each passing moment, the worry grew. Castiel had barely been able to take care of himself when he had been cut off from heaven; how could he now survive as a human with angels directly on his tail?
She found it uncomfortable to be human again; Castiel would find it terrifyingly different. She tried to think of something — anything — that would help, but only one possibility kept repeating through her mind.

Alex threw off the covers and rose to her feet. She would do whatever it took to get her mate home safely. And if this was her only option, then so be it.

Alex pulled open the doors, and light flooded into the dungeon. Crowley screwed up his eyes at the sudden brightness, but they lit up with curiosity at her presence. “Back again so soon?”

Alex ignored his wit. “You’re still the King of Hell, right?” she inquired. Her nerves had her fingers curling in the hem of her oversized shirt.

The demon cocked his eyebrows at the sight, but all he asked was, “Why?”

“Could you still make a deal — even though you’re in here?” the ex-angel persisted. She held Crowley’s gaze evenly, and for several long seconds everything was still. Tense.

Finally, Crowley spoke. “And what makes you think I’d want your soul?” Alex immediately went on the defense, spluttering out a surprised protest, but the demon cut in. “Don’t worry, mouse, you’ve got my full attention.” He lifted his arms, sending the chains clinking together.

“It’s Castiel.” The nerves returned full force, and the ex-angel shoved her fists into her pockets. “He’s human like me, and he’s running from the angels. Sam and Dean are out looking for him, but …”

“But those layered cretins couldn’t follow a trail of neon signs,” Crowley finished scathingly. “What do you want me to do about it?”

“I want you to keep him alive! At least until Sam and Dean find him. But, just … just don’t let them know about … well, about this.” Alex spread out her hands in a sweeping gesture, motioning to herself and the demon in turn. “So … you in or not?”

Crowley didn’t respond, and Alex felt her temper grow at the smug glint that flashed in the demon’s eyes. “Well?” she snapped impatiently. “Interested or no?”

“Very.” The smugness had crept into the demon’s voice. “Screwing over your three boy-toys by owning your soul?” Suddenly the demon frowned. “You do have a soul, right?”

“Yeah, I think so.” Alex mimicked his frown, and she looked down at her body. “I mean, I don’t feel … soulless. But that’s not —” The girl pursed her lips as she gathered her thoughts. “I’ll give you your freedom in return.”

“Set me free, and I’ll give you two years,” Crowley countered. “Leave me here, you’ll get one. But no soul, and no deal. Think long and hard, little mouse,” he warned when Alex’s eyes hardened. “You didn’t honestly expect me to do you a favor for so little a reward?”

“You consider your freedom ‘so little a reward?’” Alex repeated. “You’d rather stay here, rotting in this moldy room?”

“I’m quite comfortable,” the demon quipped. “In fact, I rather like it here. And for all the trouble protecting your … whatever he is — spare me the details — it hardly seems worth it. However, the real question,” he added, “is how much are you willing to give up to save his life? You’ve never
hesitated to throw yourself at me before; this time all I ask for is your soul.”

Alex scoffed at his words, but she hesitated, eyes narrowed as her choices battled within her mind. “Fine,” she finally agreed. “Two years and your freedom, but you have to make sure Castiel is safe and alive and stays that way until the Winchesters find him — and none of them can find out about this. If any of this doesn’t happen, the deal is off.”

“Fair enough.” Crowley lifted his bound hands, shaking the handcuffs expectantly. “Can you?” Alex rolled her eyes, and the demon frowned. “May I remind you, I can’t do anything with these on,” he chided. “That seems to be the very same reason Rocky and Bullwinkle put them on.”

Alex rolled her eyes, harder this time, but she reached into her pocket and dug out the small, silver key. “Hold still.” She stepped forward into the devil’s trap towards Crowley’s waiting hands, and her fingers trembled as she slowly unlocked the handcuffs. “There,” she snapped as the demon rose to his feet, fingers dancing over the marred skin. “Now go —”

“Not so fast, little mouse.” Crowley clicked his tongue, cutting the girl off. “The deal isn’t final.”

“Right, fine. You’ve got a contract on you, right? Now that your magic demon powers are back?” Alex crossed her arms, her lips set into a firm line as she sized up the stocky man in front of her.

“Unfortunately, it doesn’t work like that.” Something sparkled in the demon’s dark eyes, something akin to amusement, as far as the ex-angel could tell. “We’ll have to do this the old-fashioned way.”

Alex recoiled in disgust, but she managed to keep her lips from pulling back into a grimace. A second later, her emotions were back under control. “Convenient,” she muttered. If the demon heard, he didn’t show it.

They stood there in silence as several seconds passed, and finally Crowley cleared his throat. “Well? Changed your mind, darling?” He motioned her forward, and Alex clenched her fists at her side, steeling herself as she contemplated her next move. Crowley opened his mouth to speak, but before he could Alex lunged forward. Her hands wrapped themselves in the lapels of Crowley’s jacket to steady herself, and she kissed him.

The demon’s lips were warm, unpleasantly so, and Alex pursed her lips together tightly. It took Crowley a second to react, but when his hand came up to stabilize himself, the ex-angel was already pulling away. “There.” Alex wiped her mouth off on the back of her sleeve in disgust, and, finding the taste still lingering on her lips, spat onto the concrete floor in an attempt to rid herself of the memory. “Happy?”

Crowley didn’t respond, but the smug grin on his face said it all. Something else sat in his eyes, surprise mingled with the exuberance found upon a child’s features come Christmas day.

Alex squared her shoulders, eyes narrowing in fury at the look upon his face. “What?” she snapped.

“Nothing.” The exuberance faded into something that reminded the ex-angel vaguely of triumph, an almost predatory look of fervor too intense to be from the deal alone. “You’re full of surprises, little mouse.” His eyes gleamed, and the ex-angel narrowed her eyes; what did he know that she didn’t? She stepped forward to scuff away the chalk edge of the trap, releasing the demon, and he strolled past her towards the door. “You’re welcome, by the way,” Crowley added, turning back in the doorway.

Alex scoffed, glancing over her shoulder. “For what?” she asked, voice flat with disgust.

“I noticed your limp. Torn soleus, right?” He lifted his eyebrows when Alex met his words with a
Alex awoke the next morning to find all of the pain in her muscles gone. She rose to her feet, excitement pulsing through her body before it shriveled up as she remembered how exactly that pain had disappeared. She placed a hand upon her stomach, trying to feel if her soul felt different. But the only difference she felt was the lack of pain.

She grabbed her phone and checked her notifications. Two from Sam giving her an update and inquiring about her health. One from the number 666; all it read was ‘mission accomplished.’ Alex quickly swiped that notification away, making a mental note to actually delete the message later on.

She made her way out towards the kitchen, head tipped as she passed the room currently inhabited by Kevin Tran. However, there was no signs that he was in his room, so she continued on. Her eyes narrowed as she listened for any sign of the prophet, and her gut ached with the strain of instinctively trying to stretch out her grace. Her face fell when she felt nothing. Right.

She passed her crutches that were laying, no longer needed, against the library table as she made her way into the kitchen for — what meal would this be? She still ate whenever she was hungry, unable to get her body into a daily meal routine. A quick glance at her phone had her deciding that ‘breakfast’ would be the best term.

It was time for breakfast.

She found Kevin in the kitchen, digging through the fridge for leftover food. “Hey,” she greeted, and her stomach rumbled as she took in the fading smell of sausage; a quick glance around showed none in sight.

Sam stepped into the room, clearing his throat, and Alex looked up in surprise. She stared at the Winchester, the question she couldn’t ask hanging in the air. Sam nodded. “They’re in the library.”

Alex jumped to her feet and tore down the hall, her sock-clad feet slipping on the smooth floor. She tore into the library and slid to a stop. There, next to Dean, stood a man. He was dressed in faded jeans with a green shirt and a burgundy sweatshirt, and his thick hair lay unkempt upon his head. Blue eyes sparkled dully, but they lit up with a familiar warmth when they came to rest upon her. Alex threw herself into Castiel’s arms, and the man stumbled back slightly in surprise. Alex could feel how thin he was, and she pressed herself deep into his clothing. It didn’t smell like him; it smelled like dirt and earth and garbage. “Dammit,” she murmured, moving her head so it rested in the crook of his neck. “Don’t scare me like that again.”

Castiel’s chin came to rest in her hair, his arms holding her close. “I won’t,” he promised, his voice deep and slow and saddened. “I’m glad you’re okay. I…” He grew quiet, and even from her close proximity, Alex had to strain to hear his next words. “I thought you were dead.”

“What — what happened?” Alex pulled herself back, staring intently up into his eyes. “What happened to you?”

“Metatron betrayed us.” The ex-seraph’s face darkened as he recounted the past week’s events. “He
stole our grace to complete a spell to cast the angels out of heaven. He must have returned me to earth in Longmont, Colorado, because when I woke up, the angels were falling. I called your cell phone, but when you didn’t answer …” Castiel shook his head, shaking off whatever bad thought was going to follow that statement. “I was going to come look for you, but I was kidnapped by an angel named Hael.” The seraph glanced over at the two Winchesters to see they were watching, and he paused. “The angels have been hunting for me since then. I was living on the streets until a young man found me and offered to let me stay with him for the night. That’s when the Winchesters found me.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re safe.” Alex reached forward to take his hand, her fingers locking with his. “You’re lucky that man was kind enough to help you, you know,” she added, prying in the most gentle way.

Castiel hesitated, and Alex looked up. “Yes,” he slowly agreed. “I don’t think generosity was his motive, however. The man knew who I was, and he said he was there to keep me safe. He disappeared before Sam and Dean showed up,” he finished with a look at the two brothers, and then his gaze fell down to his bandaged hand. “I don’t know who he was, but I owe him much.”

“Huh.” Alex let the subject fall away, her curiosity satisfied; that stranger had to be one of Crowley’s men. “Well, I suppose it doesn’t matter anymore. The important thing is that you’re here and that you’re safe. Come on.” Alex reached out and took Castiel’s hand, pulling him towards the wing where the Men of Letter’s sleeping quarters lay. “You smell like a dumpster. Let’s get you showered and into some clean clothes.” She quickly led him out of the room, fully intending on getting him away and getting the whole story before the Winchesters could ask any more questions.

Castiel nodded in agreement, but instead of making his way into the shower room, he followed Alex into Dean’s bedroom. “How are you doing?” he asked, a sense of urgency concealed beneath his polite facade. “The Winchesters, they told me …”

Alex looked up from where she was kneeling beside Dean’s dresser, blinking at his silence. “How much did they tell you?”

“That they found you at a hospital almost a week after you fell. Sam explained how you had suffered heart trauma. Dean refused to talk about any of it.”

Alex tugged open the bottom drawer, heat flushing her cheeks as she felt Castiel’s gaze on the back of her head. Something about the way he spoke reminded her of when they had first met; that overly polite tone that had distanced himself from her. “I’m fine now,” she promised as she pulled out a pair of gray sweatpants before turning her search for a t-shirt. “And before you say it, look.” She turned on her heels to look up at the seraph. “What happened — I don’t blame you for any of it. It was that dickhead Metatron, okay? He did this to us.” She threw the shirt down on top of the pants in a sudden, short burst of anger. “Thank our Father we’re still both alive. I think …” The ex-angel cut herself off with a quick shake of her head. “Let’s get you cleaned up first, then we can talk, alright? Towels are on the top shelf on the left.”

Castiel stood motionless, simply staring, and Alex rose to her feet, crossing over to him and resting her hands up against her chest. “Shower?” she reminded teasingly, trying to break the tension that resided between them. “You smell.” She leaned up to press a kiss on his lips, faltering when the ex-seraph didn’t return it. Her shoulders fell, and she stepped away.

Castiel’s gaze fell off to the side. “You said they were just down the hall?”

Alex nodded, and Castiel walked away. “Don’t forget to wash your hair,” she called after him, a forced smile upon her face that faded as soon as he was out of sight. “Shit.” Alex sank down onto Dean’s bed, head hung as she heard the bathroom door swing closed. Unsure what else to do, she
pulled out her phone to reread Crowley’s latest message. “Thanks,” she murmured aloud, her voice low in despondency, and then, with a swipe of her finger, the text was gone forever.

Alex finally ventured out of Dean’s room some ten minutes later, head tipped as she listened for any signs of the Winchesters. Now that Castiel was back, guilt and fear trickled through her chest, making her stomach flip. It wouldn’t take Sam and Dean long to notice the dungeon’s lack of occupancy, and they would surely come to her for answers.

“Why would he let that son of a bitch walk?” Dean’s angry voice drifted in from the library, and Alex felt her heart sink; it seems the brothers had already found out.

“I don’t know, Dean, maybe because he told Kevin his mother was alive? Maybe he told Kevin that he’d let her go.” A dark silence followed Sam’s words, and Alex could easily picture Dean’s scowl as Sam let out a sigh. “Come on. Wouldn’t you have done the same if it was Mom?”

“No, I wouldn’t,” Dean retorted hotly. “And Kevin wouldn’t either. He knows better than that. And he promised to stay away!”

“Dean, he beat Crowley to a pulp —”

“Exactly!” his brother interrupted with a note of triumph. “He hates the guy. There’s no way he’d let him just walk free like that.”

Sam seemed at a loss for words, and unable to rebut, he scowled. “Okay, so if it wasn’t Kevin, then who? Because Alex was the only other person around here, and if you ask me, she’d be the last person to let Crowley off the hook, after what he’s done.” More silence followed his words, and Sam let out an exasperated breath. “Dude. You don’t seriously —”

“What?” Dean seemed to have been caught off-guard by the accusation. “No. No. It’s just … You don’t think it’s a bit weird about how much time she’s been spending down there? Anyone who spends that much time with Crowley’s got to be a little …” A silent hand gesture must have followed his words, because Alex could hear Sam’s indignation in his sharp breath.

“Maybe she wouldn’t spend so much time down there if you stopped treating her like she had the plague,” Sam retorted, and Alex pressed herself closer into the wall as she heard chair legs scrape against the floor.

“She’s human, Sam —”

“Exactly! She’s human, not glass. Stop tiptoeing around her like she’s going to break.”

Alex heard a door open further down the hall, and she jumped away from the wall. It was time to move before someone found her eavesdropping. The girl drew in a deep breath before she stepped into the library, feet scuffing on the ground to give the Winchesters a heads up of her arrival.

The brothers immediately fell silent, and Dean looked away when Alex stepped into view. “Hey,” she greeted, face stoic as she pretended she had overhead nothing. “Cas is still in the shower. I gave him some of your old clothes, Dean, at least until we can find him better fitting ones.” She ignored how the two brothers exchanged looks over her head; instead, she crossed the room to stand in front of Sam. “How was the trip? Successful, I see.”

“It was fine. We’re lucky we got there when we did.” Sam glanced at his drink and sat back down in his chair. “And Cas was lucky that guy found him, whoever he was.”
Alex’s eyes flickered up to Dean where they paused, and her eyebrows knit together at the frown upon his face. “How’s your leg?” The Winchester motioned down towards her left calf, and the ex-angel followed his gaze.

She lifted it off of the ground momentarily before she shrugged. “It’s doing fine. Guess a few days off of it really did the trick. The pain’s basically gone.” She let her face go blank with innocence, and Sam cleared his throat when Dean’s eyes darkened. “What’s wrong?” Alex tilted her head in confusion.

“Crowley’s gone.” Dean’s voice was tight with suspicion, and Alex let her eyes narrow even further at the news. “Someone let him go.”

“Let him — what?” The girl looked between the two brothers. “No. It was only Kevin and me here, and I was basically with him all the time. At least for the first two days.” She shook her head, and her voice took on genuine honesty. “There’s no way Kevin let him go,” she said, and, after a moment’s pause, added, “He must have escaped on his own.”

Dean scoffed. “How?”

“I don’t know.” Alex could only shrug. “But it’s Crowley. I wouldn’t put it past him.”

The sound of footsteps put a halt to their conversation, and all three turned their heads to see Castiel enter. His damp hair stood up every which way, and Dean’s clothes hung loosely off of his smaller frame, but his eyes seemed brighter than they had been before. They moved across the room before coming to rest on Alex.

“Hey.” Alex flashed him a warm smile, glad for the interruption. “There you are. How are you feeling?”

“Tired.” Castiel’s voice rumbled quietly throughout the room. “But I’m feeling better now, thank you.” Once again, the ex-seraph’s tone was strange, its usual warmth replaced with a distant politeness, and Alex frowned. Something had made him uncomfortable, and for the life of her she couldn’t figure out what.

“How about food?” she asked, privately hoping to get away from the two brothers. “I bet you’re hungry cause I mean, hell, I’m always hungry. Come on.” She waved her mate after her as she led the way out of the library.

Castiel followed, and Alex threw open the fridge door in search of a meal. “So,” she began slowly, “You’re human too, huh? How’s that been?”

“Painful.” Castiel stopped behind her, his gaze on her back as Alex pulled out some cold ground beef. “And complex. Very dull.” He paused as he looked around the bunker kitchen. “Humans see far less colors than I thought they did.”

“Huh. Looks about the same to me. Little more muted, but nothing big.” Alex retrieved some tortillas from the cabinet as the microwave warmed up her food, chancing a look back at the ex-seraph with a shrug. “But I know what you mean. I have no idea what’s going on around me anymore. It feels like … it feels like my ears of full of water; everything is quiet and muted.” The microwave dinged, and she dumped the meat onto the tortillas with a small frown. “Uh, here. Bon appetit.” She looked up into Castiel’s eyes. “I have no idea how to cook.”

“Neither do I.” Castiel accepted a plate, turning it as he stared down its contents. “But warm food will be a welcome change.”
Alex frowned as she grabbed a half-eaten bag of potato chips, and guilt and sympathy flooded through her veins. “Well, you won’t have to worry about that anymore,” she promised. “Dean’s a pretty good cook. Lisa taught him a lot, and I think he’s kind of got the knack for it. You’ll eat well.” The ex-angel paused, tipping her head. “We can eat in the library. I’m sure the Winchesters have vacated by now.”

She led the way down the hall and into the empty room. Castiel sat down across from her, watching as Alex rolled up her meal into a burrito-esque shape. She could feel his gaze upon her, careful and intense, but still he refused to speak.

Alex opened her mouth, ready to ask the ex-seraph what as on his mind, but approaching footsteps had her lips falling shut. Dean appeared in the doorway, and Alex’s eyes flickered over to him in surprise. Sam was nowhere in sight, and she frowned as the Winchester cast a look around to make sure his brother wasn’t in earshot. “Hey,” she greeted. “I hope you don’t mind, but I used up the tortillas to make burritos … sorta.”

Dean all but ignored her statement. “Cas, uh, can we talk?” The Winchester stepped forward, his voice low as if weighed down by some unforeseen burden, and Alex set her food back on her plate as her eyebrows knit together in concern.

If Castiel picked up on it, it didn’t show. “Of course.” He pulled out the chair beside him and motioned for the Winchester to sit. “Dean, you know I always appreciate our talks, our time together.”

Something in the former seraph’s words seemed to strike a chord, because Dean’s face fell for a fraction of a second. However, when he spoke, it was with firmness and insistence. “Listen, buddy. Um … you can’t stay.”

Castiel’s face went black with shock, and as the words registered, his expression twisted into confusion and hurt. A loud thud rang out through the room, and it took Alex a second to realize that it was her hand slamming down onto the table. “What?” she exclaimed, and Dean’s eyes turned to her. The girl paused, half expecting him to be joking, but no sign of humor creased his face, and anger welled up within. “You can’t be serious!” Alex pounded the table again with the butt of her wrist. “You — you can’t just throw him out, Dean!”

“He can’t stay,” Dean slowly repeated, and, to Alex, his lack of anger made the whole situation feel worse. “Every angel on this side of the globe are looking for him —”

“The bunker has wardings —”

“That are useless now that Crowley knows where it is!” Dean’s voice rose above hers. “And I wouldn’t put it past him to sell us out.”

“Crowley?” Castiel looked between the two of them. “I thought you had Crowley detained.”

“We did.” Dean’s voice was bitter. “But somehow, he got out.” He cast Alex a fleeting glance, and her eyes widened a fraction to find suspicion still lingering in his gaze.

“I didn’t let him out, if that’s what you’re implying,” she snapped. “And if you’re going to throw Cas out, you’re going to have to do the same to me.” She lifted her chin in defiance, and grey eyes glittered with barely suppressed rage when Dean merely shrugged.

“Fine.” The Winchester barely spared her another look, but his tone was sharp and pointed. “Then go.”
The young girl’s mouth fell open as she stared at Dean, shocked by his answer. “You think —”

“You want to follow Cas? Fine.” Dean’s green eyes flashed. “You already made it clear who you’ve chosen.”

“It’s okay.” Castiel reached across the table to put his hand on her arm, but he pulled back at the last second. “If what Dean’s saying is true, then we should go.” His gaze turned back to Dean. “I wouldn’t want my actions to put my friends at risk.” Castiel rose to his feet, and the chair legs scraped against the ground as he pushed them back. “I’ll go gather my things.”

He left the room, and Alex jumped up to follow, casting Dean one last sordid glare before she disappeared down the hall. “Cas,” she started in protest as they made their way through the bunker, “we don’t have to do this. Let’s go find Sam; there’s no way he’s in on Dean’s whole angel crap —”

“No.” The ex-seraph’s voice was firm. “It’s not the angels I’m worried about.” He stopped outside Alex’s room, and his eyes focused on the door so she could only see the side of his face. “If you’re coming with, go pack whatever you need.”

Alex frowned, still put-out by his distance, but she did as he said. She flipped on the lights and scooped her duffle bag up off the floor, tossing it haphazardly onto the bed. She heard the door close behind her, and even with her dulled — human, she reminded herself — senses, she could feel Castiel in the room with her. He stood by the far wall, and although Alex could feel his gaze following her around the room, he didn’t speak. “What’s your problem?” she finally snapped. The words came out harsher than expected, her anger at Dean still eating at her temper, and she cleared her throat apologetically. “You’re acting so … weird,” she added, her tone still sharp but far less hostile. “I mean, ever since you got back ... what happened?” She shoved the last of her clothes deep into the bag before tossing her laptop in as well.

Castiel didn’t answer, and, when the silence lengthened, she crossed her arms. “Fine,” she spat. “Don’t tell me.” She turned back to her bag and zipped it closed; the force of her actions almost caused the teeth to break.

“Why did you lie to me?”

“What?” Alex barely held back a laugh, and she turned to her mate. “Lie to you?” she repeated, and her eyebrows rose in surprise. “What are you talking about, Cas? Lie about what?”

She expected an answer; what she didn’t expect was for the ex-seraph to turned away and walk out of the room. “Hey!” Alex grabbed her bag and ran after him, and her fingers tightened around his wrist to pull him back towards her. “Don’t just walk away,” she snapped. “Just tell me why you’re so pissed!”

“I’m not angry.” Castiel pulled his arm free, and Alex’s hands fell back down to her side. “It’s just ...” He looked up at the ceiling, gathering his thoughts. “After all this time, after everything we’ve been through, you never bothered to tell me? Your life — your name — was it all just a lie?”

Alex swallowed thickly, and her voice quavered. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Castiel’s blue eyes sparkled with hurt as he met her gaze, and he spoke the words the young girl had been hoping she would never hear again. “I know who you really are.”
Knockin' On Heaven's Door

She was alone. The street was dark, lit only by the occasional streetlight, and snowflakes fell through the cold winter air, covering the ground. The young girl pulled her thin jacket tighter around her body, suppressing a shiver. She hated life, and she hated living like she did. They had fought again, and now she had been thrown out of the house for the night as punishment. She kicked at a loose stone, sending it clattering down the street. Stupid foster family. Like they gave a damn about her.

Suddenly there was light. A bright, blinding light that was gone as soon as it had appeared. Darkness surrounded the young girl as the ground vanished from beneath her feet, and the next thing she knew, she was falling.

May 31st, 2014
Rexford, Idaho

Alex followed Castiel off of the bus, coughing as it sped away in a cloud of dust and smoke. The thin, sparse clouds did little to hide the summer sun, and the ex-angel uncomfortably adjusted the shoulder straps of her bag. The bus had dropped them off at a small town just north of Idaho Falls, and for the first time in a while, the young girl was ready to quit traveling.

She glanced up at her companion out of the corner of her eye; he was walking down the street, completely oblivious to her gaze upon him. Two days had passed since they left the bunker back in Lebanon, Kansas, and since then the two hadn’t spoken a word about ... it.

I know who you really are. Castiel’s words echoed through her head, and Alex briefly closed her eyes at the memory. Her cheeks flushed, and as her embarrassment grew, she gave a quick cough to distract herself from her thoughts.

“Are you okay?” Castiel looked over at her in concern, and Alex blinked in surprise.

“I’m fine,” she quickly promised. Her eyes drifted upwards to one of the shop signs, and she read, “Rexford, Idaho.” Seems like a nice little town.” Her gaze continued up towards the sky; the sun, though still high above them, was beginning to Stretch towards its horizon. “What do you say we find a place to spend the night? I have a credit card or two that should work.”

“That’s a good idea.” Castiel paused on the street corner, peering both ways in search of a place to stay. “I can feel that I’m getting tired again, although for having sat on a bus all day, I’m not sure why.”

“Because human bodies are stupid.” Alex led the way down the street to an old-fashioned motel. “Take them on a ride, and they’re convinced they ran the distance themselves.” She pushed her way through the front door of the office, not bothering to stop and explain herself to the confused ex-seraph behind her; it wasn’t worth it.

She quickly rented one room for the night, and, after thanking the woman behind the desk and taking the key in hand, led Castiel down to their room. The accommodations weren’t bad; having travelled with hunters, Alex had had much worse. “Alright.” She dropped her bag onto the only bed before turning her gaze to the maroon walls. “See, this isn’t that bad. Better than sleeping another night on the bus, huh?”
Castiel gave a small nod. “Much.” He looked down at his dirty green t-shirt that he had acquired during his time away from the bunker, and after a second, he pulled it off. “Do you have another shirt that would fit me? This one is getting dirty.”

Alex didn’t respond. Her eyes had dropped to his bare skin, where Enochian was scrawled in big, bold letters on his side. “Oh, Cas.” She moved closer, a hand going forward to trace over the black-inked tattoo, and her voice grew soft; what danger had he faced that he needed such a mark. “What did you do?”

“It’s okay.” Castiel’s hand went down to cover hers. “It didn’t hurt for long. And now I’m warded against angels. So are you,” he added, and his hand moved up to rest against her lower ribs. “Now we’re both safe.” He leaned forward, hesitation in his eyes, and Alex awkwardly turned her head away. Silence clung to the air, and eventually the ex-seraph pulled away and cleared his throat. “If it’s alright with you, I’m going to take a shower. It’s been a long day.”

Castiel disappeared into the bathroom, and Alex reluctantly returned to the bed. After a moment or two, she heard the water start, and she reached over to flip on the small tv that sat in the corner.

_I know who you really are._

The shock that had followed those words had shaken her to the core. Alex barely even remembered leaving the bunker in a stupefied haze. All she knew was that Dean hadn’t been there when they had finally left and made their way down the dusty road towards the nearest bus stop.

She looked over at her phone, which lay at her side on the white comforter. Since their departure, she hadn’t heard a word from Dean; Sam, however had called her thrice. He clearly had had no idea of Dean’s actions, and his voicemails had been full of offers to pick them up. Alex had been tempted to accept his proposition, but Castiel's deep concern about Crowley and the angels had reluctantly forced her to decline.

The water stopped, and the ex-angel looked up in surprise. “You okay?” She raised her voice so it could be heard through the door, which, after a moment, opened to reveal Castiel.

Confusion flitted through his blue eyes, and he brushed back his damp hair. “Yes,” came the slow answer. “Why wouldn’t I be?” Water droplets beaded around his bare collarbone, and he wiped away with a towel.

Alex glanced over at the clock; she had been submerged in her thoughts longer than she had thought. “Never mind.” She shook her head, and Castiel approached. “Listen, Cas … I’m sorry. I know this is causing problems between us, and I … I just have to ask … how did you find out?” Castiel’s eyes darkened, and she winced internally. “We just, we just need to talk about this.”

Silence followed her question, and she kept her eyes averted as she listened to Castiel pause beside their bag. Clothes rustled, and she heard him pull on a shirt before he finally opened his mouth to speak. “You mean about your past.”

“I know who you really are.”

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“Yeah.”

The bed dipped as Castiel sat down upon it, and Alex reluctantly lifted her eyes. “Ev —”

“Don’t. Don’t … say my name.” Alex flinched at the sharpness in her voice. “Please,” she added much more quietly. “There’s a reason I stopped using it, Castiel.”

Cas fell silent for several seconds, contemplation dancing in his eyes. “It’s a very beautiful name,” he finally said. “You have nothing to be ashamed of.” Alex turned her head away, and after another
pause, the angel continued. “I know who you are because you were born on this earth on January 19th, 1996. And you died December 15th, 2013.”

*Died?*

Alex stared at Castiel, her mouth agape. “W-What?” she stuttered out. “No, that's not possible.” She had been walking down the street through the dark and the snow, and the last thing she remembered was a flash of light — how could she have —

“You were struck by a oncoming semi.” Castiel’s head tilted as he studied her, but Alex was too stunned to hear the sympathy that softened his voice. “You wouldn’t have remembered much; death would have been instantaneous.”

Alex closed her eyes, focusing on the memory she refused to dwell on for so many years. It all seemed a blur, a series of motions that all took place simultaneously, but the harder she focused, the more times she played it again and again and again, the more each individual details began to fall into place.

*She was standing in the snow, her frostbitten fingers buried deeply within her sweatshirt. The snow covered everything, and she squinted, trying to peer into the darkness that lay behind the glow of the streetlight.*

*The light appeared, and she screwed up her eyes against it. It only lasted a second before it was upon her, but before the darkness overtook the girl, the dark outline of the massive truck before her took shape. The light was from two bright headlights, and the roar of its engine could be heard from beneath the howling wind. It was upon her before she could move, before she could react. Then came the darkness. No pain, no nothing. Just darkness.*

Alex's eyes flew open as she let out a breathless noise, and Castiel's hand came to rest softly on top of hers. Her jaw trembled as she searched for words, but none seemed to come. “How?” she finally whispered. “How? I — no. No, Cas, I, I — I knew. This wasn’t real, it was a show — That’s not right!”

The hand on hers squeezed tightly. “Your soul went to Sheol.” Castiel shifted closer, his voice lowering into a murmur.

Alex looked up into his eyes; she was only able to hold his gaze for a mere second before she scoffed and turned away. "I've never heard of it."

“Sheol is for those who in life were neither good nor bad, but not much else is known — neither angel nor demon can enter. All we know is that souls go in there, and after a period of time are sent to their final destination in either heaven or hell.”

“But the — the show …” Alex leaned into Castiel’s shoulder; her eyes stung with tears of confusion and fear. "How did I … how did I know things?"

Castiel’s hand came up to rest on her hair, and Alex leaned into the heavy, comforting pressure. “I don’t know.” He fell silent for several seconds, and Alex turned to bury her head into his chest. "Most souls are only there for days; yours had been there for almost six months. Any number of things could have happened.”

“What … how did I end up in 2008?” Alex tipped her head up to look into Castiel’s eyes, leaning into his warm, reassuring touch when his hand came up to brush away her tears.

Castiel shook his head. “Once again, I don’t know. But somehow, at the exact moment Metatron cast
the angels out of heaven, you were thrown back down to earth.”

“Back in time six years.” Alex’s voice was flat with disbelief. “How the hell would that work?”

“I don’t know.” The words left Castiel's mouth again, equally flat with repetition before they softened. “Like I said, we know very little about Sheol. All I know is that your soul was expelled when the angels fell, and that both angels and demons alike are searching for it. Which is why we left.” Castiel stood up and crossed over to the bag to retrieve his toothbrush and toothpaste. “The message was sent out to all of the angels; I was able to hear it myself. You would have been in the hospital,” he added when Alex frowned. “I doubt you would have been conscious to hear it. I recognized your soul because I remembered it from six years ago.”

"Wait, so can they …" Alex trailed off as Castiel shook his head.

"No. The other angels won’t be able to immediately tell that the released soul is you, not after it was altered by its transition into grace. However,” the ex-seraph added, “too much probing would make it obvious, and Crowley …”

Alex felt her face flush red. “You think Crowley would be able to recognize me,” she finished, and her cheeks grew even hotter as she remembered the triumphant gleam in the demon’s eyes.

Thankfully, Castiel didn’t turn to see her discomfort. “I know he would,” he said as he disappeared into the bathroom. “That’s why we couldn’t stay. If Crowley realized who you were, he would try to take your soul back.”  

Guilt rushed through her, and Alex got to her feet and crossed the carpet to enter the bathroom behind Castiel. She wrapped her arm around his waist and pressed her head into his back, drawing in a long, deep breath. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” she murmured. “I didn’t mean to hurt you, I … I just — when I fell, I started a new life. That old one wasn’t me anymore.” She nuzzled against his shoulder blades. “I love you.”

Castiel’s hands came up to cover hers. “I love you, too.”

The blaring of a horn was what startled Alex into wakefulness. Her eyes flew open in surprise, darting around the room as she took in her unfamiliar surroundings. A strong arm was wrapped tightly around her waist, and the ex-angel leaned back into Castiel. She could feel him stir as she settled back down into the mattress, and felt a momentary pang of guilt for disturbing his slumber. “Morning,” she mumbled as he pressed his face into the back of her neck.

A low, wordless grunt came as an answer, and Alex rolled over onto her back with a small smile. Castiel groggily re-situated, and the ex-angel lifted her chin so his head could rest in the crook of her shoulder. It was weird to see him sleep, she mused as she stroked his dark hair. Only weeks before, sleeping would had been a symptom that something was seriously wrong. But now it was … normal.

She kissed his head, and Castiel shifted backwards so he could look her in the eyes. “Hey.” Alex leaned up to press a quick kiss on his lips. “Morning, sunshine.”

“Good morning.” Castiel sat up, and Alex propped herself up on her elbows to glance at the clock. It was almost ten o’clock. She fell back onto her pillow with a groan and stared at the ceiling as Castiel got to his feet. “Do you ever get tired of urinating?”

Alex let out a loud laugh as the ex-seraph disappeared into the bathroom. “All the damn time,” she called out after him. She sat up again just in time to see the door close, and she shook her head. “Any
plans for the day?” she asked. “Traveling?” A scowl followed those words; the last thing she wanted to do was get back onto that bus.

The toilet flushed, and Castiel reappeared in the doorway. “I like this town.” He crossed the room to sit back down on the bed, and Alex pulled him closer to her with a smile. “I thought we might stay here for the day.”

“Mm.” Alex curled up on his chest. “How about forever?” She closed her eyes as Castiel’s hand came up to rest on her shoulder, keeping her steady, and she let out a groan as her stomach rumbled.

“Perhaps we should go out for breakfast.” Castiel’s fingers played with the hem of her shirt, the pads of his fingertips brushing up against her skin. “Then we’ll decide what we should do today.” Despite his plan of action, he made no move to get up, and Alex hummed out her agreement.

Only when her stomach roared again did she roll off of his stomach and onto the mattress. “Come on, get dressed. I’m super hungry.” She hit him gently on the stomach to get him to move before she grabbed a change of clothes out of the duffle and moved into the bathroom.

She pulled on her jeans and a grey t-shirt, pausing when the door swung open. Castiel’s arms wrapped around her waist, holding her tight. His face pressed into her neck, his breath warm against her skin, and Alex let out a small chuckle. “Can I help you?”

Castiel didn’t immediately respond, and the girl frowned as the silence lengthened. "How do you do it?” The ex-seraph finally looked up, meeting her gaze in the mirror. "There's so many emotions inside of my head. How do you sort them all out?"

"Practice, mostly." Alex gave a small, unsure shrug. "Truthfully, I don't think we ever really figure them all out. We just try to live with them the best that we can. Now," she added, "and more importantly, I was thinking waffles for breakfast." Alex reached for her toothbrush, her actions slightly hindered by the man that was holding her tight. "I saw a waffle house down a couple blocks last night."

"Okay." Castiel hesitated beside her for a moment or two before he exited the bathroom, and Alex quickly dragged the bristles across her teeth until she was adequately satisfied with her hurried work.

Castiel was dressed when she reemerged, and Alex crossed over to her duffle bag to dig out whatever cash she could. There wasn't much; only a handful of change and a marked-up ten dollar bill whose upper corner had doubled as a tic-tac-toe board on their long bus ride yesterday — it had only lasted two games, due to Castiel's natural and unbeatable talent. A smile crossed her face at the memory, and Alex shoved the bill into her front pocket. "Ready?"

She held out her hand, lacing her fingers through Castiel's as she pulled open the front door and stepped outside. "It's a nice day," Castiel began politely, his head turned up towards the sky.

Alex followed his gaze, her own eyes lingering on the grey horizon that promised rain. "Yeah," she agreed. "Hopefully that storm avoids us, though. At least until we're back inside." Bored with the topic, she asked instead, "What do you think's up with Dean? He seemed a little touchy, throwing us out like that without even talking to Sam."

She tilted her head up to look at Cas, awaiting an answer. "I'm sure he has his reasons," Castiel finally said, and he fell into silence as his thoughts consumed him, and with a roll of her eyes, Alex did the same.
The waffle house was a small, quaint place on the corner of the main road, and despite the prime morning hours, only a few patrons occupied the wooden tables. Alex picked at the remaining few bites of her food, her stomach too full to take much more. "So I've been thinking," she eventually began. "This Sheol thing … it's weird, isn't it?" She gave a small laugh at the idea as she added, "It's just — I died, went to some soul concentration-camp, and then was thrown back to earth because future-me fucked up?" The ex-angel lowered her voice, not wanting to be overheard by the other customers. "That's just crazy, am I right?"

Castiel shrugged, and his gaze lifted from his food to meet her gaze. "I don't know, Alex. I know nothing about Sheol, or why it chose to expel you when it did, or how your body and your soul reunited six years ago. All I know is that it was your soul that fell, and that you are here right now."

Alex fell silent; his words left little room for continuing the conversation. Every time she brought it up, she was met with the same response. "I don't know."

"So … I guess this finally puts me in the Winchester's Resurrection Club," she finally joked, unsure what else to say. "It's about time I became one of the gang." She kicked her mate under the table with a small grin, but it faded when Castiel's face remained set in a frown.

"How's everything going?" The arrival of their waitress kept the seraph from responding, and Alex leaned back in her seat. "Here's your check. Can I take away anything you're done with?"

"Uh, sure." Alex slide her plate over to the edge of her table. "That was great, thanks," she added as she pulled out her wallet and slid one of her credit cards into the black checkbook. "So, back to the room?" she asked Castiel as their server walked away with the plates and the card. "Or do we want to hit the road again?"

Castiel sat thoughtfully for a moment or two. "We're in no hurry," he finally decided. "We can rest today and continue traveling tomorrow."

Alex scoffed loudly. "We've been 'traveling' for two days. Where are we even going, Cas? We can't just keep running forever." She slid her fork back and forth across the table in frustration, the tines scraping against the wooden surface. "We'll have to stop one day."

The waitress returned before she had a chance to continue her thoughts, and Alex tipped her head at the frown upon their server's face. "I'm sorry," the waitress began apologetically, and she handed Alex back her credit card. "It looks like this one bounced. Do you have another way to pay?"

Alex’s cheeks flushed, and she reached for her wallet. "Uh, uh, yeah — you can try this one." She held out the second card she had taken from the bunker, dropping her gaze to the table. "See, uh, see if this one works."

The waitress walked away, and Alex nervously fidgeted with the hem of her sleeve. "You don't have any cash on you, do you?" she asked Castiel in a small voice.

The ex-seraph shook his head, and Alex sunk down in her seat as the waitress returned to their table. "Did it work?" Alex asked, even though the look on her face made the answer clear.

"Do you have another card I could try?"

Alex reached into her pocket to pull out her ten dollar bill. "I have this," she admitted. "But … that's all we've got left." She set it down on the table and dropped her gaze.

The silence that followed seemed to drag on forever. "I'll go talk to my manager," the waitress finally said, and she turned to go.
She paused, glancing back to say something else, but the call of “Margaret!” from an older gentleman who sat across the room had her leaving.

Alex gently kicked Castiel under the table, drawing his attention onto her as she bit her lip. “At least we got to eat before we paid,” she tried to joke, but it fell flat, and she turned her gaze towards the door. “Well, we could … run for it.”

The idea was cut short, however, when the waitress returned. “You two can go.” She picked up the checkbook and tucked it inside her black apron. “One of the patrons offered to pay for your meal.” She placed two mints down on the table and stepped back to walk away.

“Wait!” Alex picked up the ten dollar bill and held it out. “Please. Give this to whoever picked up the bill — it’s the least we can do in thanks.” She shook the money until the waitress took it, and once she had walked away, Alex slid out of the booth. “Let’s get out of here before anything else happens.”

Castiel rose to his feet, and Alex fell in step behind him as they exited the diner and made their way back towards their room.

There was a knock on the door, and Alex looked up in surprise. She exchanged a cautious look with Cas; no one knew they were there, and angels and demons wouldn’t bother to knock. She rose to her feet and reached for her handgun that lay on top of her things. “Hello?” she called warily, tucking her weapon in the waistband of her pants. She peered through the fisheye to see a dark-skinned woman standing there.

“Hello?” the woman called back. “Motel management.”

Alex hesitantly unlocked the door and pulled it open; Castiel rose to his feet behind her, and she cast him a quick glance before forcing herself to appear relaxed. “How can I help you?”

“Maxine Wallace?”

“It’s just Max.” The lie came instinctively, and Alex leaned against the open door, obscuring the woman’s view into the room behind her. “And yeah, that’s me. Who are you?”

“Your credit card bounced when we tried to charge you for the room tonight.” The woman’s dark eyes peered over her to look Castiel up and down. “Hello?” she called warily, tucking her weapon in the waistband of her pants. She peered through the fisheye to see a dark-skinned woman standing there.

“Hello?” the woman called back. “Motel management.”

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“You’re credit card bounced when we tried to charge you for the room tonight.” The woman’s dark eyes peered over her to look Castiel up and down. “Unless you have more money, we’re going to have to ask you to leave so that another family can have this room.”

“But it’s nine o’clock at night!” Alex looked back at Castiel; the ex-seraph’s face was expressionless. She felt her cheeks burn red with embarrassment, and when she turned back, she kept her gaze on the ground. “Just — just give us a minute. We’ll pack our things,” she stuttered out. She closed the door behind her, and turned back to Castiel. “O-Our credit card bounced,” she repeated lamely.

“I heard.” The ex-seraph’s voice was quiet, and his eyes narrowed a fraction of an inch. “That’s a bad thing, right?”

“It means we have no money.” Alex stuck her hands into her back pockets. “That was the only card I had on me. I can get another one, but it’ll take at least a week for it to get approved and sent to us …” She shook her head as words failed her. “Maybe we should call Dean.”

“I doubt he would appreciate it.” Castiel looked down at the duffle bag that lay beside the floor. “We’ll be fine on our own. I lived without money my first week of being human, after all.” He
picked up one of his t-shirts and placed it inside the bag.

“Yeah.” Alex locked the door and walked over to him. “I, well, I never was homeless, but I used to run away for a few days from my foster parents.” She let her eyes fall down onto the carpet.

Arms wrapped around her, and Alex leaned into Castiel’s tight embrace. “It’s okay.” His voice was low and soft, and Alex pressed her face into his chest.

She shoved her belongings into her duffle bag and tossed the motel keys onto the table, eyes turned downwards as Castiel opened the door. She followed him out of the room and down into the street, and her gaze turned upwards towards the sky. The weather had taken a turn for the worse over the course of the day; the moon was hidden behind dark, gloomy clouds, and condensation swept alongside a cold, violent breeze. Alex grasped Castiel’s hand tightly as she followed him down the sidewalk. “Where are we going?” she asked. “I think it’s going to rain soon.”

Castiel paused momentarily. “We’ll find somewhere,” he promised. "When I was on my own, I found that most shelters were willing to take me in." His gaze turned across the street to where the steeple of a church could be seen on the horizon, and he squeezed Alex's hand. "We can start there at the church, if you like. Perhaps they can point us in the right direction."

Alex paused, unsure how she felt about that idea. "You mean, like a homeless shelter." The words felt heavy on her tongue, and her cheeks flushed at the idea. She wanted to point out how they weren't homeless, but she couldn't bring herself to utter that phrase without facing the truth. They had no money, no shelter. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm sure."

As he spoke, the sky opened up with a crack of thunder. Alex shrieked softly in surprise at the cold droplets, and she quickly shoved her phone deep into her pocket to try and protect it from the storm. A tug on her hand from Castiel had her following him across the street and down the block, but her shoes were soaked by the time that they reached the corner. "This is crazy!" she called out to her mate as wind ripped down the avenue. "Damn near apocalyptic."

If Castiel heard her, he gave no response. "Come on." He dropped her hand as he led the way up the front stairs of the church, his dark hair plastered to his scalp. He turned back down to Alex, who hadn't moved, and empathetically motioned her forward. "We can at least stay here until the storm passes."

With a hesitating nod, she followed him up the concrete stairs and into the building. They passed through the vestibule and into the sanctuary, and Alex’s eyes turned upwards to the stained glass windows; despite the rain, their colors stood out against the sky. A bolt of lightning cut through the clouds, and for a brief moment, the room flashed with a rainbow of colors, illuminating a large, wooden crucifix hung suspended behind the pulpit. “It’s nice.” The girl ran her fingers over the top of a pew. “I’ve always liked old churches. They’ve always felt ... beautiful.”

“Thank you.” A voice came from the front of the church, and Alex spun around in surprise. A man stood in a doorway off to the side, his hands folded in front of him. The light from the room behind him shone through his white hair, giving it a halo-like glow, and the wrinkles in his face grew pronounced as he smiled at them. “It’s not often we get visitors at this hour, much less on a Tuesday night. Can I help you with something?”

Heat rose in her cheeks, but before Alex could respond, Castiel spoke up. “I hope you don’t mind. We’re taking shelter from the storm.”
“It’s coming down pretty good out there,” Alex added quietly, and she brushed back her wet hair to emphasize her point.

“It sounds like it. I could hear it from my office.” The man approached. “You two must be from out of town; I don’t think I’ve seen you around, and in a town like this…” His hands went out, motioning to everything around him, leaving the rest unsaid. “So, where are you from?”

Alex felt Castiel’s eyes on her, and she took it as her cue to answer, “Oh, here and there. Little bit of everywhere, I suppose.”

“So you’re just passing through, then. Where are you staying?” The man looked up as thunder shook the church. “I’ll be leaving soon if you need a ride.”

Alex glanced at Castiel. “We, um … well, we were staying at the motel across town, but …” She shook her head, trailing off before starting again. “We’ll just stay here until the rain stops.”

The older man frowned. “Well, I can’t let you stay here unsupervised — legal reasons, you know — however,” he added when Alex’s face fell, “you’re welcome to come home with me. I usually rent out the top floor of my house, but it’s vacant at the moment. The two you can stay as long as you like.” He stretched out a hand. “My name is Greg. Greg Paske.”

“I’m Steve.” Castiel reached out to shake Greg’s hand. “This is … Maxine.” He paused to let Alex quietly add, “Max,” under her breath before he nodded. “Thank you. That’s very kind of you to offer, but we don’t want to intrude …”

“No, no, don’t you worry.” Greg firmly shook his head. “I insist.” A smile creased his face, and he added, “You won’t be the first I’ve had stay the night, and you won’t be the last. Let me go grab my things, and I’ll drive us over there.”

Alex leaned her head up against Castiel’s shoulder as Greg walked away. “He seems nice,” she murmured when he was out of earshot. “Are we going to trust him?”

She looked up into the ex-seraph’s blue eyes, but they showed no sign of suspicion or distrust. “This is holy ground; no demon can enter. And if he was possessed by an angel, they would have no reason to conceal their identity. I believe we can trust his help.”

“And if not?”

“Then we’ll take care of him.” Castiel’s hand squeezed hers tightly, a quick yet comforting gesture.

He fell silent as Greg returned, a jacket pulled over his button-down and keys in hand. “Ready? My car is just in the side lot.” He motioned them to the side of the sanctuary and through a door. Alex followed closely behind Castiel, eyes carefully taking in how the solemn, beautiful sanctuary ended and became a warm, welcoming common area, complete with couches and a darkened café. The howling wind couldn’t penetrate the walls, but the pounding rain could easily be seen through the tinted glass doors.

Greg led the way outside, and Alex screwed up her eyes against the rain. They were sheltered from the downfall by a metal canopy, but the wind still carried cold, stinging droplets into her face. “Come on!” The old preacher sprinted towards a blue sedan, and Cas and Alex had no choice to follow. They were soaked within seconds, and Alex threw open the back door and jumped inside. Brushing her wet hair out of her eyes let her see Greg and Castiel in the front seat. The car purred to life, and warm air slowly flowed through the vents. “There we go.” Greg backed the car out of the lot, and his gaze met Alex’s in the rearview mirror. “So. Why don’t you tell me a bit about yourself? Why’d you
stop in Rexford?”

Alex gave a small shrug. “Luck, I guess. It was getting late, and we didn’t want to sleep on the bus
again. What about you? How long have you lived here?”

Greg let out a small chuckle. “I was born and raised just two miles from here. The only time I left
was back in 1964. I was a wayward son.” The pastor’s voice grew reminiscent. “My family was
blue-blooded Catholic, but that wasn’t for me. So I moved to Seattle and lived there for almost ten
years.” He laughed, as if an unspoken joke lay behind his words. “Long story short, I re-joined the
fold, enrolled in seminary, and moved back home. St. Mark’s has been my church ever since. Either
of you religious?”

“It’s … complicated,” came Castiel’s slow response. “I’m no longer sure what I believe.”

“Understandable.” Greg pulled the car to a stop at a red light, pausing only momentarily before he
slowly made a right hand turn. “Just when you think you have everything figured out, the rug’s
pulled out from under you and you realize you know nothing. Ah. Here we are.” The car turned into
a driveway, and the pastor slid it into park. “The downstairs is cut off from the upstairs, so you’ll
have complete privacy.” A clap of thunder echoed through the sky as Greg pulled a bronze key off
of his keychain. “This will get you in. The door’s up there.” He pointed to their lift where concrete
stairs led up a steep hill to a front door.

“Thank you so much.” Alex undid her seatbelt and grabbed her bag, bracing herself to face the storm
outside. “We don’t stay long, I promise.”

“Nonsense.” Greg handed the key to Castiel. “You and Steve can stay as long as you want. Ah. I
have one more thing for you.” He reached back into his pockets, and when he pulled them out, he
had something in his closed fist. “I believe this is yours.”

He extended his hand to Alex, and she took the folded ten dollar bill from his hand. There, in the
corner, was a tic tac toe sketched in blue ink. “How did you …?” Alex’s eyes went wide at the sight.

“I happened to be in the right place at the right time.” Greg’s blue eyes sparkled in amusement. “And
it seems God has brought our paths to cross again.” He turned off the car. ”Now, go on. Get inside
before the two of you catch cold. We can talk more in the morning.” He threw open his door and
hurried towards his door, and Alex and Castiel did the same.

Alex’s feet carried her up the concrete steps, and she paused at the top as Castiel stooped to fit the
key into the lock. "Greg!" she called out, and the pastor looked up from his shelter under the garage.
She gave him a small wave, and her hands came up to cup her mouth as she shouted over the wind.
"Thank you."

Any words of response that were uttered were lost beneath the storm, and the man disappeared from
view as Castiel tugged her into the warm, dry shelter of the home.
The Devil's Cure

July 1st, 2014
Rexford, Idaho

A month passed, and the summer months reached its peak in Rexford. Alex and Castiel remained in the town, whose community seemed to welcome their arrival with open hands. At least that’s how it felt, the ex-angel had mused, with Greg around.

The kindly old preacher had sought to make their transition into the world of the working and the mundane as easy as possible; not only had he insisted that they remain in his house rent-free until they were able to pay him back, but he had even gone out of his way to get the two ex-celestials jobs around town.

Their living wasn’t half bad, Alex thought as she pushed her way in through the front door of Lucky Chin’s Chinese Palace, and she glanced up as the bell cried out, announcing her entrance to all inside. Between her gig here and Castiel’s — Steve, as the locals knew him — job at the nearby Gas N’ Sip, they were doing well.

“Maxine!” A loud, giggly voice came from behind the front counter, and Alex turned to see a tall brunette sitting there, a wide grin on her face and blue eyes sparkling in humor. “It’s about time you’re back.”

“Sorry, Mel.” Alex crossed over to her coworker Melanie and dropped her plastic bag onto the counter. “I got those supplies you were asking for. Anything else?”

“Ah! Thank you.” Melanie pawed through the cleaning supplies Alex had picked up from the 7-11 down the street. “You can bring these back to the kitchen. Oh, and garbage needs to go out,” she added as Alex nodded. “You work ‘till … when?”

“Six thirty.” Alex gathered up the bag, casting a quick look at the clock on the wall. “So, another twenty minutes or so.” Movement from the kitchen caught her attention. “Is Tommy working today?” The footfalls on the tile floor sounded heavy enough, but the ex-angel still felt blind and fettered without her celestial senses.

“Yeah. Connor left while you were out.” The door behind them swung open with a ding, and Melanie called out, “Welcome to Lucky Chin’s! How can I help you?”

Alex took the greeting as her call to leave, and she slipped behind the counter and into the kitchen. The smell of cooking oil hit her full force, and she gave Tom a weak smile as something deep within her chest tightened painfully. Alex drew in three deep breaths, trying to breathe the pain away as she carefully pushed back any semblance of panic. The symptoms had been recurring over the past two or three days, starting with the telltale shortness of breath and pounding heart within her chest. Dr. Chase had warned her about such signs, and Alex was following his advice very carefully; deep breaths in, slow breaths out. Keep her heart rate under control. So far, it had been working, but Alex was worried about the future time when just careful breathing wouldn’t be enough.

Just as quickly as it had appeared, the tightness vanished, and Alex gathered up the trash, holding it up high to avoid tripping over the black polyethylene that was stretched thin by the weight of its contents. She wrinkled her nose up against the smell of old grease and half-smoked pot. She would have to talk to Connor again about what exactly belonged in the establishment’s trash and what didn’t.
She dropped the bag next to the big green dumpster and leaned up to throw back the plastic lid. Then she flung the trash up and into the empty garbage, half-listening to the satisfying thud it made. The vibrations sent the lid crashing back into place, and Alex flinched at the bang.

She gave Tom a small nod on her way back in, and she slid onto the counter. Melanie was still on her stool, and Alex peered around the restaurant for the customer that had entered before she left. “Pick up,” Melanie explained as she pulled out her magazine.

“Ah.” Alex nodded. The restaurant around her was empty, save for the old couple in the back booth who ate there twice a week. “Looks like we’re winding down for the night, then.”

Her coworker shrugged. “It’s Friday. Everyone’s at the county fair.” No sooner had she spoken did the bell ring, announcing the arrival of yet another customer. Melanie looked up, and her blue eyes sparkled as she tucked her dark hair behind her ear. “Hot guy ten o’clock,” she whispered, and Alex rolled her eyes. There were only two people that would elicit a reaction like that, and Jackson the laundromat guy from down the street never came to Lucky Chin’s. She stuck out her hand, and another one clasped it, warmer and rougher than hers.

“Hey.” Alex turned her head to look back at Castiel, and a small smile tugged at her lips. “Done with work early?”

“There was a scheduling change.” Castiel’s eyes turned to Melanie. “How are you doing?”

“As good as I can be.” Melanie waved off towards the booths. “You guys hungry? Go eat, Maxie,” she added to Alex. “You only have fifteen minutes left. Besides, you’re looking a little under the weather.”

Alex’s cheeks flushed, and she mumbled out a half-convincing, “I feel fine,” before she led Castiel away. She could feel the ex-seraph’s gaze on her, and she kept her head down a she slid into the booth. “How — uh,… how was work?”

“It was fine.” Castiel sat down across from her. “Although I caught two teenagers attempting to smuggle out two frozen pizzas and a two liter of Coca-Cola under their shirts.” A deep frown followed his words, and Alex chuckled at the mental image.

“Sounds like fun. Definitely more exciting than my day. My highlight was running down to the store and buying cleaning supplies.” She folded her arms on the table and leaned forward. “So what did you do with those hooligans?”

“Nora took care of them.” Castiel looked down at his menu, falling silent for several seconds. “What would you like to eat?”

Alex followed his example and pulled her menu close. Truth be told, the pain in her chest had chased away her appetite, but she stalled for a moment by looking through the menu she knew by heart. “Egg rolls,” she finally said. “I like egg rolls.”

“Are you sure you’re feeling okay?” Castiel’s head tilted slightly as he looked up at her, and Alex slowly met his gaze.

“It’s okay,” she promised. “I’ve just been feeling a little… a little sick the past few days. I’m fine.” She cleared her throat and closed her menu. “What do you want? I’ll go tell Mel what we want if you’re ready.”

Castiel didn’t look fully convinced at her answer, but he relented. “I’ll have whatever you’ll have.”
“Let me guess. Egg roll noodle salad.” The voice came from over the top of the booth, and Alex startled slightly as Melanie popped into view. “Tommie’s already frying it up.” The young woman rested her head on her crossed arms and stared down at Castiel. “So, Stevie. You planning on going to the fair this year? Biggest event in town.”

“I don’t know.” Castiel gave a small shake of his head. “We haven’t talked about going yet.”

“Could be fun, though,” Alex quickly added. “Hey, uh, how about you go get us two drinks, huh?” she asked of Melanie, and she gave a quick laugh when her coworker stuck out her tongue. Melanie disappeared, and the ex-angel turned back to her mate. “She’s cool.”

“She seems cool,” Castiel quietly agreed. When Alex didn’t respond, his voice grew quiet. “I haven’t heard a sound from the angels since they fell. They were screaming so loud, but now …” The ex-seraph’s gaze fell. “I don’t know if I simply can no longer hear them, or if something worse has happened.”

Alex reached across the table to take his hand. “Maybe they’re just like us. Maybe … maybe they’re scared that they’re human, and —”

“No.” Castiel interrupted with a shake of his head. “They’re not human. Metatron stole our grace. The angels fell, but they still retained theirs. They’re out there, somewhere, and they’re still very dangerous.”

Alex only half heard his warning, her mind firmly fastened on his previous sentence. If the angels still had their grace, then they could still hear her prayers. Ezekiel? she quickly prayed. Where are you? Gabriel? Call me, you ass —

“Alex?” Castiel snapped her back to reality, and she blinked in surprise. “Did you hear me?”

“What? Uh — uh, yeah. Angels equal dangerous.” Alex gave a quick, curt nod. “Got it.” She leaned back as Melanie placed their drinks on the table. “Thanks, Mel.”

“Course. Food should be out in a minute or two.”

Castiel rose to his feet. “Excuse me. Bathrooms are that way, correct?” He pointed towards the back of the restaurant, and, when Melanie nodded, he walked away.

The moment he was out of sight, the dark-haired woman slid into the booth across from Alex. “Damn, he is cute. You gotta teach me how to snag guys like him.”

Alex rolled her eyes, and she snapped her fingers in front of Mel’s face to draw her attention away from the door Castiel had disappeared through. “Hey. Eyes on the prize,” she joked. “I’ve got nothing to teach. He fell for me, remember?”

“Yeah, right. No way an Adonis like him falls for a couple of simpletons like us — ow!” Melanie jumped as Alex’s foot playfully connected with her shin. “What? A girl can window shop, can’t she?”

Alex scoffed in amusement. “Yeah, but just don’t let your girlfriend see you looking,” she warned.

“Listen, Maxie.” Melanie turned to face Alex fully, her green eyes shining. “I might be gay, but I’m not that gay. I know a jewel when I see one. Everything about him is perfect — his hair, his voice, his eyes.” Her voice dropped to a whisper as she leaned across the table, her face mere inches from Alex’s. “I get shivers just thinking about it.”
“Dude! Stop.” Alex pushed her head away with a noise of disgust. “Gross! You need help.” She glanced over her shoulder to see Castiel approaching, and she kicked her coworker once again. “Go see if the food’s ready.”

The lights were bright; brighter than they had ever been. Alex winced away from them, whining out her protest. Something was wrong. This wasn’t her bed. Where was Castiel? And her pillow?

She opened her eyes to see white tiles. The walls were white, the floor was white; everything was white. Hospital. She was in a hospital bed. Alex struggled to sit up, surprised at how heavy her body felt. “C-Cas?” Her throat was parched, and memories flew past like a freight train, each to blurry to make out details. “Cas!”

There was no one. Alex tried to get out of bed, but her legs collapsed out from under her, sending her crashing to the ground. She felt a needle rip of her her arm, and she cried out at the pain.

A nurse rushed in at the noise, her eyes wide as she took in the girl on the ground. “Are you okay?” She pulled Alex back up into bed with an amazing display of strength; Alex let her, too tired to do anything. Her chest ached, a dull, deep pain that made her lungs hurt with every breath. The heart monitor next to her was screaming out as it flatlined, and the nurse hurried to turn it off before she retrieved the patches that had ripped off of the girl’s sternum.

“Cas?” Alex’s voice was coming back, and so was her strength as her body wakened, and she looked towards the door. “Castiel!”

“Sh sh shhh.” The nurse’s voice was soft and soothing. “Just calm down.”

The door opened, revealing Castiel, and Alex’s shoulders sagged in relief. “You’re awake.” The ex-scheraph’s voice cracked, and Alex stretched out a hand towards him, motioning for him to come in.

“What happened?” Alex shifted sideways as Castiel sat down on the side of the bed. Her eyes flickered down to the plastic bracelet around her wrist. They had been eating at the restaurant -- what had happened after that? “I don’t … I don’t remember anything.” Her heart slammed in her chest as Castiel closed his eyes, and she reached up to cup his face in a soft gesture of comfort.

“I don’t know,” he murmured. “No one does. You … I woke up this morning, and … and you weren’t breathing.” His voice caught in his throat, and he paused to bring it back under control. “I panicked — I didn’t know what to do. Dean had me call 911.”

“I’m so sorry.” Alex gripped his hand tightly. “I —”

Castiel shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. All that’s important is that you’re okay. I… I thought I had lost you.” He squeezed her hand back, and Alex let her head fall back onto the pillow. Her eyes sought out a clock, surprised to find that it was almost six in the evening, and she winced at the sharp inhal of surprise. “You’re in pain.” The realization was spoken quietly. “I’m so sorry, Alex. This is all my fault.”

Alex scoffed, but the noise caught in her dry throat. “This isn’t your fault,” she rasped out. “Metatron did this to us.”

Castiel didn’t respond for several seconds, and Alex watched as his shoulders fell. “How are you feeling?” he finally asked.

“Like I was hit by a truck.”
“Well, at least she’s making jokes.”

Alex turned at the sound of the familiar voice, and a mix of anger and relief pulsed through her stomach. “Dean?” Her eyes flitted to the figure standing behind him. “Sam? What are you guys doing here?”

“Cas called us.” Sam pushed past his brother to walk over to Alex, worry written deep into his face. “We thought you were dead.”

Alex forced a small laugh. “Sorry to disappoint,” she half-joked. “It’s going to take a bit more than heart problems to take me down.” She felt Castiel squeeze her hand, unpleased at her statement, but she paid it little attention. “Sorry to, uh, drag you guys up here for nothing.”

“This isn’t nothing,” Sam protested, and at the same time Dean added, “We’re on our way to Oklahoma anyways.”

Alex frowned; she knew damn well Oklahoma was in the other direction, but she kept her mouth shut. “Well, thanks for coming,” she finally muttered.

She turned her head away as Sam approached, and she squeezed Castiel’s hand tightly. “We talked to the doctor,” Sam explained. “He called Dr. Chase for consultation, but right now it seems pretty clear you haven’t recovered from your fall.”

“It’s just my heart.” Alex toyed with the corner of her sheets, unwilling to meet his eyes. “Everything else is fine. I was fine … up until a few days ago.”

There was a knock on the doorframe, and Alex looked up. A man stood in the doorway, dressed in a white coat and slacks. “Maxine,” he greeted. “I heard you were awake.” His blue eyes flickered over Sam and Dean. “May I speak to my patient alone? I have some things we need to discuss.”

The two Winchesters left with a nod, but Castiel stayed firmly by her side. “Whatever you need to say can be said in front of me,” he stated, and Alex quietly added her assent.

The doctor’s attention turned onto him. “You’re Steve, right? Greg Paske mentioned you were Maxine’s partner. I’m Dr. Weyland Mosler.”

“What’s wrong with her?” Castiel shifted anxiously on the bed next to her, and Alex opened her mouth to calm him down, but a large yawn split her face instead. Pain shot up from her chest at the stretch, and she winced.

Dr. Mosler looked down at her. “I’m sorry if you’re in pain. We would normally give you something, but we don’t want to risk triggering another relapse.”

“What’s … what’s wrong with me?” The ex-angel closed her eyes as she let her head fall back against the pillow.

Dr. Mosler hesitated. “We still haven’t completed all of our tests yet,” he finally said. “You came in unresponsive early this morning. Your heartbeat was erratic, and you weren’t breathing when the paramedics found you. You’ve been in and out of consciousness since.”

Alex opened her eyes. “Really?”

“Yes.” Dr. Mosler exchanged a quick look with Alex. “You don’t remember, do you? I’ve already explained this to you several times. At least this time you’re talking,” he added when Alex’s face fell. “That’s a sign of improvement already. What is the last thing you remember?”
Alex looked up at Castiel, and she squinted carefully as she thought. “We … we were in our bed. I had just come back from work where I … where I … work.” Her memories started to swim, and she closed her eyes to deepen her concentration. “My heart … Dr. Chase had said they were signs of — of pericarditis, but I was able to control it.”

“You should have seen a doctor when the symptoms began.” A deep frown creased Weyland Mosler’s face at her blatant irresponsibility, and he pulled up a chair to sit down beside her. “We would have been able to help diagnose and manage your condition. However,” he continued, “I’ve never seen a heart as unresponsive as yours. For some reason, whenever we try and take you off of the machine that you’re on, it starts beating erratically. As I said, we’re going to have to run a few more tests to figure out exactly what is going on.”

Alex’s face fell. “I don’t think we can’t afford them.”

A hand came to rest on hers; warmer and softer than Castiel’s. “Don’t worry about that now. What’s important is that we fix you up. We did find one other thing, however.” Dr. Mosler straightened up and picked up the clipboard hanging at the end of her bed. “We did an full body MRI while you were out to see what we were up against. It seems as if there’s a large amount of scar tissue around your sinoatrial node, which is most likely the cause of your ongoing arrhythmia. We call this sick sinus syndrome.” He looked between Castiel and Alex, pausing to give them a moment for it to sink in. “In a case as severe as this, a pacemaker is the best solution.”

“We don’t have the money for that now,” Castiel murmured.

“Well, there are also a few medications that can be prescribed, but I’m afraid that they won’t be a long-term solution.” Dr. Mosler looked down at Alex; she held his gaze for merely a second before she looked away. “And I’m afraid many of them would pose a serious risk to a fetus, so if the two of you are trying, I wouldn’t recommend them.” He paused again, but when neither Castiel or Alex spoke, he rose to his feet.

He left the room, and Alex turned her head to look over at Castiel. He had stood up and crossed the room, leaning his head up against the white wall. “Cas,” she started. “Castiel.”

“I’m going to kill him.” Castiel’s voice was low, so low that Alex had to strain to hear him. “I’m going to kill him.” He turned back to look at Alex, and she flinched in surprise at the darkness in his eyes.

He stormed out of the room, ignoring her pleas to come back. “Cas!” Alex threw her head back against the pillow in frustration, staring at the closed door. “Castiel, please. Come back!” Her chest tightened as the tears began to well up, and she clenched her fists at her side, closing her eyes and slowing her breathing to try and ride out her grief.

The tightness didn’t recede, and the heart monitor began to scream as black spots darkened her vision. She heard noises distantly around her, but they were drowned out by the ringing in her ears. Deep down Alex knew something was wrong — terribly wrong — but everything she saw, everything she felt, didn’t feel like herself.

The darkness pressed in, and all consciousness vanished from her mind.

There were voices in the room with her, low and soft but filled with urgency. They broke though her sleep, drawing her back into the waking world. Alex strained her ears to hear, but she kept her eyes closed, the dark around her too comforting to let go. “Fix her!” she heard Dean whisper fiercely.
Sam answered, but his voice was calm and methodical, lacking his normal passionate tone. “It doesn’t work like that, Dean. I’m still healing myself. Healing her would only mean I will have to stay in your brother longer.”

Alex snapped open her eyes, and the two Winchester’s gaze turned onto her. Dean’s green eyes were darkened with anger, and a scowl sat upon his face, but Sam remained expressionless. Completely devoid of emotion. “You’re awake,” he noted.

“Who are you?”

“This is Zeke. He’s an angel.” Dean drew in a deep breath, clearly unsure what he wanted to say next. “Pip … there’s a lot you don’t know.”

Alex scoffed. “Yeah, no shit, Sherlock.”

“Remember when you were in the hospital and I couldn’t come? Sam … the trials almost killed him. The doctors said he wasn’t going to pull through. The only reason he’s walking and talking is because Ezekiel here is riding shotgun.”


Ezekiel didn’t answer her exclamation; instead, he simply said, “You need to rest. Your heart is still weak after your last episode.”

Alex frowned; she vaguely remembered passing out after Castiel had — Cas. She looked around the room, but there was no sign of her mate. “But you can fix her, right?” Dean insisted.

“I can, yes,” Ezekiel said quietly. “But as I said, it will result in my prolonged stay. Slowing my healing will lengthen his as well.”

Dean’s confidence faltered, and his eyes flickered between Alex and the angel. “Okay. Can we wait until you’re juiced back up?”

The angel shook his head. “If her condition progresses as it has been, there is a good chance she will not survive to the end of the week.”

Panic ran up her spine, and Alex’s eyes widened. “W-What?” The monitor next to her started to beep as her pulse quickened, and she desperately tried to slow it down. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Your heart is failing. You lost consciousness two hours ago when it ceased beating. You’re lucky the doctors were able to revive you.” Ezekiel looked over at Dean. “I would save you, but ultimately, it’s Dean’s decision.”

“Why not Sam’s?” Alex’s eyes narrowed in confusion. “Shouldn’t it be his decision?”

“Sam doesn’t know.” Dean’s answer was blunt.

“If Samuel found out, he could eject me at his will,” Ezekiel added gravely. “Our healing is symbiotic. I heal him from his injuries, and his physical form speeds my own recovery from my fall.” His eyes flashed, and Alex was taken aback by the darkness in his gaze. “If you tell him, and he ejects me, he will die.”

“Oh … okay, got it.” The ex-angel shifted uncomfortably. “Does … does Castiel know?”
“Castiel cannot know.” Once again Ezekiel’s eyes flashed, blue lining his irises. “Do you understand?”

“Yeah — yes,” she insisted. “I understand.”

Ezekiel looked over at Dean; the Winchester gave a small nod, and the angel stepped forward. “Good. Relax.” He reached out and placed his large hand on her sternum. Alex did as he said, leaning back against her pillow. She felt warmth push through her chest. It was not pleasant, nor did it feel like an angel’s full, normal grace, and she shifted uncomfortably. It spread outwards through her limbs, stretching out like spiderwebs. Then it pulled back and disappeared.

“Thanks.” Alex reached up to touch her chest. The tightness had receded, and her breathing was growing easier now. “Listen, I just — I just have to ask. After we fell …”

“No.” Something flashed in the angel’s gaze, and he quickly cut her off. “Now isn’t the time to speak about that. Remember what I said about Castiel and take it to heart; with his past, the less he knows, the better.”

Alex’s mouth fell open, and Dean shot him a glare. “Zeke,” he snapped. “Not cool. Just — get back inside Sam.”

Ezekiel turned to look at the Winchester, but all he said was, “As you wish.” His eyes glowed a brilliant blue, and when they faded back into hazel, his shoulders slumped. “— like I had said,” Sam suddenly retorted, but he stopped short. “Oh.” His gaze flickered over to Alex, and a faint blush spread through his cheeks. “You’re awake.”

“I just woke up.” Alex looked between Dean and Sam before she slumped back down into her pillow. “Sorry, I heard arguing …”

Sam’s face softened. “It’s okay. How are you feeling?” He moved over to sit on her bed, and Alex shifted to make room. “You’re looking better.”

“I’m feeling better.” Alex reached out to squeeze his hand, hurt by the look on his face. “I think a little rest is all I need. Where … where’s Castiel?” She glanced towards the door. “Is he okay?”

“Yes, yeah, he’s fine.” Sam’s voice was soft and comforting, and Alex turned back to its source. “He just stepped out to get something to eat. He’ll be back soon.” There was a knock on the door, and Sam rose to his feet.

Dr. Mosler stepped into the room. “You’re awake.” He gave a small nod towards the two Winchesters. “Sam, Dean.” He stopped at the bedside, tucking a pen into his back pocket. “How are you feeling today? You seem well enough to be sitting up.”

“I feel fine, actually.” Alex gave a small shrug and shifted to sit up even more. “No pain, no tightness.” She looked over at the monitor next to her; the beeping was steady and slow. “I’m good.”

The doctor gave a small chuckle. “Well, let’s run a few more of those tests before we jump to that conclusion, alright? We’re going to run another EKG first, and you’re scheduled for an electrophysiology study later today if that’s okay. We gotta figure out a way to keep you from crashing like this again. Alright, kiddo?”

Alex gave a small laugh at the older gentleman’s words; for a second, he had sounded just like Gabriel. “Alright. Sounds like a plan.”

“Great. Can I speak to you two gentlemen for a minute? I just have a few questions.” Dr. Mosler
waved Sam and Dean after him, and Alex watched them go. She shot a small smile in Sam’s direction as the younger Winchester paused in the doorway, but once he was gone, her smile darkened into a frown.

Why had Ezekiel been such an ass to her? After everything they had been through? Guilt pulsed through her following those thoughts, and Alex winced. After everything he had done for her, she shouldn’t doubt him. He was mad; that was all. And rightly so.

The sun had set, and the bright ceiling lights cast harsh shadows around the room. Tiredness pressed down upon her, her body worn out from the day’s tests. Her inner elbow ached from the electrophysiological — whatever the doctor’s called it. It was all fancy words for a big-ass needle.

Castiel sat in one of the chairs next to her, and beside him, Greg Paske. The old pastor had shown up as the sun was setting. And he had brought pie.

“Nora’s letting me have tomorrow off as well,” Castiel was saying. “She’s been very kind.”

“The whole town is praying for you,” Greg agreed. “But, ah, that reminds me. Nora stopped by the house today and dropped off a casserole. She’s a very nice woman indeed.” Greg brought a bite of his dessert up to his mouth, chewing carefully.

Alex turned her eyes out the window, letting their conversation once more fall into the background. She knew staying here was pointless, and that knowledge only made her restless. All she wanted to do was go home and curl up in her own bed.

“Maxine? Did you hear me?” Greg’s voice had her turning. “I asked if you wanted more pie.”

“Uh … no thanks.” Alex looked down at her half-eaten slice. “I’m not very hungry right now.” She picked up her fork and slid the pie around her paper plate, but her appetite didn’t return. “I’m just tired.”

“Of course.” Greg rose to his feet. “You’re right; you’ve had a long day, and you need to rest. I should be going anyways. I have a sermon to give tomorrow.” He extended a hand towards Castiel, who stood to shake it. “I’ll swing by tomorrow to see how you both are doing.”

Alex gave him a small nod of goodbye as he stepped out into the hall. “Greg!” She heard Dr. Mosler’s greeting from down the hall. “There you are.”

“I forgot they knew each other.” Castiel’s hand enveloped hers, and Alex met his blue gaze, unsurprised to see worry darkening their color.

“Cas … it’s okay.” Alex squeezed his fingers tightly in an attempt at comfort. “Whatever … whatever’s going on with me, I’m going to be fine. The doc will make sure of it. So don’t worry, alright?”

The ex-seraph tipped his head. “No. You should have seen the way they were acting when you crashed. It’s a miracle they were able to bring you back. I was scared, Alex. More terrified than I ever felt in heaven.”

“That’s because you were an angel,” Alex reminded gently. “Your emotions were totally dampened. Hell, I felt more afraid of a spider as a human than I did as —”

“I’m being serious.”
“And so am I.” Alex drew in a shaky breath. “Cas,” she started, and her mate shifted closer, surprised by the sudden weight to her voice. “About what the doctor said, a-about us having kids …”

“I know. I—” Castiel cut himself off when Dr. Mosler stepped into the room, and he withdrew his hand from hers, tucking his emotions back behind his stoic wall. “Hello.”

“Hey. Sorry, was I interrupting something?” The doctor looked between the two of them, but when Alex shook her head, he cleared his throat. “Well, your tests are back, and I thought I should bring over the news right away.”

“What’s wrong?” Castiel shifted in his chair, leaning forward in anxiety, and guilt reddened Alex’s face. He wouldn’t be hurting if she had gone back on her word and just told him. But hopefully that would all be over soon.

“What did you find?” she asked forcing herself to meet the doctor’s eyes. “Nothing too bad, I hope.”

“That’s just it. We couldn’t find anything.” Dr. Mosler pulled up a plastic chair and sat down in front of them, his face a mix between delight and confusion. “Your heart’s back to its normal function. The sinoatrial is firing, and your muscles are contracting as they should. That shouldn’t be happening, which is why we had you do another MRI afterwards, if you remember.”

Alex scoffed; like she could forget. “Yeah, I remember. And?”

“And frankly, I don’t know what to say.’” Dr. Mosler leaned forward, planting his elbows on his knees. “Dr. Chase’s records showed the initial damage to your heart from your trauma, and the scan we performed when you came in showed further stress and tearing in the muscle made worse by your day-to-day life. But today …” The doctor shook his head. “It’s all gone. Simply vanished.”

Castiel frowned. “That’s a good thing, right?”

“Heart tissue doesn’t heal on its own, Mr. Novak. It’s medically impossible for her heart to have fixed itself virtually overnight. Yet, somehow, it has. Structurally, her heart is as sound as yours or mine.” Dr. Mosler suddenly stood up. “What’s happened … it isn’t possible, but, frankly I’ve learned not to question miracles. We would like to keep you here overnight as a precaution, but after that I have no reason to prevent you from leaving.”

Alex looked over at Castiel and nodded. “Okay. That’s probably for the best.” She watched the doctor leave, and once he was out of earshot, she let out a deep breath through her nose. “Uh … wow, I guess.”

Castiel turned his head, and Alex blushed, ready for a series of difficult questions. But they never came. “Perhaps my father has done something good for me after all,” he murmured, and leaned over to kiss her. “I should tell Dean and Sam.”

Alex pulled away to look over at the clock on the wall; the two brothers had been on the road for several hours by now. “They’ll be glad to hear it,” she agreed quietly. “It’s getting late anyways. I should get some sleep.”

“Of course.” Castiel’s fingers ran across her temple, gently tucking hair behind her ear. “I should be going. I’ll be back first thing in the morning.” He leaned down to kiss her one more time, and Alex reached up, curling her fingers around the back of his neck to keep him close a moment longer. Castiel pressed a kiss onto her forehead. “Good night, le enay.”
Moonlight filtered through the closed blinds, casting dappled shadows throughout the room. The room, though silent upon first glance, was filled with sounds of life; the air conditioner thrummed through the ceiling, barely audible over the monitor’s steady, quiet beep. Machine’s hummed, and yet despite the noise, the room’s occupant was asleep. She didn’t hear the groans of the building all around her, too deep in the throes of slumber. That was until a scream cut through the night.

Alex bolted up, grey eyes stretching wide as she was jarred into wakefulness by a sudden, warm rush of adrenaline. “What the hell?” The words left her mouth in a hoarse whisper as her head whipped back and forth, searching for the terred cry’s origin.

The hospital had fallen back into silence. “Hello?” Alex threw back the covers, head tipping. Wasn’t someone going to check on that? She had heard more commotion for less. She reached over and turned off the monitor with a flick of the switch and tore the patches off of her skin, tossing them onto her bed.

On silent feet, she crossed the room and cracked open the door. The lights were on, but the hall was silent; no nurses in sight. The scream came again, loud and insistent and full of terror.

Once again, there was no response, and Alex stepped out into the light. That wasn’t right. Where was anyone?

Her hunting instincts took fast hold, and she started down the hallway. Where could that have come from? She kept her body low, feet light. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest as adrenaline coursed through her veins, but she forced it down as she rounded the corner.

She could hear whimpering, pleading. Coming from the room at the end of the hall. “Please,” the woman begged, “Don’t do this.”

Alex paused beside the door and peered in. At first, she couldn’t make sense of what she saw, unsure what was shadow and what was real. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she made out a figure standing over the bed. “Shh,” it cooed. “Shh, it’s okay.”

Alex straightened up, recognizing the figure easily. It was the nurse who was on duty. She had stopped in on Alex several times since she had arrived. What was her name? “Rachel.” Alex stepped into the doorway. “Is everything okay?”

The nurse turned suddenly, and her amber eyes flashed black. “You shouldn’t be out of bed.” The demon clicked her tongue chastisingly, and the patient in the bed fell silent with a whimper. “It’s past your curfew.”

“What are you doing here?” Alex lifted her chin in pure spite as the demon stepped forward. “Huh? You’ve already got my soul. What else do you want?”

The demon scoffed. “I forgot. Does everything in the world revolve around you? Or am I not allowed to grab a snack?” She turned back to the patient, whose mouth fell open in a silent cry of fear.

“Exorcizamus te, omnis immundus spiritus --”

The demon spun around with a screech, her black eyes flashing in anger. “What did you say?”

“O-omnis immundus spiritus, omnis satanica potestas, omnis incursio infernalis adversarii, omnis congregatio et secta diabolica.” Alex’s voice grew stronger as the exorcism flowed from her tongue, slow at first, but growing faster as she found her rhythm from years of practice.
The demon convulsed and snarled, its mouth agape at an inhuman angle, and Alex shifted back a step, but her voice didn’t falter. “Ergo, draco maledicte. Ecclesiam tuam secure tibia facias liberate servire, the regimes audi nos!”

She watched as the demon threw back its head in agony, and black, burning smoke filled the room, swirling through air. The ex-angel screwed up her eyes against the fiery heat as it blew past her out the door, and it was gone.

All was silent.

Alex straightened up, reaching up to run her hands through her hair. “Shit.” Her eyes traversed the mess, running from the crumpled, unconscious nurse to the thin, wide-eyed patient frozen in her bed. Alex’s mouth hung open, searching for the words, but nothing came.

The silence was broken by a clap. And then another. A slow clap, quiet and steady, and Alex spun around to glare into the darkened corner of the room. The figure was barely visible, clad in black indistinguishable from shadows, but the gleaming eyes gave him away.

Alex squared her jaw. “You’re a little late. I already sent your bitch back to hell.”

“I’ve noticed, thank you.” Crowley stepped into the moonlight, and his gaze flickered down to the unconscious nurse. “Wish you would have done it earlier — could have saved me a trip.”

Alex narrowed her eyes as a noise of confusion slipped past her lips. “What? I — I thought she was here for me.”

“Oh, she was.” Crowley’s dark eyes turned back onto her. “I’ve got rugrats all over the place to keep an eye on you. Don’t worry,” he added when the ex-angel frowned. “They’re strictly observing — I like to know when one of my investments is dying. Unfortunately, this one,” he added with a disdainful glance down at the unconscious woman, “got impatient with her bloodlust.”

Alex scoffed. “What did you expect from a demon?” She narrowed her eyes, other matters more pressing than the misconduct of a spy. “But what the hell? I thought you said you healed me.”

“I fixed your leg.” The demon snapped his fingers, and Alex’s skin began to tingle; when she looked down, words were scrawled into her pale flesh, the black letters glowing silver in the moonlight. “Section fourteen, sub-clause C. Your left arm.”

Alex turned her forearm, searching for what he was talking about, but the contract was in high Latin, a language she hadn’t had to translate in years; without her angelic abilities, making any sense of the scribbles would take time. “Okay, so?” she just snapped. “You could have at least fixed up the rest of me, you asshole.”

“I could have,” the demon agreed. “But I didn’t. That wasn’t part of our deal. In fact, nothing about your health was. I threw all that in because — why? Because I was feeling sentimental.” Crowley’s face twisted in anger. “So how about a little bit of gratitude?”

Alex ignored him. “You told me I get two years! So maybe you can understand why I’m a little pissed that I almost kicked it after a month!” Two steps carried her across the room and into the demon’s face. “You want me to go quietly, then I get those two years, understand?”

“Or what?” Crowley’s eyes crinkled in cold amusement as he towered over her. “Need I remind you, you don’t hold the straws, kitten. If you try and weasel out of it, if you tell those sodden mongrels in plaid, you break the deal, and Castiel dies.” He watched as Alex took a step back. “Forgot about that part, did we?”
Alex didn’t respond, not willing to admit that she had. She had meant the stipulation to keep Crowley’s mouth shut, but hadn’t thought about how it worked the other way too. It would be no problem for Castiel — he was easily kept in the dark — but the Winchesters … one way or another, they would find out. “How much would it cost to change that?” The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. She watched as Crowley scoffed, and she added, “This would save your ass as well. Forget that clause, you let me live two years, and then you get my soul. And if I break the deal, you get my soul immediately. But you leave Castiel’s life out of it.”

“And?”

“And what, you bastard?”

“What do I get from it?” Crowley countered. Before Alex could respond, he sauntered forward. “Tell you what. I’ll let you keep the two years, on one condition. If I need something done, you do it for me. No ifs, ands, or buts. No questions asked.”

Alex's eyes flashed. “I’m not killing anyone, if that’s what you’re asking. Murder’s not on the list.”

The King of Hell scoffed again, and Alex lifted her chin in indignant frustration. “Any of my demons can kill a man. I doubt such a task wouldn’t be worth my trip. I’m sure I’ll think of something. At the very least,” he added, his eyes glinting smugly, “knowing I have you under my finger will be amusement enough.”

Anger pulsed through her, hot and heavy, and Alex clenched her fist to stifle it. “Fine,” she got out through gritted teeth. “But I get my two years, and not a day less. Which means if I die, you send my soul right back into my body, you understand?”

Crowley clicked his tongue. “That’s not how this works —”

“Then make it work!” Alex snapped, her anger spilling forth. “I’ll run your fool’s errands, but you can’t let me die.” She watched the demon think, and she huffed in impatience. Then she drew in a deep breath to calm her voice. “It’s only fair, don’t you think?” she added, trying a different tactic. “You’d get more use out of me that way.”

The words stung her tongue as they left her mouth, but she refused to shy away at their sound. It paid off, however, when Crowley relented. “Well, I certainly can’t argue with that,” he agreed, and Alex narrowed her eyes — was that amusement in his voice? She didn’t get a chance to ask, because the demon snapped his fingers, and her skin began to vibrate.

Alex watched as the words on her arms shifted, swimming around as the contract was altered, until they once again settled in place. The tingling faded, but it left behind a warm burn that penetrated down to her bones.

“Happy?” As the demon spoke, the words faded, sinking back down beneath her skin. A cloud passed over the moon, and the room passed into darkness.

“Yeah, I’m good.” Alex pushed back the ball of ice that sat within her stomach, and she turned to go. “Oh, and Crowley?” She paused at the door, glancing back at the shadow-concealed demon. “Call off your watch dogs, okay? Next one I see, I won’t let them off so easy.”
The day after Alex returned home from the hospital, she was exhausted. More people had passed in and out through her door than Alex had seen since they moved here, and all had brought gifts of some sorts. The freezer was packed full of meals from friends and neighbors. The women at Craig’s church had even gotten together a small charity fund to help them pay the bills. Two hundred dollars in three days, and the donations were still coming in.

“That was the Moris’. The door closed, and Castiel returned to the living room. “They were asking if we needed anything. I promised to call if we did.” He sank down onto the couch next to her, and Alex shifted until her head was in his lap.

“Craig wasn’t lying about town being tight-knit,” she murmured, eyes closed. “I swear we’ve had half the state over.” She nuzzled against his hip to find a more comfortably position, and Castiel’s hand came to rest upon her side. “Too many people for me.” She groped blindly for the remote and flipped on the news. “I need a nap.”

“— tragic accident outside of Rexford today.” The picture of an old, bedraggled man was on the screen, and Alex opened her eyes. “This marks the third unexplained disappearance this week. The police were not available for questioning …”

“That’s weird.” Alex twisted to frown up at Castiel. “Three in one week, huh? You think it’s … you know, a hunter kind of thing?”

“No.” Castiel’s hand tightened on her arm, a quick, sharp squeeze. “No,” he repeated more gently. “I’m sure it’s nothing. The police will take care of it.”

“But if they can’t —” Alex sat up, turning to face Castiel with wide grey eyes. She could feel her heart beating within her chest, strong and solid “Shouldn’t we at least look into it? Before anyone else gets hurt?”

One of Castiel’s hands came up to rest on her cheek. “Alex. That’s no longer your job.” His fingers rubbed gentle circles into her neck, and Alex leaned into the touch. “We wanted to live a normal life, away from the supernatural. That’s why we’re here.”

You can’t escape it. Crowley’s voice echoed through her head, and Alex closed her eyes. “Aren’t we here — here on this earth — to help people?”

“That was my Father’s mission,” Castiel murmured. “My mission is to keep you safe.” He leaned up, but Alex turned her head, letting his lips connect with her temple instead. He pulled back, and Alex watched his face fall out of the corner of her eye. “Promise me you won’t look into it.”

“Of course.” Alex turned back, and she pressed a soft kiss onto his forehead. “I promise.” She let out a large yawn, and her eyes flickered over to the clock. “Forget the news. Let’s go to bed.”

“It’s only nine.” Castiel’s hand came to rest on her hip, and Alex shifted so she was straddling his legs.

“Well, I’m tired.” Alex dipped her head to kiss his lips, and her fingers curled in the hair on the back
of his neck. “I want to go to bed. Want to come?” Her invitation was accompanied by another quick kiss, and she felt Castiel’s hands come to rest on her sides.

Then, to her surprise, he gently pushed her back. “You need to rest.” The ex-seraph’s blue eyes sparkled with concern. “The doctor said you shouldn’t participate in any sort of activity that would raise your heart rate.”

Alex rolled her eyes. “He’s only saying that because he doesn’t think I’m fine.” She frowned as the mood slipped away, and she let her hands fall down to Castiel’s shoulders. “He doesn’t understand, Cas. He a doctor; they don’t believe in the things we do.”

“I just don’t want to take any chances.” The ex-seraph’s fingers played with the hem of her shirt, and Alex shifted closer. “I don’t want to go through that ever again.”

“You won’t have to.” Alex pressed her forehead against his before mustering up the will to roll off onto the couch. “Fine. Let’s go to bed.”

The doorbell rang, and Alex fell onto the floor with an exaggerated groan. However, she made her way over to the door. “Hi, Maxine.” Greg stood there, his white hair dampened by the night rain. “Someone left these at my door; I believe they’re for you.”

He held up a basket full of chocolate chip cookies, and Alex eagerly snatched them up, a noise of curiosity and excitement growing in her throat. “Great!” She carried them into the kitchen, waving over her shoulder for the old pastor to follow.

“Busy day?” Greg’s eyes traversed the room, landing on the couch where Castiel sat. “I heard voices just a few minutes ago.”

“The Moris’ from down the street stopped by,” the ex-seraph explained. He rose to his feet to shake their landlord’s hand before joining Alex at the kitchen island. “They brought lasagna.”

“Fifth lasagna of the day,” Alex put in as she ripped back the plastic over the cookies and took one for herself. “So if you ever want a frozen dinner, we have meals galore.” She threw her arm open wide to point to the freezer before she pushed the cookies towards Greg. “Ooh these are good. Try one.”

The old man’s eyes sparkled, and he pushed them back towards Alex. “Thank you, but no. I had one on the way up. They’re very good.”

Alex pushed the basket over to Castiel. “So very good. Here.” She slipped past Cas and opened the fridge, careful not to dislodge the multitude of tin-wrapped pans. “Take one of these.” She pulled out one labeled “casserole” in black sharpie and handed it to Greg. “Please. We have too many.”

Greg let out a low, quiet chuckle. “Well, if you insist. I’ll take it out of this month’s rent.” He looked over at the wall clock and then down at his watch. “I should get going. Early morning breakfast tomorrow with the church staff.”

“Sounds like fun.” Alex handed him the casserole and stepped back to Castiel’s side. “I should get to bed anyways. It’s been a long day.” She patted her mate on the back before making her way to the living room as Castiel walked Greg to the door, and, once the door was closed and locked, stepped into the bedroom.

“I turned off the living room lights,” she heard Castiel say as he followed her in. “Hopefully no one else will bother us.”
“Good.” Alex stripped off her jacket and tossed it into the hamper. “I’ve seen enough people to last me a lifetime.” She turned back to Castiel; he was unbuttoning his shirt. “Except you, of course.” She made her way over to her mate, wrapping her arms around his waist, and added teasingly, “I could always see more of you.”

Her double entendre was lost on the ex-seraphim, and when he didn’t respond, Alex rested her cheek against his bare back. They stood there for several seconds until Castiel finally pulled away. “Come on. Let’s get ready for bed.”

The days began to pass, and Alex slowly fell back into the routine of normalcy. Work at resumed at Lucky Chin’s, but, though no one said anything, Alex could feel her coworkers tiptoeing around her, as if they expected her to fall over at any second. The day wore on, and before long, the end of her shift was approaching. “Mel?” The ex-angel tossed a towel into the basket and stepped out of the kitchen. “I’m heading out.”

“Okay.” Melanie looked up from her crosswords with a wide grin. “Sounds good. Just let me or Chris know whenever you feel like coming back and working full shifts again, alright?”

“Yeah. Sure thing.” Alex pushed her way out the front door, wincing slightly at the wall of hot humid air that greeted her. She rolled up her sleeves and made her way down the street to the local Gas N’ Sip. A horn honked, and Alex waved at the driver — not that she recognized them -- before she darted across the road and pushed her way into the gas station. “Hey.”

“Hi.” Castiel turned around to face her, and Alex leaned up to give him a quick kiss. “Is it four already?” He looked around, trying to find a clock.

“Yeah. Sure thing.” Alex pushed her way out the front door, wincing slightly at the wall of hot humid air that greeted her. She rolled up her sleeves and made her way down the street to the local Gas N’ Sip. A horn honked, and Alex waved at the driver — not that she recognized them -- before she darted across the road and pushed her way into the gas station. “Hey.”

“Hi.” Castiel turned around to face her, and Alex leaned up to give him a quick kiss. “Is it four already?” He looked around, trying to find a clock.

“Yup. I’m done for the day.” Alex grinned up at him before glancing towards the back of the store. “Mind if I grab a slushy? I’m thirsty.”

“The machine is making a strange noise, so I’m going to fix it. You can grab a drink from the cooler, though.”

“Thanks.” Alex hurried over to the refrigerators that lined the far wall and pulled out a Mountain Dew. Footsteps approached, and she asked, “How was your day?” over her shoulder, expecting a response.

She didn’t get what she anticipated. “Hi, Maxine.” Alex turned to see Nora standing there, a smile on her face. “How are you doing?”

“Great.” Alex kicked the fridge door closed. “Hey, thanks for, the, uh, those taquitos, by the way. Delicious.” She heard the door open with a tinkle of a bell, but she ignored it. “How — how’s Tanya doing?” she asked, referring to Nora’s five month old daughter.

“She’s doing great.” Nora’s smile grew wide at the question. “She’s starting to figure out how to crawl. And she’s talking up a storm. Oh!” Her eyes went wide as something came to mind. “I hope you don’t mind. I’ve got a date tomorrow, and I couldn’t get my normal sitter — I know Steve has his day off tomorrow, and he mentioned he was free —”

“Babysitting?” Alex guessed, cutting off Castiel’s manager. “Sounds like fun. Yeah, he’s free. Tomorrow was lazy Friday anyways.” She cracked open her drink and took a sip, humming at the sweet, fizzy taste.

“Thank you. You’re lucky, you know. He’s a great man.” Nora gave her a quick pat on the arm
before she glanced up at the clock. “I hope you’ll excuse me — I have some supplies I have order before the end of my shift.”

“Yeah, of course.” Alex watched Nora walk away before she swept her gaze around the store, searching for her mate. She heard a clatter, followed by the sound of rushing liquid, and she hurried over to the slushy machine to see Castiel struggling with the plastic cap. “I’ve got to go,” he said into his phone and shoved it into his pocket to deal with the mess. Blue slushy had spilled out over the floor and his shirt, and Alex couldn’t help but laugh at the sight. “You were right about it being broken,” she joked, setting down her drink on a nearby shelf before rolling up her sleeves and stepping up to help. She took one of the plastic pieces from the ex-seraph’s hands before asking, “Who were you talking to?”

“The, uh, the repairman.” Castiel dropped his gaze — embarrassment at the mess or at the phone call? “I’ll go get the mop.”

Embarrassment of the mess, Alex concluded as she stepped away. The smell of sickly sweet blue syrup was filling the air, and the ex-angel’s shoes stuck to the tile floor. “Gross.” She took a sip from her drink. “How was the rest of your day, apart from this mishap?” she asked humorously as Castiel returned to the floor.

“We got in a new shipment of frozen treats.” Castiel started mopping up the mess he had created. “And Nora charged me with taking inventory of the backroom.” Pride lined his voice, and Alex couldn’t help but smile; only he would take joy in being assigned the mundane. “I work closing tonight and opening tomorrow, so I should be able to get it all done.”

Alex frowned deeply at his words. “Wait. I thought you were only working until six today. What do you mean you’re working until closing?”

Castiel looked up, embarrassment reddening his cheeks. “Clive called in sick, so I offered to cover for him,” he explained. “Nora offered to pay me overtime. We’ll be able to pay Craig fully for rent this month.”

“I … I guess.” Alex crossed her arms defensively as Castiel turned back to cleaning his mess. “That’s fine. I’ll just eat up the rest of that weird casserole by myself.”

Cas picked up on her disappointment, and his shoulders fell. “I’m sorry. I should have consulted you first.” His gaze dropped to the ground.

Alex let out a long breath, drawing out the silence before she shrugged. “Whatever. It’s fine, I can swing by and bring you a new shirt later,” she added, motioning to his purple and white striped long sleeve, now stained deeply with bright slushie blue. “That one’s probably trash material.”

Castiel followed her gaze down. “Probably,” he admitted. “I have a shirt in the back that I can change into. Thank you, though.”

“Of course.” Alex stepped forward, one hand pressing lightly up against his soaked clothes to keep her own clothes from getting wet as she leaned up to press a quick kiss on his lips. “Okay, well, I guess I’ll see you later tonight.”

Castiel arrived home after she had gone to bed, and he was gone before she woke up. The only memory of his presence was the fading warmth in the bed. Alex had slowly made her though the first half of work, catering to the few patrons that had come in during the lunch hour before returning to
the back room to get some peace and quiet. She slipped out the back on her break to make her way
down the street towards the town’s Gas N Sip. The air had cooled off substantially, bringing with it a
chill that hinted at a storm on the far horizon.

She darted across the street and made her way up to the gas station doors. The sun peeked out from
its cloudy covering, catching on the sleek black paint of a nearby car, and Alex froze, her hands
gripping the metal door handle as her jaw dropped.

She threw open the door and stepped inside, eyes narrowing as they came to rest on the back of a
jean-clad figure. “— knew you had to lay low from the angel threat, but, uh, wow.” Dean
Winchester shook his head as he surveyed the gas station. “This is some cover.”

“My grace is gone.” Castiel stood behind the counter, a frown upon his face. “What did you expect?
Do you have any idea how hard it was? When I fell to earth, I didn’t just lose my powers. I — I had
nothing. Now … I’m a sales associate.” He puffed out his chest proudly, and his blue eyes
glimmered in delight.

Dean barely held back a scoff. “A sales associate?”

“You got a problem with that?” Alex lifted her chin as both men turned in surprise. “Dean. What are
you doing here?”

“Uh, Cas called. About those weird deaths and whatnot?” Dean looked back at Castiel, whose
cheeks had reddened slightly. “Didn’t you know that?”

“No, I didn’t.” Alex’s voice was pointed as she stepped forward. “In fact, he specifically told me not
to call you guys.”

“There was another death.” Castiel stepped out from behind the counter. “I thought that if it was
something paranormal, Dean and Sam would be able to take care of it. I didn’t tell you because I
didn’t want you to get involved.”

Alex huffed. “Well, I’m involved now,” she retorted, crossing her arms. She turned to Dean and
asked, “So? What have you found? It’s definitely supernatural, right?”

“The victims weren’t just killed, they were vaporized.” Dean shook his head as he recalled what he
had seen. He stepped forward as a service delivery man approached for Castiel’s signature, and his
voice lowered to a murmur as not to be overheard. “The latest vic — Joe Bridges — the inside of his
cabin was covered in a layer of pink.”

“Blood?”

“Sheriff said blood, tissue, hair. Everything. Same with the previous three cases. The neighbors
reported a pink flash at the time of death, but that’s the only lead they have.” Dean’s phone rang,
cutting him off, and he reached into his jacket pocket. “One sec.” He pushed past Alex as he
answered with a, “This is Agent Lee Ermey.”

Alex turned back to Castiel. “Why didn’t you tell me?” she pressed. “Were you just going to let him
pass through town without me even knowing?”

“I told you.” Castiel’s voice was even. “I didn’t want you to get involved with hunting, and I knew
the minute the two of you met that Dean would try and drag you back in again. That’s why I told
him to come while you were working.”

“Lucky for me I took my break early then.”
“Hey.” Dean hung up and rejoined the conversation. “There was another kill, over at the high school. You guys coming?”

Alex felt Castiel’s gaze on her cheek as she turned to the Winchester. “Can’t. I’m in the middle of a shift.” She saw the ex-seraph’s shoulders fall slightly in relief at her words, but she ignored it. “Speaking of, I need to be getting back.” Alex dug into her pocket for a list that she had scrawled onto the back of a receipt and handed it to Castiel. “Here. Can you bring this stuff back home? We’re also out of syrup.”

“Sure.”

“And I’ll see you for dinner?” Alex pointed a finger at Dean’s chest. “Cas is babysitting, so it’ll just be you and me.”

“Babysitting —” Dean turned to look at Castiel, his green eyes wide in amazement.

“He’ll tell you. I have to go.” Alex glanced down at the time on her phone. “But, uh, I’ll see you later, okay? I get off at three, so just text me then.” She gave Dean a quick wave before she hurried out the door. Why hadn’t Castiel trusted her enough to tell her? Hurt pulsed through her chest as she stepped out onto the sidewalk, but she couldn’t help the small thrill at the prospect of a case in town. “Stupid.” Alex kicked at a rock, cursing herself for the feeling; who was she kidding? Castiel had been right to question her resolve. The ex-angel pushed the thrill down, and, with one more glance backwards, she made her way back towards her work.

Seven o’clock rolled around, and Alex made her way out of Lucky Chin’s Chinese Restaurant, a half-eaten egg roll in hand. The sun was reaching towards the horizon, and a wind brushed across the top of the buildings. "Night,” she called back to Melanie, who was locking the restaurant doors behind her. "See you tomorrow."

She pulled out her phone as she crossed her street, drawing the hood of her sweatshirt up over her head as she continued down the sidewalk. She had heard no word from Dean, but Cas had texted her a little while after she had went back to work to tell her that his shift had ended. *Hungry for dinner?* she texted to Dean. *I'm off work.*

Not immediately expecting a reply, she shoved her headphones into her ear and hit shuffle on her playlist. As Shinedown started their introductory chords, she stuck her phone into her back pocket and continued on her way.

She turned up the street she lived on just as her music skipped, indicating a text had arrived. It was from Dean. *Sorry, it read. Got a call from the sheriff. On my way down to the station now. Her phone vibrated again and a new text appeared. Text you when I'm done.*

*Yeah, sure thing.* Alex pressed send as she crossed the street and hurried up the stairs to her front door. *Call me with details,* she quickly added before she dug out her keys and stepped into her home.

Almost instantaneously, her phone rang. "Hey-a, Pip. What's up?"

"Nothing." Alex kicked the door closed behind her. "Well, what'd you find out? You said there was another death. Details?"

Dean cleared his throat. "I took Cas with," he explained. "Good thing I did, too — Cas figured it out. We're dealing with a, uh, a Rit Zien. It's a, uh —"
"Medic angels," Alex finished. "Yeah, I know. Amazing healing ability."

"And the ability to obliterate instantaneously. Apparently they hone in on pain to find wounded angels. But now that they're here on earth, they're going after people. The suicidal, depressed. Last vic was a teen who got dumped publicly. Rit Zien can't tell the difference; pain is pain." Alex heard the car engine die. "Listen, I have to go. I'll swing by after I'm done here."

"Yeah, sure thing." The ex-angel hung up and tossed her phone onto the couch in passing as she made her way to the kitchen, where she unwrapped a slice of Mexican hotdish from its tin foil and put it on a plate in the microwave. While it cooked, she moved into the bedroom to out of her clothes that smelled of old grease. She pulled on a pair of faded jeans and a black t-shirt, and was thumbing through her jackets when she heard her phone ring. Clothes forgotten, she ran back into the living room to answer. "Dean?"

"No." Castiel's low voice came through the line. "It's me." There was a loud crying in the background, and Alex could heard the tension in his voice. "The baby is sick. She feel really warm, and I'm getting worried."

The microwave beeped, and Alex pulled out her food. "Okay, well, she's probably got a fever. It's probably just a small bug or something. There's probably tylenol somewhere in the house. Dosage is on the label." She looked around at the darkened room before adding, "Why'd you call me?"

"I figured you might know, having cared for Ashiel." The crying was growing louder, and Castiel turned away from the phone. "Please stop," he murmured. "It's okay. Can you come down?" he asked of Alex. "I don't want to call Nora, but I'm afraid that if it gets worse I may have to take her down to the hospital."

"Don't overreact," Alex warned. "Have you taken her temperature?" She crossed back into the bedroom to grab a jacket. "I can be there in five minutes or so if you want."

"Thank you." Castiel hung up, and Alex shrugged on a jacket with a glance over at her quickly cooling dinner. Apparently a meal wasn't on the menu.

She locked the door behind her and cut through the yard. Thankfully she knew Nora lived less than ten blocks away — she could easily cut through the backyards under the growing cover of night.

She triggered a few yard lights and darted passed two small, growling dogs before she finally stopped in front of the small suburban house that belonged to Nora Oakley. A rusted brown truck sat out front, and Alex frowned. That wasn't Nora's car, not had she seen it around town. She made her way up to the front step and rapped twice on the door. "Cas?"

The door opened, revealing Castiel, a young baby in his arms. "You're here." He ushered her in, shushing the crying child. "Thank Father. Here."

Alex awkwardly accepted the baby into her arms, resting the back of her hand against the burning forehead. "She is hot," she agreed quietly. "Shush, sweetheart," she whispered, pulling the child up against her chest.

"I was about to take Tanya outside," Castiel began. "I thought the cool air would help cool her down." He crowded at her back, looking down in worry. "Should we take her to a doctor?"

"I think she'll be okay. Quiet, baby. Mommy's going to be home soon." She carried Tanya into the living room, humming softly under her breath.

The door opened, and Alex turned. A man stood there, tall and broad, face expressionless. He
moved slowly, carefully — strategically. He wasn't human.

Castiel jumped in front of her, his hands going out to hide her from the stranger. "Ephriam." The name came out as a low growl, and Castiel shifted backwards, driving the three of them away from the stoic angel.

"You're the Rit Zien." Alex peer over the ex-seraph's shoulder, pressing the baby's warm head up against her neck.

"And you're the only one stupid enough to have taken Castiel for a mate," came the even counter. Tanya let out another shrill cry, and Ephraim's electric blue gaze fell upon her. "Let me see the baby."

"No." Castiel side-stepped, cutting off the Rit Zien's line of sight. "I won't let you touch her." Alex retreated into the living room, standing beside the crib. The baby cried in her arms, and Ephraim shifted so he could once again see the source of despair.

However, he still scoffed at Castiel's words. "You think I came for her?" he retorted, and his gaze flickered back to the dark-haired man. "No, Castiel. I came for you." He brushed past Castiel, who stood in stunned silence, and Alex turned her back to the Rit Zien. "Let me take away the fever." Ephraim's words came out in a low murmur. "She will stop crying then."

Alex kept her back to the fallen angel. "Give me one reason why I should trust you."

"Because my job isn't to mercifully smite all that I can; I heal those that I am able." Ephraim circled around to stand in front of Alex, and his hand came up to rest on the back of Tanya's small head. "Be quiet," he willed, and the child fell still. Alex could feel the temperature go down, and she shifted the baby to her other arm as Ephraim turned back to Castiel.

Seeing that the baby was no longer in harm's way, she laid Tanya down in her crib, shushing the child's soft coos of confusion. "Stay here."

"How did you find me?" Castiel was backing up, away from Alex and the child, and Ephraim followed slowly.

He raised an eyebrow at the question. "Because the two of you are warded?" he asked, stating the unspoken assumption behind the ex-seraph's words. "I found you the same way I find all my patients — I just followed the sound of your pain. You have no idea how loud it is. I could hear it for miles."

Alex backed away, gaze flickering around for any weapon that could distract and disable the angelic being. She had no grace, no angel blade. The only thing left was a blood sigil, but the kitchen was still far away. If Castiel could stall him long enough, she could make it, but …

"Do you really think you're doing Heaven's work down here?" Castiel persisted. He had his back up against the sliding glass door, pinned in the corner by the Rit Zien, who had stopped his approach in the middle of the room.

"I know I am," came the steady answer.

Castiel shook his head. "Well, you're wrong. Earth can be a hard place, but these humans, they can get better. They're just doing the best they can." His gaze slid over to Alex, and the girl froze in place when Ephraim followed his example. Alex steadily stared back until he turned away.

"Is that what you think you're doing, Castiel — the best you can?" The angel began again, and Alex continued edging towards the kitchen. "Well, I'm sorry. But if this is the best that the famed Castiel
can do, you're a more urgent case than I thought."

His voice faded as Alex slid into the other room and disappeared from view behind a dividing wall. A knife block lay just within reach, and Alex quietly removed a small paring knife, ducking back out of sight to press her back against the wall. "I used to admire you," Ephriam continued as Alex slowly drew the blade across the palm of her hand — she winced at the sharp, burning pain, clenching her teeth to keep quiet. "You failed more often than you succeeded. But at least you played big —"

The Rit Zien cut himself off, and Alex froze, afraid that he had felt her pain. With little thought for noise, she drew her fingers across her bloodied palm and began painting on the wall. She heard a thud and a cry, and she let out a cry of her own. "Cas!"

"Now what are you doing?" The ground disappeared from beneath her as Alex was flung away, and she crashed into the far wall. "Come. Here." Ephraim hauled her to her feet, ignoring how she struggled.

Alex lashed out with closed fists, and she hit the angel squarely in the clavicle. The bone broke easily beneath the pressure, and his shoulder slumped forward. The injury healed almost instantaneously, pulling the joint back into place, but the breakage lasted just long enough for Alex to rip herself free. She ducked past him and ran into the living room to find Castiel struggling back to his feet, a grimace on his face as he clutched at his shoulder. A bloodied circle, similar to her own, was traced onto the glass.

Alex spun around, positioning herself between the man and the angel, one hand held out defensively as Ephraim stepped into the living room. "Stay back," she warned. She could hear the baby crying in fear, and she balled her fists.

"This isn't your battle." The Rit Zien flicked his wrist, and a force like a brick wall sent Alex flying. She landed beside the crib, dazed. Castiel threw a punch, but Ephraim blocked it with ease and, in one fluid motion, twisted the ex-seraph around and pinned him up against the sliding door. Castiel let out a noise of pain, and Ephraim clicked his tongue. "Shh-shh-shh," he soothed. "It'll be over soon. I'll take the pain away."

Castiel struggled. "I want to live," he spat out, but he was no match for the fallen angel.

"But at what, Castiel?" The Rit Zien tightened his grasp on the man's twisted arm, and Castiel gasped out in alarm. "As an angel? Or a man?"

The door flew open, and Ephraim spun around to find Dean Winchester rushing in, angel blade in hand. The hunter had barely taken three steps into the house before he was thrown backwards by angelic grace, flying through the air and hitting the far wall with a dull thud. He slumped to the floor, and Ephraim turned back to Castiel, who had been released from his grasp during the commotion and had fallen to the ground.

"You say you want to live," the Rit Zien continued quietly. "But you can't see what I see. By choosing a human life, you've already given up. You ... chose ... death."

"No!" Alex jumped forward as the angel lifted his hand, light emanating from his palm, but Castiel's head snapped over to face her.

"No! Stay back," he yelled, a hand extending towards her to keep her away. Something slid across the ground, on a trajectory towards Castiel, but Alex was faster. She snatched up the angel blade and dropped to her knees, her momentum taking her across the floor until she could push up at the last moment, sending her up high enough to wrap one hand around the Rit Zien's shoulder. Her weight
pulled him down and onto the angel blade as she thrust it up, sending the weapon between his ribs and into his heart.

Ephraim screamed, and burning white light poured from his face as his grace exploded. His wings flashed visible as they disintegrated into ash. Then, he was dead.

The body went lifeless, collapsing on top of the young human. She fell back to her knees and shoved it off to the side, chest heaving as adrenaline coursed through her veins. Dean was struggling to his feet; Castiel was still on his knees, a solemn expression across his face as he stared down at the body of his comrade. At the sight of his distress, Alex did the best to contain her giddy smile, but her heart was racing, and she felt like she was on top of the world.

"I forgot how good that felt," she commented off-handedly as Dean approached. "Good thing you showed up, though," she quickly added before anyone could ask her what she meant. "How'd you find us?"

"The vessel is the husband of the first victim." Dean brushed his hands down across his thighs, as if to brush off dirt before reaching up to straighten his shirt. "A real big follower of that nutcase Buddy Boyle."

"Who?" The name was lost on the ex-angel, and she tipped her head in confusion.

Dean waved it off. "We think he's helping the angels find vessels. It's not important; we'll take care of it. Come on." He bent down to pick up the fallen vessel. "I'll get this guy out of here. You two take care of the rest."

Alex hurried over to the kitchen to grab several paper towels; she wrapped them around her bloodied palm in a makeshift bandage before she returned to the crib to pick up baby Tanya; tears stained her face, and she sniffled. "It's okay," Alex murmured. "You don't have to be afraid anymore." She watched as Dean carried the body out the back door. "Hey, we gotta clean up the blood, man. You want to take the baby?"

Castiel didn't immediately respond. "I saw a sponge in the cupboard," he finally said, but when he spoke, his voice was slow and quiet. "I'll take care of it."

"Okay." Alex watched him walk away. She shifted the baby to her other arm, carefully checking the paper towels to make sure the blood wasn't seeping through to the young child's white clothes. "Crap. Do you have a rag or something?" she asked as Dean returned to the house. "I'm still bleeding here."

"I'll grab you one. I'm bringing the car around to pick up the body — thankfully it's dark." Dean disappeared out the front door just as Castiel reappeared, a sponge and a plastic bucket of water in hand. Alex carried the baby back over to the crib and laid her down; her temperature had returned to normal and seemed to be staying that way. Good.

It didn't take them very long to clean up the house, and at the end it was nearly impossible to tell that such an ordeal had ever taken place. The only remaining trace was the faint hint of ash in the carpet from where the wings had disintegrated that the vacuum hadn’t been able to pick up. Dean had driven off long ago to dispose of the body, leaving Castiel and Alex to add the finishing touches after promising to return to pick them up. Nora was on her way back, responding to one of Castiel's earlier frantic calls, and upon his insistence, Alex had stayed.
The door opened in a flurry of movements, and Alex looked up in surprise from the couch where she sat, cradling the sleeping child in her arms. "I came back as soon as I can." Nora dropped her purse on the counter as she hurried into the living room. "Is everything okay?"

"Nora." Castiel rose to his feet from where he sat beside his mate, and Alex slowly followed his lead, rocking Tanya gently as the young baby awoke. "Tanya is fine. I'm sorry, I overreacted. I should have called you back to let you know everything was fine — a dose of acetaminophen brought the fever right down."

Nora stepped forward to take Tanya from Alex's arms. "She feels fine," the woman quietly agreed. "You did the right thing." Gratefulness flashed through her eyes as she looked between Castiel and Alex.

"Sorry about your date," Alex ventured as she stepped away from the mother and her baby. "I feel bad about that."

"Don't. It was a bust anyways." Nora led them over to the door, holding it open so they both could step out into the cool night air. "So thank you." She followed them out onto the front step, and Alex started down towards the street, glancing towards the Impala that now sat against the curb. "Oh, and Steve?" Nora's soft words had Alex pausing to listen to the conversation not meant for her. "That part of you that overreacted, that cares so much? That's what makes you special."

The woman gave him a small, warm smile and turned to go back into her home, and the soft, unintelligible murmur of her voice hummed through the air as she spoke to her young daughter.

A warm hand enveloped hers, and Alex looked up into Castiel's face. "Let's go." The ex-seraph led her down the walkway to the Impala. He took the front, and Alex slid into the back.

Dean stuck his phone back in his pocket — he had been calling Sam, no doubt about it. "So?" he asked. "Where to?"

"How about a drink?" Alex leaned over the seat to look at the Winchester. "There's a bar down by my work that's open late." She grinned. "Just like old times, huh? I — I haven't been able to get drunk in years."

"I would prefer it if we just went home." Castiel spoke slowly, quietly, and Alex reached out to rest a gentle hand on his shoulder, doing her best to curb her disappointment.

Dean started the car, and Alex fell back into her seat as he guided it out into the street. For a moment, it had felt like she was back where she used to be, working alongside Sam and Dean and Bobby Singer, saving people. But now she was back. Back to working late and paying bills. "Yeah," she reluctantly decided. "That's fine with me."
Ahh! Sorry for the long wait, but spring semester has had me all over the place!

July 14th, 2014
Rexford, Idaho

Alex dumped a half-eaten plate of lo-mein into the trash, knocking the ceramic dish against the side to dislodge the remaining noodles. She chanced a look up at the clock: one-thirty. She was back to working full shifts, and so her day was barely half over. "There's a new customer." Melanie poked her head into the back. "He's at table three."

"Okay." Alex stacked the plates beside the sink. "I'm taking my break afterwards, though. I'm starting to get hungry." She wiped her hands off on her pants before she followed her coworker out to the front. Alex grabbed a menu and made her way back to the far booth where their newcomer was seated. "Hi, welcome to Lucky Chin’s." She began her spiel as she set down the menu. "What can I —" The words died in her throat as she looked up into her guest's eyes, and she took a half-step back, fist balled.

"What can you do for me? Good question." Crowley pushed the menu away and motioned to the seat across from him. "Sit down."

Alex didn't move. "What are you doing here?" she hissed, casting a quick glance over her shoulder. "This is my work! What if you got spotted? You can't —"

"I'll do what I want, thank you." The demon cut her off as he put his hand on a small stack of folders. "Good work with that angel, by the way. How about we start rehoning those skills?"

He slid the folders over to her, but Alex refused to pick them up. "You mean like hunting?" She scoffed at the concept. "That seems a little below you, don't you think? Why?"

"Because if you're going to be doing my dirty work, I need to make sure you're capable of doing it. Consider it on-the-job training." Crowley pushed the folders to the other side of the booth, and made a move to stand up, but Alex stopped him.

"Wait, wait, wait, you can't — you can't just throw it at me like this. I don't have a car, I don't have access to any information — hell, the only weapon I have is a handgun with three bullets."

Crowley's eyes flashed at her tone. "Figure it out. You'll report to Jackson when you're done." The King of Hell rose to his feet and walked away, leaving Alex staring after his dark, stocky figure.

"Wait!" she hissed after him. "Who? Jackson as in 'hot-laundromat' Jackson?" Crowley disappeared, leaving her question unanswered, and Alex sat down at the now-unoccupied table with a shake of her head. "Great."

"Did you say Jackson?" Mel's head peeked around the corner, her brown eyes sparkling with interest. "Where? And where'd that creepy guy go?" She frowned to see that he was nowhere in
sight and stepped out from behind the dividing half-wall. "Weird." Her gaze fell onto the stack of folders that now lay in front of Alex. "Did he leave those behind?"

"What — yeah, yeah, I guess so." Alex tried to push them away out of Mel's prying eyes, but her coworker wouldn't have it. Her hands were on them in an instant, and Alex tried to protest. "I don't think we should —"

It was too late. Mel had already opened the first one up and was staring down at the Missing Person's report. "Whoa," she breathed out. "I think I've heard about this girl on channel 9! Do you think this guy's a cop?"

"You shouldn't be looking." Alex quickly closed the folder. "Isn't that like a … a criminal offense or something?" She set the stack down on the booth next to her. "I'm sure he'll come back for them once he realizes he forgot them. I'll take them to the back until then."

"You're no fun." Mel walked away, leaving Alex to slowly shake her head as she called over her shoulder, "This is why your life is boring."

"If only you knew." The words were spoken too quietly for the retreating woman to hear, and Alex took the moment of silence to pull the folders back up onto the table and flip through them. There were three in total, all females ranging between the age of sixteen and twenty eight. They didn't seem to have an immediate connection, and, much to Alex's dismay, no bodies had yet turned up. "Dammit." The ex-angel gathered the files up under her arm. She would have to look over these much more closely if she wanted to glean any sort of information. This would have to wait until after work.

Work came and went, and Alex was out the back door the moment the clock hit six o'clock, Crowley's case folders tucked securely under her arm. She clutched them tightly as she darted down the alley and across the street, determined to make it home as soon as possible to get her task over and done with. Castiel got off only half an hour after she did tonight, which would barely give her enough time to read over it all, but he worked the night shift the next two nights afterwards, while she only worked in the morning. If there was ever going to be a time for her to hunt, it would be then.

Her plans died when she saw her house. The lights were on, and a figure moved throughout the kitchen. Castiel. Alex recognized his silhouette. "Dammit." There was no way she could bring the files in without being noticed. And the last thing she needed was Castiel asking questions.

The ex-angel glanced up towards the sky. The air was clear and dry; no hint of any rain. The folders would be safe outside for the night. She hurried up to the doorstep and tucked the manilla reports beneath the dogwood hedge that ran along beneath the living room window. Then she stepped through the door.

"Alex." Castiel's head turned at the sound of her entrance, and Alex nodded, slipping off her shoes as she kicked the door shut behind her. "You're home."

"So are you. I thought you worked until six." Alex stepped into the living room, grinning at the smile that grew across Castiel's face. "What?"

"It's nothing." Castiel crossed the room to kiss her. His lips were soft, and Alex wrapped a hand around the back of his neck to keep him still. "Business was slow, so Nora let me off early. She says hello, by the way." He stepped back and walked back into the kitchen. "I thought I would try and
"I was getting tired of frozen meals," Alex teased, tipping her head back to sniff at the air. "It smells good. What is it?"

"Chicken. I don't know what it's called. Nora gave me the recipe." Castiel pulled open the oven to peer inside before checking the timer on the stove. "It'll be done soon. Go ahead and sit down."

"Sure. Just let me go get changed." Alex watched as he crossed over to the crockpot — when had they gotten one of those? — and poked at whatever part of their meal that lay inside. With a small, disbelieving shake of her head, she disappeared into the bedroom.

It took her barely a minute to pull on a clean pair of jeans and a sweatshirt, and she returned to the kitchen to find her mate setting the table. "Do you need any help?" she asked as she crossed over to her seat.

"No. Sit down." The timer on the stove dinged, and the ex-seraph hurried to pull the chicken out. Alex did as he said, taking a moment to look over the rest of the dishes that sat before her. Roasted potatoes and salad. "Wow. You've really outdone yourself." Alex got up to retrieve the water from the refrigerator as Cas set the chicken down upon the table. "What's the occasion?"

"I thought we deserved a nice meal. Like you said, I've gotten tired of frozen food." Castiel sat down beside her and picked up her plate. "How much would you like?"

"Surprise me." Alex reached for the potatoes. "These look delicious." She dropped two onto her plate beside the chicken before nodding in appreciation. "So, uh, how was your day?"

Castiel didn't answer her question. "I'm sorry about what happened Wednesday," he began. "If I hadn't called you to help with Tanya, you never would have had to be a part of that."

Wednesday. When she had killed Ephriam. "What?" Alex set her fork down, and her head tipped to one side. "Cas, it's okay. If I hadn't been there — you could have died. So you're welcome. Why are you apologizing?"

She watched as the ex-seraph dish himself up part of the salad in silence, and she stabbed a potato with a fork while she waited. "I'm sorry because I put you in danger," he finally said. "I put you back into that life when I shouldn't have. We're not hunters, Alex. I want a normal life, one without heaven, without angels. I want that with you."

"Yeah, me too." The words felt cumbersome on her tongue, and she ducked her head, embarrassed by her lame response. "I'm just glad you're alive."

"I don't want that to have changed anything." Castiel's fingers wrapped around her wrist, and Alex looked up in surprise. "Promise me you won't start hunting again."

"What? Uh, yeah, of course, Cas." The lie weighed down her voice, but Alex held Castiel's blue gaze as she spoke what he needed to hear. "I promise."

The house was dark, and the only sounds that filled the small bedroom was the hum of the air conditioner and the gentle breathing of the man beside her. Alex lay on her side, staring out the moonlit window. She had tossed and turned, but sleep had refused to come. Eventually the ex-angel gave up with a small sigh. She gently slipped out from beneath the comforters and crossed the bedroom floor, careful not to wake Castiel.
As soon as she shut the door behind her, she let out the breath she had been holding. Castiel had become a heavy sleeper as a human, much to her benefit. However, she didn't want to press her luck too far, so she just as quietly snuck out the front door and retrieved the three folders from beneath the window. Then she curled up behind the couch where, if Castiel awoke and came looking, she would have time to stash the evidence before he saw.

Andersen, Keely. First woman to go missing, disappeared three weeks ago from her hometown just south of Idaho Falls. The report was filled out by her boyfriend thirty six hours after her last sighting.

Alex flipped through the folder in disinterest. Everything was there, down to the very transcript of the of the boyfriend's 911 call. Nothing pointed towards anything supernatural, so she turned to the next one.

Menthall, Barrett. Victim number two, vanished a week after the first in a town fourteen miles west. Similar story with the same level of detail. Vanished without a trace, no body. Police suspect a jealous ex, but he had an alibi.

The ex-angel pushed the folder away in disgust. Once again, nothing of interest. No evidence of crazy, no relationship between the two victims. Part of her was ready to give up and just go back to bed, but the least she could do was read through the third.

As she opened it, her attention was immediately drawn to the five letter word circled and written in red on the top of the first page. 'WEIRD'. "Promising." Alex skimmed the file's contents. Amanda Zimmer, vanished five days ago. Police reported that the house had been locked and barricaded from the inside, and yet there was no sign of the woman. She had been taken two towns over from Rexburg.

"Is that it?" Alex flipped through the pages, disappointed at the lack of information. "Dammit." Once again, unhelpful. The ex-angel put her head in her hands, massaging her temple as she thought. What would be the next thing to do? She had no bodies, no means of transportation, no way to talk to any of the victim's relatives. The only lead she had was that all of the victims were from the area.

Alex ducked out from behind the couch to grab her laptop. If this was a monster, then it would hunt in one of two patterns. Either it would hunt in a radius if it had set up shop somewhere nearby, or its warpath would be linear as it moved across the state.

She stuck virtual pins into google maps to visualize the kills. All three disappearances took equidistant from each other. The center was none other than Rexford, Idaho. "That's … convenient." Alex narrowed her eyes at her findings, skeptical that the data was accurate. But perhaps that's exactly why Crowley chose it.

The floorboards creaked, and Alex instinctively shoved the police reports under the couch, snapping her laptop shut and jumping to her feet as the bedroom door opened. "Alex?" Castiel peered out, his eyes screwed up against the lamplight that illuminated the corner of the living room.

"I'm right here, Cas." Alex dropped her laptop onto the couch and reached over to turn out the light. "Sorry, I couldn't sleep. Did I wake you?"

"I heard a voice. What were you doing?"

Alex shrugged, feigning innocence. "Just talking to myself. I was trying to decide if I should eat; I didn't mean to wake you up." She walked over to him, gently nudging him backwards as she stepped back into the bedroom. "Let's go back to bed. I think I'll just wait until breakfast."
"Are you sure?" Castiel's blue eyes glowed gently in the moonlight as he stepped back towards the bed. "If you're hungry, you should eat. I've learned the human body can be quite demanding when it comes to sustenance."

"Don't worry about it." Alex slid under the covers. "I wasn't that hungry. I just had a bit of an unsettling dream and thought that maybe food would help me calm down." She turned on her side to face the dark wall, pulling the blankets close as Castiel joined her.

His solid form pressed up against her back, one hand moving down her arm to curl its fingers through hers. "You had a nightmare?" Alex could hear the frown in the ex-seraph's quiet voice. "What was it about?" He waited for Alex to respond, and when she didn't, he squeezed her wrist comfortingly. "Was it about Ephraim? I know —"

"It's okay, Castiel." Alex shifted back into his warmth, pulling his arm tighter around her. She lifted her head, and the man slid his other arm beneath the pillow to rest comfortably beneath her head. "It wasn't anything like that. You don't have to worry about me, okay? That wasn't the first time I've killed anything." And it probably won't be the last. She left those words unspoken, but they flashed through her mind all the same.

She felt him shake his head, his chin brushing up against her neck. "I will always worry about you," he murmured. "As long as I am alive, I will always do everything I can to keep you safe."

He pressed his face into the back of her neck, and Alex closed her eyes, running her thumb across the back of his hand, a silent, loving gesture. "Me too," she promised quietly, to softly for the man behind her to hear. That's what I'm doing what I have to do.

Work passed slowly the next day. Alex paced, impatient to get home. She had spent her morning thinking about Crowley's files, and she was set on figuring out more than she had last night. Finally, at six o'clock she ran out the door, barely even pausing to say goodbye to Tom in passing. She cut across the street and started at a brisk walk up the sidewalk towards her home.

The lights were off when she arrived, and she hurriedly unlocked the door and slammed it behind her. "Hello?" she called. "Cas?"

There was no answer, and the ex-angel kicked off her shoes. "Castiel?" she repeated, peering into the bedroom to make sure that the house was indeed completely empty. Satisfied with what she saw, Alex relocked the front door and dug out the folders from under the couch.

They were just as she left them, untouched and unfound by her mate, and Alex breathed a quiet sigh of relief; she hadn't had time to hide them when she had woken up that morning, and had been worried about the off-chance that Castiel had gone cleaning.

She dropped them down upon the table and took a moment to gather up her laptop and set her dinner in the microwave. While it was heating, she pulled up the map from last night. The chances that the map could have directly pointed towards where the culprit lay were impossible, but abandoned buildings and homes in the area would all constitute a starting point.

The microwave dinged, and she got up, grabbing a fork on the way. On second thought, she dug out a pen and notepad from the kitchen drawer and tucked it under her arm as she carried last night's leftover chicken back to the table.

She spread the three folders out in front of her, ordered oldest to newest, with her laptop laying on
her right and her food to her left. "Okay." Alex clicked the pen once, twice, and then three times before she stabbed a potato with her fork. "What would Bobby do?"

She turned her attention back to the map of Rexford, clicking the pen as she surveyed the surrounding land. She was going to need an expert, Alex decided as she shoved in a mouthful of chicken. She set down the pen and reached for her phone, scrolling through her contacts until she found the name she was looking for. She clicked on the icon, and the phone started to ring. "Hey, Connor."

"Uh, Max?" Connor Simmons answered, slightly confused by the sound of it. "What's going on? Listen, I'm not scheduled to work until tomorrow—"

Alex gently cut him off. "This isn't about work," she promised. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but you've lived here all your life, right?" She waited for the noise of affirmation before nodding. "Great. I need the name of all the abandoned places around here."

"Why?" Her coworker sounded guarded, cautious about her intents, and yet his voice was still slow and puzzled. "If this is about that coke dealer, I told the cops —"

"Wait, wait, what? No. Nothing about drugs." Alex narrowed her eyes. "I just need to know what's out there, and you're one of the best guys in town to ask. Just give me a list, okay? Like, is there anything just outside of town?"

"Yeah, there's a few." Connor hesitated, and Alex heard the sound of distant knocking. "Leave me alone!" the teenager snapped at someone unknown, and Alex took the opportunity to take another bite of her meal. Just as good the second time around. "You still there?"

"I'm still here, Conman."

"Okay, sorry about that. Like I said, there's a few good joints around. Um, there's that old Coca-Cola factory about a mile east of the theatre — you gotta be careful, though. A lot of junkies like to hang out there after school. They say a man died there last year."

Alex scribbled down the location on her paper. "Concern duly noted. What else?"

"Um, there's that old Billing's Farm. The house burned down like, five years ago, but that barn's still standing. And then there's that building across the highway from Red's — ya know, that diner that's always open really late with the really good fries and —"

Alex cut him off again. "Yeah, I know. What was it?"

"Dunno. But Danto says it's haunted, but everybody knows that Danto just makes up that kind of shit to scare the chicks, so it's probably just a load of bullshit, ya know?"

"Yeah. Okay, got it. Anything else?"

"There's a couple of beaten down creepy houses off Snelling, but, uh, that's all I can think of. I can ask Kelly though, cause he knows all sort of stuff like that."

"Sure, that'd be great." Alex clicked her pen closed. "Text me if you think of anything else, okay? Oh, and, uh, Connor, you'd best lay off the weed if you're working tomorrow, alright? I'd hate to have to fire you. Again." She hung up with a shake off her head. Teenagers.

Her chicken was getting cold, so the ex-angel turned her attention back to it. The houses on Snelling were out — they were right in the middle of town, and only an idiot would hide out there. The farm
was a possibility, but not a great one. The Cola factory was huge, but she knew nothing about the other building. She’d have to look into that one a bit more.

"Where’s Sam when I need him?" Alex pushed back her chair and crossed over to the fridge to get herself a drink. "I don't even know what the hell it is that I'm hunting. Dammit, I need a body."

She sat back down next to her folders, chewing on the last of her potatoes as she glanced back through the reports. There was still no similarities between the victims except for their gender. Different ethnicities, different relationship statuses, different lives.

The ex-angel leaned back and looked down at the clock. It was nearly seven; Castiel wouldn’t be home for another three hours. That would give her enough time to get down to Red’s and check out that one building and be back with time to spare.

After retrieving her gun from beneath the mattress and a flashlight from the kitchen drawer, Alex set out across town. It was a twenty minute walk to Red’s, and Alex sent up a quick prayer of thanks for the warm weather. She ducked under the highway overpass and made her way across the empty field. She could see the building against horizon, darkened by the setting sun. It looked to be some sort of a warehouse, larger than a barn, but small enough to search within the hour.

The door was propped open, and Alex nudged it open, gun head at the ready. One step forward had her stumbling, and Alex barely managed not to cry out in surprise as she tried to regain her balance. She flipped her flashlight on as she freed herself from whatever had caught around her feet, and she looked down to see a twisting tendril of leaves stretching out across the ground. “Son of a bitch,” she cursed, kicking the plant away in an attempt at revenge for her scare.

Rattled and yet more determined than ever, she stepped through the door. Her flashlight illuminated the ground in front of her, and the ex-angel wrinkled her nose at the sight of broken bottles and trash scattered across the ground. She opened her mouth to call out, but quickly shut it again as she thought better of it. She made her way through the entrance and turned the corner to find a long hallway that ended in a set of double doors. “Great.” Alex moved slowly, her soft footsteps sounding loud in the emptiness surrounding her. “Classic horror film right here.”

She gently shouldered her way through the swinging door and peered inside. A large room lay beyond, with old machinery all around covered in dust and grime. The setting sun cast long, eerie shadows across the room, and Alex quietly let the door shut behind her before she started her search, weaving her way between the rusted metal.

Something clinked across the room, and Alex froze in her tracks as her heart skipped a beat. Her flashlight spun towards the source of the noise, but whatever had caused it lay hidden out to sight.

It took her moment to gather her courage and calm her trembling hands before she started moving again. She had never gone solo on a hunt before like this, human, vulnerable, and defenseless. She had no idea what to expect, no plan of attack. All she had was three bullets and a pair of feet to run on.

Her flashlight caught something in its lights, and Alex froze in her tracks as her heart skipped a beat. Her flashlight spun towards the source of the noise, but whatever had caused it lay hidden out to sight.

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Her flashlight caught something in its lights, and Alex froze once again. It was a leg, clothed in dark, tight jeans and high heels. As the girl moved closer, the rest of the body came into view. The woman lay face down, blood pooling around her upper half. Alex shone her light all around, but she saw nothing in the shadows.

She crouched down to examine the body closer. The blood was still mostly liquid, though half-
clotted, which, Alex figured, meant she had been dead for several hours, but most likely less than a
day. She grabbed the woman by the legs and rolled her until she could see the face of the fatality.

Keely Anderson. Alex recognized the face from the police reports. She reached up to close the
victim’s eyes, and her shoulders dropped in disappointment. Part of her had been hoping that she
would find these woman scared, but alive. “I’m sorry.” The words came out as a murmur. “I’ll find
who did this.”

Her moment of silence passed, Alex turned her attention to the large, gaping wound in the chest.
“Werewolf?” Alex picked up a stick off of the ground and gently peeled the flesh back to get a better
look. “Sorry about this,” she apologized to the corpse as she examined the jagged markings. The
heart definitely seemed to be missing.

Alex rose to her feet, dropping the stick and wiping her hand off on her jeans. Werewolf, then.
Freshly turned, if it was dropping bodies at this rate. The novices were always easy to spot. At least
silver was easy to come by.

Alex continued moved onwards, moving slower now that she knew this was the place she was
looking for. It wasn’t long before something else caught her eye, and she reluctantly approached the
body of Barrett Menthall. She lay face up, chest ripped wide. Cuts and bruises littered her arms and
legs, and the sight of them gave Alex pause. “What?”

She knelt down, the hand holding her gun coming up to cover her nose as she took in the gruesome
sight below. The internal thoracic organs were pulp, with no visible sight of the heart, but that wasn’t
what captured the ex-angel’s attention.

She shone the flashlight down on the woman’s arms, head tipping as she traced the deep cuts with
her eyes. “That’s weird.” The wounds were straight and clean; they should be jagged and wide if
they were made by claws. It almost looked like knife wounds, thin and precise. “Why would a
werewolf use a knife?”

A scream punctured the night, and Alex leapt to her feet. “Dammit!” Whatever it was, it was there
with her, and not far away. She took a step back, unsure of what to do; should she run forward and
play hero? No, that was stupid, pure suicide. “Dammit,” she repeated, and her feet carried her back
towards the exit. Whatever it was, it was going to have to live another day.

Another scream cut through the air, and Alex closed her eyes. One more day, she told herself. That’s
all it’s going to get. Then it’s mine.

The next day came and went, and after Alex had dropped by the Gas N Sip to make sure that Castiel
was working late, she put her plan into motion. Silver wasn’t hard to come by; she had borrowed a
silver-plated dining knife from the restaurant without Melanie’s notice. It wasn’t sharp, but with
enough force, it could easily slide between the ribs and pierce the heart. That was if she could get
close enough.

Alex shoved the knife into the waistband of her jeans as she tugged on an old, blood-stained jacket
that had remained hidden at the bottom of her closet. Her gun rested beside it, its bulky presence a
source of comfort as she stepped out of the house and locked the door behind her.

It took her thirty minutes to reach the underpass beyond Red’s, her progression slow to avoid being
spotted. She pulled out her flashlight as she started across the field; it wasn’t dark enough to use it
quite yet, but having a solid, heavy item in her hand made her feel more confident as she crossed the
flattened earth. The building sat on the horizon, drawing nearer with each passing minute until Alex stood at the door, the dark, yawning gap beckoning her inwards.

Her flashlight swept back and forth as she made her way down the hall to the large room, ears pricked for any sign of life. She reached back to pull out her silver-plated knife as she made her way over to where the first body lay. It was still there, untouched, and Alex continued on, making her way to where she had heard last night’s screams.

She found no evidence of a struggle as she reached the end of the room; what she did find, however, was a door labeled ‘Stairs.’

The door creaked as it opened, and Alex shone her light inwards. “Here, wolfy wolfy,” the ex-angel called gently as she guided the door to shut quietly behind her. The upstairs was much smaller than the floor below, with windows on every side, and Alex could see the full moon rising on the horizon. Her gaze hardened, and she turned back to room; she didn’t have much time.

Her flashlight caught on something metallic, and Alex’s head tipped in curiosity. She crossed the floor to investigate the northeast corner; there in the wall, tucked in a hole in the old plaster, was a round silver plate with a single raceme of flowers. “That’s weird.” Alex set the plate back in its place, and she turned her flashlight to the other corner nearest to her. The scene was the same; busted plaster in the wall with flowers carved in silver.

She had taken two steps towards it when a crash had her pausing. The noise had come through a doorway, and Alex’s flashlight caught a shadow flitting out of sight. Knife at the ready, the ex-angel crept forward. The scent of death permeated the air as she drew nearer, and her hair stood on end as she found the source. The body of a young girl lay in the room before her, splayed in a pool of glistening blood. A second figure crouched in the shadows, taller and broader. Its head cocked as she entered, and the stranger shifted his weight. “Who are you?”

“Take a guess.”

The werewolf turned his head, lips pulled up in anger, and Alex could the pointed edges of his fangs. “Let me go.” Its body was changing, and his words were cracked and rough. He turned, rising to his feet, and Alex tightened her grip on the knife. “I want to go!”

The moonlight hit his shoulders, and his eyes glowed as he launched himself forward. Alex dove out of the way, rolling across the ground and smoothly pushing herself to back to her feet. Her heart raced in her chest as the werewolf turned, jaws stretched wide in a wordless snarl. He prowled closer, muscles tensed, ready to leap, and Alex forced herself to make the first move. She darted forward, catching the creature by surprise as she swung her knife down across his face.

The werewolf howled at the silver weapon as blood sprayed the ground, and he lashed out blindly. An arm caught Alex on her side, and the impact sent her stumbling back into the corner. Her head hit the wall, and she fell to the ground with a thud. The knife fell from her grasp, but the werewolf was on her before she could regain her bearings, jaws snapping, and she felt claws digging through her jacket.

It was one arm that held the creature’s jaws back from her throat, and Alex desperately searched for something — anything — to free herself. Her fingers closed around broken plaster, and she tore a small, circular plate free from the wall and swung it upwards. Her blow hit the werewolf squarely in the side of the head, and he fell backwards with a yelp of pain. Alex snatched up the knife and jumped onto the stunned creature. She drove the silver knife into its heart, throwing her entire weight into the motion to force the weapon through the muscle and cartilage that blocked its path.
She felt the werewolf die with a twitch, and then it was over. “Son of a bitch.” Alex slid onto the ground, wincing as her head pounded. She picked up the silver plate with a shake of her head. “What the hell are you doing here?” she murmured, twisting it in her hands. Something wasn’t right about this.

She pushed herself to her feet, steadying herself against the wall while she took a moment to catch her breath. There were four bodies — four that she knew of, maybe more. Somehow the task of cleaning up the mess weighed down upon her weary bones. Crowley’s minions would have to take care of this one later. For now, there was one more thing she needed to see.

She crossed to the other corner and kicked through the plaster. There, inside the last corner of the building, lay another silver plate engraved with those flowers. They looked familiar; very familiar. Alex had definitely seen them before.

She made her way down the stairs and out of the building, shining her flashlight down upon the ground. The building was lined with overgrown plants with purple flowers sprouting from a single stalk. It was what she had tripped over coming in yesterday. “What are you?” Alex shone her flashlight down the side of the building, but couldn’t see an end to the flowers.

Something gnawed at the back of her mind, a red flag that something wasn’t right, and she knelt down to snap off one of the stems. There was something else going on here, the young hunter thought as she started back towards town. And she had a pretty good idea of what it was.

The door of Sudz Laundromat swung open with the tinkle of a bell, and a figure stepped confidently into the dark establishment. He flipped on the lights, illuminating the stature of a young, lean woman. She sat on one of the washing machines, a knife balanced delicately between her fingers. “You’re Jackson, right?” Alex turned her gaze to the handsome demon, watching as his eyes flickered black in acknowledgement. “That’s what I thought.” She lowered herself off of the machine and lifted her head to try and match the demon’s height. “I took care of that werewolf out past 61.”

“Good.” The demon’s eyes turned back to their blue, and he stepped forward. “I’ll let Crowley know.”

“daemon, iungerentur cum tub corpus. Impero tibi: unum!”

The hunter steadily met his gaze. “Oh, I think you heard me. I bound you to your vessel; no disappearing, no smoking out.” Her gaze turned upwards towards the ceiling, where a devil’s trap was outlined in duct tape. “Not my best work, but I needed something temporary,” she explained when she heard the demon scoff. “You and I need to have a little chat.”

“Seems a bit overkill, don’t you think, darling?” Jackson stepped forward to the edge of the trap. “You’ve already got me stuck; what’s with the spellwork?”

Alex ignored him, choosing instead to tap the edge of the knife on the top of a machine. “I got lucky with that case,” she began, watching as the serrated blade dragged across the metal. “A werewolf twenty minutes from my house? Convenient. A little too convenient, actually.”

“they’re scavengers, sweetheart. They tend to roam.”

“This one didn’t.” Alex lifted her eyes to meet the demon’s gaze. “How stupid did you think I was? Two of the three victims were taken outside the lunar cycle.”
Jackson’s lips curled up in a snarl. “That doesn’t mean jackshit,” he scoffed. “Purebloods can change whenever they want.”

“Shut up and let me finish.” Alex tossed the knife onto the machine where it bounced with a clang. “They were taken outside the cycle, but they weren’t killed until the full moon returned. Werewolves don’t keep their food alive for later; they’re not that smart. And then there was all that wolfsbane —”

"It's a native plant, dumbass." Jackson interrupted her again, but Alex could see the surprise that flashed across his face.

"You lined the outside of the fucking building with it. It's not that native. Oh, and then there’s this.” Alex pulled the small silver disc out of her pocket and tossed it at the demon’s feet. “Now this — this had me confused. I’ve never seen anything like this before. I have to admit, it was clever. Silver charms in each corner of the building. How does that work?”

She paused, waiting for the demon to respond, but he only fixed her with an even stare.

Unperturbed, she gave it her best guess. “Something like an electric fence I imagine. I’ve seen the same thing with poltergeists; except those charms are meant to keep the ghosts out. It’s too bad Fido started digging them out of the wall, otherwise I never would have noticed." Her teeth flashed in a grin to emphasize her good luck. "But you know what? That isn’t even all of it. The way you cut that girl up with a knife — tortured her —” Alex’s face twisted in anger. "You couldn't resist having some fun, could you? It's almost like you wanted to be caught.”

Jackson glared, but he offered up no excuse.

"So how’d it go down?” Alex stepped forward until she was toe-to-toe with the devil's trap. "You kidnap a werewolf and a couple of kids for funsies? Pathetic.”

Jackson said nothing for several second. “It was Crowley’s idea,” he finally spat. “He wanted to give you something to do — God knows why — but there wasn’t a creature within twenty miles of here. So he had me make up some poor excuse of a job. A waste of my talent for some stupid little game.” The demon’s eyes flashed with rage. “Crowley’s gone soft; he’s lost his vision. If you ask me, I should have gone to work for Abaddon.”

“Huh. Well, I didn’t ask. And that’s not going to happen.” Alex pulled a large knife out of her back pocket and twirled it in her hands. “You demons think you’re smart, but you’re not. You’re just arrogant. And you’ve just killed three people. I learned that spell from Bobby Singer.” She stepped forward to stand directly in front of the demon, her chin lifted as she met his black gaze. “So you’re bound to that body, and you’re not getting out. So once I scatter your limbs across the county, you’ll have plenty of time to rethink your life choices.”

Darkness shrouded the hunter as she made her way back into town. The full moon was high in the sky, the only light to guide her path, but the ex-angel clung to the shadows. Two hours. The was how long it had taken her to dismember the demon and bury his parts in the fields around town. She was tired, she was hungry, and she was completely covered in dirt and blood. All she wanted to do was get home unnoticed and take a shower.

A car rushed past, and Alex turned away, keeping her head down and hidden to avoid attention. She had managed to dodge the late night joggers and dog-walkers, which were thankfully few and far between, but the speeding cars never gave her enough time to duck completely out of sight. But the darkness concealed the blood.
She skirted the streetlight on the edge of the corner, her heart melting in relief as her home came into view. The lights were off; Castiel wouldn't be home for another twenty minutes. By then it would all be over.

She reached up to brush away a strand of sticky hair, and her gaze hardened as she felt the demon's blood. It has screamed, the pain of the vessel feeling as real as its own, but Alex hadn't stopped. Sending it back to hell hadn't been an option; that was too light a punishment for what it had done. The operation had been messy, driven by her rage, but it had been necessary. At least now it was done.

The garage lights flickered to life, and Alex froze, forgetting that they were triggered by motion. She screwed up her eyes against the sudden brightness, and she hurried towards the stairs with a newfound vigor. She would be inside soon. It would all be over.

"Maxine?" The voice had Alex's heart plummeting into her stomach, and she froze where she was, her back to her landlord. She didn't dare move, but stayed as still as stone, half-concealed in the shadows of the house. "Is that you? What are you doing out so late?"

"It's nothing." Alex spoke slowly, carefully, and she kept her eyes on the steps in front of her. "There was just something I needed to take care of. Don't worry about it, okay? Go back to bed."

She could hear the footsteps growing louder behind her, and her muscles tensed in apprehension. "Are you okay?" Greg's voice sounded right behind her, and Alex could hear the tremble in his words. "Oh God. You —"

Alex reluctantly turned around, and she let her eyes fall downwards upon her clothes. Her jacket was almost black, heavy with sticky red liquid, and her skin was a thick, dark crimson. She knew how she looked; she could feel it in her hair, on her face; it dried and cracked with every movement. "Just go back inside," she quietly insisted. "This isn't what you think, Greg. I promise you. Please. Don't call the cops; just let me explain first."

The preacher took a step back, his eyes wide with horror, and she softened her voice. "You've known me for a while, Greg. Longer than most people in this town. I want you to know something, okay? There are four bodies in the warehouse across from Red's, three females, one male. This blood?" She motioned down to her attire, internally wincing at how easily the words rolled off of her tongue, her voice hollow and apathetic. "It's from the man responsible. I put an end to his killings."

"I —"

"I didn't kill them, Greg. The second woman — she was taken two weeks ago while I was in the hospital. And I bet if you look at the police reports and my work schedule, you'd see I couldn't have taken them either. You can call the cops if you want, but if you even believe me just a little, let me explain it all tomorrow. Please."

Greg shook his head, shifting back even further. "If what you've said is true," he began slowly, a tremble in his voice, "Then even the cops can't save you now. You're under God's judgement, child. And you've been marked by the devil."

Alex watched him hurry back into the house, a small shake of her head following his words. "Oh, trust me, you have no idea."
The blood soaked her hands, staining the sink red. Alex watched the water run down, chilling her skin as it washed away the last remaining trace of her sins. Her grey eyes flickered up to the mirror to trace her pale, round face. Blood was splattered across her cheeks, crimson flecks against white. She couldn't hold her own gaze — what had she done?

Alex jerked awake, eyes flying open in surprise. Something had moved. The bed had shifted. The pale dawn sky was on the horizon, casting a gentle light throughout the bedroom, and the bed frame shifted again as the man beside her sat up. "Alex? Are you okay?" Castiel's gentle hands came to rest on her shoulder, and Alex rolled over to look up at him.

"Uh. Hey." She reached up, fingers carding gently through his disheveled hair. "S-Sorry, bad dream." She heaved herself up into a sitting position and leaned over to press a quick, closed-mouth kiss on his lips. "Did I … did I wake you?"

"No. I wake up with the light." Castiel rolled out of bed, and after a second or two, Alex followed. She watched as her mate disappeared into the bathroom, and she looked down at her appearance; despite the hot, humid weather that marked the middle of July, she was dressed in a t-shirt and sweatpants. The feeling of the demon’s blood still clung to her body, so strong and real that Alex was afraid Castiel could see it if she uncovered her skin.

She was going to need another shower.

As if on cue, Alex heard the water start to run, and her shoulders fell in disappointment, unable to bring herself to join him. She felt her secret weighing on her shoulders, the tip of a wedge that was threatening to drive itself between them if she couldn't pull it together.

She made her way into the kitchen to start with breakfast, casting a quick glance out the window on her way past. The rest of her night has passed uneventful; no sirens, no police officers at her door; she would have to go down and talk with Greg after she had eaten.

She dug a box of cereal out of the cupboard and tossed it onto the island. Her phone rang, and the ex-angel looked towards the bedroom in surprise. Who could possibly be calling her at this hour?

She hurried over to her phone to see who it was and answered it with a confused noise. "Sheriff Mills?"

"Hey, Alex. How have you been?"

"Um … good." Alex cast a glance towards the bathroom door, and she dropped down onto the bed. "How have you been? I haven't heard from you since I kicked Crowley's ass on your guys' date," she added.

"Don't remind me. Listen, Bobby Singer had some property in town — you know, a few storage lockers here and there. He doesn't have any family left, and since I figured you were the closest thing to family he had, you might want to come have a look in them before the county does."

"Yeah, yeah, of course." Alex jumped to her feet. "Definitely. I — I can be there sometime tonight if
I leave now."

She could hear the nod in the sheriff's voice. "Okay, well, no hurry, you understand me?" There was a voice, too quiet for Alex to hear, and the noise became muffled as Jody pushed the phone into her shoulder to respond. "Listen, sweetie, I have to go. A call just came in. I'll see you soon, okay?"

"Yeah, sounds good." Alex hung up and shoved her phone into her pocket as the bathroom door swung open.

"Who was that?" Castiel stepped out, a towel wrapped securely around his waist. Blue eyes sparkled with curiosity as his head tipped to one side. "I heard you talking to someone."

"Yeah, it was Jody Mills. You've met her, right?" Alex circled around the bed to stand in front of him, a small smile on her face. "She wants me to come down to Sioux Falls. Legal reasons only," she added when Castiel frowned. "She found some old stuff of Bobby's and she wants me to look through it. I'll only be gone a day or two." She wrapped her arms around Castiel's bare shoulders and leaned up to press a kiss on his lips. "Is that okay?"

"Of course." Disappointment lined his voice, and Alex leaned back so she could look him in the eyes. "Do you want me to come with? I can ask Nora for time off of work."

"No, it's fine." Alex carded a hand through his damp hair before she stepped away. "I won't be gone long. You stay here and work. I'll call Melanie up and tell her I won't be working over the weekend." She pulled out her phone and tossed it on the bed before she crossed over to the dresser. "You … you're going to be fine by yourself, right?"

A smile graced the ex-seraph's face. "Alex. I've lived for eons. I'm confident I'll survive for a day or two on my own." He followed her over to the wardrobe to get dressed in a pair of jeans and a dark short sleeve top. "I will miss you, though."

"I'll miss you, too." Alex kissed his temple. "Okay. I'm going to run down and talk to Greg real quick before he leaves for church. Then I've got to shower, call Melanie, and then I'm on the first bus out of here, okay? I'll keep you posted with any updates. Breakfast is on the counter, and have fun at work."

"Thank you." Castiel turned his attention to pulling on his socks, and Alex made her way out of the house and down the stairs. She hesitated at the front door of the pastor's home, but necessity had her knocking thrice upon the wooden frame.

The door creaked open, and Greg's face appeared through the screen. "Maxine." His eyes flickered across her, the faintest hint of trepidation lining his blue irises, but his voice remained soft and even. "I had a feeling you would be stopping by. Come in."

He held open the door, and Alex stepped through into the foyer. "I won't stay long," she started, "I just thought I owed you an explanation after… after last night. Thanks for not calling the cops."

"I am a spokesman for the forgiving Christ. You never struck my as the murderous type when I took you in, and if what you said was true… I could only give you the benefit of the doubt until morning." Greg motioned to the living room couch. "Please, sit. Would you like some coffee?"

"No … no thanks." Alex slowly did as he asked, and after a second her head dropped to her hands. "Where do I even start?"

"How about at the beginning?"
Alex looked up as the old preacher took a seat across from her, and she inwardly scoffed at the idea. Well, I was approached by the King of Hell to hunt down a werewolf. That would certainly go over well. "I… I like to walk to clear my head," she began slowly, carefully weaving her lie. "I ended up out by Red's when I heard a scream. It wasn't loud, so at first I thought I had imagined it, but then I heard it again." The tale was coming to her easier now, and she picked up her pace. "I thought it was just a couple junkies harassing a woman — something I could handle. But when I got to the warehouse…" Here she let her voice trail off, conjuring up the image of the dead woman, and she let herself wince visibly at the memory.

"It's okay," The preacher's voice was softer now, and Alex allowed herself to glance upwards. "What did you find?"

"There were two women … laying on the floor. They were the girls from the news — those missing people from around here? They were already dead. I heard the scream again, and that's when I found him … it. I don't know." Alex ran her thumb across the palm of her hand as she paused for a slight dramatic effect. "He was kneeling over the body of another woman, a younger one, and when he saw me — he just went crazy. I panicked — I don't know how I fought him off, but I did. I-I got his knife and I stabbed his chest, and then there was blood … so much blood." Her jaw trembled slightly, and Alex squeezed her eyes shut. "I didn't know what to do. I just panicked and ran home. That's when you found me." She looked up into Greg's eyes. "Call the cops, tell them about the bodies, just please leave me out of it. I was forced to do things I'm not proud of, back in my old life, and I just came here to start again. I just want to spend my life with Steve."

Greg sat there quietly, and Alex let her attention fall to the ground, waiting with bated breath to see if her lie had been persuasive enough. "I'll inform the authorities about the crime scene," he slowly began. "I won't mention you, but if they come around again asking questions, I won't lie. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do." Alex felt her cheeks flush, embarrassed at the kindness she was being shown in return for her deceit. "Thank you, Greg. I really appreciate it." She rose to her feet. "I'll be in Sioux Falls for the next few days taking care of business — actual business," she quickly added when the man frowned. "My … someone close to me died, and there's some things I need to do to say goodbye. I'll be back by the end of the week, so … so if the cops come …" She trailed off, no words coming to complete her thought. "Thank you."

She hurried out of the house without another word and made her way up the stairs. She almost ran headfirst into Castiel on his way out the door, and she jumped back in surprise. "Sorry." The ex-seraph reached out to steady her. "Careful."

"Always." Alex smiled up at him, slightly giddy from the success of her morning so far. "Off to work already?"

"I was ready, so I thought I could get there early and start on inventory." Castiel dipped his head to press a kiss on her forehead, and Alex leaned up to meet his lips with hers. "I'm going to miss you."

"I'll give you a call first thing tonight," Alex promised. "I'll be back before you know it."

She stepped aside, and Castiel moved past her, making his way down the stairs and across the street. An hour later, Alex was showered, packed, and halfway across town on her way to the bus station. The sunlight was hot upon her clothed back, and she shifted her bag to her other hand as sweat dampened her palms. Last night's gentle rain had only caused the humidity to skyrocket, and now the
air felt as wet and thick as the muddy ground beneath her feet.

Alex pushed her way through the glass door, eyes closing in momentary bliss at the cool rush of air conditioning. The Rexford bus station was small and empty, unsurprising for a Wednesday morning. "Hey. I'd like to get a ticket to Sioux Falls?" Alex dug into her pocket for cash as she approached the window. "There's one leaving in ten, right?"

"Right. That'll be $150.00." The woman accepted Alex's stack of twenties, and the faintest hint of surprise passed through her tan face. "Should I be checking for counterfeit?" she joked.

Alex gave a half smile with a shake of her head. "No, I just don't like credit. Where are the bathrooms?"

"Out in back." The woman handed Alex her ticket with a small nod and a smile. "Enjoy your trip, sweetie. Have a good day."

Alex echoed back her farewell as she hoisted her bag back up onto her shoulder and once more stepped out into the surprisingly sweltering heat. Her eyes followed the signs for the restrooms around the side of the building, and she dropped her bag onto the patch of concrete outside the door before she stepped inside.

When she reemerged two minutes later, her bag wasn't there. "Son of a bitch," Alex cursed, searching the ground for her misplaced belongings.

"Looking for something?" A thick, amused accent had Alex spinning around to find a darkly-clad stranger behind her. "Going on a trip, kitten?"

Alex stormed up to the King of Hell, intending to snatch her bag out of his hands, but Crowley held it far out of her reach. "What do you want?" she snapped, lunging for her bag again, but the demon sidestepped her attack. "I killed your stupid werewolf, so leave me alone."

"Jackson hasn't reported back to me." Crowley dropped her bag into the mud, his interest lost in the game. "Any reasons why?"

"I killed him too." Alex pushed her way past the demon to gather up her dirtied bag. "He kidnapped those girls and confined that werewolf there until it killed them, so I gave him what he deserved. It's dead. He's dead. They're all dead, so I hope you're fucking happy. And now I'm going to Sioux Falls to get some stuff done while this whole thing blows over, and maybe, maybe I won't find myself in jail!"

Her words were accompanied by a glare, which grew sharper when amusement twinkled in Crowley's eyes. "I forgot how tiny you are without wings. How that much rage fits in a body so small —"

Alex lashed out, her fist connecting with his nose. The demon reeled back in surprise, and his hand came up to feel the dripping blood. Alex fell back into a defensive stance, but she couldn't prepare herself for the counter attack. Crowley moved like lightning, and before she knew what had happened, she was on her knees, her arm twisted upwards.

She cried out in alarm, and then screamed in pain as the demon wrenched her arm even further, causing the bone to snap under the pressure. "Listen to me." Crowley's voice was low and harsh. "You are nothing. I own you, and I can make these next two years an absolute living hell. Do you understand me?" He tightened his grip when Alex didn't respond, and she gasped.

"Y-Yes," she got out, her voice catching in her throat.
Crowley twisted her broken arm even further, and tears filled her eyes. "Yes, what?" he asked calmly.

"Yes, Crowley."

"Go catch your bus." The pain was gone, and Alex fell into the mud when the demon let her go, cradling her once-broken arm as her eyes continued to water. She didn't have to look up to know that Crowley was gone; his point had been made; he had no reason to stick around.

She pulled herself to her feet and picked up her muddied bag, wiping her dirtied hand on her jacket before she wiped away the tears brought to her eyes out of pain and humiliation. Crowley was right; without her grace, she stood no chance. With her head hung, the ex-angel slowly made her way to her bus. For now, the only thing that she could do was obey.

**Sioux Falls, South Dakota**

Fourteen hours later, Alex stepped out of the Greyhound bus and onto the flat earth of South Dakota. The few other passengers that had been picked up along the way shuffled out, and Alex squinted to make out her ride through the darkness.

The short, punctuated wail of a siren gave it away, and a smile grew upon her face as Alex hurried over to the police car sitting on the side of the road. The door opened, and Sheriff Jody Mills stepped out to meet Alex. "Hey." The greeting was accompanied by a hug, and while it caught her momentarily by surprise, the ex-angel welcomed it with open arms. "You can put your stuff in the back."

Alex tossed her bag into the backseat and jumped into the passenger seat. "How have you been?" she began politely. "It's been awhile since I've been back here."

"Oh you know, same old same old." The sheriff started the car, and the engine purred to life. "It's been quiet for the most part. How about you?" Her blue gaze came to rest on Alex. "You look … different. Not getting into too much trouble, I hope. What were you doing in Rexford?"

"It … it's a long story." Alex folded her hands in her lap, wondering where she should start. "A very long story. You remember that meteor shower two months ago?"

"How can I forget?" Mills turned the car onto the highway, and Alex leaned back as they began to accelerate. "It was all over the news for weeks." The smile on her face faded, and she looked over at the ex-angel. "Let me guess; it wasn't just some freak astrological shower."

"It was heaven." Alex's face fell. "One of the angels, he created a spell that expelled all of the other angels from heaven. I was one of them."

"Oh my God."

"I apparently hit the ground somewhere in New Jersey, and I was in the hospital for about a week. I don't remember much of it, to be honest. The angel who created the spell, he stole Castiel's and my grace. We … we're not angels any more. So we've been living in Rexford." The ex-angel gave a small shrug. "And that's where I've been. I also may or may not be under investigation for murder. How have you been?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Back up." Jody's voice grew sharp, and Alex couldn't help but laugh.
"Werewolf," she explained. "He was taking girls in the area, so I put a stop to him. My landlord … well, he saw me come home covered in blood. But he's also a pastor, so he's all about that forgiveness and whatnot. We're good. It's between 'me and God' now. Like God gives a damn nowadays."

The last words were muttered under her breath; if the sheriff heard, she gave no indication of it. "You did it by yourself?" she asked. "What about the Winchesters?"

Alex shrugged. "They're doing their own thing. I don't know. It was one werewolf; I can do it on my own." She leaned back slightly in her seat. "Any interesting cases around town lately? I know things have been a little mundane since you lost the town drunk."

"Quiet, for the most part. Although there's been some weird disappearances in Hartford; it's one of the small towns I cover on occasion. Usually there's nothing except the occasional cow tipping. But with the past week, three people have gone missing."

"If you think I'll look into it —"

"No. I wouldn't ask you to do anything you didn't want to. There's still nothing to suggest it's not just some creep. I'll give Sam and Dean a call if we don't get a lead." Sheriff Mills merged off of the highway and onto the main road that ran through the city. "I made up the extra bedroom, so you can stay with me. I'll take you down to the storage locker first thing in the morning. Eight sound good?"

"Sounds good." Alex toyed with the hem of her shirt as the sheriff pulled the car down the road and into the driveway. "I've had a long day anyways. Sleep sounds good." She rolled out of the car and grabbed her things before she followed Jody Mills up to the front door.

The house looked exactly as the ex-angel had remembered it, down to the very warm smell, and Alex let her eyes fall closed. Her feet carried her up the stairs and into the bedroom where she had once called home. Jody disappeared to the kitchen, and Alex could hear the cupboards opening and closing as she dropped her suitcase next to the door and looked around.

The room hadn't changed. The same red comforter lay on the bed, and old momentos were carefully arranged in the corner. A teddy bear sat on the window sill, and Alex's heart twisted. Ashiel. She had raised him here once, under the guidance of the sheriff; those memories felt like they were from eons ago. Life had felt so much more simpler then.

"It's just like you left it." Jody's voice came from behind her, and Alex jumped in surprise. "I haven't touched a thing, you know," the woman said as she leaned up against the doorframe. "I guess I had always hoped you two would come back."

"He's in a better place now." The words stuck in her throat, and the ex-angel desperately shut out the thoughts of the orphan's fate during the fall, consoling herself in the fact that, if something had happened to him, she would know. Deep down inside, she would know. "Ezekiel found him a family."

Recognition danced across the sheriff's face at the name, reminding Alex that the two had met long ago. However, all she said was, "Well, good for him."

"Ezekiel's done a lot for me," Alex quietly admitted. "Ever since I became an angel, he's been there when I've needed him. I don't think I could ask for a better friend." Her gaze turned to the room, and she let her shoulders fall in weariness. "He's always come through for me, and I hope that one day I can do the same for him."
Silence followed her words, and Alex heard Jody shifted behind her. "I'll let you get some sleep. Goodnight, Alex."

Footsteps retreated, and Alex quietly echoed her. "Night, Jody." She crossed the room to the bed and, too tired to change, she crawled beneath the sheets and welcomed the warm wave of sleep as it washed over her.

Sunlight woke her, and Alex blinked open her eyes. She wrapped the comforter tighter around her body, unwilling to roll over and check the time. Her arm ached with stiffness, and Alex opened and closed her fingers, grimacing at the memory of how the bone had snapped beneath Crowley's hold.

The anger and humiliation that accompanied the recollection left her wide awake, and the ex-angel rolled over to find her phone. It had fallen to the floor, and she groaned as she reached down to pick it up, returning slightly dizzy as the blood rushed to her brain. It was almost 10:30.

Alex jumped up, surprised to find she had slept in so late; Mills had said they were leaving for the locker early in the morning. "Jody?" She pulled on a sweatshirt as she hurried downstairs. "Jody?"

"You're up." The sheriff was sitting in the the living room, dressed in her tan and brown uniform. "I thought I was going to have to leave without you."

"I thought we were leaving at eight." Alex drew in a deep breath to calm her racing heart, and her head tipped to one side. "Why didn't you wake me?"

"Something came up. Remember those disappearances in Hartford I mentioned last night? Well, there was another one." Jody pulled out her phone. "I got a call saying a guy had witnessed someone lifting up an SUV to nab a girl, and they sent me this." She turned the phone so Alex could see the picture of the large, heavy car laying on its side, glass decorating the ground like snow. "I gave the Winchesters a call this morning, so they're on their way up to take a look." Alex didn't say anything, and the sheriff stuck her phone back into her pocket. "I'm on my way to the crime scene now. You want to come along? Sure could use the pair of extra eyes."

"I don't … I don't have any dress clothes," Alex started, but Jody shook her head.

"Don't worry about it. You're my guest." Jody crossed over to the kitchen, and Alex pulled out her phone. She had received a text from Castiel informing her that he was going to work and hoping she had a good day, and she quickly echoed back his wish before hesitantly adding, Apparently there's been weird things happening in town. Jody called the Winchesters, and they're on their way up. I promise I won't get involved. I'll be back as soon as Jody can get me in to see Bobby's things.

She stuck her phone back into her pocket when Jody reappeared, and she pulled open the front door. "Alright. Let's get going then."

Alex followed Jody under the yellow police tape and into the parking lot. The overturned SUV was in the far corner, and Alex lagged behind to stare as Jody went to talk with her fellow officers. They were from the Sioux Falls department; Alex recognized several faces. She wandered closer to the car, careful not to get too close to the forensics team.

"Honor Kugler." Jody Mills walked up to her, a frown on her face. "This is definitely out of our jurisdiction."
Tires squealed as a car pulled up, and Alex glanced over her shoulder, not sure if she was unnerved or relieved at the sight of the black Impala. "Well, good thing the specialists are here."

Dean's eyes lit up in surprise when he saw her, and he ducked under the police tape. "Sheriff," he greeted, giving Jody a hug. "Laying off the blind dates I hope."

"Yeah. You bite your tongue, boy," Mills warned teasingly before leaning up to hug Sam as well.

Dean chuckled, and his attention turned back to Alex. "Hey. I thought you had sworn off hunting. Where's Cas?"

"He's back home. And I'm not here to hunt; I'm here on different business. I'm only here right now before Jody wanted an extra pair of eyes before you guys got here. You made good time, by the way."

Dean shrugged, and Sam motioned to the SUV behind them as a tow truck backed up to haul it away. "So?"

"So. Car was right over there, ass over teakettle. Now, normally, if somebody would tell me that one guy lifted an SUV, I'd tell him to take a flying leap, but after what I've seen…"

"Nothing's impossible," Sam finished with a nod, and the Sheriff agreed with a worldless noise of affirmation.

"And this matches up with the other missing how?" Dean asked.

"Well, four abductions, strong evidence left at every scene — literally. The first to disappear was a pastor. Door of his study was punched in. And then, the next two — an engaged couple — their locked bedroom window was ripped open. And then, we have our waitress here with the topsy-turvy ride."

Jody jerked her thumb back towards the car, and Sam's gaze followed her motions. "Any connections between them?"

"Yeah. They were all members of Good Faith Church here. My, uh, my church group back in Sioux Falls was in a tizzy over it." Her gaze narrowed defensively when Dean hummed. "What?"

The Winchester shrugged. "I didn't peg you for churchy."

"Yeah, you know … choking in the ladie room floor cause of witchcraft kind of makes a higher power seem relevant."

Sam cleared his throat, his large hands sliding into his pockets as he adjusted his stance. "Jody, are you sure you're, uh, ready to jump back in the fray?"

Alex, who had been standing patiently at the sheriff's side, scoffed loudly at the idea of Jody Mills shying away from anything. "This wackadoo stuff keeps coming," Jody stated firmly. "The more I know, better armed I'll be."

"Okay, so we have missing church folk and super strength," Sam began, turning to face his brother. "Maybe angels harvesting vessels? Could be a Buddy Boyle type thing."

Alex frowned; that was the second time she had heard that name. "Wait, what, who? What do you mean 'harvesting'?"
"We'll explain later," Sam promised her. "Jody, you said there was a witness?"

"Yeah, more or less." Jody Mills pointed towards the restaurant through which the latest victim had been employed. "He's in there. I'll introduce you." She waved the two brothers after her, and Alex fell in step behind Sam.

The Winchesters sat down in a booth just inside the doors while Jody went off to get their witness, and Alex pulled up a nearby chair. She watched as the sheriff stopped beside a bedraggled man, and the two of them returned to the booth. Jody sat down across from Sam and Dean, and the man quietly followed suit. "Okay, Slim." Jody folded her hands on the table. "My friends here want to talk to you about the missing girl."

"Honor." The man cast a quick look up at Dean, and then to Alex. "Her name was Honor. Nice girl. Always left me meatloafs."

"Slim," Sam began, "why don't you tell us what you saw last night?"

"I heard a big noise, got woke, and there's somebody over there lifting a car up. Like this." The homeless man lifted up his arm to imitate hoisting a car up and lifting it above his head with ease. His eyes were wide, the fear and disbelief still fresh in his mind.

Dean nodded, understanding what Slim was trying to communicate. "And did you happen to see who it was?"

Slim shook his head. "I was too far," he admitted gruffly. "But I saw a light go off."

"A light?" Alex and Sam asked at the same time, and the ex-angel immediately fell silent to let the fake FBI agent have the floor. "A white light?" Sam expounded.

Once again, the man shook his head. "Blue. Blue-like fire. But not. Then she was — she wasn't there."

Alex chanced a look over at Dean. Blue fire would almost surely rule out angels, but Slim's information was still too vague to have any real leads. "Could you think of anything else?" Dean asked, but when the man firmly shook his head for the third time in a row, he relented. "Okay. Well … Slim, thank you for your time." He reached into his wallet and pulled out a $20 bill, and Slim's eyes went wide in surprise at the generosity.

Alex watched him walk away before she got up and slid into the booth next to Jody Mills. "Okay, so … not angels," she began. "Any more ideas?"

"Could be a ton of things." Dean folded up his wallet and shoved it back into his pocket. "We need more info. Has anybody talked to the victims' families?" he asked Jody.

The sheriff shook her head. "It's next on my list."

"Okay. And you said that they were all part of the same church?" When Jody agreed, Dean turned to his brother. "Ready to get your worship on?"

Jody nudged Alex in the thigh, and the young girl got up to let the sheriff out of the booth. "You going with me or Sam and Dean?" Jody asked, and Alex looked over at the two Winchesters as they rose to their feet.

"I'll go with them," she decided. "You'll get more done on your own, and it's not like we'll be fighting anything, so I won't technically be hunting. It's just a church."
Forty five minutes later, Alex found herself trailing behind Sam and Dean through the hallways of Good Faith Church. "We hope you enjoyed the tour," their red-headed guide chirped as she led the way into the office from which they had first started. She sat down behind her desk as Alex and the brothers took their seats across from her, and she asked, "Any questions before we get you boys registered?"

"Uh, yeah, uh, look, umm Ms. Futchko —"

"Oh please," the woman interrupted Sam quickly, "Bonnie will do just fine."

"Bonnie," Sam repeated. "Okay, um, we … love the church. We do. But … well, we've heard that a few members have gone missing, and, to be honest … that kind of scares us." He looked over at Dean and Alex, and Alex gave a quick nod of agreement.

Bonnie's blue eyes softened in sympathy. "Let me assure you, with our increased security, Good Faith has never been safer." Her puppy-sweet eyes turned to Alex, and the ex-angel let her gaze fall to her lap. "And those people who have gone missing, well, they are front and center in our prayers."

"What a relief."

"Now, you must have been, uh, close to them."

Bonnie matched Dean's expression with a genuine smile of her own. "Well, we do share the A.P.U. bond," she agreed with a nod.

"A.P.U.?" Alex repeated. She cast a look around the office, searching for anything that might give away the acronym's meaning, but there was nothing on the pristine white walls.

"Our chastity group," Bonnie explained cheerily. "'Abstinence Purifies Us.'"

"Oh. W-wow." The surprise in Sam's voice was evident, and he quickly did his best to hide it. "You mind if we sit in on that, maybe see if it's for us?"

The woman's voice was full of sympathy, but it remained light and cheery all the same. "I'm afraid it's members only. I'm sorry, but it can get pretty personal."

Sam and Dean exchanged looks. "Then count us in."

"Well. I'll be a squirrel in a skirt."

"You will be back in a jiff with the papers."

She hurried over to an office door and disappeared inside, and Alex could hear the creak of filing cabinet doors. "Really?" she scoffed over at Sam. "A chastity group? With this one?" she jerked a thumb over at Dean, and Dean grunted in agreement.

Sam's eyes widened in exasperation. "Listen, if all the members are in A.P.U. then maybe whatever took them is stalking virgins."

"And that Slim guy said he thought he saw fire," Dean finished. "So, what are you thinking? Dragons?"

"Mnhmm."

Sam looked up, and whispered, "Shh," as the office door opened and closed, announcing the return of Bonnie Futchko.
"Alright." Bonnie distributed three clipboards to each of them, a wide grin upon her face. "You can just sign there, and your purification can begin."

"'Purity pledge'?" Sam read, and Alex scoffed under her breath as she skimmed the document in front of her, clicking the pen in and out as she shook her head.

Bonnie nodded. "It's a commitment to your virginity." she chirped.

Dean put his clipboard down on his lap. "I don't think we can really unring that bell," he joked. "You know what I mean?"

Bonnie's eyes widened in surprise. "O-Oh. I see. Well … if you just ask for God's forgiveness for your sins and make a new vow of chastity, well, then, you'll be born again as a virgin in his eyes."

"So, you just hit the 'virginity do-over' button, and all is good with the man upstairs?"

"It's not a button." The woman looked down at Dean in pure shock. "And … this isn't just a piece of paper. I mean, this is your clean slate, your chance to be a virgin until marriage."

"Oh. Well, I think I'm a little past all this, then." Alex slid the pen into the top of the clipboard as she looked up at Bonnie. "Can I still come to the meeting, though?"

"You're married?"

Alex shrugged, casting Dean a quick look out of the corner of her eye. "If by 'married' you mean I'm in a covenantal union as dictated by the culture and tradition under which I was subjected, then yes."

Her words were convoluted, and the blank look in Bonnie's eyes confirmed that it hadn't made much sense. Dean jabbed his elbow into her arm, and Alex jumped in surprise. "Just sign the paper."

Pens scratched on the paper as the two brothers signed their names, and with a roll of her eyes, Alex did the same. She hesitated after her first name, unsure of what to put, and after a moment and a look over at Dean, she put the first name that came to mind. Alex Novak.

She handed the clipboard back to Bonnie, who beamed as she collected them. "Congratulations. You are all virgins."

"Cas is gonna be pleased." Dean's rib had Alex rolling her eyes, and she pushed back her chair to stand up as Bonnie ushered them out of the office. "Alright, meeting's in a few. What's the plan?"

"I'm still confused why I had to be revirginized." Alex smacked Dean on the back of the head before dropping onto a bench across the hall. "My sexual encounters have been a part of a monogamous relationship and within the whole 'angel's version of marriage' deal. I mean, it's kind of weird to take a vow of abstinence after I'm married."

"Don't think about it. No one's taking that shit seriously. Come on, let's go find that meeting." Dean started off down the hall, and with a roll of her eyes, Alex started to follow.

"How long do you think he'll last?" Sam whispered down to her. "Ten bucks he won't last the week."

Alex snickered, and she watched as the oldest Winchester's eyes were drawn to a young woman as she turned the corner. "Yeah right. Fifty says he won't survive the night."

She followed Dean down the hall to the large meeting room Bonnie had showed them during the
tour, eyes carefully scanning their surroundings. A few women were there, and a circle of seven chairs had been set up in the center. A table was at the far side, and Alex inhaled the scent of baked goods emanating from the stack of trays. "Hi, can I help you?" A woman approached, brushing blonde hair up and out of her face as she looked between Alex, Sam, and Dean.

"Uh, hey," Sam held out his hand for the woman to shake. "Um, my name is Sam. This is Alex and my brother Dean. We're, uh, we're new members here."

"Oh." A smile lit up the woman's face. "Well, welcome. My name is Suzy; I'm the group's leader and mentor. When did you join?"

"Well, uh, actually just today." Sam glanced back at his brother as he spoke. "Mind if we sit in?"

"No, no, of course. I'll grab some more chairs." Suzy stepped back, intent on making her way to the stack of metal chairs, but Dean stepped forward to offer his help.

Alex slipped away, and she glanced at the three other strangers that stood around the treat table. They were all female, young, and every once and awhile, one would cast Sam or Dean a look before hurriedly turning back to the group.

The door opened, and Bonnie stepped through, deep in an overly-enthusiastic conversation with another dark-haired lady; they passed Alex by without another look. Before anyone could catch her eye to talk, the ex-angel made her way closer to Sam. "This is weird," she muttered, digging her phone out of her pocket. "I haven't been around this many virgins since grade school."

She smiled at Sam's laughter, and her attention turned to the text that she had received from Castiel. *How are you doing?* it read.

Alex hesitated, unsure of how exactly to reply. *I'm fine,* she ended up typing. *Sure. I'll give you a call tonight if I'm not too busy. Hopefully I'll have it all wrapped up tomorrow.* She locked her phone and made a mental note to talk to Jody Mills about slipping away to find Bobby's locker.

A tap on the shoulder had her looking up, and she followed Sam over to the circle of chairs. She sat down on one side of Dean, shifting closer to the eldest Winchester when a woman immediately took the spot beside her. "Good afternoon, everyone." Suzy sat down at the other end of the circle, and the rest of the woman found their seats. "I thought we'd begin with a silent prayer for our missing friends."

The woman all bowed their heads, and Alex took a moment to count them: six in total. Then she ducked her head and closed her eyes, sending up a quick prayer to her Father that Sam and Dean would kill the dragon quick.

"Amen." Suzy's word signalled the end of the prayer time, and Alex lifted her head. "Now, does anyone have anything that they would like to share?"

The woman next to Sam jumped to her feet, a piece of paper clutched in her hands. "I wrote a new piece of verse," she announced. "It's called 'Sex is a racket, and God's ball is in your court.'"

"And we would love to hear that, Tammy," Suzy agreed, "later. Why don't we hear from our new friends? Sam, what brought you here to reclaim your virginity?"

Sam's eyes opened in surprise at being put on the spot, and he stuttered slightly. "W-Well, I guess because every woman I've … ever …" the Winchester searched for the right words, "had relations with, uh … it … hasn't ended well."
Dean chuckled, amusement sparkling in his green eyes as he looked around the circle. "He ain't lying."

Suzy nodded in understanding, and Alex scoffed under her breath at how much the women around them underestimated the truth in his words. "Thank you for being here, Sam. Stay strong. Stay pure."

The women echoed Suzy's words. "Stay strong, stay pure."

"And you, Dean?" Suzy's eyes turned to the older Winchester. "What set you on the path away from sin?"

"Uh, hard to say, exactly." Dean leaned forward, clasping his hands as he stared at the center of the circle. "Yeah. Sex has always felt — I don't know — good, you know? I mean, really, really good." He looked up at Suzy, and his cheeks took on the faintest hint of pink as he realized where exactly he was, and he quickly added, "Uh, but, uh … sometimes, it just makes you feel bad, you know? You're drunk. You shack up. Then, it's the whole morning thing. You know, 'Hey, that was fun.' And then, 'adios,' you know? Always the adios."

His face took on a wistful expression, and Alex couldn't help but let out a short breath of laughter that she quickly quelled, dropping her head to avoid looks as Dean continued. "But, you know, when you get down to it, what's the big deal, right? I mean, sure, there's the touching and the feeling all of each other, my hands everywhere, tracing every inch of her body, the two of us moving together, pressing and pulling, grinding … then you hit the sweet spot, and everything just builds and builds and builds …"

The woman around them shifted, and Alex distinctively saw one clench her legs tighter together, and before Dean could finish she reached up and smacked him on the back of his head. "Quit it," she scolded. "You're going to give someone an aneurysm." She ducked a half-hearted retaliatory swipe from the Winchester and added, "Βλάκας." Moron.

Dean shot her a quick glare, but he cleared his throat to finish, "Yeah, uh … but the whole thing was just a little too … sticky. So, uh, I got my 'V' card back. The end." He slapped his leg and leaned back in his chair, and Alex shook her head.

"And you, Alex?"

Alex looked up at Suzy in surprise; the group leader had managed to get herself back under control long before the rest. "Me?" she repeated, still sounding surprised even though she knew full well that she was next. "Um … not much of a story here, either." She looked over at Sam, unsure of what to say. "I … It's complicated." She ended with a shrug.

Instead of giving up, Suzy's voice remained gentle and calm. "Just tell it like it is."

"Yeah, just tell it like it is," Dean echoed, and Alex shot him a glare which was met with a grin.

"Um, okay. I … I'm not a virgin, let's get that out of the way. I'm in a committed relationship with a … a man of God. Think marriage without the, uh, the legal intrusions. It's a Biblical union," she quickly added. "We're monogamous, we agreed to stay together for life, we're open about it. We just didn't have the time or resources for the American government hand us a piece of paper, I guess." Alex shrugged, and she cast a quick look around the group. "Maybe it's Biblical in God's eyes, maybe not, but it's all we can do for the moment. Honestly, I'm just here to support my friends." That said, she leaned back in her seat, reaching over to pat Dean on the knee in a gesture to further her intent.
“Is there a reason the two of you haven’t gotten married?” Suzy persisted, and when Alex bit her lip, unsure how to word her answer, she continued, “Many times, unmarried live-in couples are afraid of the commitment.” Her eyes turned to the rest of the circle, addressing them as much as Alex. “Remaining unmarried gives them an easy out in the face of trouble or another suitor.”

The face of Lucifer flashed across her mind, and Alex felt her cheeks flush furiously. “No, no, it’s nothing like that,” she cut in sharply. “It’s nothing like that. It’s just — just a different culture.” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Dean open his mouth, so before he could make her explanation more difficult, she cleared her throat. "Could we, uh, could we maybe hear Tammy's poem?" She knocked Dean in the side of the arm with her elbow. "This one right here is just a sucker for poetry."

The meeting lasted only half an hour, and before long, it was done. After the finishing prayer, Alex folded up her chair and hauled it across the room to stack it alongside everyone else’s. "That was a nice poem," she commented as she hung the chair up on its rack next to Tammy’s. "You a writer, then?"

Tammy's face flushed at the praise. "It's just a hobby. I write one for every meeting." She fumbled through her pockets on a sudden note of inspiration. "I have another one right here if you want me to read it —"

"I'd love to, but I don't have time." Alex glanced back towards where Sam and Dean were talking, heads bowed in conversation. "Maybe next time?"

"Here." A piece of paper was thrust into her hands. "Just take this one from last week. I have copies back at home."

"Uh … thanks." Alex gave a half smile before she turned her back, her feet carrying her towards Sam as she chanced a look down at the crumpled poem. "Sex is a ravenous wolf, threatening to devour the innocent lamb," she read under her breath. "Good God."

Dean was gone by the time she reached the younger Winchester, and Alex looked around. "Where'd Dean go?" she asked half a second before she recognized the tall, broad figure standing next to Suzy.

"He, uh —" Sam cut off as a hand tapped him on the shoulder, and he turned to find Bonnie standing there, a smile upon her face. "Hey."

"So?" Bonnie's hands folded behind her back, an expectant look upon her face, and when Sam only echoed back in confusion, she expounded, "How did you like the meeting?"

"Oh, I-I-I loved it." Sam cleared his throat as he regained his composure. "Yeah. Um, you know, I-I couldn't help but think of those who weren't here."

The woman's face fell in sadness at the thought of her missing friends. "Oh. Honor. She's my favorite."

Her eyes flickered past Sam towards the treat table and hardened, and Alex followed her gaze to where one of the other women — Brenna — was stuffing cookies into her purse. "Would you excuse me?"

Bonnie walked away, and Alex raised her eyebrows as she looked up at Sam, but she didn't have time to speak before Tammy was standing beside her. "Her favorite?" the woman started scornfully. "She has no idea what kind of girl Honor is."

Sam tipped his head as he looked down at her. "You don't say. Uh — Tammy, right? The poet?"

When Tammy nodded in affirmation, Sam turned to face her more fully, curiosity lighting up his
gaze. "Tammy, why don't you tell me what kind of girl Honor is."

"She's a liar." Tammy's eyes narrowed in anger, and she lowered her voice. "She comes to these meetings and pretends she's one of us, but I know the truth. She and Pastor Fred did ... you know what."

"Had sex?" Alex guessed, and Tammy turned to her with a loud "shhh." The ex-angel held up her hands in a quick apology.

"She won't admit it, but I ... I heard them in the back closet. She shouldn't be allowed in the group, let alone being the 'favorite.' I do twice as much; I volunteer, I host the holiday parties at my house — I bake real cookies for the bake sale. Honor just brings Oreos!"

"Oh." Sam glanced past Tammy, and he put a hand on Alex's shoulder. "You know what? Can you excuse us for a second?" He motioned for Alex to follow, and she peered past the ranting woman to see Dean approaching.

A large grin split the Winchester's face as he stopped in front of them. "Guess who's taking the teacher home," he crowed before he put on the most serious face he could muster. "Research."

Sam scoffed in disbelief. "You really think you're gonna hit that? Dean, she's the chastity counselor."

Dean's grin was back. "Yeah. I know. What about you?" He looked over at Tammy, who was waiting for their return with crossed arms. "Any luck?"

"You mean am I actually working?" Sam asked, and his shoulders fell in exasperation when Dean shrugged. "As a matter of fact, yes, I am."

"Alright, well, good luck with that." Dean handed Sam the keys to the Impala and patted his younger brother on the shoulder before he hurried back over to the door where Suzy was waiting. He greeted her with a smile, but the words passed between them were lost to the chattering in the room.

Alex and Sam turned back to Tammy, and Sam cleared his throat. "Hey, sorry. So, where were we?"

"Honor is going to hell."

"Right." Alex shoved her hands into the pockets of her jacket, her lips set into a tight line. "Listen, we have a meeting with a, uh, realtor in about ten minutes. Can we finish this next week?"

"I guess." Tammy's eyes followed the two as Alex led the way away, and the ex-angel didn't stop until they were outside the church.

"Well." Alex circled around to the passenger side of the Impala and waited for the Winchester to unlock the car. "Looks like dragons might be out of the cards. They supposed to take virgins, not just self-professed ones." She slid into the seat and slammed the door behind her. "So, uh, now what?"

Sam looked up from his phone. "Huh? Oh, uh, Jody's got us a room at the motel down the street. She says she's there now." He tossed his phone onto the seat and started the car. "We'll head there now, see what we can dig up until Dean gets back."

Alex nodded. "Okay, sounds good. So who's this Boyle guy?" she asked, leaning forward in guarded curiosity. "He an angel?"

"We don't think so." Sam turned the car onto the street and sped up. "All we know is that he's a preacher who's trying to find angels vessels by getting religious people to let them in. And it seems
"Great," Alex slumped down in her seat as they sped through a light. "Hopefully Kevin can get those translations going so we can reverse Metatron's spell." She looked up when Sam didn't respond, but the grim look on his face said it all. "What?"

"Kevin … he doesn't think the spell can be reversed. He's still working on it, but we might need to find another way."

"We definitely need to find some way," Alex grumbled. "Nothing spells peace like an entire army of scared, angry, and powerful soldiers let loose onto the earth."

The Impala rolled to a stop, and Alex got out and followed Sam across the parking lot and up to room fourteen of MacCarty's Scottish Motel. "Hey," Sam greeted as he stepped inside, and Alex echoed him as she caught sight of Jody seated at the round wooden table on the other side of the room.

The sheriff looked up from her laptop as Alex kicked the door shut behind her. "How was church?"

"Well, it turned into confessional." Sam crossed the room and sat down across from Mills, and Alex followed suit. "Apparently, two of our vics, Honor and Pastor Fred, did the dirty."

"Oh, well, they're not the only ones." Jody pushed her laptop away from her slightly as she met Sam's gaze. "Barb Blaton, our missing bride to be — her mom said she heard Barb and her fiancé in Barb's bedroom."

Sam lifted an eyebrow. "Going at it?" he guessed.

"Well, she said she heard sex noises, then Barb crying, then Neil telling Barb that it didn't count because it was under thirty seconds." Jody paused to let the Winchester chuckle before finishing, "And then, two hours later, she heard a smash and saw a flash of light under the door."

Alex leaned forward her in seat. "Let me guess. Blue light?"

The sheriff nodded. "You know, I'm thinking whatever this thing is, it's not going after virgins, even born-again virgins."

"It's taking virgins who break their chastity vow. So dragons are off the list."

"I'm sor — dragons?" Jody looked up in shock, her blue eyes flickering between Sam and Alex. "Those are a thing?"

"Yeah," Alex agreed, and Sam added, "Too many things are a thing." He got to his feet and pulled his phone out of his pocket. "I'm going to go get my laptop and give Dean a call. He should know."

"Probably." Alex watched the Winchester exit the motel room before adding, "Although knowing him it's way too late. Dean took the chastity counselor home," she explained to Jody, settling down in her seat with a shrug. "Sam's gonna owe my fifty bucks soon."

The sheriff's eyebrows lifted in surprised. "You placed a bet?"

"Oh please." Alex scoffed in amusement. "It's normal. Apparently they placed bets on getting me laid a couple years ago."

She fell silent as the door reopened and Sam stepped through, his backpack over his shoulder and his
phone up to his ear. He back down and dropped his laptop onto the table, his angular face twisted in exasperation. "Dean, come on, call me," he insisted, and then he hung up and dropped his phone onto the table.

Jody looked up at the Winchester, a half-smile on her face. "You know, for being born again today, you sure look like crap."

Sam chuckled, and he shook his head before he looked up, interest sparkling in his eyes as a thought came to mind. "Wait a second. Did you … get —"

"Born again?" When Sam agreed, Jody laughed. "Oh, Sam. I don't make promises I can't keep." Amusement lit up her eyes before her face once again grew serious. "It's just … I enjoy church. I mean, after … after Bobby, Crowley … I needed something that made sense to me — you know, comfort, I guess."

The sheriff shrugged, but Sam nodded in understanding. "Yeah," he agreed, "I guess we're all looking for that."

"Except those that got it." Jody looked between Sam and Alex's puzzled faces, and she smiled. "Come on. You and Dean? The three of you? That's something special, don't you think?"

"It's certainly something." Alex rose to her feet, laughing to herself as she thought about Jody's words. "Listen. Is anyone hungry? I think I'm going to run down to the store and pick up some stuff." She shoved her phone into the back of her pocket before circling around the table, pausing briefly pat Jody on the shoulder. "Any snack requests? I'll pick up some pork rinds, since I bet Dean's going to be hungry later."

"I think we're good." Sam barely looked up from his laptop, and Jody's shoulders rose and fell in a shrug. "See you in a few."

"In a few," Alex echoed back as she made her way out of the front door of the motel. The air outside had a slight nip to it, and the ex-angel shoved her hands into her pockets as she made her way down to the sidewalk. There had been a gas station just a few blocks away, far within walking distance. She inhaled deeply, taking in the South Dakota air that somehow still felt so familiar even after all these years.

She turned the corner onto the store-lined street of Hartford's main town, shielding her eyes as a car rushed by, pulling a cloud of dust and debris with it.

A crash came from down the alley between two store fronts, and the ex-angel paused, her grey eyes turning towards the sound. The alleyway appeared empty, and Alex's hand instinctively came up to rest on the hilt of a knife, fully on edge and aware of her humanity.

But the brick-lined backstreet remained silent, and after a minute or two the young hunter turned to go. The second her back was turned, however, the noise came again. "Hell no." Alex pulled out her knife and flipped it open as she stepped in between the two brick buildings. "Hello?" she called. "Who's there?"

Five steps carried her past the dumpster and face to face with the perpetrator. With a screech, the tabby cat streaked past her, disappearing around the corner. "Dammit." Alex shook her head, her eyes rolling in disgust at the cliche of her scare. She sheathed the knife and shoved it back into her pocket, but before she could turn around, the alley lit up into a brilliant blue light.

A figure was pressing at her back, and Alex instinctively threw her elbow backwards, but a hand
touched her shoulder, and ice rushed through her veins, painfully cold. Darkness pressed in, and Alex's eyes rolled into the back of her head as she fell to the ground, unconscious.

Her eyes flickered open to darkness. The air was moist, the floor slightly damp, and Alex reached up to soothe her aching head. "What the hell?" She pushed herself to her trembling feet, and as her eyes adjusted, her surroundings became clear. The floor was stone, and so were the walls that curved upwards into an arching ceiling. She was definitely underground, no doubt about it; the ex-angel could taste it in the air. "Hello?" she called, and she took a step forward, ears straining as she sought to hear anything that might be near her. She reached up to touch her back pocket, but her knife was gone. "Dammit."

There were voices up ahead, and Alex fell silent as she dropped low into a crouch. They didn't seem to be approaching, so she began to move forward, her canvas shoes and careful footfalls silent on the stone.

A large room opened up ahead, and the voices grew louder. They were rushed, filled with fear, and Alex straightened up as she stepped into view.

There were four; two females, two males. The older man was laying on the ground, eyes closed and chest barely rising as he breathed. The other three were huddled in the corner, whispering fiercely among themselves. One of the woman caught sight of Alex, and she let out a high-pitched scream. "Who are you?" The man spun around, hands going out to protect the women next to him.

Alex held out her hands in innocence as she shifted backwards. "It's okay. My name is Alex. Who are you?" The answer was obvious, but the question started the conversation that she needed. "Where are we?"

"I don't know. I — I'm Neil, this is my fiancé Barb." Neil looked down at the man on the floor. "That's Pastor Fred." He watched as Alex crossed the room and and knelt down beside the man. "He's starving to death."

"How long has he been down here?" Alex placed her hand upon the thin man's chest, and his eyes fluttered open. "It's okay," she promised. "We're going to get you somewhere safe."

"Somewhere safe?" Neil scoffed loudly, and Alex got back up to her feet. "We've been here for days! No food, no water! Nothing!"

The ceiling creaked above them, and Alex looked up in surprise. Her fists tightened at her side, and she tensed as she traced the movement across the length of the ceiling, and it stopped near a ladder that lead upwards. The ex-angel raised a finger to her lips, motioning for the others to be quiet as she crept towards the ladder. The figure above them had stopped by the hatch, and Alex picked up a lantern that was laying on the table; not the best weapon, but the only one around.

The hatch unlocked, and a blue light filled the air, a hot blue flame that had Alex shielding her face. Something collided into her side, strong and solid, and it sent her flying across the wall into the stone. There was screaming, and the flame was gone within seconds. Alex struggled back to her feet, but the hatch was already closed. She spun around to make sure her four companions were okay. Honor, Neil, and Barb were huddled in the corner.

Pastor Fred was nowhere.

"Where'd he go?" Honor's voice was high with hysteria, and Alex's hair stood on end.
She bolted over to the ladder and hauled herself up, ignoring how the metal creaked and groaned under her weight. "Hey!" She pounded on the metal hatch, and the sound echoed through the underground room. "Hey!"

The air was filled with a horrifying scream, a noise that went straight down to her bones, and Alex redoubled her efforts. "Hey!" she yelled. "You son of a bitch! I'm going to fucking kill you, you understand?"

"Oh my God!" Honor cowered in the corner, her face screwed up in horror as the screams faded, and Alex slid down the ladder with an angry curse. "We're all going to die."

"We're not going to die." Alex felt up her pockets, but she had nothing on her. "We're getting out of here. I've got three people out looking for me, and they'll find us. And we can hold off this bitch off from here until then. We need weapons; pipes, bricks, anything that we can use."

"T-There's stuff in the tunnels." Barb's voice was shaking as she tightly gripped her fiancé's hand, and Alex nodded in understanding.

"Good. If that thing starts coming back, you call from me. I'll go see what I can find." With one last look towards the now silent room above their heads, Alex hurried back into the dark.

She followed the twisting tunnels as they wound beneath the ground, a network of passageways that always led to one of two options; either back to the main room or a dead end. The light didn't reach far, and Alex felt her way along the walls with the tips of her fingers, eyes straining against the darkness for items on the ground.

A cry of alarm had her sprinting back to the main room, and she slid to a halt as she recognized exactly what had caused the ruckus. Two figures lay on the ground, unconscious, one male, one female. "Damn." Alex crossed over to the room and nudged at the broad-shouldered man. "Dean? Get up, you dumbass." She turned to look back at Honor, about to ask a question, but her gaze was pulled over to where Barb was dragging her fingernails down the rugged stone. "What the hell are you doing?"

Alex jumped over Suzy and grabbed Barb's wrist, pulling her away from the now bloodied wall. The woman's nails were broken and bloodstained, and Alex scowled in disgust. "I'm so thirsty." Barb's voice shook as she stared down at the oozing blood. "So thirsty. There has to be a way out!"

"There is a way out. We'll be out soon." Alex nudged Barb towards Neil, who was standing near the rickety picnic table. "You just have to be patient." She returned to Dean's side to find both of the newcomers slowly regaining consciousness. "Hey. Steady there, cowboy."

"Where are we?" Dean jerked into consciousness at Alex's voice, and the ex-angel dropped down onto one knee to steady him.

"Hell." Neil's voice was grim, and Alex scoffed.

"Come on, get up." She helped Dean to his feet before turning to help Suzy. "So let me guess. You two broke your vows?" The sheepish look on Suzy's face had Alex turning to Dean with a grin. "Looks like Sam owes me fifty bucks."

"Shut up." Dean looked around the room, and his eyes came to rest on the hatch high above their heads.

Alex chuckled and watched as Dean climbed the ladder and pounded his fist against the hatch. "I tried that, by the way."
"We tried, too," Neil added scathingly as Dean rested his shoulder against the metal and pushed upwards, but the Winchester's efforts were to no avail. "There's no escape."

"Are we going to run out of air?" Suzy's voice was shaking, either out of fear or cold, and Alex could only give a small, half-comforting shrug.

It was Neil who responded, his eyes dark. "I don't think so. Somebody wants us to die nice and slow."

"And then it's going to take us, just like it took Pastor Fred."

Dean looked down at Honor's words, and his green eyes flickered around the room until they came to rest on Alex. "What took him?" he asked, ignoring Neil's response.

Alex understood; her analysis would be the most helpful. "We don't know," she began. "It's whatever put us down here, thought. I didn't get a good look; it came in a flash of blue fire, and then Pastor Fred was gone. He's definitely dead by now."

"Son of a bitch." Dean jumped down the ladder, his eyes flashing with anger.

"Dean," Suzy stepped forward to gently touch the Winchester on the shoulder, her voice soft and quiet. "Maybe God wants us down here — because of what we did."

Dean scoffed. "Trust me. This is not God's work — son of a —" The Winchester frantically patted down his jeans, clearly looking for something. "They took my phone," he cursed before pulling out a second, smaller device. "Luckily, I keep a spare."

"There's a grate against that wall." Alex pointed towards a large pipe barricaded with iron bars. "Might be the best place to try for a signal."

She followed Dean over to the pipe and watched as he stuck his arm through, eyes narrowed in concentration. "Come on, bars," he muttered under his breath, waving his phone around in the air.

He must have got something, because he suddenly leaned forward. "Sam?" he yelled. "Sammy! Hey, listen to me! Whatever it is, it got us — me and Pip. We're underground. We're in some sort of a tunnel system," The words were spilling from his mouth as he tried to cram as much information into each second before the connection was lost. The whistle of a train filled the air, and Dean raised his voice even more to be heard. "We're by a train station — Sam!"

Dean pulled away to look down at his phone. "Dammit," he cursed, and he shoved his phone back into his pocket in disgust. "I lost him."

Alex frowned at the news. "Well, hopefully he at least got some of the message." She turned back to look at the other four prisoners; Neil and Barb were in the far corner, whispering among themselves.

"Don't, Neil," Alex distinctly heard Barb begging. "Please, don't." She fell silent as Neil shushed her, and Alex and Dean exchanged cautious looks.

"Don't what, Neil?" Dean called, and the other man's sharp gaze swung over to them.

"Just mind your beeswax, pal."

Dean's eyes lit up at the disrespect he was being shown, and he stalked over to the younger gentleman. "Hey. Hey!" He poked Neil in the chest when he rolled his eyes. "Listen, we're all stuck down here together. So you got something to say, you say it."
Neil's eyes widened slightly at Dean's tone. "Okay, look," he started hotly, "whatever that fireball thing was, it's taking the weakest, and I am not gonna be next. So, the way I see it, her leg's busted anyways." He waved a hand in Honor's direction, and Honor let out a horrified gasp. "We serve her up. It could buy us some time."

"Screw you, Neil," Honor spat, and a thud echoed through the room as Dean shoved Neil up against the hard brick wall.

"Busted leg?" he snarled, and Alex took a step closer, ready to intervene if it became necessary. "Try a sprained ankle, okay? Nobody's serving anybody up!" His voice grew loud and authoritative, but Neil refused to back down.

"We are under the gallows, all of us! Give it Honor. It might save the rest of our necks, unless you have a better plan."

"Maybe I do." Dean's voice grew quiet, but it lost none of its intensity. "Maybe we'll give him you." He paused, head tipping as he narrowed his eyes, and Neil looked away. "Oh, what, you don't like that idea? Then shut up!" He pushed Neil back one more time to emphasize his point before he spun around and stalked away.

Alex followed him to the other side of the room with one last dark glance towards the other man. "Sam will find us soon," she promised, leaning her shoulder up against the brick wall as she looked up at Dean. "Did he manage to get a hold of you before you got here?"

"Yeah." Dean crossed his arms as he watched Barb slowly approach her sullen fiancé. "He said that this thing wasn't dragons because all of these guys broke their vows. Which is why we're here. Except I don't get why you're here," he added after a second.

"I have no idea." Alex shrugged, her shoulder scraping against the rough stone. "Maybe because I wasn't serious about it when I made the vow? It's impossible to say at this point without knowing what it is we're dealing with — a pagan god, most likely. It's clearly got a thing for virgins," she explained when Dean lifted his eyebrows. "What else likes them? I don't know. All I know is that Cas is going to be pissed if he finds out about this."

An hour passed — or at least, Alex thought it was an hour. Dean's phone had died, and there was no real way to measure the time. Neil hadn't spoken since his spat with the Winchester, and everyone was huddled in silence. Alex sat on the wooden table, legs crossed as she toyed half-heartedly with her shoelace, shivering slightly at the cold. "Sam's going to get here soon."

Dean didn't say anything, but Neil looked up with a scowl. Alex locked gazes with him, daring the younger man to speak up. When he didn't, she dropped her gaze back down to her lap. She heard Dean get up and cross the room, and she watched him out of the corner of her eyes as he looked thoughtfully up at the ladder.

Suzy and Honor were sitting behind Alex, and Dean's movement sparked a conversation between them. "You broke too, huh?" Honor whispered.

Suzy shifted in her seat, and her voice took on an embarrassed tone. "Guess I'm not as strong as I thought I was," she murmured back.

"God forgives. You told me that yourself."

Honor was cut off by a loud, metallic bang high above their heads, and Alex jumped to her feet.
There was someone above them, trying to get in. "Told you!" Neil jumped to his feet, his voice high in a panicked shriek. "It's back for one of us. What are you gonna do now? Right, you should have listened to me —"

"Shut up!" Dean snapped over at him, and Alex moved over to stand at Dean's side. "Shh!"

"Jody!" A muffled voice could barely be heard, and a grin split Alex's face. That was Sam. If there was a response from the sheriff, it was too distant for her to hear. "Dean!" Sam pounded on the hatch. "We're here! We're gonna get you out!"

"Sammy?" Dean scaled the ladder and banged on the metal. "Sammy? Sammy!"

"Hey, Dean, we're here!" Sam repeated loudly. "We're gonna get you out —" Suddenly the younger Winchester cut off, and Alex tipped her head in worry when his voice didn't return.

"Sammy?" Dean threw his fist up against the metal hatch. "Are you still there?"

Alex pulled herself up the ladder opposite of Dean, resting one rung above him so her face was just below his. From where she was, she could hear the sounds of a scuffle in the room above. "Shit," she cursed, hooking one arm around the ladder to anchor herself as she pressed up against the cold roof. "We have to get this open."

"Sammy!" Dean continued his assault on the door, pressing his full weight upwards in an attempt to dislodge the door.

"Dean!" Alex's fingers traced a rusty screw. "Is there a screwdriver down there?" she yelled down to Honor. A quick and hard thump on her arm conveyed Dean's appreciation at her idea, and he was quick to echo her request.

"Hey." Honor pulled a pair of scissors out from the battered metal box that sat on the table. "From the first aid kit."

Alex slid down the ladder to retrieve them, tucking the metal into her pocket as she crossed back over and ascended the ladder. "Here!" She handed the twin blades to Dean, wincing as she heard a blood-curdling scream from above. "Jody!" Alex pressed her hands against the hatch, gritting her teeth as she tried to undo the screws with her mind, almost as if she still had her grace, but the effort was useless. "Dammit!"

One screw fell to the ground, landing with a thud on the straw-covered floor, and the hatch jiggled when Alex pushed upwards. Another screw fell, and Alex redoubled her efforts while Dean started his work on the third and final screw.

It came loose with a clang, and Alex thrust the hatch upwards off of its hinges. With Dean's help, she was able to push it off to the side and scramble free. The ex-angel spun around, eyes narrowed as she adjusted to the darkness of the barn they were in.

Bonnie stood across the room, her eyes glowing with fury as she stood over Sam, who was laying flat on his back. "Hey!" Alex and Dean yelled the word at the same time, and Alex broke into a sprint across the straw-covered ground.

She slid to a stop as the woman's face exploded into blue flames before crumpling to the ground to reveal Jody, one hand clutching her side, and the other a blood-soaked wooden stake. "What happened?" Dean was at his brothers side in a moment, quickly checking him over for any sign of injury.
"You're hurt." Alex stepped forward, grey eyes widening at the blood that soaked Jody's shirt. "Dean!"

"It's okay." The sheriff's voice was breathy, and she dropped the stake onto the ground as she looked Dean and Alex over. "Flesh wound. Glad you two are okay."

"Yeah, of course." Alex nudged the corpse that lay at her feet. "So, what exactly was this chick? It looks like you figured it out just in time," she added as she motioned to the stake in Jody's hands. "Pagan god?"

"Vesta." Sam pushed himself to his feet, casting a glance towards where the other four captives were hauling themselves out of the hatch. "How's everyone?"

"Shaken, but okay." Dean followed Sam's gaze over his shoulder. "They'll be fine with a bit of rest and therapy." He grimaced and reached up to touch his shoulder. "Dammit, I'm not as young as I used to be."

"Guys, I really think we should get going." Alex pressed a hand up against Jody's shoulder as blood seeped through the sheriff's fingers. "We need to get her to a hospital now."

"Hey. Hey!" Dean's voice grew deep as he turned towards Honor, Neil and Barb. "You guys stay here — we're going to call the cops, but we have to get her to the hospital."

"Wait, wait, y-you can't just leave us here!" Neil hurried over to them, but stopped short as his eyes came to rest on Bonnie's body on the ground. "Oh my God!"

There was a shriek as Honor and Barb noticed it too, and Sam stepped forward, hands out to try and call them down. "It's okay, it's okay. No one's going to hurt you anymore, alright? We just need you to wait for the cops. Can you do that?"

"Y-Y-Yeah."

The words were stuttered, but the meaning was clear, and Sam turned back to Jody. "Come on. Let's go." He held out a hand to help support her as he lead the way out, and Alex hurried in front of them to get the Impala door.

The air had already turned cold and dark, the sliver of a moon providing little light, and the ex-angel nearly fell as she tripped over a root that was partially embedded in the hard, dry dirt. The only thing that caught her was the dead, stunted tree, and pain ran up her arm as the rough bark sliced through the palm of her hand. "Son of a …" Alex bit her teeth together in frustration as she regained her balance before crossing over to the Impala. "Here." She yanked open the door so Sam could help Jody in before she turned her attention to her hand. She couldn't make out much in the dark, but the pain and the wetness told her it was bleeding a little.

"You okay?" Light had her flinching away, and she squinted up at Sam to find him looking down at her with a flashlight.

"I cut my hand open." She lifted her hand up into the light to show off the thin wound. "It's nothing bad, it's just getting everywhere." She looked back towards the barn at the sound of footsteps through the grass. "Pop the trunk and I'll get a bandage out."

"Sure thing. Oh, uh, here." Sam dug through his pocket to pull out Alex's phone. "We found this an alley by the motel. You must have dropped it."

Alex accepted it with a grin, which quickly faded into a frown. "Thanks." Three new messages.
They were all from Castiel. The ex-angel hurried around to the trunk to grab a bandage before she slid into the seat next to Jody. "Here." On a second thought, Alex pressed the white fabric into Jody's shoulder. "Use this."

Jody grunted in thanks, and Alex pressed her hand into her jeans as she looked down at her phone. *I'm off of work. Can I call you tonight?*

*Hello?*

*Alex? Is everything okay?*

"Shit." Best that she could, Alex typed out a one-handed response. *Hey, it's okay. Can I give you a call in a bit?*

The response came back almost instantaneously. Sam said you were missing. I thought you said you weren't going to hunt.

*I wasn't hunting. Sam and Dean killed the thing, and I just lost my phone. I'll tell you more later. I have to go.* Alex tucked her phone into her jacket pocket as the Impala roared to life and sped away back towards town.

Eight hours later, Alex found herself standing in the Winchesters' motel room, her bag in her hands as she stood beside Jody Mills. The sheriff's eye was black and blue, and her left arm was in a sling, but she was alive, and she was packing up her things off of the far bed.

The motel door opened, and Alex looked up to see the two brothers enter. Sam looked between the two of them, his eyes resting on the bags in their hands. "Heading out?"

"Yeah." Jody slung her bag over her good shoulder as she turned to face Sam and Dean. "I'd tell you boys to stay out of trouble, but what's the point?" She stretched out her arm to give Sam a hug, letting out a small "ow" as the Winchester pressed up against her bad shoulder.

Dean stepped forward to give the sheriff his own hug. "Thanks for bailing me out," he said as he pulled away.

"Oh, what can I say? I'm getting the hang of this." Jody Mills smiled up at Dean before turning her gaze over to Alex. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah, I'm all packed." Alex adjusted the strap of her bag as she looked up at Sam. "I'll keep in touch, okay? See you around." She shot Dean a small smile before she followed Jody across the room.

"Drive safe," Sam called after them, and Alex lifted a hand to acknowledge that she heard.

"Thanks," Jody added as she pulled open the motel door. "Don't get the door for me or anything."

"If you wanted me to get it, you just had to stand back," Alex retorted playfully as she stepped outside. "I can drive if you're incapable," she teased as she threw her bag into the back of Jody's truck.

Mills let out a snort of amusement as she climbed into the driver's side seat. "Not a chance." She started the car as Alex got in next to her. "We'll stop by the storage lockers on our way back if you want. They're only about ten minutes from here."
"Yeah, that sounds great." Alex rested her phone on the seat next to her. "That's all I came here for, so this trip has been one hell of a detour."

Jody chuckled as she guided the car onto the road leading to the highway. "You're telling me." She glanced over at Alex out of the corner of her eye as she added, "Sam told me you quit the life."

"I… I tried." Alex gave a small, noncommittal shrug. "I really did, for a while. But it always seems to find a way to drag you back in, doesn't it? I guess once you know what's out there, it's hard to turn a blind eye."

"Isn't that the truth." Jody guided the truck onto the highway back towards Sioux Falls. Silence fell, and Alex turned her attention towards watching the flat landscape fly by, broken only by barns and cows.

Five minutes much have passed before Jody spoke up once more. "It's hard to believe that for all the years I've been sheriff, I never noticed what's really out there. Everything Bobby did for us, and he never got recognition."

"Yeah, well, that's the job. The less people know, the better, I guess. As long as they're safe in their ignorance, we did our job." Alex rested her head against the glass. "Bobby never asked for anything in return. I miss him every day."

Jody didn't immediately respond. "Me too."

The sheriff's truck pulled into the parking lot of a large, square building, and the ignition died. "We're here." Jody got out of the car, and Alex followed, slamming the door behind her. She followed Jody up through the front door and down a line of storage lockers. Alex could feel her heart pounding in her chest as they stopped at the end of the hall, and Jody Mills pulled a key out of her pocket.

"Here."

"Uh … thanks." Alex took the small silver key in her hands, the metal warm from where it had rested against the sheriff's skin, and she stepped forward to stand beside the door. She hesitated, and she cast a look back at Jody Mills. The sheriff gave a small nod of encouragement, and Alex pressed the key into the lock.

It clicked open, and Alex pushed the door open to reveal a dark, dusty room inside. The ex-angel drew in a deep breath as she stepped inside, and the automatic lights flickered on above her head. Boxes were stacked against the far wall, all labeled in Bobby's familiar scrawling. They all contained research; books and notes on every creature the old hunter had encountered.

The center of the room was empty except for one central cardboard box. One word was written on the top flaps. *Alex.*

The girl dropped to her knees, pushing back the sharp twinge of emotion that coursed through her chest. She pulled the box open and peered inside. There wasn't much; on top lay a gun, and Alex smiled as she recognized it as the first sawed off she and Bobby had made together — the scuff marks on the barrel were from where she had started to cut too close to the stock were still visible. Beneath it lay a manilla envelope, and Alex slowly pulled it open.

*Alex.*

*If you're reading this, that probably means I'm dead. I had your name on this locker; Jody will know what to do. The deed to the house and the property are enclosed. Do with it what you will, but my mother always wanted the place to stay in the family, and you and John's boys are the closest thing I*
got. So thank you for that.

I never told you this, but I did some digging into your story when you first arrived. And I know the truth. I didn’t say anything — part of me hopes that one day you’d talk about it. Or maybe you haven’t because just don’t remember. Either way, I think I was able to piece together what happened to you.

If you care, I’ve included all the research of Sheol that I was able to find. And I was able to locate your father. Do with it what you will.

Good luck, Evelyn. Whatever you decide to do, just know that I'm proud of you.

Bobby Singer.
The sun was high in the sky, its golden rays cutting through the thin curtains that were drawn tightly together. They landed on a small figure curled up in a bed, which shifted as the light brought her into wakefulness. Alex groaned, pulling the sheets tightly around her as her head pounded against her skull. She had finally returned home in the early morning hours, having taken one of her old cars from Bobby's property and driven back herself, and the ex-angel had immediately collapsed onto the bed. She didn't remember much past that; just the warm, solid presence of Castiel that had curled around her as she drifted back into sleep.

The sun only got brighter, and Alex groaned again, louder this time. The light wasn't going to go away. Either she could man up and eat breakfast, or she could relocate to the couch, far from the morning's light.

Either way, it was going to involve moving.

With a resigned sigh, Alex pulled herself out of bed and made her way into the kitchen, the blanket still wrapped tightly around her body, a remnant of warmth from the bed. "You're awake."

Alex turned towards the voice with bleary eyes, surprised to find Castiel sitting on the couch. "Yeah, barely." She crossed over to him and collapsed onto the cushions beside him, resting her head in his lap. "My head hurts."

"You got home very late." Castiel's warm hand came to rest on her shoulder. "I didn't expect you to get up so soon."

"The sun woke me." Alex's eyes turned onto the manilla envelope that she had dropped on the coffee table late last night. It contained Bobby's letter and research, neatly tucked inside, with her name scrawled in thick black ink across the top. "Did you see…"

She motioned towards the folder with her free hand, and the ex-seraph followed her gaze. "I noticed it," he quietly agreed. "But no, I didn't look inside, if that's what you mean." He leaned forward, his stomach pressing into Alex's head as he stretched to pick it up. "What's in it?"

"Bobby figured it out. I don't know how he did it, but he somehow managed to piece together that whole … soul thing." Alex took the file out of Castiel's hands and pulled the flap open. Her fingers brushed the paper inside, and she felt Bobby's letter, folded into thirds to hide the carefully written words. Behind that was the first set of notes, and Alex pulled them out and handed them up to her mate.

Pages rustled as Castiel turned through them, and Alex rolled back to bury her head in his warm stomach. She knew what the pages said; she had poured over them a hundred times before she had driven home.

"This is … impressive." Castiel's voice was quiet and thoughtful. "When did he do all of this?" He turned the page. "There are some interesting thoughts here. He seems to think that souls are required to relive their lives over and over again until they finally make a decision that sends them either to heaven or hell." The papers rustled again, and Alex tilted her head upwards to see that he was looking through a photocopied rune with scribbling around the edges.
"That's either sanskrit or cuneiform." Alex pulled herself up into a sitting position, resting her cheek against Castiel's shoulder. "It must have taken him forever to even begin translating that."

"It's still unfinished; he only has a few fragments that are intelligible. And it seems a lot of his thoughts are incomplete," Castiel turned to the last page. "He doesn't know why you fell—"

"Yeah. That's because Metatron's spell hadn't happened yet."

"— but he seems to think there was a disruption at the end of one of the cycles which expelled your soul," the ex-seraph finished. "Interesting." He placed the papers down on the coffee table. "I'll have to look at this more in depth later."

He fell silent, and Alex looked up into his eyes. "Something's wrong." She sat back, a small frown upon her face. "What is it?"

"Eight men were found dead at a roadhouse yesterday afternoon. They all died from stab wounds. It was all over the news last night." Castiel's gaze fell onto his lap. "They were angel kills. I know the signs. Our brothers and sisters are slaughtering each other."

Alex reached up to rest her hand on the back of Castiel's neck, gently massaging the muscles with her thumb. "I'm sorry. Why would they do such a thing?"

"I don't know." Conflict battled within Castiel's gaze, and he turned to look to Alex. "Should we … it just feels like we — I — should do something. They fell because of me, and now they're dying." He shook his head as he turned back away. "But I can't, because I promised you that I wouldn't."

Both were quiet for several seconds, and as the silence lengthened, Alex finally spoke up. "I know. But if you — Cas, this is different; this is your family out there. If you want to try and help, I'm not sure I could bring myself to stop you. Besides," she added, "you wouldn't be alone. If this thing has 'angel' written on it, I guarantee the Winchesters will be there soon enough."

She pushed off the blanket around her body, the heavy warmth too much now that she was beside her equally warm mate, as she turned her face away from Castiel's thoughtful expression. "Perhaps you're right," he finally admitted. "Maybe Sam and Dean will know how the angels are finding vessels so quickly."

"Buddy Boyle. Sam told me that he's this, uh, holy internet preacher that the angels are using." Alex got to her feet and crossed over to the kitchen as Castiel picked up his laptop off of the coffee table. "I don't know how he's doing it, but apparently he has a pretty high success rate."

She pulled cereal down out of the high cabinet as a voice filled the room, loud and earnest. "Folks, like I've been telling you," it insisted, and Alex glanced back towards the source. "We're in the most sacred of times. A legion of angels reaches out to us. Can you feel their divine presence? And if you do, there's nothing to fear. Heck no! If the angels come a-knocking, you just let 'em on in and fill yourself with their grace!"

The laptop clicked as Castiel closed it, and Alex turned back to her food. "I haven't looked into him, but apparently he's been a hit," she added. "Remember the Rit Zien? Dean said his vessel was a born-again Boyle." Her words were met with absolute silence, and Alex set down her bowl with a soft sigh. "Cas, I know this decision is hard for you, but if you feel like you need to go check it out, I understand. Just say the word, and we'll leave."

The couch creaked as Castiel stood up. "I always wanted us to be out of that life. Why does it always seem to be dragging us back in?" The question hung in his eyes, emotions swimming in their blue
depths, and Alex gave a soft shake of her head.

"I don't know. But that's what you do for the people you care about." She set her spoon down on the counter beside her bowl. "If you're comfortable with it, we'll check out the scene, and then we'll turn the rest of the field work over to the Winchesters. They'll keep us updated on anything else they find until you know how far you want to put yourself out there, okay? Just let me eat breakfast, and then we can go."

"Thank you." Castiel crossed over to her, and Alex accepted a kiss from him, frowning as it felt distracted and distant. "I'll go get what I need. Thank you for understanding."

He left the room, and Alex watched him go, unwilling to acknowledge the excitement that bubbled beneath her skin at the prospect of a case. She pushed it down deep inside of her, locking it away. One more scratch at the insatiable itch surely wouldn't hurt …

**Caribou, Wyoming**

Six hours later, Alex found herself standing in the dark, cluttered roadhouse staring down at the photos of sheet-covered bodies. Castiel stood beside her, dressed in his newly-bought suit, the old FBI badge Dean had given him in his hands. "Where there any witnesses?" he asked the man in front of them as Alex flipped to the next photograph, taking in the bloodied bodies of the dead biker gang.

"No, sir," the young officer replied. "No one's come forward yet. A couple of patrons found the place not long after it happened, though. I can give you their statements."

"That would be great." Alex looked up from the photos with a nod.

"Ah, my colleagues," Castiel touched the officer lightly on the arm as he excused himself, and Alex turned to see Sam and Dean stepping into the room — it hadn’t take them long to show up, it seemed. She followed Castiel, casting Sam a quick smile as she came to stop in front of him.

"Agents," Sam greeted, a smile across his face despite the formality in his tone.

Castiel echoed him, mimicking the Winchester's mannerisms as his eyes sparkled with delight at being able to partake in the brothers' deceptive game. "Agents."

"Dude. What the hell are you doing?" Dean's voice was low, angry almost, and Alex frowned, not fond of the sharpness in his gaze, a painful contrast to his brother’s warmth.

"What?" she retorted back. "We wanted to check this out. I mean, the murders were all over the news, and Castiel thought it would be a good idea to step in and help."

"Yeah ... but you know this is an angel situation, right?" Sam looked between the two of them, concern in his eyes. "I mean, you guys left that night because angels were on your ass."

"Yeah," Dean added, and Alex pursed her lips at the uncomfortable look that flitted across his face — he clearly hadn't told Sam the truth as to why they had left. "And besides, you were living the life, you know? Early retirement, moving up the retail ladder."

Castiel looked over at Alex, and she gave him a nod. The ex-seraph squared his shoulders and turned back to Dean. "If angels are slaughtering each other, I have to do what I can to help."
"These guys are his family, Dean," Alex added. "If they were yours, you'd do the same. Besides, we both agreed to play a very minimal role here; once you guys have this under control, we'll step back and give you the wheel as long as you just keep us updated. Here." She handed Sam the crime scene photos she had received when she and Castiel had first arrived.

"These angels, uh, they were butchered," Castiel explained as Sam showed his brother. "Much more violence than was required."

"Definitely took more that one or two killers to pull this off," Sam agreed as he handed the pictures back to Alex.

"Hit squad?" Dean guessed. "Bartholomew's people?"

"Who?" Alex tilted her head in confusion. "I don't think I know him. Is he like Buddy Boyle?"

"He's an angel." Dean's response was sharp and pointed, his disdain for the angelic being painfully evident. "And yeah, we think he's working with Boyle, but we don't know. But apparently he has enemies. Or this could be someone different all together."

"Well, whoever it is, we'll find him." Castiel patted both of the brothers on the shoulder before he stepped away. "Is anyone getting hungry? I'm getting hungry."

Alex watched as Castiel walked away before she looked up at the two Winchesters. "I am pretty hungry," she admitted. When neither brother responded, she shrugged. "He's just trying to help, guys. Listen, it's like I said. We're just here for the day, and then we're going to turn it over to you. Please, just let him help."

She turned and made her way out of the roadhouse, reaching down to take Castiel's hand as she stopped by her Marquis. "What were the two of you talking about?" Castiel watched as Sam and Dean paused outside to talk with some of the officers.

Alex shrugged. "It's nothing important. Dean's not in a great mood after the last case, so I wanted to remind him to keep his mouth shut. Also, I convinced them to come with us for dinner and have a few beers while we're at it." She lifted an eyebrow as Sam and Dean stopped in front of her. "Right?"

"Uh, right." Sam gave a nod; Dean didn't respond at all. "There was a bar back in town. Mikes, I think it was called. How does that sound?"

"Sounds good to me." Alex dug the keys out of her pocket and reached up to loosen the tie around her neck. "We'll meet you guys there. Come on, Cassie." She got into the car and started the engine, running her hands along the thin steering wheel as the car purred to life. Castiel joined her, and once the door was closed, Alex guided the Marquis out onto the main road and back towards town.

The familiar bitter tang of alcohol filled the air, rising alongside the hum of voices, conversations mingling together to become indistinguishable. Alex glanced around Mike's Bar as she followed Sam through the crowd, hand tightly gripping Castiel's to lead him onwards. "Come on." She took a seat at the table, and Castiel sat to her right.

Dean appeared with four beers, and Alex curiously accepted hers. She hadn't had beer since she had become human again; she hadn't liked the taste before, and that was back when it didn't have any negative effects. She raised the glass lip to her mouth and let the liquid flow inwards, saturating her tongue.
It was still gross.

Alex set the bottle down, watching Dean down half of his drink without batting an eye. "How's Kevin?" she inquired, ready to start a conversation to break the stiff atmosphere. "I haven't heard from him recently. Is he still at the bunker?"

"Yeah. He's hanging in there and working hard." Dean set his drink down. "He's been working on reversing Metatron's spell. He's hit some walls, but the kid's a trooper."

"That's good." Alex nodded, glad at the news. "Tell him we said hi, huh? I feel like him and I don't talk as much as we should."

"You guys should swing back by the bunker," Sam suggested, looking between Castiel and Alex with a small smile. "I mean, if you're ever in the area. The door's always open."

Dean dropped his gaze to the table, and Alex cast him a long look, frowning at his silence; how long was he going to keep lying to Sam?

"You're right; it is so good being together again," Castiel suddenly said, breaking into the awkward pause that had followed Sam's words. "You know, this is my first beer as a human. I hope it's okay, me joining you?" He looked between Sam and Dean, the question hanging heavy in his eyes.

Dean's eyebrows lifted slightly in surprise. "You know, Cas, are you sure you're ready to jump back into this? I mean, it seemed to me like you'd actually found some peace."

"I have." Castiel's gaze fell on Alex, and the ex-angel blushed. "But, like it or not, this is my problem. And if I can't fix it myself, I thought I should at least make sure that I can offer my support." His attention turned to Sam. "I might not be able to fight in the front lines, but that doesn't mean I can't care."

Sam nodded. "All right, well, then, in that case, we need to figure out, uh, who are we up against, what do they want, and how do we stop them."

"Well, let's just assume these guys are, uh, Bartholomew's men." Alex pushed her beer closer to Dean, a subtle sign that he could take it if he pleased. "If so, and if there's fighting on a scale like we just saw, then he's obviously making a power play. So the question is against who, and why?"

"They most likely want to reverse Metatron's spell and return to heaven." Castiel watched as Dean took a drink, and he quickly did the same. "And if this is a power play, then he's most likely intending to retake heaven and take Michael's position. But he'll need a large enough following."

Alex nodded; it sounded plausible. "So maybe this was a recruitment deal gone wrong? Or two factions trying to take down the other? Maybe there's a second player trying to do the exact same thing. It wouldn't be the first time different angels thought they should rule."

Dean opened his mouth to speak, but he paused, gaze falling down onto his empty beer bottle. Before he could utter a curse, Sam pushed back his chair. "I'm going to get us another round," he announced.

Castiel immediately jumped to his feet, holding out a hand to keep Sam down. "Nah. I'll get it."

He swaggered off towards the bar, and Alex watched him go with a shake of her head. "If he's going to stick around you guys, he's going to need to work on his tolerance," she joked. "He's almost as bad as Garth."
Dean sighed, shaking his head in disbelief as he watched Castiel lean up against the bar to converse with its tender. "One beer, he's hammered." Both he and Alex turned back towards Sam as blue light flashed out of the corners of their eyes, and Dean sighed again, this time louder. "Oh boy."

Sam's spine straightened, and his gaze locked firmly upon Dean. "Well?" he asked, his tone authoritative and firm. "What are you going to do about this?" He didn't even acknowledge Alex's presence, and the ex-angel frowned, taken aback by the coldness.

"Ezekiel …" she began, but Dean spoke over her words.

"About Cas?" he asked.

The angel gave no physical signs of agreement; his posture remained stiff as a board. "He is a beacon, Dean, pulling every angel for miles down on our heels."

"What's your problem?" Alex's fist tightened, and she clenched the tabletop tightly in her hands. "He's warded, you moron. We both are. No angel is going to recognize him. What's wrong with you? When did you become such a dick, huh?"

Ezekiel's gaze turned upon her, and his face seemed to soften ever so slightly from its rigid facade. "Alex." Even his tone was softer, yet with no less urgency and will. "When I chose to answer Dean's prayers to heal Sam, I chose sides. And that means I am not in good standing with the other angels. I am not strong enough to face them yet, and you know as well as I do that I cannot risk Sam's safety."

The seraph fell silent as Castiel returned, three beers in his hand. "Here we go." Castiel set them down on the table, passing them around. "Three brewskies. I, uh, I see you haven't finished your first," he added to Alex, motioning to her still mostly-filled bottle.

Alex waved it off. "It's fine."

Ezekiel loosened his back, falling back into Sam's typical posture. "I'm going to get something out of the car." He abruptly stood up and walked away, and Alex watched go with a deep frown; why was he being so tense? He had known Castiel for eons; why would be be hiding from his friend now?

Castiel cleared his throat. "I, um, I noticed you look … kind of uncomfortable whenever Sam mentions my leaving," he began. "Doesn't he know that you told me to leave?"

"Here's the deal." Dean set his beer down and turned in his seat to face the ex-seraph. "When Sam was doing the trials to seal up Hell, it messed him up. Okay? The third one nearly killed him. If I'd let him finish, it would have. He's still messed up, bad."

"You said the angel, Ezekiel, he helped heal him." Castiel's eyes squinted slightly in confusion when Dean looked down at the table.

"Look, I've got to do anything I can to get him back. Now, if that means that we keep our distance from you for a little while, then … then I don't have a choice. I don't feel good about it, but I don't have a choice." Dean looked up, his green eyes starting on Alex and then quickly moving over to Castiel. "It's great to have your help, Cas, okay, but we just can't work together."

Castiel's face fell, and it took him a moment to respond. "When you say that, do you mean like last time when you made us leave and refused to answer my calls?" Dean didn't answer, and the ex-seraph's gaze sharpened. "Dean."

"Fine." The Winchester slammed down the last of his drink. "We'll keep the both of you in the loop, okay? Look." His tone grew softer, and he drew in a deep breath. "What you two have — that
normal, apple pie and white picket fence life — why would you want to give that up? Either you can
go home and be happy, or you can stay with us, but you know as much as I do that the only way
you'll leave again is when you're dead." Dean pushed back his chair and got to his feet. "It's your
call."

Alex watched the Winchester make his way back through the crowd, following his tall figure until it
disappeared out the door before she turned to Castiel. "Well? What do you want to do?"

Castiel looked down at his beer, thoughts and emotions flickering across his face before he lifted his
head to meet her gaze. He held it for several seconds, his blue eyes soft and resolute, and then he
spoke. "Let's go home."

Pain woke her. Alex's eyes flew open with a scream as cold, hard metal cut through her skin, leaving
in its wake burning agony. For a second, all that existed was the pain. But as it began to ebb, her
vision widened, and the rest of the world came back into view. She was in a dark, damp room. There
was movement, figures in there with her. As the pain stopped ringing through her ears, she could
make out voices. Castiel's was the loudest, pleading to their captors, and Alex tugged on her arms —
bound by chains.

The dark shadow that had sat in the corner of her vision moved, and Alex's eyes stretched wide as
she realized that that shadow was a human being. She blinked rapidly, and her eyes adjusted until
she could see the cruel, angular face that was level with her own. Her gaze traced a large scar down
the left side of his face before landing on the sharp, bloodied tip of the angel blade. Anger pulsed
through her, and Alex lifted her chin to glare at the angel before her.

"Look who's awake." Even his voice was horrid, thin and grating, and the ex-angel's toes curled
within her blood-stained shoes. "We were wondering when you would join us."

Alex's response was to glare, her eyes narrowing into chips of grey ice and the corner of her lip
pulling up into the unmistakable hint of a snarl.

The angel chuckled, a dark, cruel noise, and he pressed the tip of the blade against her cheek. A flick
of his wrist had the flesh tearing, and Alex dug her teeth into the side of her cheek to bite back a cry
as the angel rose to his feet. "Stop it!" Chains rattled as Castiel struggled against his bonds, his voice
a loud roar. "Leave her alone!"

Blood ran down her cheek, dripping onto her shirt, and Alex tilted her head to elevate the wound.
Her head throbbed, a dull and persistent ache below the sharp gashes across her face and forearm.
How had they gotten here? The ex-angel couldn't remember. They had left Wyoming early that
morning — yesterday morning? How long had she been out?

They had arrived home in the middle of the day, and the first thing Alex had done was to go to the
fridge, intent on tracking down the remaining ice cream that was hidden somewhere inside the
freezer. "Hungry?" she called to Castiel as the couch creaked. She wasn't granted an immediate
answer; the ex-angel had woken up with a small hangover, and had been unusually quiet through
the entirety of the drive. "Come on, Cassie." She grabbed two spoons and returned to the couch,
straddling the ex-seraph's thighs as she ripped off the lid. "Eat. Don't make me finish this on my own
—"

The front door flew open, and Alex jumped to her feet. Two men came bursting through, dressed in
black, and Castiel's arm pushed her behind him as he faced the strangers. "Who are you?" he
demanded, and Alex sidestepped to peer around him at the intruders with a scowl.
"Castiel." The smaller man stalked across the room, a cold smirk on his face. "As I live and breath. He turned back to his companion. "I told you it was them. Good thing we decided to follow you back into town. Isn't this a treat."

The way his words slid over his words had Alex shivering, and she balled her fists to cover it. "What do you want?" she spat. "We don't have anything, okay?"

"Oh, this isn't about what you have. It's about what you can do for me." The man ran his tongue across his bottom lip as he looked the two up and down. "The name's Malachi. I think it's time we talked somewhere a little more ... private."

"This is a bonus, Castiel." Malachi stood in front of her mate, twirling his blade in his hand. "We were tracking Muriel, cowardly holdout that she is, and wonders of wonders, she led us right to you."

"Not knowingly." The voice came from a bruised and battered figure was tied to a wooden post. It was a woman, but Alex didn't recognize the face.

"I stand corrected. Not knowingly. Stupidly."

Castiel's eyes were on Alex, and she gave him a barely perceptible nod. She was okay. In the dim candlelight she could make out the blood that stained his own face and shirt; she hadn't been the only one that had met the edge of Malachi's knife. "What do you want?" She glared over at the two angels, and she winced internally as a scream echoed off of the walls. It hadn't come from within the room; who else were they keeping within this building?

"What do I want? I want information on Metatron's spell." Malachi's attention turned onto Castiel, and the knife traced along the ex-seraph's throat. "I want to know how to reverse it."

"I don't know —" Castiel cut off with a cry as the knife dug into his skin, leaving a trail of crimson blood. "I don't know how Metatron's spell worked," he got out through gritted teeth. "Therefore, I can't assist in reversing it. I was an unwitting accomplice."

"Ohhh. A dupe." The angel's voice was scathing. "The great Castiel. Valued and trusted Castiel." He crossed the room, pausing by a metal tray. His hand hovered over it, clearly intent upon picking up whatever lay upon it as he continued. "Top-of-the-Christmas-tree Castiel. No more than a dupe." He paused, eyes narrowed as he carefully considered what lay in front of him. "Dupe or mastermind, you were inside the circle. You know where Metatron's weakness lies."

"No, I don't."

Malachi let out a deep sigh at Castiel's even response, and he motioned back to his companion. "Theo."

The broad-shouldered angel stepped forward. With one hand, he pulled Castiel's head back by the hair, and with the other he brought up an angel blade up to Castiel's shoulder blade. The metal dug into the flesh, and Castiel groaned loudly in pain.

"Are you serious?" Alex let out a loud scuff, tugging her bonds as she tried to get up, anything to distract them from hurting her mate. "Is that what this is about? What part of lying don't you understand? He told us the spell would keep the angels in, okay, so we were tricked. We don't know anything!"

The angel's hand descended, and he picked a knife up off of the tray. "Cheeky one, isn't she?" He crouched down in front of her, twisting the small serrated blade so it glinted in the candlelight.
"However, I know ways of making people talk."

The knife moved down her skin, slow and agonizing, and Alex screamed at the hot, burning pain. She could feel it tracing a path across her clavicle, a slow, dragging cut made wet by the flow of blood.

"No!" The cry came from two sources, Castiel and another, and Alex's gaze snapped to the angel in the corner. Muriel. Why did she care?

Malachi didn't look back. "Theo." He addressed the large angel that stood by the door, his silent accomplice. "Kill her!"

"No!" Castiel struggled at his chains. "No, she's innocent. You leave her alone!" He strained forward as the angel Theo crossed the room, and Muriel's breathing grew heavy, weighed down with fear. "Please, no!"

Muriel screamed as she died, and Alex turned her head away from the bright light. The burning grace was dimmer than usual, a grim reminder of the angel's fall, and Alex closed her eyes.

"Angels butchering angels." Castiel's voice was quiet and hollow. "Is this what we've become?"

"Just following in your example, Castiel." Malachi turned slightly, just enough so he could stare up at the ex-seraph. "How many did you kill in heaven? How many in the Fall?" The look on Castiel's face must have surprised him, because he let out a noise and rose to his feet, as smooth and oily as a snake. "Oh, you didn't know? A host of angels died when they fell — Azrael, Sophia, Ezekiel —" Ezekiel. Alex's breath caught in her throat. Dead? No, that wasn't true. It couldn't be. She barely heard the rest of Malachi's speech, how they had died, wings shredded and grace burning in agony. "N-No — no." She looked over at Malachi, her voice rising in anger. "Ezekiel is alive. You're lying!" The words caught in her throat, pushed aside by a choked noise.

"Oh, he's dead, sweetheart." Malachi dropped back down in front of her. "I found his body. I buried him. He's dead, all because of you. They're all dead. Their blood is on his head."

Alex dropped her gaze, unable force her retort beyond her dry throat. Ezekiel … he couldn’t be dead, not after what he had done to save her. The world spun, the shock coupling with the loss of blood too much, and she squeezed her eyes shut.

"Hey. I'm talking to you." Malachi’s fingers wrapped themselves in her hair, yanking her head back so he could look her in the face. "And now Cas here is going to start talk. Or he'll watch you die." His words were emphasized by his fist, and Alex's vision swam, the breath knocked out of her by the blow to her cheek. Another blow landed just above it, the knuckles catching on her eyebrow and just barely missing digging into her eye.

"Stop it!" Castiel begged. "I don't know anything!"

"You can't lie to me, Castiel." Malachi's knife dug into Alex's shoulder, the blade curling under the bone, and Alex screamed. The pain was worse than anything she had ever felt, and she could feel each inch of skin and flesh the serrated blade sawed through. The world closed in, her ears ringing as the pressure of the agony burned into her skull, and she barely noticed when the knife was removed. Her stomach roiled, bile rising within her throat, but it couldn't push its way past the lump that blocked her windpipe.

There was more pain, sharp, unadulterated pain. There was screaming, and her voice was raw, but the noise didn't sound like her own. Even the pain didn't feel like her own, not with the blackness
closing in around her vision. She was going to pass out soon — or she was going to die. Die — Ezekiel was dead. Her mind was fixated on that fact, even as her body reached its limits. He was gone.

"No!" The pain stopped, and Castiel's voice had her pausing as she teetered on the edge of the darkness.

Malachi moved away, and Alex's body went limp, every muscle weak with exhaustion. "Alright. I see how it will be. Then I leave the both of you in the hands of an artist." Metal clinked against metal as the angel tossed the bloodied knife onto the tray, and Alex heard the door slam shut behind him.

"Don't ask for mercy." Theo spoke for the first time, his voice low and dark. "There is none." Footsteps echoed through the room as he crossed over to the tray of torture devices, but Alex couldn't bring herself to lift her aching head to watch. "I'll give you one last chance for this to end."

"Give her a quick death."

Castiel's words had Alex shaking, and tears welled up within her bruised and beaten eye. "Cas." The word came out as a thin whimper, quiet and nearly unintelligible. "N-No, don't …"

"Castiel. I need you to speak to Metatron." The angel's voice was a hurried whisper. "Everyone knows you have influence." The words almost didn't register in Alex's mind, and it was all she could do to just sit there and listen. "He'll listen to you. Ask him to raise me to heaven. You can do this, Castiel." Theo was pleading now. "I'll be a soldier for Metatron, do anything he wants."

"You … you serve Malachi." Alex forced herself to raise her head as she forced out her statement through her bruised and raw throat.

Theo shook his head, barely sparing Alex a glance as he turned back to Castiel. "I thought he was the answer, but he's crazy."

"You're … noticing this now?" There was the hint of a scoff on Castiel's tone. "You were more than willing to do his dirty work." His words were followed by a look towards Muriel's body.

Theo followed it. "I did what I had to," he replied simply and firmly.

"When you were sure he would defeat Bartholomew," Castiel finished, and Alex squinted up at the two of them through her single unswollen eye.

Theo was nodding in agreement with Castiel's sentiment. "But no one will survive this war."

"So, what? You'd rather just sit up in heaven and watch?" Alex scowled at the thought. "How selfless. And you call yourself an angel." She shifted, whimpering at the pain in her chest.

"Alex." Castiel's tone carried a note of warning, and she dropped her gaze, hands clenched tightly in a fist where they were pinned against her back. Her head ached, and her wounds stung; anything that she could say would be insulting and defensive. If talking themselves free was their only option, Castiel would have to do it himself.

However, Theo hadn't taken her words as an insult; instead, his tone grew even more pleading. "I can talk to him about restoring your grace."

Alex watched as Castiel's face grew thoughtful, and she narrowed her eyes as he took several seconds to think. "Well, it's, um, it's true," he finally lied, very slowly and carefully. "Metatron and I do have a working relationship."
"I knew it!" A broad smile broke out across Theo's face, and Castiel mimicked it. "You're allies."

"You're clever, Theo," he praised, and Alex ducked her head as she rolled her one good eye. "And he could use a skilled soldier like yourself." Castiel paused, and a small frown grew across his lips. "Oh, but I don't know …"

Concern flashed across the angel's face, and he hurriedly insisted, "I-I'm a team player, Castiel."

"All right." Castiel gave a curt nod of his head, and he gestured up to the chains that bound his wrist above his head. "Well?" He straightened up as Theo dug the key out of his pocket, and Alex perked up; the pain was fading faster now as the adrenaline of their escape kicked in. However, Castiel made no motion to unbind her. "I'll — I'll need a moment to make contact," he announced, rubbing his sore wrists as he stepped away from the chains. "And you have something that I need."

Theo backed up, nodding enthusiastically. "Anything."

Castiel's moved in a blur. One hand went out to shove Theo back against the wall, and the other scooped a scalpel off of the metal tray. He brought the blade through Theo's throat, and Alex's eyes went wide as a bluish white light bled outwards, wisping through the air. Grace.

It disappeared into Castiel's mouth, and the scalpel dropped to the ground as he raised his hand to Theo's forehead. The second his palm made contact, the angel died, light exploding from his face.

Castiel turned to Alex, his eyes glowing a bright, brilliant blue. "Y-You …" Alex's jaw shook with the effort to speak, and she watched as Castiel approached through her one good eye. The wounds that had stained his white oxford red were disappearing, fading back into his skin, and as he neared her, Alex felt the locks on her chains click open.

Castiel's hand went out, helping the young hunter to her feet, and she shivered as she felt the unnatural warmth in his hands. "Cas …" She stumbled, unable to support her own weight, and Castiel was there, holding her up.

A hand was on her cheek, and his lips were pressed up against hers, burning with the heat of the stolen grace, and Alex closed her eyes as it washed through her body, a tidal wave of warmth and strength. She could feel the grace permeate every part of her body, chasing away the cold and settling deep inside of her chest. All of her pain faded away into the heat, and her senses were opened. She could hear again, she could see.

Then Castiel pulled away, and the heat began to fade. "Cas …" His name came out in a gentle whisper, and she pressed her hand up against his cheek. "What did you do?"

"I did what I had to do." Regret flickered in the seraph's eyes. "Stealing an angel's grace —" A scream cut into his words, and Castiel raised his head. "I'll explain later. Come. We need to leave."

"No, Cas …" Alex held him back with trembling hands. "Ezekiel …"

Castiel gripped her hand tightly. "Ezekiel is dead. I'm sorry, but we need to go now." He dragged her after him, out the door and up the stairs, maybe down some halls — Alex wasn't paying attention. How could Ezekiel be dead? She still couldn't believe it. He had saved Sam after the fall — he had saved her. He couldn't be dead.

The sky was light; it was still day. The sun illuminated her blood-stained face, and its rays refracted off of her tears, temporarily blinding the young hunter until she reached up to brush them away. The warmth of the angel's grace had faded, leaving behind a pit of ice within her gut. It wasn't cold like Lucifer's, which had felt like the icy rush of a mountain stream; this felt chilling. Wrong.
It took her a moment to realize that they had stopped moving. "Alex. Are you okay?" Castiel's hands were on her face, wiping away the blood from her wounds and peeling back the collar of her shirt to see if any damage remained.

"I'm fine." Alex reached up, brushing away the thick, drying blood with her sleeve. "What did you do? Did — was Malachi telling the truth?"

Castiel shook his head. "I stole Theo's grace," he slowly began. "I'm an angel again … I think."

Sadness crept into his voice. "My wings…"

"I can't see them." Alex wiped her eyes to clear her vision as she stepped back to peer around Castiel's back. "Don't you have them?"

"You can't see them?" Cold icy grace pushed against the grace that resided in her, and Alex pulled away in disgust. "Your human soul is still there. You aren't fully angel."

Alex pushed away the prying grace. "Okay, so? I can feel the grace. That's got to count for something —" Something pickled against her mind, a foreboding feeling that swelled up from the ground, and she glanced towards the road. "Let's get out of here. We need to tell Dean about — about Ezekiel, o-or whoever he is." Without a second look back at the place from where they had come, she hurried off towards the black pavement of the road.

A payphone sat on the corner of a gas station, and Alex broke into a run. She threw open the door and dug through her pockets, searching for change as she racked her brain to remember Dean's number. She shoved the quarters into the slot and dialed the phone just as Castiel caught up to her. The phone clicked, and her heart pounded in her chest. "Dean?"

"Alex?"

"Dean, I don't have a lot of time, so I just need you to listen." Alex drew in a deep breath to slow down her hurried words, and Castiel reached past her to take the phone.

"Dean, it's Castiel. The leader of the opposition is an angel named Malachi," he explained in a low, rushed tone. "He had us, but we got away."

Confusion and concern sharpened Dean's tone. "How? Where — Cas, where are you?"

"I … I did what I had to. I became what they've become. A barbarian."

Alex cut in, taking over the explanation. "He killed one of the angels — Theo — and took his grace. So now he's sort of an angel, and I'm … I don't know what I am."

Castiel tipped the phone back away from her. "It's better that we stay away," he told Dean. "We're leaving Rexford. They're going to want me even more now. But I'll be alright; I got my grace back. Well, not mine, per say, but it'll do for now."

There was a small pause as Dean thought. "And … and you're okay with that?"

"No. But if we're going to go to war, then I need to be ready." Castiel's eyes fell on Alex's face, and he added, "I'll do whatever I can to protect you."

Alex couldn't hold his gaze, for long, and she snapped her attention back to the phone, a more pressing matter at the forefront of her mind. "Dean, I — is Sam there?"

"What? No, no, he went out. Why?" Dean's voice grew sharp, and Alex heard the sound of a chair
creaking as he leaned forward in concern.

"It's Ezekiel, Dean. He's dead. He — he —" Tears welled up, and Alex bit back a choked sob. "He
died in the fall after s-saving me." She swallowed, composing herself the best she could. "Whoever
is possessing Sam, it's not him."

"Possessing?" Castiel's surprise drowned out Dean's reaction, and then the phone line went dead.
"What do you mean by that?" The seraph hung up the phone, and Alex squeezed past him out into
the open air.

"I don't understand most of it myself," she admitted, wiping her nose with the back of her hand.
"Apparently Sam was badly hurt during the trials, a-and he was in a coma, so Dean — he got this
angel who said he was Zeke to heal him. And I guess the only way he could do that was from the
inside."

A tear fell from her cheek, and Alex's jaw shook. Castiel's arms enveloped hers, and Alex leaned
into his solid warmth. Oh God. Ezekiel was dead. After everything he had done for her — he was
the reason she was alive today. He gave up his life to save hers.

"It's okay." Castiel pressed his lips against her temple, murmuring soft and low. "It's okay, Alex. I've
got you." He held her close, his breath warm upon her hair. "We need to go."

Go? "Go where?" Alex lifted her head to look up into his eyes. "We can't go home, Castiel. Malachi
will find us."

"I know." Castiel pulled her head back up against him, cradling it against his chest. "I don't know
what we're going to do, or where we're going to go. But whatever happens, I won't let anything hurt
to you." He rested his chin upon her head, and Alex closed her eyes. "I promise."
Weak sunlight filtered through the glass, turning the horizon a pale purple. Alex could see it from her window, the view unhindered by the flat South Dakota land. She was curled up in the guest bedroom of Jody Mills’ home, tucked safely beneath the heavy covers, but despite the warmth and the comfort, sleep had eluded her.

She could feel Castiel in the room with her; Theo's grace still sat inside both of them, connected by a thin ethereal strand. The seraph was at the foot of the bed, still as a stone. He had been up all night; clearly his angelic identity no longer required him to sleep. Unlike Alex. Exhaustion weighed down her very bones, but every time she had drifted off, she had woken up to screaming in her head.

"Hold onto me." She could hear Ezekiel's final words searing through her mind. "I've got you."

"Still can't sleep?" Castiel's murmur had her looking over her shoulder. His blue eyes were on her, watching her with barely concealed sympathy. "You're safe here, you know. I won't let them find you."

"I'm not scared of that." Alex patted the bed beside her, indicating that he should join her beneath the covers. "I…just keep having nightmares."

Castiel's face set tight in a line of grim understanding. "Of Malachi."

"No, no, not of him." She was lying; Malachi had haunted her dreams, but it hadn't been what had woken her up in terror. "I keep dreaming of Ezekiel." She shifted as Castiel slid into the bed next to her, turned on his side to fit up against her thin frame. "Of how he died."

Castiel's hand slid over her waist, curling down to rest against her stomach. "Ezekiel gave his life because he cared about you," he began, speaking slowly with careful intent. "And I owe him my life for that." The hand moved upwards to tuck a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. "He died doing the job our Father gave us; he died protecting you."

"He shouldn't have died at all." The words came out as a whisper as her throat closed, and Alex squeezed her eyes shut. So many angels had died; who else hadn't survived?

The sun was brighter when Alex reopened her eyes, and she blinked twice, surprised to find that she had fallen asleep. Castiel's presence had kept the nightmares at bay, but now the bed beside her was empty, though the sheets were still warm. He hadn't been gone long. With great reluctance, Alex focused on the icy grace within her, following its thread down the stairs to find Castiel seated on the living room couch. He was talking on the phone, but she couldn't make out words.

She threw back the sheets and made her way down the stairs, stifling a yawn and inhaling the warm smell of fresh pancakes. Jody must be up.

They had arrived at the sheriff's home late last night, desperate and out of breath, and Jody had ushered them in without a second's thought. But despite her initial understanding of their situation, Alex was sure more questions were to come.
"You're up." Jody poked her head into the living room to greet Alex. "Just in time. Breakfast is almost ready." She disappeared back into the kitchen, and Alex glanced over at Castiel. He had hung up the phone and stood up, a frown set deep into his face.

At Alex's prompting, he stepped forward. "We need to get to Kansas. Dean needs our help." He slid his phone into the pocket of his suit pocket as he glanced back towards the kitchen. "Jody will understand."

"Like hell I won't." Jody's voice drifted back through the room, and Alex chuckled. "I just made pancakes. Don't tell me you two don't have twenty minutes to sit down and help me eat them all."

Alex patted Castiel on the side of the arm as she slipped past him. "You heard the lady," she forced herself to joke as she entered the kitchen. "Breakfast first."

"How'd you sleep?" Jody handed Alex three plates, and the young hunter turned to place them onto the kitchen table. "Castiel says you were having nightmares."

"It's nothing." Alex waved off the concern in the sheriff's voice. "Nightmares are nothing new. I think I didn't sleep well because of …" She paused, thinking back to what little information they had given away last night. "After Malachi … tortured us, Castiel stole another angel's grace. That's why he's an angel again. And because we're mates, I have some of that grace inside of me. But …" Alex shook her head as she set silverware around the table. "It doesn't feel right, Jody. It sits like ice in my chest, and it just feels so … wrong."

She looked up to find Jody watching her, her blue eyes soft. "Does it hurt?"

"No, no it doesn't hurt. But the coldness is uncomfortable." Alex retrieved the pint of orange juice from the fridge as Jody placed the pancakes in the center of the table. "And it just doesn't feel like part of me."

"Because it's not part of you." Castiel spoke from the doorway into the kitchen, and Alex's eyes flitted across his face before dropping back down. "We stole another angel's grace; there's nothing natural about that. It will always be uncomfortable. More so for you, I imagine, because its coexisting with your soul."

“And you … don’t have a soul.” Jody’s eyes squinted as she looked at Castiel, unsure if she heard him right.

The seraph shook his head. “No. I am — and I was — an angel, even if I didn’t have my grace. But Alex was a human. Souls are immortal,” he reminded. “They don’t simply disappear. When she became an angel, her soul was … the cornerstone; there, but altered by grace. When it was removed, it reverted back into its original state. The only way to change it back again to retrieve our own grace.” He crossed the room and sat down at the table, and Alex did the same. "That is if there is any left."

"Alex mentioned that someone had stolen your grace for a … spell?" Jody looked over at Alex for confirmation, and the hunter gave a small, barely perceptible nod. "She also said you guys were settling down like normal human beings, but … I’m guessing that's been put on hold."

Alex saw Castiel's shoulders fall in the corner of her eyes, and she distracted herself by reaching forward to dish up some food. "For the time," she agreed, her words chosen carefully in hopes of restoring some of her mate's spirit. "But for now, we're headed down to Sam and Dean, and then from there … I don't know."
"Well, you two are always welcome here." Jody's voice was firm, leaving no room for discussion. "My door's always open any time of the day or night. Between the three of us, it's nice to have people around the house." Jody handed the plate of pancakes to Castiel, who accepted it graciously. "Oh, and it looks like it's going to rain today. Alex, your jacket is still in the closet. If you want one," she added to Castiel, "I think some of Sean's are still there too."

"Thank you. And thank you for your hospitality." Castiel set the pancakes back down on the table. "But we do need to leave soon. Dean needs us at the bunker." He looked over at Alex and added, "If you feel too tired to drive, I'll gladly do so. I understand the basic mechanics enough that I'm sure I will pick it up easily."

"Sure …" Alex shot Jody a look of faux concern. "But just in case, we're leaving my Marquis here. We'll take one of Bobby's cars. After breakfast." She slid the syrup over to Castiel. "Here. Eat." With a nod, she dug into her breakfast, and after a moment, Castiel followed her lead.

**Lebanon, Kansas**

A hand shook her from her sleep, and Alex's eyes flickered open. She was in the front seat of the Bobby's old 1978 Lincoln Continental, Castiel's pick from the few cars at the yard that had still run. Right now, they were on the side of the road, and Castiel was shaking her awake. "Wha—what?" Alex gently batted his hand away as she sat up, grimacing at the kink in her back. "Why'd we stop? Did you hit something?" She looked around, but there was nothing strange around the car.

"No. I don't know why we stopped." Castiel's face was scrunched up in confusion, and he gripped the steering wheel tightly. "I can't get it to start again."

"Did you try turning it off and then back on again?" Alex rubbed her eyes as she leaned across the car to look at the dashboard. "Oh." The answer was immediately clear, and she rolled her eyes. "Dude, you're out of gas."

"Oh." A faint hint of a blush spread across the seraph's face. "But we already got gas a on this trip."

"Yeah, and now you need more." Alex unbuckled her seatbelt and threw open the car door. "Where are we at?" She pulled out her phone to check the GPS signal against Google Maps; they were only a few miles from the bunker. "Well, I guess we can just hoof it from here."

Castiel joined her outside the car. "How long will that take?"

"Depends. It's just a mile up the road here or so." Alex shoved her phone back into her pocket. "Remember what I said about watching the gas gauge?" she asked as they reached the end of the street. "Bad things happen when it hits empty — mainly the car stops going."

"I apologize. I wasn't paying attention." Castiel walked at her side, and he reached up to adjust the collar of his coat. He had found the tan trench coat in Jody's closet, an old artifact that had belonged to the sheriff's husband, and he hadn't taken it off even after the rain had ceased — if Alex had to guess, it reminded him of his old coat, back from where he had truly been an angel.

"How did you sleep?" The seraph's voice pulled her out of her thoughts, and Alex looked up in surprise.

"Sleep?" she repeated. "Oh, oh yeah. I slept just fine." The Lincoln had broken down on the edge of town, and she pointed her finger down the road to where a fuzzy hill sat in the distance. "That's
where we're going. I think." She pulled out her phone to double check.

A honk of a car had her jumping, and she turned to see a black truck pulled up beside them. "You two seem lost." A man leaned out the window, curiosity on his warm face. "Need some help?"

Alex met his words with a smile. "Our car broke down a little while back. We're just headed a mile up the road where our friends are going to meet us. Are you headed our way?" She pointed off down the paved road, a vague gesture towards where the bunker lay.

The man looked thoughtful, momentarily hesitant about letting them ride along, but after a second or two he gave a shrug. "I'm on my way back to Smith Center. So if that's on the way, you two are more than likely to tag along."

"That would be awesome." Alex looked over at Castiel, waiting for his final say in case he had picked up any indications of danger; when he nodded, she turned back to the stranger. "Like I said, we're only headed up to that old warehouse up there. It's probably — what? A three minute ride?"

"Fine by me." The stranger jerked his thumb into the back of his truck. "You two can climb in the back. Just let me know when you want off."

Alex scrambled up into the bed of the pickup, Castiel on her heels, and the car rumbled as it started off back down the road. "Talk about a godsend," the young hunter muttered as the truck picked up speed. "Think this guy is a demon?" She gently pressed out her grace, uncomfortable about how it felt, but she couldn't feel anything out of the ordinary.

Castiel gave a small shake of his head. "No, he's not a demon. Or an angel. Perhaps he's just a kind human."

"Small-town communities tend to be," Alex quietly agreed. She settled down against the back of the truck as the wind sped by, catching her hair and whipping it against her face. "Hey, Cas, why'd Dean call? Did they find anything important?"

Castiel didn't immediately answer, and Alex looked up into his face as she awaited a response. "It's Sam," he finally said, his voice raised up over the wind. "The angel who possessed him is in control and has disappeared. He …" Castiel shook his head and fell silent, and Alex narrowed her eyes as worry took hold.

"What? Why? What happened? Is Sam okay?" The questions came out of her mouth hard and fast, and she turned her body to face Castiel more fully.

"I don't know." Castiel shook his head. "Dean will fill us in more fully when we reach the bunker." He pointed off towards the side of the road, and Alex turned just in time to see the road leading to the bunker fly past. "I believe that was our destination."

"Shit." Alex spun around and pounded her fist on the glass window of the truck. She caught the driver's eye in the rearview mirror, and she motioned back towards the abandoned warehouse beneath which the bunker lay.

The man nodded, and the car rolled to a halt. "You sure this is the spot, miss?" he asked as Alex and Castiel jumped out of the back. "There's not much here."

"Yeah, I'm sure. It's only a few minutes hike from here." Alex reached into her pocket and held out a wad of cash towards the stranger. "Thanks for the ride, man. We really appreciate it." She watched as the car sped off, and she turned back to Castiel. "Sorry, you were saying?"
The seraph shook his head. "I had nothing more to say." He led the way up the dirt road to where the bunker lay, and Alex jumped down the metal stairs to wrench the door open. It creaked and groaned, and she slipped through and into the building that she had once called home. The air smelled just as she had remembered it; cold, metallic, and slightly musty, but still it brought a rush of warmth through her veins. It smelled like comfort. "Dean?" Alex hurried down the stairs, calling out the Winchester's name.

"Alex?" Dean Winchester stepped out into the library, a gun and a machete in his hands. He set them down inside his green duffle bag as he turned to face the two of them. "And Cas." His eyes swept up and down the seraph. "Look at you, all suited up and back in the game."

Castiel looked down at his new trench coat. "I, um … we came as soon as you called. I was —"

He fell silent, and Alex looked up at him in confusion. He was staring at the library, his face blank and expressionless, and Alex followed his gaze. The library was a mess; books were thrown against the wall. A lamp was lying broken on the ground, and a chair had been thrown across the room. "Dean? What happened?"

Her question was ignored, her soft tone shadowed by Castiel's sharper voice. "Alex told me that Sam was possessed by Ezekiel — or whoever he is." The seraph moved forward, making his way up the steps until he stood beside Dean in the library. "Why would you do that?"

Dean's eyes flashed. "Sammy was dying. What was I supposed to do?" The Winchester shook his head as his anger faded. "He said it was the only way, and I believed him." The anger returned. "And it sure as hell ain't going to bring Kevin back."

"Kevin?" Alex perked up at the prophet's name. "Why? Where is he?" She looked around, but the young prophet was nowhere in sight. "Did Ezekiel kidnap him?"

Dean's voice was flat as he turned to Castiel, barely audible to her ears. "You didn't tell her."

Castiel shook his head. "She's been through enough. I thought it best to wait."

Wait? Alex stalked up to the two men, and her gray eyes flashed furiously despite the shaking of her jaw. "Dean. Where's Kevin?"

She didn't want to hear Dean's response, the answer to a question she already knew. "He's dead." The Winchester's words were hollow. "That son of a bitch killed him."

"Oh." Alex blinked, once, then twice, and then she turned away. Theo's grace turned in her chest, churning her stomach, but other than that … nothing. Somehow, that information meant nothing to her. Alex swallowed thickly, trying to conjure up some feeling -- some emotion of grief -- but her chest felt hollow. Castiel's hand reached out to take hers, and Alex jerked away as it pricked by a pin; his touch threatened to collapse the wall inside, to take that numbness away.

Castiel withdrew his hand, and he turned back to Dean. "So who is this angel, if it isn't Ezekiel?"

"A dead man walking." Dean shoved the last of the weapons that lay on the table into the duffle bag and zipped it shut.

Castiel watched with a frown as he caught sight of an angel blade packed on top. "What, you're going to destroy him?" When Dean grunted in agreement, he added sharply, "You kill an angel, its vessel dies too."

"Think I don't know that?" The zipper on the bag jumped the track, and Dean wrenched it back. "If I
don’t end Sam and that halo burns out and I …" His head dropped to his chest. "God, I was so damn stupid."

"You were stupid for the right reasons."

Dean scoffed at Castiel's attempt at comfort. "Yeah, like that matters."

"It does. Sometimes that's all that matters." Castiel stepped forward, and Alex stepped back, head turned as she stared down at the ground. "Listen to me. Sam is strong. If he knew an angel was possessing him, he could fight. He could cast the angel out."

"The only problem with that is that Sam doesn't know." Alex spoke up, drawing both's attention onto her. "And I'm guessing whoever this guy is now has Sam tucked far away out of reach."

"Do you remember Samandriel?" Castiel's question caught Alex off guard, and she gave a nod; of course she remembered the young, wide-eyed angel. Castiel turned back to Dean. "Before he died, he told me the demons were able to dig into his mind, access his coding. We might be able to do that here. Might be able to — to bypass the angel and talk directly to Sam."

Dean's grim expression didn't change, but something akin to guarded hope glittered deep within his eyes. "And you think that would work?" he asked.

"I don't know, but I think we should try."

"How?" Alex shook her head at Castiel's idea. "Crowley's the only one we know who even knows how to start that process. We'd need his help, but last I checked the King of Hell wouldn't be keen after, you know, being in your dungeon."

"We'll worry about that later." Dean pulled out his phone. "Sam's took the Impala, but he still has his phone on him. I can trace his GPS signal, or at the very least I can trace one of my burners." He grabbed his bag and slung it over his shoulder. "Come on. Let's get going."

"Yeah, slight problem." Alex looked over at Castiel. "The car's back in town. Einstein here ran it out of gas. So I hope you're up for walking." She turned around and started up towards the stairs.

"Alex." Castiel was behind her, a steady presence, and an unbidden tremor passed down her spine at his gentle tone. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Alex brushed off his touch, her fingers lingering a moment longer on his hand. "I-I just need some time. First, we need to find Sam."

Somerset, Pennsylvania

It hadn't taken Dean long to track down Sam, and by nightfall they had crossed the county line into Somerset County. The Lincoln sputtered as Dean killed the engine, and Alex groaned as she straightened her back; the car's backseat was somehow even less comfortable than the front, and her spine cracked in protest. From the stiff way Dean moved as he got out, he seemed to be having the same problem. He slammed the door behind him as he circled around to the trunk, and the car shuttered at the force.

What are you, a pimp? Alex could hear Dean's scoffing words in her head as she followed him out, and she suppressed a snort of amusement. The Winchester hadn't been impressed with the car's golden exterior, and even less impressed with its suspension system. The car has groaned, creaked,
and bounced the entire ride, and frankly everyone but Castiel was surprised that it had made this far.

The seraph had taken a real liking to the car. "Careful." Castiel gently closed his door as he joined them by the trunk. "Don't break it."

Dean snorted. "I think we're way past broken, buddy." He threw open his duffle bag and pulled out an angel blade and held it out to Alex. "Here."

Alex held up her hands, stepping back in confusion. "We're not here to kill Sam, right?" The answer was obvious; such an order would be preposterous coming from Dean, but the presence of the weapon left her momentarily unsure. "What's that for?"

"If worse comes to worse and he goes psycho, you need to keep yourself safe." Dean pushed it into her hands before digging out one for his own. "Cas?"

"I'll be fine, thank you." Castiel's attention turned off down the street, gazing at something far off in the distance. "We're not far away." Wind whipped across the street, and he turned to look back at the two of them. "We should get going."

Dean took off down the street, Castiel at his side, and Alex followed more reluctantly, eyes trained on where her hand was connected to the angel blade. The touch of it made her grace — Theos grace — swell up, stretching down her arm and binding with the metal until the weapon felt like an extension of her hand. The distant flutter of an owl disappeared, and the sounds of the world closed in around her until she could only hear the sounds directly around her. The hum of a passing car, the murmuring of Castiel and Dean.

"Cas!" The words came out louder than she had intended, and the angel blade fell from her hands onto the pavement below.

The seraph was at her side in a second. "What's wrong?" His grace pushed inwards, but Alex's instinctively fended it off, pushing it away from her human soul — away from the darkness that bound it to Crowley's deal.

The weapon was gone from her hands, and her hearing had returned. "What — I —" Alex shook her head, eyes closing briefly as she took in what she could hear; the highway in the distance, the music from one of the neighboring houses. "I … I just couldn't hear for a minute." She looked down at the angel blade, and she slowly reached down to pick it up. She was prepared this time, as as her grace connected with the weapon, her hearing faded away.

Castiel's hand on her shoulder has her looking up. "What's going on?"

Alex shot him a small half-smile. "I'm okay," she promised. "I think … I think this grace is a little faulty. It can't seem to keep up my hearing and bind to the weapon at the same time." She tightened her fingers around the blade as the grace settled inside of it. "It just took me by surprise, that's all."

Her smile seemed to reassure the seraph, because he nodded and stepped back. "We'll figure out what's going on." He turned back to Dean, who had been watching them with a quiet impatience. "Let's keep going."

They turned the corner of the street, and Alex could see the black, sleek outline of the Impala sitting on the curb. Dean's pace quickened to catch up to his car, leaving Castiel and Alex no choice but to follow.

Dean ran his hand over the hood of his car, silently checking for any damage as he passed. The car looked clean and unscratched, which was for the best, both for Sam and his possessor's sake.
"Dean." Castiel pointed towards the house across the street where the garage lights were on.

Dean nodded in understanding, and he lead the way up to the home. He motioned towards the side of the house, and Alex slipped off in the direction of his gesture. She circled around, light on her feet, and she peered into each window. The only light that was on was the kitchen, where a tall, broad figure was washing his hands.

Alex dropped down out of sight and quickened her pace as she finished her loop. "He's in there." Her voice was a rushed whisper as she stopped on the porch next to Dean. "In the kitchen in the back left."

Dean rushed forward, and the door swung open silently under his gentle push. He motioned Castiel and Alex after him as he entered into the darkened living room, and the smell of blood left an metallic tang on the room of her mouth. She clamped her jaw shut as she followed Dean through the living room.

"You should not have come here, Dean." Ezekiel stood with his back to them; he turned as they entered, his head raised high and shoulders dropped. The angel in control somehow managed to make Sam's body look even taller, and power emanated from his slightest movements.

One hand went out to keep Alex back as Dean stepped forward. "You killed my friend, then you take my brother, and you think I'm going to let that stand?"

The stranger's eyes moved up Dean's body until they rested on his face, sizing up the man in front of him. "I allowed you to live."

"Mistake." Dean lunged forward, but he had barely taken a step before he was thrown backwards through the kitchen doorway and into a bookshelf; it broke beneath his weight, and he crumpled to the ground. The angel turned to Alex, but footsteps behind him had him spinning around. Castiel's fist shot out, knocking the angel squarely in the nose, and Sam fell to the floor, unconscious.

Castiel watched him fall, his lips set into a thin line of displeasure as he let his fist fall back down to his side. "Dean." His gaze turned onto where the Winchester was stirring, and he repeated himself. "Dean. Now what?"

"Get him into the car." Dean Winchester pulled himself to his feet, and one hand went up to gingerly feel the back of his head. "We need to get him out of here." He crossed the room and grabbed his brother by the shoulders, and Castiel wordlessly bent down to pick up Sam's legs.

Together, they carried Sam's unconscious body out the door and into the backseat of the Impala, and Alex followed, keeping a sharp look out for anyone who might be around to catch sight of what they were doing. "Where are we taking him?" she whispered as Dean shoved Sam's long legs up so he could close the car door. "He's not going to stay out long enough to take him all the way back to the bunker."

"There's got to be something close by." Dean reached back inside the backseat to pull his car's keys out of his brother's pocket. "We'll start heading east and see what we find. Cas, with me." He pointed to the front seat of his car. "Alex, follow behind."

"Sure thing." Alex took the Lincoln's keys from Dean and started off down the street towards where the golden car lay in wait. She heard the Impala purr to life, and she watched the headlights flicker on as the car rolled off down the street.
The Lincoln rolled to a stop alongside the sleek Impala, and Alex killed the ignition as she looked out at the warehouse that lay before her. The exterior was dark and worn, with cracked, yellow glass panes. Alex got out, checking to make sure her phone was in her back pocket before she closed the car door and made her way into the warehouse.

The front door creaked as she opened it, and she was greeted with a flight of stairs that led down to a large, musty room. Dean and Castiel stood there, and Alex could make out Sam's form slumped in a wooden chair. Chains held him fast, and as Alex got closer she could see that they were warded. His head was held upwards by a thick leather band across his forehead, but his eyes were closed.

"You made quick work." Alex stopped at Castiel's side as she finished her appreciation of their work. "You think that'll hold?"

"It better." Dean looked over at Castiel, and the seraph nodded, agreeing with Dean's assessment. "You still got Crowley's number?"

Alex set her lips in a thin line at the unspoken order behind his words. "It's six six six," she retorted. "Not exactly complicated. But yes. I have it." She stopped, but when Dean didn't respond, she reached into her back pocket. Crowley was going to kill her for this. "Fine. Fine. Give me a minute."

She retreated across the room as she dialed the King's number, teeth digging into her bottom lip in frustration as Dean followed. But she didn't dare snap; too many questions into her behavior could lead to answers she didn't want to give. Instead, she clenched her jaw and waited for Crowley to answer.

"Hello, darling." The demon's voice was slow and lazy, as if he were already bored of their conversation. "This better be important."

Alex glanced over at Dean, and she self-consciously shifted the phone to her other ear. "Yeah … I need a favor."

"Favor?" The slightest hint of sharpness crept into Crowley's voice. "No, I don't believe you get to ask for favors. Last time I looked, my job was to give you orders, and your job was to follow them. I'm your boss, not your partner!"

Alex winced, thankful that Dean wasn't close enough to overhear the demon's words. She just had to play it cool and get Crowley's interest. "You cracked into Samandriel's head, right?" she asked, trying to keep her voice sharp to keep Dean's suspicions off of her, but subdued enough to appease the King of Hell. "Do you remember how to do that? Could you do it again?"

Her approach seemed to work, and the threat disappeared from Crowley's tone, replaced by curiosity. "Come again?"

"Could you break into another angel's head?" Alex repeated. "Like, oh, I don't know … right now?" She bit her lip, waiting for the demon's response, and she chanced a look out of the corner of her eye.

Dean, who had his arms crossed impatiently, caught her gaze, and as their eyes met, he frowned. Before Alex could protest, he had snatched her phone away from her and was stomping across the room. "Alright, listen up, you son of a bitch." His voice faded into the distance as he disappeared into another room, and Alex's shoulders fell. Great. There went that.

Her attention was immediately drawn elsewhere, however, as Sam began to stir. Castiel, who had his hand on his forehead, pulled away as the hazel eyes flickered open. "I healed most of Sam's internal burns," he told Alex as she approached. "I should be able to fix the rest as well."
"That's good." Alex looked down at the stranger as he shook his head, brushing off the pain from Castiel's fist. "Well? Who are you?"

"What's your name?" Castiel added. "I thought I knew every angel in heaven, but I've never seen you."

The angel's eyes narrowed as he started up at the seraph. "Why should I tell you anything?" he asked, his voice sharp and his eyes hard with anger.

Dean's angry voice drifted through the room, and Alex put a hand on his shoulder. "Go check on Dean," she instructed quietly. "I'll watch him." She watched as Castiel hesitated, and she pointed off towards where the Winchester had disappeared to. "I'll be fine. We're just going to talk a bit, okay?"

"Okay. Call if you need anything." Castiel walked away, and Alex pulled up a nearby chair, straddling it to face the angel. He met her gaze, unblinking.

"What's your name?" she tried again. "I know it's not Ezekiel." Her question was met with silence, and Alex chewed on her lip as she tried a different approach, tipping her head in innocence. "Dean and Castiel think you're a bad person."

The angel's face remained expressionless, but Alex could see his arm twitch momentarily as he tested his warded bonds. "And you do not?"

Alex shook her head. "You saved my life when you healed my heart. And you offered to heal Sam even though you already had a vessel. So no, I don't think you are." She rested her forearms on the back of the chair. "I've seen many bad angels in my time. You don't seem like one of them."

"You say that, but you don't know the things that I have done." Something flickered through the angel's eyes, an emotion too quick for Alex to catch. "How can I be a good person when I was imprisoned in heaven's crypt for over five thousand years?"

"Because I've met an angel who's been locked away for just as long. And if Lucifer can show kindness after everything that he has done, then I believe that you can too."

"You … met Lucifer?" The angel's head tipped in curiosity and surprise, and when Alex nodded, his eyes narrowed slightly as anger darkened their color. "Then you have been deceived, just as he deceived me. He is not capable of feeling kindness. Anything he has shown you is manipulation, a means for his own perverted end."

Alex leaned forward, surprised by the emotion on the once-stoic angel's features. "What did he do to you?" she pressed, her grey eyes searching his face for any hints that might answer her question. "Who are you?" The angel didn't answer, so she added, "Just tell me why you killed Kevin. After so many months of living quietly with him, what changed?"

The angel scoffed. "You make it sound like I had a choice in the matter." His eyes darkened. "I told you. You don't know the things that I have done, nor the things that I have had to do to make this right."

Footsteps approached, and the angel's eyes hardened as he shut his mouth. "Crowley's on his way." Dean tossed her phone back to her, and Alex fumbled as she caught it. "Get ready."

Alex's face twisted in sympathy. "Let's just try talking to him," she began, turning to face the two men. "We can learn who he is without having to drive a needle into his head."

"I don't give a damn who he is!" Dean snapped. "He just needs to get out — now!"
The angel's eyes turned slowly to look over at Dean, his head straining against his bonds. "And if I don't? Even bound, I can rip this body apart. Tell them, Castiel."

Cas didn't respond, but from the way his head turned away, it was clear the strange angel wasn't lying. Dean's face twisted in rage. "You do, you die."

"You want this to end? Go ahead." The angel lifted his head defiantly. "Put a blade through your brother's heart." When Dean didn't, he relaxed slightly, and his voice lost some of its sharpness. "If it makes you feel any better, I have Sam locked away in a dream. As far as he knows, the two of you are working a case right now — something with ghouls and cheerleaders."

Dean stepped forward, and Alex shifted away, giving the pissed off man plenty of space. "Why are you doing this, huh? We fought together. I trusted you. I thought you were one of the good guys!"

The angel met Dean's gaze. "I am doing what I have to do."

The metal door flew open with a bang, and Alex jumped back in surprise. Dean didn't flinch. "So am I." He turned away from the angel to face Crowley, who stood at the top of the stairs. "It's about time."

"Hello to you too." Crowley descended the stairs, his dark eyes taking in the four before him. "Cas. Powered back up, I see." His gaze passed over Alex without a second glance, instead settling on the bound angel. "You didn't say he was in your brother." Interest and barely concealed amusement sparkled in his eyes. "This'll be more fun than I thought."

Dean's jaw set at the demon's careless words, and Alex felt his gaze on the side of her face, but she didn't dare speak up against the King of Hell; Dean, Cas, and Crowley in the same room was a nightmare come to life. "How'd you get him here?" she murmured to Dean, a frown upon her face. She hadn't expected Crowley to show up at all; Dean must have had a very convincing argument.

Dean didn't respond, and she circled around to stand beside Castiel as Crowley pulled up the other chair across from the angel. From his pocket he produced a long metal spike, and Alex recognized the material as the same metal of angelic weapons.

"Be careful," she insisted as the demon studied the tip, but she fell silent when Crowley gave her a look of warning. Castiel’s gaze turned onto her for a second before it swung back onto the Crowley as the demon took Sam's head in his hands.

The sound of Sam's scream echoed off of the walls as the metal spike pierced his skull. Alex flinched away as Crowley pushed it in even further, past the bone and into the brain, and the scream grew louder. When it had faded, when the angel had grit his teeth, Crowley pulled out a second spike and pressed it into Sam's temple.

Alex turned away, pressing herself into Castiel's side as the screaming continued. With each new twist of the needle, the sounds grew louder and louder, cutting through Alex's bones as sharp as any of Crowley's weapons. She could feel Castiel against her, and while his face remained emotionless, she could feel the stiffness in his muscles.

There were footsteps as Dean stalked away, and Alex watched him go, fully ready to follow — whatever she had to do to get away from the screaming. Castiel hurried after the Winchester, but Alex only managed to take one step after him before Crowley's voice had her stopping. "Alex."

The screaming trailed off into a pained groan, and Alex reluctantly turned back to face the demon.

Crowley dug a spike deep into the angel's forehead, twisting as the being beneath him screamed out
his agony, but as he forced the needle into its final resting place, the angel's face immediately fell expressionless. "There." Crowley brushed his hands off. "He's not conscious. You and I can have a little chat." He must have seen how Alex glanced back over her shoulder towards where Dean and Castiel had disappeared, because he reached up and twisted another metal spike. "That'll keep them away," he said as the angel's mouth fell open in a cry.

"What do you want?" Alex clenched her fists against the sound, her face set grimly in an attempt not to show her fear.

"Don't take that tone with me," the demon warned. "Your asinine fucktoy may have his wings back, but you're still human."

Alex narrowed her eyes, and she summoned up the chilling mass that was Theo's grace and flicked it through the air. One of the lantern's Dean had set up exploded, sending sparks and glass everywhere, and she lifted her chin defiantly.

Crowley, however, only scoffed. "A bit of grace doth not an angel make." The angel beside him screamed again, almost drowning out his words. "So you're juiced up. But you still have a human soul, and it belongs to me."

"Zir noco iad Gadreel." Words erupted from the angel's mouth, a sharp, careful chant. "Zir noco iad Gadreel."

"Ah. Interesting." Their conversation lost, Crowley turned his attention back onto the angel as he raised his voice. "Laverne! Shirley! Come here!"

Dean and Castiel returned, and Alex half-heartedly sidestepped away from Crowley, less concerned with being caught talking to him than with the words spilling forth from the angel. "Is that his name?" she asked, looking up at Castiel with wide, grey eyes. "Gadreel? But he — how?"

"Gadreel?" Dean repeated sharply. "Does that mean something to you?"

Alex gave a quick, short nod. "Yeah. Lucifer — he told me all about Gadreel. Apparently he was God's most trusted and was put in charge of watching over Eden's Gate. Lucifer screwed him over and slipped by. And you know the rest from Genesis."

"My, my." Crowley clicked his tongue. "A celebrity."

"It's his fault — all of it." Castiel's voice deepened in anger. "The corruption of man, demons, hell. God left because of him. The archangels — the apocalypse. If he hadn't been so weak, none of it would have happened." The seraph lunged forward and wrapped his hands in the unconscious angel's jacket, shaking him furiously. "You ruined the universe, you damn son of a bitch!"

"Hey!" Alex pushed herself between the two of them, shoving Castiel away from Gadreel. "Stop it! What the hell are you doing? He can't hear you! There's needles in his damn brain — you could kill him!"

"Alex, he —"

"It wasn't his damn fault, okay? You angels weren't even aware deception existed until Lucifer rebelled. Gadreel got screwed over." Alex pushed Castiel in the chest when the seraph advanced again. "Leave him alone!"

Gadreel groaned as Crowley twisted the needle, and Alex turned back to the scene in front of her. "What's taking so long?" Dean snapped.
Crowley didn't stop his work to answer. "Other than the fact that I'm trying to unravel a living, multidimensional knot of pure energy, not much."

The unconscious angel suddenly drew in a gasping breath, and Alex jumped slightly as his eyes snapped open. "It won't work." Gadreel words were forced, pained. "You will never find your brother. Go ahead. Poke and prod. I can sit in this chair for years and watch you fail over and over again." His eyes sought out Dean Winchester. "I've endured much worse than this, Dean. So … much … worse. And I have all the time in the world."

"Shut up! Alright. Plan B." Dean spun around to face Castiel. "Cas, you got to possess him. Do it now!" he snapped when the seraph hesitated. "Get in there, tell Sam what's going on, and help him kick that lying son of a bitch out!"

"It might work," he slowly began. "But I can't possess a vessel without permission."

Crowley cleared his throat, raising his hand, but Dean shook his head. "No," he snapped. "Not happening."

Crowley turned fully to face the Winchester. "Don't be daft. Demons take what they want. I can burrow into that rat's nest of a head. I can wake Sam up. Just call me plan C."

The room fell silent as Dean hesitated, and Alex looked between the two, surprised that Dean was even considering Crowley's proposition. "Dean, you can't —" Castiel started, but Dean cut him off.

"You got a better idea?" he snapped before he turned back to the demon. "What about the angel?"

"I'll work fast."

"And if he finds you?"

Crowley scoffed at Alex's concern. "I'll run," he promised scathingly. "I'm not dying for you lot. Of course," he added, motioning towards Sam, "if I do this, you're gonna have to remove Gigantor's warding."

Dean didn't hesitate. "Cas, burn off Sam's tattoo."

"Dean," Castiel began, but the Winchester wouldn't hear it.

"Do it," he instructed. "Do it." He crossed his arms as Castiel stepped forward, and Alex watched as the seraph peeled back Sam's shirt to place his hand over the ink-black skin. Gadreel grunted in protest as Castiel's hand lit up with grace, and the tattoo disappeared. Crowley stepped forward, but Dean held out a hand. "If you mess with Sam," he warned, "if you try anything —"

"I keep my bargains." The demon sat down in the chair across from Gadreel, straightening his cuffs as he settled down. "Besides, I don't want to be inside your brother any longer than I have to. I'm not one for sloppy seconds."

Dean frowned, but he held back any rash retorts. "When you find him," he said instead, "say 'Poughkeepsie.' It's our go word. It means drop everything and run."

"Fine." Crowley rested his hands on the arms of the chair. "While I'm gone, hands off the suit." His words were accompanied with a look over at Alex, and the young hunter narrowed her eyes, unamused by his assumptions.

Gadreel's jaw set as he glared at the demon before him. "I will destroy you."
"Eat me." The demon's head was thrown backwards as red smoke exploded out of his mouth, and it twisted and spiraled through the air before it forced its way down Gadreel's throat with a speed and force that had Alex wincing internally. Gadreel's eyes rolled back into his skull, and when the last of the smoke had disappeared, his head slumped forward in unconsciousness.

"A demon and an angel walk into my brother. Sounds like a bad joke." Dean's humor was forced, and Alex couldn't muster up the sound to even respond. All she could do was stare at Sam's unconscious body, not wanting to miss a single thing. It was hard to believe that, at that very moment, two very different beings were battling for control.

"Dean," Castiel began from beside her, his voice low, "if this doesn't work …"

"It'll work." Dean's words were firm, his conviction held together by pure denial of the alternative, and he crossed his arms as he fell quiet.

As the silence dragged on with no change in Sam, Alex's attention turned to Crowley's unmoving vessel. She stepped forward to place two fingers on his neck, curiosity driving her to check for a pulse. The skin was still warm, residual of the demon's essence — a creature forged in hellfire burned hot. But the heat was fading, and there was no pulse to be found. More confident now, she pressed her grace inwards to confirm that the heart was moving. As she did, her hearing closed in, and she pulled back with a curse. "Dammit."

"What's wrong?" Castiel's attention snapped to her, his voice terse with surprise and concern.

"It's this stupid grace again." Alex pulled it back in, directing the coldness back to her hearing. "It's like I can only use it for one thing at a time because it shorts out my fucking hearing everytime I try to do something with it." She clenched her fists as she looked up at the seraph. "It's because I'm not an actual angel, isn't it?"

The look on his face confirmed what Crowley had said, but Castiel's reply was only, "We'll talk about this later," before he turned back to Sam.

Alex frowned with displeasure, but she fell silent as well, stepping away from Crowley's vessel as she kept her eyes trained on Sam. Every once and a while she could swear she saw a muscle twitch, but it was the only sign of the ethereal battlefield within him.

Suddenly, his head flew backwards, and Alex flinched as white light as brilliant as the sun shot out from Sam's throat, pushing its way between Dean and Castiel before it flew through a shattered window up above. A second later, red smoke billowed outwards, twisting between Alex and Castiel before it re-entered its vessel.

Sam's eyes snapped open, and Dean jumped to his brother side. "Sam!" He put his hands on his brother's shoulders as he stared into Sam's shocked face. "Cas?"

Crowley reached up to brush off his suit. "I'm fine, thanks for asking," he quipped as he rose to his feet.

Only Alex acknowledged his words with a look; Dean and Castiel's attention were focused fully on the younger Winchester. Castiel was removing the metal needles from Sam's skull with skilled, careful hands. "Sam, are you okay?" he inquired, but he faltered as the room was lit up by headlights. Alex's attention snapped upwards; her unspoken question, however, was immediately answered by Castiel. "It's Abaddon."

"Shit." Alex stepped forward, but her anger faltered slightly as she remembered that she had left her
weapon in Dean's car, unwilling to touch it lest her grace withdraw again. She cursed.

"Go. The back door." Crowley pointed behind him. "I'll handle this."

"Oh, cause you're such a good guy?" Dean scoffed as he scrambled to free Sam from his bonds.

Crowley rose to his feet. "Right now, I'm the goodest guy you got."

Dean straightened up, leaving Castiel to finish healing Sam as he stared the demon squarely in the eyes. "This doesn't make us square," he warned darkly. "I see you again —"

"I'm dead," Crowley finished, unperturbed with the Winchester's hostility. "Yes, I know. I love you too."

Dean glared, but the slam of three car doors had him pushing past the demon to help Castiel carry his brother towards the exit. Alex followed, intent on leaving close on their heels. But she had barely taken a step before Crowley stopped her.

"Alex." The demon crooked a finger, beckoning her closer. Alex hesitated, considering running away, but she found herself drawing near all the same. Crowley held out a closed hand and Alex reluctantly took the folded piece of paper in between his fingers, wincing internally at the brush of his warm skin. "Make it quick." The demon's hand fell back to his side as he dismissed her. "Get out of here."

Alex didn't hesitate. Her feet carried across the room and down the hallway. She looked back only once, just in time to see Crowley take a seat in the large chair Sam had once occupied, crossing his leg as he waited patiently with his back to the door Abaddon was approaching. Alex heard the door handle turn, and then the scene disappeared from view as her feet carried her around the corner.

She caught up with Dean outside just as he was helping Sam into the Impala. "What did Crowley want?" She could hear the terse suspicion in the Winchester's voice, and she kept her head held high as she pretended to shrug his question off.

"Nothing," she lied. "Just some stupid downtalking. Told me to stop calling him. Where are we going?" she asked, quickly changing topics to avoid anymore prying questions.

"Back to the bunker." Dean slid into the front seat and dug his keys out of his pocket. "Meet us there."

"Um, yeah. Sure." Alex glanced over at Castiel as the seraph emerged from the other side of the car from where he had been with Sam. "Um, Cas, you better ride with them. Make sure that he's okay, alright? Me — I'm just going to swing by Sioux Falls to get the rest of our stuff from Mills," she explained, purposefully slowing her voice to avoid tangling her tongue over the lie. "I won't be long." She glanced over her shoulder towards the warehouse as she added, "Come on. We really need to get out of here."

"Alex —"

"Cas," Dean snapped, and the Impala roared to life. "You in or you out?"

"Just get in," Alex insisted. "I swear I won't stay there long, and you can call me anytime. Please just go." She watched the indecision battle in his eyes, and she let her shoulders fall as a genuine smile graced her lips. "I love you, okay?"

Castiel's face softened. "I love you too." He slid into the front seat, and the Impala sped away down
the darkened road. Once it was out of sight, Alex crossed over to her own car and stepped inside. Her hand unclenched, revealing the piece of paper Crowley had given her, and she unfolded it with steady hands.

An addressed was written in black ink. 243 West 1st Street, Wichita, Kansas. Del will give you your instructions. In the bottom corner, scrawled as if an over thought, was, Bring a gun.

Alex let the paper fall onto the seat next to her, and she reached back into the back to find her bag. The handle of her gun glinted in the moonlight, and Alex let the bag slide back into the shadows. Good. She was ready to go. The car roared to life, and Alex drove off down the road.

Wichita, Kansas

The sun had barely risen above the horizon when Alex pulled her car up to the address she had been given. A storage locker lay before her, just on the outskirts of a large, dark forest, and Alex hesitantly got out of the car. Her gun rested as a comforting weight against her side as she closed the door behind her, the slam echoing through the still air. The side door was locked, but it swung open under her gentle touch of her grace, and Alex frowned as she peered down the hallway light by flickering iridescent lights.

A guttural scream came from down the hall, and Alex spun around in surprise, a hand going back to instinctively wrap her fingers around the handle of her gun.

“There really is no need for that.” A voice from behind her had the young hunter turning. A man stood at the end of the hallway, his eyes inky black as he looked her up and down. “I’ve got them all securely contained, I promise you that.”

“Who are they?” Alex cast a wary glance towards the voice screaming for help, but all she saw were hallways lined with storage lockers. “Monsters?”

“Insurance,” came the vague answer. “You must be Alex. Crowley said you would be coming around for something.”

“So then you must be Del.” Alex tucked her gun away and approached the small, scrawny demon. “What’s the matter?” she asked as a disdainful frown crossed his face. “You look a little pissed. We’re both on the same team, you know.”

The demon’s eyes flashed black from beneath his thick black-rimmed glasses. “I haven’t heard from Crowley in three months, and then all of a sudden he’s asking me to pass on info to a washed-up wannabe angel?” He scoffed as he held out a brown folder. “I’m a demon — I have needs. But instead I’m stuck at this — this dead-end job, and he’s sending you out to party? You’re nothing compared to me!”

Alex reached out to take the papers, but when the demon pulled them out of reach, she frowned, her eyes narrowing in impatience. “It doesn’t matter what I am,” she retorted. “It’s not your call, it’s Crowley’s. Last I checked, he’s still the King. So unless you’re thinking about defecting …” She watched panic flash through the demon’s eyes, and her lips curled into a smirk. “I didn’t think so. So do your job and let me do mine. Capisce?”

The demon scoffed again, louder this time, but he let her take the folder from his hands. “Fine. Don’t let the door hit you on the way out.”
“I won’t.” Alex turned and stalked away, head held high until she was out of the demon’s sight. The door slammed shut behind her, and Alex slid into her car, only then letting the tension leave her shoulders. The screaming was muted now, but definitely still there if she listened for it, and the angel pulled her grace away from her ears so the noise would stop. Her attention turned to the folder in her lap, and she opened it to find the name of her destination scrawled on the top of the first page.

Hibbard, Idaho.

Alex closed the folder and tossed it onto the seat next to her as she reached down to start up her car. Hibbard was north of Rexford, just a few miles up the highway from the home she never thought she would return to. The car purred to life, and the young hunter guided it down the parking lot and back onto the street.

She was going back to Idaho.
First Born

July 26th, 2014
Rexford, Idaho

Blood stained the sink, dark red spatterings that faded to pink as the water washed it away. Alex dug her nails into her skin as she tried to scrape the dried layer that caked her hands. Her jacket lay in the bathtub, soaking in hot water in a half-hearted attempt to draw the blood out.

She had arrived in Hibbard late that evening. The folder the demon Del had given her had contained all of the information that she would need. No research was necessary; the job was purely dispatch. Her target was a small boarding school of witches just a mile west in the woods. Names and faces were included, as well as a list of all of their victims.

She had gone in under the cover of night, gun loaded and a knife stashed on her belt. The first two had gone down easily, caught by surprise as two bullets pierced their skulls. The next three had fallen in similar manners, cries of shock falling from their lips before the bled out on the ground. The fourth kill had been messy; it took three bullets to bring her down, and she had twitched uncontrollably for several seconds before she fell still.

There had been twelve in all. Many were young, students, novices to the world of hunters, and they fell easily beneath the muzzle of her gun. But there were others that had put up a fight, and the scuffle had been a bloody one.

But they were dead.

Alex looked up into the mirror, frowning at the faint splattering across her freckled face. Her gray eyes flickered, resting on the border between determination and exhaustion as she stared at herself through the familiar mirror.

She hadn't known where else to run, and so she had returned to the only place she knew; her and Castiel's home. The door was still unlocked, and everything was where they had left it. No one had been inside; this was her sanctuary, her safe haven. It belonged to her and Cas.

Her eyes fell onto her phone that sat on the counter beside her. The notification for Castiel's voicemail still sat displayed on her lock screen, a reminder of her deception. Alex wiped her hands off of her pants as she reached for it with a frown. He would surely be worried by now; best to soothe him before he grew suspicious.

Her phone rang, and a ding answered it. The house creaked, and the young hunter immediately snapped to attention. Her blood stained fingers closed around her gun, but before she could take a step towards the bathroom door, it flew open. Brilliant blue eyes flashed in surprise, and the gun fell back onto the counter.

"What are you doing?" Castiel stepped into the room, and his eyes went wide at the sight of the blood. "What happened?"

Alex didn't respond. "H-H-How…" she finally managed to get out. "W-What are you doing here?"

"Jody Mills said you never showed up." Castiel's gaze traveled across the entire room, taking in the blood-stained clothes and the red tub. "And our grace is connected." The seraph's face twisted in anger as he took in the blood. "What did you do?"
"I’m fine, thank you." Shame washed through her, and Alex's face grew red as her voice sharpened defensively. "I just took care of some things, alright? It's no big deal." She turned back to the running sink, watching as the blood slid down into the drain as she tugged softly on tendril of grace that connected her to her mate; she hadn’t even thought about it.

"You were hunting." Castiel's voice was flat, and Alex's eyes closed. "You were hunting," he repeated. "After you promised me that you wouldn't." Disbelief hallowed out his tone as the realization came crashing down, and pity swept through the young hunter.

*I’m doing this to keep you safe.* Alex bit back the words as they rose in her throat like bile. She couldn’t play innocent; not with blood all over her hands. “Yeah,” she snapped instead, surprised by the sharpness in her voice, “that was before we were tortured by angels!” Lies.

Castiel seemed taken aback by her sudden rage. “And so you think that makes it okay to go off on your own?” His own anger exploded, fueled by his fear. “You lied to me — do you think I’m an idiot?” He stepped forward, and Alex straightened up to match his height, glaring when words didn’t come. “I’m your mate.” The seraph’s eyes flashed with anger before it fell back into hurt. “We’re supposed to work together or not at all.”

*You don’t understand.* “You wouldn’t work with me anyways.” The words were snarled, and Alex grabbed her gun off of the sink. “All you wanted was to work at your stupid gas station and ignore how everyone around us is dying! And then we weren’t prepared, and we almost died! We would have if Theo hadn’t been such a fucking idiot!” She was yelling now, her face red. Why couldn’t he just understand? Why had he come?

“Alex.” Alex could see the shock in his eyes. “Please. We agreed to get out of this life. You told me you wanted to leave.”

“That was when we were angels.” *Why did she have to lie to him?* “It’s not the same anymore, Cas. We’re not safe, our children wouldn’t be safe. You can’t just turn a blind eye to it all!”

“Everything I’ve done, it’s been to protect you.” Castiel’s voice was soft and comforting, everything Alex didn’t want it to be. He should be furious at her, and his compassion only fueled her rage.

“I don’t need protection!” Alex shoved her way past Castiel, her feet carrying her towards the door. She snatched a sweatshirt off of the couch and stormed out the front door, but Castiel didn’t follow. Alex’s fist flew out, knocking over a trash bin and sending the contents spilling out into the street. He wasn’t coming after her. He hadn’t made any move to stop her. All she wanted was for him to make her stop, because Alex knew she couldn’t stop herself.

Lucifer would have made her stop.

The thought made Alex’s chest ache. He would have stood up to her and forced her to stop hunting on her own. And even if he hadn’t succeeded, he would have given her something to be angry about. But all Castiel had done was beg; how could she be mad at that?

“How’d it go?”

Alex spun around, hackles rising as she found herself face to face with the last person she wanted to see. “Come to gloat?” she spat. “I hope you’re happy, you — you — κώλος!” She spat the Greek insult out, too angry to remember it wasn’t English. “Cas knows I’m hunting, and I just had to lie to my mate. So I hope you’re fucking pleased with yourself.”

“Quite.” Crowley remained unaffected by her attitude. “Now if you’re not busy, I’ve got a task for
“Again?” Alex glared up at the demon. “I just finished your last stupid job. You promised me I wouldn’t have to kill!”

“I told you I wouldn’t have you kill humans,” Crowley corrected impatiently.

“Witches are still people!”

“Debatable.” Crowley cleared his throat, clearly bored with their current line of conversation. “And you’ve clearly proven yourself capable, so I won’t need to be testing your skills anymore. Now come on. We have actual work to do.”

Alex glanced back towards the house, but there was still no sign of Castiel. Who knew what he was doing. “Fine,” she relented with a scowl. “Let’s just make this quick, okay? What are we doing?”

“We’re going to find a way to destroy Abaddon.” Crowley’s dark eyes sparkled at the very prospect. “There’s a weapon to destroy her completely: the First Blade.”

Alex frowned, wholly unimpressed. “Okay, fine. Where do we get it?”

Her indifference seemed to irk the demon, and he narrowed his eyes. “We don’t,” he corrected. “We work with Dean Winchester, and he gets the weapon for us.” His thin lips turned upwards in a smirk at Alex’s confusion. “I’ve been tracking the blade for decades. The closest I got was when one of my droogs got wind of a protege demon of Abaddon’s who claimed knowledge of the blade. Sadly, before Smitty could nab the guy, a hunter by the name of John Winchester nabbed the protege. I’ve already talked to Dean — he’s got a lead. We’re meeting him there.”

The King of Hell snapped his fingers, and the world spun as Alex was enveloped by a dark, prickling energy. Her vision was consumed by blackness, and vomit rose in her throat, but Alex held it in as light returned to her eyes.

They were standing just outside a storage locker, a small one with damp, musty air. The door was open, and Alex stepped inside, her eyes going up to the devil’s trap that covered the entrance. “Is all this really necessary?” Crowley stared up at the painted warding with a frown. “I mean, I’ve been inside your brother. We’re practically family.”

Green eyes flashed furiously as Dean appeared from behind a metal shelf. “Listen to me,” he snapped. “We are the furthest thing from family —” He cut off in surprise at the sight of Alex. “What the hell?”

“I thought we could use the help.” Crowley watched impatiently as Alex stepped into the room, clearly expecting her to let him in as well, but the young hunter smirked as she left him outside.

“It sounded interesting, so I tagged along,” she lied, gaze traveling across the haphazardly arranged items. Nothing looked familiar; this must be one of John’s lockers. “What are we looking for?”

“Anything on the First Blade.” Suspicion lined Dean’s voice, but it didn’t last long. “Know anything about it?”

“Just what Crowley told me.” Alex jerked a thumb back towards where the demon stood, arms folded as he glared at the two of them. “What about you?”

“Nothing. Just that Dad tracked down a demon that was looking for it. And he wrote down the coordinates to this place next to it.” Dean started rummaging through the boxes with a shake of his
head. “I don’t even know where to start.”

“So what do you call this decor anyways?” Crowley called from the doorway as Alex turned her back to both of them. “Rustic obsessive? Paranoid deco?”

Alex rolled her eyes, and she picked up a glass jar of — who knew what it was. The lid was loose, and she leaned forward to take a sniff before recoiling in disgust. Gross.

“Here we go.” Dean’s voice had her turning. He was holding a file out of a large cardboard box, his finger dragging down the first page as he skimmed its contents. “Looks like my dad was working with another hunter when he nabbed Abaddon’s pet. He was working with a woman named Tara.” He glanced over at Crowley, but when the demon didn’t respond, he frowned. “Doesn’t ring a bell.” He turned his attention to the next page as he continued to read. “All right, looks like they interrogated the demon. Then they exorcised him. But not before he mentioned the First Blade.”

“I love it when I’m right.” The smugness in Crowley’s voice was hard to ignore, and Alex and Dean exchanged looks.

“Yeah, well, the rest of the file’s empty, genius.” Dean shoved the file back into the box and pushed it back onto the shelf.

“What? Didn’t they teach note-taking at Hunter’s Hogwarts?”

Dean waved Alex after him, and he pushed his way out of the storage locker, ignoring the King of Hell’s clever quip. “Let’s go see if Tara’s still kicking.” He slammed the door closed after him and locked it with a metal paddock, and without a second glance, he stalked off down the hall. Crowley motioned Alex after the Winchester, and she fell in line, following him off towards the Impala with a grimace.

“Shotgun,” Crowley called as they stepped out into the night air.

“Uh, wrong. You’re in the back.” Dean pointed to the back seat as he circled around to the front, and Alex shot Crowley a smug grin. It faltered as it met the demon’s face, and she slid into the car with a shake of her head. This was going to be one hell of a trip.

Dean pulled the Impala up to the curb of a small town pawn shop, and Alex groggily raised her head. She had fallen asleep at some point in the night, and she rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. She looked over at Dean, unsurprised to find him awake and alert as ever. Freaking Winchesters. “Where are we?” She looked up at the faded letters of the white-painted pawn shop. Tara’s. Ah.

She threw open her door and got out, stretching her hands high over her head to chase the stiffness from her muscles. She could feel her gun in the back of her jeans, a comforting, solid presence, and she dropped her arms to let her sweatshirt cover the black grip. She fell back behind Crowley and Dean, letting the two take the lead as they entered the shop. “Tara?” Dean asked, and Alex peered past him towards the middle-aged woman who was reading a magazine behind the counter.

The woman barely looked up. “That’s what the sign says,” she agreed, finishing her page before she turned her blue eyes up onto the three of them. “Can I help you?”

“Yeah. I hope so.” Dean strolled forward. “ ‘John Winchester’ ring a bell? I’m his son.”

Something sparked in her eyes, but whether it was suspicion or surprise, Alex couldn’t tell. “You
Sam or Dean?” Tara asked, and she pushed her magazine to the side as she straightened up, her full attention turned onto her three guests.

“Dean.” Dean took another step forward, and so did Crowley, moving to Dean’s side and leaving Alex by the door.

Tara winced, reaching down to touch her leg in surprise, and Alex let herself stray from the two men, uninterested by the conversation thus far. The boxes and trinkets that lined the room had far more potential for satisfying her curiosity. “Well, didn’t you grow up pretty,” she heard the woman say. “Still in the family business?”

“Yeah, born and raised,” came the response. “Listen. Bunch of years back, you worked a job with my dad. Well, me and my, uh, associates here —”

Dean cut off, and Alex looked back, starting in surprise at the sight of the shotgun pointed straight at the three of them. “Whoa, whoa.” She backpedaled until she was standing next to Dean. “I don’t think that’s necessary —”

The gun swung over to her. “Ever since ’92, I get a painful little tickle in what’s left of my knee whenever a demon is around.” Her gaze darted between Alex, Dean, and Crowley as she searched for the culprit.

“Hunters. So trusting.” Crowley raised his hand, fingers coming together. “I’ll go grab a latte while you get this sorted.” He snapped, but he remained rooted in the spot.

“Devil’s trap beneath the knock-off Persian, jackass.” Tara’s gun turned onto the demon, who was frowning in disgust at the woman’s trap.

Alex watched as Dean shifted the rug backwards with his boot to reveal the white-painted trap. “Tara, listen,” he began, “my, uh, associate —”


Dean turned to him with a scowl. “Not helping.”

“Not caring,” Tara added sharply, and Alex rolled her eyes, unsurprised with how well the conversation was going.

“Look.” Crowley motioned to himself and Dean Winchester in turn. “I’m the King of Hell. He’s a Winchester.” Alex felt his gaze pass over her, but she remained unmentioned. “There’s a reason why we’re working together.”

“Yeah. It’s called possession.” Tara grabbed a metal flask from beneath the counter, and in one swift motion she pulled the cork out with her mouth and threw the clear contents all over the first person she could reach.

Dean Winchester’s lips pursed as the holy water hit him directly in the face. Tara slowly set the flask down, and Dean opened his eyes, blinking to clear away the water. “See?” he said impatiently. “I’m good. Okay?” He looked back at Crowley. “Yes, you’re right. He is a jackass, but he’s helping me on this.”

“Helping you with what?” The suspicion hadn’t left the woman’s eyes, but it had faded somewhat, and Alex brought the sleeve of her sweatshirt up and across her face to dry it off.

“You and my old man found a demon who knew something about the First Blade. We need to find
the blade.”

“Well, hell.” Tara looked the Winchester up and down, unsure what to make of the news. “You are as handsome as John. And as dumb, too, if you’re looking for that old relic.”

“We’re hunting a Knight of Hell.” Alex spoke up, drawing the woman’s scrutiny over onto her. “And that weapon’s one of the only things that’ll put those a-holes down for good.”

Tara scoffed. “They’re all dead.”

“Well, clearly one’s not,” the young hunter retorted hotly. “Ever heard of Abaddon? Because she’s back.”

The muzzle of the shotgun quavered before the blonde reluctantly put it down on the counter. “Don’t move,” she ordered, and she slipped away into the backroom.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” Alex glanced over at Crowley’s quip, and their eyes met for a brief second before Alex dropped her gaze away.

Tara returned with a file tucked under her arm, and she spread it out on the counter so Dean could see the writing. “The demon said the archangels used a weapon that could kill the Knights of Hell,” she explained. “We’d never heard of anything like the Knights of Hell or a First Blade. Your dad thought he was lying, trying to save himself. We took him out, and we had a lovely weekend together.” The woman closed the file and pushed it aside. “Then we went our separate ways. But I could never let the Blade go. Something like that could really give a hunter an edge, you know? I looked all over the world — destroyed my knee and my life. All I found?” She crossed the room to a wall where a safe sat safely imbedded. “A location spell for the blade that I could never finish. Couldn’t find one ingredient — essence of Kraken.”

“Kraken?” Crowley repeated the word in surprise. “I got a warehouse full of Kraken essence in Belize. I could be there and back before you say ‘presto.’ ”

“Presto.”

Crowley’s shoulders fell in exasperation at the women’s distrust. “I can help,” he insisted, and he turned to look at the Winchester beside him. “Dean?”

Dean gave a curt nod. “He wants Abaddon as dead as I do.”

Tara shook her head. “If your daddy could see you now.” She circled around the counter, wariness still darkening her gaze as she picked up her shotgun, but she pushed back the faded rug with her foot. The gun discharged, and Alex shielded her face with a hiss of alarm as the buckshot tore into the wooden floor beneath, sending splinters up into the air. When she looked back up, Crowley was gone. “You know,” Tara began, “even if that blade is real, it ain’t worth being bosom buddies with the King of Hell.”

Dean shook his head. “Abaddon? Way worse. We’ll deal with Crowley after. Trust me.” His eyes turned onto Alex, and she gave a small nod in agreement with his statement.

Tara’s attention turned to her. “Don’t think I caught your name.”

“Alex.” Alex crossed her arms as she faced the older woman, but before either could add anything further, Crowley reappeared, a small jar of black dust in his hands. “Great. Good talk.” Alex turned her attention away from the woman as Dean took the jar from the demon.
The three set about preparing the spell, gathering the bowls and a large paper map. Crowley watched curiously, crowding the space beside Dean and leaving Alex no place around the counter. So she let her gaze wander around the shop, taking in the ceramics and small tokens that lined the shelves.

The whoosh of flames caught her attention again, and she hurried back over to the counter to watch the fire envelope the map, consuming everything in a ring that centered around the state of Missouri. A spark jumped out of the fire, landing in the southeast corner of the state, smoldering just north of Springfield. The fire died, and Tara nodded. “Missouri. Figures.”

She stepped away from the map, and Dean and Crowley did the same. “Would you care to join us?” Crowley asked, surprisingly polite for having been caught unaware by a devil’s trap.


Crowley frowned, and Alex rolled her eyes; if she and the demon were going to be at odds the entire time, maybe it was for the best that Tara didn’t come along. She glanced up at Dean out of the corner of her eye, curious if he was thinking the same, but all that the Winchester said was, “Thank you.”

Tara answered him with a curt nod. “Good luck, Dean. You’re gonna need it.” She gathered up the ashes that were the map as Dean turned away, and Alex followed him and Crowley out into the street.

“Missouri’s not far, right?” she inquired, reaching for the Impala door as she pulled her phone out of her pocket. There was two new text messages from Castiel, as well as a missed call, both from when she had been asleep. She slid in to the front seat, missing Dean’s answer as she unlocked her phone and read the message.

Where are you? The first one read.

Alex swiped down to the next one. I need to get back to the bunker. Sam needs me to continue his healing. Meet me here, or at least let me know where you are. I'm sorry if I hurt you.

Alex shook her head, regret sitting within her gut as cold and unwelcoming as Theo’s grace. I'm with Dean, she eventually wrote back. It's okay. I shouldn't have yelled at you. I love you.

The words felt hollow, and Alex's thumbs danced above the screen, but no other words of inspiration came. She watched the message send, praying that he understood. The car purred to life, and they took off down the street.

Springfield, Missouri

It was past five o'clock when the Impala finally rolled into Springfield, Missouri. The map had led them to a small farmhouse just outside the city, and Alex looked up from her phone as the car slowed to a roll. She had been texting Castiel once again; they were planning to track Gadreel down with a fragment of his grace left behind in Sam.

The car doors slammed as Dean and Crowley got out, and Alex hurriedly finished her response to with the two luck before she shoved her phone into her pocket and got out to join them outside the car. Before them lay a field full of white wooden boxes — man-made bee hives. She ducked as a bee flew past her head, grimacing at their situation; she hated bees.

"Wait." Crowley suddenly froze, his hands going out to keep the two of them back. "I'm feeling something."
Dean pulled himself to a halt, a frown upon his face as he looked back at the demon. "What, cramps?" he asked, his tone dry with scorn.

"I'm feeling something dark," the demon elucidated, his brown eyes narrowed at how easily the hunter had brushed him off.

Alex rolled her eyes. "What," she asked, "darker than you?"

Crowley opened his mouth, ready to issue a retort, but his eyes slid past her towards something that lay off in the distance. The color drained from his face, and the demon's eyes went wide. "Oh no. We need to leave now."

Alex spun around, her stolen grace crackling within her as she searched for Crowley's fear, but all she saw was the beehives being tended to by a beekeeper dressed in white netting. Dean scoffed, unable to find the source of the danger either. "What, are you allergic to bees?"

"That's not a beekeeper." Crowley's voice was little more than a hiss as he took a step back. "That's the father of murder."

"Sorry, who?"

Crowley whipped his head around to look Dean straight in the face. "It's Cain."

"Cain?" Alex repeated, and her eyes narrowed as she tried to place the name, but only one was coming to mind. "You mean like … Cain and Abel?"

Crowley gave a short, hurried nod. "We need to be a world away from here — from him," he hissed, and he spun around, but he pulled up short when a man suddenly materialized behind him, leaving the demon to reel back in surprise.

"You're not going anywhere," the stranger said, his voice low, soft and dark. "Crowley." The name left his tongue, syllables flowing together with familiarity, and he lifted the netting so they could see his face. Blue eyes sat in a weathered face, the lines hardened with displeasure at the sight of the three. His dark hair was greyed, particularly around the beard, and yet despite the signs of age, his eyes shone with vitality.

"Come with me." Cain motioned the three of them after him, and his voice left no room for disagreement. Alex fell in line behind Dean, casting a glance over her shoulder at Crowley, who was lagging behind. Their eyes met, and the faintest hint of a smirk crossed the demon's face, out of place given his facade of fear. Alex turned back around, her grey eyes narrowing in confusion. What was he getting at?

They entered the house, and the door swung closed behind them with a bang. "Sit down." Cain pointed towards the living room couch, and Alex watched as he disappeared into the adjacent kitchen. She followed Dean over to the couch, letting her eyes traverse the room as she took her seat between Dean and Crowley. Her heart beat within her chest, and her stolen grace stood on edge; the uncomfortable coldness pushed her even further down the fearful path.

The trembling demon beside her didn't help, and Alex threw an elbow into his side. "If you're so scared, why don't you just leave," she hissed.

Crowley's eyes turned up off of the floor and onto her. "I'd never leave my domestic partner in crime," he quipped, and Alex rolled her eyes, looking away to try and ignore the flush of her cheeks at his blatant crack at their working relationship.
Dean, thankfully, didn't seem to catch on, and instead snorted in contempt. "Yeah, like your heart grew three sizes. You can't zap out of here, can you?"

Crowley looked away. "Cain's doing something to me," he admitted after a moment of silence, the faintest hint of a tremble in his tone.

"Well, it's not your day for getaways, is it?" Dean glanced towards the kitchen, and Alex did the same, trying to catch sight of their captor. "Alright, so, tell me about this Cain."

Crowley's voice was little more than a hushed whisper. "Well, after Cain killed Abel, he became a demon."

"A demon?" Alex tilted her head to one side. "What do you mean? How's that possible? Lucifer never mentioned him."

"Because that arrogant monster tells you everything." The demon's eyes narrowed as he turned his head to look at Alex. "I mean he's the deadliest demon to walk the face of the earth. Killed thousands. The best at being the worst. And then he just … disappeared. Everyone thought he was dead or, at least, hoped he was."

Crowley fell silent as footsteps approached, his gaze falling back onto the variegated carpet. Alex raised her head to see Cain enter, a tray of teacups balanced in his hands. "Do either of you keep bees?" he inquired as he set the tray down on the coffee table, and Alex was taken aback by the amiability in his tone. "It's very relaxing. They're such noble creatures. And the honey? Well, I keep it right out of the comb." He handed a teacup and saucer to Crowley, and when the demon took it, it rattled loudly in his shaking hands. "There you are." Cain handed Alex and Dean a cup as well as he continued his monologue. "They're dying, you know. Without bees, mankind will cease to exist." Satisfied with his point, he looked between the three of them. "So, what are the King of Hell, a Winchester, and a fallen angel doing in my house?"

"Y-You know who we are?" Dean looked over at Alex; the young girl could only offer up a shrug. Cain's eyebrows lifted. "I'm retired. Not dead. What I don't know is why you're looking for me — more importantly, how you found me." He sat down in an armchair across from them, and Alex took a moment to run her eyes across his form; for someone of his age, he was sturdily built with no signs of frailty.

"Ah, that's, uh, a — a funny story," Crowley started, his words tripping over his fear, and Alex narrowed her eyes, unable to tell if it was genuine or a part of the demon's convoluted games. "Bit of a misunderstanding. We really should —"

"Shh." Cain gave a small wave of his hand, and Crowley's words died in his throat. His hand came up, wrapping around his neck as nothing but a strangled noise emerged, and a flicker of fear — genuine fear — passed through his eyes.

"Oh, you gotta teach me how to do that."

Dean's words drew Cain's attention back onto him. "Why are you here, Dean?" he repeated, the amiability gone from his tone.

"We're looking for the weapon the archangels used to kill the Knights of Hell," Dean explained. "The First Blade. We need it to kill a Knight of Hell — Abaddon." Cain’s face darkened, but he said nothing, and Dean’s lips pursed in a thin line. "Look, I get it. You're retired. We're not here to get between you and demonic AARP, but it's bad out there, and I'm just looking to even the odds."
The ancient demon seemed uninterested in Dean's story. "One last time. How did you find me?"

"We didn't." Alex spoke up, making sure to keep her answer short and to the point. "We used a location spell to find the Blade. It led us here. To you."

Cain's gaze swung across to her. "Anyone else know you're here?"

"No." Dean's lie was quick and smooth, and Alex echoed his sentiments with a nod. "Just the three of us." He motioned to himself, Alex, and Crowley in turn.

Satisfied with their answer, Cain rose to his feet. "Well, it's been a pleasure having company, but once a century is enough for me. You can let yourselves out."

The old demon started on his path out of the room, and Dean jumped to his feet to intercept him. "Hey, listen, pal. We're not leaving here without the Blade."

Cain turned back, and Alex rose to her feet, ready to defend Dean if push came to shove. But the man simply looked the Winchester up and down. "You have quite a reputation, Dean. I see the part about you being brave rings true."

"What can I say? I'm an all-in kind of guy." The humor died as Dean's eyes grew serious. "Abaddon is the last Knight of Hell, and if you're out of the game, what the hell do you care if she dies?"

Behind them, Crowley made a strangled noise, and Cain's gaze slid over to him. "If your friend could talk," he told Dean, "he would tell you that I trained the Knights of Hell. I built that entire demonic order with my own hands — Abaddon included."

Dean turned to stare at Crowley, surprise and indignation flashing in his eyes. "Well, that is information I could have used five minutes ago!" he hissed, and Crowley gasped and spluttered in his best attempt at an explanation.

Alex turned to look up at Cain. "Lucifer said the Knights were his fallen angels that became human," she started. "Why did you train them?"

"It was my job. They were human, freshly turned demons. Lucifer put me in charge with training them into what they are today. All of this Crowley knows," Cain gave the demon a low glare. "But there's something your friend doesn't know, something that no one knows, in fact — outside of Abaddon. It wasn't the archangels that slaughtered the knights. It was me."

Crowley's eyebrows lifted in surprise, and the room fell silent. "Well, that is information I could have used five minutes ago!" he hissed, and Crowley gasped and spluttered in his best attempt at an explanation.

Dean turned to stare at Crowley, surprise and indignation flashing in his eyes. "Well, that is information I could have used five minutes ago!"

Crowley's voice was hoarse as he hurried out towards the car. "Can we leave the country now?"

Dean stopped beside the Impala. "But you said the First Blade was our only shot at killing Abaddon," he reminded pointedly. "This is the closest you've been to it. We're not leaving."
Crowley looked between Alex and Dean, his face blank with disbelief. "Will you listen to reason for once?"

"Hey. He said he was going out of town. Awesome. We wait 'til he's gone, come back, bust in, take what's ours. Got it?" Dean slid into the Impala, and Alex and Crowley followed suit. "We'll be in and out before he even notices."

"This man knew who we were when he met us, and you want to try and slip below his radar?" Alex shook her head. "That seems stupid, Dean. There's got to be some way we can just … convince him or something."

"You heard him." Dean started the car and began to guide her down the long, dusty driveway. "He's past reasoning. We'll do what we have to." He reached over to turn up the stereo, drowning out any protests as he drove the Impala back towards town, and the old, isolated farmhouse disappeared from sight.

They returned under the cover of night. Cain's black pick-up truck was nowhere to be seen, and Dean parked the Impala off on the side of the road behind some dried brush. Then he pocketed his gun and the demon-killing knife before he led the way up towards the house. "This is by far the dumbest idea you've ever had," Crowley hissed as the front door gave way under Dean's gentle hand. Alex followed, fingers clenching around nothingness; her angel blade was back in her home, and the comfort her gun brought her felt empty in the face of the father of murder.

"Yeah, well, it's still early." Dean stepped inside, eyes narrowed as he looked around the softly-lit home.

Crowley peered into the living room, and then backtracked so he could glance into the kitchen. "Oh, there's nothing here," he quickly decided. "Shame. Let's go."

"Hey! Sack up and start looking okay? We don't have much time." Dean moved into the living room, and Crowley reluctantly made his way into the kitchen. Unsure what else to do, Alex passed Dean as she made her way into the rest of the house. There was not much; a bathroom and bedroom were all that were left. Alex left the bathroom untouched and moved into the bedroom, walking around on the balls of her feet as she cautiously examined the objects around her.

There wasn't much; a simple bed, a wooden nightstand, and a matching dresser. A chair was in the corner, with a jacket thrown over the back, and a cracked mirror hung across from the window. Alex started her reluctant hunt at the nightstand; the top drawer was cracked open, and Alex peered inside for anything that might be the First Blade. But there was nothing blade-like in sight.

"Nothing." She could hear Crowley's voice from the main room, and she stepped back into the hallway, glad to be heading back towards her companions. "Not even porn."

"Think I may have figured out why he went off the reservation so many years ago." Dean was handing a small silver picture frame to the demon, who took it curiously. Alex crossed the room to peer over his shoulder at the yellowed photo of a smiling woman.

Crowley's eyes danced over the image. "Lovely. Little plain. Who is she?"

Dean pointed to the photo. "Cain had a similar ring on," he explained, and Alex's gaze dropped to the woman's finger. "Father of murder got hitched." He opened his mouth as if to elucidate, but the sound of several distinct locks clicking shut. "He's back. Come on." Dean hurried over to the front
door, but it refused to budge.

Cain suddenly appeared behind Crowley, and Alex stumbled back in surprise at his presence. She barely heard Dean's command to go towards the back door, which was cut short as the two turned around to see the ancient demon blocking their way. Cain's hand pointed to the picture still gripped in Crowley's hands. "That belongs to me."

"Sorry." Crowley timidly handed the photo back. "Gorgeous, by the way."

The room lit up as headlights flashed outside, and Alex crossed the room in two hurried steps to peer out the window at the three cars that barricaded the driveway. "Hey, uh, any chance these guys are with you?" she quietly asked Cain as men and women unloaded from the trucks, and she stepped aside as Dean and Crowley looked for themselves.

Cain's answer was short and harsh. "No."

"I guess we can't wait any longer." One of the men leaned out of the center truck, calling out to those in the house. "Your friend Tara was helpful! Got downright chatty ... after I peeled all her skin off." He chuckled, and Alex curled her fists into a ball as anger pulsed through her, causing the lights to flicker as Theo's grace churned within her. "We don't want any trouble, Cain. Just want the so-called King and the Winchester. Got a new master to impress, and I'm betting bagging those two will do just that."

"Thank God I'm not involved," Alex quipped dryly, casting a glance back up at Crowley. "Who's 'master'? "

"Abaddon." The King of Hell's dark eyes flashed. "This lot need to die. I count —"

"Too many," Dean finished, and he stepped away from the window to look over at Cain. "The whammy you put on the doors that keeps us in. Will it keep them out?"

Cain shrugged. "For now."

Alex frowned at his complete uninterest in their dire situation, but Dean didn't seem to notice as he turned back to the window, mind whirring as he thought. "I'm gonna barricade the entrance," he told them hurriedly. "Get ready for a fight."

"Well, good luck with that." Cain turned to leave, and Dean's face twisted in anger as he looked over at the ancient demon. "What?"

Cain paused as he met the Winchester's gaze. "You exposed my home. You expose me." His voice grew sharp with the accusation.

"Well, boo-hoo!"

Cain looked Dean up and down, and his eyes glinted at the Winchester's rash words. "Brave, yet impulsive. You truly have lived up to your reputation."

"I can't say you've lived up to yours."

"Dean!" Alex snapped the Winchester's name. "Stop bickering and barricade the fucking door. If he isn't going to help, then the demons can have him. He's not our problem."

Cain's gaze turned onto her, and Alex refused to flinch away despite the coldness that ran through her blood. "What can I say? I'm retired. If you survive, you're welcome to join me for the last meal I
will eat in this house before I disappear again. It's the least I can do." He turned away and disappeared into the kitchen where his grocery bags sat on the table, and Alex looked back at Dean with a small shake of her head.

Dean mimicked her before he turned away to the living room and started pushing the couch towards the front door. Crowley immediately moved to help him, but not before he caught Alex' eye with a wink.

The young hunter frowned, unsure what it meant; was he playing mind games with Dean, or with her? She made her way back into the kitchen to barricade the back door, doing her best to pay no attention to Cain, who was in the beginning stages of preparing his meal. "Are you seriously not going to help?" she asked as she started pushing a heavy cabinet across the door.

Cain didn't look up from the fridge. "Why would I?"

"Because it's your house?" Alex grunted as the heavy cabinetry started to slide across the linoleum floor. "Or maybe because they're fucking demons? Who doesn't love to kill demons?" Her words were followed with a sharp glare in Crowley's direction; if the King of Hell heard, he gave no indication of it.

Cain closed the refrigerator door and turned back to the table, a beer in his hand. "It's like I told you; I'm retired. I don't get involved in conflict anymore."

"Well, then just give us the First Blade so we can do it ourselves!" Alex slammed her fist down on the counter, and Cain lifted his head to finally look her in the eye.

"No. And if I were to give up my weapon, it wouldn't be someone with a pawned soul such as yourself." He ignored Alex's pained glance towards the room where Dean Winchester was attempting to barricade the windows. "Don't worry; he can't hear us. But you do know he suspects something, I'm sure." Cain placed four ears of corn down onto the table, one after another. "The blade, it corrupts. Placed in the hands of a demon, it can do unspeakable destruction. And that I can't allow."

"Then give it to Dean." Alex shut her mouth as Dean entered the kitchen, his green gaze sweeping across the scene in front of him.

"So, this is your play?" he snapped, his eyes coming to rest on the ears of corn. "Corn?! What am I not getting here? I mean, it's not like you're a coward."

Cain sat down at the table, unfazed by the anger in his tone. "Since when does the great Dean Winchester ask for help?" he countered. "Well, that doesn't sound like the man I've read about on the demon bathroom walls." He paused, head tipping slightly as if deep in thought. "Maybe you've lost a step. Let's find out." Cain snapped his fingers, and the cabinet slid away, and the door flew open. Two demons rushed in, and with another snap of his fingers, Cain had the door closing behind them. "Oh, don't mind me," he told them as he looked up at Dean. "Enjoy yourself."

Alex immediately backtracked, weaponless, but Dean pulled the demon knife out of his pocket as he squared up against the two dark entities. Glass shattered, and a third demon burst through the kitchen window. Dean spun around, his knife arm swinging out, but the demon ducked and threw a punch into Dean's stomach.

Alex launched herself forward, wrapping her arms around the demon's waist and sending the both of
them flying back into the front entryway. The demon's fist came down on her shoulders, trying to
knock her loose, but Alex refused to let go. She wrapped her legs around the man, driving her fists in
at tight, short punches. Her stolen grace churned inside of her, and Alex let it fuel her rage.

A strong kick from the demon knocked her away, and Alex rolled to her feet as she dropped into a
defensive crouch. She could hear Dean battling the two demons in the kitchen; "Doing great," Cain
encouraged him.

The demon rushed her, and Alex dodged a well-thrown punch. She jabbed the heel of her palm into
his sternum and drew her thinly-stretched grace into her other hand as she pressed it into his face.

It died not with a bang, but with a sizzle, and Alex watched in pitiful disgust as it slumped to the
ground. She turned back towards Dean, ready to help as he pinned the female demon to the table and
drove the knife into her stomach.

A second demon caught her from behind, and a thick, strong arm wrapped around her neck. Alex
jabbed an elbow back into their ribs and went limp; her weight dragged the demon downwards. She
popped back up, driving her head into his chin, and she was able to struggle free.

There was a flash of metal; Crowley was holding out an angel blade, and Alex grabbed it by the
blade. She swung the handle at the demon, who jumped out of the way, giving her enough time to
get her bearings. She twisted the knife around, and as her fingers tightened around the handle, her
stolen grace rushed downwards and bonded with the metal.

Alex lunged forward, blocking a punch and throwing her shoulder into the demon's chest before she
drove the blade into the heart. It died, and Alex turned back to help Dean.

Crowley's hand on her shoulder, however, stopped her. He gave a small shake of his head, taking
back the bloodied blade, and Alex grabbed it by the blade. She swung the handle at the demon, who jumped out of the way, giving her enough time to get her bearings. She twisted the knife around, and as her fingers tightened around the handle, her stolen grace rushed downwards and bonded with the metal.

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drove the blade into the heart. It died, and Alex turned back to help Dean.

Crowley's hand on her shoulder, however, stopped her. He gave a small shake of his head, taking
back the bloodied blade, and while Alex's face twisted in displeasure, she stepped aside to watch as
Dean exchange violent blows with the demon who had torn Tara to pieces. Her toes curled within
her boots as the demon landed a solid punch upon Dean's cheek, but Dean twisted, and in one swift
motion he was able to slam him down onto the the table and jam the demon-killing knife deep into
his throat.

The demon died with a gurgle and a flash, and Dean looked up at Cain in cold triumph as he yanked
out the knife and shoved the body onto the floor. "What was that?" he snapped, but despite the
harshness of his words, his voice quavered with exhaustion. "Some kind of test?"

Cain took a sip of his beer before he use it to gesture at Dean. "I felt connected to you right from the
beginning. Kindred spirits, if you will. You and I are very much alike."

Dean snorted. "Right. Yeah, except I didn't kill my brother."

Something flashed through the old demon's eyes, but it was quickly replaced by indifference. "You
saved yours. Why?"

"Because you never give up on family — ever."

Cain hummed in acknowledgement of Dean's firm statement. "Where's your brother now, then?" he
inquired.

Dean's shoulders rolled back as he circled around the table to glare down at Cain with barely
concealed frustration. "I don't know what kind of game you're playing here, but I don't really care.
Just give me the damn blade."
Cain held Dean's gaze for several long seconds, and Alex stepped forward, ready to intervene. But the demon spoke. "Sorry, Dean. I have nothing to hand over."

"What?"

"I no longer have the blade." Cain rose to his feet, and Alex backpedaled as he slowly made his way into the living room. "It's gone."

"Gone?" Alex repeated with undisguised shock. "How is that possible?" She looked back at Dean, and then at Crowley. "The location spell located it, and it brought us right here."

Cain paused at the fireplace, taking a moment to prop the silver picture frame back up on the mantle before he turned back to the three of them. "Your spell brought you to the source of the Blade's power," he corrected. "Me." He drew up his right sleeve to reveal a brand on his forearm.

Crowley gasped, and Alex caught him hurriedly making the sign of the cross as fear flashed across his face. "Really?" she criticised. "Really?"

Crowley met her words with a scowl. "It's the bloody mark of Cain."

"From Lucifer himself. The mark and the blade work together," Cain explained. "Without the mark, the blade is useless. It's just an old bone."

"Bone?"

"The jawbone of an animal." Dean cast Crowley a look over his shoulder in answer to the demon's confusion before he turned back to Cain as he added, "The jawbone you used to kill Abel because he was God's favorite."

Cain's face darkened. "Abel wasn't talking to God," he retorted. "He was talking to Lucifer. Lucifer was going to make my brother into his pet. I couldn't bear to watch him be corrupted, so I offered him a deal — Abel's soul in heaven for my soul in hell. Lucifer accepted … as long as I was the one who sent Abel to heaven. So, I killed him." The faintest hint of sadness crossed his face, and Cain let his sleeve fall back down over the mark. "Became a soldier of Hell — a knight."

Alex could feel Dean's gaze on her, a silent question of whether Cain's words rang true, and she shook her head. "Lucifer never mentioned any of this," she admitted quietly. "But it's possible. He must have had you train his fallen army after he was sent to the Cage."

Cain gave a small nod. "My knights and I, we did horrible things for centuries. Bringers of chaos and darkness."

"Then you met Colette." Dean's voice was surprisingly soft, and Cain's shoulders fell at the memory. "She knew who I was … and what I was. She loved me unconditionally. She forgave me. She only asked for one thing."

"To stop."

Cain nodded in agreement with Crowley's words. "When the knights found out, they took retribution. They took Colette, so I picked the First Blade back up. It felt so good to have it in my hands again, and I slaughtered the Knights of Hell."

"Not all of them," Alex reminded, her tone erring on the side of sharp, and Cain's eyes turned onto her. "Abaddon is still alive."
"No," the demon agreed. "Not all of them. Abaddon … Abaddon possessed Colette. I tried to free her, but she snapped Colette's neck." His voice trembled slightly, and Alex's gaze dropped to the ground. "I tried to kill Abaddon, but she fled as I drove the Blade into Colette's body." Cain's voice strengthened with new resolve. "Colette … she made me promise that I would stop killing. That I was better than all of that, and she was right. So I buried her, and I walked away."

The room was silent for a moment as each processed Cain's solemn words. "Well, I'm sorry," Dean finally said. "Truly. But I have to stop Abaddon. So, where is the blade."

"No," Cain pushed his way past Alex and Dean, his feet carrying him swiftly towards the front door.

"Hey!" Dean sprinted after him, grabbing the old demon by the shoulder and spinning him around to pin him against the wall. "Listen, you son of a bitch," he hissed, the demon-killing knife pointed straight at Cain's chest. "You may be done killing, but I'm not."

Cain reached up and grabbed Dean's wrist, and before anyone could react, he plunged the knife into his own heart. "You never give up on anything, do you?"

Shock flitted across the Winchester's face, but within a second he had regained his composure. "Never."

Cain pulled the knife back of his chest, unharmed, and Dean took a step back. "Well," he said. "I do."

He vanished into thin air, and Dean's eyes went wide. "Cain?" he bellowed. "Cain!"

Voices came from outside the house, and Alex peered out the window, her heart thudding in shock as she watched several dozen demons approach the house. "Guys, we have bigger problems here," she warned, backing away so both Crowley and Dean could have a look. "There have to be at least thirty out there; there's no way we can take all of them alone."

Crowley's dark eyes flickered across the crowd. "Well, I'll stay as long as I can," he promised lightly, and Alex shot him a low glare.

"How generous." Alex looked over at Dean, frowning as she saw anger dancing his his emerald gaze. "We can't fight them," she repeated. "If we make it out the back door, we might stand a chance, but this house is a deathtrap."

Dean didn't respond, his head instead snapping onto something that lay just beyond her. "What the hell, man?" he snapped, and Alex spun around to find Cain standing beside the fireplace, the picture of his wife held forlornly in his hands, his face fallen in grief. "You in or out? I'm getting head spins."

"Dean," Alex snapped, silencing the Winchester. "You'll help us, right?" She turned to Cain, voice sharp yet pleading. "We can't do this on our own."

Cain's gaze came to rest on her. "I'll give Dean the mark, if that's what he truly wants." He turned to Dean. "The mark can be transferred to someone who's worthy."

"You mean a killer like you?" Dean's eyes hardened at the thought, and Cain gave a small nod.

"Well, if you're looking for cold-blooded killer, you've got two of the best right in front of you," Crowley chimed in, drawing three pairs of eyes onto him. "Oh sure, Dean's the obvious choice," he continued, "big, strong, tempered. But if you're looking for ruthless, she's your best bet."
Dean glared over at Crowley, and Alex felt her cheeks blushing slightly under Cain's stare. "No," he finally said. "With the mark comes a great burden. Some would call it a great cost. Either Dean bears the mark, or no one will."

Alex frowned, and Dean turned back to Cain. "Can I use it to kill that bitch?" he asked, and when Cain nodded, the Winchester blinked. "Yeah, well, then spare me the warning labels. I'm in."

Cain extended a hand towards him. "Good luck, Dean. You're going to need it."

"Yeah, I get that a lot. Let's dance." Dean reached out to take Cain's hand, but the ancient demon grabbed him by the forearm. The mark began to glow with a blood-red light, and it traveled down his veins as it passed into Dean's arm. The light settled at the top of Dean's forearm, burning the brand into his skin.

Dean gasped in pain, and Crowley inched forward. "Dean?" he asked as the two separated, and the light died.

"I'm fine." Dean stared down at the brand, a simplified outline of an animal's jawbone. He tore his gaze away to look up at Cain. "Alright, where the hell did you stash the damn blade?"

"Nothing can destroy the Blade, so I threw it to the bottom of the deepest ocean." Crowley groaned deeply at Cain's words, but the ancient demon wasn't finished as he spoke to Dean. "It was the only way I could keep my promise to Colette. You find the blade, kill Abaddon, but make me a promise first. When I call you — and I will call — you come find me and use the Blade on me."

"Why?"

"For what I'm about to do." The world spun at his words, and Alex stumbled as she found herself outside the house beside Crowley and Dean. The doors were thrown open, and the demons rushed in, unaware of the three of them standing beneath a large oak. The doors slammed shut, and Alex could hear the locks click behind them.

The windows lit up with a red light, and screams pierced the darkness. Crowley stepped forward. "They're trapped in there."

"Yeah. With him." The screams continued, some loud and drawn out, others cut short in death. Alex stepped away with a shake of her head. "We should get going. While everyone is still distracted."

She stretched her eyes open wide as she peered through the darkness towards the road where the Impala was hidden. Dean brushed past her, and Alex fell in line behind him.

A hand brushed against hers, and Alex's fingers closed around a scrap of paper that was passed into her hands. Three words were scrawled onto it, hurried yet elegant, and Alex crumpled it in her fist and let it fall beneath her boot. When would the orders end?

"He was right, you know." Crowley spoke up as they neared the car, and Dean paused to look back at him. "You are worthy."

"Oh, great." Dean's voice was sharp, scathing, and Alex paused at Crowley's side. "Now you're gonna get all touchy-feely too?"

Crowley ignored his tone. "Your problem, mate, is that nobody hates you more than you do. Believe me, I've tried."

Dean huffed, but otherwise didn't respond. "So how do we find the Blade?" he asked instead with a frown, and he reached into his pocket to dig out the keys for the Impala.
Crowley shrugged, and Alex shifted away as he stepped forward to land closer to her. "You can't search the bottom of the ocean, but I can. So, I'll find it and bring it to its new owner."

Dean turned to face him with a scowl. "Like I trust you," he spat. "I saw you, Crowley. Back at Cain's. You dusted that undercard demon, and then you just sat back and watched the main event." His gaze turned onto Alex, and she winced at the fury. "You both did. You knew about the mark. You knew about Abaddon and Cain — you knew about all of it, and you played me."

"I didn't know anything." Alex bristled at the accusation. "All I was told was that we were going to find a way to kill Abaddon, and that was enough for me. So don't you dare —"

"Don't I dare what?" Dean's face twisted in allegation and anger. "You know what, if I didn't know any better, I'd think the two of you are chumming around."

Alex's mouth hung open, but no words of defense came to mind. Crowley, however, was quick to jump to her defense. "Zip up, Winchester. I'm flattered, but she doesn't know anything. I brought the two of you along because Cain would have never given me the Blade. But who can say no to you two? I needed you to play along."

"You knew we were being followed, and you didn't say anything!"

The demon shrugged. "Well, Cain would want want to see his prize fighters close up. You plus demons equals fight night."

He looked over at Alex, blinking, and the young hunter immediately knew what he wanted her to do. "Tara died because of you!"

Crowley brushed her off with a shake of his head. "Omelets. Broken eggs. Et cetera."

Dean's fist came out of nowhere, and Crowley stumbled back, his hand going up to cover his cheek, and Alex winced as she remembered the outcome to the fight she had picked with the King of Hell. "After I kill Abaddon, you're next!"

"You don't mean that. We're having too much fun." Crowley straightened up as Dean wrenched open the Impala door. "Listen up. Even with the Blade, we're gonna need all the help we can get against Abaddon."

"Go find the Blade." Dean threw open his car door. "Alex, get inside."

Alex took a step towards the Impala, but Crowley cleared his throat. "I'll take Mouse back. I'm going her way." He held Dean's disgusted gaze, and Alex flinched at the suspicion in the Winchester's eyes.

"I'll see you soon," she promised, stepping forward, and she pulled Dean into a quick hug, her hands sneaking under his jacket to wrap around his waist. "Tell Sam I said hi, okay?" She pulled back and watched Dean get into the car. It purred to life, and Alex turned away as Impala it drove off, leaving her standing beside the King of Hell.

She looked up once the headlights were out of sight. "Okay, so what the hell was that about?" She turned to face Crowley with a deep-set scowl. "He probably suspects our deal, thanks to you! Why did I have to come along?"

"Consider yourself plan B," Crowley reached up to gingerly touch his cheek. "Or, preferably plan A, but I had my doubts to whether Cain would be willing to pass on such a powerful instrument to someone like you."
Alex crossed her arms. "Because I'm one of your stupid pawns," she stated bluntly.

"Yes, among other things. And considering this was our only shot at getting the mark, I couldn't risk taking any chances. If you couldn't convince him, Dean certainly could. Believe me — I would love to have the First Blade at my disposal. But having it in the hands of that brutish nightmare is better than not having it at all." Satisfied with Alex's silence, he added, "Well, did you get it?"

Get the knife. Her written orders flashed through her mind, and Alex gave a grim nod. She held out her hand, revealing the serrated blade of the Winchester's demon-killing knife. "You know Dean's going to kill me, right?" she snapped. "This better be fucking important."

Crowley brushed off her anger with a flash of his white teeth. "Don't worry. Do this right, and you'll have it back in the Winchester's trunk before he even notices that it's gone."

Alex scoffed at the idea. "And if I don't?"

"Then you better start thinking up a convincing lie." Crowley lifted his hands, his fingers poised in a snap. "You'll find all the information you'll need on your kitchen table." He snapped, and the world spun in a nauseating circle. "Good luck."

Crowley disappeared, leaving Alex standing on the sidewalk by her home. The wooden handle of the knife was cold against her skin, and Alex reluctantly slid the blade into the pocket of her jacket as she followed the driveway up to her front door. It opened under her gentle push, and she stepped into the darkened room. There, on the table lay a single manilla folder, just like Crowley had said. A quick job, he had promised. But it was always one job after another, after another; her two years of life were turning into two years of slavery. "When will it end?"
The soft beeping of her alarm jolted Alex awake, and her eyes flew open. She was enveloped in blankets, the heavy warmth brought about by the thick sheets of the spare bed in the home of Jody Mills. The young hunter rolled over to silence her phone, blinking sleep from her eyes as she stifled a yawn as she looked around at her familiar surroundings. Her reason for showing up on Jody's doorstep late last night was twofold; she was meeting Castiel, who, having fully healed Sam to the best of his ability, was returning from the bunker. But the second, most important reason was that Crowley had sent her there.

The manilla folder lay on the floor beside her, and Alex peered down at the scattering of papers. There were four names — four demons of Abaddon that were high enough up the ladder that they needed to be neutralized.

Alex threw back the covers and rolled out of bed, kicking the folder beneath the dresser as she rolled her shoulders back in a stretch. She could hear movement downstairs; Jody was already up and getting ready for work, but there was something else, a low, deep voice.

Her feet carried her down the stairs to find Castiel standing in the entryway. Dark circles sat under his eyes, and when he turned to Alex, his gaze was shy and uncertain. "You're awake."

"Yeah. Hey." Alex crossed the room and leaned up, pressing a soft kiss onto his lips. She felt him stiffen slightly, and she curled her hand around his neck before she pulled away. "I'm glad you're here. How's Sam?"

"He's doing well, despite our attempts to remove Gadreel's grace." Castiel's face grew grave. "He wanted to use it to track Gadreel's location, but I couldn't remove enough of it to complete the spell without killing him. He will have to find Gadreel another way, but at least he is well enough to do so on his own."

"Glad to hear it." Alex glanced towards hallway where Jody was loading up the washing machine. "I missed you, by the way." She reached out to take his hand, squeezing it gently to emphasize her point. Guilt constricted her chest, and she forced another small smile, but before she could say anything else, Jody returned.

"Hey, you." The sheriff shot Alex a warm grin. "How'd you sleep?"

"I slept fine, thanks." Alex returned the smile, unwilling to admit that her dreams had been plagued with nightmares of Cain, hunting her down no matter how fast she ran. "You work today?"

"Yeah. You two are welcome to stay here, though." Jody tucked in her uniform. "Anything you need, you just let me know, alright? I'll be home by six, if I'm lucky." She pulled Alex into a side hug and pressed a kiss on her temple. "See you in a bit."

"See you." Alex watched as Jody left, and she heard the throaty growl of the sheriff's truck as it roared to life. "So, uh, you ... you probably want to talk." She turned back to Castiel, her toes scuffing against the wooden floor.

"No." Castiel's voice was soft. "What I want is for you and I to have a normal life. But that isn't
going to happen, is it?"

"I … I want it to." Alex shifted forward. "I've been thinking, Cas, and I do want that kind of a life. It's just … I can't explain it right now." She turned away as the words stuck in her throat. "I just need you to trust me, Castiel."

"I'll always trust you." The seraph was at her back, so close that Alex could feel his heat. She leaned back, eyes closed as his arms enveloped her, rocking her gently from side to side. His lips came to rest against the back of her head. "I'm just worried for your safety."

"I know." The words sounded hollow. "But you shouldn't." Alex reached back to curl her hand in the seraph's hair, and his lips dipped down to rest against her neck. "I'm going down to Bobby's today," she explained after a moment of silence. "It feels only right, seeing that he left the land to me. You're welcome to accompany me, of course."

"I would love to." Castiel's grip on her didn't lessen, and Alex relaxed into his hold. "But we'll have to figure out what we're going to do soon. I doubt Jody would appreciate our company for very long."

Alex laughed at his words. "Don't let her get to you," she teased, and she reluctantly wiggled her way out of the seraph's grasp. "She enjoys having someone around." She glanced over towards the kitchen. "Breakfast? I'll be ready to go in about half an hour."

"I don't eat anymore." Castiel followed her over to the counters where Alex retrieved one bowl. "Since I've regained my grace, everything tastes like it used to. Like … like molecules. It's unsettling."

"Lucky you that you don't have to eat." Alex dug around in the fridge for some milk before she turned back around. "It's wonderful, but irritating —" Castiel's lips were against hers, and Alex cut off with a pleased hum of surprise as her eyes fell closed. She groped around behind her to place the milk down as he pinned her up against the fridge. "Hey, you," she teased as he pulled back slightly to breathe. "I wasn't expecting that."

"Neither was I." Castiel pulled back a little more, but his hands didn't leave her hips. "But it felt right."

Alex laughed, and she gently slipped out of the seraph's grasp to finish making her breakfast. "I had to take the bus into town, so I hope you have that pimp mobile." She sat down at the table, and Castiel took a seat next to her. "Bobby's is about a ten minute drive from here."

"Yes. It's sitting outside." Castiel momentarily looked as if there was something he wanted to say, but no words seemed to come, and he fell quiet once more, leaving Alex to enjoy her breakfast in silence.

Twenty minutes later, Alex stepped out of the Lincoln Continental and onto the hard dirt of the old salvage yard. Castiel followed, killing the engine and pocketing the keys as he joined her in the driveway that lead up to the blackened husk of Alex's old home. "What is it you're looking for?" he asked as the young hunter paused beside the charred dirt that used to mark the front porch.

Alex gave a small shrug, shaking her head as she tried to buy herself time to find a reason. "I don't know," she finally admitted. "I just felt like I should come back here." She started forward, picking her way down a pile of rubble until she was standing in the concrete basement, surrounded by timber
and destroyed relics. She could see the iron hull of the panic room, untouched by the flames, and she climbed under a meshwork of support beams to squeeze through the door.

The inside was just as she remembered it, apart from the thick black ash that had sifted down through the fan above. There were books piled beneath a cot, and a plastic cup sat beside it, its lip partially melted from the fire's heat.

Footsteps crunched through the debris, and Alex felt Castiel's presence stop beside her. "It's still hard to believe that this place is gone." Alex stepped closer to pull open one of the warped metal cabinets. "There's not much left to salvage."

"Not after so long of being exposed to the elements," Castiel quietly agreed. "It will be difficult to find anything anymore." He stepped back and forced the iron door open, shoving timbers out of the way with a supernatural strength. Alex turned back to the cabinet and tried to do the same, planting her feet as she wrapped her fingers around the handle as she pulled with all her might.

The door didn't budge. "Dammit!" Alex pulled harder, and she forced her grace down into her arms. The cabinet flew open with a bang and Alex stumbled back.

Castiel was at her side in a second. "What did you do?" He steadied her, his arms a solid, stable presence.

"It's this stupid grace!" Alex shoved it back into the corner of her being. "It just sits there so fucking useless, and it keeps flipping out whenever I use it." She kicked at an empty shell casing, sending it skittering across the room.

"It's not cooperating because you're no longer an angel." Castiel's hand squeezed her wrist. "Your soul reverted back to its human form which isn't compatible with Theo's grace." He paused, and Alex could see it in his face that he was searching for a relevant analogy, but none came to mind.

"I want my grace back." Alex's voice grew sullen as she let the grace return to its natural state, and her hearing extended to its near-angelic range. "It could do more than one thing at once, and I could see your wings."

Castiel's gaze fell over his shoulder, and his face fell. "You wouldn't like to see them now," he murmured. "There's a price to pay for stealing another angel's grace."

"Or other things," Alex quickly added, her brain scrambling for words. "Like demon's faces. Or other angels' wings, so we could avoid them. And I miss having my grace bonded to yours." She tentatively stretched Theo's grace forward, but when it refused to stretch far beyond her body, she placed a hand on Castiel's arm and let it travel through her limb. She could feel the other half of the grace, stronger and warmer within her mate, but still very much separate.

Castiel didn't respond, and Alex pressed a kiss onto his cheek as she squeezed her way past and back into the basement. Her phone vibrated from within her pocket, and the young hunter pulled it out. One text message from Dean; the message she had been dreading.

Hey. You seen the demon knife? It's not in the car. Alex could hear the pointedness in his words, an unspoken accusation.

Oh yeah. Sorry, man I meant to tell you yesterday, but I drove all day. She typed out her reply, her premeditated words flowing easily onto her device. I found it on the ground after you left. It must have fallen out of your jacket or something when you socked Crowley. I'll give it back next time I see you.
She reached back to touch the handle of the serrated knife that rested in her jeans as she sent the message. Theo’s grace stirred within her as Castiel passed by, and Alex drew it up into her head as an idea came to mind. Just as she hand channeled it into her hand, she focused it into her sight, and the world immediately grew brighter.

Castiel flickered, and Alex closed her eyes at the sight before her. His wings were back, but they were little more than yellowed bones with a few ragged, grey feathers hanging on by a thread. The majority of them were located around the base, small and dirty, but a few primaries hung on, their vanes crumpled and torn.

Alex let her stolen grace fall back away, unable to stare any longer at the gruesome, pitiful sight. They weren’t his wings; Castiel’s were blue. Where the grey feathers Theo’s? The seraph had been right; he had paid dearly for their grace.

The day came and went, bringing the evening with it, and Alex found herself curled up on the sheriff’s couch, her head resting on Castiel’s broad shoulder. She could hear Jody in the kitchen, followed by the clang of the dishwasher, and Alex lifted her head to call out. "Jody? You want any help in there?"

"I just finished." Jody Mills stepped into the living room, a dish towel slung over her shoulder. "And for the last time, no. You two just relax and pick out a movie. Something classic."

"Galaxy Quest is a classic." Alex flipped through Jody’s Netflix queue. " 'Gone with the Wind'? " She shook her head. "You’re such a girl."

"A girl who can kick your ass if you don’t shut up." Jody disappeared back into the kitchen, and Alex chuckled at her faux insult. She returned her head to Castiel’s shoulder as she continued to scroll through their choices.

The clock chimed six thirty, and Alex set the remote down. "You know what we need?" she suddenly asked, getting to her feet and grabbing her phone. "Ice cream. Nothing says 'summer movie night' like a big bowl of it, you know? I'll run to the store." She shoved her wallet into her jacket and fished the keys to her Marquis out of her pocket. "Any flavor requests?"

She was met with befuddled silence. "Um, mint sounds good," Jody finally said, reappearing from the kitchen. "But we have popcorn too —"

"Don't worry about it; my treat." Alex pulled open the door, pausing only when Castiel rose to his feet. "Hey, Cassie? Pick out a good movie, okay? I'll be back in ten." She slammed the door behind her and ran out to the car before anyone could say another word.

Once inside, she slumped against the leather seat to still her thudding heart. That had gone far better than she had planned. The young hunter reached into her jacket to feel the handle of the demon knife before she started the car, her gaze darting down to the open folder that lay on the seat beside her. Joseph Kennedy, chief treasurer at one of the medical companies based in Sioux Falls. One of Abaddon’s men. Alex guided the car down the road, flicking on the overhead light as soon as she was out of sight of the house. He lived four minutes from Jody, just across the main highway, and a earlier call to his secretary confirmed that he left work at six. Home around six-thirty.

Alex turned the light off and pressed down on the accelerator, and the car shot through the intersection. She crossed the highway, and the car slowed, pulling up to a stop beside a darkened home. Alex peered across the street as she killed the engine, but she detected no signs of life from
within the home. Perfect.

She drove the car around the block and parked it around back, her knife gripped tightly in her gloved hands as she circled around the back of the home and opened the back door, her grace unlocking the silver lock beneath her gentle touch.

She cast a look over at the clock on the stove: 6:34. She had seven minutes to kill Kennedy, grab some ice cream, and get back to Mills'. "Completely doable," she muttered under her breath as she snuck down the hall and into the main study.

Headlights flashed through the window as a car pulled into a driveway, and Alex ducked, her chest hitting the carpet as she dropped out of sight as a smile crossed her face. Right on time.

"I don't care what they say about Crowley, Abaddon wants it done tomorrow." The door opened and slammed shut, and Alex slunk forward until her back was up against the wall. "I have the files on my desk; I'll text you the address."

The hall light flickered on, and the shadow of a man approached the study, his footsteps loud and sure. Alex pressed herself in tighter against the wall, her fingers digging into the handle of the knife as she awaited her opportunity.

The demon didn't notice her as he entered, placing his phone on a stack of books as he paused beside the heavy oak desk. Alex let her stolen grace rise to her eyes, confirming the presence of the twisted, tortured soul, because she made her move.

She rose to her feet and lunged forward, crossing the carpeted floor on silent feet and driving the knife into his back. The demon snarled in surprise, keeling forward to escape the pain, and Alex wrenched the knife out from his ribs as she buried her hands in his blonde hair, pulling his head back as she thrust the blade deep into his throat.

Light exploded from his face, and the demon fell dead before he could land a retaliating blow in defense from her surprise attack. Alex knelt down to wipe the blade off on his jacket, her eyes narrowing as she considered her next move. She reached into his pocket and closed her fingers around his wallet; missing money would throw the cops for sure, but on a second thought, she picked up the file off of the desk.

The demon's phone sat beside it, still unlocked, and Alex stared down at the half-typed address, memorizing the array of numbers and words. "A demon meeting," she muttered, scrolling up through the conversation. "Crowley will be interested."

"Joseph?" A woman's voice came from upstairs, and Alex straightened up in alarm as the name flashed through her mind. Melissa Kennedy. Her name had been in Crowley's file: another demon, posing as a stay-at-home mom for their two year old daughter.

She circled around the desk and into another room as the footsteps drew closer, knife poised and ready to claim its next victim from behind. As Alex reached the back of the hallway and peered past the stairs, the small, soft shape of Melissa Kennedy came into view, a dish towel draped over her shoulders. "Joe?" she called again, and Alex drew her grace up into her eyes as she stepped forward.

Then she faltered.

There was no demonic presence within her; Melissa was human. Alex's feet carried her backwards towards the kitchen door, a grimace on her face. Shit.

She ran outside and jumped into her car. "Shit!" The word came out of her mouth this time, and she
placed a hand on her racing heart as she glared over at the dark figure beside her. "Dammit, Crowley! What the hell?"

"Just checking in." The demon's gaze swung over to the home. "I take it you successfully took care of the Kennedys?"

"I killed Joseph because he was one of Abaddon's demons. Melissa was human." Alex dropped the folder she had stolen onto the seat between her and the King of Hell. "I told you; I don't off humans."

Crowley's face twisted in anger, and he flipped open the file he had left her so Alex could see the pictures of Joseph and Melissa. "Your job is to do what I say," he reminded impatiently. "If I tell you to kill an entire orphanage, you do it quickly, quietly, and without questions."

"I agreed to do your dirty work, not to be pleased about it!" Alex turned to face him in her seat, her eyes flashing. "I don't kill people, Crowley. And I wasn't about to make that poor kid an orphan for no reason."

The demon scoffed. "She may not have been a demon, but she was playing for Abaddon's team." He leaned forward, a challenge in his gaze. "What are you afraid of — you're destined for hell, little mouse. You've got nothing to gain from playing nicely." He lifted his fingers, poised in a snap, but the noise was lost over the deafening explosion as the Kennedy house went up in a ball of flames.

Alex stared at Crowley, her mouth hanging open in shock and horror, but she could muster any words strong enough to convey her fury. Melissa and her daughter, no older than Ashiel — just like that, they were dead.

"There." The demon didn't give the burning home a second look. "Hopefully we're clear about what I expect. Shut your mouth," he added in a tone that made the young hunter's blood catch on fire. "You had your chance to take care of the problem, and you dropped the ball."

"I — Cas —"

Crowley scoffed loudly. "Neither of you will do anything. You're on my payroll, need I remind you. And Castiel has become a spineless sap."

"I — I — you're lucky Lucifer is still in the cage!" The words exploded from her mouth before she could stop herself, and her stolen grace roiled within her. "He wouldn't hesitate to break your fucking neck!"

"I don't doubt it. Good thing he's locked away for good." Something flickered through the demon's gaze, which quickly grew into humor. "You — do you believe that he loves you? That all those dreams weren't just one big gambit to get himself out?"

Alex shoved the keys into the ignition, tucking the demon knife into her jacket as she tossed the folder she had found into Crowley's lap. "I found this," she growled. "Abaddon's demons are doing something tomorrow."

Crowley scoffed at her change of topic. "You actually think that Lucifer fell in love with a monster like you? Some half-human, half-angel mutant with a hellbound soul?" Crowley laughed, and Alex almost cast him a look; she had never heard him laugh like that before. "Kitten, you're the very epitome of what he despises."

"Good thing it doesn't matter, because he'd still rip you apart!" Alex started the engine, and the Marquis hummed as it came to life. "So unless you have something useful to say to me, just get your
ass out of my car!" She snapped her head to look the demon in the eyes, but Crowley had disappeared. "Dammit!" She slammed the heel of her palm down on the steering wheel, teeth grit at the pain.

Her attention was drawn to the car's clock: 6:40. She was behind schedule. "Dammit," she repeated, this time with less vigor as she dug her phone out of her pocket. The girl drew in two deep breaths through her nose as she dialed Jody's number, forcing a smile when the sheriff answered. "Hey, Jody."

"Where the hell are you?" Jody's voice wasn't sharp, just curious, and Alex closed her eyes in thanks. "How long does it take to get ice cream?"

"Sorry, I'm at the store now. I've got a bit of a conundrum. Do you want mint chocolate chip, or mint explosion? Because they both look amazing, but I don't know how picky you are about your ice cream." Alex forced a light laugh, turning her head away from the burning home that had claimed Melissa Kennedy and her young daughter.

"Are you joking?" Jody's voice was incredulous, and Alex slowly started driving the Marquis down the street, trying to get out of the neighborhood. "Just pick the cheapest one, sweetheart. Movie night's cancelled; there's been a fire in town and I need to get down there."

"Oh. Okay. I, uh, I guess I'll just see you later then." Disappointment crept into her voice; genuine disappointment, and Alex looked up at the flames in her rearview mirror. "Good luck." She hung up and tossed the phone onto the seat beside her as firetrucks screamed out their horror as they barrelled down the street. The street was lit up with iridescent lights as they neighbors rushed out into the street, and Alex guided the Marquis down the street and back into the night.

"Where are you going?" Lucifer was perched on a table, and blue eyes sparkled with a dangerous light. Crimson wings stretched outwards, flickering in and out of sight, and Alex jumped to her feet. The concrete room stretched into darkness, and Alex stumbled towards it, panic pushing her forward.

"You can't run, little one." Lucifer appeared in front of her, and Alex skidded to a stop. "I'm inside your head." The devil's forked tongue traced his lips, and Alex pushed her way past him. "I know what you want, what you need." His voice followed her as she tore through the darkness.

She turned a corner to find herself in her heavenly home. Except everything was red. Everything from the ceiling to the floor was a deep, wet crimson, and the tongue-curving tang of iron hung in the air. Lucifer sat on the stairs, watching her lazily as the floor shifted and swirled. Figures rose out of the blood-stained carpet, ugly, jagged forms with jet black eyes.

Alex jerked awake with a gasp, violently struggling free from her captor. She could feel it fighting back, strong arms pinning her down, and she cried out.

"Alex, stop!" The arms released her and the mattress shifted, and Alex's head whipped around to stare Castiel in the eyes. Oh. The seraph's face was dark with concern as he looked down at her. "It's okay. You're safe."

Alex pulled herself up into a sitting position, and her muscles trembled at the memory of her dream. She could still taste the blood in her mouth, and at Castiel's gentle touch, she buried her head into chest. "Bad dream," she murmured, drawing in a deep breath through her nose to replace the smell of blood with the warm, heavy scent of the man beside her. "Sorry." She nudged Castiel back down
onto the bed and curled up beside him, resting her head on his shoulder.

The room was light, indicating that the day was just beginning, and Alex nuzzled against her neck. "Did I wake you?" she inquired, wrapping her fingers into his shirt.

"I never fell asleep." The seraph rubbed his hand against her back. "I stayed here to keep you company all night, though. You didn't sleep as well as you normally do."

Alex stiffened slightly, but the only emotion in his voice was concern. "Like I said," she murmured. "Nightmares. I don't know why." Lies. "I'm okay now." She lifted her head to press a quick kiss on his cheek before she sat up, the adrenaline in her veins making sleep impossible. "I think I'll just go take a shower and try to forget about it."

"Would you like company?" Castiel sat up as well, and his head tipped as he studied her. "I remember you mentioning before that that is something couples do."

Despite herself, Alex chuckled. "As much as I appreciate the gesture," she teased, "I don't think Jody would be a fan of that. Some other time." She slid out from under the covers and grabbed a clean shirt off of her dresser. "What do you want to do today?"

"I was thinking about looking for a job." The mattress creaked as Castiel swung his legs out off the bed. "If we are going to settle down here again, we'll need income again."

"That might be a good idea." Alex didn't look up, too busy fishing a pair of shorts out of her drawers. That'll give me some time alone to figure out a plan, she added as an inward thought. "Why don't we start doing that after breakfast?"

"Alex?" Jody's voice drifted upwards from downstairs as the ex-angel stepped out into the hall. "Is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me." With a roll of her eyes, Alex tossed her clothes into the bathroom as she paused at the top of the stairs. "You're up already? I thought you had a late night."

"I have to get down to the station to look into that fire from last night." The sheriff stepped into view, and even from where Alex stood, she could see the dark circles under her eyes. "911 reported a distress call coming from the house before it went up; the husband has been reportedly stabbed. I don't think there's much left of a body to confirm, though."

"Oh … that sucks." Alex could feel the faintest hint of color creep into her cheeks, and she did her best to suppress it as she asked, "Did anyone make it out?"

"The casualties haven't been confirmed, but there's no evidence that either Mr. or Mrs. Kennedy or their child made it out." Jody fastened her belt around her waist, and after a second she asked, "You don't know anything about this, do you?"

The hallway behind Alex creaked as Castiel approached, and the girl gave a quick shake of her head. "Not at all," she lied. "Why would I?"

"I just thought you might have seen something since you were in the area." The words were spoken slowly, as if the sheriff couldn't fully bring herself to believe Alex's alibi, but she didn't press it. "Well, if you think of anything, just give me a call, okay?"

"Sure thing." Alex watched as Jody left the house, and only when the door had closed behind her did the girl turn back to Castiel. She could see the concern written onto his face, and so she grabbed his hand before he could ask any incriminating questions. "Well, now that she's gone, I guess we can
shower in peace." She headed off back towards the bathroom, and Castiel followed close behind.

Alex flipped through the worn pages, her head bend as she tried to decipher the messy scrawlings that were the demon's handwritten notes. The address from his phone was scribbled on a napkin beside her, and her laptop showed the location on a map relative to her current position. It was a small warehouse fifteen minutes away, just southwest of the downtown area.

The house creaked above her, and Alex sat up with a jolt, her hands instinctively covering her work to keep it from prying eyes. No one was home — she knew that well, having watched both Jody and Castiel leave, but guilt still had her jumping at every noise.

Alex dropped her gaze back down to her work, breathing deeply through her nose to calm her nerves. She had to figure out when the meeting was and who was going to be there before it was too late. Too bad every damn note was in Latin.

The table vibrated loudly as her phone flickered on, and Alex jumped with a loud curse. "Dammit!" She threw her palm down on the table, satisfied by the loud, resounding thud, and she snatched up her cellphone to see who had scared her. It was a text from Jody Mills. *I won't be home till late,* it read. *I'm still working on that Kennedy case.* The phone vibrated again her hands as another message popped up. *Sure there's nothing I need to know?*

Alex unlocked her phone with a sigh; the sheriff was too intuitive for her own good. *Nothing helpful, I'm afraid,* she reluctantly admitted. *Joseph was a demon, but the other two were clean as far as I know. Could have been a demon hit squad that didn't want any survivors, maybe. Hell's been at war lately.*

*Don't tell Castiel,* she added in a second thought. *He doesn't need to get involved.*

She waited for a response, but nothing came. With a small sigh, Alex placed her phone down in her lap as she turned back to scanning her notes. Hopefully her pseudo-lie would satisfy the sheriff for a while.

The second page was of little use, but the ex-angel paused at the third, her finger coming to rest on a word halfway down the page. The only word in the entire manuscript that was in the English language: Sioux Falls. Alex leaned forward in excitement; it was the most promising lead she had yet.

"Having fun?" Crowley's voice had her jumping out of her seat, and Alex whipped around to stare the King of Hell in the face. He was standing in the living room, taking in the furniture around him. "Quaint little place, isn't it? I believe this belongs to your friend Jody —"

"Say her name one more time and I swear to God I will kill you."

"Quaint little place, isn't it? I believe this belongs to your friend Jody —"

"Say her name one more time and I swear to God I will kill you."

The demon's lips twisted upward in a smirk at her outburst. "Little beyond that, aren't we?" He motioned down to the table. "What are we working on?"

"Nothing." Alex dropped back into her seat. "If you're here to gloat, just forget about it. I'm doing your damn job; the least you can do is let me do it in peace." Her eyes dropped down to the bloodied knife in his hand, and her face set into a deep frown, but she said nothing.

"Mm." The demon sauntered up to her, his fingers dragging across the wooden table as he came to stop at her side. "Well, I hope you’re not planning on doing ‘nothing’ for too long; you’ll need to catch that meeting before it’s over."
A retort jumped to Alex’s throat, but she bit it back as her fingers curled in the pages before her, drawing in a deep breath through her nose before she tightly asked, “What are you talking about? If you know something I don’t …”

The demon’s hand traced the back of her chair as he circled around her, and the young hunter jerked in surprise as his fingers brushed past her shoulder on its way to tap the page in front of her. “Four o’clock.” Crowley’s voice was smug, pleased at how he had made her flinch. “The warehouse on the corner of Sandmeyer. Do you know where that is—”

“Of course I know where that is!” Alex’s thudded the butt of her wrist against the table in frustration. “I was the one who gave you the damn address. So unless you’re here to help, get out!” She spun around, but the demon was gone. “Son of a …” Alex pushed herself to her feet and slammed her laptop shut with a huff. If she left now, she could just barely make it there in time. She haphazardly threw the papers back into the folder and rushed them upstairs, sliding them carefully under the dresser to keep them hidden from any prying eyes. She dug the demon knife out from deep within her bag before she jumped back down the stairs, grabbing her jacket off the banister on her way out the door.

The warehouse stood alone on the corner of the road, cut off from the rest of the world by a chain link fence. The ground around it was dirt, populated by sparse patches of grass between the rusting metal pipes. Alex parked the Marquis across the street, glancing over at the clock as she killed the engine: 4:02.

She got out and crossed the street, casting a look around as she slunk around to the back of the lot. A gate sat at the end, secured with a padlock and a rusty chain, and Alex wrapped her fingers around the steel lock, flinching as her grace snapped it open with a violent clap that shook her bones. The young angel discarded the chains as she slid through the door and crossed into the warehouse.

The inside was just as haphazard and crowded as the lot outside, filled with pallets and crates that had turned the open floorplan into a maze. Alex slunk along the grimy wall, the knife gripped tightly in her hand. There were voices up ahead, sharp and unpleasant. “Why isn’t he here?” A female stood in the center of an open space, arms crossed as her dark eyes flashed. “Abaddon is getting impatient.”

“He’ll be here.” One of her companions, a thin, skinny man, shifted nervously on the dusty ground. “Joseph must have a good reason for being late.”

“Unless he’s dead.” The third demon’s deep voice was scornful. “No one’s heard from him since the fire. Maybe one of Crowley’s swine got lucky.”

“So we lost both of the Kennedys?” Anger sharpened the demon’s voice, and Alex held her breath as the demon stepped towards her hiding spot. A dusty glass bottle lay on the ground at her feet, and Alex stretched forward to pick it up as the demon turned back to her companions. They were murmuring quietly to themselves, still unaware of her presence, and Alex pitched the bottle off to her right. It shattered against the concrete, and the whispering immediately stopped. “What was that?” One of the male demons spoke up, his voice a deep growl.

Alex pressed herself tightly against the wooden box as footsteps approached. The demon circled through the warehouse, passing her by on his way to where the glass shards lay scattered across the ground. Alex snuck after him, her feet silent on the ground as she tailed behind him.

The demon paused by the shattered bottle, and Alex made her move, lunging forward to wrap her
arms around his neck. The knife dug deep into his throat, and the demonic creature died without a sound, his face flashing with fire as the evil within him burned away.

Alex staggered as the body went limp, and she slowly lowered it to the ground with a grunt of effort at the heavy weight.

“Where the hell did that idiot go?” The woman’s voice rose through the air. “Wilson? Did you find anything?”

Alex slunk forward, and she let her grace rise up to her ears as she searched for any indication that they were approaching. She slid between two stacks of pallets as the third demons added nervously, “It was probably nothing. Abaddon searched this place before she arrived.”

There was no answer; Alex knew there would be none to come. She heard the female demon sigh. “I’ll go look for him. Stay here.”

The young hunter pressed herself in between two piles of lumber as the demon stalked by, and she turned around and slipped by on her way to the male who had stayed behind. He was standing alone, half turned away from her, hands shoved uncomfortably in his pocket as he waited for his superior’s return.

Alex pushed herself to her feet, and two steps took her across the gap to where the demon was waiting. He caught her movement out of the corner of his eye, and he jerked back in surprise, just barely missing her knife aimed at his chest. Her feet hit the ground, and she spun around, ducking a punch as she lunged forward. The butt of the knife connected with the demon’s sternum, knocking him back, and she hooked a leg around his, sending the both of them tumbling to the ground. The demon landed on his back, and Alex on top of him, her weight sending the knife deep into his chest. The demon died, but before Alex could catch her breath, she was dragged to her feet by her collar. “Where did you get that knife?” The demon’s eyes glinted black, and a snarl darkened her face. Her nails dug into Alex’s skin, and the hunter struggled against her grip.

She thrust the knife downwards, and the blade buried itself in the female’s demon’s thigh. The demon shrieked, and Alex ripped the knife free and swung it upwards, but she fell backwards as the demon pushed her away. Her back hit the ground, and Alex rolled away before the demon could grab her again.

She was back on her feet within the second, but the demon was quicker, grabbing Alex by the throat and hoisting her up into the air as she scowled. “You shouldn’t have come here,” she hissed, her nails digging into the girl’s flesh. Alex struggled, her hands wrapping around the woman’s wrists as she lashed out with her feet. Her heel caught the demon on the thigh, digging into the wound, and the demon grunted in pain, loosening her grip and dropping the hunter back onto the ground.

The warehouse door opened with a squeak — Alex recognized the sound in the back of her mind, but she paid it no attention as she grabbed her adversary by the shoulder and thrust the knife into her chest, just below the heart.

“Alex!” The deep, rough voice had Alex freezing as her eyes turned towards the source. Her eyes locked with Castiel’s, and she watched as his face went blank with panic.

And then the demon’s hand pierced her stomach.

She felt it instantly, the fingers pushing their way past her intestines, and the blood rushed to her ears, pounding so loud that she could hear nothing else. The demon pulled her hand away, and Alex
stumbled back, hand going limp as she left the knife in the demon’s chest. It’s face flickered once, twice, and it collapsed to the ground with a dull thud.

The young hunter didn’t notice. Her hands had come up, gently encircling the gaping wound in her abdomen. The adrenaline was rushing through her veins, dulling the sensation as blood darkened her clothes, sticking to her skin and spreading outwards.

The ground disappeared from under her, spinning into the abyss, and she hit the concrete floor with a jolt and a groan. She felt herself moving as gentle hands pulled her close, pressing into her abdomen to staunch the blood. “It’s okay. It’s okay, it’s okay.” Castiel leaned over her, his eyes wide as he held her close. “You’re going to be okay.”

Alex gave a small nod, and she clenched her teeth to keep her jaw from trembling in pain. She reached up with a bloody hand to cup his cheek. He was right; it was going to be okay. The pain disappeared as her grace stretched out through her body, leaving behind only a fuzzy warmth that spread through her veins. There was a coldness too, laying deep beneath it, but Alex focused on the warmth as she buried her blood-slick fingers in her mate’s jacket.

Castiel’s stolen grace pressed into hers, but the damage was too extensive, the bleeding too much. Alex could still make out his face as the edges of her vision grew gray, and she curled her fingers around his wrist, mouth opening in an attempt to speak. Blood soaked her throat, drowning her bubbled words, and all she could do was brush away a tear as he clutched her tight. His lips were moving, but there were no words.

The light darkened as a shadow approached, and Alex felt Castiel tense. His head turned, snarling out something, but Alex couldn’t hear the words over the rush in her ears. The warmth was beginning to fade as her grace gave out, leaving her body cold and aching. The calmness disappeared as panic took hold, and she gripped Castiel, her chest contracting in a wet cough as blood forced its way up her throat and into her mouth. Her grace was giving up — she couldn’t breathe as the blood filled her lungs, and darkness pressed down upon her as she drew in her last breath.

She just wanted her mate to hold her until it was over.

The shadow moved closer, and Alex closed her eyes, ready for the reaper to take her. She felt it crouch at her side, and a hand came to rest on her mangled flesh.

And then the coldness disappeared, sucked from her body and vanquished into the void. Her flesh mended, and color returned to vision, bringing the figure before her back into focus. “There we go.” Crowley rose to his feet, and Alex wheezed, clutching at her abdomen as she weakly spat blood onto the concrete below her. “You know dying isn’t part of the deal, kitten.”

Alex didn’t respond, too focused on the pain in her chest; whatever the demon had done had taken away the adrenaline but not the agony. She coughed again, forcing up the last of the blood from her lungs as she curled up in Castiel’s lap, reaching out to grab her mate’s arm to steady herself.

“You’re welcome.” The demon pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped the blood off of his hand. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have hell to raise. And I believe the two of you have some things to discuss.” His eyes gleamed, and then he was gone.

Alex froze, and for the first time she became truly aware of the seraph behind her. He was still holding her, keeping her off of the cold stone floor, but his muscles were tense and unmoving. For
several seconds neither moved, both unwilling to be the first to speak. “Cas …” Alex finally forced herself to speak through a hoarse voice. “We should go.” She shifted out of his lap with a pained groan, pulling herself across the ground to wrap her fingers around the handle of the knife.

Castiel didn’t move, and after a moment, Alex reluctantly turned back to him. He hadn’t moved from where he knelt, his clothes and skin dark with warm, slick blood. His face was blank, eyes glazed as he stared at her, and Alex felt her heart crack at the pain in his gaze. “Cas.” Alex hesitantly crawled back into his lap, and when the seraph didn’t move, she rested her head against his chest, eyes squeezed closed as she curled up in his arms. “I’m sorry.” The words were barely audible, and her eyes stung with tears as reality came crashing down upon her shoulders. He knew everything she had worked so desperately to conceal.

And the truth had hurt him worse than she had imagined.

The young girl’s body convulsed in a stifled sob, and she pressed her face deep into his shoulder in shame. Her movement spurred the seraph to move, and his arms held her close as his face came to rest in her blonde hair. “It’s okay.” The words rumbled deep within his throat, low and defeated. “I love you.” His fingers threaded through her hair, holding her head against his shoulder. “It’s okay.” His voice caught in his throat, and Castiel pressed his cheek against her temple. “Whatever you did,” he finally began, “I know you did it for the right reasons. “

“I …” Alex hiccuped. “I did it to save you. You were human a-and the angels were after you, and I was so scared. I couldn’t — I couldn’t lose you, no matter what.”

“So you sold your soul to Crowley.” Castiel’s voice was quiet, but there was a note of anger buried deep in his tone that made Alex press her face even deeper into his chest. “How long has he given you?”

“Two years from the day we fell. And — and if he needs something done, I do it.” The words came out no louder than a whisper. “But he can’t let me die. I get exactly two years to live.” She closed her eyes, listening to her mate’s racing heart. “I can get hurt, but my soul can’t leave until the deal is over.”

“I thought … I should have felt it.” Castiel shook his head. “I wish you would have told me sooner. Then I and the Winchesters could help.”

“No.” Castiel slid her off of his lap, and he rose to his feet. “Let’s get you back to Jody Mills. You’ll be safe there until you’ve fully recovered.”

“Wh — wait, what?” Alex stumbled into his chest, and she stared up at him with narrowed grey
"What are you talking about? You make it sound like —"

"The only way to break your deal is if you're an angel again, and you can only do that with your grace." Castiel wrapped his arm around her waist to keep her steady as he guided her towards the door. "And since Metatron took both yours and mine, there's a good chance some remained after the spell was complete. If I can find that grace, then you won't have a soul to which the deal is bound to."

"O-Okay, then I'm coming with you." Alex wiggled free of the seraph's hold to walk on her own, crossing the concrete in unsteady yet determined steps. "I'm not letting you go alone, Cas."

"No." Castiel drew to a halt, and his blue eyes flashed at the prospect before they softened once again. "No," he repeated. "If Crowley discovers what I am doing, then he'll do everything in his power to stop me. And more than likely he'll send you to kill me; either you'll succeed and remain human, or you'll refuse, and he'll take your soul on the spot." The seraph gave a firm shake of his head. "No. You need to stay behind. This is something that is best done alone."

Alex's shoulders fell as she stared up at her mate. "Please don't do this," she begged. "Just walk away from saving me, and we can live normal lives, just like you always dreamed. It might only be two years, but it's something."

"It wouldn't be right." Castiel stepped forward, and his hands came up to cup her face. "My dream is you, and if that means fighting for it, then that's what I have to do." His eyes shone with intensity, and Alex couldn't help but look away. "Let's get you back home." His hands fell away, and Alex let him guide her out of the building and into the light.
Alex curled up on the living room couch, one hand holding her aching stomach as she stared blankly at the flickering television. It was the only light in the room, bright against the darkness of the night, and Alex groaned unhappily. She was cold, in pain, and alone, and all she wanted was for her mate to return.

Headlights flashed through the window, and Alex curled up tighter as the garage door began to open with a metallic roar. Jody Mills had finally returned from work, long after she had promised.

Light flooded the hallway as the sheriff stepped into the house and flipped on the light, and Alex flinched away, struggling to sit up as Jody peered into the living room. "What's up with you?" The sheriff turned on the lamp next to her, frowning down at the ex-angel. "You look like you've had a worse day than me."

Despite herself, Alex laughed. "Don't get me started." She placed her hand on her aching stomach with a grimace. "I threw some bloody clothes on the washing machine. I'll move them to the trash when I'm back on my feet." She pressed her hand into her abdomen as her stomach roiled at the memory, and she quickly changed the subject. "How, uh, how was your day?"

"Crazy." The couch dipped as the sheriff dropped down onto the couch beside her. "Rescue teams recovered the bodies from the Kennedy's house, but there isn't enough left to tell if they died from anything that wasn't the fire. Whoever started it knew what they were doing." Jody paused with a heavy sigh. "Anyways. What made your day so bad?"

"Just the usual." She watched as the sheriff's lips tightened, and she reluctantly explained, "I took care of three more demons in town; Joseph Kennedy had been setting up a meeting for them. They're dead, but one of them …" Alex hesitated, suddenly unsure of how much she dared to tell her friend. "They got my pretty good in the gut," she finally said. "With … with a knife. My grace healed it up fine, but it still hurts like a son of a bitch."

"Ah. Speaking of, where's Castiel?" Jody looked around the house, but the seraph was nowhere to be found.

Alex's head fell, and she pulled the pillow closer in her arms. "He's … gone away for awhile," she quietly admitted. "Something's come up — angel stuff. I don't know when he'll be back, so I guess it's just you and me for a while."

"Then I guess you'll have the house to yourself this weekend." Jody patted Alex firmly on the leg as she rose to her feet. "Alright, listen. I'm going to take a nice, hot shower. While don't you call us in a pizza in the meantime, okay? How does that sound?"

"It sounds great." Alex smiled as Jody walked away, but once the sheriff was up the stairs and out of sight, she curled back up on the couch, a pillow clutched tightly in her arms. Lying to Jody Mills made her stomach churn in guilt, but she was safer not knowing the full truth. But even still, Alex knew she would feel better about it if Castiel was with her.

She flipped through the channels to land on the news, tossing the remote onto the coffee table as she reached for her phone. "— bizarre death in Stillwater, Minnesota last night. The competitive eater
Wayne McNut was found early this morning in the parking lot of last night's competition...

"I didn't recognize him.' " An older gentleman appeared on the screen, and Alex's attention slipped away from her phone. "He looked he had lost two hundred pounds overnight."

"Authorities are ruling McNut's death as a result of sudden cardiac arrest, but the news has shaken the entire community."

Alex sat up, her grey eyes flickering with curiosity. Stillwater, Minnesota — her hometown. "Well, well." She turned off the tv and glanced up towards the stairs, listening as the water rushed through the shower pipes. "It looks like I'm going to Minnesota tomorrow."

Stillwater, Minnesota

Jody was long gone when Alex awoke the next morning, and the young hunter took no time in packing up her things and climbing into the front seat of her Mercury Marquis. Six hours later, she pulled up into the motel parking lot on the edge of the St. Croix River and checked herself. "Ah, I missed this place." Alex slung her bag over her shoulder, locking the car behind her as she made her way down towards her room. A glance to her right brought the river into full sight, the blue-grey waters flowing lazily against the high, ragged cliffs of the Wisconsin border.

She dropped her bags down on the floor as she looked around the room, taking in the soft, muted colors that surrounded her. "So witches it is, huh?" A familiar voice drifted through the door as footsteps approached, and Alex spun around to watch two tall shapes pass by her curtain-drawn window. "I hate witches."

A door opened and closed two doors down, and Alex immediately ran outside to see the sleek black hood of the Impala parked in front of her room. "No way." The ex-angel's head tilted back in a laugh of pleasant surprise, and she made her way over to motel room 7. Her grace slid out as she touched the lock, and the door swung open with a gentle push.

It creaked as it opened, and metal flashed as Dean Winchester spun around, gun drawn and at the ready at her sudden appearance. "What the fuck?"

"Whoa." Alex's hands went up instinctively, and she looked between Sam and Dean, unable to hide the wide grin on her face. "Howdy, partner. What brings you to my neck of the woods?"

"Your town?" Sam squinted in confusion, his hazel eyes sparkling with uncertainty. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing." Alex let her hands drop back down to her side as Dean cleared and pocketed his gun. "And yeah, I grew up here. Now I'm here for the weekend — I literally just checked into my room two minutes ago. What about you? I thought I heard the word 'witch.' "

"A three hundred pound hot dog-eating champion died Wednesday night." Dean crossed over to the motel table, shrugging off his suit coat and draping it over the chair. "Cops found him the next morning weighing less than a hundred, dry as a mummy. Cardiac arrest, they're saying."

"But the sheriff there said the vic suffered massive organ damage," Sam quickly added. "Like the life was just sucked right out of him."

Dean cracked open a beer and settled down in a chair. "We went to talk to his competition — some guy called Slim Jim or something. But his wife — uh, Mala or something — she's a gypsy. Sam
found a hex bag."

Sam nodded and pulled a small leather pouch out of his pocket, placing it on the table next to his brother. "Where's Cas?" he asked as Dean pulled the hex bag towards him and pulled the string around it loose to reveal its contents.

Alex watched as Dean drew out a lock of dark hair and a glass marble before she returned her gaze to Sam to slowly answer his question. "He's … gone off on some angel business. He'll be back soon, but until then it's just been me. Mind if I tag along for a bit?" she added, motioning down to the hex bag. "A third pair of eyes couldn't hurt."

Dean shrugged, but Sam met her statement with a grin. "Yeah, yeah, of course." He sat down at the table and pulled out his laptop, motioning to another chair as he did so. "Sit down — how have you been? We haven't heard from you in a while."

"Yeah, uh, I've been fine. Just doing my own thing, I guess." Alex sank into her seat with a shrug. "Nothing special." She turned her attention to the hex bag, rolling one of the cat's eye marbles between her fingers. "This is weird. I haven't seen one of these without bones before."

"In Romanichal culture, the pouch is called a putsi bag," Sam explained from behind his laptop. "It's used for hexes."

Dean looked up. "Okay, so what? Mala's putting hexes on hubby's competition?" Sam shrugged, and his brother took a swig of his drink. "I mean, what do we got ourselves? A 'thinner' sitch here?"

"Slim Jim might not even know," Sam added, and Alex couldn't help but snort in amusement at the man's name. But before either she or Dean could speak, there was a knock on the door.

Dean rose to his feet, a frown darkening his face as he pulled his gun out of his jeans and pressed his eye up against the peephole in the door, the barrel of his gun resting against the wooden grain. Whatever resided outside was deemed non-threatening, as he shrugged and pulled open the door. "Hi."

"I believe you have something of mine." A female voice answered his terse greeting, and Dean stepped back to let the woman inside. Alex rose to her feet as the sight of the young dark-haired stranger.

"Who's she?" Alex narrowed her eyes in suspicion as Dean closed the door behind her, and she crossed her arms as the thin woman looked between her and Sam.

"Alex, this is Mala." Chair scraped against the floor as Sam stood up, and Alex's frown deepened even further.

"Alex, this is Mala." Chair scraped against the floor as Sam stood up, and Alex's frown deepened even further.

"So she's the witch. The one who killed the fat dude." Her stolen grace roiled warily within her, and she lifted her head as the stranger's gaze turned upon her.

"Killed?" Disbelief hollowed out Mala's voice, and her eyes widened in surprise. "W-What do you mean? You — you mean Wayne?" Tears suddenly sprang to her eyes, and Alex felt the tension leave her body at the sudden change in emotion. The young hunter shifted backwards as Mala sat down on the edge of one of the beds, and Alex heard the tap run as Dean fetched her a glass of water. "I couldn't kill him," she sniffled. "I loved him!"

Alex’s eyebrow cocked, and Sam slowly sat down on the other bed to face her as he exchanged a look with his brother. "So … you were …"
"Yes." Mala blinked rapidly to chase away the tears as she took a sip of water. "Okay? We were having an affair — for years, actually."

Dean sat down beside his brother. "I don't mean to be rude," he started, and Alex rolled her eyes as she returned to her seat at the table, "uh …but how is it that Wayne McNut is your type? I mean, you're married to a man who's barely a buck — wet."

"What can I say?" The faintest hint of a blush spread across her face, but she gave a small shrug to hide it. "Sometimes it's nice to feel a little give."

Alex pulled the hex bag closer and moved the contents around with her finger as Dean let out a noise of understanding. "Oh. Yeah, I get that — a little extra cushioning for the, uh …" He trailed off as Sam pointedly cleared his throat, and Alex chanced a look over at the Winchester with a roll of her eyes.

"Help me understand something," Sam began, steering the conversation back on topic. "If you loved Wayne, why did you put a curse on him?"

"It wasn't a curse." Alex could feel Mala's eyes come to rest on her, and she carefully set the marble down as she turned to meet the woman's gaze. "Putsi bags are also used for blessings. I wanted Wayne to win. Plan was, take the prize money, get a quickie divorce, and then tie the knot in Orlando." Her voice dropped to a whisper as she added, "Wayne used to call me his 'Princess Jasmine.' "

Alex covered up a snort with a cough, and quickly asked, “Maybe this Slim Jim guy found out and tried to get revenge,” to distract the Winchesters from her lapse of stoicism. “He’s got everything he would need if he’s living with a gypsy.”

“Romanichal,” Mala corrected, but Alex ignored her. “And no — Jim has no idea. We don’t see each other very often anymore, so it’s easy to keep the secret.”

Her eyes fell on the hex bag in Alex’s hand, and the young hunter pushed it across the table. “Here. Take it. You’re free to go.” She watched as Mala scooped up the bag and hurried out the door, shaking her head as she listened to a car rumble to life. “Unbelievable.”

“Back to square one.” Dean rose to his feet, crossing over to the table to pick up his beer. “That crosses off public enemy number one. So next question is —“

“Was there anyone else who didn’t like Wayne,” Sam finished. “Yeah. Great. I’ll see if there’s any leads in the file.” He sat back down at the table, and Alex leaned forward curiously as he pulled the manilla police folder out of his bag and placed it on the table. The Winchester caught her eye, and he pushed the autopsy report over to her. “Here.”

“Thanks.” Alex settled back in her seat with a happy grin. She pulled a skittle free and tossed it into her mouth, chasing it around her mouth with her tongue before she crunched it between her teeth.

Dean scoffed, and the young hunter looked up. “How can you even think about eating looking at that?” he asked, motioning down to the picture of the wrinkled corpse.

“How can you not?” she jested back, and she flicked a small candy in the direction of his face. The Winchester caught it before it hit its target, and he slid it into his mouth with a shake of his head. “This stuff is cool.” She dropped her gaze back down to the photo as she took in the empty flaps of skin. “So this guy lost two hundred pounds of fat? That sounds like a weird hex to put on somebody.” She chuckled as she looked over at Dean. “Hey, uh, what if we’re not dealing with a
witch here? What if this is aliens? Adipose?” Her joke was met with silence and she added, “The fat just walks away? No? Nothing?”

“I-I don’t get it.” Sam looked over at his brother, but all Dean could do was shrug.

“Never mind.” Alex waved them away with a shake of her head, and she cracked another skittle between her molars. “Doctor who — I forgot you guys can’t stand that show.”

“Probably because every big bad was an alien.” Dean rolled his eyes, and set his beer down and got to his feet. “Aliens don’t exist, remember? It’s stupid.” He walked off towards the bathroom, and Alex turned her head to watch him go.

“That’s why it’s fiction!” she called over her shoulder. The bathroom door slammed behind him, and she turned back to the photos with a huff. “And angels are technically aliens,” she muttered under her breath. Sam didn’t hear, and with a resigned roll of her eyes, she started flipping through the written report.

A knock at her door woke her up, and Alex groaned out her protest as she struggled into consciousness. She staggered across the room and unlocked the door, pulling it open to reveal Dean Winchester, dressed in a suit and tie. “You’re out of practice,” he teased good-humoredly, glancing behind the door to find the young hunter weaponless. “If I was a monster, you’d be dead.”

“If you were a monster, you’d be deader.” Alex flung the door open wide with a frown that displayed her full displeasure at being woken up. “What do you want, Winchester?”

“A body dropped at a fitness center in town. Me and Sam are on our way there.” Dean jerked his thumb back towards the car. “You want in?”

“I don’t have any clothes for it.” Alex mimicked him by jerking her thumb back towards her bed. “But thanks for waking me up and all. Now if you don’t mind, I think I’ll get back to sleep.” She let the door swing closed and collapsed back onto her mattress with a low groan, closing her eyes as she willed back the rest that had been so cruelly taken from her.

She tossed and turned for several seconds, but sleep evaded her, so finally she threw off her blanket and grabbed her phone off of the nightstand. There was no new notifications, and Alex dialed Castiel’s number and let it ring.

The seraph answered after only a few seconds. “Hello, Alex. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything is fine. I’m in Minnesota with the Winchesters. I’m more worried about you — found anything yet?” Alex pulled herself up into a sitting position and glanced over at the clock. 7:15.

“I’m in Springfield. I’m meeting up with an old acquaintance. He may be able to point me in the right direction.” The blaring of a bus horn sounded in the distance, momentarily muffling Castiel’s voice. “I’ve acquired an angel blade, so I have some protection. And I’ll make sure to keep you updated if anything should arise.”

“Okay, sound good to me.” Alex glanced towards the window as a car flashed by, and she hesitated. “Yeah. Just stay safe, alright? You’re public enemy number one right now.”

“I know. And I will be. I love you.”
“I love you too. I’ll call you later.” Alex hung up and tossed her phone onto the other bed. Her stomach rumbled, reminding the ex-angel that she hadn’t eaten since dinner last night, and with a groan she got to her feet, unwilling yet ready to start her day.

Her gaze fell on her laptop, on top of which lay the white folder that housed all of Bobby’s notes on Sheol. Curiosity overtook her, and the young hunter took a half-step towards it before pulling back. She had been intending to continue her old mentor’s research, but the past few weeks had brought about too many challenges to grant her the necessary time. Maybe today she would be finally able to sit down and get to work.

Her stomach rumbled again, and Alex pushed the thought away with a shake of her head. Maybe today was the day, but now was not the time. Food first; work could come later.

The motel door opened, and Alex looked up as Dean stepped through. “Hey.” She sat up further on the bed, hands going out to stabilize her laptop that was seated on her legs. “Back already? Where’s Sam?”

“He’s down at the morgue. Today’s vic was the same as the last. Dropped dead after dropping a hundred pounds overnight. She was knocked out with a weight, but the cops are still stumped as to what made her look as she does. Sam found a weird mark on her back, so he went down to the county morgue to see if Wayne has the same about half an hour ago.” Dean crossed the room and sat down at the table. “Working hard or hardly working?”

“I don’t have anything to work on. I’m just reading into some other stuff.” Alex closed her laptop and slid it off to the side. “Now, what’s the plan?”

“I talked to one of the employee’s at the gym, and she had the same mark as the victim. Only difference is she’s still alive. She clammed up when I asked where it was from, so I’m going to do a little digging into her past.”

“Sounds like fun.” Alex watched his fingers dance across the keys, and after a second or two she pulled her own laptop back onto her lap and opened it up. Three web pages popped back up, one after another, each one projecting a different opinion on the nature of Sheol. Her renditions of Bobby’s notes lay on her menu bar, currently hidden as she searched for information to fill in some of the grumpy old hunter’s blanks.

Not much had been new, and most of the information she had primarily found had been misleading. *Sheol was mistakenly translated as Hades in the Greek, Bobby had written. The concepts, while similar, was Hellenized, and its meaning was ultimately lost.*

Thankfully, a this written by a graduate student in Israel had gone back to the earliest primary sources, and his writings had proven to be her best lead so far. From what Alex could decipher from the introduction, he seemed to be comparing it to the concept of “life flashing before one’s eyes”; a quick reliving of the past, except in Sheol, those flashes were repetitive.

She had just started a paragraph on the Egyptian god Maat, the weigher of hearts, when the door opened, and she looked up to find Sam Winchester step into the room. “Hey,” she called, and Dean grunted out a greeting of his own.

“Hey.” Sam reached up to loosen his dark tie as he looked between Alex and Dean.

“Find anything at the morgue?” Dean asked, and Alex closed her laptop to give the younger brother
“Yeah.” Sam crossed the room to stand across from his brother at the table. “Uh, so, Wayne was banged up pretty bad. But on the back of his neck, just below his hairline … suction mark — identical to Carol’s.”

Dean nodded, clearly unsurprised by Sam’s report. “Okay, so they both had marks, just like the hot trainer at Rollz.”

“Except that one is still alive, as far as we know.” Alex swung her legs over the side of the bed so she was facing the two Winchesters. “Okay, so if we have an MO, that probably means we’re dealing with an actual monster. Not a witch or a deity. I suppose that’s good news.” She glanced over at Dean. “Did you dig anything up on the trainer?”

“Yeah.” Dean gave a firm, quick nod. “She just recently lost a ton of weight. When I asked her about the mark, she, uh — she clammed up, got all embarrassed,” he explained to his brother. “So, uh, I did some checking. And it turns out that she took a couple of ‘me’ days last month and went here.”

Dean turned his laptop around so Sam could see the screen, and his brother squinted as he read the header of the webpage. “Canyon Valley?”

“Yeah.” Dean reached over and clicked on the trackpad, and music poured out of the speakers. Alex hurried over to Sam’s side as the promotional video began to play.

“When you look in the mirror, do you recognize the fat person staring back at you?” The voice was female, the words thick with a Peruvian accent. “Have you tried every fad diet, every fitness trend out there, but nothing seems to work? Here at Canyon Valley, we guarantee weight loss with no surgery …” Pictures of the resort drifted by, showing off the clean and bright attractions. “No extreme dieting … and no intensive workout regimen. Guaranteed results in one week!” The speaker appeared on screen, alongside a tall, built man with a brilliant white smile. “You can reach your weight-loss goals,” the olive-skinned woman insisted as they stood in front of cardboard cutouts of their toned, thin shelves. “We did. But only if you reach for the phone and call Canyon Valley … now!”

The ad ended, and Alex looked up at Sam, one eyebrow quirked in uncertainty, unsure of what she should think. The Winchester’s angular face was hard to read, and after several seconds he asked, “How far away is that place?”

“A couple of hours.” Dean turned the laptop back to him. “It’s northwest of here. If we left now we could be there by three. I think we should go there.” He closed his laptop and rose to his feet, ignoring how his chair legs scraped loudly across the linoleum. “It’s the best lead that we’ve got.”

“Yeah. I agree.” Sam shrugged off his suit coat. “Let me get changed, and then we can head out.” His attention turned down to Alex, and he asked, “Are you in?”

“Yeah, of course.” Alex glanced back towards her laptop where her research lay. “Give me five minutes to pack. I’ll meet you out by the car.” She scooped up her computer and exited the room, letting the door swing closed behind her to leave the Winchesters to pack in peace.

Alex followed Sam and Dean through the doors of Canyon Valley, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her button down as she nervously scuffed her shoes against the ground. Their current plan
had been Dean’s idea, spurred on by the help wanted ad on the resort’s website, and despite his confidence, the young hunter couldn’t help but worry about the chance that their gamble wouldn’t pay off.

“You must be the Winchesters.” The woman from the ad walked up to greet them, a hand extended warmly in their direction. “I’m glad you were able to make it.”

“It’s our pleasure.” Sam reached to shake her hand first, motioning to himself and his companions in turn. “Uh, I’m Sam, and this is Dean and Alex.”

“I’m Maritza.” The woman looked back over her shoulder as her promotion partner entered the room, and a smile grew across her face. “This is Larry, my husband and co-owner of the business.”

“Hi,” Larry met the three of them with a warm grin, and he shook their hands with a firm grip. “Welcome to Canyon Valley. Please.” He motioned towards a door that lay in the front wall. “Why don’t we step into my office and talk?”

“That would be great.” Sam walked at Larry’s side, and Alex followed close at his heels. “We saw that you had some open positions as personal trainers, and after we looked into the business, we knew we had to come by immediately.” He sat down in a chair upon Larry’s insistence, and Alex took her seat on a couch beside Dean. “We were really, really moved by the online testimonials.”

“Oh, yeah,” Dean agreed. “That was some powerful stuff.”

Maritza smiled, and she looked between them as she asked, “And you said you both were certified personal trainers?”

“Yeah.” Dean nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah, personal training brothers. Kind of like Hans and Fran, but, uh, less German.”

Alex closed her eyes at Dean’s words, internally wincing at his humorous tone. Larry’s lips twisted into a half-frown at the Winchester’s half-answer. “And you’re certified in …”

“Making people sweat! Yeah. Kicking ass and taking names!” Dean leaned forward and slapped his hand loudly against the table. “That’s how we do!”

Alex’s lips set into a tight line, and Sam cleared his throat. “Uh … uh, to clarify, uh, what my brother’s trying to say is, we both have a passion for fitness and helping people.”

A smile grew across Maritza’s face, and she reached over to take her husband’s hand. “Oh, us too! In fact, that’s how we first met.”

Larry chuckled at the memory, and he squeezed his wife’s hand. “I was Maritza’s first client back in Peru,” he explained. “I was on a student visa — homesick, stressed, eating my troubles away.”

“Oh, it’s true!” Larry’s chuckle grew into a full laugh. “I was one empanada away from a heart attack. But then this … gorgeous godsend made me the lean, mean fighting machine I am today.” He leaned forward, his fists flying out in a series of quick and complex punches and blocks before he fell back on the couch with a grin.

“Oh!” Dean’s involuntary noise of surprise had the married couple laughing, and Maritza’s eyes turned over to Alex. “And what about you?” she asked. “Sam never specified what it is you do.”
Alex opened her mouth to respond, but Sam jumped in before her hesitation became obvious. “She works with us,” he explained. “She’s not certified, but she’s a quick learner. I can guarantee she’ll excel in whatever position you give her.”

“I see.” Larry’s grin broadened as he looked over at Sam. “The good news is, we are hiring. The bad news is, there’s only one trainer position available.” His gaze turned over to Dean, and he asked, “How do you feel about working in another department?”

“Huh?” Dean’s face momentarily went blank, and his eyes flickered over to his brother. “Uh — uh, sure, what did you have in mind?”

“We have some positions open in our kitchen. I’m sure the two of you would find yourself quite at home there.” Larry looked between Alex and Dean, and when both nodded their agreement, he clapped his hands. “Wonderful! Maritza and I will draw up the paperwork, but in the meantime, I’ll show the three of you around the complex and then to your rooms.” He rose to his feet, a hand extended towards them with a grin. “What can I say? Welcome to Canyon Valley.”

“This is stupid.” Dean’s mutter had Alex looking up to see the Winchester adjusting his thin hairnet for the umpteenth time in the last half hour. “This isn’t food. No wonder everyone here is losing weight.”

Alex rolled her eyes, half-tempted to respond, but instead contented herself by sliding a plate of vegetables onto the buffet table as she removed the empty one. They had been working for barely two hours, and Dean’s complaining had yet to taper off. “Carrots are food,” she reminded in passing. “And so is fruit. Jury’s still out on whatever this is.” She pointed down to the formless white lumps that sat on her dining cart, left over from the lunch period that was winding down, and she was rewarded with a snort of disgusted amusement from the Winchester.

Footsteps approached, and Alex looked up to see Sam Winchester, dressed in black shorts and a thin dark tank top. Dean smirked at the sight, his green eyes sparkling with amusement. “Nice shorts.”

“Nice hairnet,” Sam shot back light-heartedly.

Dean’s grin faded almost immediately to be replaced with a frown. “Yea, why do I got to be the lunch lady?”

Sam scoffed, and his gaze flickered across the long line of tables lined with lunch. “Since when have you ever complained about being around food?”

“Okay, this is not food.” Dean scowled as he glared back at the assortment of fruits and vegetables.

“Hey, new guy.” Alonso, the head kitchen staff and their current trainer, approached, looking between Sam and Dean. “Quit flirting with the trainer and keep scooping, huh?”

Dean shot the man another dark glare, and Sam chuckled as he looked down at his watch. “It’s alright. My, uh… ashtanga yoga class starts in five minutes.” He slung his towel over his shoulder as he turned to go.

Dean scowled, jealousy darkening his face and his tone. “How the hell do you know anything about yoga?” he scoffed as his brother started to back away.

“You’re not the only one who’s ever dated someone bendy.” Sam shot Dean a grin, and he turned on his heels and walked away, leaving his brother to watch him leave with a disapproving shake of
Alex opened her mouth to tease him, but before she could, a man walked up to them, a tray half-filled with food held in his hands. “Hey, you have any oatmeal?” he asked.

Dean let out a low, dark chuckle. “Yeah, I wish. No, but we have, uh, something that’s tofu over there.” He motioned down towards the beginning of the buffet with the plastic ladle in his hands. “I—what is that? It’s a pancake. It’s tofu.”

He looked down at Alex for help, but all she could do was shrug. “I have absolutely no idea,” she admitted. “It’s . . . healthy, I guess.” The man walked away, and Alex shook her head. “I can’t wait until this over and I can have fries again.” She pushed her cart forward, guiding it towards the kitchen as she sighed. “Hopefully we can find this son of a bitch soon.”

She tossed another empty tray or two on top of the last before she guided the cart through the swinging white double doors and into the kitchen where she could place them beside the stainless steel sink. “Hey, Rich,” she called to the head chef, and he turned at the sound of her voice. “Anything else you need me to do? Lunch is almost over out there.”

“Just get the place cleared and then start cleaning up.” Rich disappeared into the large walk-in refrigerator, and with a grim shake of her head, Alex threw open the dishwater and loaded in the trays.

She heard the kitchen door swing open, and when she looked back up, Dean was standing against the wall, his head bowed as he stared down at his phone. A towel suddenly flew across the room, hitting Dean squarely in the neck, and the Winchester jumped in surprise. “Flojo.” Alonso set down the food he was preparing to glare. “You got time to learn, you got time to clean, huh?”

Dean opened his mouth to snap, but thought better of it, instead dragging the towel across the countertop. “I’m starving,” he said instead. “When do we get to eat?”

“Same as the clients.” Alonso picked back up his knife and started spreading butter across some kale.

Dean scowled as he glared over at the food being prepared for the next round of meals. “They expect us to eat this rabbit food?”

“It’s not rabbit food,” the man reminded impatiently. “It’s super food.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that one,” Alex crossed over to stand by Dean’s side. “Rabbits definitely eat this stuff, so I’m pretty sure this qualifies as rabbit food. Either way,” With a look up at the Winchester, she added, “Are you sure there’s nothing else? Maybe could we just take ten minutes to go out and get a burger?”

Alonso sighed, and he crossed the room, picking up a large bowl of a cream-colored pudding and set it down next to the Winchester. “At Canyon Valley, we’re supposed to lead by example.”

“Stupido.” Alonso placed a tray of plastic containers down next to it. “It’s for the clients. They’re allowed to have pudding on their spa day. It’s like a— a last hurrah before the real work starts. Get to work.” He pointed at Alex, and added, “You too,” before he walked away.

With a low grumble, Dean picked up one of the plastic containers and a spoon, and Alex watched as the pudding fell into the bowl with a loud splat. The Winchester paused, and then he dipped his finger inside to take a taste. “Mm. What do you know? Looks like its my ‘spa day’ too.”
“Careful,” Alex teased as he slipped one of the containers of pudding into his apron. “That stuff might have vitamins in it.” She grinned at the glare she was given, and with that, she pushed her way back out to the buffet.

When she returned from clearing up the last of the buffet tables, Dean was gone. “Hey, Alonso,” she called as she slammed the dishwasher closed, “things are slowing down, so I’m going to take a quick five. I’ll be right back.”

Alonso waved his hand in her direction, signaling that he had heard, and Alex pushed her way out of the kitchen and set off down the hall. She shoved her hairnet into her pocket, shaking her hair free with a roll of her eyes. “Good work.” Sam’s voice came from around the corner, and Alex immediately perked up. “See you all soon. Good job.”

The Winchester thumped a man on the back as he walked out of the yoga room, and Alex chuckled as the man wheezed slightly at the impact. “How was class?” She leaned up against the wall as she grinned up at Sam.

“It, uh, it was great.” The quick rise and fall of Sam’s eyebrows expressed his exasperation with his work, but before he could further elaborate, a loud voice came from down the hallway.

“Agent Frehley?” A blonde woman in a wheelchair was being pushed towards them, and recognition lit up her face as she stared up at Sam. “What are you doing here?”

Larry, who was pushing the wheelchair down the hall, paused, and his eyes narrowed in confusion.

“Uh, I-I-I don’t know,” Sam stuttered. “She must be pretty out of it, huh?” His phone rang, and he jumped to answer it. “Oh, excuse me. Sorry, I got to get this. Have a good one.” He turned away, leaving Alex standing with the two.

“Agent?” she repeated with a forced laugh. “Ma’am, that’s my brother. I think I’d know if he was a secret agent.” She grinned up at Larry adding, “Then again, maybe I wouldn’t.” She shot him a wink as he wheeled the drowsy woman past, and he chuckled as he disappeared around the corner. Crisis averted, Alex turned her attention back to Sam.

“Come on.” Sam’s hand wrapped around her arm as he rushed past, and Alex broke into a sprint after him. “Where’s Dean?”

“Dean? He — he was in the kitchen. I don’t know where he went.” Alex slid around a corner, almost tripping over her own feet as she followed him through the swimming double doors. “What’s going on?”

Sam stared around the room, giving Alex a minute to catch her breath. “Dean’s in trouble. He said he’s … I don’t know. By sweet potatoes? He sounded drugged.”

“Sweet potatoes?” Alex’s gaze flickered around the room. “He could be in the basement. We keep the bulk foods down there.” She hurried across the kitchen to pull open a heavy door, revealing a dark cement staircase that led down into blackness. “Come on.”

Sam flicked on the lights and took the lead, and Alex took up the rear, closing the door behind them as they descended into the harsh fluorescent hallway. “Dean?” Sam called, pushing open the first door that he happened upon. “Dean!”
“Sammy.” The word was almost impossible to hear, and Alex’s head swiveled towards the source. It had come from the end of the hallway, behind a door marked ‘storage,’ and Alex tapped Sam on the shoulder as she pointed towards the door.

It opened under Sam’s touch, and the younger Winchester rushed inside. “Dean!” He dropped to his knees beside his brother, who was laying on the concrete ground, his head propped up against a burlap sack of sweet potatoes. “Hey. Hey! Wake up!”

Dean stirred groggily, and his head lifted so he could look up at Alex and Sam. “What took you so long?” he asked with a groan.

“Dude. What the hell happened to you?” Alex knelt down beside him, and her question was answered before the words finished leaving her mouth. She picked up the empty plastic container of pudding, and her lips set into a tight line.

Dean groaned again. “I was drugged. The — the pudding,” he explained to his brother, and his eyes flickered closed for a brief second. “It was supposed to be for the clients, but I couldn’t resist.” He rolled back onto his stomach, resting his head on his sack of potatoes.

Sam took the container from Alex and took a sniff. “What — salted caramel?” He handed it back to Alex, and the young hunter lifted it to her own nose to smell for herself.

“Yeah, man.” Dean nuzzled up against the burlap, his eyes closed. “The best of both world — salty and sweet.”

“Right. Uh ... Alright, you stay here.” Sam rose to his feet, but Dean immediately rolled over.

“No, no, I’m gonna come with you,” he insisted, pulling himself halfway up to a sitting position as Sam made his way back towards the door. Alex reached out to steady him when his arms shook, and Dean toppled back onto the ground. “Go ahead, man,” he mumbled, pulling himself forward until he could rest his head on the potatoes once more. “I’ll catch up.”

“I told you not to eat that,” Alex joked, tossing the container to the other side of the room where it skittered across the ground. Dean didn’t respond, and the girl placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. Her stolen grace crept forward, a cold force within her veins, and Alex hesitantly let it creep into the Winchester in search of any unseen injuries. “So, you think somebody is drugging the clients? Why?” She pulled her grace back as it burned hot, frowning to find that not all of it returned.

“Dunno.” Dean turned his head so he was facing away from her as he slurred out, “Don’t care.”

He fell silent, and Alex shifted so she was sitting cross-legged on the ground. “Do you want something to drink?” she eventually asked, breaking the lingering silence. “There’s some bottled water in the corner here.”

Her offer was met with a groan, and the room grew quiet once again. Alex listened to the hum of the generator, and after a few minutes, footsteps approached, signaling the return of Sam Winchester. He held a white bottle in his hands, and he dropped down next to his brother. “Hey. I talked with the chef who made the pudding.”

“And?” With a strong reluctance, Dean rolled over and pulled himself up into a quasi-sitting position.

“And the only thing he put in there that wasn’t on the recipe were supplements. He puts them in all of the pudding, which only goes to the clients on their spa day.”

Dean looked up from where he had his head in his hands. “What kind of supplements?”
Sam handed him the bottle, and then held out a drink in a small green can. “Here. To boost metabolism, per Larry and Maritza.”

Dean placed the drink in his lap as he unscrewed the supplement’s lid, and Alex peered over his shoulder to look down at the small white pills. The Winchester pushed the bottle back towards his brother. “These aren't supplements, they’re roofies.”

Sam scoffed. “What? How do you know what roofies look like?”

“How do you not know?” Dean immediately retorted, and his dull green eyes flashed. “You think I want to end up in a hotel bathtub with my kidney carved out? In Chechnya?” He groaned as he shifted positions, sitting up a little further, and he asked, “Did you find anything out in yoga?”

“Yeah.” Sam screwed the lid back onto the bottle and placed it at his feet. “Yeah. Invasion of the Body Snatchers. Every single person in class had one of those freaky-ass suction marks.”

Alex narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean by a suction mark?” she asked. “I’m sorry, I — I still don’t know what you guys keep talking about. Do you mean like a bruise? Like — like a hickey?”

“What — no. No, it’s … it’s hard to describe.” Sam looked over at his brother for help, but Dean just shook his head. “I’ll show you later. How are you feeling now?” he asked Dean.

The Winchester gave an unconvincing shrug. “I’ll be fine.”

“Good, because we have another problem.” Sam’s words had Dean cracking open his eyes to see his brother grimace. “Donna Hanscum is here.”

Alex shook her head, unfamiliar with the name. “Is that that woman who called you, uh, Agent Frehley?” she guessed, and Sam nodded.

“Son of a bitch.” Dean grimaced again, and with Sam’s help, he pulled himself to his feet. “What did she say? Did she give us away?”

“I don’t think so, no. Luckily Alex was there, so I think she was able to convince Larry that Donna was just out of it.” Sam gave her a quick nod of appreciation, and Alex got up with a frown.

“Wait. Who is this Donna person?” she asked. “How does she know the two of you?”

“She’s the sheriff down in Stillwater. The officer at the gym crime scene said she had left on vacation last night, but I guess she’s here.” Dean made his way towards the door, more steady on his feet now that he was up. “Now we need to go and talk with her before she gives us away any more.”

Alex followed Sam and Dean up the stairs and back out of the kitchen, and her grace flickered coldly within her chest. “Larry was taking her down to the recreational room,” she said. “She’s probably still there.”

“That’s this way.” Sam pointed down the hall, and Dean took the lead, his footsteps growing more steady and even with each passing second. “It’s just across from the fitness center.”

Dean pushed open the wooden door, and Alex’s gaze flickered around the room until it came to rest on the woman from earlier. She sat in a chair by the window, still wrapped in her soft white robe as she stared out at the woods beyond.

Sam moved forward, and Alex followed at his heels. “Donna?” Sam’s voice was quiet, but it was still enough to cause the woman to startle, her blue eyes going wide as her head snapped towards
them. “Can we talk for a minute?”

“Sure, have a seat.” Donna’s voice carried a thick, bubbly accent, and Alex pulled up a wooden chair to sit down beside Sam. “You know, I didn’t mean to bail on you fellas, but I’ve been waiting over six months to get into Canyon Valley. And let me tell ya, it was worth it. I already lost ten pounds!”

“In — in one day?” Surprise lined Sam’s voice, and Alex lifted her eyebrows in disbelief.

Dean cleared his throat and added, “No offense, Sheriff — cause you’re looking great — um, but aren’t you the least bit curious as to how you dropped ten in a day?”

“Well, to tell you the truth, Agent, I don’t really give a flying fudge.” Donna chuckled, but the humor disappeared from her sparkling eyes. “My husband — Doug — left me last year cause he said I loved cookie-dough milkshakes more than him.”

Dean frowned sympathetically. “Yeah, well, Doug’s a dick,” he promised, and Alex hummed in agreement. “You deserve better.”

Donna’s voice get soft. “Thanks. But he was right. That was a dark time for me. Whoever said you eat your pain? Not me. I guzzled it.” She laughed again, and some of the light returned to her face. “Anyhoo … I guess I just wanted to feel pretty again. And Canyon Valley did that. Only question is … what are you doing here?”

“We’re, uh, we’re undercover,” Alex explained. Donna’s eyes turned onto her, and the young hunter added, “I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Agent Phillips. I work with these two. I was called in because we believe there to be a connection between Canyon Valley and the murders in Stillwater.”

Donna leaned forward in curiosity. “What kind of connection?”

Alex glanced over at the Winchesters, and Sam took it as his cue to answer. “Suction marks.”

“You mean like this?” Donna suddenly turned around in her seat and lifted her robe to reveal a large, dark mark on her back about the size of her palm. It was slightly raised, and Alex’s head tipped in surprise.

“Y-Yeah.” Sam stuttered slightly, and he exchanged a look with his brother. “Where did that come from?”

“My spa treatment.” Donna turned back around to face them. “Cupping.”

“Cupping?” Dean repeated, and the sheriff nodded enthusiastically.

“Yeah. You know, I thought it was gonna hurt, but honestly, I snoozed through the whole thing. By the time I woke up, I was down two dress sizes.”

Alex glanced over at Dean, and her lips twisted into a frown. “Hey, Donna,” she asked. “Before this, uh, this cupping, did you eat any pudding?”

“Darn tootin’.” Donna laughed, her brown eyes glimmering at the memory. “Licked the bowl clean.”

Alex rose to her feet. “Hey, can I speak to the two of you for a second?” She motioned towards the door, and when the two brothers exchanged looks, she cleared her throat. “In private. We’ll be around,” she told Donna. “Thanks, and I guess we’ll be seeing you about.”
“You betcha.” Donna beamed up at the three of them. “Glad I could be of help.”

Alex hurried out of the room, and the door closed behind the two Winchesters as they followed. “What’s this about?” Sam asked. “What was it?”

“I thought by suction marks you meant like small little bruises.” Alex led the way down the corridors towards their living quarters. “Not fist-sized bumps like that. This might be a long shot, but I can swear I’ve seen that before.” She pushed her way into her room and threw her bag onto the bed, digging through its contents to pull out her worn leather journal Bobby had given to her. “Here.” She flipped in a few pages, her fingers tracing down the lines until they came to rest on a new entry. “Felix brought one of these to us back when you were in hell, Dean. He was a hunter — is a hunter, if he’s still around.” She handed the journal over to Sam. “Feeds on fat and leaves a large, raised mark. Sounds like a pishtaco to me.”

Dean’s eyebrows lifted in disbelief. “A fish taco?”

“Pishtaco. Confused me at first, too.” Alex pointed to the journal as Sam skimmed through the messy half page of writing. “It’s a little difficult to read since Bobby made me write this in the middle of the night, but all of the lore should be there. They’re Peruvian — their name means ‘fat eater’ or something like that. Uh, contemporary lore portrays them as Wendigo-like humans that get a taste of human and can’t go back, but actually, they’re a sort of parasite that inhabit a human host and take over the body.”

“It does seem to fit,” Sam agreed, and he handed the journal to his brother. “It looks like silver kills them?”

“That’s what Felix used. The actual parasite lives beneath the tongue and comes out through the mouth — that’s what that drawing is there,” she added with a nod towards her journal. “Cut that in half and you’ll destroy it. Otherwise fire works well if you can keep it still long enough. That’s how we got rid of the body. They’re basically all fat, so they just sort of … melt. Like candle wax.” Alex frowned as the long-forgotten memory surfaced, and she quickly shook them away. “Guys, Maritza does the spa treatment, and she’s from Peru. It’s got to be her.”

“We’ve got silver in the trunk.” Dean handed Alex back her journal and gave her a solid thump on the shoulder. “Good thing you tagged along, huh?”

“Yeah, good thing indeed.” Alex tucked the leather bound book back into her bag as the two Winchesters stepped out of her room. She followed after a moment, navigating through the halls and out the back door to where the Impala was parked.

“She?” Dean handed her a silver knife with a long, smooth blade, and Alex twisted it in her hand to test its stability before she let it fall to her side. “If Larry knows what she is, he may know that we’re hunters. Be careful.”

“Always am.” Alex fell in line behind Sam as they made their way back into the complex. “Same things goes for you. I’ll take the east side. You guys take the rest.” When Dean nodded, Alex slipped away down the hall, and the brothers disappeared out of sight.

She searched every room she came across, but her hunt turned up empty. With nothing left to do, she set off in search of Sam and Dean; hopefully they had had more luck than she did. “Vampires kill.” Maritza’s voice drifted out from a nearby room, and Alex pulled up short, head perked and hand gripping the handle of the knife as she crept closer to its source. “We’re just … parasites.”
Dean’s sarcastic voice had the tension leaving her shoulders. “Oh, well, in that case …”

Alex pushed her way through the door to find Sam and Dean standing in front of the Peruvian resort owner, whose hands were bound together behind the back of a chair. “Look, I would never hurt anybody!” she insisted, and when her gaze swung over to Alex, the young hunter could see that they were wide with desperation. “Okay this — this is why Larry and I started Canyon Valley. We could help people lose weight, and I could feed. It was a win-win.”

Dean scoffed loudly, and Alex slid her knife into the back of her jeans. “Yeah, except for the two you dysoned to death.”

“That wasn’t me.”

“Not you?” Alex repeated, stepping forward to stand beside Sam. “Well, then who was it?”

Hesitation weighed down Maritza’s voice, but she did give Alex the answer she needed as tears filled her eyes. “Alonso. He’s my brother.”

“Alonso from the cafeteria?” Dean’s eyes narrowed slightly, and Maritza nodded as she turned her head back to him.

“I’ll go check the kitchen.” Alex shoved her way out of the door, and her feet carried her down and around the hall. Footsteps behind her signaled that Sam was accompanying her, and the young hunter slowed down to allow him to catch up. “Do you believe her?” she asked as they turned the corner.

“A scream cut Sam off mid-sentence, and the Winchester sprung into action, tearing down the hall and through the double doors of the kitchen. Alex followed at his heels, her shorter legs bringing her two seconds behind him as she barreled through the doors and skidded to a stop.

The metallic tang of blood sat in the air, and Alex whipped out her knife at the sight of a pair of legs laying half-obscured by the kitchen island. She crept forward, slipping past Sam as she circled around until the body came into full view. “That’s Larry.” A sense of sadness weighed down her proclamation, and Alex loosened her grip on her weapon as she stared down at the bloody, frothing neck and the blank, cloudy eyes. “Fresh kill. I guess Maritza wasn’t lying at all.”

“Come on.” Sam’s hand on her shoulder drew her attention away from the body, and Alex followed him through the hall and back to Dean. “She’s telling the truth,” he told his brother as he stepped over the threshold, and Alex softly closed the door behind them to discourage any potential listeners. “Someone just killed Larry.”

A sob burst out into the room, and Maritza’s jaw trembled. “You don’t …” Tears filled her eyes, and Alex watched as her head fell to her chest as despair overtook her.

Neither Winchester stepped forward to help, and Alex too hung back, unsure of how to comfort the grieving widow. The tears fell, but after a few seconds, Maritza lifted her head. “I brought Alonso here from Peru to show him a better way, a more civilized way,” she murmured. “One where we weren’t monsters. That the secret to coexisting with humans was just … eating enough to get by.” Her voice cracked, and she fell silent.

Sam crossed his arms. “Let me guess. Alonso wasn’t a big fan of portion control, was he?”

“No. During a routine treatment, he almost killed a client. He sucked out too much fat.” The woman lifted her gaze to look between Sam and Dean. “I demoted him to kitchen duty — no human contact,
just fat from a jar. But he said the more I deprived him, the hungrier he got. A-And now three people are dead. My husband …"

“Where’s Alonso right now?”

“Th—The basement?” The answer to Sam’s question sounded unsure, but after a moment of silence, the confidence in her voice grew. “That’s — that’s where he spends most of his time now.”

Satisfied, Dean took a step forward towards the door, but Sam reached out to slow his brother down. “What about her?” he asked in a low voice, and Alex’s gaze darted over to the bound and despondent monster.

Dean shared none of his brother’s care for remaining unheard. “Well, till we figure out which side she’s on, she stays put.”

Maritza lifted her head to look Dean in the eyes. “I am on your side,” she insisted.

“We’ll untie her after we find Alonso.” Alex pulled open the door, holding it open for both Sam and Dean. “Just to make sure that he doesn’t try and kill her too.” Her words were intended to be soft, but they seemed to have no effect on the Peruvian woman. Sam and Dean stepped out into the hallway, and with a shrug, Alex did the same, letting the door swing closed behind her.

She followed the brothers down the hall and through the kitchen, her footsteps silent and her shoulders tense. Her grace remained stubbornly within her body, and the young hunter twisted the knife in her hand. Sam and Dean dug into their jackets to pull out a flashlight as they reached the stairs, and the darkened hallway lit up with a pale white glow. Dean took the lead, moving slowly lest their target appear from around the corner, but the hallway was empty.

The two Winchesters exchanged a look, and with a nod they split up, Dean going to the left, Sam to the right. For a moment Alex hesitated, unsure who she should follow, but as the brothers moved away and the hallway grew darker, her feet carried her after Sam.

The first room they encountered was a supply closet, small and empty. The second was locked; Alex’s grace quickly solved the dilemma, only to revealed yet another empty room. She channeled her grace up into her eyes, and the darkened room grew lighter, allowing her to see into the corners even Sam’s flashlight couldn’t reach.

A squeal and a crash had her jumping, and Alex spun around to see a wooden wardrobe falling to the ground, pinning Sam Winchester beneath it. Alonso crouched on the top, his eyes wide and mouth stretched open in a snarl. “You and stupido have no chance,” he hissed. “The fat makes us stronger.”

“You’re lying!” He let out a growl and reached down for the Winchester, but Alex was faster, launching herself forward and bowling the monster off of the wardrobe and onto the ground. The two landed in a tangle of arms and legs, and Alex struggled to pull herself free from the pishtaco’s
Sam gasped as he freed himself from the heavy furniture. “I guess after you killed her husband … you were too monstrous, even for her,” he taunted, and Alonso immediately let go of Alex to fling himself towards Sam.

The flashlight was knocked against a wall, shattering the bulb and throwing the room back into darkness. Alex heard Alonso hiss, pleased at his advantage, and she pulled herself to her feet as she grabbed her knife. “Duck!” she yelled as Alonso took a swing at Sam’s face, and the Winchester did as she said, eyes screwed up as he tried to see through the heavy darkness.

Alex yanked the monster back by the collar of his shirt, backpedaling as a fist came out in her direction. Footsteps approached, signaling Dean’s arrival, and that brief moment of distraction was what Alonso needed to sweep her legs out from under her, knocking her flat on her back. He pinned her down, and with her grace in her eyes, the young hunter couldn’t muster the strength to break free.

Alonso’s jaw fell open, and a large, fleshy protrusion extended downwards, coiling like a veiny worm. It flared near the end into a large sucker, lined with teeth, and Alex’s struggling grew tenfold.

Suddenly Dean was at her side, sending his knife through the appendage and severing it in one clean blow. Alonso screeched, rearing backwards in pain, and Alex flinched as the sucker fell onto her chest. “Shit!” She yanked her arms free of the dying monster’s grasp so toss it away and scramble to her feet. “Thanks.” She brushed off her clothes as she glared down at the corpse, drawing in slow, shaky breaths through her nose to calm herself down. “Apparently I’m still a little rusty.”

Her lie seemed to sate the brothers, and she watched as amusement twisted Dean’s lips into a smirk, but he said nothing. “Come on.” Sam picked up his knife and slipped it into the back of his jeans. “Let’s get upstairs and untie Maritza before we someone calls the cops.”

“I wonder if we should just to Peru,” Alex mused as she lead the way out into the concrete hall. “She’s got nothing left here.”

Dean shook his head. “She won’t make it that far. Once this place clears out, we’re gonna make this a family affair.”

Sam stopped and turned to face his brother, disbelief written across his face. “Wait, Dean. We’re not going to kill Maritza.”

“She’s a monster.”

“She hasn’t hurt anyone.” Alex narrowed her eyes as she looked up at Dean. “I have to side with Sam here. So what she’s a monster — she’s tried to help people, Dean. She doesn’t deserve to die, no more than anyone else here.”

Dean looked between Alex and his brother, and after a second, he gave a small, defeated shrug. “Fine. So, one-way ticket to Peru it is. Let’s just get out of here, alright?”

“Yeah, fine.” Alex stepped aside so Dean could take the lead. She cast one last look back into the darkness and, suppressing a shiver, she followed Sam up the stairs and back into the light.
“Sam!”

Alex jerked awake at the yell, her eyes flying open in surprise. For a moment she was displaced, laying on a bed surrounded by concrete walls, and she scrambled to her feet as Sam’s reply bounced off of the bunker walls. “Dean?”

“What the hell?” Alex pushed her way into the hallway, a hand coming up to brush back her messy blonde hair. “Sam?” she yelled. “Dean? What’s wrong?” The sudden cry implied danger, but for the life of her she couldn’t imagine what.

Sam appeared around the corner, confusion and concern etched into his long face. “Where’s Dean?”

Alex shrugged, but before she could speak, the lights flickered. “What the hell?” Her grace stirred uneasily inside of her, and the young hunter felt her muscles tense as she looked around. “Dean!”

No answer came, and Alex followed Sam out into the library. One of the wooden chairs spun in a slow, even circle, and she shivered as a chill passed through the air. “Sam,” she began, “something isn’t right.”

The Winchester lifted an iron sword off of its pegs. “Yeah, tell me about it. Dean!” He started towards another hallway, his weapon held firmly out in front of him, and Alex followed close at his heels. Her grace pricked, but it stubbornly stayed within the confines of her body, and the ex-angel shivered with unease.

Something moved in the corner of her eye, and Alex spun around to see a dark, swirling shape move through the air. Her mouth opened to cry out to Sam, but a shot drowned out her voice, and she squealed in surprise as rock salt tore into her cheek. The young hunter stumbled back, clutching her face as her head snapped towards the source of the gunfire. Sam stared blankly at where the apparition had vanished from, his mouth slightly agape. “So…”

“Yep.” Dean cocked his shotgun, a frown set deeply into his face. “Bunker’s haunted. Did I get ya?’

“Yeah.” Alex pulled her hand away to reveal the blood on her fingers, and she scowled in disgust. “What the hell? I thought this place was warded to hell and back.”

Sam crowded inwards, his hands coming up to examine her wound. “Come on. Let’s get that cleaned up.” He guided towards the kitchen with a hand on her shoulder, and Dean followed close behind.

“It is,” he began, answering her previous question. “That’s how I know nothing got in — there’s no way it could have gotten through those sigils. So whoever’s haunting us must have died here.”

Alex scoffed at the idea as she sat down at the table, and Sam turned to look up at his brother, guarded curiosity on his face. “What, dead Men of Letters?”

“No, that doesn’t track.” Dean shook his head, and he handed Sam a wet washcloth from the sink. Alex winced as the younger Winchester pressed it against her face, and after a second she reached up to bat his hand away; she could hold it there herself. “I mean, we’re the first people to occupy this
place in fifty years. Why would a ghost wait so long to get its spook on?”

“Must have been a more recent death—”

“No.” Dean cut his brother off, his tone sharp and pointed, and Sam paused in surprise.

“How can you be so sure?” he asked, and Alex pushed him away when he tried to peel back the washcloth to get a better look at the tear in her flesh.

“Because I burned his body myself, okay? It’s not him.” Dean crossed his arms, and Alex narrowed her eyes as she tried to remember who they were talking — ah yes. Kevin Tran. He had died here at the bunker. A wave of sadness passed over her, which further intensified as Sam’s next words.

“Okay, so you cremated him. We cremated Bobby, too, and he came back.”

“Sam, I’ll telling you — this ghost, it’s not Kevin —“ The coffeemaker next to Dean started to blink, its red light flashing spastically as Dean spoke the prophet’s name. Dean faltered, and his gaze turned onto the appliance that sat on the counter he leaned against.

“K-Kevin?” At Sam’s words, one of the cream mugs exploded in a shower of ceramic shards, and Alex flinched away at the loud bang.

“I think that answers that question.” Alex pulled the washcloth away and reached up to touch her face. “I don’t — I don’t get it. Why would he choose to stay?” She drew her grace up into her eyes, scouring the room for any sign of the prophet, but she couldn’t find him at all.

“I don’t know.” Sam picked up the coffee machine and put it on the table as he slid into the seat in front of it. “Kevin? Kevin, are you there?”

There was no response, and Sam’s shoulders dropped in disappointment. “I don’t think he has enough strength right now,” Alex said as she let her grace fall away from her eyes. “I can’t find him. He must be somewhere deep in the veil.”

Dean shook his head, and he pushed himself off from the counter. “This is ridiculous,” he snapped, turning away, and Alex and Sam exchanged looks, unsure who his comment was directed at. “That’s it. I — I’m going to go shower, okay?” He threw his hands up as he walked towards the door. “You guys — you guys can figure out how to talk to him. I’m out.”

He disappeared from sight, and Alex watched as Sam frowned after him. “He doesn’t mean that,” she started, knowing Sam understood as well. “He’ll be back after he cools off and works through it.” She looked around the room, drawing her grace back up into her eyes as she searched for any sign of the ghostly prophet. “I find it hard to believe too,” she finally admitted when Sam didn’t respond. “He knew better than to stay, you know?”

“Yeah, you would think.” Sam slid the coffeemaker further down the table before he leaned forward, propping his head up on his elbows as he settled down to wait for Kevin’s return. He fell silent, and Alex did the same.

Almost a full hour passed, and Alex lost track of time as she found herself wandering through the vast wasteland of the internet. It was Dean’s reappearance that finally snapped her back out of it. “Anything?” he asked, and his voice startled Sam out of his deep concentration.

“Eh, a couple dings.” Sam leaned back, stretching out his tired limbs. “A little EMF activity, but
mostly … silence.”

“So, he’s back in the veil.”

Sam shrugged. “I guess so. Fumbling to break through. I mean, you got to figure it took Bobby months to make contact.”

“True,” Alex softly agreed. “And Kevin … well, he’s still new at this.” Sam got up and exited the room, and she drew her grace up into her eyes as she looked around the room. They landed on the small, thin figure of Kevin Tran, and the ex-angel rose to her feet. “Kevin?” She felt her chest contract in surprise and joy at the sight, followed by a sharp stab of sorrow, and her vision blurred slightly as tears sprang into her eyes.

The prophet looked up in surprise, and his mouth fell open as words poured from his mouth, but no sound reached her ears. “Kevin?” she heard Sam repeat from behind her, but she ignored him.

“I — I can’t hear you.” Alex shook her head, and she reached up to rub her eyes. “Yeah, I can see him,” she called back to the two brothers. “I just can’t … why are you here?” She watched as Kevin’s mouth moved again before her shoulders fell. “I can’t hear you. You’re not strong enough.” Or my grace can’t stretch itself that thin, she thought despondently, unwilling to speak that possibility aloud.

“Wait. You mean Kevin — he’s there?”

Alex turned back to Dean, giving a small, curt nod. “He’s over there, I just can’t … He’s trying to speak, but I can’t hear him. He’s not strong enough to break through the veil just yet.” She rubbed her temple. “I … I just need to take a breather, okay? I’ll be right outside. Think you can take watch for a minute?”

The frown on his face was clear, but Dean nodded. “Yeah, sure thing.” He sat down on the table beside the coffeemaker. Alex left the room, pausing slightly as Sam passed her by on his way down towards the library.

“Kevin?” she heard Dean’s voice from behind her, and the angel had to pause. “Kevin? Alright. I can’t do this.” His voice grew sharp as his anger rose. “This coffee-buzzing, bump-in-the-night crap. I got serious things to say to you, okay? And I’m not going to say them to this.” There was a thud as he slammed his palm down onto the table, and the ex-angel took a guilty step away from the door. “Kevin … I’m sorry. You did not choose this life. You busted your ass, you lost everything, everyone you love … and your reward? Getting killed … on my watch. If I …” Dean drew in a deep, soulful breath, and Alex’s chest contracted in sorrow. “It was on me. It was my fault, and …” He fell silent, and the lights above Alex’s head started to flicker. “And there’s nothing I can do to make that right. I am so sorry.”

Sam appeared around the corner, bursting past Alex and into the kitchen. “Hey, did you see that?” he asked breathlessly. “The — the lights were …”

He fell silent, and Alex stepped back into the kitchen to find the corner of the room flickering with a cold energy. “No, this is not happening.” A voice filled the room as Kevin Tran began to take shape, and Alex curled her grace up inside to make sure that she wasn’t just seeing him through the veil. “I didn’t spend months struggling to break through the veil just to get stuck listening to Dean Winchester having a self-pity session. Didn’t hear enough of those when I was alive.”

“K-Kevin?” Dean turned, his face blank with surprise, and the dead prophet looked between him and Sam before his gaze finally came to rest on Alex.
“Y-You can see me?” he asked. “And — and hear me?”

Sam nodded, and Alex said, “Uh, yeah. Yeah. We all can. Just, uh, just take it easy, okay?” she added when Kevin’s form flickered violently, disappearing completely for a second before once again stabilizing. “You won’t be able to hold this form for very long, not yet. Not without a lot of practice.”

“Then we should talk fast.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Dean stepped forward, cutting into the prophet’s words. “Why aren’t you in — in heaven? I mean, if anybody deserves an express pass to paradise —”

Kevin flickered again. “I couldn’t,” he explained. “I can’t. No one can. Heaven’s closed for business.” His gaze darted over to Alex for the briefest of seconds before falling back onto Dean. “Everyone who’s died since the angels fell are just stuck inside the veil, waiting. And it’s bad in here. Like DMV-line-times-infinity bad.”

“Well, I mean, what can we do?” Sam looked over at his brother, and Dean gave a nod of agreement.

“I need a favor — big one. Find my mother.”

“Kevin,” Sam started before Dean cut in. “Crowley only told you she was alive to mess with you,” Dean said harshly, but the prophet wasn’t phased.

“I’m not going off his word. Alright? I have my own sources. It’s crowded in the veil. All of us are stuck near the sites of our deaths. But I’ve been able to pass messages spirit to spirit.” Kevin flickered again, and Alex took a step closer before he stabilized. “— made contact with another new arrival,” he continued, unaware that his ghostly form had momentarily faded. “She said she saw my mom just a week ago, alive.”

For a moment Sam and Dean were silent. “Okay, this — this spirit you’re playing ghost telephone with,” Dean finally said. “I mean, what do you even know about her?”

“Her name’s Candy. Says she’s in a forest in Wichita by a train trestle.”

“Candy?” Alex repeated in disbelief. “And — and that’s all you have for us? Nothing else?”

“Long distance communication within the veil … it’s not ideal,” Kevin explained. “That’s why I need you to go there summon her, see what else she knows. You say you want to make it right? This is how.” He disappeared with a flicker, and the room fell silent.

“Great. I guess we’re going to Wichita.” Dean stalked out of the kitchen, and Alex watched him go with a deep-set frown.

“Hey, I’m sorry, but I’ve got to ask. Does Dean seem a little … tense with us as of recently?” she asked Sam, and the Winchester’s tight-lipped expression answered her question. “Of course. You two are fighting. Do I even want to know about what?”

“It’s nothing. He’s upset because I told him that if our situations had been reversed, and he had been in that coma, I wouldn’t have done what he did. I wouldn’t have let an angel possess him.” Frustration flashed in Sam’s eyes. “He thinks he’s being the hero, but he’s just being selfish. And now Kevin is dead.”
It was late that night by the time they reached the forest that Kevin Tran had spoken of. The air was surprisingly cold for an August night, and Alex tugged her jacket tighter around her small frame. The trees blocked out the twinkling stars above, and the only light came from the brothers’ pale flashlights. Alex’s grace twitched within her arm, twisting and binding to the angel blade in her hand. It has been a gift from Dean, one of the extras from the Impala’s trunk, and while she hadn’t hesitated to accepted, she regretted how her grace, now occupied in her weapon, no longer strengthened her senses. She tread on behind the brothers, her steps light and her head swinging every which way to peer in between the dark, groaning trees. “Alright, that’s the trestle.” Sam’s voice startled her, and she swung her gaze around to where the Winchester was staring up at an old metal structure. “Candy said her spirit was stuck nearby.”

“She died here?” Dean looked around through the darkness with a scoff. “What got her? A bear?”

Alex chuckled, and Sam added, “I’m still stuck on the fact that we’re trying to summon a ghost named Candy. You know, just cause Kevin said he heard his mom is alive doesn’t mean she —”

“Hey, we at least owe it to the kid to try, alright?” Dean dropped his backpack on the ground with a thud, and Alex’s head snapped to him. Something flickered through the trees behind him, and Alex immediately dropped her blade onto the grass as her grace sprung up to her eyes.

She heard Sam’s questioning noise, but she ignored it as she took a step closer to the woman who stood at the edge of the trees. “It’s okay,” she began slowly, hands going out to assume a non-threatening gesture. “Are you … are you Candy?” The woman’s mouth moved, and Alex shook her head. “I can’t hear you, alright? You’re still in the veil. We were sent here by Kevin Tran.”

Recognition sparked in the woman’s eyes before Dean stepped in front of her, blocking Alex’s view. “Do you see her?” he asked, and Alex gave a quick nod, pushing past him, but the woman was gone. “Is she here?”

“Well, she was, at least.” Alex turned back to look at the two brothers. “I don’t know where she went, but she was here.”

“So … you can see ghosts, but you just can’t hear them?” Sam asked as Dean knelt down beside his backpack. “Why?”

“Because my stupid grace can only do one thing at a time.” Alex reached down to pick up her weapon, and her grace instinctively slid down into the metal. “I could probably hear them if I listened for them, but only if I use my grace.” She shrugged. “I dunno, man. It’s complicated. What are you doing?” Her attention turned to Dean, unsure of what else to say.

“Well, Candy’s only been dead a week, right? So I figured she could use as much help as she can get, so …” Dean pulled their coffeemaker out of his bag, and Alex’s head fell back as she rolled her eyes.

“Really?” Sam asked from beside her, and Alex watched as he shook his head in disbelief.

Dean shrugged, and he sat the machine down on one of the old picnic tables. “Whatever works.” He pulled out an old radio from his bag and set it down beside the coffee machine. “We know she’s here, so the sooner we make contact, the sooner we can find Ms. Tran.”

Alex tossed her weapon onto the table. “It looks like she’s gone deep back into the veil,” she reported as she made a quick survey of the woods around them. “Conserving energy, hopefully. It might be a few minutes before she can work up the strength to break through.”
“Great. Well, good thing I have plenty of things to set up.” Dean hauled his bag up onto the table and held out a hammer to his brother. “Well? Start hanging.”

The night grew long, and the still air lost the last bit of its heat from the day. Alex sat beside Sam, her hands tucked firmly between her warm thighs as she waited impatiently for the ghost’s return. Dean sat a few feet off, staring down at his phone. “You feel that?” Sam suddenly asked, sitting up straighter as he looked around. “I think I felt a chill.”

“Yeah,” Dean agreed dryly. “It’s cause it’s cold.” With a sigh, he lifted his phone up to his ear as it rang. “Crowley, it’s Dean,” he snapped. “Call me when you get this.”

“Really, Dean?” Sam leaned forward as his brother hung up. “That’s your third unanswered voicemail. You ever think maybe he’s just not that into you?”

“Well, he is our last confirmed link to Ms. Tran,” Dean retorted. “Yes, he is a flaming douche, but at least we know he’s real, which is more than we can say for this Candy no-show.”

“Hey, I saw her.” Alex shot Dean a glare, the frigid air making her temper run short.

“Yeah, well I didn’t. We’ve been here for half an hour, and nothing’s happened. I say we pack up, go home and get warm, and then come back tomorrow in the day. When the sun’s up.” Dean rose to his feet, his mind made up, but before he had taken a step in any direction, the radio hanging on the tree in front of them crackled to life. Static filled the silent woods, and Alex could hear the faint, clipped syllables of a woman’s voice trying to break through.

Both of the Winchesters were in front of the radio in a heartbeat. “Candy?” Sam asked. “Are — are you there? Is that you, Candy?”

Dean reached forward to adjust the radio antenna. “Hello?” The woman’s voice grew stronger. “Hello?”

Dean turned the dial, searching for the strongest frequency as Candy’s words cut in and out. “There, there.” Sam suddenly said as the voice came through loud and clear. “Stop, stop, stop. Candy?”

“— in a box,” the woman was saying, thin and terrified. “They put me in a box. All of us in boxes, side by side. Me, Jerome, Linda.”

“Linda’s —” Dean started, but his brother immediately spoke over him. “Ms. Tran. Candy, these boxes, where were they?”

“I don’t know. They were cold. Dark. There — there was a vent. We could talk to one another.”

Sam looked down at Alex, and the ex-angel shrugged, raising her grace to her eyes as she looked around for Candy. There — standing a few feet away from Dean. “What were the rooms like?” she asked, and Candy looked surprised to find Alex staring straight at her.

“B-Bare,” she stuttered, her mouth moving but her voice coming from the radio. “Cement. Except for the door. That was … metal, but, like … ridged.”

“Ridged?” Sam repeated. “You mean like corrugated?”

“Yeah!” Candy nodded enthusiastically as she looked over at Sam. “I tried to lift the door, but I couldn’t. Locked from the outside.”
“Like a storage unit?” Dean murmured up to his brother.

“Maybe,” Sam agreed quietly before turning back at the radio. “Candy, who was holding you there?”

“Two men.” The small woman shuddered at the memory, and the panic returned to her voice. “It was so dark in the box. When they came, I could barely see. The — the first guy was British, I think. Kind of short, loved hearing himself talk.”

“Crowley,” Alex confirmed. “Okay, so what did these people want?”

Candy shook her head, unsure. “Said I was worth more alive than dead. But the first man stopped coming. Then it was just the other guy. We thought with just him … we’d try to escape. I ran so hard, so far, but …” Panic swelled up in Candy’s face, and she flickered, the static overtaking her voice.

“Candy?” Sam called. “Candy, are you there? What about Ms. Tran? Candy?”

“I-I-I don’t know.” Candy’s voice returned, small and scared. “Maybe she survived.”

“Maybe?” Dean’s voice grew sharp as he glared at the radio. “That’s not what you told her son.”

“I said she was alive. I don’t know what happened after. For her sake, I hope she’s dead.” Candy flickered once, twice, and then disappeared, and her voice degraded into static.

“Candy?” Sam called. “Candy?”

“She’s gone.” Alex shoved her hands into her pocket, and she let her grace fall away from her eyes, watching as the world darkened around her. “She’s faded back into the veil.” She reached up to rub her eyes, jerking slightly as a sudden shiver passed down her spine. “Let’s pack up and get to the car, okay? I’m cold.”

“Good idea.” Dean picked up the radio and shoved it into his bag alongside the coffeemaker, and Sam handed him the other various electronics that he had set up around the perimeter. “So, we thinking some sort of storage unit, then. How many do you think are in the area?”

“I don’t know. It can’t be more than a mile from here, if Candy made it this far before Crowley’s guy found her.” Sam started up back towards the car, and Alex and Dean followed. “There’s not much in this area to begin with.”

Alex let the Winchesters pull ahead as they made their way up over the ridge. A demon-run storage facility in Wichita, Kansas. She had already had the misfortune of being sent there on one of Crowley’s errands — if she was truly lucky, it wouldn’t be the same place.

Dean unlocked the trunk as they reached the Impala, parked off a dirt road beneath the cover of the trees, and Alex slid into the backseat as he tossed his supplies inside and slammed the trunk closed. Sam got into the front, his backpack slung over his shoulder, and he tucked it between his legs as he pulled out his laptop.

The car started when Dean got in, and within minutes they were back under the starry night sky. “Okay, there are three storage facilities nearby,” Sam finally said, breaking the silence. “The closest is about a mile up the road. Oh, and I, uh — I think I’ve dug up some stuff on Candy. Turns out she was the kept woman of a powerful Congressman. Gossip blog said he worshiped the ground she walked on, literally. He, uh — he had a foot fetish.”
Alex pulled her lip up in disgust, and her expression was mimicked across Dean’s face. “So, Crowley was holding the beloved tootsies of a powerful politician?” he asked, and Sam nodded in agreement.

“And the beloved mother of a powerful prophet,” he added.

“Human leverage.” Dean guided the car around a sharp turn before asking, “But why kill Candy?”

Sam gave a small shrug. “Well, you heard her,” he guessed. “Uh, she tried to make a break for it. Maybe Crowley wanted to make an example.”

“No, no.” Dean shook his head, and his brother looked over at him in surprise. “The guy left in charge. Crowley wanted the victims alive.”

“So, what, you want to give him a medal?” Sam stared at his brother, shocked when Dean didn’t take back his words. “I mean, Crowley’s the one who put them in the cells in the first place.”

“I, uh, I don’t think Dean’s defending Crowley.” Alex leaned forward between the two brothers. “He’s just saying that this isn’t exactly Crowley’s M.O. I mean, killing her would take away all of his leverage, and all to what? Set an example to two other people that are scared out of their wits? Doesn’t seem advantageous.”

“Thank you.” Dean gestured back to her, and Alex gave a small nod. “See? I’m just trying to talk things out. You know, working the case. Businesslike.” His pointed words had some effect on Sam, because the tall hunter groaned in frustration and rolled his eyes, and Alex frowned. Dean must have seen her confusion in the rearview mirror, because he added, “Oh, didn’t you hear? Apparently Sam and I are no longer brothers — his words, not mine. We’re strictly business now.”

“I didn’t put it like that, and you know it,” Sam snapped, his head spinning around to glare at his brother.

“Oh, you’re right. I forgot the part about how I have a — a God complex because I just want to keep my baby brother alive, which apparently makes me the bad guy.”

“I was ready to die, Dean.” Sam’s voice was sharp with exasperation, and Dean scoffed. “I was ready, but you couldn’t live with it, so you just had to bring me back. Because that’s what you always do. And now Kevin’s dead, and Crowley is on the loose. I told you — everything that has gone wrong between us has gone wrong because we’re brothers.”

“Exactly! We’re family!” Dean’s voice rang through the car, loud and clear. “I don’t care whether you like it or not, because we are. And that’s what family does. I do whatever I have to to keep you safe only to find out — to find out that you wouldn’t even try if the situation was reversed.” He reached over and turned on the stereo as Sam opened his mouth to respond, and Alex fell back into her seat as music blasted through the car, too loud for anyone to yell over the noise. It did not, however, obscure the glare that Sam gave to his brother, and Alex curled up in the back, her hands coming up to plug her ears as the conversation died and the car continued on.

An hour later, they had both checked and crossed off two of the storage facilities from the list. Neither of them had exhibited anything out of the ordinary, and neither had been the one that Alex had once visited. The surrounding land was beginning to look familiar, and the ex-angel’s heart sunk as Dean pulled the Impala off onto a side road as they neared the last facility on their list.

“Let me guess,” Dean muttered as the three of them exited the car and made their way in through the
front door. “5’5, pasty white, black-rimmed hipster glasses, just like the last place.”

Sam snorted at his brother’s prediction of the employee’s appearance; their fight now over, the two had at least fallen back to speaking terms. Alex watched as Dean rang the small bell, grinning smugly as a man matching Dean’s exact description popped up from behind the counter. “Nailed it,” he whispered back to them.

Alex couldn’t share in his amusement as the employee’s gaze came to rest on her, and her grin faded away. The small silver name tag confirmed her suspicions; standing in front of them was Del, the demon Crowley had left in control. She felt a blush rise to her face, but Del’s gaze had moved on without lingering. “Can I help you?” he asked the two brothers cheerily.

“Yeah, hi. Agents Nicks and McVie. Back there is Agent Bramlett. We need to take a look at your, uh, rental records.” Dean pulled out his fake badge, and Alex and Sam did the same, holding them up long enough for the demon to see before tucking them away.

“Uh, my manager’s not here,” Del began apologetically. “I really don’t think I should —“

“Hey!” Dean’s thin patience showed as he snapped, and Del jumped slightly in surprise. “The records, pal.”

“Yeah. Barry! Bring out the rental binder!” The demon raised his voice, and after a second or two, another man approached, and Alex watched as Sam and Dean exchanged amused looks at how the second man fit Dean’s earlier description to a T; scrawny, pale, with a black and red “Castle Storage” t-shirt and thick black glasses. In his hands he held a large white binder, which he set down on the desk before backing away. Alex drew her grace up to her eyes before he left — he was human, but the twisted, charred face of Del showed that a demon still possessed him. “There you go, sir.” Del slid the binder over to Dean, and Alex looked away, shifting awkwardly to stand closer to Sam, whose attention had turned to the far wall where a large map of the complex hung.

“Hey,” he called, and Dean looked up from where he was flipping through the rental leases. Sam motioned his brother over, and pointed to the upper right hand corner of the map. “Okay, check it out. Corridor ‘Q.’ Three adjacent units separate from the others. I mean, Candy said there were three hostages, right?”

Alex recognized the exit door she had entered through in the past, and she dared to cast a look back at Del; the demon’s face remained expressionless. “Yeah,” Dean agreed, and he flipped through the binder in his hands. “Okay, It’s all leased by the same guy — a D. Webster.”

“D. Webster?” Sam repeated. “Wait. As in like, Daniel Webster?”

“Well, I know a lame Crowley in-joke when I see one,” Dean muttered, and he snapped the thick binder closed with a heavy thud.

“You guys say ‘D. Webster?’ ” Del spoke up from behind the counter, leaning forward in curiosity, and all three hunters turned to face him.

“Yeah,” Dean agreed guardedly. “Yeah, you — you seen him?”

“Uh, no, just … I know his name from the records. He’s leasing another unit on the other side of the facility. I could show you,” he offered, motioning towards the door that led deeper into the complex.

“Yes,” Dean agreed guardedly. “Yeah, you — you seen him?”

“Uh, no, just … I know his name from the records. He’s leasing another unit on the other side of the facility. I could show you,” he offered, motioning towards the door that led deeper into the complex.

“Yeah, that’d be great.” Dean watched as Del circled around from the desk and opened up the door as he quietly added to his brother, “All right, why don’t you take corridor ‘Q’? I’ll go with, uh, Del the funky homosapien. Alex?”
“I’ll, uh, I’ll go with you.” Alex followed Dean and Del down the hallway, her head tipped as she
listened carefully, but there was no screaming to be heard from within the complex.

Dean cleared his throat. “So, uh, when’s the last time Webster has been here? Do you know?”

“I haven’t seen him for months,” Del admitted, and Alex narrowed her eyes at the sharpness that
lined his tone. “He used to come by a lot, but then one day, he just … stopped. Ah, here we are.”
The demon unlocked one of the units and lifted the door to reveal a large room full of boxes and
tools. The lights flicked on as Dean and Alex entered, and the ex-angel cast a look back at the
demon, who stood with his arms crossed.

Dean wandered inwards, pausing by the workbench to examine a small scythe that sat out in the
open. He hummed slightly in confusion before moving on to the shelving full of cardboard boxes.
Alex followed, watching as he reached inside of one to pull out a small green child’s toy. “You sure
this is the one leased by Webster?” he asked doubtfully.

“Yeah, this is it.” Del took a step closer, his head tipping in confusion.

Dean knelt down, and he waved Alex over. The ex-angel approached, crouching down beside him,
and the Winchester pointed to the corner of one of the boxes. The name ‘Bob Gunderson’ was
scrawled in black permanent marker. “This isn’t Crowley’s unit.”

Alex heard Del surge forward, and Dean suddenly slumped onto the ground, unconscious. “Whoa!”
The ex-angel jumped to her feet, her eyes flashing as she faced the demon. “What the hell?”

“They’re the Winchesters. Crowley is going to be pleased.” Del pulled a coil of rope off of the
workbench and pocketed the knife with whose handle he had knocked Dean unconscious. “I assume
that’s why you brought them here.”

“What? No!” Alex knelt down beside Dean, reaching out to take his pulse. “I — I’m undercover,
you asshole! You’re going to give me away.”

Del pulled Dean up into a sitting position and tied him up to the shelves. “We’ll let Crowley decide.”

“What the shit?!” A voice from behind them had both Alex and Del spinning around to find Larry,
the other Storage Castle employee standing at the door. Alex opened her mouths to stutter out an
excuse, but the demon moved as fast as lightning, his knife going out to slit the employee’s neck as
he dragged him into the room.

“Dude!” Alex shoved Del on the shoulder, causing him to drop the body and stumble back. “Don’t
dare think I’m beyond killing you, because I swear to God —”

Del scoffed loudly, and he reached up to readjust his glasses that had been jolted askew. “You can’t
do shit without Crowley’s permission. Rumor is that last time you offed a demon, he put you back in
your place.”

Alex scowled, but she didn’t argue. “Just tie me down before Dean wakes up, okay? The last thing I
need is them being suspicious of me.” She sat down beside Dean and looped her hands between the
metal supports of the shelf as Del tied them together with the rope. His work was quick and rough,
and Alex hissed as his nails dug into her wrists.

Satisfied with his work, the demon returned to where his coworker was bleeding on the floor, and he
propped the body up and placed a metal bowl beneath his neck, letting the blood run into the basin.
“This job sucks,” he muttered. “ ‘Trust me,’ he says,” and Del’s voice took on an accent to mock
Crowley’s. ‘You definitely want to be a part of this — a chance to get in on the ground floor of my
operations, a real learning experience. Consider it a stepping stone, my lad — like an internship.”

“So, you’re the one.” Dean stirred, speaking up, and Del’s attention was drawn to him. “You’re the one who Crowley left in charge.” He looked back at Alex, a question in his eyes, and Alex gave a small nod; yes, she was okay.

Del ignored their exchange. “Yeah. What a privilege. Feeding the apes, hosing the floors, washing out the honey buckets, and for zero credit. The boss, M.I.A. Too important to show for work, to even return my calls. And you know the worst part?” The demon paused, gesturing to them with a knife.

“I’m all ears,” Alex quipped, and she grinned at the glint in the demon’s eyes, frustrated at her interruption during his rhetorical question.

“The worst part was that I wasn’t allowed to kill anyone. I was told to protect them. I mean, how sick is that?” Del’s gestures got stronger, and Alex watched as the blade glinted in the harsh iridescent light. “Am I not a young, vital demon with basic demon needs and rights? And when I call Crowley to inform him that I’ve single-handedly caught the Winchesters, if he even answers my call, think I’ll get a thank you? Ha!” The demon scoffed loudly as he shoved the body away, picking up his bowl of blood and setting his knife aside.

“Yeah, you’re right, kid.” Alex could see Dean’s fingers out of the corner of her eyes, working at his bonds as he spoke to keep Del distracted as he sought freedom. “He won’t give you credit. If anything, he’ll be pissed.”

“What?” Del’s gaze turned over to Alex, dark with confusion, and the ex-angel gave a small, barely perceptible shrug.

“Well, me and Crowley,” Dean explained, “we’re — we’re tight now. Thick as thieves. Saw him just last month. We, uh, we had a grand old time.”

“So that’s where he’s been. Out partying with humans — with hunters?” Del suddenly threw the bowl onto the ground, and Alex flinched as blood splattered everywhere. “You know, I put up with a lot! Caring for humans, working with angels — but I’ve had enough! I’m tired of languishing here in this go-nowhere, no-kill joke of a job. I quit!” Del ripped off his name tag and threw it onto the ground.

“Well, congrats.” Dean tugged at his ropes, and as he moved his legs, Alex caught sight of the wooden handle of the demon-killing knife tucked around his ankle. “Now what? Early retirement, margaritas on the beach?”

Del scooped up the knife and surged forward, straddling Dean’s legs. “I was thinking something a bit differently.” His eyes flashed black as he pressed the blade up against the Winchester’s throat. “Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve done this? I thank you for reminding me what I truly am.”

Dean groaned as the knife dug into his skin, and the iron tang of blood filled the air. Alex struggled against her bonds, forcing her grace down into her arms to break the fibers. “You kill him and I fucking kill you!” she hissed.

Del paused, pulling back to look the young hunter in the eyes. “You won’t dare,” he taunted, lifting the blade high above his head, the tip pointed towards Dean’s heart. The ropes snapped, and Alex launched herself forward, knocking the demon away before he could land his final blow.
They both fell onto the concrete, and Alex struggled to get to her feet, but a leg lashed out and caught her in the knee, sending her toppling to the floor. Del jumped up, ready to attack, but a dark blur from behind him sent him flying across the room and into the metal shelving, knocking him down onto the ground. Alex staggered up right to see Sam grab the demon by the shirt. “Get Dean,” he ordered, but the Winchester was already on his feet before Alex could get back to him.

She heard the clink of metal, and she turned to see that Sam had forced Del onto the ground and secured his hands behind his back with warded handcuffs from the bunker. “You okay?” she asked Dean, watching with concern as he pressed his hand into his bleeding neck.

“It’s not deep,” the Winchester promised as he glared down at the demon. “Did you find her?”

Sam gave a curt nod. “Yeah. She’s outside.”

Del glared up at the Winchesters, a scowl on his face. “You’re not going to kill me. Crowley wouldn’t allow it.” His gaze slid over to Alex, and the ex-angel paused, unsure what to do. When the demon’s stare didn’t abate, she gave a quick, barely perceptible nod.

Dean scoffed, the interaction between the two going unnoticed. “And what makes you think we give a rat’s ass about what Crowley wants? Besides, last I checked, you quit.”

Something flickered in the demon’s eyes, something akin to fear. “Is that why you’re here?” He stared up at Alex, eyes wide. “Did you know?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Alex shook her head. “I didn’t come here to kill anybody. In fact, I think we’re saving that honor for someone much worse.” She looked over at Sam, and the Winchester nodded.

“Much, much worse,” Dean added, and he held out the demon knife. Footsteps approached, and Linda Tran stepped into the room, ragged and dirty, but her eyes glowed with the rage. “Do the honors, Ms. Tran.”

“With pleasure.” The prophet’s mother took the knife from Dean, twisting the blade in her hands, and Del shifted backwards on his knees.

“Hey, lady, I swear,” he started, words spilling from his mouth as Ms. Tran approached. “I was just following order—” He cut off with a gasp as the knife pierced his heart, and the demon’s face lit up with a bright orange light. It flickered once, twice, and then three times as Linda held the blade there, prolonging the demon’s suffering before she finally pulled it free and allowed the creature to collapsed to the ground, dead.

She held the blade out, not turning around as she stared down at the body that lay in front of her. She stood there for several seconds in silence, and when she spoke, her tone was rough, but her words were sure. “Take me to my son.”

“Ms. Tran …” Alex began, and the woman turned to look over at her.

Tears glistened in her eyes, proof that she already knew the fate that had befallen her only child, but her voice lost none of its clarity. “I said, take me to my son.”

Alex pushed her way into the bunker, raising her grace to her eyes. “Kevin?” she called out, hurrying down the stairs to stand in the library. “You there?” She felt Dean stop beside her as she looked around, smiling to find the prophet entering the room.
He stopped behind them. “Well?” The way Dean spun around meant that Kevin had materialized, and Alex let her thin grace fall away.

“We got her.” Dean’s voice caught momentarily as he faced the prophet. “She’s here. But we wanted to give you a moment to … you know, process.”

Kevin’s eyes widened every so slightly in surprise. “Oh, I, uh …” he began. “Does she know?”

Two sets of footsteps approached as Sam led Ms. Tran through the bunker. “Kevin?” Her voice shook as she stepped into view of her child, and Kevin turned. “Hello, son.”

“Hey, mom.”

Tears filled Linda’s eyes. “Oh.” Her jaw trembled, and Alex turned away, unable to watch.

“Dean.” She motioned the Winchester closer. “Let’s give them a moment alone. What are we going to do with them? We can’t keep them here.”

Dean’s gaze lingered on the Trans for a moment longer. “No,” he finally agreed. “But it wouldn’t be right to separate them again. Kevin’s spirit has to be attached to one of his possessions. If he doesn’t know, then maybe Ms. Tran does.”

“Yeah. I’ll go get his things.” Alex pushed past the Winchester and made her way down the hall to Kevin’s bedroom. The door was unlocked, and Alex flicked the lights on to reveal a half-made bed scattered with notes. She gathered them up, collected the few precious belongings that the prophet had kept in a small wooden box, and returned to the library.

Kevin was gone, disappeared back into the veil, and Alex placed what she had brought down on one of the tables. “Here. This is all I found.”

Dean pushed the papers off to one side, his fingers lingering on a folder jammed full of papers. “So, this is, uh — this is all of it,” he told Ms. Tran. “You know, hunter’s tools — notebooks, papers, pencils, P.S.A.T. results.” He paused, smiling as he looked over the results. “Perfect score. Way to go, kid.”

“This.” Ms. Tran reached into the wooden box and pulled out a silver signet ring. “This is it. His father’s. Mr. Tran died when Kevin was a baby,” she explained, her voice soft and low. “It’s the only piece of his father Kevin ever had. If Kevin’s s-spirit is bound to some object here … this is it.”

“Listen, Ms. Tran. There’s a lot we don’t know about this heaven situation. There are risks to taking Kevin home with you. Now, spirits, the longer that they’re in the veil, they have a way of …” Dean hesitated, and his face fell, unable to bring himself to finish his thought. “Well, it doesn’t end up well.”

“He’s my son.” Ms. Tran gripped the ring tightly in her hand. “It’s my job to keep him safe for as long as I can.”

“I … I might be able to help.” Alex held out her hand to the woman, and after a second or two of hesitation, Ms. Tran placed the ring in her palm. Alex closed her fist around it, letting her grace spill down her arm and into the metal as her eyes fell closed in concentration. She could feel Kevin’s soul bound within, and she poured her energy inwards, strengthening the connection and stabilizing his spirit. Her grace spluttered, pulsing hot like fire in her veins, and Alex opened up her hand with a gasp.

Ms. Tran took it back, not asking for an explanation of what had transpired, and Alex drew in a
shaky breath as the tattered, burning remains of her grace rushed up into her body. “Are you sure you’re okay with this?” Dean asked.

“She was held and tortured for a year because of me.” Kevin flickered into view beside his mother. “Now that I’ve found her, I’m not letting her out of my sight. She’s my responsibility.”

“And you were ours. And we failed you.” Sam sighed as he looked down at the prophet. “Kevin, I ___”

“Sam.” Kevin gently cut him off. “I know that wasn’t on you. Go put a blade in that asshat who possessed you and we’ll call it square.” Sam gave him a small, grateful nod, and Kevin turned his attention to all three of the hunters. “Guys. Thank you.” His eyes met Alex’s, and she half-heartedly returned it as she watched the world start to spin.

Dean shook his head. “You can thank us when we get you to heaven where you belong. Okay, until then, enjoy your time with your mom. The, uh, uninterrupted, 24/7, no-escape quality time.”

“Dick.” A wide smile split the prophet’s face, and he rolled his eyes as he and his mother turned to go.

“Dean.” The room spun uncontrollably, the air as hot as hellfire, and Alex reached out for the table to steady herself. The last remaining fragments of her grace were burning inside of her, scorching her organs, and she doubled over as she gasped for air through collapsing lungs. “I—I — I think —” The ground slid out from under her, and she collapsed into the impending darkness.
Alex opened up her eyes to find herself surrounded by cold, damp darkness. She shivered, and as her mind awoke and her eyes adjusted, she realized that she was lying in her bed. Her hair and clothes were damp, and she rolled over with a groan of confusion and pain. The clock read 4:58 p.m.

Alex pulled herself up on shaky legs and stumbled out into the hall. “Sam?” she called. “Dean?” She passed the Winchesters’ rooms and made her way into the library. “Sam.”

Sam Winchester was seated at the tables, his head bowed as he stared at his laptop. At the sound of his name, he looked up in surprise, and his eyes widened. “Alex? You’re, uh, you’re up. How are you feeling?”

“Like I was hit by a train.” Alex sank down into the chair across from him, her head falling into her hands. “What the hell happened? All I remember is that everything was felt like it was on fire.”

“You passed out, and yeah, you were burning up. We had to put you in an ice bath just to bring your temperature down.” Sam closed his laptop so he could look her in the eyes. “You had us scared. What happened?”

Alex reached down inside of her, searching for anything, but there was nothing that she could feel. “I think … I think the last of my grace burned up. I can’t feel it anymore.” She looked down at her hands as her fingers tingled at the memory. “I used it all up protecting Kevin.” She looked back up, gaze sweeping the room. “Is he gone?”

“Yeah. They left this morning. They send their thanks, by the way.”

“They didn’t need to.” Alex pushed herself to her feet, wincing as a sharp twinge ran up her leg; a quick look down showed bruising on her calf from where she had fallen. “Where’s, uh, where’s Dean?”

“No idea. He might be in his room.”

“Thanks.” Alex got to her feet and walked away, following the hall down to Dean’s room. She found the hunter beside his bed, throwing his clothes into his duffle bag. “Going somewhere?”

The Winchester looked up at the sound of her voice. “Hey, champ. How are you feeling?” When Alex only shrugged, he dropped his gun on top of his things. “I caught wind of a case. You want in?”

Alex scoffed, surprised that he had bothered to ask. “Of course. I don’t think I ever unpacked from our last trip.” She stepped out of her room but stumbled, barely catching herself against the far wall.

“You okay?” Dean leaned out with a frown, and Alex took a moment to straighten her shirt as she nursed her pride. “If you’re not well enough, you should probably —”

“I’m fine. I’m coming with.” Alex brushed back her hair with a loud scoff, annoyed at the Winchester’s words. “Just give me a few minutes to get my sea legs back, okay, captain?” She watched doubt flicker across Dean’s gaze before he shrugged and stepped back into his room.
Alex returned to hers to find her bag sitting, still mostly full, in the corner of the room. The only thing out of place was her angel blade, which now lay on the ground, and Alex bent over to pick it up. There was no rush of grace at the touch, and the metal remained cool in her hands. Alex tossed it back onto her things; if there was any grace left within her, it was too weak to even make its presence known.

Slinging her bag over her shoulder, Alex returned to the hallway to find Dean closing his door behind him. “You sure you’re feeling good enough to come along?” he asked again, and Alex rolled her eyes.

“Yeah. I’ve been in worse conditions than this as of late. I’ll be fine.” Alex followed him down the hall, adjusting her bag as they crossed through the library where Sam still sat.

“All right,” Dean called, passing by his brother and making his way towards the stairs. “We’ll be back.”

Sam looked up in surprise, eyes wide at the sight of the two hunters, packed and ready to leave. “Whoa, whoa. Wait. Where you headed?”

“Washington. I caught a case.” Dean paused, glancing back at his brother with a shrug. “Oh. You … you want me to come with?”

“I have Alex.” Dean jerked a finger towards her, and Alex gave Sam a small wave as Dean turned, about to leave again before he glanced back. “Why? Do you want to come?”

“On a hunt? Why wouldn’t I?” Sam pushed his chair back, ready to stand up. “Why didn’t you ask me first? Alex just woke up from — from who knows what?”

“I don’t know, man. Cause lately with you, up is down and down in sideways, you know? I-I — I don’t know what you want.” Dean’s words were met with a glare, and the Winchester sighed as he walked over to the table. “Okay. You want in? Fine. Sure thing.” He reached into his jacket and pulled out a newspaper article that he had printed out. “Photo leaked from the crime scene. Girl was murdered in her room, doors were locked, the windows were locked.”

Alex dropped her bag, and she joined the brothers to peer over Sam’s shoulder at the selfie of the teenage girl, and her eyebrows lifted as the sight of a tall, skinny, faceless man in a suit standing in the shadows behind her. “Who’s the wallflower?” Sam asked, handing the photo back.

“Exactly.” Dean stuffed it into his pocket. “Best guess — ghost caught on film. So, you’re coming?”

“Does it look like I’m staying?” Sam got to his feet and gathered up his laptop with a shake of his head. “Give me five minutes to pack. I’ll meet you at the car.” He hurried away, and Alex picked her things back up, watching as Dean rolled his eyes and led the way up the stairs and out to the car.

**Springdale, Washington**

A chilly breeze rustled through the leaves above her head as Alex followed Sam and Dean up the driveway of a white suburban house. She pulled the sleeves of her suit coat down over her hands at the cold, stifling a shiver as Dean reached up to ring the doorbell. They were at the home of the deceased girl, having driven nonstop from Lebanon, and the ex-angel impatiently awaited to be invited inside.
The door opened after a second or two, revealing a pale, middle-aged woman. Her dull, grief-filled eyes darted between the three of them, and after a moment she hesitantly asked, “Can I help you?”

“Mrs. Miles? I’m Agent Malloy. These are my coworkers Agent Roth and Hudson.” Sam motioned to both Dean and Alex in turn, and the ex-angel reached into her pocket to produce her falsified identification as both Winchesters did the same. “I believe we spoke earlier on the phone.”

“Oh, of, of course. Come in.” Mrs. Miles waved the three inside, and Alex gratefully stepped over the threshold. The door closed behind her, and Mrs. Miles folded her hands in front of her. “I suppose you three would like to see Casey’s room.”

Dean nodded, and Sam quickly added, “If you don’t mind.”

“This way.” The woman led them up the stairs and down the hall to the room at the far end. The scent of soap and bleach filled the air, and the carpet around the open closet was stained a deep red. “I scrubbed for hours,” Mrs. Miles whispered. “I’ll have to rip the carpet up. My daughter, Casey … she picked the color out herself.”

“We’re very sorry for your loss.” Sam turned to face her, and Alex moved around the room, taking in the array of photos and memorabilia that lined the shelves. Dean moved beside her, and Alex heard the faint buzz of an EMF detector, stifled by the Winchester’s hand. “You mentioned Casey had no known enemies on the phone. What about at home? Anything unusual you may have noticed? Uh, electricity acting up or lights … flickering. TV on the fritz?”

“No, no fritzing. No cold spots either.”

Her words gave Alex pause, and the young hunter turned in surprise to face the middle-aged woman. “Cold spots?” she repeated. “What makes you mention cold spots?”

“I’m sorry.” Mrs. Miles ducked her head, embarrassed by what she had accidentally let slip. “That must sound strange, but … it’s been three days since …” She shook her head. “And the police have found nothing. I’d h— I’d have to sell my house to afford a private investigator, so when the Supernaturalists called —”

“Whoa,” Dean interrupted. “Uh, sorry, the, um … supernaturalists?”

“I know to the FBI it’s not exactly orthodox. But these men had answers that no one else had, and I — I owe it to Casey … to listen.”

Sam and Dean exchanged looks, and Alex frowned, puzzled at who the woman was speaking of; no hunters she knew had ever used such a guise. “Now, they,” Sam began, “they brought up cold spots in relations to …”

“Signs of the paranormal, I suppose.” Mrs. Miles gave a small shrug. On a second thought, she added to the brothers, “They’re coming by today to take a look.”

Sam’s lips set in a tight line, and Alex stepped forward to stand at Dean’s side. “And these … these supernaturalists. Did they give you a name?”

“They … they called themselves the Ghostfacers?” Mrs. Miles looked over at Dean when the Winchester coughed in surprise. “I’ve never heard of them, but they said they could help.”

“Yeah, I bet they did.” Dean’s dark word were muttered too quietly for the woman to hear, and he cleared his throat before he spoke up. “Alright. We’re going to go down to the police station and see what they have learned. If you have any questions, or if anything happens, feel free to give us a call.
We’ll be in contact.”

Alex followed the brothers down the stairs and out the front door. “Ghostfacers?” she repeated as the door swung closed behind them. “As in ‘Ghost! Ghostfacers!’? I totally forgot about those guys.” She was surprised to find both Winchesters staring down at her, and her eyes narrowed. “What?”

“You're telling me you couldn't remember details about the damn apocalypse, but you still know that?”

Alex shrugged, defensive against Dean's tone. “Maybe. I — It's catchy.” She climbed into the back seat of the Impala before adding, “But we're definitely talking about those people? I thought they got out of the business once that one gay dude died.” The brothers exchanged looks once more, and she frowned. “Guys. What?”

“Forget it.” Dean started the car and guided it down the road. “Ann said they weren't coming until later, right? Let's grab a bite, swing by the station, and wait for them to roll into town.”

“Yeah, sounds good to me,” Alex agreed as the Impala sped across an intersection. “It shouldn't be hard to find them in a town this size. I mean, there's probably, what? One motel within ten miles?”

She chuckled, but neither of the Winchesters noticed. They were both staring at a parking lot of a diner, and Alex followed their gazes to a large, white van. Dean parked the Impala on the curb and killed the engine, and with a frown of confusion, Alex followed them up to the van. A skull was painted in black on the side, and beside it were black, bold letters that spelled out ‘GHOSTFACERS.’ “Son of a bitch.” Dean muttered the curse under his breath, and he led his way into the diner.

Two men sat in a booth off to the right; one ginger with a short, stylish beard, and the other scrawny and clean-shaven. Both were deep in conversation as they stared down at their phones. “Yeah,” one was saying. “Uh, it — it could a platonic … arm that's touching her.”

Dean and Sam marched across the room and slid into the booth beside them, effectively boxing them in, and Alex pulled up a wooden chair, straddling it as she looked between the two men.

The bearded man glared at Dean across from him. “Ah, the Winchesters,” he said, voice laced with sarcasm. “Yay.”

“Says nobody,” his partner added in, and the man added, “Ever.”

“All right, shut up and listen.” Dean's voice was low and dangerous, but the Ghostfacers simply rolled their eyes. “This is how it's gonna go. You two clowns are gonna get into that mystery machine outside, and you're gonna leave town or I'm gonna put holes in your knees.”

“Can I get you guys anything?” A tall waiter approached, looking down at the five of them. “Something, uh —”

“I think we'll just take the bill, thanks.” Dean waved him away, turning back to the two men. Behind her, Alex heard the harsh criticism of the manager to the waitress who had just spoken to them, and she turned her head briefly to watch him rebuke the young man on his work, but after a second she turned back, more interested in the pair before her.

“First of all,” the man beside Sam was saying, “you guys don’t scare us,” and his bearded friend chimed in, “Not at all.” Alex rolled her eyes, and the first man lifted his shirt to reveal a mini pistol. “Say hola to my little pistola.”
Alex scoffed, drawing the men’s attention to her. “Is that supposed to be impressive? Because mine is bigger.” She pointed down towards her hip where her own Colt sat snugly against her side, and her hand dropped down to rest on the grip.

“Yeah, well… size isn't everything, you know.”

“Only people with small guns say that.” Alex returned her hand to the table, smirking as Dean let out a low, single chuckle of amusement. His approval spurred her on, and she asked, “Okay, Larry and Curly. Why are you here?”

The two Ghostfacers scoffed. “Uh, that's not our names. I'm Harry.” The dark-haired man motioned to his bearded compatriot. “This is Ed. And who are you? I didn't know the Winchesters were picking up strays.”

He and Ed exchanged fist bumps, pleased with his wit, and the young hunter rolled her eyes. “Alex. Ex-angel. Nice to meet you. Get out of town.”

“Ex-angel? You mean like, like a …” Harry trailed off, and he and Ed exchanged looks of surprise and confusion before both scoffed, and Alex narrowed her eyes angrily. “You know what? Look. Whether you guys like it or not, we are handling this situation.”

Ed nodded. “Yup.”

“Really?” Dean frowned when Ed hummed in agreement, and he snapped, “Because I see a couple of fame whores who are pointing their cameras at a mom who just lost their kid.”

Both Ghostfacers frowned at Dean’s harsh implications. “Guys,” Ed began with a deep breath, “we are investigators, and we have every right —”

“No.” Dean cut him off. “No, you don’t. You know why? ‘Cause you’re just gonna get in our way.”

“Or get somebody else killed,” Sam added, and even Alex widened her eyes at the younger Winchester’s brazen comment.

“That’s right,” his brother agreed. “So, you can either walk out of here … or crawl.” His hand moved downwards towards his gun, his threat painfully clear. “Up to you.”

“Oh my God, Menudo.” Harry’s head tipped back in exasperation, completely unfazed by the sharp and pointed words. “Will you guys relax? We know what we’re doing.” His companion gave a hearty agreement, and the two exchanged pleased looks.

Dean, however, remained skeptical. “Really? And what about the rest of the Bad News Bears, huh? Where’s the — where’s the fat one?” He looked around the diner, and Alex followed his gaze, but there was no one nearby fitting his description. “And — and the girl? There was a girl, right?” He looked at Sam, and his brother gave a nod.

“They —” Ed began, but he cut off, glancing at Harry. “We dropped them,” he finally said. “They were — they were dead weight.”

“Well t-they’re still alive,” Harry quickly added.

Ed’s eyes went wide as he realized what his words had accidentally implied. “They’re — no, they’re still alive,” he wholeheartedly agreed.

“I see.” Dean didn’t look wholly convinced. “So, it’s just the, uh, the dumpy duo, then. Well, that’s
great. So here’s the deal.” His voice hardened once again. “A ghost … will land you two dead in
five seconds flat.”

“A ghost?” Harry chuckled, glee in his eyes as he stared at the two Winchesters. “Oh. They think it’s
a ghost. It’s so not a ghost.” He grinned over at Ed, who agreed with a loud, “No.”

Alex pursed her lips, not fond of their mockery. “Okay, hotshots,” she snapped, leaning forward to
glare at the two. “We’ll bite. What exactly do you think we’re dealing with?”

“Can I — can I do it this time?” Harry looked over at Ed, and when the bearded man nodded, he
grinned, turning back to Sam and Dean. “Okay. I’ve waited all my life for this. Amazon me,
bitches.”

Dean’s eyes darkened, his face twisted beyond annoyance. “I will shoot you,” he retorted. “Bitches.”

Sam cleared his throat, sensing that his brother was at the end of his rope. “Like we were saying, you
were just going, right? Great.” He got up, and Alex pushed the chair back as she rose to her feet, the
chair legs scraping loudly against the floor.

“Good talk.” Dean stormed out, and Alex and Sam followed, pushing their way through the doors
and out towards the Impala. “Son of a bitch.” The Winchester kicked at a rock as he made his way
over to his car, shaking his head in disgust. “I swear if they’re not out of here by tonight, I’m
shooting them.”

Sam and Alex exchanged looks, and the young hunter pulled open the door to the backseat. “Whoa.
That seems a bit harsh … maybe.” Her eyes met Dean’s in the rearview mirror, and she quickly
looked away. “Sorry. Forget I said anything.” Dean threw the car into drive, and Alex reached for
her seatbelt as they drove away.

“U

h … Dean?” Sam’s voice had Alex looking up, shoving the last of her folded clothes into her bag
that sat on the motel bed. They had returned to their room after grabbing a quick lunch, and Sam had
made a beeline for the table the second they had stepped across the threshold.

“Yeah?” Dean shrugged off his suit coat and rolled up the sleeves of his oxford as he meandered
closer to his brother, head tipped in curiosity.

Sam looked up from his laptop, a look of shock and barely-disguised horror etched into his face. “Ed
and Harry wrote a book. Yeah,” he added at Dean’s noise of surprise. “Uh, ‘The Skinny on
Thinman,’ by America’s foremost supernaturalists.”

“What the hell’s a Thinman?” Dean grumbled as he sat down across from his brother, and Alex
hurried across the room to see what Sam meant.

“I don’t know.” Sam was looking down at a supernatural forum, where a black-and-white picture of
a runner was on display. In the background stood a tall, faceless man in a black suit, barely hidden
from view. “Whoa. Check that out, though. That does kind of look like whatever was behind Casey
Miles, right?”

He turned the laptop around so his brother could see, and Dean studied it for a second before he
scoffed. “Or Garth if somebody shaved his face off,” he added. “Big whoop.”

Sam ignored Dean’s crack. “Here we go. Uh, Thinman. An urban legend started on the world wide
web, lurks in the background of his victims lives until he’s ready to kill them.”
“Yeah, because everything started on the internet is true.” Dean rolled his eyes before rolling up a sleeve that had slipped down as he looked around the room. He stood up and made his way to the fridge. “Like, uh, oh, the shark attacking a helicopter — they write a book on that one too?”

Alex laughed, but Sam just shook his head, lips pursed to find his brother not taking things seriously. “Dude, real or not, thousands of people have posted to this site. It’s like the Thinman is the new Bigfoot or something.”

“Oh, or Thinman is a ghost with a brand name.” Dean pulled out a lukewarm beer, cracking it open with a shrug.

Sam leaned back in his chair, frowning as he met his brother’s eyes. “You saying that cause you really think its a ghost or because you don’t like the Ghostfacers?” he asked.

Dean echoed his brother frown, and he looked over at Alex; the young hunter gave a small shrug. “I mean,” she began, “we did find EMF in Casey’s room … but that’s not exactly proof, Dean. A lot of things can create EMF.”

“Exactly.” Sam gave her an appreciative nod. “Like how the house was right next door to power lines, which can affect the read.”

“A girl died in a locked room, Sam.” Dean crossed the floor in two steps and sat down across from his brother. “Spells ‘ghost’ right there.”

“Maybe it got there before it was locked up,” Sam countered, and Dean scoffed. “Who knows, Dean? But how can people all over the world see the same ghost? Spirits don’t exactly hop around.”

“I know that. But right now, the veil is all kinds of screwed, okay? Ghosts could be popping up anywhere.”

Sam looked over at Alex, hoping for help, but the ex-angel shrugged, unopinionated and unsure who she should side with. “Yeah, but Dean,” he tried, “Thinman sightings date back a couple years. The veil’s only been a problem for, what, the last six months?”

Dean reached down and pulled his laptop out of his bag, placing onto the table with a thud. “Well, you know, people still see Elvis all over the damn place,” he muttered as he logged on, pausing to look up as the computer thought. “Look, all I’m saying is those douche-wheels ain’t experts on crap.”

“And we’re not saying that they are,” Alex agreed. “We’re just … even blind squirrels are right twice a day, you know?” Dean grunted, and she leaned closer, trying to catch a glimpse of his screen. “What are you doing?”

“I’m checking the local deaths to see if there’s any candidates for ghosts.” Dean’s keyboard clicked under his fingertips, and Alex drummed her nails on the tabletops as she looked over at Sam with a shrug. The Winchester sighed, turning back to his own computer, and Alex got to her feet to retrieve her own which was still laying on the motel bed. She dropped down on the mattress and pulled her laptop open, and all of Bobby’s notes popped up, one after another, until he desktop was hidden from view.

She siphoned through the tabs, settling on one full of her own personal comments, and her face furrowed as she stared at the ancient runes Bobby had haphazardly translated. “Okay.” Dean broke the silence, and Alex glanced up, hastily closing her laptop as Dean looked between her and his brother. “All right, over the past six months, there have been three unnatural deaths in Springdale,
“Okay, that's not exactly a recipe for a vengeful spirit.” Sam glanced down at his own computer screen, and he cleared his throat. “There have been a bunch of unexplained deaths pinned on Thinman,” he began, scrolling down through his research. “Um, a vic dies, then, a couple weeks later, a photo pops up of the vic with Thinman photobombing.”

“So, Thinman's stalking folks?” Dean scoffed at the idea, but his tone left room for persuasion.

“According to the lore, yeah.” Alex spoke up, eager to get a word in before the conversation developed far past her knowledge.

“According to the idiots,” Dean countered with a glance back at her, an arm slung over the back of his chair. “How come none of these vics pinged our radar?”

Sam shrugged. “I'm pretty sure the mysterious deaths can be chalked up to non-supernatural causes. That and, honestly, most of these photos look pretty fake.” He turned his laptop so Dean could see, and Alex got up to join them, curious at the images Sam had discovered.

He turned it away before Alex could see, and Dean grunted in suspicion. “Even Casey's?”

“Except Casey's.” Sam pulled up Casey's selfie, and Alex leaned up against his chair as she stared down at the pale, faceless monstrosity in the shadows. “Casey’s photo wasn't doctored. Whatever was behind her was really there.”

“Okay, well, that doesn't make any sense. I mean, how could something be both real and fake at the same time?”

“Guys. It's got to be a Tulpa.” Alex sank down into her chair. “Internet-rumor-come-to-life pretty much fits the profile.” She frowned as she looked up at Sam. “Those things are damn near impossible to kill, though, right?”

“Not always, but yeah, they can be tricky.” Sam shrugged as he nodded to his brother. “Could be a Tulpa, yeah.”

“Maybe.” Dean echoed his brother's shrug. “Okay, so the last thing Casey did was take a photo on her phone. How did that photo end up online?”

“No clue.” Sam typed something into his search bar, a frown upon his face. “It was originally posted to a Thinman fan forum, but the I.P. address was blocked.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait.” Dean looked up, his green eyes wide with surprise and disgust. “This thing has fan?” Alex and Sam exchanged glances, and the Winchester’s shoulders fell. “Of course it does. Okay, well, then somebody wanted this photo on the internet, and I'm guessing that the ghost didn't hop online to post it.”

“Well, who would have posted it?” Alex looked over at Sam, her head tipping. “Maybe one of Casey’s friends? Or did she maybe post it to Facebook or something?” She frowned, shaking her head. “No. She would have noticed him in the background. She would have freaked out and called the cops, not posted to social media.”

“Well, I guess we could head down to the station.” Sam closed his laptop and rose to his feet, reaching for his jacket that hung on his chair. “If we can take a look at her phone, then we can find out where the photo went.”
“Sounds good to me.” Dean fished the Impala’s keys out of his pocket and strode towards the door. “Maybe the sheriff will be able to shed some light on this whole thing.” He disappeared out into the street, and with a shrug, Sam and Alex followed.

The police station was small and quaint, located on the corner of the town’s main street. Inside, the building was as quiet as the town, and Alex looked around for any sign of the staff. The only person beside the hunters was a man standing behind the desk, his attention on his desktop. He looked up when the door closed behind them, and he straightened up, surprised at the strange visitors. “Hello. How can I help you?”

“Hi. Agents Malloy, Roth, and Hudson.” Sam motioned to himself and his companions in turn, flashing his fake badge before he shoved it back into his jacket pocket. “We’re in town regarding the death of Casey Miles. You are ..?”

“Sheriff Deputy Tom Norwood.” The man extended a hand towards Sam. “I didn’t realize the FBI was involved in something like this.”

“We like to be thorough. Can we see the case files?” Norwood nodded and disappeared around the corner, and Dean looked around the empty police station. “Is the, uh, sheriff around?” he asked when the deputy returned with the box in hand. “There’s a couple questions we’d like to ask him.”

“Uh, sorry to disappoint.” Tom Norwood set the box down on the counter and slid it over to the Winchesters. “Sheriff’s on a hunting trip. But, uh, I appreciate you agents being here. I could use all the help I can get.”

Sam opened up the box and dug inside, and Alex watched as a frown grew across his face as he pulled out Casey’s white phone. “Wait a second, Was this cracked when you found it?” Sam turned the phone so everyone could see, showing off how the screen was shattered beyond repair.

“Yeah, man. Maybe she dropped it?” Deputy Norwood shrugged, not finding the same significance in the destruction. “911 call went dead at 11:59.”

“Wait, what time was the photo posted?” Dean muttered to his brother, turning away slightly so the sheriff couldn’t hear.

“Around 2:00 a.m,” Sam responded.

“But the coroner has the death at midnight.” Dean’s eyes shone with confusion. “How could she have posted the photo from her phone?” He looked down at Alex, but the young hunter could only shrug. “That — that's impossible.”

“Or … supernatural.” Norwood spoke up, drawing all three’s attention onto him.

“What?” Dean asked, while Sam quickly added, “Why would you say that?”

The deputy shrugged again. “A couple fellas came by, uh, asking questions about the girl's death, suggested they might be able to help,” he explained. “They, uh, gave me a book they wrote about, um …”

“Thinman?” Dean’s voice was flat, and Norwood snapped his fingers together at the name.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Just …” He trailed off as Dean turned around and walked away, his shoulders hunched in fury, and the deputy turned his attention onto Sam and Alex. “Not a fan?”
“You could say that.” Alex’s phone rang, and the ex-angel jumped to answer it. “Excuse me. One of
two contacts.” She met Sam’s gaze, and the hunter nodded in understanding. Alex hurried towards
the door, pressing her phone up against her ear. “Cas?” The name came out as hiss as she pushed her
way outside. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Puzzlement lined the seraph’s voice. “How are you?”

“Dandy. Just … chilling with the Winchesters.” Alex leaned up against the Impala, her eyes
watching as Dean paced outside of the station. “I haven’t heard from you in days; you’ve been
getting my texts, right?”

“Yes. I’m sorry; I’ve been extremely busy as of late. I found Bartholomew — well, he found me.
But he’s dead, and I think …” Castiel trailed off momentarily. “I think some of his followers now
expect me to lead.”

“Lead?” Alex repeated. “Lead where? Lead a war against the other factions?”

“No.” The seraph’s voice was firm. “I won’t condone the death of any more angels.” His tone
softened, and he added, “They’re expecting me to lead them back to heaven.”

“Okay, and … that’s bad?” Alex leaned forward. “Cas, if Metatron is holed up in heaven, maybe
you’re going to need an army to get in. Who knows if he’s managed to recruit anyone; even if he
hasn’t, he’s sly. Maybe having help isn’t a bad idea.”

Silence followed her words, and Alex heard Castiel sigh. “Perhaps,” he finally said. “But that
remains to be seen. How are you? Have you had any more contact with Crowley?”

“No, not for a while now.” Alex frowned, not found of the change in topic. “It’s unusual, but I’m
sure as hell not complaining. Like I said, I’m with Sam and Dean. We’re in Washington working a
case.” She lowered her voice into a hushed murmur as Dean walked past. “I figure if you-know-who
has me running ‘errands,’ I may as well keep my skills sharp in the meanwhile,” she explained.

The displeasure in his voice was clear, but Castiel relented. “You’re safer now that you have grace,”
he reluctantly agreed, and Alex guiltily bit her tongue to keep herself from correcting his lie. “And
you’re in less danger with them than by yourself. Promise me you’ll be careful.”

“Of course. I always am. And you too, okay? I’m sure there’s still a ton of angels out for your
blood.”

“I’m doing what I have to do to retrieve our grace. Any danger will be justified by freeing your
soul.” There was a noise from Castiel’s end, a voice, and the seraph cleared his throat. “I should go. I
will call you when I get the chance. I love you.”

The station door opened, and Sam stepped out, carrying copies of the case files. “Yeah, I love you
too. Stay safe, Cas.” Alex hung up, shoving her phone deep into her pocket before she pulled open
the Impala door so the Winchester could place the files down. “Got it?”

“Yeah. The deputy doesn’t know much.” Sam straightened up and closed the door. “That was Cas?
How is he?”

“He’s doing fine.” Alex waved Dean over and circled around to her door. “He’s safe, for the
moment being, but not much closer to finding Metatron. How about we grab some dinner?” she
suggested to the brothers. “I could eat.”

“Sounds good to me.” Dean’s words were still muttered, but he climbed into the car. Sam and Alex
followed, and the Impala purred to life and drove away.

The break of day brought about a new body. Alex followed Sam out of the Impala, frowning as she looked towards the diner they had visited only a day before. “Here?” She reached into her pocket to make sure her identification was there as she glanced towards the line of police cars. “Man, this town really is small.”

She stepped inside the diner behind Dean, watching as the Winchester immediately stiffened at the sight of the two, scrawny ghost hunters in the corner near a sheet-covered body. The clean-shaven one — Harry — was holding a camera. “Agents, thanks for coming.” Deputy Norwood hurried over to then, his relief hidden by a sense of professionalism.

Dean nodded his head in the direction of the Ghostfacers, the displeasure in his voice clear. “What are those two crapshoots doing here?”

The deputy shrugged. “I figured it wouldn’t hurt to go a little ‘Medium,’ you know?” he joked, but his humor faltered when he saw their faces. “Uh … two counties over, folks were combing the place for a poor little dead boy back in August of last year,” he hurriedly explained. “The cops let a psychic do her thing, shish, bang, boom — found the body a day later.”

“Uh-huh. Excuse me.” Dean tapped Alex on her shoulder, and the girl followed him over to the two men. Dean stepped forward, slapping Harry hard on the back with a sharp, “Hey!” The two Ghostfacers let out cries of surprise, and Dean crossed his arms, voice low and sharp. “I thought I told you to beat it.”

Harry scowled as he regained his composure. “Oh, well, what are you going to do?” he challenged. “You gonna out me, ‘agent’?” His fingers came up, forming air quotes around his words, and Alex narrowed her eyes.

Dean held up his hands, backing off slightly at the clear threat, but he didn’t give up completely. “Okay, look, playing paparazzi at a crime scene — who does that help but yourselves?”

“The bloggers, Dean,” Harry retorted, “the believers — everyone who needs just a little proof to know that Thinman is out there.”

“See.” Alex turned to Dean. “A ton of fans from all across the world? Throw in the right Tibetan symbol … Sounds like a Tulpa to me.”

Ed scoffed, rolling his eyes as he shook his head. “Right. Because thousands of people can agree that the Thinman is any one thing. The lore changes blog to blog. He’s not a Tulpa.”

Alex opened her mouth to protest, but Dean beat her to the punch. “Okay, all right. All right.” His voice rose in anger. “Right here, right now, cut the crap. Do either you actually know what the Thinman is?”

“No,” Ed deadpanned. “We just play Supernaturalists on TV.”

“We have no idea what we’re doing,” Harry agreed before he gave a heavy roll of his eyes. “Of course we do!”

Ed cleared his throat, and his voice took on a dark, dramatic tone as he took a step forward, eyes glittering with joy at knowing something the Winchester didn’t. “Thinman is part man, part tree.”
“Some people believe that he emerged from the nightmare of an autistic boy.”

Dean rolled his eyes, cutting off Harry’s even more dramatic continuation. “All right, so you guys have no idea.”

“Fellas, you’ll want to see this.” Deputy Norwood’s voice rose above their bickering, and Alex quickly hurried over to the counter to stand by Sam’s side.

The security footage from last night was up on the screen, and Sam motioned towards it as Dean and the Ghostfacers crowded in. “Alright, check this out.”

The tape played, showing a man, the victim, inside his office where they now stood. The camera switched to the parking lot, and a figured passed in the bottom corner, a flash of white against the dark. The camera flipped back, and the figure was in the room, standing behind the restaurant manager. A knife glinted as it swung upwards, gliding across the man’s pale throat. He collapsed, dead, and Sam stopped the tape.

“Whoa.” The word left Ed and Harry’s mouth simultaneously, their eyes wide at the actual murder they had witnessed.

None of hunters, however, were phased. “Alright,” Dean said, leaning forward, “so how did he jump from the parking lot to the diner? The doors were locked?” he asked the deputy.

“The footage shows Trey locked them ten minutes before,” Norwood agreed, and Sam nodded. “Locked, not locked, it doesn’t matter.” Harry’s voice shook slightly, but he reeled it back in as he looked at his partner. “Everyone knows Thinman can teleport.”

“I didn’t even get a blip on my EMF.”

Dean looked over at Ed. “So, maybe it’s not a ghost,” he gruffly conceded.

Deputy Norwood glanced up at the Winchester in surprise. “You Feds believers now?” he asked, his eyes moving from Dean over to Sam.

All three ignored him, and Ed took a step back. “Okay, uh … we’re gonna go. Uh, good work, deputy, agents.” He nodded to them in turn before slapping Harry on the arm. “Let’s go. Let’s go, man.”

Alex watched the two Ghostfacers hurry away before she turned back to the tape. “Can you play that through one more time?” She watched as the Thinman appeared back on the screen, and her lips turned down slightly in a frown. “It doesn’t look like a ghost,” she murmured up to the brothers, stepping back and waving them closer so the deputy couldn’t hear. “It looks physical. There’s no disturbances in the tape. The thing doesn’t have eyes, but … shifter? Maybe? I have absolutely no idea.”

“Yeah, I don’t know either.” Dean cast a glare towards the door where the Ghostfacers had disappeared through before shaking his head. “Alright, let’s get going. There’s nothing else here.” He stalked off towards the exit, and with one last glance back at the crime scene, Alex followed.

The door to the motel opened, and Alex looked up with a grin to see Dean enter, carrying two white take-out bags. “Dinner’s served,” he grumbled, dropping the bags onto the table and shrugging off his jacket. “What did I miss?”
“Nothing.” Alex got up off of the bed and crossed over to the table, sinking down into her seat. “We’ve just been waiting for you. Both Sam and I are stumped.” She jerked a thumb back towards the bathroom door that hid the taller Winchester. “He’s taking a shower to clear his head. Should be almost done by now, though. Hey, Sam!” she added, raising her voice. “Food’s here.”

“Huh.” Dean reached into the bags to pull out the fries. “Sounds productive.” He sat down across from Alex and tossed her a paper-wrapped burger before he unwrapped one for himself.

“Hey.” The bathroom door opened, and Sam stepped out, dressed in jeans and a light-grey shirt. His eyes swept over the food before a frown settled upon his face. “Dude. Again?”

“What? They’re fucking good.” Dean took a bite of his hamburger with a shrug. “Got you one, too.” He pointed to the third burger that sat at the empty chair. “So. Any news on anything?”

“Nope. I was on the phone with Deputy Norwood. Still no sign of of the sheriff, and they have no leads on anything related to either Casey’s or Trey’s murder.” Sam unfolded the white paper, revealing his food before he looked over at Dean. “Oh, and, uh, still no sign of Crowley or Gadreel. They’re still both far off the grid.”

“Excuse me.” Alex rose to her feet, jerking her head towards the bathroom. “Be right back.” She hurried across the room and into the bathroom, closing and locking the door behind her; any discussion involving Crowley was not one she wanted to have.

“You still think they’re working together?” Alex could hear Sam’s skeptical voice as she pressed her ear up against the door. “Dude, I’ve told you a million times. That’s ridiculous.” Dean started to respond, but Sam quickly cut him off. “No. Dude, I don’t want to hear it, okay? You’ve got nothing to back it up.”

“You don’t think it’s weird that Crowley suddenly breaks free from the bunker?” Dean let out a loud sigh. “It’s … it’s a gut feeling, alright? Something doesn’t feel right.”

“No. You know what isn’t right? How you’ve been second guessing her ever since she chose being with Cas over hunting with us. Yeah, sure, it’s a little weird Crowley escaped, but he’s gone, okay? So just let it go. This is Alex we’re talking about. We’ve known her for years — the real her.” Sam cut off as Alex reopened the door, and the conversation immediately died. “Okay.” Sam cleared his throat, dropping his gaze to his food as he quickly changed the topic. “Just, uh, just grasping at straws here, but when I think ‘teleport,’ I think crossroads demon.”

Alex’s met Dean’s gaze, unsurprised to find frustration and skepticism in its depths, but he reluctantly followed Sam’s lead. “Mm. Demon that likes to stab and watch YouTube,” he scoffed with a shake of his head. “Why not?”

Dean’s words seemed to spark a memory in Sam, because the younger Winchester raised his head. “Oh,” he said, “by the way, speaking of which, the video of, uh, Trey getting knifed is already online. It has like, two thousand views.” He reached over his food to opened up his laptop so Dean could see the video posted on a Thinman forum. “It’s like somebody wants people to see Thinman in action.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “It’s ‘cause people will watch ‘cause people are sick,” he muttered.

“And when did ‘viral’ go from that baby chimp falling out of a tree to killer ‘candid camera’?” Sam added, closing his laptop with a shake of his head.

“You know what video would have gone viral if we still had it?” Dean leaned back in his chair, a
broad smile across his face. “When you were five and you got dressed up as Batman and you jumped off the shed ‘cause you thought you could fly.”

“After you jumped first,” Sam retorted with a grin, and Alex leaned forward, unfamiliar with the story being told.

Dean scoffed. “Hey. I was nine, and I was dressed up like superman, okay? Everybody knows that Batman can’t fly.”

“Well, I didn’t know that. I broke my arm.”

“I know you did.” Dean’s head tipped back as he laughed at the memory. “Man, I drove you to the E.R. On my handlebars.” His voice grew quieter. “Hm. Good times.” His eyes glazed over slightly as he thought back, only to be shaken out of it by a loud and hurried knock on the door. The two brothers exchanged looks, and Alex reached back, fingers wrapping around the grip of her gun. She watched as Dean did the same, slowly getting to his feet as he drew his weapon, but before he could answer it, the door flew open and Ed came barging in. Dean’s shoulders fell in exasperation, and his grip on his gun relaxed. “Come on in.”

Ed didn’t seem to notice the Winchester’s firearm. “I got to tell you guys something important,” he began, his voice rushed and breathless, “and then the case is yours.”

Sam rose to his feet, and Alex followed, stuffing two fries in her mouth as she crossed over to stand beside Dean. “Okay,” she mumbled around her mouthful. “Shoot. What’s so damn important?” She motioned to the bed in case the Ghostfacer wanted to sit down and catch his breath, and the man gladly accepted.

“Alright, so here’s the thing. Either you bleed Ghostfacers red or you don’t. If Spruce wanted to start a startup and Maggie’s heart was in the roller derby, who am I to stop them? But Harry —” Ed’s face grew red, and his gaze fell to his lap. “I-I couldn’t let him give in to his girl. I mean, she — she called the Ghostfacers stupid. Stupid!” He looked up into Dean’s face. “Can you believe that?” He watched as the two brothers exchanged looks, and he added, “I-I don’t care how much money her daddy’s hedge fund has. I just couldn’t watch Harry become a corporate stooge.”

Dean frowned, his patience wearing thin with the Ghostfacer’s ramblings. “Okay, this all sounds like sad times at Bitchmont High,” he snapped. “What does this have to do with the case?”

Ed looked over at him, mouth slightly agape at the Winchester’s lack of sympathy for his trying tale. “Harry was gonna leave, so I needed to give him a reason to stay. I-I made up Thinman,” he stuttered out.

“You … you what?” Alex blinked back shock as she looked between Sam and Dean, unsurprised to find it mirrored upon their faces.

Ed’s face flushed bright red, and he looked down at his hands in his lap. Recovered from his surprise, Dean crossed his arms and asked, “So you’re saying that this crap is actually crap?” Triumph gleamed in his eyes as he looked over at his brother.

Ed shrugged. “One old photo of a butler, a lot of Photoshop later, and I posted on one of those horror forums under ‘anonymous.’ And it blew up. Yeah.” He watched as Sam scowled, and he weakly defended, “I only faked one case for us, and then we’re packing up to go home when somebody posted a sighting of Thinman, so … we went after it, and that’s how Thinman became a crowdsourced legend. Look, we were at the front of it. It felt like something. It — it was so awesome to have a following, and Harry — he was just — he was so into it.”
Sam shook his head. “Ed, you have to tell him.”

“You don’t get it.” Ed jumped to his feet, and for a brief second, fierce indignant flashed across his face. “We were the Thinman guys. Without the Thinman, we’re just … guys— just — we’re just puffs.” He sank down onto the bed, falling silent.

_Puffs? “What?”_ Alex narrowed her eyes, confused, and Sam and Dean echoed her.

No explanation came, and Ed just shook his head. “If I tell Harry,” he said instead, “he’s gonna leave the Ghostfacers.”

“Listen, if you don’t tell him, he’s gonna leave anyways.” Sam’s voice grew surprisingly insistent, and Alex cast him a glance out of the corner of her eye. “Trust me here. Secrets ruin relationships.”

Guilt pulsed through the ex-angel’s chest, and she almost looked away before she steeled herself. No. Sam couldn’t be talking about her; he had no reason to actually suspect anything. She looked over at Dean, surprised to find him staring at his brother, face twisted in a fleeting grimace as if he had just been stung, and some of her guilt faded away. Maybe she wasn’t the subject of the Winchester’s pointed jab.

Ed, on the other hand, seemed completely oblivious to the hidden meaning behind Sam’s words. “Okay,” he reluctantly agreed, “well, I’ll just tell him when the time is right.”

Dean crossed his arms as he turned back to the supernaturalist. “Time’s right now, chief.”

“Well, he's — he's not here.” Ed’s cheeks flushed again as he glanced towards the closed door and admitted, “Uh, he's — he's out in the woods, uh, searching for Thinman.”

Sam’s face darkened, and he looked back at Alex. “Okay,” he started, turning back to Ed with a shark voice, “because Thinman, or whatever the hell this thing is, has killed two people, and now Harry is in the woods alone.”

“Well, actually, it’s more like ‘wood,’ ” Ed defended, “um, ‘cause I dropped him off by some trees behind a grocery store.” He watched as Dean and Sam exchanged unamused glances, and he forced a small chuckle. “Guys, come on. He’s going to be fine. Guys?”

Sam and Dean didn’t listen, already halfway out the door, and Alex motioned Ed out after them before she followed, slamming the door behind her and sprinting over to the Impala. The brothers were already in, and Alex slid into the backseat. “Which store?” she asked as Ed crawled in beside her.

From the front seat, Dean snorted. “There’s only one in town,” he retorted before Ed could respond, and the Impala roared to life. It tore down the street, tires screeching as it turned the corner.

The grocery store came into view, lit by the streetlights. A figure appeared under the iridescent lights, clutching his side as he stumbled out into the road, and tires squealed as Dean slammed down on the brakes.

The car door flew open before Alex could even process the stranger in front of them, and her feet hit the pavement seconds before Sam’s. “Harry?” Ed’s cry rang through the air as he ran towards his friend, who was clutching his bloody side as he stared at the hunters in shock and alarm. Harry took one step, but his legs buckled from under him; if it hadn’t been for Sam and Dean catching his fall, he surely would have hit the ground.
“Get him to the car.” Alex hurried back to open the back door, holding it open so Sam and Dean could help the half-conscious man into the backseat. “Harry?” She put a hand on his shoulder, steadying him as she looked down at his bloodstained shirt. “It doesn’t look to bad,” she reported to the Winchesters, and Harry began to stir beneath her touch. “I think we can patch it up here.” She carefully peeled back the torn shirt to examine the skin. “Knife wound,” she reported. “Not deep.” Above her, Harry groaned, and the ex-angel took a step back. “We’ll let Sam handle it,” she told him. “He’s the best with a needle.”

The trunk of the Impala opened and closed, and she looked over her shoulder to see Dean clicking on a flashlight. “Pip.” He motioned Alex after him, and she left the two Ghostfacers with Sam as she hurried over to stand at his side. “With me. Maybe whoever did this is still around.”

“Okay. One second.” Alex dug around inside of the trunk, and her fingers closed around one of the angel blades. The metal was cold and foreign in her hands, so different from when her grace had made it feel like a living extension of her hand, and the ex-angel twisted it in her grasp before she turned back to Dean. “This thing should kill whatever’s out there, Thinman or not.”

“Sam.” Dean waved his brother closer, and he dropped his voice so the Ghostfacers couldn’t hear. “We’re going after whatever did that. We’ll be back soon.”

“Yeah.” Sam nodded, and Alex followed Dean off into the woods. Her eyes strained against the darkness as they passed through the trees, and the ex-angel stuck close to the Winchester and his flashlight.

“Three victims in three days?” Alex paused to peer into the woods, but they remained quiet and still. “What is this thing?”

Dean didn’t respond, and Alex turned her gaze back to him. “Blood.” The Winchester pointed down at the ground beside which he was kneeling. He rose back to his feet, wiping his hands off on his jeans. “There’s footprints going this way.” He led the way through some undergrowth to a dirt road, and Alex gripped her weapon tighter as she followed him. “Hey.”

The Winchester pointed to the road, and Alex tipped her head as she caught sight of the single set of tire tracks in the mud. “A car?” She looked up at Dean. “You think … you think it belongs to Thinman?”

Dean chuckled at the idea. “Maybe. Here.” He held out the flashlight to Alex, reaching into his pocket for his phone. “If we’re lucky we can match the tracks.” Alex held the light steady as the Winchester snapped a few pictures of the muddy tire tracks. “Anything else out here?”

“No idea.” Alex shrugged. “My grace is gone, so I know about as much as you.” She shone the flashlight around through the dark, peering through the trees. “But I don’t see anything. Whatever attacked Harry seems to be gone.”

“Alright. Let’s get back.” Dean took the flashlight back and led the way through the thin line of trees to where Sam, Harry, and Ed were standing around the Impala. Harry was on his feet, still clutching his side, but color had returned to his cheeks. “Some fresh tire tracks back over there,” Dean said as Sam turned to face them. “We took some photos.”

“What for?” Harry asked, and Dean’s gaze flickered over to him.

“Because that car might belong to whoever knifed you,” he retorted sharply,

“Well, whoever cut me was Thinman, and Thinman doesn’t drive!” Harry’s voice rose in anger and
frustration, and he looked between the three hunters. “It was Thinman, jackass! I shouldn’t have to connect the dots for you guys. I figured, you know, you’re both intelligent, m-maybe.” The Ghostfacer’s anger dwindled slightly as he stuttered, and Alex watched as both Sam and Dean gave Ed a pointed look.

“Um, maybe we should get back to the motel,” Alex suggested, glancing between Ed’s flushed face and Harry’s pale one. “Before that thing comes back or Harry here passes out. Okay?” She looked up at Dean for affirmation, and the Winchester agreed with a curt nod.

“Yeah. Sure.” Dean fished the keys out of his pockets. “Get in the car, guys.”

Alex leaned up against the brick wall, listening as the Ghostfacers argued within the room. She couldn’t make out words from behind the closed doors, but the raised voices and sharp words made it clear that Harry wasn’t taking Ed’s confession very well.

The door opened, and Ed stepped through, his head hung in dismay. “Hey.” Sam’s voice came from down the hallway, and Ed looked up towards the source. “How’d it go?”

“It, um, went, uh … um …” Ed trailed off, and he walked off, shaking his head in despondence, and Alex watched him disappear around the corner.

Sam frowned and pushed his way through the door, and Alex followed, curious as to what would ensue inside. “Hey, how’d it go?” The Winchester stopped beside Harry, who looked just as soulful as his partner.

“I just got punched right in the feels.” Harry looked up at the two hunters, his bottom lip trembling, and for a brief second, Alex almost felt sympathetic. “None of this was real, guys. Ed was just pretending, and now he wants me to pretend, like this is just something I could get past.” His shoulders slumped, and he looked back down at the ground.

“I know what you mean.” Sam’s voice was warm and gentle with empathy. “Look, there are things you can forgive, and there are things you can’t.”

“So, which one is this?”

Sam shook his head. “That’s something you got to figure out for yourself.”

There was a knock on the door, and Dean peeked his head through, his gaze moving between Sam and Alex. “Hey,” he called. “Uh, I got a lead on those tire treads, if you want to …” He trailed off, and Alex hurried over to move back into the hall. Sam followed at her heels, leaving Harry to process Sam’s words.

“What’s up?” she asked as Sam closed the door behind them.

“So, the tires were only made for one kind of car,” Dean relayed. “It’s a 1989 Geo Metro. Town this small — there’s only one registered here. Deputy says it belongs to a guy named Roger who works night security down at the mill on the north side of town.”

Sam frowned, and he and Alex exchanged surprised looks. “So, this thing can teleport, but it has a job and car. What are we dealing with?”

“Let’s go find out.” Dean turned around and led the way down the hall and towards the Impala. “If we’re lucky, this son of a bitch will be dead by the end of the night.”
Her head throbbed. Alex’s eyes flickered open, surprised by the darkness, and she let out a low, loud groan. She could hear noises around her, a busy hum, and the sound of something heavy being dragged across the ground. As her senses expanded, she realized that her hands were bound; the cold metal of handcuffs dug harshly into her skin. What had happened? The memories were cold and muddled within her mind, and the ex-angel let her eyes fall closed as they began to come together.

They had arrived at the mill not long after leaving the motel. Alex climbed out of the car to stand beside Sam, one hand going back to check that her gun was securely tucked in her pants while her other hand tightly gripped the handle of her angel blade. “This is the place?” she called back to Dean.

“Yeah.” Dean clicked on his flashlight, a frown on his face as the door to the mill swung open to reveal a short, pudgy figure. Alex stepped forward as she recognized the man; Deputy Norwood. “I thought we said my partners and I would take care of this.”

“Look, guys,” the man began awkwardly, “my boss is AWOL. We don’t have a warrant. My ass is on the line if this thing goes sideways.”

Sam and Dean gave each other a grim, unamused look. “Alright,” Dean eventually had relented. “Just stay back.” He pushed his way past the deputy and into the mill, and Sam and Alex followed. She had barely taken one step over the threshold before a sharp burst of pain flashed across her eyes.

Every past that had been black. Alex opened her eyes, hissing again as she felt the residual pain in her body. “What the hell?” Her eyes adjusted until she could see Deputy Norwood standing beside Dean, who was handcuffed to a wooden chair. “What did you do?” she snapped, raising her voice high above the deputy’s incessant whistling. “Tase us?”

“Bingo.” Tom Norwood barely spared her a look as he stepped away from the Winchester, moving back to where a camera was set up on a tripod. The lens was pointed at Dean, and Alex narrowed her eyes to see that a wooded backdrop was hung from the ceiling.

“So, you’re Thinman, huh?” Dean’s groggy voice signaled his return to consciousness, and his words had Sam stirring. “That would make sense if it didn’t look like you just ate a fat camp.” Alex snorted in harsh amusement, but the deputy simply ignored Dean’s jab and continued to whistle. Dean’s head rolled back. “Oh, God, Sam, make him stop.”

“Hey, so, what’s the deal?” Metal clinked as Sam tugged at his bonds. “What are you, Norwood? You a demon? I mean, how did you teleport back at the diner?”

“Team effort.” The deputy looked up from his work with a grin, and Thinman appeared around the corner. The creature reached up behind its head, and Alex scowled as it pulled off its mask to reveal a tall, thin man with a cold grin.

“You’re shitting me.” Alex tugged angrily at the handcuffs. “You mean there isn’t a monster? Just two douchebags playing Scream?”

“Wait. I know who you are. You’re the busboy from the diner.” Sam narrowed his eyes, and Alex did the same as she remembered the argument that had taken place behind her when they had confronted the Ghostfacers. “So, what, you just wanted to kill your boss?”

Roger let out a low chuckle as he exchanged amused looks with his partner. “Trey was a dick.”
“And what about Casey?” Dean snapped. “What did she do?”

The cold grin didn’t leave the man’s face. “She wouldn’t go out with me, so I set her up with someone else — my knife.”

Tom Norwood’s head tipped back as he let out a loud laugh. “Good one, Rog.”

Dean jerked his head off to the side, and Alex followed his gaze towards the darkest corner of the mill where a body lay half-obscured in the shadows. “I see the sheriff didn’t make it out of town.”

“Well,” the deputy retorted lightly, “he really should have given me the time off I asked for.”

“So you killed him?!” Alex’s voice rose in anger, echoing off of the stone walls, and the two killers’ eyes turned onto her.

“I didn’t kill anyone.” Norwood nodded to his partner. “Roger did. He’s the psycho. I’m the visionary. I don’t blame you for underestimating me,” he added, glaring down at Dean. “Everyone does. Fancy Feds, coming in here, treating me like a paper monkey from the get-go. But I was Thinman the whole time.” His eyes shone with glee. “Do you have any idea how good that felt?”

“No, you sicko!” The ex-angel’s voice dropped into a low, harsh growl. “But you know what does feel good? Trying to decide which of you freaks I’m going to kill first.”

Roger and Tom exchanged looks. “You know what?” Norwood finally said, “I think we’ve had a change in our casting.” He crossed the room to yank Dean out of the chair, and Alex snapped out her protest as Roger pulled her to her feet. A slap across her cheek had her falling silent as she was dropped into the chair, and the ex-angel glared up through the pain.

“You realize what you two jackasses are doing doesn’t make you Thinman,” Dean growled as Norwood shoved him down onto the ground. “It makes you copycat killers.”

“It makes me Thinman,” Roger retorted. “And you’re not telling anyone I’m not, because you’ll be too dead to talk.” He stepped behind Alex out of sight, and she craned her neck back to try and see him.

“Show time,” Tom crowed, stepping away from the Winchesters to stand behind the camera.

“You three are lucky ducks.” Alex could hear Roger moving behind her, and she scowled at his words. “You’re the stars of our best video yet. And when it goes viral, everyone will know Thinman’s real.”

“Your movie’s shit,” Alex spat. “You’ve got me handcuffed to a fucking chair against a half-ass backdrop. No one’s going to buy that.” She jerked her head upwards as she felt the cold chill of a knife up against her throat. “Go ahead.” She jerked angrily at her bonds, tilting her head back to glare at Roger. “Kill me and see how long I stay dead. And by the way — I’m going to kill you first.”

Roger simply chuckled, and his fingers wrapped in the ex-angel’s blonde hair as he jerked her head back. “Wait!” she heard Sam yelled. “No, no, no, don’t!”

His words were cut off by the sound of a door slamming shut, the metallic bang echoing off of the stone walls, and everyone fell silent, staring off into the dark. “Well,” Alex finally asked. “You guys gonna get that?”

Roger stepped away, and Alex pursed her lips as he ripped off a piece of duct tape and roughly...
slapped it over her lips. Norwood did the same to Sam and Dean, and then the two men slunk off into the shadows.

Alex looked over at the two brothers, jiggling her handcuffs in a wordless question. She tugged forcefully, wincing at the pain in her wrists. Sam shook his head, and Alex could hear the faint metallic clink as he worked over his bonds. As she watched, the handcuffs clicked free, and Sam tore off his gag and untied his feet. “Hey.” He pulled the duct tape off of his brother’s lips. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Dean looked over at Alex, and the ex-angel nodded, shifting her legs impatiently as Sam freed his brother before moving on to her.

As he worked, she tilted her head, listening for any signs of the men. “What do you think made that noise?” she murmured as her gag was removed, and she rubbed her sore wrists. She could hear the sounds of a struggle in the distance, and she instinctively reached back to find her gun missing. “Son of a bitch.”

“No idea.” Sam nudged her to her feet. “Come on. Let’s get out of here before they come back.”

“I need my fucking gun.” Alex pushed her way past him to where Norwood had been standing, her eyes squinting to peer through the darkness. “I’m going to kill them both.”

A push from behind had her stumbling forward. “They’re coming back,” he hissed as Dean hurried further away. “Get back before they see you.”

“— we have here is a ‘Frankenstein’ situation.” Norwood’s voice drifted through the air, and Alex crouched lower to the ground, hidden by the darkness. “I mean, wow, the creator. I mean, we — we were gonna let you one you guys live to tell our story, but now, once you two are dead, there’ll be no proof that Thinman was your brain child.” He paused, and Alex crept forward slightly, shocked at the sight of the two Ghostfacers in the hands of Roger. “No.” The deputy’s jaw fell as he stared at the empty chairs, and Alex pressed herself close to the ground as his gaze swept through the darkness around him.

The Winchesters rushed past her, grappling the psychopaths, and Alex pushed herself after them. Ed and Harry stumbled away with cries of surprise as Dean wrapped his arms around Roger, barely dodging a savage swing of the knife before stumbling back. He threw a punch, but Roger blocked it, sending the knife up and through Dean’s bicep.

The Winchester hissed, lashing out in defense, and the knife flew from Roger’s hand, skittering across the ground. It landed at Alex’s feet, and the ex-angel dove after it just as Roger did the same. His hands wrapped around her arms, holding her down as one reached for her throat, and Alex struggled as she grasped at the knife.

Her fingers wrapped around the handle, and she brought it up, kicking Roger in the gut as she struggled free. A hand caught around her ankle, and the young hunter turned around. Anger pulsed through her skin, hot and sharp, and she drove the knife deep into the man’s neck; she could feel the blade tearing through muscle and cartilage before it hit bone. Roger’s eyes went wide, and Alex let go of the knife, leaving it embedded deep within his neck as she kicked away his lifeless hand.

“Wait, no!” Ed’s cry had her remembering about Tom Norwood, and her head snapped upwards to find the deputy’s gun pointed at Sam. The Ghostfacer stood between the two, his hands up defensively as he rushed out, “No! No! No, look. Look at me. This is my fault, okay? It’s all my fault.”

Tom Norwood grinned, and Alex pushed herself to her feet, ready to knock the man away as he
said, “I got enough bullets for both of you —”

He never finished his sentence. A gun discharged, sending a bullet through the deputy’s chest, and the man fell to the ground. Alex looked up, mouth wide to see Harry standing behind him, a gun in his trembling hands. Dean was at his side in an instant, taking the weapon away, and the Ghostfacer took an unsteady step backwards. “What are you guys doing here?”

“Uh, saving you?” Harry’s voice shook even as he spoke, and Alex scoffed as she stepped away from Roger’s body.

“Come on. Let’s get you guys outside.” Sam ushered Ed and Harry towards the front door, and Alex followed when Dean waved her after them. “Are you two okay?”

“I’m fine,” Ed insisted, and Harry mumbled his agreement. “We’re just glad that no one’s hurt. W-Well, apart from — from those guys,” he added awkwardly. “Uh, I … I’m sorry. This is all my fault. If I hadn’t — if I hadn’t created Thinman, if I had just been honest, this wouldn’t have happened.” Ed looked over at his shaken partner, and his shoulders fell. “You were right, Sam. Secrets suck.”

“Yeah.” Sam watched as the two Ghostfacers stepped away towards their van.

“Hey, Sam.” Alex reached out to touch the Winchester on the arm, and Sam turned to look down at her. “Uh, when … when you were telling him about that secret thing, you … were you —“

“What?” Confusion flitted across Sam’s face. “No. No, I wasn’t talking about you. Listen, I know in the past, with the show — I get why you lied, okay? And at least you were honest about it — sorta.” The confusion returned momentarily before it disappeared. “Don’t worry about what I said, okay?” Sam’s hand thumped her on the shoulder, and his attention turned to Dean. “So, we good in there?”

Alex turned to see Dean standing behind them, and she blinked back surprise at the pointed look in his eyes. It lingered for a moment, dark and cold, before it turned to Sam and disappeared. “Yeah,” he agreed. “With the Thinman footage and the way I set the bodies, there should be enough breadcrumbs to make it look like those two psychos offed each other.”

“They were just people, man.” Sam shook his head in disgust. “They weren’t … demons. They weren’t monsters. They … they were just fucking people.”

“Yeah, well, like I said, people are sick.” Dean shook his head and reached behind him. “Here.” He handed Alex her gun.

“Yeah, thanks.” Alex watched the glare flashed once more through his gaze before she looked away. She tucked her gun back in her jeans, shifting closer to Sam as concern at Dean’s growing suspicion pulsed through her veins. ‘A gut feeling,’ Dean had called it. For the moment Sam was dismissing it, blinded by his loyalty, but how long would that last?

“Can I get a ride from you guys?” Harry walked up to them, determination glittering behind the tears in his eyes. He adjusted the bag that was slung over his shoulder as he looked between the two hunters.

“Yeah, sure.” Dean circled around to the driver’s side door, and all four got into the Impala. Alex rested her head against the window as the car roared to life; she could see Ed standing beside his van, watching them drive away with tears in his eyes. For a second, she saw herself in his place, standing alone as Sam and Dean left, never to return. The ex-angel’s eyes hardened, and she turned her gaze away. The Winchesters could never find out.
August 15th, 2014  
Lebanon, Kansas

Alex pulled open the fridge, staring intently into its depths as she searched for a drink. The empty cardboard box of Mountain Dew sat in the back, and the ex-angel scowled in frustration. Three beers, some left over jerky, some of Sam’s fruit, and a packet of raw ground beef was all that decorated the shelves; someone would have to make a run into town soon.

She shoved an apple into her mouth as she grabbed a beer, kicking the fridge door closed behind her as she walked out of the kitchen. The Winchesters were in the war room; Sam was seated at the large map-table, staring at his laptop, while Dean paced at his side. “Come on, Crowley,” he snapped impatiently into his phone. “Pick up!” He looked over at his brother, a scowl on his face. “Where the hell is he? It’s not like he’s got a social life.”

Sam looked up from his computer. “Uh, are you actually worried?” he half-teased, and Alex sank down into the chair beside him.

“So …” she slowly began, “why exactly are we trying to contact the King of Hell?”

Dean frowned down at her, annoyance all across his face. “The guy’s got one job. Find the First Blade, bring it back. How hard is that?”

Sam scoffed. “It’s Crowley,” he reminded, sharing an amused look with Alex. “He’s not exactly a team player.”

“Yeah, but his ass is on the line, too.” Dean hung up and sat down across from his brother. “He goes missing for weeks on end without a peep? Well, not one that makes sense, anyways. Listen to this.” He set his phone down on the table, and low mumblings came through the phone’s speaker. Alex distinctly recognized the word “Dean,” but anything past that had quickly dissolved into unintelligible ramblings.

“Wait a second.” Sam looked over at his brother, his eyebrows arched high in surprise. “Did Crowley … drunk-dial you?”

Dean rolled his eyes and dialed the King’s number again. “Come on,” he snapped into the phone. “Pick up.” When he went to voicemail again, the Winchester looked over at Alex. “Well? Have you heard from him?”

“She?” Alex snorted, cracking open her beer before she snapped her fingers in mock remembrance. “Oh, uh, now that you mention it, I haven’t been getting my usual good morning texts. What do you think, dumbass?” She took a drink, rolling her eyes at the implications of Dean’s pointed words.

“Listen,” Sam jumped in, preemptively cutting off any ensuing bickering, “if we want answers, we know how to get them.” He closed his laptop, ready to get up. “There’s a crossroads just a few miles from here; someone’s bound to know something.”

“Yeah. Okay, fine.” Dean shoved his phone into his pocket. “We got what we need in the trunk. You in, wingless?”

“Course.” Alex brushed aside the stinging insult, choosing instead to focus on taking a large, careful bite of her apple. “Lead the way, asshat.” She rose to her feet and grabbed her beer, motioning
towards the stairs with the hand holding her fruit. “We’re talking about the crossroads that’s just down the ways a bit, yeah?” she asked Sam, her words muffled around her mouthful.

“Yup.” Sam let Dean walk past him and make his way up the stairs before he dropped his voice to a murmur. “Listen, you don’t have to let Dean under your skin like that —”

“He’s not.” Alex brushed the brother’s sympathy off. “Don’t worry about it. Whatever’s bothering him, it’s nothing I can’t handle.” She hurried up the stairs after Dean, leaving Sam to bring up the rear.

The air outside was slightly chilled, and Alex took another bite of her apple as she followed Dean over to the car. “We really need to figure out how to get that garage open,” she mumbled as she stopped beside the backdoor. “I don’t care how badly jammed it is; there’s no way in hell I’m walking out here in winter.”

Sam chuckled from behind her. “You are from the North, right?” he teased, pulling open his door and sliding into his seat.

Alex did the same. “Shut up. Just because I’m used to the cold doesn’t mean I have to love it.” She slammed the door behind her, taking a long drink from her bottle. The car started, and they pulled off down the road. “Hey,” she began, leaning forward to murmur in Dean’s ear too quietly for Sam to hear, “you told Sam about the Mark?” She cast a look over at the taller Winchester, but his attention was on his phone, paying the two of them little attention.

Dean glanced back at her through the rearview mirror. “Course,” came his gruff answer. “Why wouldn’t I?” He turned the Impala onto the main road, and the tires squealed against the pavement.

Alex fell silent, exchanging a look with Sam, who had looked over at them curiously. “I don’t …” she finally said, “I don’t know.”

“I don’t keep secrets unless I have to.” Dean’s voice grew venomous, and his eyes darkened as he held Alex’s gaze through the mirror. “Understand?”

“Calm your balls. I was just curious.” Alex flicked Dean on the back of the head, doing her best to remain unperturbed by his aggression. “No need to get pissy about it.” She jumped out of the car as it rolled to a stop, tossing her hair over her shoulder as she circled around to the trunk.

Dean and Sam joined her, and Dean pulled out a can of spray paint. “Here.” He handed it to Alex. “We’ll need a devil’s trap.”

“On it.” The ex-angel shook the can for emphasis and stepped away, letting the brothers worry about the summoning spell. She drew a large, wobbly red circle on the ground before she started on the star. “Are we summoning Crowley, or just any demon?”

“Whoever we get.” Dean’s voice was clipped, his attention on preparing the ingredients of their spell. “Just on the off-chance that he’s actually busy doing his damn job. Almost done?”

Alex looked down at the half-finished star. “Uh … yeah,” she lied before redoubling her efforts. “Give me another couple of minutes.” She glanced up as Sam crouched beside her, a second can of paint in his hands, and she gave him a small nod of thanks as he started on the symbols. “There.” She rose to her feet, crossing over to Dean as Sam put the final touches on the last sigil.

Dean lit a match, and the herbs in the wooden bowl went up in flames. “Daemon, esto subiecto voluntati meae.”
“Winchesters.” A low snarl rumbled through the air, and Alex looked up to see a short, olive-skinned woman standing in front of them, red eyes flashing in anger.

“I-Is that, uh …?” Sam’s stammered words had the ex-angel looking up at him in confusion.

She looked over at Dean, surprised to find the same startled look across his face. However, he forced it back down, replacing it with a stoic facade as he grimly joked, “Well, that explains a lot.”

“How — who is she?” Alex narrowed her eyes as she stared at the demon, carefully scrutinizing the cold eyes and the dyed red hair. “Have we met her before?”

“Dude, s-seriously?” Her words brought Dean’s shock back up to the surface. “Snooki? Jersey Shore? Snooki & Jwoww?”

“No, no, that means nothing to me.” Alex rolled her eyes. “I have an actual life, Dean.” She turned back to the demon. “So, where’s Crowley?”

The demon pursed his lips, and Sam stepped forward. “We can do this one of two ways,” the Winchester said. “The easy way — you talk. Or the easier way —” the Winchester reached into his jacket pocket to reveal the demon knife “— you still talk.”

“I vote number two.”

Snooki glared over at Dean. “You want info on Crowley? Google him. Are we done?” Sam took a step forward, the knife raised, and panic flashed through her eyes. “Whoa!” she cried. “Not the face! Are you crazy?” She waited until Sam stepped down before she crossed her arms. “Listen, guys, what happens in hell stays in hell. I got nothing.”

“But you do have a pretty sweet deal with Crowley in charge,” Dean reminded. “If Abaddon wins, you can kiss all that goodbye.”

Sam added, “All the fancy cars, the book deals.”

“Showbiz can be tough.”

Snooki looked between Sam and Dean, a scowl across her small face. “I’m doing fine,” she retorted scornfully. “Thanks.”

“Oh.” Dean looked over at his brother before his gaze dropped to the painted stone beneath their feet. “Well, good luck landing your next gig inside a devil’s trap.”

The demon rolled her eyes with an overly dramatic sigh. “What do you want to know?”

“Where’s Crowley?”

Snooki raised an eyebrow as she stared up at Sam. “Last time I heard, he was somewhere in the western Pacific.”

Alex looked up at Sam. “That make sense,” she murmured, and both Winchesters gave a small nod in agreement.

“Really?” Snooki snorted in disgust at the hunter’s words. “Floating around in the ocean while his kingdom goes up in flames? You guys are crazy. Hell’s getting crazy. Even the loyalists want to sign on with Abaddon. She’s gonna make her move.” The demon looked between the three hunters. “Are we done? I’ve got a thing.”
Sam and Dean exchanged a look, and Dean gave a small nod. “Exorcizamus te,” Sam began, “omnis immundus spiritus …”

“Seriously?” Snooki’s voice rose in anger over Sam’s chanting. “An exorcism? We had a deal!”

Dean smirked. “See ya, Snooks.”

“… Ergo, omnis legio diabolica, adiuramus te … cessa decipere humanas creaturas, eisque aeternae perditionis veneum propinare.” The exorcism finished, and the demon’s head was thrown back as black smoke billowed out from her mouth and disappeared into the ground.

Fifteen minutes later, Alex found herself seated beside Sam in the bunker. Her empty beer sat in beside her, pushed aside to make room for her laptop, but at the moment, her attention was on her phone. Castiel had texted her on the ride back from the crossroads, updating her on the status of his search for Metatron and inquiring about her safety.

I’m fine, she had finally responded. Nothing new. We’re looking for Crowley because he’s AWOL.

“Finding anything?” She leaned over to look at Sam’s laptop, unsurprised to find a picture of a deep ocean trench on one half of the screen, surrounded by text. She watched as the Winchester gave a shake of his head, took absorbed in his work to commit to a verbal answer.

Her phone rang, and the ex-angel jumped to answer it. “Hello?” she asked. “Cas? What’s up?” She watched as Sam’s eyes darted up to her, and she excused herself from the room.

“What do you mean you’re looking for him?” Confusion lined the seraph’s voice, and Alex paused outside one of the vacant bedrooms, far away from the Winchesters.

“I mean the Winchesters are looking for him because they haven’t heard from him in almost a month.” Alex shrugged, sliding down the wall to sit on the stone floor. “I’m not happy about this, if you’re wondering.”

“Do they know? About your deal?”

Alex cast a quick glance down the hallway, lips pursed tight in fear that one of the brothers would walk past and overhear. “No,” she slowly responded. “They don’t. And I plan to keep it that way.”

“Understandable.” There was a pause, and Alex heard Castiel heave a sigh. “Hopefully I can find Metatron soon. I find it difficult to sleep knowing Crowley still controls you.”

Alex frowned, her face blushing slightly, and she tapped the stone ground as she sought out a distraction. “You, uh … you’re still sleeping?” she asked lamely, biting her lip before she finished, “I thought you were an angel again.”

“I am.” The terseness in the seraph’s voice showed he was displeased with the change in conversation, but he explained, “My grace isn’t strong, and sleep allows it to rest and recover.”

Footsteps echoed off of the stone, and Alex looked up in surprise; no one approached, and she dropped her head back down to her phone. “I should get going,” she murmured. “Before the Winchesters find something and decide to act without me knowing. I’ll talk to you when this is all over, alright? Be careful.”

“The same to you.” Castiel sighed again, and his voice softened. “Hopefully I’ll be able to see you
soon; it’s been too long. I love you.”

“Yeah. I love you too.” Alex hung up and rose back to her feet, glancing back down the hall, but there was still no sign of either brother. She made her way back into the main room, unsurprised to find that Sam hadn’t moved from when she had left. He glanced up when she entered, and the ex-angel flashed him a small smile. “Cas,” she explained. “Just checking in.”

Sam looked like he was going to respond, but the arrival of his brother stopped him “Hey.” Dean entered the room, a half-empty bottle of beer in his hands. He gave Alex a half nod before turning his attention to his brother. “Find anything?”

Sam cleared his throat. “So,” he began, “Cain said he tossed the First Blade into the deepest ocean, right? That’s the Mariana Trench. Maybe Crowley found it, and it’s a double cross.”

Dean shook his head as he sat down across from his brother. “That doesn’t make sense. He wants me to power up and kill the ginger. He set it up.”

“Okay.” Sam closed his laptop to look his brother in the eyes. “Assuming he does show up with it, Crowley is only useful to us until we have the Blade.”

“Yeah,” Dean agreed, “so?”

“So …” Sam finished, “there’s nothing stopping us from using it on him, right?”

Alex blinked in surprise to find Dean’s gaze on her. “What?” she retorted before she looked over at Sam. “I’m with you, man. The sooner we kill that son of a bitch, the better.” She glanced back at Dean, waiting for him to acknowledge the truth in words, but before he could say anything, his phone rang.

“Speak of the devil.” Dean jumped up to answer it. “Did you find the First Blade?” He listened for a second, and a scowl grew across his face. “Well, then, what exactly?” he snapped, and Alex exchanged a look with Sam; that wasn’t a good sign. She watched Dean’s eyes darkened. “Where?” The Winchester listened, and then he hung up. “Get packed.”

“What?” Sam rose to his feet. “Dean, what happened?”

“Crowley’s in Kansas City; I got an address. He’s in trouble.” Dean fished his keys out of his pocket to make sure they were there before he shoved them back into his pocket with a dark scowl. “Whatever it is, it can’t be good. Get your things.”

The hotel door swung open under Sam’s gentle touch, and Alex wrinkled her nose at the smell of death. “What the hell?” She pushed her way in front of Dean to follow Sam into the penthouse suite, frowning at the sight of four bodies scattered across the floor. Three of them were pale, their skin as white as sheets; the fourth — a female — still had color, but the blood seeping from her abdomen was quickly pulling it away.

“What the hell?” Dean’s curse followed hers, and Alex dropped to her knees beside the nearest corpse. There were no bloodstains, no gaping wounds, and the ex-angel looked up at the brothers with a shrug. Dean frowned. “What happened to them?”

“No idea. It looks like they’ve been exsanguinated, but I don’t know how.” Her eyes drifted over the small scabs on the body’s arm — drug addict, perhaps? “Where’s Crowley?”
“He’s not here.” Sam called from the bedroom, returning to the main room and standing beside his brother. “He must be out.”

“Son of a bitch.” Dean thumped his palm against the wall. Alex got up and circled around to sit down on the couch with a shrug, and after a second, Sam sank down beside her. Before he could offer up a question, however, the sound of a key fumbling in the lock filled the room.

The door opened, and Crowley stepped through, holding a brown bag in his hands; the lifting of his eyebrows was the only sign of his surprise. “Hello, boys.”

Dean crossed his arms, nudging at a nearby corpse with his foot. “And what do you call this?” he snapped, and Crowley’s gaze turned onto him.

“Refreshments?” he quipped, and Alex watched as Dean’s frown darkened.

Sam rose to his feet, and Alex quickly did the same. “What’s in the bag, Crowley?” She took a step closer, and the King of Hell gripped the brown paper bag closer to his chest with a defensive, “Nothing.”

“Really?” Sam reached forward. “Maybe I can, uh —“ He tore the bag from the demon’s unwilling hands, pulling free a plastic bag of AB blood. He scowled, showing his brother before turning back to the demon. “What, are you knocking over blood banks?” Crowley didn’t respond, and the Winchester grabbed his hand as Dean grabbed a chair and swung it around to rest behind the King of Hell.

Hands went up to the demon’s shoulders, shoving him down into the chair, and metal clinked as Sam locked a handcuff around one wrist, chaining the demon to the chair. Crowley tugged at his bonds, the brother’s actions happening too fast for him to process, and he looked up at at the two. “Come on, guys.”

“Look at you.” Dean stood in front of him, a grimace of disgust on his face. “You’re a mess. You know, we were counting on you. You let us down.”

“Your slimy followers were counting on you to kill Abaddon,” Sam added, “and you let them down.”

Dean responded, but Alex didn’t hear, too busy sinking down onto the couch and out of sight. Sam, Dean, and Crowley in the same room as causing her heart to pound within her chest — maybe if they couldn’t see her, they wouldn’t talk about her. “What is this, an intervention?” she heard the demon snap, and she sunk even lower in her seat.

“You need to focus, Crowley,” Sam retorted. “Get a grip.”

“What, “ Dean added, “you just gonna let hell to go to hell?”

“You don’t know what it’s like to be human!” Crowley’s desperate words had the ex-angel looking up in surprise; the demon was staring up at Dean, whose lips were pursed. Realizing his mistake, the King of Hell looked over at Sam. “It’s in your DNA,” he explained. “It’s my addiction, my cross, my burden!”

“Alright, take it easy.”

“I see the darkness of it now, the Anthony Weiner of it.” Crowley carried on, ignoring Dean’s words. “It makes you needy. I needed her.” He turned to the female in the bedroom, gaze lingering on the fatal wound. “Lola used me. She reported everything I did back to Abaddon.”
Concern flashed across Sam’s face, and he glanced over at his brother. “Crowley …” he began, “did you tell her about the First Blade?”

“I don’t know.” The demon’s answer was blunt and honest. “Things get a trifle blurry when I’m medicated.”

“Great.” Sam turned his back to the King of Hell, speaking in a low murmur that only Dean and Alex were meant to hear. “If he told Lola, she definitely told Abaddon.”

“Which means that Abaddon’s in the hunt for this thing, too,” Dean finished with a scowl, and he turned back to face Crowley. “Alright, you know what? This crap ends now. You’re cut off. Okay? Kicking it. Cold turkey.”

“What? I —”

“No.” Sam unlocked the handcuffs, and Dean pulled Crowley out of the chair, handcuffing his wrists together in one swift motion. “Come on.” Dean shoved the King of Hell towards the door, and Alex followed into the hall, carefully closing the door behind them.

She followed them down down to the car, frowning as Dean shoved the demon into the backseat on the side that she normally sat. With the greatest reluctance, she slid in beside Crowley. “So,” he began, holding out his wrists, “mind getting these off?”

“I don’t have the key.” Alex turned her head away, watching how the brothers stood outside, talking over the roof of the Impala. “You wouldn’t make it ten feet anyways.”

The demon chuckled and returned his hands to his lap. “Touché,” he relented. “I see your grace is gone again. What happened?”

“Dunno. I used it up, maybe.” The ex-angel kept her voice clipped, and she leaned forward, pounding on the front window until Sam opened his door. “Hey. We leaving or what?”

“Uh, yeah.” Sam leaned back up to exchange another few words with his brother before he slid into the front seat. Dean followed, and the Impala roared off down the road.

The dark, damp dungeon lay before them, a black abyss in the archive room. Dean shoved the demon forward, and the lights turned on, revealing the chair in the center of the demon trap. Crowley groaned, his eyes rolling in disgust, but he didn’t protest as Dean led him over to the chair.

Alex hung back, waiting until Dean had chained the demon up and walked away before she stepped through the doors. Sam sat at a dark steel table in the corner, his laptop up and his head already bowed in concentration. “Back in this fetid pit,” Crowley finally muttered. “Could have at least added some throw pillows.”

Sam ignored him. “You swept the Mariana Trench, right?” he asked, and when Crowley nodded, he added, “And …?”

“And the First Blade was not, as hoped, in the Trench.” The demon let his arms rest in his lap as he stared over at the brother. “It had, in fact, been scooped up by an unmanned sub, from whom it was stolen by a research assistant, who reportedly sold it to Portuguese smugglers who, in turn, lost it to Moroccan pirates in a poker game.”

“What?” Sam glanced over at Alex, his brow furrowed in confusion, and the ex-angel gave a small,
unsure shrug.

“Poor moose. It’s always a little tricky keeping up, isn’t it?”

The Winchester scoffed, dropping his attention back down to his laptop. His gaze darted up once, twice, and then his eyes flickered to Alex, disconcerted by the King’s unblinking stare. “What are you doing?”

Crowley hesitated before he answered. “I’m still a little tainted by humanity,” he finally said, slouching slightly in his chair to keep his air of disinterest. “Makes me sentimental.”

“Well,” Sam snapped, “stop.”

A grin curled on the corners of the demon’s face. “You and I both know we shared a moment back in that church,” he persisted, and Sam’s head snapped up — Crowley’s eyes gleamed to see he found a nerve. “And on some level, we are bonded.”

Sam slammed his laptop closed. “Crowley, the only reason you are alive is that we need your help to deal with Abaddon ‘cause she is an even worse pile of crap than you are. And that is the extent of my concern for you. Got it?” The demon didn’t respond, and Sam reopened his computer. “Okay. What happened after the pirates?”

“I don’t know.” Crowley’s gaze drifted around the room in faux hurt at the brother’s harsh words. “They sold it to a Mr. Andre Develin. After that, I don’t know. That’s all I learned before you brought me here.”

Sam got up to his feet, tucking his laptop under his arm as he kicked the chair back under the table. “Fine. Alex, stay here and keep an eye on him, okay? I’m going to go talk to Dean.” He pushed his way out of the dungeon, leaving the door cracked behind him, and Alex awkwardly turned back to the King of Hell.

“You can wipe that deer-in-a-headlights look off of your face.” Crowley’s eyes glittered with amusement. “I won’t be telling the Hardy boys anything about our agreement. Not while I’m in here, anyways.”

“I wouldn’t put it past you.” Alex took a seat up on the table, crossing her legs under her as she pursed her lips. “And I can’t let you go, because this time, they’ll know that it was me.”

“Bollocks.” Crowley’s head tipped back in a momentary lapse of stoicism. “Alright. What have you got to eat? I get hungry during detox,” he quipped when Alex lifted her eyebrows in surprise. “I could go for some chips.”

Alex pushed herself off of the table and stalked out of the dungeon, leaving the demon’s request unanswered. She pulled the doors closed, locking Crowley away, and she stormed back up the stairs in search of the Winchesters.

They were sitting in the library, and from the way Dean was sipping on his drink, the ex-angel knew she had walked in on a lull in their conversation. “Well?” She sat down in an open chair, looking between the brothers.

“I’m still looking into Andre Develin,” Sam explained. “It looks like he’s a collector; he’s on the FBI’s radar.” He looked up from his laptop to ask, “Did Crowley say anything else?”

“Just that he wanted some chips.” Alex paused before adding, “I’m not getting him either. Find anything?” She motioned to Dean’s laptop, determined to get the conversation away from her and
“Nothing.” Dean closed the laptop lid with a shake of his head. “Hey, have you heard from Cas recently?”

“Yeah. Nothing new on his front.” Alex pulled her phone out of her pocket and placed it on the table, staring down at the black screen. “He’s still looking for Metatron and our grace, but I don’t know that he’s much closer.” With a sigh, she picked her phone back up. “Okay, well, I’m going to go take a shower and maybe a nap. Let me know if you two find anything. Oh, and, uh, we should probably check up on you-know-who every once and while. We don’t want him slipping away like last time, huh?” She rapped on the table, giving the brothers a quick nod as she dismissed herself, disappearing down the hall towards her room.

Alex shivered at the rush of cold wind, tossing her still damp braid over her shoulder to rest against her back. The night sky was clear, yet chill, and the ex-angel drew her jacket a little more tightly around her shoulders.

Sam sat on the bench beside her, his legs resting on the seat as he sat on the back, and the young hunter had to crane her neck to look him in the eyes. Dean sat beside her, more at her level, but his attention was out towards the road at the edge of the park.

They were waiting for Andre Develin, who had agreed to meet Sam at this park just outside of Springfield, and, against all of Dean’s best judgement, Crowley had tagged along.

“What is Crowley doing?” Sam’s exasperated voice had her peering behind his back in search of the King of Hell. He was standing a few yards off, one arm deep inside a vending machine, and even from where she sat Alex could see the concentration furrowing his brow.

“He’s stealing candy,” she reported, and Sam’s head dropped into his hands.

“He is — he’s — he’s stealing candy,” he repeated in dismay, pinching the bridge of his nose as he shook his head.

Dean leaned back to glare at the demon. “You know, at least when Cas was human, he was an okay guy. Should’ve known Crowley would be a douche version.” The Winchester rose to his feet. “Hey,” he snapped, and Crowley looked up in surprise. “Hey! Cut it out, man! Image! You’re the king of rotten. Act like it.”

The demon stepped back from the machine, a frown upon his face, and Alex rolled her head back. “I’ll go buy him a freaking candy bar,” she muttered. “Before that asshole gets the cops down here.” She rose to her feet and moved towards the King of Hell, digging into her pocket for chain. “Hey,” she snapped, mimicking Dean’s sharp tone. “What’s your problem, dude?”

“What’s my problem?” Crowley lowered his voice into hiss. “I haven’t eaten since I left my damn hotel room.”

Alex brushed off his scalding tone with a roll of her eyes. “You’re a demon,” she reminded coldly. “You don’t eat.” However, she fished out a dollar bill from her pocket and shoved it into the King of Hell’s hands. “Fine. Use this before you break something.”

Crowley’s gaze had slide past her, and the ex-angel turned to watch a tall, thin man approach Sam and Dean, clad in a thick black trench coat. The Winchesters rose to greet him, and when Alex turned back, Crowley was no longer at her side. He had crossed over to a bench and sat down, her
dollar bill still held in his hand, but before she had taken two steps towards him, his head was thrown back.

Red smoke billowed out of his mouth and spiraled through the air, twisting and writhing like a snake as it disappeared down the stranger’s mouth. Sam and Dean spun around, eyes wide as they stared at Alex beside the demon’s empty vessel, and the ex-angel could only shrug helplessly as she stared back with wide, nervous eyes.

The smoke returned within seconds, pouring back into Crowley’s body, and his eyes snapped back open. The man he had possessed was speaking, unaware that time had passed, but Alex didn’t pay him any attention as she circled around to stand in front of the King of Hell. “Dude,” she snapped. “Really? What the hell was that?”

“What the hell was that?” Dean stalked up to them, his shock hidden by anger, and Alex blinked back surprise to find his attention not directed at Crowley, but at her.

“Hey! Don’t look at me,” she snapped. “What am I, his guardian? How the hell am I supposed to stop that?”

“National Institute of Antiquities.” Crowley rose to his feet, brushing off his suit. “That’s where the First Blade is. Ready to go?”

Sam and Dean exchanged looks. “You’re not going,” Dean finally said, and Crowley’s face went blank at the Winchester’s bluntness. “You’re going back to the bunker with Alex. Sam and I will go find the Blade. Capisce?”

“Dean …” Alex started, but she quickly cut herself off with a shake of her head. “Okay, fine, whatever. I can babysit.” She pulled her hands up into the sleeves of her jacket, glancing towards the car. “Let’s just get going.”

The dungeon door creaked open, and Alex looked up to see Sam and Dean standing in the pale light. “Oh thank God.” The ex-angel threw her head back in relief. “I thought you guys were going to be gone forever.”

“We were gone a day.” Sam stepped into the room, his gaze darting over to where Crowley sat, still chained to his chair. “Have you been here the whole time?”

“Basically,” Alex groaned, slowly straightening up her seat as she stretched out her back. “I didn’t want him getting away again.” Her words were accompanied with a glare towards Dean; hopefully her words had some effect on his perception of her guilt, but if it did, it didn’t show. “Well? Did you get the First Blade?”

“No.” Sam turned to look down at Crowley. “What do you know about the Men of Letters massacre of 1958?”

“We know Abaddon missed our grandfather and Larry Ganem,” Dean added, his voice just as sharp as his brother’s. “Was there anybody else?”

“What the hell are you guys talking about?” Metal scraped against stone as Alex pushed her chair back to rise to her feet. “What happened?”

“Abaddon’s men got there first.” Sam turned back to the young hunter to explain. “They possessed and killed two of the guards after they broke into an empty vault where the First Blade was supposed
to be. What they didn’t know was that the curator had removed and sold it because it couldn’t be authenticated.”

“She sold it to a man that called himself Magnus,” Dean finished.

“As in Albert Magnus.” Alex nodded in understanding. “As in the Men of Letter’s undercover name.”

“Let me get this straight.” Crowley spoke up, drawing their attention onto him. “You keep me locked up in this closet with this — this witless teenager, ignore my suffering, and then come barging in here and demand my help?”

“I’m twenty two,” Alex retorted. “And, yeah, more or less. That sounds about right.”

“Did I or did I not keep my end of the bargain the other night?” the demon demanded. “Quite brilliantly, I might add. We are partners!” His voice rose in indignation. “And you owe me!”

“Owe you?” Sam snorted, almost amused by the King’s audacity.

“I wouldn’t be in this mess if it wasn’t for you two! You shoot me up. You make me a junkie, and then you keep me stashed away while my kingdom falls apart?!” Crowley looked between Sam and Dean.

The dungeon was silent for one, two, and then three whole seconds before Dean finally relented. “What do you want?”

“I want out. Maybe some place with some ambient lighting. And I want something to drink.”

“Prove that you know something useful,” Alex countered, and Crowley’s gaze turned onto her, his gaze cold and promising of vengeance, but she firmly held his stare until he answered.

“There was a rogue member. The Men of Letters tossed him out not long before Abaddon killed the lot. Happy?” The demon held out his hands towards Sam and Dean. “Do we have a deal?”

Dean scowled, but he turned to Alex and Sam. “Start moving the archives up into the library,” he snapped, his patience clearly wearing thin. “I’ll … take him upstairs.”

Alex nodded, thankful not to be involved as she followed Sam back out into the archive room. “Here.” Sam handed her one of the heavy file boxes, and the young hunter staggered slightly under the weight. “You got it?” Sam’s hand was on her shoulder, stabilizing her, and Alex grunted out an answer before she started making her way towards the stairs.

It took her a few minutes, but she got the box up the stairs and into the library where she finally dropped it onto the table. “Ugh.” She looked up as Sam set his two boxes onto the table beside her. “How many more of these?”

“Only one. You stay here and get started.” Sam disappeared back out the door, and Alex pulled the lid off of one of the boxes, grabbing a handful of folders as she sank down in her chair.

Footsteps approached, and Alex watched as Dean led Crowley into the room. The demon was still in chains, but he barely seemed to notice as he chose a chair in the corner and sat down. Dean attached the handcuffs to the chair’s arm before he straightened up. “Well?” he snapped dryly. “Anything else?”

“Something to drink, if you don’t mind.” Crowley watched, humor dancing in his eyes, as Dean
snatched a glass and a bottle of scotch off of the table and set it down next to the demon.

“Happy?” Dean turned away and sat down at the table across from Alex as Sam luged the final box up into the room. “Is that all?” he asked his brother, and Sam gave a quick nod as he sat down next to Alex.

Crowley settled down into his cushioned seat, his eyes closing halfway in momentary bliss. For several minutes he was silent, and the three hunters worked in silence. However, eventually he looked up from his drink and broke the silence. “It’s not very good scotch, is it?” he commented after a while, and Alex rolled her eyes.

“You okay, Crowley.” Sam looked up from the big, brown box of Men of Letters archives. “Every single name from the entire membership in 1958 matches the men who were killed.”

Crowley flipped through one of Dean’s pornos, barely paying attention to any of the hunters in the room with him. Alex narrowed her eyes, ready to clear her throat, but before she had the chance, the demon asked, “That would be the active membership, correct?” He set down the magazine and looked up as Sam rolled his eyes. “Were you three dropped on your heads a great deal? Like I told you, rumor has it that a rogue member was tossed out on his arse. Does that make him ‘active?’” He looked between Sam and Dean, and Alex’s shoulders dropped when she realized that he had a point. “Seriously, how did you ever function without me?”

Dean picked up one of the archive boxes that was sitting at the end of the table. “Infamati et oblitori,” he read.

“Dishonored and forgotten.” Crowley turned the page in his magazine, humming in appreciation to whatever he had seen, and Alex rolled her eyes. She walked over to Dean and pawed through the files inside; there wasn’t a lot, only four or five, and Alex picked up the top one. “Cuthbert Sinclair,” she read, turning open the first page to see a date. “This has to be the guy. He was thrown out in 1956.”

“The rest of these guys were gone long before then,” Dean added as he pulled out the rest. “I’ll look into them, though, just in case.”

“Good idea.” Alex carried the file back to her seat, flipping through the first couple of pages. “Here.” She pulled out a thick, bound stack of papers from within and handed it to Sam. “I’ll go through the first half, you see what this is.”

“Okay.” Interest gleamed in the Winchester’s eyes as he took them, and Alex settled down in her chair as she began to skim the first page.

“He seems like an impressive guy,” she finally said a minute or so later. “It says here that he was named ‘Master of Spells’ not long after he was initiated, and ended up designing most of the bunkers warding. I wonder why they dumped him.”

“Probably because his work got a little crazy.” Sam flipped through several stapled papers. “The leadership called it ‘eccentric’ and ‘crazy.’ These are all projects that he proposed in the last two years that he was here. Rejected. Rejected. Rejected.” He tossed them into the center of the table one at a time so Alex and Dean could see the read lettering across the top.

“So difficult — brilliant, ahead of your time, desired for it.” Crowley spoke up, drawing the hunters’ attention onto himself. “Trust me, I know.”

Dean pulled the folder Alex had been looking through over to him, ignoring the demon’s comment. “
‘Formal separation from Men of Letters — April 1956,’ he read.

Sam nodded, “He missed the massacre.”

Ice chinked against glass as Crowley swirled his glass. “I never knew his name, but I heard someone say he was out,” he admitted. “Did my damndest to find him. Thought he might by my way inside this joint.”

“So, where’d you look?”

Crowley took a sip of his scotch. “I’ll show you.” He watched how Dean’s gaze hardened in anger, and his lips curled up in a smirk. “You think I’d just tell you and go back to that infernal room?” He set his drink back down on the end table and straightened up, planting his feet upon the ground. “Grand Island, Nebraska. We’ll start there.”

Alex stepped out of the Impala, peering through the thick wall of trees before her. Crowley stood beside her, his cuffed hands in front of him as he patiently waited for the two brothers to join them. “Do you mind?” He held out his hands to Sam, frowning when Sam hesitated. “I’m not going anywhere, moose,” he retorted. “I want this as much as you.”

Sam unlocked the handcuffs, and Crowley immediately strolled into the woods. The hunters followed close at his heels down a thin dirt path. The trees were thick for merely a few yards before it opened up into a clearing. “So, this is where your demons tracked him to?” Dean brushed aside a tall stalk of grass as he stepped past the King of Hell, looking skeptically around at the empty field.

“Exact spot. My boys never could find him.” Crowley placed his hands in his jacket pocket as he stared into the distance. “I’m sensing nothing, so if he’s here, he’s warded up to the gills.”

“Well, he was a genius at it, right? Sure as hell ain’t gonna be found by a bunch of demons.”

The demon rolled his eyes at Sam’s words. “Oh, like he’s gonna open his heart to you lot, because you’re such prizes?”

“Better — we’re legacies.” Dean moved further into the clearing, motioning his brother after him. “Alright, if he’s so bent on hiding, maybe he’s watching. Give it a shot.”

Sam lifted his head as he raised his voice. “Cuthbert Sinclair — uh, Magnus — whatever.” The Winchester’s words echoed through the empty clearing, and Alex stepped forward to stand at his side. “We’re Sam and Dean Winchester, Henry Winchester’s grandsons.”

“And Men of Letters ourselves,” Dean put in.

Sam nodded. “We know what happened back in the day. We don’t necessarily agree with it. We figured … maybe you want to tell your side of the story.”

His words were met with silence, and Alex looked up at the brothers. “Maybe he’s not home,” she suggested weakly, and she glanced back at Crowley for support to her claim. However, the demon’s attention was on something behind her, and the pointing of his finger had her spinning back around. Smoke twirled through the air, surrounding a door-like opening into nothingness. Sam and Dean stepped forward, and the ex-angel turned back to Crowley. “Stay here,” she ordered, pointing her angel blade at the King’s heart. “I’m not above stabbing you in the spleen.”

Amusement had Crowley’s eyebrows raising, but he stayed rooted in the ground as Alex followed
Sam and Dean into the smoky darkness. She was blinded by light on the other side, and narrowed her eyes against the lamplight. They were in a hallway, ornately decorated, that stretched out before them; a glance behind her showed the doorway to now be gone.

“Which way?” Sam looked left and right, at a loss, and after a second, Dean pointed to the right. He led the way, and Alex took up the rear, head tipped as she took in the elaborate mansion where there had once been empty wilderness.

They turned the corner, and Alex opened her mouth, ready to ask a question, but before she could utter a word, the hallway exploded into life.

A man bowled into Sam, hissing in fury as he wrapped his arms around the Winchester’s neck. Before Alex could react, a second figure hit her from behind, sending her tumbling to the ground. Her angel blade skittered across the ground, and she scrambled on the slick floor, searching for a purchase to propel herself closer to it. The creature at her back held her down, its claws digging into her shoulders, and Alex lashed out with her feet.

A solid kick to the creature’s side dislodged it just enough for her to slip forward and wrap her fingers around the angel blade. She twisted, rolling face up as she lashed out, and the weapon impaled itself through the creature’s rage-filled face. It exploded into light, and Alex closed her eyes as she pushed the deadweight off of her and onto the ground. “Son of a bitch!” she gasped out, blinking to try and clear the black spots of her vision.

She heard a thump as a head hit the ground, and she watched as a decapitated body collapsed next to her. Vampires? She pushed herself to her feet as Sam killed the woman that had attacked him, yanking the demon-killing knife from her chest.

“Bravo!” A disembodied voice floated through the air, and Alex spun around, searching for the source. “Well done!” The words were followed by a gentle applause, and Alex cursed under her breath as she stepped forward to stand at Dean’s side.

A door creaked open, and a man stepped into view. “Come.” He motioned to the room from which he had appeared. “Fancy a drink?” He disappeared back from view, and with a frown, Dean hesitantly stepped after him. “Sorry about all the theatricality.” The man was seated in a chair, and Alex looked around at the ornate sitting room; display cases lined the walls, containing a variety of different objects. “I just wanted to see what you three were made of.”

“So, what, are we underground?” Dean slowly took a seat on the couch across from the man, and Sam and Alex followed suit.

The man chuckled. “No. No, my fortress is right where you were standing. But it’s invisible.”

“Then you must be Cuthbert Sinclair.”

“Ugh.” Sinclair scowled at the name before his face softened in thoughtfulness. “I haven’t gone by that moniker in, oh … fifty seven years now.”

Surprise flashed across Dean’s face before it hardened. “Well, you’re looking good for a guy pushing … ninety?”

Magnus chuckled. “Well, thanks, sport. There’s a spell for damn near everything. I am impressed, thought. You did exactly what you should’ve done. Though I am gonna miss those three from my zoo.” His gaze turned onto Alex, dropping down to the weapon in her hands. “I have to ask; how did you get your hands on an angel blade? Those things are quite rare.”
Alex looked down at the silver metal, and her hands instinctively tightened around the handle. “It came with the wings, I guess,” she admitted, tucking the weapon onto the seat between her and Sam, out of the stranger’s sight.

“You’re an angel.” Something crept into Cuthbert’s voice, greedy and sinister behind a facade of manners, and Alex lifted her chin.

“Was an angel,” she corrected. “I’m just human, now. What, uh, what do you mean by ‘your zoo?’”

Sinclair’s eyes lit up, and he leaned back in his chair. “Oh, you are in the midst of the greatest collection of supernatural rarities and antiquities on the planet. I’ve got nearly every species of supernatural creature that walks on this planet — however, an angel I do not.” The greed returned to his eyes, flashing through them, and Alex unconsciously shifted closer to Sam. However, the emotion disappeared within a second. “Now,” he said, turning to Sam and Dean, “Did you say that you were Men of Letters? I thought that whole thing died out after ’58.”

“Well,” Sam began, “we are — we are legacies. But actually, uh … we’re hunters.”

Magnus let out a surprised and pleased laugh. “Hunters?” he repeated. “Wow! Hunters.” He looked between the two brothers, his gaze darting over to Alex before returning to Sam. “With the keys to the kingdom! The boys must be spinning in their graves. Damn snobs. Bunch of librarians, if you ask me. Although I was always fond of Henry. I was his mentor, you know. Til the squares gave me the boot. Yeah.” The man scoffed at the memory. “Course, he came here to visit me in secret. Called out to me, same as you did. Oh yes.” He chuckled. “Quite the wild hair, your grandfather was.”

Sam smiled at the story, but Dean cleared his throat, his patience wearing thin. “Listen, Magnus, uh … We got ourselves a little situation. Abaddon, the last Knife of Hell, is looking to up her pay grade and take over the place.”

“Things never change, do they?” Magnus picked up a glass with a dark liquid in it and took a sip. “I kept telling the boys over and over again — I would say, ‘we could stop all this. We could rid the world of monsters once and for all if we just put our minds to it,’ but, ‘oh no,’ they said. ‘No no no. It’s not our place. We’re here to study. We’re here to catalog.’”

Magnus rolled his eyes, and Dean shot his brother a glance before he gave a small nod. “Yeah, yeah, no, we get it. They’re, uh … geeks.” Magnus gave a hum of agreement, and Dean added, “But Abaddon — she can be stopped. But we need something that we hear you have — the First Blade.”

“Hmm. I see. Interesting.” Magnus leaned forward in his seat, lowering his voice. “But if you’d really done your homework, you would know that it’s absolutely useless, unless, of course, you’re possessing the Mark —”

Dean pulled up his right sleeve, revealing the red brand on his forearm, and Magnus cut off in surprise. “The Mark of Cain,” he finished.

“Oh, my.” The man’s gaze rested on Dean’s arm, interest gleaming in his deep blue eyes. “How did you come by that?”

Dean quickly rolled his sleeve back down, hiding the brand from Sinclair’s view, and Sam spoke up. “Listen, if Abaddon takes over, the one thing she wants more than anything is to make hell on earth. Not even you can escape that.”

“And they say all hunters are morons.” Magnus leaned back in his chair and motioned behind the three of them. “It’s right there behind you, gentlemen.”
Sam and Dean rose to their feet, and Alex quickly did the same, gripping her weapon tight as she turned around. A display stand stood five feet from them, supporting Cain’s weapon. The old jawbone gleamed in the ambient lighting, still holding several teeth, and the base was bound with leather that formed the handle.

“Listen,” Dean began, “if you’re serious about taking action, this — this is taking action. You loan us that Blade, and we will stop the bitch.”

“Hmm.” The chair creaked softly as Magnus rose to his feet. “Let me think about it.” There was a pause, and Alex turned back to face him. “Alright, I’ve thought about it.” The man brought his hand up to his lips, blowing harshly, and Alex flinched as a green dust exploded from his palm into the faces of her and Sam. “Abi, ab oculus meis!” he ordered, and the world spun.

Alex stumbled back, raising her hands to brush the powder out of her eyes. “Son of a bitch!” she yelled, blinking in surprise to find herself back out in the clearing. “Dammit!”

“No!” Sam spun around, his eyes wide. “Dean? Dean!” He suddenly tore off across the grass, and Alex followed, jumping over a fallen branch as she darted through the trees.

Sam’s long legs quickly left her in the dirt, and Alex slowed her pace as she followed the path towards the Impala. “Crowley!” she yelled, looking around for the demon. “Where are you?”

“Magnus has Dean.” She could hear Sam’s breathless voice up ahead, and she slid to a stop on the road. Sam was unlocking the trunk, and Crowley stood nearby, his head tipped in curiosity.

“So you found him, I take it.” Crowley’s voice was unperturbed, and he watched as Alex jogged up to the car. “Does he have the Blade?”

“Yeah. But he also wants the Mark.” Alex watched as Sam pulled open the trunk. “Dude, what’s the plan? We have to get back in there and get Dean.”

Yeah. But he also wants the Mark.” Alex watched as Sam pulled open the trunk. “Dude, what’s the plan? We have to get back in there and get Dean.”

“Yeah, yeah. I know.” Sam started to dig through the contents, but he paused as Crowley took a step closer, peering over the Winchester’s shoulders. “Do you mind?”

The demon backed away. “Who would have sunk it, eh, moose?” he asked. “You and me, same team, in the trenches. When this is over, we can get matching tattoos.”

Alex scowled, and Sam heaved one of the archive boxes from the bunker out of the trunk. “Just to be clear, Crowley, we are not on the same anything.” He carried the box around to the passenger side where he could sit in the car. “By the way, since the place is warded, your powers are useless, which means you are useless, even more so than usual.” He gestured towards the demon with his knife, keeping the King at bay as he ripped open the box and dug through the contents.

Despite the threat, Crowley kept his cool. “You’re gonna need another set of hands when you get in there, unless you have other volunteers in mind.”

“I’ve got Alex.” Sam gestured to her in turn, and Alex puffed out her chest as she smirked over at the demon. “So I think I’ll pass.”

Crowley only frowned. “If memory serves me, I’m the one who helped your brother find Cain so that we could find the Blade, so that Dean could receive the Mark. I’m the one who flushed that lout Gadreel out of your noggin. So, lately, big boy, I’ve seen more playing time than you.”

Sam lifted his head, his eyes wide with exasperation. “Crowley, will you please shut the hell up? Alex, make him shut up.”
“What? I —” Alex pursed her lips, turning back to the King of Hell. “Crowley, just — shut the hell up.”

The afternoon passed into early evening, and Sam had found nothing. Alex had taken up to pacing around the car, wearing tracks into the thin grass. The sun was stretching towards the horizon, and a chill wind had picked up, and the ex-angel pulled her sweatshirt tighter around her body. “Here’s something.” Sam’s words had her perking up instantly, and she hurried over to stand at his side. “Apparently, Magnus wanted to make the entire Men of Letters invisible. All physical points of entry were to be eliminated ‘and entrance would only be gained by spell.’ ” Sam’s gaze ran down the file he was holding before he looked up. “Oh. We’re gonna need some things. You actually might turn out to be useful, Crowley.”

The demon smirked, uncrossing his arms from where he had been standing, virtually unmoving, all night. “Tell me what you need. I’ll be back in a jiff.”

Sam quickly scribbled down the ingredients on a piece of scratch paper, and then the demon was gone. Alex dropped down in the grass across from Sam, anxiously picking at the green stems as they awaited the King of Hell’s return. “So you think that spell is the same one Magnus is using now?”

“I think it’s the best bet that we have.” Sam handed Alex the file, and she quickly glanced over the page before she handed it back. “It’s been hours, and it’s the only lead that we have.” He got up and circled around to the trunk, digging out a wooden bowl.

“Here.” Crowley was back, a bag in his hands, and Sam quickly emptied the contents into the bowl. “What did I miss?” Alex and Sam didn’t answer as they hurried back towards the clearing, leaving the demon to saunter off after them with a roll of his eyes. “I did good, eh, moose?” he called.

“Everything on the list. You’re welcome.”

Sam scoffed. “Stay close, do what I say, and shut the hell up,” he ordered.

Crowley stopped at his side with a chuckle. “I’m growing on you, aren’t I?” He looked humorously over at Alex, and the ex-angel pursed her lips, quickly looking away.

“Ingressum domi dona mihi,” Sam chanted, and fire left into the bowl, sending sparks into the night air. Smoke rose from the ground, billowing as it created the same black doorway Alex and Sam had stepped through before. Sam tossed the bowl aside, and he led the way into the mansion.

The crushing darkness encircled her for a second before the hallway came into view, and Alex blinked away the spinning sense of displacement. “Love what he’s done with the place.” Crowley appeared beside her, gazing around at the well-lit walls.

“Is this the same hallway?” Alex frowned; the walls were as blank as the other one, giving no indication of their position. “I can’t tell.”

“Shh.” Sam put a hand up, and Alex paused, listening to the footfalls that were drawing nearer. He motioned them further down to the hall to hide in a small, curtained alcove, and Alex drew her shoulders back tightly in displeasure to find herself jammed in next to Crowley — she could feel the heat of his skin through her clothes, and, disgusted, she pushed herself as close to Sam as she could.

The footsteps passed by and paused, and Alex heard the sound of a key in a lock. Sam slipped out into the hall, the demon knife in his hands, and Alex immediately followed, keeping low on her silent feet.
Magnus stood a few yards away, tucking something into a drawer, and Sam jumped forward, grabbing the man and pushing the knife up against his throat. “Take me to my brother,” he growled, and the man shrunk away in surprise.

Magnus slowly lifted his hands and obliged, silently making his way down the hall. Sam stayed at his back, knife against his neck, but Alex hung back a few steps, gripping her angel blade tightly in case the Man of Letters decided to try anything; something about his subdued meekness didn’t feel right. They passed down another hall before they stopped beside a door, heavy and brass. It opened beneath Magnus’ touch, and Alex peered past Sam to find herself back in the sitting room.

Dean was there, chained against one of the ornate pillars. His eyes widened when they entered, and he strained at his bonds. “Sam!” he yelled. “No!”

Magnus shimmered before them, shifting into a dark-haired man, and Alex jerked back as he violently ripped the knife out of Sam’s hand. Sam jumped away as the shifter swung the knife, barely getting out of the way, and Alex lunged forward, sinking her blade into the shifter’s heart. It died with a scream and a flash of light, and Alex shoved the corpse to the ground as she stepped into the room.

The cocking of a gun had her freezing. Magnus stepped into view from behind Dean, the Winchester’s gun pointed at her heart. “Shape-shifter,” he crowed. “You see? There are benefits to keeping a zoo. And I’m tempted to add you to my collection,” he added, motioning from her weapon to her with the barrel of the gun. “At least until I get my hands on an actual angel.” He waved them into the room, and the door swung closed behind them. “Sam. Why don’t you tie up your friend there for me, won’t you?”

Alex looked over at Sam, and the tight line of his lips answered her silent question. She slowly walked over to one of the pillars and pressed her back against it, lifting her chin to hold Magnus’ gaze as Sam secured her with a coil of rope. He backed away, and Alex watched as Magnus tied Sam up to a pillar next to her.

“You know,” he began, stepping away to admire his handiwork, “I discarded you far too quickly, Sam. You’re both way more valuable than I thought you were.” His gaze flickered over to Alex before he turned his attention onto Dean. “Why would I knock myself out trying to sap your will? I think Sam here will get you to see things my way.”

Dean struggled angrily against his bonds as the man drew a knife out of his pocket. “Magnus, I swear to God …”

“What? What are you going to do?” He turned to Sam, a glimmer of dark amusement in his eyes. “What is he gonna do, huh?” He slid the knife down Sam’s cheek, and the Winchester hissed at the pain as blood welled up from the torn skin. Dean strained at his chains, and Alex did the same, her fingers digging into the knots as she tried to loosen Sam’s work. “Yeah, look, look, Sam,” Magnus was saying. “I’m not going to kill you. Of course not.” There was movement, and Alex’s head snapped up, but Magnus continued on, unaware. “But I am going to make you suffer unimaginably, alright?”

Alex watched as Crowley peered in through the doorway, and she widened her eyes, jerking her head towards Magnus as she tried to silently signal him to help. The demon shook his head, but, with a snap of his fingers, Alex felt the ropes around her wrist fall away.

Chains clinked, and Alex watched Dean slip free and dart over to where the First Blade sat upon its pedestal.
Magnus reacted too late; by the time he had spun around, the weapon was in Dean’s hand. “N-” The Man of Letters’ cry was cut short as the First Blade cut through his neck, sliding through the flesh like it was warm butter. His head toppled to the ground, and his body followed a second later. Alex rubbed her wrists, stepping forward to untie Sam, but she paused when she found Dean’s gaze on Crowley, unblinking and cold. The First Blade trembled in his arms, shaking with an uncontrollable urge, and Alex shifted back, unnerved by the focus on his face.

“Dean?” Sam pulled at his ropes, and Alex snapped out of her trance with a jerk. Her feet carried her over to untie the Winchester, fingers clawing at the course fibers as Sam called out his brother. “Dean. Hey, it’s over. He’s dead.” The ex-angel watched as Dean’s gaze dropped down to the Blade, and hers followed, eyes growing wide at the sight of his forearm. It glowed with an unnatural red light, his veins shimmering and bulging as they trace their way up to the smoldering Mark. “Drop the Blade, Dean.” Sam’s voice shook, but his brother didn’t look away as his trembling continued, the power of the weapon shaking his very being. “Dean!”

Dean’s eyes snapped upwards, locking with his brothers, and Sam’s voice softened. “Drop the Blade.”

The jawbone hit the wooden floor with a thud, and Dean drew his trembling hand up into the safety of his chest. Alex undid the last of Sam’s knots, and the Winchester was free. “We have to get out of here.” Alex turned to Crowley. “How?”

“Same way as before, I presume.” The demon motioned to a large table filled with jars of various materials. Then his eyes drifted down to the First Blade, and he gave a small jerk of his head in its direction.

Alex understood. She slipped across the room, intent on picking up the weapon, but Sam got there first, scooping the Blade up into his hands as he turned to Crowley. “Alright. Get us out of here.”

“Of course.” Crowley turned back to the table, and Alex shifted away, sticking her hands in her pockets as she waited uncomfortably. After a second, she turned, eyes falling on her angel blade that had been dropped, discarded, on the floor, and she hurried over to pick it up. “Ingressum domi dona mihi.” The door to the outside world opened at Crowley’s words, and the demon led the way out and back into the clearing.

“I’m fine.” Dean’s words had Alex glancing behind her, and she frowned to watch him push Sam away. The young Winchester frowned as Dean stumbled on, unsteady at first, and Alex stepped aside to let the both of them stalk past.

“Brilliant, I must say,” Crowley began as Dean led the way back towards the Impala. “I’m speaking of myself, of course. All you three managed to do was get trussed up. Combine a little derring-do on my part, a little dumb muscle from squirrel, a little bleeding from moose, and whatever the hell you did,” he added to Alex, but the ex-angel barely heard.

She was staring at the Impala. The doors were thrown wide, its windows shattered and its contents scattered across the ground. “No, no!” Dean’s voice cracked, and he broke into a sprint. “Come on. What the hell?”

Sam was at his side in an instant, running his finger over the torn leather seats. “That’s sulphur,” he reported. “Demons.”

“Abaddon’s.” Dean straightened up, looking back at Crowley. “Well, she’s just one jump behind us. Guess she couldn’t find Magnus’ joint either. What about the trunk?” he asked his brother.
“Safe.” Sam lifted up the trunk and peered at the contents within. “Warding kept them out.”

“Demon mitts all over my baby.” Dean slammed the door shut, and his face twisted in rage. “Oh, come on! Oh, now they’re keying cars?” He dropped to his knees, fingers coming out to trace the scratchings in the paint, and Alex felt her own stomach twist at the writing that marred the sleek black paint.

“What language is that?”

“It’s Enochian.” Both Alex and Crowley answered at the same time, and the ex-angel stepped away from the demon to move closer to Dean’s side. “The message isn’t for you,” Crowley continued. “It’s for me. ‘Be afraid. Your Queen,’ ” he read. “Abaddon’s getting more brazen. She thinks I’m losing my grip.”

Dean’s head fell, pressing into his beloved car as his eyes squeezed shut, and Alex reached out to put a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Dean, she murmured. “It’s okay.”

“Dean.” Sam’s words had Dean shaking off Alex’s hand as he rose to his feet, his green eyes hardening with fury. “Listen,” his brother began in a hushed whisper, “you said Crowley was only useful til we got the Blade. We got the Blade.”

Panic shot through Alex as Dean’s gaze flickered over to Crowley, and she winced as she felt the King of Hell’s eyes upon her. The demon flicked his hand, and the Winchesters flew into the Impala, pinned by an immovable force. The First Blade fell onto the dirt, and Alex closed her eyes as she found herself still standing on her feet, unaffected by the King of Hell’s attack.

“You know, boys, I’m in debt to you,” Crowley began. “You forced sobriety on me, and now I can see the situation for what it is. Dean, you are quite the killing machine. And it occurs to me that Abaddon is not the only name on your list. My name must be up there as well.”

“It’s no good to you without me,” Dean snapped.

“Yes,” the demon relented, “but as long as I have it, it’s no good to you.” His gaze turned onto Alex, and the young hunter took a step back, eyes stretched wide in a silent plea. “Alex.” A smirk tugged the corner of the demon’s lips upwards. “Be a dear and fetch that for me, would you?” Alex hesitated, and the smirk faded into a cold-set frown. “Now.”

With trembling hands, Alex bent down to pick up the First Blade. The leather was warm in her hands, and she gripped it tight as she carried it over to the King of Hell. “Alex?” Sam struggled against the car, his hazel eyes wide. “No, don’t!” Alex paused, and the urgency in his voice grew. “You don’t have to do this,” he begged.

“That’s where you’re wrong, moose.” Crowley held out his hand, and Alex placed the jawbone into his awaiting palm, head turned away so the brothers couldn’t see her face. “She’s been playing for my team for months. Isn’t that right, sweetheart?”

Alex didn’t answer, and she heard Dean’s fist thump against the Impala. “Son of a bitch!” he yelled, and the ex-angel flinched away. “I knew it! I fucking knew it!”

“Now, this is the way it’s going to go. I’ll hang onto old donkey teeth here until such time as you locate Abaddon. Then you’ll destroy her. You’re right, moose. You can’t trust me. But, sadly, I can’t trust you, either.” He turned to Alex, and the ex-angel reluctantly lifted her head to look into his eyes. “I’ll be seeing you around.”

He disappeared, and Sam and Dean were released from their hold. Alex winced as she forced herself
to face the brothers. “Sam,” she started, “Dean —” Dean’s fist came out of nowhere, straight at her face, and the sharp, blinding impact sent Alex falling backwards as the world disappeared into darkness.
Alex blinked back into consciousness, groaning at the ringing in her ears and the pounding in her head. She was sitting up, slouched in a chair, but wherever she was, it was dark. Where was she? The ex-angel grimaced, straining her eyes to see in the darkness. The only source of light was a thin strip on the ground five feet ahead of her, clearly from a room beyond. She tipped her back to sniff at the musty air, and the young hunter groaned as she realized where she was.

The bunker’s dungeon.

Alex let her head fall to her chest. “Dean?” she yelled, but it felt hoarse in her throat. How long had she been out? “Sam!”

The doors swung open, and Alex screwed up her eyes against the light. Two figures stood outlined against it, and the young hunter grimaced at the tightness in their posture. Great. She heard the two enter, their footsteps loud on the stone floor.

“Well?” Dean’s voice sounded as the lights flipped on, and Alex looked up into his scowling features.

“Well what?” She spat out her response, the throbbing in her head making her temper run short. “Get me out of here.” She tugged fruitlessly at her bonds as the Winchesters scoffed.

“You’re not going anywhere. What the hell?” Dean’s voice exploded in anger, and the young girl flinched away. “Working with Crowley? You know, you’ve done a lot of stupid things before, but this takes the cake.”

“You don’t understand, you idiot —” Pain shot through her face as Dean’s fist connected with her jaw, and the ex-angel gasped for air. She could taste blood, but the blinding pain was too intense for her to even spit it out; all she could do was let it drip from her mouth as her head fell to her chest as Sam jumped forward to intervene.

“What don’t I understand?” Dean’s voice shook with uncontrollable rage as his brother pushed him back. “You betrayed us, and now Crowley has the First Blade! You lied to us, Alex, after you promised you weren’t. What else have you lied about, huh?” The Winchester slipped past Sam, and the chair shook as Dean planted a hand against the back, leaning down until his face was inches from hers. Alex kept her gaze on the ground, and she flinched away when Dean’s fist flashed past her head, pounding against the back of the chair with a crack. “What else!?”

“Dean, stop!” Sam snapped, dissipating some of Dean’s rage as he turned to face his brother.

“We can’t trust her, Sam. She played us, and for all we know she’s been playing us for years. I mean, think about it — everything we know about her is what she told us, and we just took it on her word. How can we trust it now?”

“We’ve known her for — for years.” Sam’s gaze darted over to her, but the small hunter kept her eyes on the ground. “You’re just going to throw all that away?”

“I’m saying we can’t trust anything she’s told us,” Dean hissed in response. “I — I mean, how do we
even know Alex is her real name, huh?” He turned back to the ex-angel, his eyes glinting in suspicion. “Well?” he snapped. “Is it?”

Alex lifted her eyes, but she couldn’t bring herself to lie in the face of his rage, and she dropped her gaze once again. “Oh my God.” Shock flashed across Dean’s face, followed by fury, and he spun around and stalked out of the room.

Alex’s bottom lip trembled as he disappeared from view, and she winced at the sound of boxes crashing to the ground as Dean took out his rage on the shelves outside. “You don’t understand,” she whispered, and her voice shook as her head fell back to her chest.

“What don’t we understand?” Metal scraped against the ground as Sam pulled up a chair, and Alex closed her eyes. She could hear the disappointment in Sam’s voice, the betrayal, and the pain of it hurt worse than Dean’s blows. “Alex, why would you do this?”

The young hunter half-heartedly lifted her head. “I didn’t want to do it,” she got out, and a tear-choked sob caught in her throat, stifled by the blood still filling her mouth. “I didn’t!” Her fists tightened in their bonds, and the chains clinked together at the moment.

“Then why?” Sam’s voice was surprisingly calm, and Alex flinched away his hand came to rest upon hers.

The touch was warm and gentle, and Alex flexed her fingers in surprise. “Cas.” Stubbornness rushed through her, and she lifted her gaze. “I-I want Castiel.”

“We can’t reach him.” Sam’s answer came quickly and firmly, and Alex could hear the faint threat behind the obvious lie, a warning not to push him. “Why?”

“Because I had to.” Alex spat out her words. “Okay? You think I like being Crowley’s bitch? You think I’d choose to do that, running his stupid little errands and killing whatever he told me to?”

Her outburst was met with silence, and Sam withdrew his hand. “No,” he finally said. “I don’t, but I …” He trailed off, shaking his head. “I’m sorry.”

He rose to his feet, and Alex leaned forward as the Winchester started to walk away. “No, no, wait! Sam!” Her voice cracked with urgency. “Please, just listen to me. I — I had to do this! I made a deal with Crowley to save Castiel, okay? Cas was being hunted by angels, and I-I couldn’t …” Alex hung her head as her voice dropped in regret. “I couldn’t take it. I needed to make sure he was safe.”

The chair squealed as Sam sat back down. “How long did you get?”

“Two years. Two years for Crowley’s freedom and Castiel’s safety. T-The deal was void if any of you found out, but after my heart gave out, a-and I realized that it was only a matter of time before one of you caught on … we revised it.” Alex closed her eyes as the memories came back. “We took out the clause, but in return … if he needed something done, I would do it. And I would get my two years — all of it, and not a day less.”

“Why?”

Alex shook her head. “The way he said it, it seemed like the best option. But some of the things he made me do …” She trailed off with a shiver before she added, “And the worst part is that it doesn’t even matter.” She looked up into Sam’s hazel eyes. ”It doesn’t matter who I kill or who I save, because I’m going to hell either way.”

Sam’s hand came to rest on her small shoulder. ”Hey, listen to me. It’s going to be okay,” he
promised. “We’ll fix this.”

The ex-angel shrugged it off. "You can't." She let her head fall back to her chest, no longer willing to continue the conversation. Sam rose to his feet and walked away, and the room fell back into darkness as the door closed behind him, leaving the ex-angel alone with her thoughts.

She wasn't sure how much time passed; at least a day or two, judging by the hunger in her stomach despite the small, irregular meals. The visits were far and few between, and just when Alex thought that they had finally forgotten about her, the doors finally opened. Alex winced at the brightness, turning her head away to shield her eyes. "Hey." Sam's voice was soft, and the ex-angel looked up into his face as her eyes adjusted to the light. "How are you doing?"

"Hungry. Stiff. Thirsty." Alex shifted in her seat, groaning as the handcuffs rubbed against her chafed wrists. "I need a shower."

"Come on." Sam circled around behind her, and Alex turned her head, trying to watch as he undid her bonds. "Let's get you upstairs."

The ex-angel rubbed her sore wrists in surprise as the handcuffs fell away, and she let Sam help her to her unsteady feet. "There's no way Dean's on board with this," she muttered as she stepped towards the open door, and she cast a quick look around for the eldest brother.

"It doesn't matter what Dean thinks." Sam led the way up the stairs, and Alex followed close at his heels, refusing to show how her stiff and hunger-weakened limbs wanted to fall behind. "I'm not going to let him keep you down there any more."

"Like hell you will." Dean's voice came from the end of the hall, and Alex turned to see the Winchester standing there, arms crossed. "Dude, what the hell?" Green eyes flashed as he stared at his brother, and Alex shifted closer to Sam. "I thought we agreed to keep her down there."

"No, you said we were going to keep her down there. And she's been down there long enough — she needs to eat, Dean. We can't keep treating her like she's not human." He looked down at Alex and tilted his head towards the kitchen. "Go get some food," he instructed. "Meet us in the library when you're done."

Alex hurried away, not hesitating in case one of the brothers changed their minds, and she didn't stop until she was safely within the confines of the kitchen. "C-Cas?" Alex tipped her head back to look up at the ceiling, keeping her voice low lest Sam or Dean overhear. "Where are you? I … I need your help. Please."

Unsure what else to say, she pulled open the fridge in search of nourishment. There was a half-empty pizza box, and, unsure what else to do, the ex-angel threw two pieces into the microwave. She tucked a coke can under her arm as the machine dinged, and, with a reluctant frown, she made her way back towards the library.

Sam and Dean were both there, seated around a pile of books, and the young hunter awkwardly took a seat at the far end of the table, gently setting down her plate as to avoid attention. It didn't work, and she turned away from Dean's glare. "Hey," Sam began, "so, I caught wind of a case online. A first grade teacher came home and killed her husband."

"Well, maybe she snapped." Dean turned his attention back down to the mess of books in front of him. "Ankle biters can do that to you."
"Dude, she pounded him into groundchuck."

Alex watched out of the corner of her eye as Dean flipped through the pages of a leather-bound encyclopedia before he quickly pulled a second one close, running a finger down the page. "So, what are you thinking?" he asked, his voice distant and distracted.

"Uh, best guess — possession." Sam glanced over at Alex, and the ex-angel gave a small, barely perceptible nod in agreement.

Dean grunted, and he pushed his chair back as he got to his feet. "Why don’t you go?" he suggested, crossing over to one of the metal filing cabinets and pulling open the top drawer.

Alex watched him pull a folder free and flip through it, her face blank with surprise; she had never seen the Winchester so committed to research that he had turned down a case. "Dean, look," Sam finally said. "I want to find Abaddon, too, but we’ve been combing through this stuff for days."

Dean ran a finger down a page, his eyes darting back and forth as he read over the worn Men of Letters report. "Well, maybe we missed something," he snapped, his voice surprisingly sharp, and Alex winced when his gaze snapped up to her when she cracked open her drink.

“And maybe there are better ways to spend our time than just spinning our —”

“Maybe we don’t have the time!” Dean cut his brother off, eye flashing angrily as he shouted out his words. He roughly dropped the file onto the table before he turned to dig out another one.

Sam’s shoulders fell as he stared at his brother. “What’s up with you?”

“Nothing.” Dean pulled a sheet out paper out of the cabinet and returned to his seat.

“Yeah?” Sam closed his laptop and rose to his feet, towering over his brother. “See, because ever since you killed Magnus, you’ve been acting … sort of … obsessed.”

“Well, maybe because I want an end to all this.” Dean finally lifted his head to meet his brother’s gaze, his voice sharp. “Maybe because if we find Abaddon, then Crowley ponies up the First Blade, and we kill her and him both. So, what you call being ‘obsessed,’ I call doing my job.” He turned back down to his folder, his signal that the conversation was done.

“Okay, um … I get it. I’m just checking in.” Sam slid his chair back under the table, and he jerked a thumb towards the ex-angel. "It’s fine. I’ll just take Alex with me instead."

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Dean’s eyes widened, and his head snapped towards Alex before turning back to his brother. “You’re not serious.”

“Uh … yeah. I am.” Sam crossed his arms, and Alex slowly rose to her feet. “I still trust her to have my back on this, Dean. And I clearly can’t leave her alone with you. So she’s coming with.” Dean didn’t argue, and Sam motioned off down the hall. “Go get your stuff,” he told her, and Alex gave a small, quick nod. “I’ll go pack the car.”

Alex followed Sam in through the swinging doors of the police station, pulling her badge from deep within her jacket pocket as they were approached by a tall, dark-haired officer. “Agents Waters and Gilmour.” Sam introduced them, and Alex’s eyes swept around the tidy waiting room. She could feel the sheriff’s gaze on her, resting on her left jaw; a deep bruise marred the pale flesh, Dean’s mark of her betrayal. “We’re here about Karen Young.”
The sheriff looked back up at Sam, surprise flitting through his brown gaze, but he simply nodded. “Suit yourself. I’ve got a copy of the report on my desk. I’ll go grab it for you.” He walked away, waving the two hunters after him.

Alex reached up, gingerly touching her swollen face. “Don’t touch it.” Sam’s murmur had her hand falling back to her side. “Just ignore him, okay?”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever.” Alex fell in step behind Sam as they followed the sheriff to his office. The man appeared a second later, holding out a manilla folder, and Sam took it in his hands. He flipped through it before handing it down to Alex, and the ex-angel did the same, skimming through the report to fill in the holes of what Sam had told her in the car. Karen Young, a thirty two year old first grade teacher, brutally beat her husband Ric to death last Wednesday night with a candle holder. The crime scene photos showed the brutality in gruesome detail; the attack had continued far past the point of necessity,

She handed the the file back to the sheriff, and he dropped it back down on the desk. “If you two want to have a chat with Karen, she’s here in cell one.”

“Yeah, that would be great.” Sam stepped aside so the sheriff could take the lead back down the hall. “So, it says here in your report that you were the first one on the scene?”

“Yes, sir. I found Mrs. Young sitting next to her husband covered in blood.” The sheriff pushed his way through a door, and Sam and Alex followed.

“Was the husband abusive?” Alex asked, letting the heavy metal door swing closed behind her with a bang.

“Ric?” The man glanced back at her in surprise, and his brow furrowed. “Oh, no. Not at all. I mean, he could be a stubborn S.O.B., but can’t we all?”

“Ah.” Sam nodded in understanding, and Alex shoved her hands into her pockets. “Anything else, uh, weird that maybe you felt was too odd to include?”

The sheriff blinked, confused by the Winchester’s words. “Like?”

“Like,” Alex elaborated, “did you smell sulfur?” She rolled back her shoulders to stand straighter as she paused beside Sam Winchester.

“Why would I smell sulfur?” The man scoffed at her words, and Alex’s lips twitched downwards in the hints of a frown.

“Of course.” Sam gently touched Alex on the arm, a silent gesture of support, as the young hunter let her shoulders fall in disappointment. “Uh, thank you. What about Karen’s eyes? You notice anything strange?”

The sheriff’s attention turned to Sam. “Actually, agent,” he admitted, “they, uh, pretty much looked like eyes.” He turned and led the way around a bend in the hall, and Sam and Alex exchanged exasperated looks, but it was cut short when the sheriff stopped dead in his tracks. “Oh Lord.” His voice shook, and with a start of surprise, Alex hurried around the corner.

There, in cell number one, hung a woman’s body. Glassy, lifeless eyes stared into nothing as the corpse swung from the bed sheet wrapped around a ceiling pipe. Blood dripped down from her broken and bleeding nails, and Alex let her gaze sweep across the stone walls of the cell. Words were scraped into the rough cement, phrases and fragments in thin, bloody letters barely readable beneath the overwhelming amount scarlet handprints. “Shit.” She muttered the curse beneath her
breath as she looked back at Sam to find her own surprise mirrored on his face.

“I gotta — I gotta call back up.” The sheriff reached up to his walkie that rested on his shoulder. “Joey, I-I’m gonna need an ambulance over at the station. Karen — yeah, Karen’s dead.” He listened to the crackled response before he turned back to Sam and Alex with a shake of his head. “I … I don’t get this. Karen and Ric were two of the most ordinary people you’d ever meet.”

Sam tore his gaze away from the hanging corpse. “Did she go anywhere on the day of the murder?”

“It was Saturday.” The sheriff looked down at the ground, determined not to turn back to Karen Young. “Uh … a quick trip to the grocery store. That’s about it.”

A faint buzzing filled the air, and Alex looked down to see an EMF detector hidden in Sam’s large hand. She cleared her throat, covering up the sound. “Okay,” she decided. “We’ll get out of your guys’ way then. I guess … let us know if anything turns up. You have our number.” She stepped back, and Sam followed her back down the hall and towards the exit. Only once they were free from the sheriff’s sight did she look up at the Winchester. “Okay … so?”

“Yeah.” Sam ran a hand through his dark hair. “I’m going to call Dean.” He pulled out his phone and dialed his brother’s number, and Alex stretched her neck up so she could hear the conversation more clearly.

“How’s Mrs. Manson doing?” she heard Dean inquire.

“Dead.” Sam pushed his way out of the police station and led the way towards the black Impala. “Hung herself in her cell.” He unlocked the car, and Alex circled around to her side. She missed Dean’s response, but Sam frowned at his words. “If it was a demon,” he countered. “I mean, there was no sulfur, no EMF anywhere. And everyone who saw her just before she gutted her husband said she was totally fine.” He put the phone on speaker and place it on the dashboard.

“—are you still doing there?” Dean was asking. “This sounds like a case of the crazies to me.”

“Well, if nothing kicks up by morning, we’re out of here.” Sam hesitated, exchanging a look with Alex, before he asked, “How’s the research going?”

“It’s going. Alright. Well, uh … good luck.” The phone clicked as Dean hung up, and Sam sighed.

“How’s he doing?” Alex clicked her seatbelt into place as Sam started the car. “He seems a bit … tense … but I don’t know if that’s just ‘cause of, you know … me.”

Sam shook his head. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “But he’s definitely changed. When he first held the Blade …” the Winchester trailed off. “It’s like he wasn’t himself. But I think your deal has made it worse.”

Alex’s shoulders fell as the Impala drove away from the police station, and she turned to watch her reflection in the side mirror. The dark purple markings of her jaw were hidden by the night, and she turned away.

“Hey … Sam?”

“Yeah?”

“Why … why do you still trust me?” Alex glanced at him from the corner of her eye. “After what I did …”

“What are you talking about?” The car rolled down the street, and Sam frowned as he shot her a quick, confused look. “Listen, I get why you made that deal, okay? And whatever it’s made you do,
you did it to save Cas. Everything you’ve done, it’s been for help people. Sure, I’m not happy about this, but I don’t think you’d do anything to hurt me.” The Winchester paused, letting his words hang in the air before he asked, “Am I right?”

“Yeah. You’re right.” Alex sighed, watching the buildings pass by. While doubt still gnawed at her stomach, she couldn’t deny that he was right about one thing; she couldn’t bring herself to hurt him. “Can we grab some dinner?” she finally asked. “I’m still pretty hungry.”

“Sure. I think I saw a diner on our way into town.” Sam turned the Impala around a corner, and Alex leaned back against the window as they took off down the road.

Within five minutes, Sam pulled the Impala up in front of the brightly lit diner. Alex jumped out of the car, her stomach rumbling at the prospect of food, but she forced herself to follow him through the doors. Her gaze traversed the warm white and red decor, her nostrils flaring as she took in the smell of salt and grease. They took a seat at the counter, and Alex swiveled slightly on her red bar stool, the tips of her toes brushing against the ground. “Hi.” A dark-haired waitress walked up to them, a half-filled coffee pot in her hand. “What can I get you two?”

“I’ll just start with some coffee,” Sam decided, passing a menu over to Alex.

Alex waited until the waitress had slid a mug over to Sam and poured him a cup before she added, “I’ll take a coke and a burger. No tomatoes, extra onions.” She slid the menu back over to Sam as her stomach twisted painfully, growing impatient, and she tightened her fingers around the edge of the counter as she forced her mind away from eating. “Alright,” she began as the waitress walked away, “so demons are out. What else?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s not ghost possession either, and angels tend to stab — plus suicide is a little below them, don’t you think? Uh, shaitan, maybe?”

Alex grimaced as she remembered the red djinn. “God, I hope not.” The memory of her demon self passed through her mind, and the ex-angel shivered. That was going to be her in two years, a twisted, raged-filled monster —

Sam’s hand came to rest on her knee, jerking her out of her thoughts. “Hey, you okay?”

“Yeah, I — I’m fine. Just really hungry.” The waitress returned with her drink, and as Sam ordered his dinner, Alex pulled out her vibrating phone to find Castiel’s name on the screen. “Uh, excuse me just one second.” She rose up from her seat and stepped away as she pressed her phone up against her ear.

“Hey. Cas. What’s going on?”

“Nothing of any importance. I’m just checking in.” Castiel’s soft, rumbling voice had warmth rushing through her chest. “How are you? I haven’t heard much the past couple of days.”

“Oh … yeah.” Alex glanced back at Sam before dropping her gaze. “It’s been a bit rough, to be honest. Where are you at? I miss you.”

“I’m near Champaign, Illinois. One of Bartholomew’s soldiers — mine now, I suppose — heard rumors of a rogue angel in the area, so I’m up here looking for him.” The seraph let out a low, frustrated breath of air. “I’ve found nothing, though. If there was someone here, he fled long ago.”

“Oh. Well, you know, you could come over to Milton,” Alex suggested, and hope lifted her tone.
“That’s where Sam and I are. We’re staying at the Charlottes’ Motel, room fifteen.” A hand tapped on her shoulder, and Alex spun around to see Sam pointing towards the kitchen, indicating that their meal was almost done. “Mm,” she hummed before Castiel could answer. “I need to go, handsome. Love you.”

She returned to her seat and took a sip of her Coke, but the sweet liquid did little to curb her hunger, and she cast a longing glance towards the kitchen. “Cas, uh, Cas says hi,” she half-lied to the Winchester next to her.

The waitress returned with their food, and Alex’s mouth watered at the smell. “Can I get you anything else?” she asked, but Alex barely heard her, her attention too focused on the meal in front of her.

“Uh, this is great,” she distantly heard Sam reply. “Thank you.”

The bell rang on the door, and a teenager took a seat at the counter with them. “Be with you in a moment, Bill,” the waitress told him with a small smile before she turned back to exchange a few words with the chef in the kitchen.

Alex picked up her burger, but it stopped short of her mouth as she looked over at the teenager in surprise. He had dug his hand into a half-filled plate beside him, left over from one of the other patrons, and immediately starting shoving them into his mouth, forcing them down with a mannerless hunger.

The waitress turned back, her mouth falling open at the sight. “Bill, what are you doing?” She crossed her arms, her face aghast. “Your mother raise you in a barn?”

“Don’t talk to me like that!” Billy’s voice rose in a shout, and the waitress’ eyes widened in shock. “Hey.” Sam turned to the teenager with a frown. “Take it easy. She’s working hard.”

The waitress walked over to Billy, Sam’s frown mimicked across her own features. “What’s eating you?” she asked, worry lining her voice.

In response, Billy tipped an empty glass off of the counter, and it shattered against the tile ground. “You,” he said with an indifferent shrug. “My mom. Them.” He gestured over to Sam and Alex, and the ex-angel narrowed her eyes in offense.

“Hey,” she warned, setting down her burger. “Give it a rest, buddy.”

The boy glared at her, his blue sparkling with a ruthless anger, and Alex lifted her chin defiantly, refusing to look away. “Billy?” The waitress put a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Billy. I’m gonna call your mom, have her come fetch you.”

“No, you’re not.” In one swift motion, Billy grabbed the waitress’ hand and pinned it to the counter. A steak knife flashed through the air, embedding itself in her hand, and Alex launched herself to her feet, instinct carrying her into the teenage boy. She lashed out with her fist, catching him on the side of the head, but Billy was quick too, his own hand slamming against her bruised jaw. Alex hissed, wincing away, and the teenager took the opportunity to shove her away, sending her tripping over chairs and falling into a table. The sharp wooden edge slammed into the back of her skull, and Alex slumped to the floor, dazed.

She distantly heard Sam take over, knocking the boy out with a single, well-aimed blow, but the world around her spun too much for her to make sense of the colors and sounds surrounding her. “Alex? Alex. Hey.” She closed her eyes at Sam’s loud, ringing words, and she distantly felt his
hands grabbed onto her shoulders. A wave of nausea passed through her, and she wretched, but nothing in her empty stomach came up. “Hey.” Sam’s hand moved in front of her vision, tracing her eye movement before he frowned. “Concussion. Stay down.”

Alex could hear police sirens approaching, and she groaned loudly at the painful sound. She shut her eyes and leaned her head back against the table leg as the diner doors were thrown open and the police rushed in. “Agent.” She heard the sheriff approach Sam Winchester, and she groaned once again at the loudness in his voice. “Didn’t think I’d be seeing you so soon.”

“Yeah. It’s a good thing I was here.” Sam’s words were partially drowned out by the wails of an ambulance, here for the waitress.

Someone knelt down beside her, taking her head in their hands, and Alex winced away at the bright light suddenly in her eyes. “— how are you feeling, miss?” A man was speaking to her, and the ex-angel drew her focus in to the paramedic. “Any nausea, loss of consciousness?”

“Nausea, yeah, no to the — the blacking out. I-I’m just dizzy.” Alex pushed the penlight away so her pupils could slowly dilate back to their normal size. “It’s just a small concussion.” She pushed herself to her feet, determined to prove that she was okay. Her first few steps were unstable, the world tilting and spinning with each shift of her weight, but she was able to make her way over to Sam’s side. “Hey, sheriff.”

“You look awful.” The sheriff looked the young agent up and down. “Did Billy do that? I’m really sorry,” he added up to Sam. “We’ll take him into custody; you can come down and speak with him if you want.”

“I, uh, I think we’ll swing by in the morning. My partner hit her head, so it’s best if I take her back to the motel and make sure she’s okay. But, uh, please, call me if anything changes.” Sam shook the sheriff’s hand before he gently led Alex out of the diner.

“Wait, wait.” Alex tugged slightly on his hand, looking over her shoulder towards her uneaten burger; it sat on the counter, forgotten, but despite her weak struggles, Sam continued to lead her towards the exit. “Sam…” Her stomach constricted angrily as it disappeared from sight, fighting through the wave of nausea that followed, and the ex-angel fought back a weak cry of defeat as she was led into the parking lot.

Alex rolled over, wrapping her arms around the warm limb beside her and curling up tight. She could hear Sam’s alarm going off from the nightstand, and she buried herself deeper into the Winchester’s side. “Sam,” she whined, and she nudged him in his side with her knee with all the force her sleep-weak body could manage. “Turn that off.”

The giant beside her grunted as he awoke, and the heavy warmth shifted as he leaned over her for his phone. “It’s almost seven.” His voice cracked, his throat dry, and he cleared it loudly before he added, “We should get up.” He pushed himself into a sitting position, and Alex groaned at the cold air that rushed beneath the sheets, shivering as its icy fingers dug into her thin, pale skin. “Hey. How’s your head feeling?”

“Could be better.” With the greatest reluctance, Alex sat up as well, resting a gentle hand against the large lump on the back of her head; the flesh was tender, and her head pounded at the sudden change in position. Her stomach contracted, and with a muted hiss of pain, she added, “I’m fucking hungry though. I didn’t get dinner last night — again.”
“We’ll get you a good breakfast before we head down to the police station,” Sam promised as he made his way to the bathroom, his bag in his hands. “Meanwhile, here.” He reached into the front pocket of his backpack and pulled out a granola bar. “It should still be good.”

Alex greedily caught it with a hum of delight, ripping open the wrapper and tossing it onto the ground. She devoured the bar in five bites, barely stopping to enjoy the taste. “Sam?” she called, rising to her feet. “Hurry up.”

She quickly changed into a pair of clean jeans and a grey v-neck and was in the process of pulling on a black flannel overshirt when Sam emerged from the bathroom, dressed in his suit and tie. “Ready?”

“Yeah.” Alex shoved her phone into her pocket and beat Sam to the door, hurrying out to the Impala. She ran her hand across the hood, damp with the morning dew, as she circled around to her door. “Where’s the nearest restaurant? I’m craving bacon.”

“Yeah, uh, the diner from last night is just right down the road.” Sam unlocked the car, and Alex slid into the passenger seat. “That sounds good to me.” He started the Impala, and Alex watched the scenery go by in impatient anticipation.

The diner wasn’t far away, but the two minute drive felt almost like a lifetime, and the moment the car was in park, Alex jumped out and hurried in through the doors. She slid into the red stool and grabbed a menu, drawing in a deep breath at the mouth-watering smell of bacon and eggs. “I’ll have whatever he’s having,” she told the waitress, pointing at the meal of a nearby patron, adding a “Please,” as the woman looked up in surprise.

Sam sat down beside her, and the stool groaned slightly under his weight. “I’ll just have some toast,” he told their waitress. “Thanks.”

“Coming right up.” The woman turned towards the kitchen to put in their order, but her gaze couldn’t help but wander back onto them. “You two are the FBI agents from last night, aren’t you?” Her gaze lit up when Alex simply shrugged, and she hurried back over to stand across from them. “Wow, I — we — didn’t think you’d be coming back here. I heard what happened with Billy.” The woman’s brow furrowed sympathetically. “He’s normally such a sweet kid. I don’t know what got into him. I just came from the hospital,” she continued, and Sam and Alex exchanged looks. “Johanna’s doing good; she’s going in for surgery later this afternoon, poor girl.”

“That’s, uh, that’s too bad,” Sam agreed, but Alex only glanced towards the kitchen, fingers drumming on her thigh as she impatiently waiting for her meal. “I’m just glad we could help.”

“Of course.” The waitress glanced back towards the kitchen. “Hey, Richie, hurry up with these two’s food, would ya?” she called. “These agents look half-starved.”

“Understatement.” Alex looked around, swallowing thickly as she watched the other customers eat, and her stomach rumbled loudly, eliciting a sympathetic look from the waitress. She dropped her gaze to her lap, playing with the hem of her shirt as a distraction, but Sam’s voice had her looking up.

“Dean texted me,” he began casually, and his fingers danced along the handle of his coffee mug. “He still hasn’t found anything on Abaddon.”

“I doubt there’s anything to find.” Impatience sharpened the ex-angel’s voice, and she added as a mutter, “We should be out there looking for her instead of just reading through dusty old books.” She watched as Sam’s eyebrows lifted, and she blinked. “What? I want her dead too, okay? She’s got Crowley on edge —the sooner he’s sated, the easier my life is.”
“And the longer Abaddon’s out there, the higher the body count,” Sam added, and Alex grunted; right, she knew that.

She was saved from responding by the arrival of their food, and Alex perked up at the sizzle of grease filled the air. “Here you two are.” The waitress set the plates down with a small smile. “If there’s anything else you need, you just let me know.”

“This looks amazing.” The ex-angel picked up her fork and dove in, barely taking the time to chew as she rushed to sate her desperate stomach.

Sam’s phone rang, and the hunter dismissed himself from where he was nibbling on his toast, but Alex barely noticed. She shoveled in another mouthful of eggs, slower now that her hunger was being assuaged.

“The sheriff wants me down at the station.” The stool squeaked as Sam returned, and Alex looked up in surprise as she stuck a piece of bacon between her teeth. “You can get that to go, and I’ll drop you off at the motel.” He waved the waitress over and handed her his credit card, and Alex cocked her head in confusion.

“What?” she asked around a mouthful of eggs, and her fork clattered against the edge of the plate as she dropped it. “No, no, I’m coming with you, Sam. Why would I go back to the motel?” The waitress returned, a box in her hand, and Alex quickly scooped what remained of her meal into the bottom. “Do you have a fork I can borrow?” she asked as the woman walked away, and when she nodded, Alex turned back to Sam, waiting for an answer.

The Winchester seemed momentarily at a loss for words. “Alex …” he started, “you hit your head pretty good last night, okay? Maybe you should just take it easy for a while.”

“I’m fine,” Alex repeated, rising to her feet as the waitress returned with a brown take-out box. “Seriously, it’s okay.” She dumped the last of her eggs into it and closed it up, tucking the plastic fork into her mouth. “Let’s go.”

Alex tossed her plastic fork into the trash can as she walked up to the police station, awkwardly straightening the collar of her jacket as she followed Sam into through the doors. The sheriff was there waiting, deep in conversation with another officer. He looked up when they entered, his eyes flickering between Sam’s sharp suit and the ex-angel’s crumpled streetwear. “Agents. Glad you could make it. How’s your head?”

Alex shrugged, brushing off his concern. “Better than ever. What’s going on?”

“I think I better just show you.” The sheriff waved Sam and Alex after him, and the two hunters followed him down towards the cell block. Alex could hear noises, sounds of life, and she frowned as they turned the corner. The cells, once empty, were now full, and the thick, metallic tang of blood hung heavily in the air.

“What the hell?” Alex’s gaze traversed the cells in shock, her jaw slack. There was a woman swirling blood in her palm, sitting against her blood-stained wall, and in the cell across from her, a man beat his bruised and battered head against the bars in a slow, consistent rhythm. “What happened here?”

“I was hoping you’d tell me,” the sheriff admitted. “You’re the ones that mentioned weird.”

Alex felt Sam’s eyes on her, and she walked to a cell where a young woman was tracing out the
word fear with bloodied fingertips. Her eyes were dull, staring straight ahead at her handiwork without even acknowledging the visitors, and Alex gave a small, confused shake of her head. “Where did they all come from?”

“Oh, they’re all locals. Four of the straightest arrows you’d ever meet. Apparently, they’ve been acting like this for days.”

“Do they have something in common?” Alex asked from where she stood, and the woman before her finally glanced up towards the strangers before her gaze once again fell back to her work. “Like a church or a club? Anything?”

“Not of my knowledge. Oh, I met the kid’s girlfriend. She said he was hitching a ride when a van picked him up, and that’s the last she heard of him. Whatever that’s worth.”

“Hey, Nate?” An officer appeared in the doorway, a cup of coffee in his hands. “There’s a man for you at the door? I figured you should talk to him.”

“Thanks, Peter. Excuse me, agents.” The sheriff walked away, and Alex stepped aside to let Sam pass her on his way further down the cell block.

Sam stopped in front of Billy, and Alex glanced over her shoulder to make sure the cops were gone as he reached into his jacket and withdrew a flask of holy water. He splashed a few drops onto the teen sitting quietly on his cot, but the boy barely seemed to notice. “What are you, Billy?” Sam finally asked.

The teenager looked up, his gaze locking with Sam’s. “Clear.”

“Of?”

“Everything.” Billy rose to his feet and crossed the cell to stand in front of Sam, his head lifted to steadily hold the intimidating stare of the hunter.

“Why are you doing this?”

The boy chuckled, and he looked down at Alex with his cold, dead eyes. “You think there’s a ‘why?’” he asked, and Alex squared her jaw. “No. It’s because I want to. And I can.”

“Agents.” A low voice had Alex turning away, boy forgotten, and a grin lit up her face to find Castiel standing at the end of the hallway. “Good to see you again.”

Three steps carried Alex across the room and into his arms, pressing her face into his neck as she wrapped her arms around his trench coat. She kept the hug brief, stepping away to maintain some professionalism. “What are you doing here?”

“Your motel room was empty, so I assumed this would be the most likely place for you to be. Sam.” Castiel gave a small nod of acknowledgement in Sam’s direction before his attention turned to the people around them. “What’s going on?”

“You tell me.” Sam shook his head, stumped by their case. “It’s not demons or ghosts. We were thinking maybe shaitan?”

Castiel brushed past the Winchester to stand in front of the man who kept hitting his bloodied head against the bars. For several seconds he just stared, eyes narrowed carefully in thought. “I’ve seen this before,” he finally said. “With you.”
His sharp gaze turned onto Sam, and the hunter’s eyes widened in surprise. “Me?” he repeated. “You mean —”

“Their souls are missing.” Castiel turned back, head tipping as he watched the man again. “They’re aggressive, violent, impulsive — running off of pure instinct.”

“It’s like the littlest things can set them off,” Sam added, nodding in agreement as understanding lit up his face. “I mean, I wasn’t out of control like these guys are, but maybe everyone’s reaction is different. Okay, so then, what? Maybe demons making deals and taking people’s souls?”

“Except no one here’s made it big,” Alex reminded. “Angels, maybe? They like souls, too. Or maybe the demons are up to some weird shit.”

“Maybe. I’ll go see if the sheriff has any sort of surveillance pictures.” Sam waved them after him as he led the way back down the hall. “So, Cas, what brings you into town?”

“I was in the area,” the seraph responded. “I had news of a rogue angel, but I couldn’t find anything. Alex suggested that I come up here.” Castiel’s hand came up to rest on her shoulder, and Alex lifted her gaze to his face. “What happened to your face?”

The ex-angel self-consciously brought a hand up to touch the deep purple bruise. “Dean.” Her face twisted at the painful memory. “He punched me.”

“He’s — uh, he’s been under a lot of stress —” Sam started awkwardly, but Alex scoffed, cutting his apology short.

“It’s fine, Sam. He knows.” Alex paused, staring up at Cas. “Crowley told them about … you know, my deal. I don’t know if it was just a dick move or — or a power play or who knows what, but he told them.” She batted away the seraph’s hand when it came up to rest on her bruise. “Stop. I deserved everything I got.”

Castiel frowned, but he turned away, respecting her decision. “I take it Dean didn’t handle the news well.” The seraph’s arm went down to wrap around her waist, a comforting gesture as he turned to address Sam. “But you seem calm.”

The Winchester gave a small shrug. “Well, I wasn’t at first,” he admitted, “but once she explained it … I guess I understood. I mean, I’m still not happy about it, but what’s done is done, you know?” He trailed off as the sheriff walked up, effectively putting an end to their conversation.

“Agents.” The officer gave a quick nod to each of them. “Here are the copies of the grocery surveillance pics from when Karen was there.”

“Uh, thanks.” Sam accepted the brown folder and tucked it under his arm before he looked around. “Is there a place we can sit down to work?”

“There’s an open table just outside the break room.”

“I think we’ll run out to get some coffee,” Alex motioned between herself and Cas, intent on getting the seraph out of the station so they could talk instead of work. “Want a cup?” When he nodded, she led the way out of the station.

Castiel followed close behind, letting the doors swing closed behind him as he fell instep beside her. “Are … we actually getting coffee?”

Alex laughed, reaching down to take the seraph’s hand. “Yes, we’re actually getting coffee,” she
teased before she sobered up. “Alright, I know you’ve been meaning to ask it. Go on.”

“Where is your grace?” Castiel’s hand tightened around hers, and he stopped walking. “Did another angel steal it?”

Alex shook her head, gently extracting herself from the seraph’s iron-like grip. “No, no one stole it. It just sort of … got used up, I guess.” The ex-angel let out a sigh. “Honestly, the whole time I had it, it didn’t feel like it was mine. It felt foreign … invasive, and every time I used it, it just kept getting smaller. I eventually just used it up — oh yeah!” She snapped her fingers together. “I’ve been meaning to tell you this. Remember Kevin Tran? Apparently since Metatron closed the gates, no souls are getting in. Kevin’s stuck down here. I used the last of my grace to secure his grace to an object. Then I blacked out and woke up human.”

She continued her way down the street, and Castiel followed. “I’m sorry to hear that.” His apology was grave, concern lacing each word. “I can give you more — I don’t have a lot, but what I do have …”

“No.” Alex batted away her mate’s outstretched hand. “You can’t do that, Cas. You’re standing up against Metatron; you need it more than I do. Thanks to Crowley’s deal, I can’t die for the next two years. If I do, he has to bring me back.” She bumped her shoulder against his. “Silver lining, I guess.”

Castiel stopped on the sidewalk, and Alex took the opportunity to kiss him, leaning up and pressing up against his warm, dry lips before he could put up another fight. Castiel responded immediately, one hand resting on the back of her neck to keep her close.

After a second, Alex forced herself to pull away. “We’re on a mission,” she teased. “Coffee. Come on.” She wrapped her hand around his and pulled him into a coffee shop.

They returned to the police station within fifteen minutes, coffee in hand, and Alex pushed her way into the back room. An officer passed by, and the ex-angel looked around in search for Sam Winchester. “This way.” Castiel nudged her on the shoulder as he stepped past and took the lead, and Alex fell in step beside him.

Sam was seated at a wooden table, leaning forward in his chair as he listened to an elderly woman. “I say ‘demons,’ and you don’t bat an eye, when everyone else around here thinks I’m nuts on toast,” she was saying, and Alex slid into the seat next to Sam, her curiosity peaked.

“Coffee,” she announced, handing Sam his cup. “Who’s this?” She turned to the woman with an outstretched hand. “Agent Gilmour.”

“I’m Julia.” The woman looked between Sam and Alex, and her gaze briefly flickered up to Cas. “You’re one of them, aren’t you?”

“Sorry, one of who?”

“Men of Letters.” Julia waited for the shock to pass across their faces before she explained. “They came in here 1958.”

Sam exchanged a look with Alex, and the ex-angel shook her head, unfamiliar with what the woman was speaking about. “Men of Letters … came here?” Sam finally asked.

Julia nodded. “Oh, yes. It was different, then. I was different. They were a lovely couple. They gave
false names, but later I learned that the man’s name was Henry.”

“Henry Winchester?”

“Never got a last name, but the woman was named Josie. Did you know them?”

“Yes,” Alex started slowly, and Castiel put a firm yet gentle hand on her shoulder, and she reached up to touch his fingers. “Or, at least, sort of. It’s, uh … complicated.”

Julia chuckled at the ex-angel’s words. “I’m an ex-nun, sweetie. Complicated is my middle name. They came to investigate Sister Mary Catherine. She killed two people before jumping from the bell tower. So I took them to see Mother Superior and sister Agnes.”

“And it was just those two?” Alex glanced over at Sam. “1958 — they wouldn’t have been full members yet — what were they doing out in the field?”

“They said that they had been sent by the cardinal,” Julia explained. “I took them up to Sister Catherine’s room on Mother Superior’s orders. We couldn’t get the blood off of the walls — she had written in some language that we couldn’t read. They said it looked … something about Enochian? It meant ‘Knights of Hell’, though.”

“Knights of Hell?” Sam’s head snapped up in surprise. “What were they doing here?”

“I’m not sure of anything I saw that night,” Julia admitted. “We couldn’t leave our room after ten o’clock. Mother Superior forbade it. But … I snuck out anyways. I saw Mother Superior dragging a girl down the stairs, and her eyes …” The ex-nun’s voice dropped low. “Her eyes were black. I tried to flee.” She shook her head, trailing off momentarily as her memories consumed her. “I woke up in a dark place, tied to a chair. There were others. They were taken, like me. Sister Agnes was there, but she wasn’t Sister Agnes. I watched her take each person, one by one, into the back room. I don’t know what she did, but there was screaming and blue light.”

“And then?”

“I was so scared. I prayed and prayed, but God didn’t answer my prayers. Henry and Josie did. They exorcised two of the demons, but Mother Superior … she threw Henry into a wall and knocked him out. She wanted to possess him, but Josie …”

“She took his place.” The realization hit Alex in the chest like a ton of bricks, and she exhaled sharply. “Of course. Sam, that must have been Abaddon. Julia, did you see what she was doing down there?”

“Yes, Abaddon. That was her name.” Julia nodded in earnest agreement. “And no, but whatever she was doing at St. Bonaventure, it seems to be happening again.”

Sam’s hand hovered over the surveillance pictures he had been given earlier. “The convent’s name was St. Bonaventure?” he asked, and Alex looked over at him in confusion; his tone had implied he had heard the name before. Julia nodded, and he added, “Where is it?”

“On the outskirts of town. It’s been closed for years.”

“It makes sense it’s starting up again, now that Abaddon’s back,” Alex murmured over to Sam before turning back to the elderly woman. “Alright, Julia, maybe it’s best if you lay low for the next day, just until we clear this up.”

The woman gave a nod of understanding and rose to her feet. “Okay.”
Sam got up as well. “Here, let me walk you out to your car,” he offered, holding out his arm, and the woman graciously accepted. “I’ll be right back,” he promised, and then he led Julia away.

Once they were out of sight, Alex grabbed the surveillance photos as Castiel sat down across from her. On top lay a picture of a parking lot, and Alex’s finger landed on a white van where the words *St. Bonaventure* was written across the back doors. “Dude.” Alex slid the picture over to Castiel. “Look. Billy — one of the soulless guys back there — his girlfriend said he got picked up by a van. This has got to be it.” She pulled out her phone and looked up the covenant’s address; it wasn’t too far, only five miles to the north. “We could get there tonight, kill whatever’s taking these people’s souls, and maybe even get the souls back if we’re lucky. Sounds easy enough.”

A loud scoff came from behind her. “Yeah right, like you’re going with.” Sam leaned past her to grab his coffee. “There’s no way you’re going after a Knight of Hell — or any demon for that matter — with a concussion.”

“What?” Castiel’s head tipped, his eyes squinting confusedly as he stared at his mate.

“She hit her head pretty badly in a fight last night,” Sam explained, and Castiel rose to his feet. “So she’s not engaging in any combat until she’s healed up. You’re human now,” he reminded sharply when Alex opened her mouth to protest. “And you’ve been hurt enough recently. You can’t just pretend to be fine when you’re obviously not.”

Alex scoffed, and she jumped in surprise when Castiel’s hand pressed up against her temple. Ice flowed inwards — his stolen grace — and Alex shivered at the cold that wrapped around her bruised brain. It pulled away, and Castiel removed his hand. “There. Now she can come with us.”

“Thanks.” Alex jumped to her feet, casting a smirk towards Sam before she smiled up at her mate. “Thanks,” she repeated softly, “but you don’t have to use your grace on me. I’ll be fine.”

Castiel didn’t respond, and Sam cleared his throat. “Okay. Should we go, then? I don’t think there’s much more to do here.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Alex picked up her drink, and she followed Sam and Castiel out of the police station and over to the car.

The moonlight lit the ground beneath her feet as Alex stepped out of the Impala. Her head tipped at the choking purr of Castiel’s car as the seraph pulled up beside them, and the ex-angel circled around to the back to retrieve her angel blade. She twisted it in her hands as Castiel stopped beside her, and she looked over at Sam. “So, this place is a hell of a lot bigger than we expected,” she began, motioning towards the dark, towering fortress that lay in front of them, and she let her gaze sweep across the broken window and boarded doors before suggesting, “Sam, how about you start with the left wing, Cas takes right, and I’ll take the middle?”

“No.” Castiel gave a firm shake of his head. “You go with Sam. I can hold my own. Take the left. I’ll search the right.”

He walked away, and Alex gave a small, half-rebellious shrug of her shoulders. “Whatever. I guess we have the left side,” she muttered, slamming the trunk shut as she moved towards the convent. “Come on, then.”

She let Sam take the lead in through the front door, his flashlight illuminating the darkened halls beyond. “Julia said that she had been taken down in the basement,” he said. “We should start there.”
“Yeah, of course.” Alex slipped silently past him, staying close enough that the Winchester’s light could guide her but far enough ahead that it was clear she was taking the lead. “There’s bound to be a door around here somewhere.” She pulled open one door, peering into the room. “Nope.”

“Down this way. There’s a staircase going up.”

“We want a staircase going down,” Alex reminded, but she closed the door and hurried over to follow him down the hall.

“They usually put staircases together,” the Winchester reminded quietly, and as if to prove his point, he pulled open a door and shone his light down a flight of rickety wooden stairs. “See?”

Alex rolled her eyes and followed him down, stepping softly on the wood to avoid its creaking. The basement was dark and dusty, and a pile of cardboard boxes lined the far wall. Beside it was a shelf, filled with jars, and Alex pushed her way past Sam to make her way to the five glowing balls of blue light contained within. “Whoa.” She reached for one, but before her fingers could close around the smooth glass, there was a sudden movement.

She spun around at a cry and a flash of light, her weapon raised and ready to defend herself. Sam yanked the demon knife out of a man and shoved the body away and the ex-angel took a step towards him, concern prickling in her veins.

She opened her mouth to ask if there were more, but a force like a brick wall hit her shoulder and sent her flying across the room. She collided into a stone pillar and slumped to the ground, the breath knocked from her lungs. A crash and a thud from beside her came as Sam landed amongst the cardboard boxes, and she gasped for air as she wrenched open her eyes. “Souls are a very precious and fragile thing.” The soft musings of a woman’s voice drifted through the air as a nun stepped into view. She ran her fingers along the glass jars as she looked over at Sam. “Break one of those, and them little buggers fly right back home. We can’t have that, now can we?”

Sam’s voice was pained and breathless, but venom still laced his words. “So, after all these years, you’re still doing Abaddon’s dirty work, huh Agnes?”

Agnes. Sister Agnes. Alex groaned, and the demon chuckled. “Would you believe it’s gotten even dirtier?” she quipped. “Used to be folks believed in the Church. Heck, the way they would come strolling in here, looking for God. It was like fish in a barrel. But times change.” Her voice grew scathing, the pleasant memories of the past gone. “You can blame your perverts for that. Now I’m riding shotgun in some smelly van with a handyman and tricking any half-wit I can lay my hands on. But it’s worth it.”

“Because stealing souls is such a great thing.” Alex spat out, and she tried to roll over onto her side.

The nun’s dark gaze turned onto her, and a rush of power sent Alex back onto her stomach with a grunt. “Stealing souls is winning!” she retorted angrily.

“Winning what?”

“Hell’s crown, nimrod.” Sister Agnes took a step towards Sam. “You think Abaddon is just gonna sit there while those panty-waisted demons refused to pick a side? And so she made a plan — if you can’t convince ‘em, make ‘em.”

“She’s turning souls into demons.” Alex hissed out the realization, and the rush of anger brought her up to her hands and knees. It was followed by a chuckle, and she lifted her head. “Well, at the rate you’re going, you’ll have a small roomful in about, oh, a couple thousand years. Good plan.”
The force of the brick wall returned, forcing her back onto the ground once again, and the ex-angel groaned out her pain. “You think I’m the only one doing this?” The demon’s voice grew withering. “We have factories spread throughout. Worry not, though. Victory is nigh. Ad we’d like you to be on our team. Recruitment is easy. I just have to rip your soul out of your body.”

Sister Agnes took a step towards Alex, and the ex-angel laughed scornfully. “Yeah, I don’t think so.” She forced herself back up onto her knees, grey eyes narrowed as she stared the demon in the eyes. “My soul’s already been claimed for team Crowley.”

A figure stepped up from behind the demon, and her face exploded in a flash of white light, causing Alex to flinch away in surprise. The angel blade ripped a scream from her throat as she died, and Castiel shoved her off to the side. The glitter in his eyes and the tightness in his jaw conveyed his displeasure at Alex’s statement, and the ex-angel braced herself for a rebuke that never came. “Are you two okay?” was all he asked.

“I’m fine.” Alex forced herself up onto her feet as Sam walked over to the glass jars. He picked up the first one and unclasped the lid, and the small glowing soul forced its way out and flew away, disappearing through the cracks of the boarded up window. The ex-angel pressed her weight into Castiel’s chest, stumbling slightly as her legs wobbled as Sam released the last four souls. “Just … a little winded.”

“We should get her back to the motel.” Castiel led her towards the stairs, but Alex suddenly pushed him away.

“No, no, I don’t need that. I’m not hurt.” She turned back to Sam. “I’ll finish the job.”

“There’s nothing left to do.” Sam placed the last jar back onto the shelf. “Why don’t you guys head back? I’ll up be there in a minute.”

Castiel took Alex’s hand, and the ex-angel let him lead her up the stairs and out of the convent. “So, now what?” She slipped her free hand into her back pocket and bumped shoulders with her mate as they paused beside the Impala.

“Now I go back to work.” Regret weighed down Castiel’s voice, and his thumb rubbed gentle circles into the back of her hand. “I’m no closer to finding Metatron, and I’ve been searching for several months.”

“Maybe … maybe I could come with you this time.” Alex looked up into his face, hope lighting up her eyes. “I mean, it’s either I go with you or I go back to the bunker.” Back to Dean, she added silently.

To her dismay, Castiel shook his head. “It’s not safe. We’ve been over this before; if Crowley finds out, he’ll surely send you to stop me.” He turned to face her, and Alex stepped closer into his warmth. “You need to make sure that he never finds out; that’s the best way that you can help.”

“I know.” Alex rested her cheek against his chest, and the seraph’s arms wrapped themselves around her waist. “I just miss you a ton. I wish you’d come visit more.”

“I’ll stop by as often as I can.” Castiel’s chin came to rest on her forehead, and Alex closed her eyes. “Once this is over with — once you are safe — things will be different. There’ll be no reason for us to be apart.”

Doubt gnawed at her heart, and Alex pushed away the disappointment that weighed down upon her shoulders. “Yeah,” she quietly agreed. That day couldn’t come soon enough.
Meta Fiction

Chapter Notes

Okay yeah this chapter was mostly for fun

August 20th, 2010
Lebanon, Kansas

Alex awoke to darkness. She groped blindly outwards, knocking a book off of her nightstand before she flicked on her lamp. Her room came into view, the pile of dirty clothes and old books tucked against the dresser casting long shadows on the floor, and the ex-angel groaned at the mess. She swung her legs out over the side of the bed, and a much louder groan escaped her at the soreness in her ribs; her scrap with Sister Agnes had not been without its consequences.

She could hear the shower turn off as she stepped out of her room, and the ex-angel slowly made her way down towards the library. She yawned, and her hand came up to soothe her bruised jaw; it was healing, but not fast enough, and the purple splotches were beginning to turn a sickly yellow-green.

“Alright. Thanks, Carlos.” Sam’s voice reached her ears, and Alex stepped out of the hallway to find the Winchester seated at the war room table. “Listen, you, uh, if you catch wind of any other demon activity, give me a holler, alright? Appreciate it.” He hung up as Alex sat down across from him.

“Hey. Dean still in the shower?”

“Yeah. It sounded like he was almost done, though.” Alex trailed off as footsteps approached, and she glanced over her shoulder to see Dean Winchester enter the room, moisture still clinging to his hair.

“Anything?” The Winchester sat down at the head of the table, and Alex shifted away from him; he hadn’t been pleased at their return two days ago, and even less pleased that Sam had refused to put her back in the dungeon, and since then, Alex had been doing her damnedest to avoid him.

Sam shrugged, oblivious to the ex-angel’s discomfort. “Yeah. A dozen demon-related cases, people without souls acting out, but …”

“But no sign of Abaddon,” Dean finished disparagingly.

“Right.” Sam pulled his laptop closer, and Alex dropped her gaze down to her phone as she felt the eldest brother’s eyes turn onto her. “Looks like she’s vanished.” He sighed, and Alex echoed him, dropping her head onto the table; after St. Bonaventure, the Winchesters had redoubled their efforts on tracking down Abaddon, but even with their new lead, the hunt still seemed to be dwindling.

“So, I guess we’ll just have to keep on digging.” Alex glanced up towards Dean to find him rubbing at his forearm, and her eyebrows knit together in concern. “Dean. You okay?”

The Winchester blinked in surprise and pulled his arm away. “Yeah. I’m fine.” His response was cold and pointed, and the ex-angel dropped her gaze. “Let’s get to work.”

He rose to his feet, but Alex’s phone vibrated loudly within her hands, drawing his attention back
“Are you with Sam and Dean?” Alex heard a door swing open and shut from the other end of the line, and she grunted out her affirmation. “I’ve caught wind of something in Utah. I heard a call — a sort of summons for angels — but when I got there, over a dozen angels had been slaughtered. One of the survivors said that an angel offered them a place in heaven if they joined Metatron, and he butchered those who refused. From his description, I believe him to be Gadreel.”

“Gadreel?” Alex’s eyes widened in surprise. “You think Gadreel is working for — for Metatron?” A kick on her shins had her looking over at Sam, and she quickly set her phone down on the table and placed it on speaker phone. “Hey, Sam and Dean are here. Tell them what you just told me.”

Castiel repeated his discovery. “I don’t know how long the two have been partners,” he finished, “but they are.”

“So, Metatron made Gadreel kill Kevin?” The table creaked as Dean leaned forward onto it, and Alex leaned away from the hunter.

“It would explain a lot,” Castiel slowly agreed, “and there have been no new prophets, which Metatron could have fixed to his advantage.”

“And Gadreel said that angels are returning to heaven,” Dean pressed, ignoring the seraph’s statement. “How? I thought that the spell was irreversible.”

“That’s what Crowley said,” Alex retorted sharply, and she trailed off when Dean’s gaze swung on to her, causing her to shrink away from the glare. “Maybe … maybe we should just find Gadreel and have him tell us the truth,” she finished in a much softer voice.

“Dean.” Castiel cleared his throat, drawing the brother’s attention back onto him. “Here’s something to start with finding Gadreel.” His voice grew more distant as he pulled the phone away from his ear, and the line crackled as he fidgeted with his phone. “Uh … hold on, I’m … uh, sending Alex and Sam a photo of the symbol that drew all the angels in.”

Sam pulled his laptop closer. “Okay, got it.”

“It’s acting as some sort of angel siren,” Castiel explained. “I think its a spell. The ingredients used to create it were very odd. Griffin feathers, bones of a fairy. I’ve never seen it before.”

“Yeah, me neither. All right, let me see what I can find.” Sam turned his laptop back towards him, and the clack of keys filled the room.

“‘Honor bar.’” Castiel’s words were muttered, and Alex had to lean forward to hear. “What’s honorable about a miniature fridge in a motel room?”

The thought was obviously not meant to be heard, and Alex let out a low chuckle when Dean responded with a humored, “Everything.”

There was a small thud as the seraph pushed the refrigerator door closed, and he asked, “How are you, Dean? I didn’t get to see you when I last ran into your brother.”

Dean shrugged. “I’m fine, Cas,” he half-lied, and Alex chanced a look up into his face. “How about you?”

“I miss my wings,” the seraph admitted quietly. “Life on the road … smells. And being human is …
difficult, to say the least. Hopefully this will be over soon.”

Sam cleared his throat, and the seraph fell silent. “Uh, listen, I got a match, and it’s not from the lore … it’s from police records.” The Winchester leaned forward to Castiel could hear him better. “Looks like that symbol you found was spotted at a handful of crime scenes the last couple days, all multiple homicides.”

“And where were these crime scenes?”

“Uh, Utah … Baker, Hill Valley.” Sam scrolled through the reports. “Also it looks like most of the crime scenes were in industrial sites.”

“That would make sense,” Castiel agreed. “I found the sigil in a factory in Bishop’s Falls, Utah. It looks like Gadreel is heading north.”

“Okay, so what’s the next big town up there?” Alex asked. “That’s got to be the most likely place for him to hit next — maybe we can get there before any more angels die.”

“There are two. It could be Auburn or Odgen.”

“Alright, Cas, you take Auburn, we’ll take Ogden,” Dean decided. “We’ll meet in the middle.” He reached past Alex and hung up the phone. “Didn’t we work a case in Ogden?” he asked his brother as he took a seat back down in his chair.

“Yeah, it was a … it was a witch situation, right?” Sam nodded, eyes squinting slightly as he thought. “This was way before you,” he added when Alex frowned. “This would have been, when? Back just after Dad died?”

“Yeah, that sounds about right. There was that kid in town that helped us, wasn’t there?”

“Yes.” Sam nodded earnestly. “We should call him, see if he’s still in business.” The Winchester closed his laptop, and Alex picked up her phone when it vibrated to read the new text message from Castiel. I love you.

“What was his name?” she heard Dean ask as she typed out her response, but her fingers faltered when she saw the picture that Castiel had sent her. It was a triangular sigil, glowing blue on the stone wall; it looked like a ‘V’ with a half sun drawn over it.

“Wait.” Alex looked up at Sam. “Wait, so this is the sigil that Cas said Gadreel was using?”

“Uh, yeah. Do you recognize it?”

“Yeah.” Alex jumped to her feet and kicked her chair in. “Holy fuck. I-It’s the Horn of Gabriel — Bobby had found it while digging up stuff about the apocalypse. I don’t know anything about it, I just remember what it looked like. I’m sorry — I — I’ve got to go find Cas. He shouldn’t be dealing with an archangel’s instrument on his own.” She snatched up her phone and shoved it into her pocket. “You two head out whenever. I’ll meet you in Oregon.”

Sam nodded, and Alex hurried out of the room before Dean could think about protesting. She scooped her bag up off of the ground and shoved a handful of clothes inside, only pausing long enough to sniff a shirt and discard it back onto her floor. Her laptop and angel blade went on top, and she grabbed the keys to her Marquis off of her dresser as she swung her bag up over her shoulder. You’re dealing with the Horn of Gabriel. I’m on my way up, she texted Castiel as she made her way back through the hallways and out of he bunker. I’ll call you when I get in town. See you soon.
Birds chirped above her head, and Alex groggily lifted her head. She blinked, eyes narrowing against the bright sunlight that shone upon her face. Her cheek was warm, pressed into sun-kissed metal. The ex-angel pressed her hands onto the surface, and her fingers curled around the edge, smooth and round. Where was she?

As her eyes adjusted to the light, the world around her came into focus. She was in a field; soft green grass stretched out before her, waving in the gentle wind. Off in the distance lay a line of trees that sloped gently upwards towards the sky. “What the hell?” Alex pushed herself to her feet, eyes narrowed at the circle of similar platforms all around her. Each held a person; some were looking around, sharing in Alex’s surprise, while others crouched on the ground, shielding their eyes from the light above. On the platform next to her, a man was throwing himself against an invisible wall, his teeth bared in a display of fangs. Alex reached out, and her palm met a solid force, and the touch sent tendrils of green light snaking out like small cracks.

“Welcome, creatures great and small.” A deep voice boomed from above their heads, coming from nowhere and yet everywhere all at once, and Alex drew back her hand, “Welcome to the 2014 Hunger Games.”

Silence followed his words, and Alex blinked back her surprise. “No. Oh, you have got to be shitting me.” Alex threw her weight against the invisible barrier, but it didn’t give. “Cas?” She yelled out her mate’s name. “Cas!”

“As are the rules, the last man standing gets to go. Perform well, and you’ll be rewarded by sponsors. Once the horn sounds, the barriers will go down, and the games will begin. And, as always, may the odds be ever in your favor.”

“For fuck’s sake.” The ex-angel rolled her eyes furiously. “Hey!” She threw back her head and yelled into the sky. “I don’t have time for this, okay? Let me out —”

Her words were drowned out by a blaring horn, and the ground beneath them shifted as the platforms sunk into the ground. Men and women alike jumped onto the grass, and Alex stretched a tentative hand forward to test for any sign of resistance. But, like the voice had promised, the barrier was gone.

The air was filled with screaming, and the ex-angel jumped down onto the soft earth. Something gleamed in the dirt ahead of her, and she stepped forward, leaning down to pick up the small, serrated knife. “This is stupid.” She jumped backwards as a shape flitted by, but the creature paid her no attention as it tore towards the forest, screeching at the top of its lungs.

With one last glance back towards the bloodshed, Alex followed.

She didn’t stop running until she reached the tree line, and even then she kept up the pace, putting distance between her and the creatures behind her. How had she gotten here? The ex-angel scratched her head as she thought back. She remembered leaving the bunker and most of the drive up, but … the last thing in her memory was stopping for gas just south of Auburn. “Hey!” The ex-angel kicked at a tree, glaring up into the sky. “What the hell is this, huh? I have places to be!”

No answers came, and Alex clambered up the rough bark when she heard shouts approaching; the thick foliage would be able to hide her for the time being. She tucked the handle of the knife she had found in her back pocket as she hoisted herself upwards, cursing under her breath with each step she took.
From below her came the sound of quickly approaching footsteps, and the ex-angel pressed her back into the trunk as she waited the creature below her out. She lifted her right arm up, studying the thin, black band that was wrapped seamlessly around her wrist. “The fuck are you?” she muttered, poking at a small, black button.

Light flooded from the device, springing up into the air like a screen, and the ex-angel’s eyes widened in surprise to find a picture of herself looking back at her. Beneath it were written a handful of details.

First Name: Alex  
Last Name: [Redacted]  
Species: Human  
Standing: Underdog

“Underdog?” The girl huffed, pursing her lips together. “Underdog my ass.” She lifted her hand, flicking a finger off to the side, and the same statistics appeared for each contestant. “Okay, this is actually pretty sweet,” she reluctantly muttered. Werewolf, vampire, wraith — what the hell was a Pontianak? Shifter, ghoul — a fucking Wendigo? Fuck. I’m so boned.”

The footsteps disappeared off into the distance, clearly more interested in getting away than hunting her down. With another click of the small button, the hologram disappeared, and Alex pulled out the knife, pressing the blade between her teeth. It felt solid, definitely metallic, and she dug a coin out of her front pocket and tapped it against the blade; definitely silver, by the ringing. Perfect.

“Hey.” She pulled herself to her feet and climbed higher, pushing herself towards the sky. “Hey, asshat.” She hissed her words, not wanting to be heard by the blood-thirsty zoo below her. “Gabriel, I know this is you. It’s gotta be you. What the hell is this, huh? I’ve got stuff I have to do — there are angels dying out there, and I have to stop it.”

Silence met her words.

“Hey!” Her voice rose into a shout. “Gabriel, don’t play dumb with me! Stupid fantasy land — this has your stink all over it. So just drop it, okay?” The ex-angel threw her head back with a loud groan when nothing happened. “This isn’t happening.” She rested her head against the bark, eyes closed. “I don’t have time for this. Someone’s using your horn to kill angels, okay?”

Her shout was met with a growl, and the ex-angel jumped, almost losing her grip on the tree. The trunk swayed as a creature clambered upwards, fangs bared. Blood stained his face and hands, and Alex kicked away a hand that tried to latch itself onto the branch she stood on. “Get out of here!” The heel of her boot connected with the creature’s forehead, and it tumbled away, but the momentum sent the ex-angel off balance, and she followed, slithering off of her stronghold and crashing towards the ground.

Her foot caught in the fork of two branches, and she screeched in pain as it stopped her fall, leaving her suspended in midair by her leg. The tree creaked, and the branches cracked, sending her the last five feet onto the ground. The hard earth collided with her shoulder, knocking the wind from her lungs.

Alex struggled past the breathlessness, gasping for air as she got to her knees, but her attacker hadn’t moved, still unconscious from his fall. With the tip of her knife, Alex drew back his upper lip to reveal long, vampiric fangs. There was a backpack beside him, dropped during his fall, and Alex ripped open the zipper and dug through its contents. There were a few strips of meat, but she left them where they were; with her current competition, who knew what it came from. She did, however, take a bottled water and an apple. “You won’t miss this, right, buddy?” she asked as she
pushed herself to her feet. Her ankle crumpled from under her, and she fell to the ground. “Dammit!”

There was a snarl and a cry from off to her left, and adrenaline pushed her back to her shaking feet, and with gritted teeth, the ex-angel limped further into the woods.

She put half a mile in between her and the field before she finally stopped. She half crawled, half slid down a muddy embankment. There under a rocky alcove she rested, ripping off her shoe and sock to run gentle fingers over her swollen foot. “Son of a …” The pain had her hissing, and she poured a capful of the water over the inflamed skin. It didn’t feel broken, but was definitely badly sprained.

Alex stretched her leg out, letting it rest against the earth while she turned her attention back to index of monsters around her wrist. The majority were werewolves and vampires, easily disposed of, and the ex-angel ran her finger over the spine of her knife. The wendigo, however, could prove to be difficult.

“Where’d she go?” A voice came from above, and the ex-angel pulled her leg in, pressing her back up against the dirt. “I thought I saw her go this way.”

“You think she knew we were coming? Gave us the slip?”

The first voice scoffed loudly. “You saw her stats. She probably fell in the river and drowned herself.” His words were followed by a harsh laugh, and Alex tightened her grip on her small knife.

“Maybe we should just go after that pack of vampires back at the field,” the second voice suggested, not sharing in his companion’s mirth. “They’re our real enemies.”

“Not with this.” Alex lifted her head, fruitlessly trying to see what the man above her held, but the two remained far out of her sight. “I found it in the field. It killed the wraith in one blow, so it’s obviously silver, but it’s big enough to take off any vamp’s head.” The voice turned scathing, sharp with a loathsome venom. “We’ll take care of them before dusk. For now, you take one more look by the river, and I’ll check this ditch. I’ll meet you back by the dam.”

“Yes, sir.” Footsteps faded away, and Alex pulled her legs underneath her into a crouch as dirt slid down the steep incline above her head. If what was above her weren’t vampires, then they were either werewolves or shifters; they were the only species to have more than one contender, and somehow the ex-angel doubted that in this arena there would be any sorts of inter-special alliances.

She twisted her silver knife in her hand and pressed herself into the rock, peering out in search of the enemy as confidence coursed through her. A werewolf or a shifter she could handle with ease.

The ex-angel kicked off her other shoe and picked up a handful of rocks; with a flick of her wrist, she sent them skittering down the slope off to her left. The approaching footsteps suddenly stopped, and a low chuckle filled the air. “Gotcha, princess.”

A dark shape passed outside her hiding spot, and Alex followed, her bare feet silent on the earth. She could see her hunter clearly now; broad shoulders, thick dark hair. He moved with a cocky step, too confident to worry about anything behind him. The ex-angel tightened her grip on her knife before she lunged forward, burrying the hilt of her weapon into the base of his neck.

The creature screamed, and Alex leapt away, yanking her knife free as the man twisted and fell. The second her good foot hit the ground, she shot forward, her momentum carrying her and the knife into the man’s chest.
It died with a choked gasp, and Alex pushed herself to her feet, wincing as her ankle screamed out its protest. A cannon went off high above her head, and the ex-angel rolled her eyes. Hunger Games: right. However, her frustration at the game was short lived when her gaze came to rest on the weapon that was still gripped tightly in the werewolf’s hand. “Oh, hell yes.” Alex dropped to her knees with a bump, ignoring how the rocks dug painfully into her calf as she frantically ripped the still-warm fingers off from around the handle of the gleaming silver handle. “Fuck yeah.” She twirled the angel blade in her hand, grinning in relief at the warm, familiar feel. “Finally.”

The black band around her vibrated, and when Alex pushed the small button, her picture appeared. Beneath her name blinked her stats, with one big change.

**Status: Competitor**

Alex closed the hologram with a grin. “Alright, then.” She nudged at the dead creature, and the body rolled down the embankment and into the river. “I’ll play by your rules, Gabe. This could be fun.” She lifted her voice so it rang through the valley, but when no answers came, she dropped back down into a mutter. “Let’s get this over with; I need to get out of here.”

She pulled her shoes back on and clambered back up the slope. “Hey!” She lifted her voice and let it ring through the woods. “Anyone out there?” Adrenaline pulsed through her, lifting her spirits and her courage, and she stepped out into a shaft of sunlight, chin held high.

A scream came from deep within the forest, and Alex took off towards the noise. Her feet carried her across the uneven ground, her going made slow by her ankle, but the ex-angel pushed herself faster through the pain. She almost ran headlong into a young girl, and her evasion maneuver had her skidding through the dirt; she spun around, crouching low as she faced the crying child that had fallen to her knees, cowering in fear.

The girl’s brown eyes were stretched wide with fear, and blood was splattered across her face. “Please don’t hurt me,” she begged, crouching at the base of a tree.

Alex straightened up, her weapon held cautiously at her side. “Who are you?” she demanded fiercely. “You weren’t on the roster.” She tapped her black waistband, frowning to see that the same band was missing from the child.

“Please.” The girl’s voice trembled, and she squeezed her eyes shut.

With a glance around at the silent forest, Alex dropped down into the dirt. “What’s your name?” When the girl only whimpered, Alex set her blade down in her lap, softening her voice to appear less threatening. “I’m Alex.”

“I—I—I’m Meghan.” The child opened her eyes and, seeing the ex-angel on the ground, sunk down against the tree. “Please, miss. Please don’t eat me.”

Alex bit back a surprised laugh. “Why would you think that?” She leaned forward when a sob shook the child’s chest. “It’s okay,” she soothed, and her eyes narrowed in suspicion. “What are you doing here?”

“We were just walking home from the mall.” Meghan sniffled and rubbed at her tearful eyes. “A-And then we were here. T-Then there was this loud noise a-and then …” Tears streamed down her face, and her voice grew quiet. “A-A monster ate my mommy.”

Alex trailed the tip of her weapon through the dirt. “Well,” she finally said, “I kill monsters.” She got to her feet and peered through the forest. “And, well … shit.” She scratched her head with the side of
her blade and added, “You’re not by any chance just some hologram, right?” She motioned towards Meghan with her weapon, watching how her eyes widened in surprise and fear. “Yeah. I didn’t think so. Come on.” Alex took a step in the direction that the girl had come from, eyes narrowed as she scanned between the thick trunks. “Yeah, thanks a lot, Gabe!” she yelled into the empty air. “Really? A kid? This is great.”

She pushed her way through the undergrowth, and Meghan scrambled after her. “Who are you talking to?”

“A friend.” Alex kept her answer vague, confident enough to keep the young child at her side but still unwilling to trust her completely. “He’s the guy running this show.” She ran her forefinger over the handle of her blade, thumbing the small, familiar nick in the side — how it had gotten in the arena was unknown, but this weapon was definitely hers.

“You … you know the man?” The young girl’s voice was small, and Alex looked back over her shoulder in surprise.

“What man?”

“The man who brought us here.” Meghan gave a small shudder. “The black man with the black eyes.”

Alex stopped in her tracks. “Black eyes?” she repeated, and her feet turned her back around. “As in a demon?” The ex-angel didn’t wait for the girl to answer before she pushed herself through the undergrowth with a newfound vigor; if demons were running the show, that changed everything. “We need to get out of here now.”

“How?” Meghan sniffled again at the urgency in her voice. “The monster —”

“Oh, trust me. The monsters are the least of our concerns.” Alex rested her hand against the bark of a large tree and peered up towards the sky. “If this is demons,” she begrudgingly reasoned, “then, good news, we’re still on earth and not in some weird bizarro world. Bad news, there’s probably something out there keeping us in this area. Here.” Alex handed Meghan the silver knife she had pulled from the werewolf’s chest. “Keep watch. I’m going up to take a look around.” He tucked her angel blade into the back her jeans, snug between the denim and her belt, and then she clambered up the tree.

The sun was waning towards the horizon, and Alex narrowed her eyes against the light as she tried to see how far the trees went. Mountains lay off to the north and curved to the east, their peaks disappearing into the clouds. There was no sign of civilization, and Alex slid back down the trunk, dropping down onto the ground below. “Alright. We need to find shelter.”

“Why?”

“Because night’s coming. The monsters like the night.” Alex looked around, teeth digging into her lip as she thought. Through the trees, she could hear the rushing river, and she reached down to take the child’s hand. “We’ll stay down by the river for now.”

“Why?”

“Because.” Alex tightened her grip on Meghan’s hand, her patience wearing thin at the constant questioning. “It’s loud, and it’s smelly. They’ll have a harder time finding us. Plus there’s food there too. Now be quiet.”
“Alex!” Castiel’s desperate voice had the young hunter spinning around, eyes wide as she searched for the source. Wind rushed over the rocky cliff, billowing through the bloodstained sky, and she screwed up her eyes against the gales. “Alex!” The seraph was up ahead, scrambling for purchase on the steep, stony slope. “Wake up!”

“Cas!” Alex struggled towards him against the wind, reaching out to take his hand that lay just out of reach. “Cas!”

The wind kicked up dust, and the seraph shimmered. His form faded, morphing into the dark, stocky figure of the King of Hell. “Alex!” Crowley’s thick accent cut through the torrents, and Alex stretched her arm out as far as she could. His hand reached towards hers, fingernails torn and bloody from gripping the rocks, but despite his situation, his voice was calm. “You need to wake up.”

Alex’s eyes snapped open to darkness. Her muscles screamed in protest to her position, folded up against the rocky wall of a cave they had found. Beside her lay Meghan, fast asleep. Shit. Alex mouthed the word; how had she fallen asleep? Her berating thoughts were arrested by the crunching of pebbles. The sound of an intruder had adrenaline coursing through her, chasing away the tiredness from her mind. Her fingers tightened around the handle of her weapon as she pressed her back into the rocky wall, one hand extended to protect the sleeping child.

Her heart thudded against her chest, feeling too loud to be hidden even by the rushing water, and the footsteps stopped. “This is stupid.” Alex pushed herself to her feet, twisting her weapon in her hand as she stepped out into the dark. “We don’t have time for this. Hey!” She dug her heels into the rocky shore as she stared around in the dark, voice lifted for all to hear. “I know you’re out there! Come and get it!”

Something hit her from behind, sending her sprawling across the ground, and Alex immediately forced her body go pliant, rolling with the momentum and pushing herself back to her feet. She lashed out at a dark shape that flitted by, but it ducked the blow and spun away.

A second weight hit her from behind, and Alex fell under the force. She could feel claws scrabbling at her clothed back, searching for a purchase as teeth snapped at her neck, and she shoved her arms backwards, jabbing at the shape with the tip of her weapon. She felt the blade dig into flesh, and the vampire jumped away with a pained shriek. It fled into the night, and Alex scrambled to her feet even as the first vampire careened into her. Alex felt teeth dig into her throat, and fury rushed through her, strengthened by the pain. She wrapped her arm around the vampire’s head, keeping it near as she drove the angel blade down through his back.

The creature died with its jaws latched around her neck, and Alex clenched her teeth as her flesh singed as its eyes burned away. With a loud groan, she pushed it back onto the rocks and staggered to her feet, her bloodstained weapon held in one hand while the other clutched her throat, trying to stem the flow.

“M-Miss?” Meghan’s head peered out of their rocky hiding spot, brown eyes wide as she stared at the bloody ex-angel. “Are you okay?”

She crept out into the night, but Alex couldn’t find her voice to respond. She turned her eyes up towards the sky as something glittered in the moonlight, drifting downwards through the air. A small metal box, kept afloat by a silver parachute, made its way down from the sky, and Alex’s weapon fell from her hands as she reached up to take it from the air. She knew what it was; in this simulation, it could only be a sponsored gift — whatever that meant in this world. At the moment, the ex-angel didn’t care.
Her fingers closed around the metal and popped the lid free. Her legs shook beneath her, and Alex tightened her grip around her own neck as she brought the gift down to peer inside. “What is it?” Meghan’s soft voice came from behind her, and Alex let the box fall away as she lifted free a small, glass vial.

Blue essence swirled within, and Alex felt a tremble of relief and elation pass through her. Her wound forgotten, she scrabbled at the cap, her blood-soaked hands slick on the smooth glass.

The lid fell off, and the grace escaped, twisting through the air, and Alex breathed it in. Her eyes fell closed as the angel grace flooded through her veins, warming her toes and fingertips. Her flesh stitched back together, fusing back to perfection.

Something pierced her skin, lodging itself between her ribs, and Alex looked down in surprise. The tip of a knife protruded from her chest, and the angel curiously touched it with a finger. The pressure felt like a pinch, the pain suppressed by her grace, and Alex turned to look back at Meghan who stood a step away, her face blank. “You.” She reached behind and pulled the silver knife free, discarding it onto the riverbed. “Of course.”

The girl’s form morphed, skin falling away as she took a step back, and a teenage girl unfolded from the mess. Alex stepped towards the shifter, closing the gap between them. “Why did you wait so long to try and kill me?” The shifter’s mouth opened, but Alex lifted a hand, her palm pressing against the girl’s head. Her grace flowed inwards, burning away the life within, and the body crumpled to the ground. “Never mind, I don’t care.”

Two cannons fired, and Alex stretched her hand out as her grace pulled her weapon up into her hand. “Gabriel.” Alex summoned up the grace, so unlike the cold foreign chill of Theo’s. This grace was soft, warm with familiarity.

A second metal gift came down, landing at her feet, and Alex knelt down to pull out a single piece of folded paper. *Kick ass. G.*

Lightning flashed through the sky, and the air was filled with snarls. Creatures poured out from the woods, and Alex rose to meet them, exhilaration and adrenaline fueling her onwards. Her grace sparked through the air, molding with her angel blade. The first fell beneath her blade, the second beneath the palm of her hand.

She lost track of time as monster after monster fell, slaughtered helplessly by her power and skill, until finally none remained. Alex shoved the final body aside as she withdrew her blade, eyes glowing with a golden light as Gabriel’s grace swelled within.

A light glowed from within the trees, and Alex curiously made her way after it, reining her grace back in as she made her way through the darkened night. The light faded as she grew closer, and Alex picked up her pace until she came to a stop in front of a wooden door. The white light spilled from around the edges, and the doorknob gave way underneath her touch.

Alex pushed her way through, eyes narrowing against the sudden bright light. She drew her grace in tight as her vision adjusted to take in the long hall that opened up to a wide golden room. The angel pursed her lips together as she stalked forward towards the grandiose chair that sat in the center of it all. Golden wings sprawled out across the armrests, stretching out across the floor and shimmering in the light, but Alex couldn’t help but notice their poor condition; some feathers were charred, some were small, soft with new growth, and some were missing all together.
In the midst of the feathers sat a man, sprawled out across the chair as his golden eyes watched her approach. “What’d you think?” he asked, and his arms stretched out proudly.

“It sucked.” Alex tucked her weapon into the back of her jeans as she stopped in front of the chair, crossing her arms as she confronted the archangel.

A frown slipped over Gabriel’s face, surprised by her displeasure. “Well, I didn’t have much time to set it up,” he defended, straightening up in his seat. “First that asshat started blowing my horn, and then you rolled into town? I couldn’t get to Cas in time, and I barely found you —”

“Cas?” Alex stepped forward, grey eyes flashing as her voice deepened in anger. “What do you mean?”

“What did you think about the concept?” The archangel continued on, ignoring her remark. “Hunger Games are in now, aren’t they? I’ve been watching a lot of movies recently, and with all … that —” he motioned to Alex, and the girl scoffed, “— you seemed like you needed to kill a few things —”

“Hey!” Alex grabbed Gabriel by the jacket, cutting him off. “Where’s Cas? Okay? Where’s Cas, and what the hell happened to your wings, huh?”

“I was hiding.” Gabriel pushed her away, and Alex stumbled back at the strength behind his shove. “Deep, deep in hiding in the safest place in the universe … heaven. But then you and the three stooges had to go and ruin Christmas, now, didn’t you?”

“Cry me a river, asshole.”

The archangel gave a dramatic roll of his eyes. “Look. I dropped, I hid, I finally watched Downton Abbey. Alright,” he relented when Alex cocked an eyebrow, “I didn’t. But then your BFF Metatron sent his minions out looking for me. Apparently he thinks since I’m an archangel that I have extra juice.”

“Which you do.” Alex flicked out her grace — Gabriel’s grace — that resided in her chest.

“Yeah, but you’ve got all that I can spare. I know, it’s not a lot. But I got hurt in the fall, too, used most of my juice to get back into porn.” Gabriel paused, his face scrunching up momentarily as he thought about his words. “That came out wrong. And so did that.”

“Dude. What’s your point?”

“My point is that I’ve been on the run. That is, until, somebody started playing my song.”

“Yeah, I know.” Alex shoved her hands into her pockets, lips pursed tightly. “Gadreel been summoning angels using your horn.”

“Gadreel?” Gabriel’s eyebrows lifted up in surprise. “That old chestnut? Wow.”

“Yeah, he — wait, wait, no.” Alex shook her head to clear her thoughts. “That’s not the — what happened to Castiel? What do you mean you couldn’t get to him in time?”

“Some of Metatron’s goons grabbed him.” Gabriel shrugged, disinterested in her line of conversation. “Like I said, you’re lucky I found you before they nabbed you too.”

“Okay, well, we — we have to find him.” Alex reached back for her weapon, but her fingers closed around midair. She spun around, searching for it, when a glint of metal from Gabriel’s hand caught her eye. The archangel was balancing the blade on his fingers, his attention on it fully. “Hey! What if
“They won’t.” Gabriel let the angel blade fall back into his lap. “Those brothers Brain and Brawn have got a hostage.” He held out the weapon, handle first, and Alex took it from his grasp. “Tomorrow afternoon. Bishop’s Family Motel. Be careful — my grace won’t last you long.”

“It’ll last me as long as I need.” Alex flexed her clenched fists, feeling the archangel grace pulse through her veins, stronger and fuller than Castiel’s and Theo’s grace combined. “And let me guess. You’re going to stay … here.” She motioned around to the golden room. “Safely out of the way.”

“You got it.” Gabriel watched how her eyes hardened before he scoffed. “You don’t seriously think I would put my neck out there for this. Listen, Alex.” He leaned forward in his chair, his golden wings dragging against the ground. “Don’t get my wrong; we’re friends — we were even platonic partners in crime with that tot of yours —”

Alex’s fists buried in his jacket and hauled the archangel to his feet. Her anger flared, and her eyes glowed gold with his grace. “Say his name and you’re dead.”

Gabriel extracted himself from her grip with ease, and with a flick of his finger, Alex was shoved back five feet. “With what weapon?” His voice stood on the edge of taunting, and Alex’s fingers clenched as instinct to reach for her angel blade took hold; it wouldn’t do anything against an archangel. “Do you know how many monsters you killed today?” Gabriel sauntered forward as Alex straightened up, shoulders rolling back. “Ten, fifteen, twenty? Maybe more? Did you even know what it was you killed?”

Alex scoffed loudly. “It doesn’t matter,” she sneered. “There’s no point — I’m going to hell anyways. I’ll kill any bloodsucker I meet, and anyone else who gets in my way. Besides, in my line of work, those people in my way probably deserve it.” She turned away, unable to face the look on the archangel’s face. “Just … beam me back down to earth, okay? I’ve got a hostage exchange to get to.”

Alex’s feet thudded on the warm pavement, solid and even as she crossed the street towards the old motel. The parking lot curved around towards the back, and the young hunter picked up her pace, eyes narrowed in pleased confidence; her weapon hung at her side, and Gabriel’s grace rested comfortably in her chest, a ball of smouldering embers ready to be fanned into flame at a moment’s notice.

“Either of you bring s’mores?” Metatron’s voice drifted around from the corner, and Alex’s fingers circled into a fist as she stepped into view. The scribe was standing in a ring of fire, his hands outstretched to be warmed by the flames. “Holy fire always gives them a delightful minty aftertaste. Make a wish, boys.” With a deep breath, he blew out the fire, and Alex stepped back behind the building, surprised at the show of power — not even Gabriel had done something like that. “No thanks!” A crash followed the scribe’s words, and Alex watched as Sam and Dean were thrown back into the Impala, dazed.

The scribe circled around to the trunk and opened it, waving away the warding with a flick of his hand. Inside lay Gadreel, cuffed and gagged, and Metatron helped him to his feet. Anger pulsed
through her, and Alex stepped forward as her eyes narrowed. She flicked out Gabriel’s grace, accentuated by her anger, and the trunk slammed shut.

Metatron spun around, his blue eyes widening in surprise. “Just in time,” he half-crowed, and his hand came up as his grace poured forth. It hit Alex full force, but she managed to stay on her feet, meeting this blow and deflecting it with her borrowed strength. Her eyes glowed golden as she summoned all her strength to push back, and Metatron stumbled away.

“Gadreel.” Alex strolled forward, head lifted authoritatively.

Gadreel gave a slight dip of his head of greeting. “Alex.” Wonder filled his voice, and a mix between guarded amity and discomfort flickered in his eyes. “I have not seen that grace in a long time. How did you find it?”

“I’ve got connections.” Alex stopped beside him, surprised by his lack of animosity, and she mimicked his cordial nod. “How about you? I hope the brothers didn’t hurt you too badly.” Her eyes fell on his bruised face, and she reached up.

The angel respectfully deflected her touch. “I do not need your pity.”

“I’m just trying to build some amiability between us. Not between us, though,” she added over to Metatron, who was struggling back to his feet. “I just don’t like you. Get up.” Her grace flicked up, forcefully helping the scribe to his feet to emphasize her strength.

“Where the hell have you been?” Dean’s voice came from behind her, but Alex didn’t turn to face him, her attention fully focused on the two angels before her.

“Where’s Castiel?” She let her grace rise back up in her chest, ready for another bout of conflict, but it never came. What came instead was a white car, its tires screeching as it pulled up to a stop.

“A deal is a deal.” Metatron brushed of his cardigan with a sharp glare at the angel. “Unlike your friends, I actually keep my end.” He crossed open to the car, and the door opened, revealing Castiel. The passenger side door opened as an angel stepped out to pull Castiel out into the parking lot.

The seraph’s gaze darted between the brothers to Gadreel and then to Metatron before it finally landed on Alex. “Why are you doing this?” Dean demanded, stepping forward to Alex’s side, and the young hunter lifted her head as Gadreel got into the car.

Metatron chuckled at the Winchester’s angry tone. “Because I can. Because you and your little brother and your fine, feathered friends and all those secrets you’ve got locked away in your bunker can’t stop me. But I am gonna enjoy watching you try. It’s gonna be a hell of a show.” He turned to face Castiel, who had taken a step away to stand beside Alex. “I’ll see you around, Castiel. Never forget I gave you a chance.”

The scribe got into the car, and it disappeared down the street, leaving the four of them alone. “What the hell is he talking about?” Alex let Gabriel’s grace fall back inside of her as she turned to her mate, eyes narrowed in worry. “And what the hell happened to you?”

“It’s … a long story. But the long and short of it is that Metatron is trying to play God.”

“Play God?” Sam scoffed, shoving his hands into his jacket pocket. “Cas, he erased angel warding. He fucking blew out holy fire. He is God. He’s powering up with the angel tablet. How the hell are we supposed to stop this guy?”

He paused, and after a second Alex looked up in surprise to find that his gaze was on her. “Oh, I, uh,
I just got lucky,” she lied. “I caught him by surprise.”

“Yeah, I see you got some mojo back.” Dean turned to his brother, his lips pursed tight. “Alright, so what if there is a stairway to heaven?” he asked, and Alex stepped back to Castiel’s side as the two Winchesters brainstormed. “We find it and get a drop on this guy.”

“You want to sneak into the Death Star, take out the emperor?”

“Oh, I …” Castiel cleared his throat, drawing the brothers’ surprised attention onto him. “I’m not sure what a fictional battle station in space has to do with this, but if taking out the emperor means taking out Metatron, I’m on board.”

“Whoa, whoa — wait.” Alex exchanged a surprised look with Sam. “Did you just — you just understood a Star Wars reference. How the fuck —”

“Metatron … downloaded every type of story he’s consumed into my mind. Apparently my ignorance got on his nerve. I … I imagine it will make our conversations simpler,” he added to Sam and Dean.

“That son of a bitch.” Alex snapped Gabriel’s grace out angrily, and the street light above them exploded into sparks. Castiel reached out, his fingers threading through hers as he took her hand to calm her down.

“You sure you’re alright?” Dean’s green eyes flashed with surprise. “Where the hell were you today, huh?”

“It’s nothing,” Alex muttered. “I’ll explain later.”

“And what about you, Dean?” To her surprise, Castiel countered the Winchester’s question with his own. “There’s something different about you.”

“I’m fine.” Dean patted Castiel on the shoulder with his right hand, turning to go, but Castiel’s hand shot up, his fingers gripping Dean’s wrist like a vice.

The seraph pulled the arm down and ripped Dean’s sleeve upwards, revealing the Mark of Cain branded onto his forearm. Dean tried to pull away, but Castiel’s hold was unbreakable. “What have you done?” The seraph’s eyes darkened, and Dean finally was able to rip his arm away.

“It’s a means to an end,” he snapped, defensively rolling down his sleeve to cover up the mark.

“Dammit, Dean!”

Dean cut him off. “Look, you find heaven, you drop a dime. Meantime, I got a knight to kill.” He stormed away to the Impala, and Alex watched him go with a scowl.

“Hey.” Sam touched Alex gently on the shoulder, drawing her attention back onto him. “What about you? You coming with us?”

Alex looked up at Castiel. “I think I’ll spend the night here,” she decided. “My car’s still back at the gas station, so I’ll be driving back in that either way.”

Castiel nodded, and he put a hand around her waist, keeping her close as Sam glanced towards the Impala. “Alright,” he agreed before he looked over at Cas. “We’ll be in touch. Be safe out there.”

“You too,” Castiel agreed, and Sam turned to go. “Wait, Sam,” he added with a glance towards
Dean. “Keep an eye on him.”

Sam nodded, and Alex watched as he walked away and climbed into the Impala. The car roared to life, and then it was gone, tearing off down the street. She reached up to cover the hand at her side with hers, threading her fingers through his. “That went well,” she finally joked, her voice dry with her humor.

Castiel didn’t immediately answer. “You knew he had the Mark,” he finally guessed.

“I was there when he got it.” Alex leaned her head against his shoulder, tugging gently on his hand so he would hold her tighter as she relayed the story. “Crowley was there too — he’s the one who brought us there. Originally he wanted me to take it, but Cain wouldn’t have any of that. I, uh … I think he knew that Crowley owned my soul, and hates demons about as much as I do.”

“I’m glad he didn’t.” Castiel led the way over to the line of doors in the motel, and Alex followed, her gaze darting over to the old Lincoln that sat in front of door 28. “There’s no telling its effect on a being like you. And I’m sure Crowley would have certainly found a way to use it to his advantage.”

He unlocked the door and stepped inside, flipping on the lights to illuminate the quaint wooden room. “I worried about Dean, though. He barely tempers his anger as it is. I’m afraid that, with the Mark, he may one day lose control all together.”

“So I take it you know a lot about it, then.” Alex kicked the door closed behind her, and Castiel turned to face her.

“I know that it was a gift — a burden — from Lucifer. And I know the fall and the fate of Cain. Nothing good will ever come of it.” The seraph shook his head, chasing away his thoughts. “It’s not important,” he finally said. “Tell me how you got Gabriel’s grace.”

Alex sank down onto the bed, and her story poured forth, only providing details when Castiel asked. “He just … gave it to me,” she finally finished. “So I could help you. Here.” She pulled Gabriel’s grace up to the surface and pressed it against Castiel’s. “You should take some. You need it more than I.”

“I shouldn’t.” Castiel gently pushed her hand away, but Alex firmly moved it back. “I have Theo’s grace; it will last me as long as I need.”

“Yeah, but his grace sucks.” Alex let Gabriel’s grace swell up, and her eyes glowed golden. “Just take a little bit; I only got some, and it’s still stronger than all of Theo’s. I don’t need it all.” She curled her finger in his white shirt, leaning forward. Castiel didn’t protest, and she kissed him, pressing her lips against his as she let Gabriel’s grace flow forth and into his veins.

It was Castiel who pulled away, breaking off the grace, and Alex let what remained return to her chest. “So, what about you?” She poked him in the shoulder and pulled her feet up onto the bed to face him. “Gabriel said Metatron kidnapped you.”

“Yes. I think he used a method similar to what Gabriel has used with you as far as constructing a hallucinatory world.” The seraph’s gaze dropped down to his lap. “He used Gabriel’s face to try and convince me to reunite the angels and lead them in a war against Metatron.”

“What?” Alex recoiled slightly in surprise, and her eyebrows knitted together. “He wants you to lead a rebellion?”

“He wants an antagonist to his story. His plan is to slaughter the angels, and in exchange he would grant you and I access to heaven and an endless supply of grace.” The seraph hesitated before
adding, “He also promised to overturn your deal with Crowley.”

“You didn’t …” Alex let out a breath of relief when Castiel shook his head, and she scooted closer to him. “Okay, so let me get this straight. This asshat wants you — you — to be the Lex Luthor to his Superman?” She scoffed loudly. “Great. We’re not just dealing with a juiced-up scribe — we’re dealing with a delusional one. Some hero he’ll make; not only has he deceived you, but he’s killed hundreds of angels and Kevin Tran —”

“I know.” Castiel’s warm hand stretched out to cover hers. “I have no intention of accepting his offer, no matter how tempting. We still have time to find our grace without his help.”

Alex leaned over, pressing one hand against his thigh to steady herself as she kissed his lips. “We’ll figure it out,” she promised, pressing her forehead into his. “We’re going to stop Metatron, kill Abaddon, and find our grace.”

Castiel’s hands twisted through her hair, and Alex dropped her head down to the crook of his neck. She shifted, straddling his lap as she pressed herself into his warm, solid chest. “What are you going to do now?” she murmured.

“I’m going to start gathering angels.” Castiel’s cheek rested against her head. “I won’t lead them against heaven like Metatron asked,” he added quietly when Alex shifted uncomfortably in his lap, “but there is safety in unified numbers.”

Alex let out a wordless hum of agreement as she wrapped her arms around her mate, pulling him closer. “I guess.” She pressed her cheek even further into his chest, and the seraph tipped back, laying back against the bed and bringing his mate with him. Alex leaned up, brushing her hair out of her face before she leaned down to kiss him.

Castiel’s hands came up to rest on her waist, and Alex pulled back slightly. “I have the room until tomorrow morning.”

Alex sat up, hooking her fingers through the seraph’s belt loops as she twisted to glance back at the clock on the wall. “And I plan on staying ’til then,” she teased as she slipped off her jacket and dropped it on the bed behind her. She leaned back down, pressing her hands against her mate’s chest as she kissed his lips.

Her phone rang, and Alex pulled it out of her pocket with a scowl. Dean’s name flashed across the screen, and the angel tossed it onto her jacket on the floor. “It’s not important,” she promised when Castiel started to sit up. “Dean Winchester can wait.”
Alex followed the hallway down towards the library, brushing her wet hair back over her shoulders. She paused briefly to mindlessly tug on the collar of her old t-shirt before she dropped her hand back down to her side, tucking it within the pocket of her sweatpants. Up ahead, she could hear Sam and Dean talking in hushed voices, their words too soft for her to make out meaning, but she paid them little attention, her mood too good to be spoiled by whatever gruesome death the brothers were discussing.

They hadn’t been there when she had arrived back at the bunker, and the angel had retired to the bathroom to take a much-needed shower after her long drive back from Oregon. Castiel had reluctantly remained behind, necessity taking him down a different highway, but Alex could still feel the brush of his skin against hers, and the back of her neck tingled at the tangible memory of his lips against her hairline. A smile grew across her lips, and the angel quickly did her best to quell it as she stepped into the library.

“Hey.” Alex shoved her other hand into her pocket as both brothers looked up, and her merriment immediately died; The grave looks on their faces had her frowning, and she stopped just inside of the doorway. “Uh … everything okay?”

“I found this in your room.” Dean shoved something across the table, and Alex’s heart plummeted at the sight of Bobby’s last gift. “I don’t suppose you were going to tell us about this, either.”

“W-What? What the hell! That’s none of your business!” Alex hurried forward and snatched the folder up into her arms, pressing it into her chest as she glared up at Dean. “It was meant for me, not for you!” She looked over at Sam, searching for support, but the Winchester’s face was twisted in hurt and betrayal. “You — you didn’t read it, did you? It’s not yours! Sam!”

“How long have you known?” Sam’s voice was quiet, and Alex hugged the folder closer to her chest. “Have you been lying all this time?”

My name is Alex. I’m a hunter, I’m an angel, my mate is Castiel. The mantra ran through her mind as she stared at Sam. “I-I …” she stuttered, searching for words. “What do you mean?” Dean stepped around the table, and Alex’s hand went out to keep the Winchester at bay. “Hey,” she snapped, and her voice took on an authoritative deepness. “Hey, hey, hey. Let’s just stay calm about this —”

“Stay calm? Everything about you was a lie, and you want me to stay calm?” Dean stepped forward, and Alex tried to deflect the incoming arm. She twisted, doing her best to keep her folder out of his grasp, but Dean’s reach knocked her off balance, and she fell. The folder hit the ground, and Dean planted his foot on top of it, pinning it to the ground.

“Get off!” Alex threw herself against Dean’s legs, but the large Winchester didn’t budge. “Dean!” Gabriel’s grace boiled within her, and Alex’s eyes glowed golden as she glared upwards. “Get off!”

She shoved Dean back again, and the force of her grace-infused action had the Winchester falling back across the table. The room fell silent, but Alex didn’t care. She gathered up Bobby’s file into
her arms, smoothing down the crumpled edges.

She heard Dean get back to his feet, ready to pick a fight, but then Sam was there, pushing himself in-between them. “Dude, yelling at her won’t do any good,” he murmured, and Alex hugged the papers tight. “She’s not going to talk if you try and scare her.” Dean started to protest, but Alex glanced up to watch Sam put a hand on his brothers chest to keep him back. “Let me talk to her. Go wait outside.”

Dean stalked away, and Alex busied herself by smoothing down the wrinkled edges of Bobby’s last handwritten note. Tears stung her eyes, and she sniffled to try and keep them in as Sam knelt down in front of her. “He ripped it,” she whimpered, running her fingers across where Dean’s heel had tore the bottom of the page.

Sam sighed, his shoulders falling unhappily. “I’m sorry. Listen. Alex — I know that’s not your real name —”

“It’s real enough,” Alex whispered as she tucked her note back into the file with care.

“I just want to understand why.”

“Why what?” Alex pushed herself to her feet and cross over to the table, keeping her back to the Winchester as she flicked her grace crossly. “W-Why did I lie about my name, or why did lie about about where I’m from? I don’t know. I don’t know, okay?” She hugged the folder against her chest. “I … I didn’t even know I was from here until recently.” Her gaze dropped down to the papers in her hands. “How … how much did you read?”

“Most of it. Bobby … he put in a lot of work into Sheol.”

“Yeah, he did.” Alex turned to face him, her eyes wide in a desperate plea. “You have to believe me. I knew nothing about Sheol — I hadn’t even heard of it until Cas told me about it.” Alex sunk down into one of the chairs. “You read Bobby’s notes, so you know that Sheol is … sort of what people call Purgatory nowadays, except, you know, it’s for people not monsters. I’ve been looking into it.” She swung her foot sullenly, kicking at the table leg as she added, “It’s for like … neutral souls who weren’t good enough to go to heaven and not bad enough to go to hell. Apparently it’s impenetrable to all but souls and reapers, so not even the angels know much about how it works. Archangels, maybe, but not normal angels.” Alex paused, and she momentarily berated herself for not asking Gabriel about it — Sheol hadn’t even crossed her mind.

“But this Sheol is like a sorting center,” Sam added, taking over the explanation. “Bobby says that the soul lives its life over and over again until they’re finally, uh … sorted.”

“Until they make a decision that finally tips the scale.” Alex nodded slowly in agreement. “Yeah, very kemetic. But since living the exact same life over again wouldn’t result in any changes, Bobby says the cycles change slightly each time until the scale tips. Cas says most souls stay there anywhere between a few hours to a few days, but I was there for almost six months — who knows how many lives I lived.”

“So these souls Groundhog’s Day their way to heaven?” Dean leaned up against the doorframe, and Alex looked up in surprise.

“Or hell,” she added, and her gaze dropped down to her lap. “Cas and I … we think my whole concept of the Supernatural show came from Sheol twisting different aspects my life. That’s — that’s why I didn’t know that the angels were going to fall — I-I died last December. The angels fell in May. I-I guess I really can’t know the future.”
“So, do you … what do you remember?”

“I don’t know.” Alex shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. “I don’t know what about my life is real and what’s Sheol, Sam. I just … I just don’t know anymore.”

“Wait.” Dean crossed his arms as suspicion lined his voice. “So if you were dead, how the hell did you get down here?”

“Dean, Bobby’s notes said that only some sort of cataclysmic event could have done this. I mean, back then he thought it was one of Lucifer’s seals, but Metatron’s spell would have been strong enough.”

Sam’s words did little to phase Dean’s skepticism, and Alex added, “Sam’s right. My human soul fell with the angels. It had just finished its final, uh, cycle, and … and it was on its way to hell when the spell basically … knocked it off course —“

“And back in time six years.”

“I don’t like it either, okay?” Alex’s voice rose in a shout against Dean’s retort, and she drew her knees up into her chest. “I don’t like it, and I don’t understand why this had to happen to me, and for all I know my soul already went to hell and dealing with you two is my eternal punishment —”

“Hey, hey, calm down.” Sam put a hand on her knee, and Alex glowered down at him but fell silent. “You said your soul was going to hell? Who told you that?”

“Crowley.” Alex dragged her sleeve across her nose as she sniffled. “He’s fucking smug about having my soul again.”

“I bet.”

Alex glared over at Dean, but a gentle squeeze from Sam’s hand had her shaking his comment off. “Cas said a lot of the angels are looking for my soul — of at least, as my soul was. Thankfully, I guess being angelified changed it enough that they won’t be able to recognize it without looking too hard.”

Dean’s phone rang, and Alex fingered the stiff corner of the folder as he answered. “Hello?” The Winchester stepped out of the room, and Sam rose to his feet.

“Thanks for telling us this.” Sam patted her on the knee, but Alex didn’t look up, too focused on the pages in her hand. Her face flushed at his childlike treatment, but she said nothing in fear of starting up the conversation all over again.

“That was Jody.” Dean stepped back into the room. “She’s got a dead vamp and a runaway teen up in Sioux Falls. I said we’d be there first thing tomorrow.”

“Okay, great.” Sam walked over to his brother, leaving Alex alone at the table. “Let me go get my stuff.”

“Hey. Pip. Pack up.” Dean shoved his phone into his pocket, and Alex peeked upwards. “You’re coming with.”

“Yes, Dean.” Alex slunk away towards her room, reluctant weighing down her head. She closed her door behind her and carefully tucked Bobby’s folder back into its home beneath her pillow, and then she turned her attention down onto her unpacked bag. The last thing she wanted was to get into the car with the Winchesters, but there was no way that Dean would let her stay behind, unattended, in
the bunker. The heavy thud of a fist on her door confirmed her suspicions, and Alex reluctantly grabbed her things and left the room.

**Sioux Falls, South Dakota**

Alex stepped out of the Impala, the hood of her sweatshirt drawn up against the cold drizzle that soaked the ground beneath her feet. The damp air smelled of tar and exhaust, and the angel pressed her lips together in a half smile as circled around the car. “You three are a sight.” Jody Mills got out of her cruiser, a grin across her face.

“Jody.” Sam mimicked the sheriff’s smile as he moved around to stand next to his brother. “How’s the shoulder?”

“Eh, only aches when it rains. How have you guys been?”

“Peachy,” Dean lied, while Sam shrugged with an added, “Touch and go.” Alex said nothing, her gaze dropping to the ground, and her toes scuffled against the pavement.

She felt Jody’s eyes move across all three of them before she huffed. “I know the feeling.”

“So, uh, what you got for us?” Dean asked.

Jody turned to unlock the trunk, and Sam stepped forward, ready to investigate whatever lay inside. “He jumped one of my men last night. Thankfully Frank’s okay; poor guy still doesn’t know what hit him.”

Alex peered around him to see a pair of legs laying limply against the carpeted interior, but the rest of her view was obscured as Sam leaned down to draw back the lips of the decapitated head. “Yeah, uh, that’s a vamp, alright,” he confirmed as he straightened up, and Alex barely caught a glimpse of a fang sliding back into the gums as the trunk was once again closed and locked.

Dean chuckled. “I don’t know, Sammy. Looks like Jody might not need our help anymore.”

“Oh, they grow up so fast.” Sam added as he moved back across the pavement to stand beside his brother with a smile.

“Don’t they?”

“Yeah, joke all you want,” Jody said, cutting into their light hearted teasing. “There’s more where this came from. My men brought in a runaway last night,” she explained when Dean let out a word of surprise. “There’s no ID on her — nothing on here, actually, except a bus ticket out of Nebraska. Total Jane Doe. She won’t even give me her name; girl’s basically feral. She’s got zero manners,” the sheriff added pointedly, “didn’t even thank me for saving her. Anyhow, this thing went to plenty of trouble to get at her. And to hear him tell it, the ‘others’ will want her at least as bad as he did.”

Sam’s lips turned down into a frown, and he looked over at his brother. “Sounds like a nest.”

Dean quietly agreed, and Jody looked between the two of them in surprise. “Nest?” she repeated. “I’m guessing that’s not half as cute and cozy as it sounds.”

“Oh, I’m afraid not.” Dean reached into his pocket to pull out his car keys. “Sounds like we should get down there and talk to this girl, huh?”
“Sounds good to me, Alex.” Jody turned to the angel, who lifted her head in surprise. “Why don’t you come with me, huh?”

“Uh … sure.” Alex cast Dean and Sam a rushed glance before she did as the sheriff said, hurrying around the squad car to pull open the passenger side door. She paused, mouth half open as she poised to speak, but she clamped her jaw shut as she thought better of it, choosing instead to slide into the car.

Jody joined her a second later, and Alex dropped her gaze to her hands that rested uncomfortably in her lap. “You were mighty silent back there,” she began as the car’s engine purred to life. “What’s going on?”

“It’s complicated.” Alex’s gaze flickered up to the rearview mirror to watch both brothers get into the Impala.

“We’ve got a three minute drive. Get as far as you can.”

“Oh, okay. You’ve heard of — of demon deals, right?” Alex curled her fingers around the seatbelt, nails dragging across the polyester webbing. She waited until Jody gave a nod before she sighed. “When the angels fell, I lost track of Castiel. I had no way to contact him, no way to know if he was alive. I just knew that every fallen angel was looking to kill him, and I was too sick to go find him. So, I, uh … I made a deal … with Crowley.”

She watched Jody stiffen in surprise out of the corner of her eye. “Crowley?” she repeated, and Alex ducked her head at the tightness in her voice. “You — you mean you —”

“I needed to keep Castiel safe, and I, I was out of options.” Her defense felt weak on her tongue, and the angel bit her lip. “The important thing is that Cas is safe, and I have eighteen months left on my deal.” She forced a low chuckle. “Dean was pissed when Crowley told him. He gave me this.” She turned her head and touched the fading bruise on her jaw so Jody could see.

“That looks old. How long ago was this?”

“Mm, a week? Maybe longer? Sam understood once I explained it, but Dean’s been sort of a bitch lately.” Alex rolled her eyes, and her mind momentarily drifted back to Castiel’s concerns about the Mark of Cain, but she quickly pushed the idea aside; whatever Dean had done to her, she had deserved it.

“They still both seem pretty mad,” Jody said with a frown, and she turned the car onto the main road that housed the Sioux Falls Police Station. “You sure that’s all they’re upset about?”

“Well … no.” Alex fidgeted in her seat. “You know … you know how Bobby and I told everyone that we were related? I know a lot of people said they saw a resemblance, but it’s not true.” She looked over at Jody, and her own eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Wait. You — you seriously never guessed that?”

“No, I just assumed … seriously?” Jody looked over at Alex, her face momentarily blank with shock. “You just acted so similar — never mind. Okay, then, so then where are you actually from?”

“Stillwater, Minnesota.” Alex took a deep breath before she launched into her tale. “I lived in Chicago with my foster parents until December 14th, 2013 — eight months ago. That night, we had fought, and I left the house to cool my head. I was hit by an oncoming semi and died instantly — I didn’t even see it coming. I just saw a flash of light, and then … then the next thing I knew, I was falling out of the sky. I landed on Dean’s car and the date …” Alex paused, letting out a deep breath
before she finally admitted, “It was May of 2009.”

There was a moment of silence before Jody laughed. “You’re joking. You’re joking, right?” She glanced over at Alex, and her smile died. “Of course you’re not.”

The sheriff fell back into silence, and after a second or two Alex inquired, “Aren’t you going to ask how?”

Jody gave a small shake of her head. “I’ve learned to stop questioning things with you three,” she half-joked. “It makes my job a hell of a lot easier. Besides,” she added after a second, “You don’t sound like you have all the answers either.”

“I don’t,” Alex reluctantly agreed. “It’s just a lot of speculation for now. What we know is that the reason I came back — the reason my soul fell back to earth — was because of the angels falling — uh, you know, that freak meteor storm.” She waited for Jody to nod before she sighed. “Sam and Dean are really really not happy about it. I mean, I can’t blame them, except … Jody, I honestly had no idea that it had even happened — that I had died — until Cas told me.”

“They’re mad at you for something you didn’t even know about,” Jody finished with a nod. “Alright. Demon deal and … whatever the hell you want to call that. Anything else I should know about before we go in there?”

Her words was light, but Alex could hear the tension in her voice as the sheriff turned the car into the parking lot of the police station. The angel shifted nervously in her seat, debating whether or not she should finally come clean. “Alex isn’t my real name.”

“Christ.” The car died, and Alex winced at the muttered curse. “Is there anything about you that’s real?”

“Everything about me is real.” Alex threw open the car door, gaze turned towards the pavement below her. “Who cares what I call myself — I’m still the same person that you trusted ten minutes ago.” She got out and closed the door behind her, not waiting for anymore questions. “Come on,” she called. “We should get in there before Sam and Dean show up.”

She could feel Jody’s gaze on her back, and she kept her pace well in front of the sheriff as she pushed her way into the building. “Hey, Frank.” Jody waved at a pudgy man by the vending machine. “How’s the head?”

“It’s been better.” The man grimaced before his gaze turned over to Alex. “Hey, you’re, uh, you’re Bobby’s girl, aren’t you? I haven’t seen you in years.”

“Yeah, it’s been a while since I’ve been in town,” Alex lied. “Sorry to hear you got jumped last night. Glad to hear you’re okay.” She paused, letting Jody catch up and take the lead. “Where’s this girl?” she murmured, peering around the station.

“In the back. Hey, Johnson.” Jody raised her voice to grab the attention of the officer at the front desk. “I’ve got two agents coming in in a few minutes for the girl — crossing state lines and all. Just send them back when they’re here, alright?”

“Yes, sheriff.”

Jody led the way down the hallway. “Go ahead and wait here,” she instructed. “I’m going to go get her and bring her to one of the interrogation rooms. Feel free to grab some coffee or something.”

“Okay.” Alex stepped back and let the sheriff go off to the right before she moved off towards the
break room where the coffee pot was boiling. She heard voices from the front room, deep and authoritative, a sure sign of the Winchesters’ arrival. She heard footsteps approaching, and she peeked her head out into the hallway to wave them over. “Jody’s getting the kid out of lockdown,” she explained as the brothers stopped beside her. “She’ll be back any second now.”

As if on cue, Jody appeared behind Sam and Dean. “I put her in interrogation room two — second door on your left. You two can go in whenever you’re ready.” She motioned Alex over to her and added, “You, with me. We’ll go see if the DNA results have come up with anything.”

Alex nodded, thankful for Jody’s intuition to keep her and the brothers apart. “Sure. We’ll meet up with you soon,” she told Sam as he nudged Dean down the hallway, and once they were out of sight, the angel shook her head.

“Come on.” Jody waved Alex after her further into police station, and the young girl followed, hands shoved deep into her pockets. She hung back as the sheriff disappeared into her office, choosing instead to study the name plate that hung beside the door: Kevin Ludd. A fragment of scotch tape clung to the silver frame, and Alex scratched it off as she listened to the indistinguishable murmurs from inside the room.

Jody stepped back out, a sheet of paper held tightly in her hands. “We’ve got a match.” Interest gleamed in her eyes, and Alex dropped her hand back to her side.

“Who is she?” she asked as she followed Jody back down the hallway. “Where’s she from?”

Her questions were left momentarily unanswered as Jody stopped beside the interrogation room to rap on the metal door before she peered inside. “Sorry to interrupt,” she began. “We got a match on her DNA.” She stepped back, and after a second Sam and Dean appeared, stepping out into the hallway; Alex shifted back to give them room as Jody cleared her throat. “Annie Jones. Reported abducted outside of Kenosha in ’06. Raised by an elderly grandparent. No living kin.” Jody handed the report to the Winchesters before she crossed her arms. “You think the vamps are the ones who took her?”

Dean frowned, skimming through the information before he handed the paper over to Sam. “Eight years is a long time for a human to live with vampires without getting killed or turned.”

Jody shrugged. “You’re the experts, but there was something … familiar about the way this vamp talked to her.”

“Jody’s right.” Sam gave the sheriff a small nod. “And she had scars on her neck — feeding scars. Uh … they’re layered,” he explained, “as if they’d been built on for years.”

“So she’s a blood slave.” Dean took over the explanation. “We’ve seen it before — vampires keeping people as pets, human feedbags. Sometimes these slaves …”

“Stay loyal to their captors,” Sam finished, and Dean nodded in agreement.

“So … this girl’s not talking cause she’s got a case of … of what? Vampiric Stockholm syndrome?” Jody looked between Sam and Dean and then over at Alex, her brows furrowed in surprise, and the angel gave a small shrug.

“I guess so,” she said, shoving her hands into her jacket pockets. “She’s probably protecting the nest.”

“Alright.” Dean gave Jody a sharp nod. “She’s already guessed that we’re hunters and clammed up, but we can work with that info. Good job.” He pushed his way back into the room, and Sam and
Jody followed. After a second or two, Alex did the same, slipping in through the door to stand against the wall.

Sam moved to stand in front of a dark-haired teenager, and the girl’s round face tightened with anger and distrust. “Okay, listen,” the hunter began. “Those vampires gave you a home, they raised you. So you feel a debt. Annie, we get it. Loyalty is a very powerful thing.”

“Alex.”

“What?” Alex perked up at her name, confused as to why this stranger was addressing her. “Me?”

The teenager’s cold gaze turned onto her. “No,” she retorted. “That’s my name.”

Sam pursed his lip together. “No, it’s not,” he patiently explained. “Your name is Annie Jones. Those vampires stole you. They’re monsters, Annie.”

“Alex.”

“And they didn’t love you,” Dean added, ignoring her interruption. “They loved your blood. They fed on you.”

“I fed them.” The teenager’s fists tightened. “My choice. My brothers — they brought me food when I was hungry. So when they struck out on a hunt, I fed them. They’re my family.”

Sam and Dean exchanged looks, and Alex narrowed her eyes as she looked the girl up and down; she looked only to be fifteen or sixteen years old, but the glint in her eyes seemed old and worn, a sure sign of a life of hardship and violence. “Okay.” Sam cleared his throat. “You care about them, but Alex … there’s a reason you decided to run away.”

“It was time … to move and get out on my own.” The teenager’s voice quavered, her answer unsure, and her gaze dropped down to her lap.

“And how do you think that decision is gonna sit with the rest of the nest?” Dean challenged. “One of them already pursued you. You think when the rest of them find out that you left that they’re just gonna shrug and cut their losses?”

“You lived with them for years,” Sam added roughly. “They’ve tasted your blood. They have your scent down cold. I mean, how far can you run and for how long?”

The teen’s eyes watered at the brothers’ harsh tone, and a single tear ran down her cheek as Dean continued. “You didn’t think this out, did you? What would happen, who might get hurt — your, uh, ‘brother’ for one.”

“His name was Cody. And she killed him!” A finger was flung out toward Jody Mills, sharp and accusing, and the sheriff blinked back her surprise.

Dean was quick to jump to her defense. “Because of a choice you made. These are the consequences. You have two options — them or you. And we can help you. We can keep you safe. But you have to help us.” He leaned forward across the table. “Where’s the nest?”

“I-I can’t.” The tears were back, and the teenager’s voice was quiet with fear. “After what’s happened … mama finds me, she’ll kill me.”

“Alex …”
“Hmm?” Alex leaned forward, the noise of curiosity instinctively leaving her mouth before she realized that the Winchester was speaking to the other girl. “Oh — sorry.” She crossed her arms when Dean rolled his eyes, and she added, “Couldn’t we — couldn’t we just call her Annie? I mean, because otherwise this is going to get really confusing for all of us.”

“My name’s not Annie! It’s Alex.”

“Yeah, well my name is Alex, too.” Alex retorted crossly. “So why don’t we just, I don’t know, call you by your real name?”

“Why don’t we just call you by your real name?” Dean’s sharp quip had Alex glaring, and she immediately fell silent, lips pursed tightly.

“Come on.” Jody broke into their bickering and ushered the three of them out of the room, and Alex fell in step behind the sheriff, using her to distance her from the Winchesters.

“Hey, Jody, is there a computer that I can use?” Sam asked with a glance back towards the room where the teenager now sat alone. “I want to see if I can dig up any evidence of a nest near — where did she come from?”

“Uh, O’Neill, Nebraska. And yeah. You can use mine.” Jody led the way down the hall, and the hunters fell in step behind her. Alex slipped off to the side to grab herself some coffee while the brothers worked. The pot was still boiling, and she slowly poured herself a small cup, killing time while Sam and Dean worked.

She poured some creamer in followed by one, then two, packets of sugar. She was digging around for a third when the heavy footsteps announced the arrival of Dean. Alex grabbed her coffee and sidestepped the Winchester, ducking her head low as she slipped out of the room.

She found Sam and Jody in the main office, and she quietly pulled up a seat next to Sam to watch his progress. “Mills, you okay?” Dean’s voice marked his reappearance, and Alex chance a glance up towards him.

Jody sighed. “No wonder she didn’t thank me,” she murmured. “That creep was her brother.” The sheriff shook her head, chasing away her regret. “I’m fine. You know, mostly, I’m just — I’m hung up on the name. Alex and Annie — they’re so close already. Why’d they change it?”

Dean shrugged, and Alex shook her head, unsure of what the answer might be. The silence was broken when Sam cleared his throat. “Okay, so we know from her ticket that Alex hopped on a bus out of O’Neill, Nebraska, right?”

“Obviously, it’d be better to go in with a firm location,” Sam continued, “but the town isn’t that big. There are no caves or other natural hiding places.”

“Alright, so go in, canvass it cold.”

Sam nodded. “Well, I worked together a short list of possible nest locations,” he told his brother. “Uh, there’s an empty fire station, four or five derelict homes. Nothing we couldn’t hit in a day.”

“Okay.” Dean nodded, and Sam rose to his feet. “You sure you’re alright to babysit by yourself?” he asked Jody as they made their way towards the front of the station.

Jody glanced back towards the hallway that led to the interrogation room. “Oh, well, the girl’s a
flight risk, not exactly friendly, but I think I can handle babysitting detail.”

“The station’s been made,” Sam added cautiously. “It might be worth heading upwind for a while. I mean, vamps are trackers.”

“Terrific.” Jody looked between Sam and Dean before she nodded. “Well, I’ve got an old family cabin outside of town. Shouldn’t raise too many eyebrows, me being gone for a day.” Her gaze fell down onto Alex. “Why don’t you roll with us?”

“Uh, no.” Dean firmly shook his head, and the angel’s shoulders fell. “No offense, sheriff, but I think Alex better come with us.”

Jody Mills opened her mouth to protest, but Alex quickly cut in. “It — it’s fine,” she promised. “I’ll be okay with them.”

“There’s got to be someone here if you need backup,” Dean added.

Mills scoffed at Dean’s idea. “You want me to enlist my men in a protection detail against vampires?” She motioned over to the weighty officer that stood at the far end of the room, deep in conversation with a coworker. “Frank’s still in the dark about what hit him last night. The poor guy still has nightmares about the barn episode of ‘The Walking Dead.’” Jody shook her head. “They’re good cops, but they’re not ready for this.”

Dean chuckled, and after a second his brother asked, “Jody, in your late night reading, did you ever come across anything about dead man’s blood? It takes vamps down like a horse tranq,” he explained when Jody shook her head.

“I would not say no to some of that. I mean, not that I’ll need it,” Jody quickly added. “You guys are gonna get the jump on these vamps and be back here before they even know their kin’s missing, right?”

Dean nodded, and Alex followed Sam and Dean out of the police station and off towards the Impala that sat at the end of the parking lot. “Dean,” Sam began once they were out of earshot, “are you sure not leaving Alex with Jody is the right idea?”

“Hell, you know why. There’s no way I’m making Jody watch Alex and Alex duke it out.”

“Ha ha. I’m sure that’s it.” Alex waited for the door to click open before she climbed inside. “Whatever. Let’s just get this over with so we can go back home, okay?”

O’Neill, Nebraska

Alex’s flashlight darted across the old, withered grass as she made her way up the winding driveway towards the farmhouse on the horizon. Her fingers tightened momentarily around the handle of her angel blade as gravel crunched beneath her feet. Sam and Dean moved up ahead of her, silently making their way toward the third abandoned home outside of O’Neill. The sun had set, and the moon and stars shown bright, twinkling in the dusky sky.

The front porch creaked under their weight, but the front door swung open with no resistance. “This place is a foreclosure, right?” Dean murmured as he led the way inside, and Alex followed after him, taking in the blankets on the floor and food on the counter with broad sweeps of her light.
Yep,” Sam agreed from behind her. “It is, just like the rest of them.”

“Well, somebody’s definitely been squatting here.” Alex stepped over a pile of trash before her flashlight’s beam came to rest on the kitchen windows. “Look. They’ve been blacked out.”

Sam opened his mouth to answer, but a noise had all three pausing. It was low at first, a mechanical whir that choked and spluttered at first before growing into a steady, throaty growl. Sam’s hand tapped the angel on the shoulder, and he motioned her after him back out the door and onto the grass. Dean followed at their heels, pointing off towards the right before tapping his own chest.

Sam nodded, and he nudged Alex after him as they circled off to the left. Alex stayed close to the house, footsteps silent on the barren ground, and she peered around the corner to watch the scene in front of her.

The source of the noise was a woodchipper, and before it stood a tall, broad man. He was carefully feeding something to the blades — what it was the angel couldn’t see — but the spray of pulp and thick-red mist from the other end made its contents easy to guess. She watched as Dean appeared around from the other side, approaching the vampire from the back until he was close enough to speak. “Hey!” he yelled over the noise, and the vampire turned around in surprise. Sam slunk forward, circling around to stay out of the distracted monster’s sight. “Hey, you need a hand with that? Oh.” The Winchester chuckled dryly as he motioned to the machine. “I guess not.”

The vampire bared his teeth as he snarled at Dean, but Sam was quicker. He snatched up a shovel and swung it downwards, cracking it over the monster’s head. The man fell onto the ground, unconscious, and Alex joined them beside him. “Great.” She reached over and turned the chipper off with a disgusted shake of her head before she paused, looking around the empty field. “Well … where’s the rest of them?”

“Come on.” Dean hoisted the unconscious vampire up across his shoulders. “Let’s get him inside. Pip? Rope.”

He held out the keys, and Alex nodded and took them from his hands. She hurried down to the Impala and threw open the trunk as the Winchesters dragged the vampire into the house. She grabbed two coils of rope and threw them over her arm before she slammed the trunk closed and made her way back towards the farmhouse.

By the time she reached the kitchen, however, Sam and Dean were already in the process of securing the unconscious monster. Two pegs in the ceiling held iron chains, which the brothers were making quick use of to secure the vampire in place. “Sick bastards,” she heard Dean mutter under his breath as he stepped away, and the creature’s eyes flickered open.

Alex tossed the rope onto a chair as she circled around to sit on the table next to Sam. “Morning.” She gave the vampire a curt, thin-lipped nod. “Got a name?”

The vampire blinked slowly before he cast a snarl in Alex’s direction. Their gazes locked, and for several seconds Alex didn’t think he was going to answer. “They call me Dale,” he finally growled.

“Well, Dale.” Dean crossed his arms, and the vampire’s gaze swung over to him. “You go out with the family, bring home a nice dinner. How did you get stuck doing the dishes?”

“We all have our roles to play.”

“Yours being destroying the evidence?” Sam flipped through two wallets that sat on the table. “Nice job. Ralph Hedges. Stacy Kepler.” He handed them to Alex, and the angel examined the licenses
herself. “Any reason you targeted them?”

“Yeah. Hunger.” Dale chuckled darkly as his eyes flashed, but his malice didn’t faze the hunters before him.

“And, so, the family’s what? Out taking a nice after-dinner stroll?”

“Oh, I’m sure they’ll be back real soon.”

“What I asked was …” Dean stepped forward, and his hands tangled in Dale’s long brown hair as he jerk the vampire’s head upwards “Where are they?” His sharp words were met with a glare, and the vampire spit up into Dean’s face. “Alright.” Dean’s fist collided with the creature’s stomach, sending it swinging backwards against the chains with a low groan. “You don’t want to talk. No skin off my back.” He dropped Dale’s head and threw another punch into his jaw. “Cause you see, a blood-sucking, body-chipping vamp — that’s bad enough, but vamps …” Another blow landed, accentuating his words, “that kidnap kids …” Dean yanked Dale’s head back up. “Well, I’m going to enjoy putting you down.”

“Of course.” The vampire chuckled as Dean stepped away. “Oh, I knew this was about Alexis. I warned Mama that girl would screw everything up for us one day.”

“ ‘Mama?’ “ Sam immediately perked up. “As in one vamp that turned you all?”

“Well, all of us but little sis. She was, uh, ‘too good to turn.’ ” The vampire scowled darkly. “Mama couldn’t bring herself to, no matter what we said, no matter how bad Alexis got.”

“Bad?”

“Let me guess.” Dale’s gaze swung over to Alex. “You never had a teenager sister. Dragging her heels, whining, near constant, about everything, but more and more about the blood, like she’s above it, like she’s better than us cause she don’t feed on people.”

Dean scoffed. “She is better than you, dumbass.”

Dale ignored him, his attention still fully on Alex. “Her moping? That teenage crisis-of-conscience crap? It’s annoying as hell, but it’s just an act. When the chips are down, she’ll always choose us over humans. I mean, how do you think we stayed off your radar all these years? Pretty, young, lost-looking thing like her? Irresistible, especially to the kind of man few people would miss.” The vampire chuckled. “I mean, sure, we hunt sometimes for sport, but it’s a lot easier and a lot safer to get delivery.”

“She’s your lure.” Dean’s face went blank with shock before it hardened, and he exchanged a worried look with his brother.

“Best a vamp could ask for,” Dale agreed. “Ad you better believe you don’t get that good at it unless you enjoy it. In her own sweet way … girl’s as bloodthirsty as a vampire.”

“Jody.” Sam jumped to his feet, and both he and Dean hurried out of the room. Alex watched them go, eyes flickering with concern as they pull their phones out of her pocket.

Confident that they weren’t going to leave without her, Alex turned her attention back onto the vampire. “So where’s everyone else?” she challenged. “Road trip after your sister and — what was the name of that lowlife? Caleb? Cody? I forget. We didn’t ask before we killed him.”

Dale’s fangs bared as he glared over at Alex. “Laugh while you can. We’re gonna find you, and then
we’re going to kill you — all of you — nice and slow.”

“‘We?’” Alex picked Sam’s machete up off of the table, examining the blade in the thin moonlight. “No, no. You’re not going to be around.” She slid off of the table and made her way off to where Sam and Dean were standing.

“She’s not answering,” Dean was saying.

“I just ran the victim’s names through the local P.D.” Sam’s gaze flickered over to Alex. “Hedges and Kepler both worked at the O’Neill bus station.”

“So they killed them for Alex’s — Annie’s — location.” Dean’s phone rang, and he jumped to answer it. “Jody?” He paused for a moment. “Listen to me. The vamps knew that Annie went to Sioux Falls, okay? They’re probably already there. We’re on on way there next. But there’s something else. Something about Alex — Annie.” He listened for another second, and his face darkened. “What? We’re on our way now.” He pulled his phone away from his ear with a scowl. “She hung up.”

“We moving?”

“Yeah. I’ll meet you outside.” Dean took the machete from Alex’s hands, and Alex followed Sam out the door. The thud of a head hitting the floor came as she stepped over the threshold, and she glanced back over her shoulder to watch Dean step out after her, his face set in a grim line. Their eyes met, and Alex quickly turned her gaze away, surprised by his stony look. It was going to be a long drive back.

**Sioux Falls, South Dakota**

The sun was rising through the thick pines as the Impala tore down the road, kicking up clouds of dust in its wake. “What if she’s not there?” Sam’s voice was tight with worry, and the Impala skidded around the bend.

“She’ll be there.” Doubt clouded Dean’s face, and Alex shifted impatiently in the back seat. A few months ago, she could have been at Jody’s side in an instant — the wait now was agonizing.

Mills’ cabin appeared through the trees, and the Impala screeched to a halt. A figure lay in the dirt, face down, and Alex threw open her door. “Jody!” Her feet carried her through the mud and to the sheriff’s side. “Hey!”

The woman stirred beneath her concerned touch, and her eyes fluttered open groggily as Sam and Dean helped her to sit up. “Where’s Alex?” she got out, struggling to her feet with the help of the two brothers.

She stumbled, and Sam caught her. “You tell us.”

Jody’s eyes fell closed as she thought back, and she let out a loud groan as she reached up to feel the back of her head. “They … came and I tried to stop them.”

“And you got knocked out,” Dean finished. “Well, happens to the best of us.”

“Yeah, well, you’re lucky you’re alive.” Alex peered through the trees, but there was no sign of any other life. “Okay, so where do you think the vamps went?” she asked Sam, a frown upon her face. “Back to the nest?”
“Of course. Why wouldn’t they?” Sam’s face darkened as he looked over at his brother. “Question is — what are they gonna do when they find their brother dead?”

“Okay, so we go back now.”

“Okay.” Jody nodded firmly and took a step towards the Impala, pushing herself free of the Winchester’s hold. “I’m coming.”

She stumbled, reaching out to lean against the thick trunk of a nearby tree, and Dean was at her side to steady her. “Uh, Jody? Hey, hey. Whoa. Hold on.” He turned her so she could look up into his face. “You’re hurt.”

The sheriff’s tone was adamant. “I’m coming.”

“Jody, we can handle the nest on our own.”

Jody Mills’ eyes turned onto Sam, and she scoffed loudly. “I don’t give a fuck about the nest,” she retorted. “That girl was under my protection.”

Dean glanced back at his brother, his lips pressed tightly together in a frown. “Okay,” he started, “that ‘girl’ can’t be trusted. She’s a lure. She’s a — a honey trap. She’s been feeding people to those vamps!”

His voice grew angry, and Jody glanced over at Alex, eyes flickering in concern. The angel gave a small, reluctant nod; Dean was telling the truth. Jody’s eyes hardened, and she turned back to Dean, straightening up and stepping away from him. “I don’t care. Whatever she did, she did because they made her.”

Dean snorted. “Oh, and that’s a reason?”

“She’s a kid!”

“Yeah, a kid who’s been playing vampire murder since before she was in braces.” Dean crossed his arms and turned to his brother, who seemed hesitant to get involved.

“Jody,” Sam finally said, “he’s right. At best her loyalties are … screwed.”

“And how do you even know she wants to be saved?” Dean took back over. “For the past eight years, she has been baiting the hook for an entire nest. She’s got more blood on her hands than most monsters we kill.”

“Are you saying she’s on your list?” Jody’s eyes flashed, and Sam hurried to step in.

“No, we’re not saying that,” he soothed, but Dean quickly added, “Well, not yet. Look, it sucks, okay? It does. But with hunting monsters come harsh truths. This is a clean-up mission. It’s not a rescue.”

“Why are you fighting so hard to protect her?” Alex finally stepped forward, and all eyes turned onto her. “I-I mean, you barely know her. Why is this so important to you?”

Jody scowled, and Alex blinked in surprise at the anger in her gaze. “I’m coming.” she repeated, turning around and making her way to the Impala. “And if either of you lays so much as a hand on Alex … you’ll have to go through me.”
The drive back to the vampire nest was quiet. The Winchesters only opened their mouths to speak, and Jody had spent the trip either staring out the window or dozing off. After several failed attempts to start a conversation, Alex had reluctantly resigned herself to silence. They stopped only once for gas, and before noon they were pulling back up to the old foreclosed farmhouse. “Well, their truck’s in the driveway.” Jody spoke up for the first time since they had left, and Alex frowned as she stared at the large, mud-stained Ford.

“So basically we’re walking straight into this,” she concluded.

Dean grunted in agreement. “Well, we’ve faced worse odds.” He killed the car engine and turned in his seat to look back at the sheriff. “Jody. This is a raid, so tread lightly, stay close. Priority is clearing the nest; Alex comes second. You got it?”

“Got it.” Annoyance lined the woman’s voice, but she reluctantly agreed to their terms, and the four got out of the car. Dean circled around to unlock the trunk, and Alex immediately snatched up her angel blade, clutching the warm metal tight in her palm as the Winchester distributed machetes out among his companions.

She fell in step behind Jody, taking up the rear as Dean led the way up to the front door. It opened beneath his touch, and with a quick signal from Dean, Alex slipped off to the right to check the kitchen. She felt Jody follow close behind, and she pressed a finger up against her lips as she paused beside the closed pantry door. Jody nodded, weapon raised, and Alex quickly pulled it open.

Empty.

With a nod, Alex led the way into the back living room, sparsely decorated with a couch and some chairs, but it too was void of life. Dean and Sam stood off in the far doorway, and Alex crossed over to them with a shake of her head.

Sam narrowed his eyes, confused, and Dean motioned upwards with the handle of his weapon. He led the way back to the staircase, and he and Sam ascended the stairs. Alex started after them, but an outstretched hand from the taller Winchester had Alex pausing on the first step. She frowned, but did what she was told, staying in the foyer with Jody Mills.

As the brothers’ footsteps faded, Alex shifted uncomfortably, peering back over her shoulder towards the front yard. Why wasn’t there anyone home? That didn’t seem right — this had to be a trap.

As if on cue, a noise came from downstairs. Jody Mills immediately started after it, and Alex let out a low hiss that went ignored. The angel quavered, momentarily unsure if she should obey Sam or go after Jody. She watched as Jody disappeared down the basement stairs, and her fists clenched at her side. “Jody!” She hissed the name out, sharp with irritation, and she hurried after the sheriff. “Get back here!”

Footsteps came from behind her, and Alex spun around. “She went —” She started, but she never finished her thought as a blunt object collided with her skull. The world snapped to blackness, and Alex slumped to the ground.

She wasn’t out long — barely a second or two — before Gabriel’s grace brought her back into consciousness, and the angel groggily opened her eyes. She was being moved, dragged by the collar.
of her jacket, and she groaned at the rough treatment as she was deposited on the floor of the back living room.

A body hit the ground beside her, and Alex rolled over to see the back of Dean’s bloodied head. His chest rose and fall, a good, solid rhythm, but he didn’t stir, not even when the vampires roughly pushed him further away from her.

Hands hauled Alex to her feet, and the angel spit angrily when her wrists were bound roughly behind her back. She was dropped, hitting the floor with a bump, and she shifted until her back was pressed up against the back of the couch before she glared up at her captors. They were male, both tall and broad, and they met her glare with an amused sneer.

Sam was tied to a wooden chair in front of her, and Alex turned her attention onto him. “You okay?” she asked, and the Winchester gave a small nod.

One of the vampires had a shotgun gripped tightly in his hands, and when Sam struggled, testing his bonds, he pressed the muzzle up against the Winchester’s temple. “No, no, no, no,” he chastised. “Unh-unh-unh-unh. Hell of a sight to come home to … brother lying dead on the floor.” He pulled the gun away and twisted it, thrusting the butt into Sam’s stomach. The Winchester curled forward, groaning agony, and the vampire chuckled. “No idea it was a Winchester that had done it. So … which of you was it? Which of you took off my brother’s head? Was it you? What it him?”

“What about me?” Alex challenged, but the vampire ignored her outburst.

“Pretty fitting,” he continued, “brother for a brother. This place has been a good home to us. But since you two had to come around and ruin it, we’re gonna have to hit the road and find a new one. And when we hit the road … we like to pack a lunch.”

He handed his gun to his brother, and Alex scoffed as the muzzle turned onto her. She watched as the first vampire circled off behind Sam, and, when he picked up two tin buckets, Alex’s face darkened; two rubber tubes were attached to the tops, ending in sharp syringes. “Hey!” She struggled against her ropes. “You’re barking up the wrong tree, asshole! They didn’t gank that pathetic excuse for a monster.” Her eyes glinted as the vampire paused. “What were their names — him and his brother?” She scoffed loudly. “They were barely worth killing, but I did it anyways. And let me tell you — it was fun.”

“Shut your whore mouth.” Anger flashed through his eyes, and Alex lifted her chin defiantly. “There’s no way you got the jump on them, not — not you. Not with that stupid toothpick.”

He motioned down to the angel blade that lay in a pile next to the Winchesters’ machetes, and Alex rolled her eyes. “It’s a sword, dumbass,” she retorted. “Maggots like you don’t stand a chance.”

The shotgun muzzle pushed against her temple, and Alex rolled her eyes. “Quiet, or Kyle’s gonna fill your skull with buckshot,” the vampire warned, and his brother chuckled.

Sam curled his fingers into the arm of his chair as the vampire pushed one of the crude, hollow needles into the Winchester’s arm. “Do it!” Alex pulled at her bonds. “You think you can kill me?” She watched as Sam’s blood spilled into the pail, and her gaze flickered over to the still unconscious Dean. “Come on, Kyle. You’re gonna kill me anyways.”

“Alex, stop —” Sam cut off with a hiss as the vampire slid the second needle deep into his other arm. Alex pulled her knees up under her, and the gun pressed even firmly into her head. “What’s your problem, girly?” Kyle mocked. “Don’t want to share in his fate?”
Alex lifted her chin. “You don’t kill me now, then I guess I’m just going to have to kill you.”

The vampire next to Sam chuckled, rising to his feet as he turned to face Alex, and her eyes flashed with fury. He laughed again before he nodded towards his brother. “Let her have it.”

“No!” Sam struggled, but his blood loss weakened his fight.

Alex held his hazel gaze as the shotgun pressed up against her skull. His eyes widened desperately, and the angel shot him a wide grin. “Gotcha.”

The trigger clicked, but the gun didn’t fire. “What the —“ The shotgun fell from his hands, and Kyle flew across the room and into the plaster wall. A dark shape appeared in front of him, and the room exploded in a flash of brilliant light as an angel blade pierced the vampire’s heart. In the same instant, Dean scrambled to his feet, careening into the older vampire and tackling him to the ground.

The rest of the struggle was hidden from view as the dark figured hauled Alex to her feet. “What the bloody hell was that?” The room spun as Crowley shoved her up against the wall.

“It’s called a deal,” Alex spat back, and she let Gabriel’s grace well up to untie her bonds. “You’re not the only one who can take advantage of it!” She shoved Crowley away, her eyes glowing golden in a moment of fury. “What, you think after your little stunt I’m just going to shake it off? That it was no big deal? Dean almost fucking killed me!” She poked a finger into his chest, unperturbed by the fire darkening his eyes. “You want to pull my strings, puppet master? Fine, but I’m going to pull right back.”

She could hear Dean scuffling with the vampire behind Crowley, and she tried to peer past the demon’s shoulders. “Well?” she growled when he didn’t budge. “You gonna help or not?”

“This isn’t over.” Crowley vanished, and Alex hurried over to Sam. Dean had the vampire pinned against the wall, the machete held flat against his neck in a standoff of strength and will.

Seeing that he had it covered, Alex dropped down in front of Sam and untied his arms. “Stay still,” she instructed as she pulled out the first syringe and clamped her hand over the bloody hole. Gabriel’s grace spluttered forth, healing the wound, and Alex quickly did the same to the other arm.

“Look at me.” Dean’s deep, authoritative voice had Alex glancing up in surprise. “Look at me, bitch!”

The vampire lifted his gaze, his fangs bared, and as their eyes met, Dean pushed the machete forward, sending the blade deep into the monster’s neck. It caught on the spinal column, and, with one last powerful movement, the Winchester forced the weapon all the way through, and the body crumpled to the ground.

Dean watched the creature fall before he turned to his brother, who was watching with eyes wide. “Where’s Jody?”

“Downstairs.” Worry had Alex’s voice growing sharp, and she pushed herself to her feet. “She heard something and went running off before these assholes knocked me out.” She reached out, putting a hand on Sam’s shoulder as the Winchester pushed himself to his feet, slightly unsteady from his loss of blood, but he shrugged her help off. “This way.” Alex circled off behind him and led the way towards the basement stairs.

Dean followed close behind, her angel blade in his hands, and Alex quietly accepted her weapon back before she pulled open the door to peer into the darkness beyond. The faintest hint of sunlight came from around the stair’s bend, and Alex took the lead as she hurried down the rickety stairs.
Jody stood at the base, a machete in her hands as she held a woman’s head back by the hair. “Don’t watch this, sweetheart.”

Alex’s gaze flickered up to where Alex — the other Alex — stood in a shaft of sunlight, her eyes bloodshot and her mouth stained red. Her jaw trembled, but she turned away as Jody lifted up the machete and brought it down through the women’s neck.

Alex stepped out of the way as Sam and Dean joined her at the bottom of the stairs. “Jody?” Sam moved forward, letting go of his brother upon whom he had been leaning for support. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I think so.” Jody stood awkwardly, balanced on one leg, and her attention turned onto the young teenager who faced the wall. “They turned her,” she murmured to the brothers. “Is there nothing … is there anything we can do?”

“That depends,” Sam began slowly. “Alex … have you fed?”

The teenager turned towards Sam, wincing as the sunlight hit her face. “N-No,” she whispered, her voice shaking as her gaze fell down upon her dead mother. “She … she just bled into me.”

“Okay.” Relief filled the Winchester’s voice. “Okay, that’s good. That means we can help.”

“We’ve got the stuff up in the trunk,” Dean added. “Come on, Alex — Evelyn.”

“Don’t call me that,” Alex snapped, but she reluctantly went with Dean up the stairs and towards the Impala. She fell in step behind him with a deep frown. “What?” she finally snapped when Dean unlocked the trunk. “What, no — no backlash, no yelling? Crowley just showed up, and you have nothing to say?”

“What do you want me to say?” Dean shot her a glare, but Alex held her ground. “You’re still buddies with the King of Hell —”

“Whoa, whoa, hold up!” Alex cut him off, launching into the argument she had known was coming. “He didn’t save me because we’re bunk buddies — he saved me cause it’s part of our deal. He’s not allowed to let me die until my time is up, so, yeah, I’m going to take advantage of that as much as possible!” Anger boiled beneath her skin, and Alex stepped closer to the Winchester.

Dean scoffed loudly. “Yeah. Alright, listen, Evelyn —”

Alex’s fist flashed out, connecting with Dean’s jaw. “I said don’t call me that!” she yelled as she dropped back into a defensive stance, expecting retaliation.

It didn’t come. Dean rubbed his jaw as he glared down at her, and Alex stared back until he turned back to the trunk and began to gather up the ingredients. The angel stepped away and made her way back into the house, bypassing the basement and making her way into the empty living room.

The stairs creaked, and Alex paused to listen as Dean made his way down with the cure. Instructions were given, muffled by the floorboards, and after a second or two Sam and Dean reappeared from the basement and made their way out of the house. “She what?” Sam was saying, and Alex crept after them.

“I told you. She punched me in the face. Fucking bitch.”

Sam didn’t immediately respond, and Alex paused beside the door, head cocked to catch his words as the Winchester sighed. “Just … just stop pushing her,” he finally said before he changed the
Dean rolled his eyes, and their voices faded as they moved closer to the Impala. “Well, hey, you got another snappy one-liner, I’m all ears.”

“What I’m saying is — it looked to me like you were enjoying it. Maybe too much.”

“And?” The trunk creaked as it was opened. “Well, sorry for not putting on a hair shirt. Killing things that need killing is kind of our job. Last I checked, taking pleasure in that is not a crime.”

“What are you doing?” Jody’s voice had Alex jumping in surprise. The angel started out a spluttered explanation, but Jody just shook her head. “It’s okay. Come on.”

She led the way outside, and Alex followed close behind. Sam and Dean fell silent as they turned to face them. “How’s things back at the station?” Dean asked politely, keeping his gaze purely on the sheriff.

Jody didn’t seem to notice the cold shoulder directed at the angel beside her. “Well, they beat Frank up pretty badly, but at least they kept him alive. He kept apologizing for spilling the beans about the cabin, but I told him that one’s on me.”

“Well, speaking of apologies, um …” Sam cleared his throat. “We owe you a big one.”

Dean nodded. “We were wrong about the girl.”

“No, you were right — about me. My judgement was clouded.” Jody sighed. “You know, working this case, it brought … feelings back. Feelings I’ve been trying to bury for years, you know, buried it under work, religion … even dating. We know how that worked out. But you know, it was still there, you know, underneath. The grief. Don’t know what that means for me, just that I’ve been — I’ve been fooling myself thinking that I could ignore it.” The sheriff trailed off before she shook herself out of her thoughts. “Anyways,” she finished, a professional clip back in her voice, “thank you — for coming out, for curing Alex.”

“You don’t need to thank us,” Sam promised. “I mean, you’re the one who killed her sire, got her blood.”

“Sure it’ll work?”

Dean gave a short nod as he rubbed his jaw with a small wince. “Well, speaking from experience, it’ll be a rough couple of days, but … she should pull through. You sure you don’t want us to stay?”

“I’m good.” Jody motioned back to the large black truck. “Alex is doing good, and we’ve got ourselves a ride. We’ll be okay.”

Sam and Dean exchanged a glance before Sam slowly asked, “After it’s done, you know what to do with her?”

“We’ll figure something out.” Jody put an arm around Alex’s shoulder. “Anyways, I hate to keep you guys here. Look after them, eh?” she told the angel, and Alex chuckled slightly. “I’ll call with any updates.”

Jody walked away, and Alex watched her disappear back into the farmhouse. She turned back to face the Winchester’s, keeping her gaze off to the side, but they didn’t speak to her. The car doors opened and closed, and Alex quietly followed them into the car as it roared to life and took off down the road.
I'm finally caught up on the new spn episodes, and I'm not going to lie, I'm super excited for when Lucifer comes back into this story.

Also I crunched the numbers, and this season alone is only about 50 thousand words (~five chapters?) short of a quarter of a million words so daymn
“You sure there’s not more?”

Alex paused outside the kitchen, head tipped at Dean’s strange words. She pulled her earbuds out of her ear, frowning as she pressed herself up against the wall. “No, that’s it.” Sam was there too, his voice soft and quiet, and the angel’s frown deepened. “Evelyn Greysen Ross. Born in Stillwater, Minnesota. Mother died in 2003, and her father disappeared in 2008. She was put into the system. Her first foster family died in 2012 — fatal hit and run. The report says Alex — Evelyn — was found holding the family’s biological son in her lap. She must have pulled him out herself. She went to a second foster family and was hit by a truck December 2013.”

“Is that all?” A chair creaked as Dean leaned against it. “That’s all you found?”

“Well, so far, but there isn’t much else I can dig up. She didn’t post on any social media, only had a small, close-knit friend group. There were a few reports of domestic fights between the foster mom and her, but it never came to anything.”

“So everything she said checks out,” Dean finished, and Alex scowled; was that relief of disappointment in his voice? Sam must have nodded, because the Winchester sighed. “Okay, great. But why lie?”

Alex’s phone dinged, and the Winchesters fell silent. The angel yanked her phone out to quiet it, but the damage had been done. “Alex?”

Alex winced at the sound of her name, and she looked down at her cell to see who had caused her discovery. It was Crowley, and the angel scowled as she read the text. New job. Get it done. A link was sent alongside it, and Alex read the header as she stepped into the kitchen. “Uh, hey.” She kept her cool as she looked at the two brothers, but their faces were unreadable. “What’s up?”

“Nothing.” Dean crossed over to the fridge, and Alex sank into the chair across from Sam. “How about you? I thought you were sleeping.”

“I woke up.” Alex shrugged with a thin frown. She glanced over at Sam, thankful to see that he at least looked guilty. She turned her attention down onto the article that she had been sent. “Um, I might have a case for us, though. Chicago. A man went into a club and killed almost all of the occupants — ripped them to shreds with some kind of Wolverine-esque weapon. There’s a witness — a cop named Ennis — who saw the thing kill his girlfriend.” Alex clicked the link and handed her phone to Sam. “Definitely sounds like our kind of thing, so I was headed over there. You two are welcome to join.”

She watched as Sam and Dean exchanged glances. “You are going to go hunting yourself?” Dean pulled out a beer, his eyebrows lifted in surprise.

“You are really going to start drinking at nine am?” Alex retorted sharply.

Sam handed Alex her phone back and opened his laptop. “I saw something about it, but I haven’t had time to read it yet,” he said. “Sounds like it could be our type of thing, though.”
“How’d you hear about it?” Dean cracked open his drink and walked back over to them.

Alex steadily held his gaze and gave him a half-hearted shrug. “It was in my newsfeed,” she lied. “It caught my eye.” She leaned back in her chair, arms crossed as she looked between him and Sam. “So. What have you two been up to?”

The guilt was back in Sam’s eyes, but Dean remained unfazed. “Depends on how much you heard,” he replied breezily, and despite herself, Alex grinned in amusement.

“I think I heard enough.” She pulled her legs up underneath of her, and the humor left her voice. “You were looking into me. You still don’t trust me, do you?”

“We were just curious.” Sam was quick to jump to his brother’s defense, but Dean just grunted in faux agreement. “You said it yourself, you don’t know the difference between Sheol and real life.”

“Well, it didn’t sound like as much changed as I hoped.” Alex pushed herself to her feet with a grim frown. “I’m going to go pack my things. If you guys want in, I’ll meet you up by the cars in, what, fifteen minutes?”

“We’ll be there.”

Alex nodded to Sam, and, without another look at Dean, she stepped out of the kitchen. There she hesitated, ears perked for the Winchesters’ next conversation. “Since when does Alex work cases on her own?” she heard Dean ask. “Fifty bucks Crowley put it up to her.”

Anger pulsed through the young hunter, and she was glad to hear Sam snap, “Dude, will you just let it go? She’s just trying to help.”

“She’s been lying to us, Sam. For years.”

“Because you’ve always been upfront and honest,” came the sharp reply, which was immediately followed by a sigh as Sam regained his temper. “We knew Alex had secrets from the day we met her; that was just who she was. But when it really came down to it, she was always on our side, okay? We just have to trust her on this one.”

Dean grumbled out a reply, but Alex barely heard as her face flushed with warmth as Sam’s faith in her. Chairs scraped from within the kitchen as the Winchesters rose to their feet, and Alex hurried back down the hall, determination settling in her eyes. Sam was right; she would do whatever she had to to prove that.

Chicago, Illinois

Alex straightened the collar of her shirt as she stepped out of the Impala, brushing her blonde hair back out of her face. She kicked the car door closed behind her as the Winchesters emerged, dressed in suits and ties. “The detective said Ennis Ross was being called in for questioning at nine,” Sam reported, looking down to check his watch. “They should be inside.”

“Great. Let’s get this over with so we can get lunch.” Dean reached up to adjust his tie as he led the way into the police department, and Sam and Alex followed behind. “Hi. Agents Bonham and Pert,” he called as he approached the front desk. “This is Special Agent Sucherman.”

The Winchester jerked a thumb back towards Alex, and the young hunter reached into her pocket and pulled out her identification. “We’re here about the Lassiter-Feynman stabbing,” she explained...
as she tucked her badge back into her front pocket. “I believe Agent Pert spoke to your sheriff earlier this morning.”

The cop nodded. “That was probably Neil Laudan. He’s out right now, but Detective Fred Costa is in the back with one of our cops who was an eyewitness,” she explained. “They’re back in room one.”

“Great.” Sam glanced off down one of the hallways. “If you could just direct us there . . .”

The woman pointed behind her. “It’s just off to your right. You can’t miss it.”

“Thanks.” Sam led the way down the hall, and Alex took up the rear, peering into the open rooms that they passed to see what lay inside. The station, however, was surprisingly quiet, and the angel had only managed to spot one other officer before they stopped in front of the closed interrogation room.

Dean pushed the door opened and stepped inside. “Agents Bonham, Pert, and Sucherman. FBI,” he announced, and Alex followed Sam into the darkened room. “We’ll take it from here.”

Alex’s eyes flickered past the man that sat at the table, coming to rest on the tall, broad detective that stood in front of Dean. “Like hell you will,” he retorted. “Sine when did the Feebs start working stabbings?”

“Alright, listen.” Alex waved Detective Costa over to her, gently guiding him out of the room with a hand on his shoulder. “We were looking over the file, and this stabbing fits the profile of a certain perp. Now, I could go into detail, but I — I’m not going to.” She quickly closed the door and turned back to the Winchesters with a nod. Her gaze flickered over to Ennis, and she felt her cheeks flush slightly to find the cop staring at her, eyes narrowed in confusion. “Agent Sucherman,” she quickly introduced. “You’re Ennis Ross, correct?” The young man didn’t respond, but after a second his mouth opened, and Alex jumped to add, “Alright, so let’s talk about last night.”

“Why?” Ennis Ross scoffed at the idea. “So you can call me crazy too?”

“Try us.”

The firmness of Dean’s words had Ennis pausing, and he ran his finger across the darkened skin of his wrist as he contemplated his next words. “There isn’t much to tell,” he finally began, and the sharpness in his voice fell away into hollow grief. “I took Tamara — my girlfriend — out for dinner at Il Secundo. I was going to propose,” he explained as both Winchesters took a seat down at the table. “But . . . but it didn’t feel right. I saw Sal Lassiter there, too,” he added, sharpness returning to his tone. “He called the waiter away to some backroom club. But his bodyguard . . . I saw his face in the mirror — his true face. It was . . . it was monstrous.” Ennis shuddered. “They walked away, and I was so scared that I convinced Tam to leave with me. We went down to the ferry docks a block away. And then . . . that’s when Sal came running out, covered in blood.”

Ennis trailed off, and Alex prompted gently, “And then what?”

“Then he collapsed. And I . . . I didn’t really see what happened next. Some faceless . . . thing dressed in black, he knocked Tam into a wall. She hit her head, and s-she . . .” The man’s voice cracked. “I didn’t know what to do. That thing killed Sal with these . . . these claws before it ran. And when I got to her . . . she . . . she . . .”

“There is nothing you couldn’t done.” Sam’s tone was soothing, but it did little to quell the man’s grief.
“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” he snapped. “Look, this thing wasn’t human. So what are you gonna do about it?”

Sam and Dean exchanged looks, and Dean rose up to his feet. “I don’t know what to tell you, kid,” he finally said. “There’s no such thing as monsters.” He tapped his brother on the shoulder, and when Sam got up, he led the way out the door. Alex hesitated, casting a look towards Ennis; his face was one of hurt and anger as he watched Dean disappear. With one last sympathetic glance, the young hunter followed the Winchesters out and into the hallway.

“Werewolf?” she guessed as they stepped out into the street. “‘Claws’ is nondescript, but the moon was pretty full last night.”

“It’s possible.” Sam stopped beside the Impala, hand closing around the door handle as he waited for his brother to unlock the car. “We’re going to need a look at the body though before we can know anything.”

“We can hit up the morgue later.” Dean unlocked the Impala, ad Alex slid into the backseat. “We’ll go to the crime scene first.” His eyes met Alex’s in the rearview as he climbed into the driver’s seat, and he added, “Don’t look disappointed. The dead aren’t going anywhere.”

He chuckled at his own joke, and, while Alex rolled her eyes, she didn’t bother to respond. “Crime scene’s down by the docks,” she said instead. “It’s not far from here. Just drive along the lake until you hit yellow tape.”

The car purred to life, and Dean scoffed. “We’re in Chicago,” Alex heard him mutter. “There’s yellow tape everywhere.”

“Ha ha. Shut up and drive.” Alex kicked the back of his seat as she undid the top button of her blouse. “We’re not on the south side, moron.”

“Where did you live?” Sam’s question caught the angel by surprise, her head recoiled back slightly.

“What?” The word came out of her mouth as she processed his request, and she quickly cleared her throat. “Uh, I lived up on the north side. About two miles from Lake Michigan.” Her gaze turned out the window towards the expanse of blue water that was barely visible through the buildings. “I used to take the L — the light-rail system — into the city to work, and — dude, I think that’s it up there.” Alex jammed her finger up against the window as she pointed down towards a ferry dock that was sectioned off with tape.

Dean guided the Impala down an alleyway, and the angel followed them out of the car and down towards the waters edge. “Agents, Bonham, Pert, and Sucherman,” she heard Dean announce to the officer on duty, but she paused only long enough to flash her badge before she slipped beneath the yellow police tape and onto the crime scene. The pavement was empty, and the only sign of a violent struggle was the bloodstains beside the numbered yellow cones. Sam and Dean had stopped a few feet off, deep in conversation with the officer, and Alex cast them a quick look out of the corner of her eye before she knelt down beside the biggest bloodstain.

“That’s where they found Sal.” Sam’s voice came from behind her, and the young hunter grunted in acknowledgement. “Tamara had been thrown into that wall there.” He pointed off to their right to where a similar set of plastic yellow photo markers were set. “First responders said there was nothing weird about it, and there’s no witnesses except for Ennis.”

“Huh.” Alex pushed herself back to her feet. “So, in other words there’s not much here that we didn’t already know.”
Footsteps approached as Dean slipped under the police tape. “Cops have got nothing new,” he announced, confirming Sam’s claim. “Apparently the night was pretty quiet. Nearest sign of trouble was at a restaurant called Il Secundo where someone cut the power.”

“Il Secundo?” Alex looked up at Sam. “That’s where Ennis said he saw Sal.”

“Bingo.” Dean snapped his fingers and tucked his phone back into his pocket. “It’s closed until three, so we have time to go check it out. It’s just down the block.” The Winchester looked down at the photo markers scattered across the room. “Anything here?”

“Nothing. Nothing suggests that this wasn’t just a plain old normal stabbing.” Alex shoved her hands into her pants’ pockets. “Let’s go grab some lunch, and then we can go change and check out this restaurant.” She followed Sam and Dean back under the yellow tape and down the alley, pausing only momentarily to glance down the river towards the open lake, where the sunlight glittered on the waves. For a brief second she felt her chest constrict; had it really been on these streets that she had once walked down, oblivious to what lay in the dark? Those times felt like a lifetime ago.

“Hey. You ready?” Sam’s hand came to rest on Alex’s shoulder, and the angel tore her gaze away, bringing it up to rest on the Winchester’s face.

“Yeah.” The young hunter gave him a small nod, gently shrugging off his touch as she followed him back up to the Impala. “Let’s go.”

Within the hour, they were back in front of Il Secundo. The Impala rolled to a stop, and Alex followed the Winchesters out of the car, brushing down the front of her wrinkled grey shirt as she circled around to the back. Dean paused, and the keys scraped against the lock before the trunk clicked open. “Here.” The Winchester handed his brother a machete and held one out for Alex, but the angel shook her head.

“No thanks.” Alex dug through the trunk and pulled out her angel blade. Her fingers traced the thin tip as the brothers filled their guns with silver bullets, and once they were done, she slid her weapon into the back loop of her worn jeans. “Ready?”

Dean nodded, and Alex fell in line behind them as he led the way down the alley to the back door of Il Secundo. It was closed but unlocked, opening at the slightest push from Sam, and the brothers exchanged looks above Alex’s head before Dean stepped inside.

Alex followed, leaving Sam to take up the rear. They passed down the luxurious hallway until they came to pause beside the swinging door that led into the kitchen. Dean pulled back the hammer on his gun, cocking his head further down the hallway.

His eyes locked with Alex’s, and the angel nodded in understanding, slipping down the hall in search of the kitchen’s other entrance. She paused outside the silver door as she drew her weapon, head tipped as she listened for movement; when there was nothing, she pushed her way inside.

The kitchen was dark, and the angel felt along the wall for a switch. It clicked on, and the room flickered into view, displaying the pristine silver countertops. Sam and Dean stepped through the other door, and Alex turned to look at them. “Seems normal so far.” Her words hung in the empty air, and the angel kept them brief as she made her way to the metal door that led to the walk-in refrigerator. She undid the latch and pulled it open to peer inside, but the only thing on the shelves were boxes of fruits and vegetables. “Normal in here, too,” she called, and for a moment her mind turned back to the nightmarish kitchen at the Elysian Fields Motel — “Motel Hell,” Dean had rightly...
coined it.

She turned back to the brothers, looking for a response, but the yell of “Chicago P.D.!” had all three freezing. “Stay where you are!” The voice was distant, coming from somewhere down the hall, and Dean immediately hurried out of the room, Sam close at his heels.

Alex followed, breaking into a sprint to keep up with the long-legged Winchesters. She slid around the corner to see Dean draw his machete as he jumped through a heavy metal door; beyond that stood a man, lips drawn back in a fanged snarl as he faced something obscured by the doorframe.

Alex pushed her way past Sam, her own weapon drawn, as Dean’s machete slid through the vampire’s neck. The creature collapsed to the ground, revealing the figure that stood behind it. Brown eyes were stretched wide as Ennis looked between Sam and Dean, and his mouth hung agape at the sight of them. “Great.” Alex looked around the room, her heart thudding in her chest, but there was no other sign of danger. With pursed lips, she twisted her angel blade in her hand and tucked it in the back of her jeans. “You again.”

“He looks better with a little off the top, don’t you think?” Dean joked to his brother before he turned to look at the young cop. “You want to run, now’s the time,” he advised, nudging at the head of the fallen vamp.

“I’m not going anywhere until someone tells me what the hell’s going on!” Ennis’ voice shook as he stared down at the headless corpse, and his hands that held his gun, still raised, trembled visibly.

Dean’s tone dropped, his voice deepening with authority. “You should go.”

“No.” The man’s gaze lifted up to meet Dean’s, and he held his ground, braced for an argument.

Dean, however, simply shrugged. “Alright,” he relented, and Alex frowned in surprise at how easily he had acceded, “Sammy, give him the talk.” He thumped his brother on the shoulder before he stepped over the body to make his way further into the room.

“Oh, look, my name is Sam Winchester. That’s my brother Dean.” Sam launched into his monologue, and Alex’s attention wandered to the scene around her. “And that’s Alex.”

“Alex?” Ennis repeated. “As in —”

“As in just Alex,” Alex quickly cut in. “And no, I don’t think we’ve met before.” She watched the brothers exchange glances over her head, and she cleared her throat. “Uh, sorry. Sam, you were saying?”

“Yeah. We, uh … we kill vampires. And werewolves, and demons, and — basically, we chase down evil … and we cut its head off.”

The angel ran her hand over one of the round tables that decorated the floor of the nightclub, her fingers tracing the deep, blood-stained gashes in the wood. “So you’re, what, monster cops?” she heard Ennis ask, and she rolled her eyes at the concept.

“Hunters,” Dean corrected from across the room, and Alex picked her way across the mess of overturned tables and chairs to stand by him.

“Then what killed my girlfriend?”

“We’re working on it, okay?” Dean’s voice grew sharp for a moment before it fell back into a softer, more disinterested tone as he pulled open a cabinet. “And from what you told us, uh, this thing
sounds new … or Freddy Krueger.”

“W-What about that guy I saw in the mirror? With — with the messed-up face?”

“Wraith, probably,” Alex suggested, and Sam nodded as he added, “Look, a lot of these things, they can look human until you catch them in a mirror or sometimes on camera.”

“It looks like there was a nasty fight here,” Alex murmured to Dean over Ennis’ next question. “There’s a lot of blood, too much for everyone to have survived. But there’s no bodies, and the cops didn’t mention anything about this place except for the power outage. What’s going on?”

“No idea.” Dean wrenched open one of the refrigerators disguised as a cabinet that lined the back wall. “But, uh … hey, Sammy.”

Sam looked up at the sound of his name. “Yep?”

“This is full of — of blood and meat. A lot of meat.” Dean reached into the chilled cabinet and pulled out plastic ziplock bag. “Actually this one, uh, this one’s labeled Susan.”

Sam’s lip curled up in disgust. “What is this, some kind of backroom …”

“Monster V.I.P.,” Ennis finished, and Alex cast him a glance of surprise — he was catching on quickly.

Dean tossed the bag back into the fridge and slammed it shut with a grimace of repulsion. “Yeah, well, if it is and Sal Lassiter was here …”

“Then he’s not human,” Alex finished, and her eyes swept around the room. “So … so we have monsters killing each other now? What the hell?”

“Maybe.” Sam met her words with a frown. “We got to see the body.”

“I’m coming with you.” Ennis hurried around the bar to stand in front of Sam, and Alex pursed her lips in frustration.

Dean scoffed loudly as he crossed the room. “No. You’re gonna stay.”

“Or what?” Ennis turned to face him, anger darkening his face. “Huh? You gonna hurt me? Kill the girl I love? Ruin my damn life?” His gaze swept across the three of them. “Yeah, you’re too late.”

Sam stepped forward, reaching out to put a hand on Ennis’ shoulders, but the young cop shrugged it off. “Ennis, listen,” he began. “I get it. Believe me, I’ve been there. But what we do? It’s messed up. So do yourself a favor and stay out. You can get hurt, too. Okay?”

Ennis glared, but he didn’t respond. “Okay,” Alex concluded. “Come on, you two. We should go check out Sal’s body. Maybe we can figure out what this guy was. Stay out of our way,” she added with a pointed finger in Ennis’ direction. “I don’t want to see you around here again.”

“Aaagents. Freddie told me you might be stopping by.” The sound of a firm, clipped female voice had Alex looking up from her phone in surprise. A woman stood before them, dressed in a white lab coat over her blouse and slacks, and Alex rose to her feet. Sam did the same, stretching out a hand towards the coroner. “I’m Sara Motley,” she introduced. “And you are?”

“Agents Pert and Sucherman.” Sam shook her hand, and Alex did the same. “It’s nice to meet you.”
“Likewise.” Sara’s green eyes moved across Alex, and the angel lifted her head in an attempt to stand taller next to the monstrous Winchester. “I assume you’re here to look at Ms. Feynman and Mr. Lassiter.”

“Yes, that’d be correct.” Sam stuck his hands in his pockets as he nodded. “Do you mind?” 

“Not at all.” Dr. Motley waved the two of them after her as she led the way back into the morgue. “Kel,” she called, and the woman behind the front desk looked up. “Can you file these for me? It’s the paperwork for Mrs. Mason’s death.”

“Of course, Dr. Motley.”

Sara Motley put the files in her hands down onto the desk and pushed her way through the swinging double doors. “I wasn’t expecting new blood for something like this,” she admitted as she passed through a doorway. “Usually Agent Reisman comes in when something big happens around here.”

“Reisman?” Sam repeated in surprise, and he cleared his throat to cover his confusion. “Oh yeah, uh, he’s up in Milwaukee for a couple weeks, so we’re here to step in.”

“Gotcha.” Dr. Motley pulled open one of the metal square doors and rolled out a sheet-covered body. “This is Tamara Feynman.” She pulled back the sheet to reveal the thin, beautiful face of a young woman. “Cause of death is severe head trauma here.” She pointed to the right side of the skull, and Alex bent down to see the large lesion on the skin, glancing up only when she heard the second gurney being pulled out. “And this is Sal Lassiter; cause of death is blood loss and overall trauma.”

Alex’s attention turned to the mess of torn tissue on Sal’s chest. “Was everything there?”

The coroner’s lips twisted in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Uh, just standard procedure,” Sam quickly interjected. “There was nothing weird about the wounds? The heart was still there?”

“What was left of it.” Dr. Motley looked between Sam and Alex with a wary frown. “Like I said, his chest was torn to shreds. Oh, one other thing,” she added when the two hunters exchanged glances. “One of my employees, Derek, confessed that he let someone in here last night to see Sal’s body. He’s new,” she was quick to defend, but the sharpness of her tone revealed her displeasure. “The man paid Derek three thousand dollars to get in. I went over the body, and nothing was out of place. Who knows what they wanted.”

Sam’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Who was it?” he asked. “Did he say?”

“Yeah. It was Julian Duval. He lives on the west side, out by Downers Grove.” Sara Motley covered Tamara’s body as Alex stepped back.

“Okay, thank you.” Alex peered down at the patchwork of stitching on Sal’s body before she retreated fully to stand next to Sam. “Was there anything else weird? Or out of the ordinary?”

Dr. Motley shook her head. “Nothing strange, but the blood work hasn’t come back yet. Do you have a way I can contact you if something turns up?”

“Uh, yeah.” Sam reached into his front pocket and pulled out his business card. “Here. Thank you for your time.” He stepped out of the room, and Alex followed him out and back into the lobby.
Alex stepped out into the night air, shivering slightly at the wet chill that clung to her skin. Dean and the Impala sat across the road, and she followed Sam across the pavement, head tipping up to peer over the hedge and towards the dark, looming house beyond. The Duval mansion — more like a castle, the angel scoffed. “Hey.” Dean got out of his car, head tipping in their direction. “What’d you find?”

“So, get this.” Sam leaned up against the Impala’s hood, and Dean joined him, hands shoved deep into his pockets. “The, uh, coroner says this guy, this, uh, Julian Duval, shows up, drops three grand to see Sal’s corpse.”

“And he lives in a fucking castle.” Dean shot a glance towards the hedge beside them. “Who is this guy?”

Something crackled, like thin branches breaking, and Alex’s head snapped to the side, eyes stretched wide as she tried to peer through the darkness. “Well, if we’re lucky, someone who knows what happened to that monster boy,” Sam was saying, but he trailed off when he saw Alex’s tense form. “What?”

“I thought I heard something.” Alex’s shoulders rolled, a subconscious motion of flattening her feathers, and a sudden pang of grief pulsed through her chest; she hadn’t thought about her wings in a long time. “Never mind.” She reached back to feel her gun that sat snugly against her hips, and she glanced towards the trunk. “Hey, can you open that up? I don’t like the feel of this place,” she explained as Dean circled around to the back of the car. “It feels … evil.”

She pulled out her angel blade, twisting it in her hand twice with a small grin as Gabriel’s grace, worn thin from time, twitched slightly at the contact. “I don’t like it either,” she heard Sam add as Dean returned to him. “How do you want to do this?”

“I can go in first.” Alex closed the trunk. “I’m the best at avoiding detection. I’ll go in, scout the place out, and then …” She tightened her grip on the blade, and she circled back around to stand in front of Sam and Dean.

A scream broke through the night, and Alex jumped, spinning around towards the source. “Violet!” A cry rose up in the air. “Violet!”

Something collided into her shoulder, and Alex stumbled away as Dean barreled forth. Sam followed more slowly, reaching out to steady her before he sprinted after his brother, and Alex took up the rear, her own legs carrying her after them as fast as they could. “What the hell’s going on?”

“It took her.” Alex skidded to a stop next to Sam, her weapon poised as she looked the stranger up and down. Her gaze flickered over to his companion, and her lips pressed tightly together. “What are you doing here?” she snapped at Ennis. “I thought we told you to get lost.”

“Who are you?” Sam spoke over her to the stranger, but Ennis answered.

“His name is David Lassiter,” he explained. “He’s a shapeshifter.”

“Oh great.” Alex straightened up, chin lifted angrily as an alarm sounded from the direction of the massive house. “Great. We got to go. Now!” she snapped when no one moved. “Go!” She bolted back towards the car, glancing over her shoulder only long enough to make sure that everyone was following.

“Get in.” Dean threw open the car door and slid into the driver’s side, and Alex hesitated as the
Ennis and David made a beeline for the backseat.

“Wait!” Alex slipped in front of Sam, clambering in to sit between him and Dean. “I’m not going in the back with them,” she snapped, casting the two men dark looks through the rearview mirror. “What the hell were you doing there?”

“It took Violet!” David Lassiter was quick to match her temper. “I need to find her! So just get me down the road and I’ll get out.”

“Not until you tell us what the hell is going on.” Dean sped off down the road. “This thing that took her — it the same thing that killed Sal?”

“I-I think so,” David began, and Ennis quickly chimed in his agreement. “It was,” he promised. “I saw it, too.” He nudged David before motioning towards the brothers with his head. “Tell them. They’re, uh, they’re hunting this thing, too.”

“Tell us what?” Dean’s voice grew sharp, and Alex turned in her seat to look back at the two of them.

“Chicago is divided.” Hesitation weighed down the shifter’s voice as he looked warily between the three hunters. “It’s owned by five families. Werewolves run the Gold Coast, ghouls own the north. Djinn and sirens are vying for the south, and us shifters are in the west. We blend in, keeping the peace. We keep human casualties to the minimum.” Dean scoffed, and David glared. “I don’t like it either,” he shot back. “Me and Violet, we were going to leave, get away from all of this. But you know what’s going to happen if we don’t catch this thing? War. My sister is going to declare war on the Duvals — the werewolf family — and that means blood, human and monster, in the street.”

The Impala screeched to a stop at the edge of the road, and Dean pulled the keys from the ignition. “Alright, everybody out.” He threw open the door, and Alex followed him into the street. “So you’re telling me there are five monster families that run Chicago?” Dean turned to face David as he scoffed. “What is this, ‘The Godfather’ with fangs?”

David didn’t answer, his phone pressed up against his ear, so Ennis spoke up. “Well, if it is, I’m gonna need all the help I can get.”

Dean’s eyebrows lifted in surprise at the young cop’s comment, and he turned to look over at his brother. “Well, he doesn’t quit. I’ll give him that.”

“Violet’s not picking up.” David turned back to the four of them, concern deep in his voice.

“Wait, so this girl,” Sam started. “She’s a shifter, too?”

“Werewolf.”

“Awesome.” Ennis and Dean spoke in unison, and Alex rolled her eyes, but she couldn’t bring herself to act shocked; not after everything.

“If she has her cell, we could trace the signal,” Ennis suggested, and Dean nodded.

“Yeah, you might be right.” Sam reached into his pocket to pull out his own phone as he turned to David Lassiter. “Alright. What’s her number?”

David lifted his head as he held Sam’s gaze. “Take me with you, and it’s all yours.”

“No!” Ennis’ anger had Alex looking over at him in surprise. “Oh, hell no!” The cop looked over at
Dean. “Dude, he’s a freaking transformer!”

Dean’s voice was steady, lined with faint frustration. “And sometimes you got to work with the bad guys to get to the worse guys,” he reminded, and Alex grunted in agreement.

“Dude.” David frowned. “I’m right here.”

“Yeah, we see you.” Alex shoved her hands into her pocket as she looked over at the shifter with pursed lips. “And we said okay, alright? So come on. Let’s hurry up and get this over with.” She climbed back into the Impala, and the Winchesters followed. Alex tucked her angel blade in between her knees as Sam slid in beside her, and the car doors slammed as Ennis and David got into the back. Alex watched Dean scowl out of the corner of her eye, and the car tore off down the road.

The sky was dark when the Impala pulled up alongside an old abandoned warehouse, and Alex glanced up at the dark clouds that promised rain. “Signal’s coming from in there,” Sam announced, pointing to the building, and Dean turned the car off. Alex followed him out of the Impala, her weapon gripped tightly in her hand as she stared at the forlorn and grim structure.

“Hey.” David’s voice had her glancing back to see the shifter confronting Ennis. “Thanks for … you know. And about your girlfriend, I’m …”

He trailed off, and the cop’s gaze flickered to the ground before returning to David. “Look,” he started firmly, “I don’t need no apology from you.”

“I lost someone, too, okay?” The shifter’s voice grew sharp. “But I’m trying here.”

Alex glanced over at Sam as Ennis’ voice softened. “I’m sorry about your brother,” he said. “He spoke about you at the end. He said, ‘David, I’m sorry. I didn’t have a choice—’ ”

“Alright, you guys can kiss and make up later.” Dean cut Ennis off as he circled around to the trunk, and Alex followed him, thankful for the Winchester’s interruption. “We got work to do. Come on.” He fished his gun out of the trunk before holding out a handgun to Ennis. “Here.”

“I have one.”

“Normal bullets aren’t going to do shit.” Dean popped the mag out to show off the ammo inside. “You’ll need silver.”

“Silver won’t do anything.” David spoke up, drawing the hunters’ attention on him. “This thing had silver claws.”

“So that basically rules out just about everything we thought it was.” Alex looked over at Dean with a frown before she ran off the list. “Shifter, werewolf, djinn, wraith.”

“Which leaves … sirens, demons, angels —”

“Well, it’s not angels,” Alex quickly cut into Sam’s list.

“Don’t worry, I said I’ve got it.” Ennis pulled out his mag to show Dean the silver ammunition within, and Alex lifted her eyebrows in surprise. “My dad had them,” he explained. “I found them in his things.”

Dean didn’t say anything, but Alex watched as he exchanged a look with his brother. She turned to
David, who was waiting expectantly beside Dean. “Here.” The angel held out her angel blade to the monster. “You take this. I have a gun of my own.”

“What is this?” The shifter ran his finger over the shining metal as his lips pursed into a frown. “It’s not silver.”

“No. It’s an angel blade. It’ll kill just about anything.” Alex reluctantly reached back to pull out her own Colt. “What?” She looked over at Dean. “I don’t know about you, but I’d rather give him a short-range weapon than a fucking gun.”

“Okay.” Dean closed the trunk. “Come on.” He led the way towards the building, and Alex took up the rear. She paused beside the door as something prickled on the back of her neck, and she peered back through the darkness. But there was nothing there; only the thick, still air.

With a frown, the angel followed the hunters into the warehouse and up a flight of stairs. At the top they paused, and Alex peered back down the stairs; she could have sworn there was something behind her. “Alright,” Dean finally said, motioning to David. “You’re with me, Romeo. You three, stick together.”

“Sounds good, Buffy,” the shifter retorted, and Alex snickered as she turned back to the group before her. She watched as the two walked away before she followed Sam and Ennis down in the other direction. She took up the rear, watching how the young cop walked carefully, shoulders tense and ears pricked.

A noise had Alex freezing, and the angel spun around towards it. “What is it?” Sam’s flashlight passed over her. “Did you see something?”

“Heard it.” Alex glanced back at him and Ennis with a frown. “You didn’t hear it?” Both men shook their heads, and Alex turned back towards the darkened hallway. “Maybe it was nothing,” she admitted, doing her best to quell the uneasiness in her stomach. “You two keep going. I’ll check it out real quick.”

“You’re letting her go off on her own?” she heard Ennis whisper. “But Dean said —”

“She can take care of herself. Come on.” Sam turned away. “This way.”

Alex slipped off into the darkness, her footsteps silent on the concrete floor. A shadow flitted across the hall, and the angel dropped down into a crouch. The hallway curved, ending in a door that hung open on broken hinges. Alex pushed her way through the broken metal door, grunting as her sleeve caught on the handle. She tore herself free and moved her flashlight around the dark, cluttered storeroom, but there was no sign of anything suspicious. The hunter frowned, turning back towards the doorway, but the faint scuff of boots on the ground had her hair standing on end.

The angel spun around as a dark shape flashed out of the darkness. Her hands went up to defend herself as the weight of the shadow collided into her, and the two of them fell to the ground. Her body cracked against the concrete floor, and Alex felt her phone fracture from within her pocket. She swung a fist into her attacker’s head, but it was caught in a vice-like grip, and something cold and metallic pressed into her arm. “You’re not …” The stranger’s hold lessened as his voice trailed off, confusion driving his hesitation.

Alex took the moment of doubt to turn the tides, surging upwards and knocking the stranger back and onto the ground. The hold on her wrist suddenly tightened, sending Alex falling on top of him. Her free arm caught her, her fist planted on the dusty ground. Her knuckles bumped her flashlight that had fallen during the skirmish, and the impact had the light spinning to illuminate the man
beneath her. The light caught on her necklace, which now hung freely, dislodged from beneath her shirt during the fight. The man reached up, his fingers closing around the tarnished silver wing, and Alex reared back in surprise, jerking the charm from his grasp. “Hey!”

“Where did you get that?”

Alex scrambled to her feet and grabbed her gun, stepping back as the stranger sat up. “None of your business,” she spat. “Who are you and what the hell are you doing here? Are you the one who killed Sal Lassiter?”

“Sal Lassiter?” the stranger repeated. “The head of the shifter family? No. I didn’t kill him.” Alex faltered, confused by his calm and truthful denial, but her gun snapped back up when he stepped towards her. “My daughter had a charm just like that.”

Alex quickly tucked her necklace back into her shirt, hiding it from view. “A lot of people have them,” she snapped as she shifted backwards, anger rising in her chest; she knew exactly where the conversation was going. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. My father is dead!”

“So is my daughter,” came the quiet response. “I was there when they buried her eight months ago. I didn’t think I would ever see her again —”

“Shut up!”

“Grey —”

“I said shut up!” Alex’s grey eyes flashed furiously and she pointed the gun at her father’s chest. “Don’t call me that! Don’t you dare call me that!”

“I’m sorry.” Her father spread his hands out low, and his face darkened dolefully. “I didn’t mean to upset you, Evelyn.”

“What the hell are you doing here?” Alex squared her shoulders but refused to lower her gun. “I thought you would be halfway across the country — maybe Los Vegas or something. Why are you here?”

“I’ve been here the whole time. I didn’t know you were living here until they put your obituary in the paper —”

“No. No, why are you here. Here.” Alex jerked the muzzle of her gun to motion to the room “This warehouse. And how the hell did you know about Lassiter? A-And shifters. Who the fuck are you? Kolchak?”

“Ev, please. Calm down. My brother — your uncle, Nathan Ross — was a police officer who was killed on this side of town in 2007. I didn’t mean to get involved, but the police were covering up his death. I refused to give up, and the more I dug, the deeper I got into the corruption.” Her father reached up to touch a faded scar on his forehead. “You remember how I got this?”

“You told me you were drunk.” Alex’s voice was flat. “You got in a bar fight.”

“I was attacked by a werewolf. He must have followed me home. I would have died if a pair of hunters hadn’t been tracking it, too. That’s when I knew I couldn’t stay living with a foot in both worlds. If I hadn’t stopped at that bar — if I had gone straight home — that thing would have killed you.” Her father’s words caught in his throat, and he quietly added, “I couldn’t lose you, not after your mom.”
Tears stung her eyes, and Alex tried to blink them back. “So you just abandoned me?!” her voice cracked, and the angel stepped backwards. “Y-You’re trying to tell me this was all some — some self-righteous act? No. You — You were a drunk, a gambler, a good-for-nothing asshole who drove away and never looked back at your own kid. So don’t act like you’re the hero, because you still lost me!”

“Evelyn, you don’t understand.”

“Like hell I don’t!”

“I was in too deep. The families that owned this town are monsters, and it was them that had Nate killed because Nate, Nate was a hunter. They own the police, so they knew that I was looking into his death. What was I supposed to do? Raise you in a life full of death and blood and violence?” Her father took a step towards her, his hand outstretched. “What father would want that for their child? You weren’t supposed to find this lifestyle.” His gaze darkened sorrowfully as it fell onto her gun. “It brings nothing but death and pain.”

Alex’s voice was bitter. “My old life was nothing but death and pain.”

She held her father’s gaze, her eyes blazing with anger until he finally looked away, his shoulders falling in defeat. “You asked me why I’m here. I’m here to keep Nate’s son from going down the same path as his father. As me. As you.”

Anger welled up inside of her, and Alex dropped the gun as her free hand curled into a fist. It swung through the air, and the angel punched the man in the jaw, sending him stumbling back. Anger clouded her vision, and she kept going, blow after blow falling until her father fell to the ground; she didn’t even register that he hadn’t once even tried to hit her back.

“Alex!” The distant sound of Sam’s voice had her mind clearing, and Alex stumbled to her feet.

“Alex.” Her father repeated the name as he looked towards the voice’s source. Guilt pulsed through her as she looked down at his bruised and bloodied face, but it quickly melted back into anger as he spoke again. “Are they referring to you? You always did like that name.”

“Shut up!” Alex lifted the gun, stepping forward to aim it at his head. “I swear to God I will shoot you if you don’t shut up. I’ve killed for less.”

“So you would kill your own father. What’s happened to you?” Her father’s voice was soft, so full of pain that it made her blood boil. “You’ve changed so much, Grey.”

“I’ve become stronger. Better.” The call of her name came again, and Alex tightened her finger on the trigger. Is this what Crowley brought me here for? “If my friends find you here, they won’t ask questions,” she warned.

“Then let me go.” Her father looked towards the open door, and Alex shifted, blocking his view while she glared down with narrowed eyes. His shoulders fell, and his gaze dropped back to the dusty floor. “Perhaps I deserve this, after all that I’ve done. But I want you know to that I never stopped loving you.”

“Shut up!” Alex pulled back the hammer on her gun. “Don’t give me that shit. This isn’t a fairytale. You don’t get redemption!”

“Just do what you think is right.” Her father kept speaking, unruffled by her anger, and his eyes lifted to hold her gaze. “It’s okay.”
Alex pressed her finger up against the trigger, and her eyes hardened through the tears even as her hand shook. “Don’t say that to me,” she whispered, half-begging and half-demanding. “It’s not okay. Not matter what I do, it’s never going to be okay.”

Alex stepped out of the room, her gun tucked carefully beneath the hem of her shirt. She could hear footsteps echoing down the hall, fast and heavy, and she lifted her voice to call out as Sam and Dean turned the corner. “It’s okay.” She looked at the two Winchesters before her gaze slid over to Ennis, David, and a young female who clung to the shifter’s arms. “I’m right here. What did I miss?”

“We heard a gunshot.” Sam peered into the darkness behind her, and Alex shifted uncomfortably in front of the door. “What happened? Are you hurt?”

The angel looked down at her bloodied knuckles, consciously trying to brush the blood off onto her jeans. “I’m okay,” she promised. “It’s not my blood. It was nothing; I took care of it.”

“You sure? There might be more.”

Dean stepped forward, and Alex hurried to block his path to the metal door that lay ajar. “It’s okay,” she hurriedly insisted. “I said that I took care of it. There’s no one alive left in that room.” She pressed a hand up against Dean’s chest to keep the Winchester back. “Dean, trust me. I took care of it. Let’s just get these guys out of here and some place safe.” She nodded toward David and Violet, whose eyes were wide with fear and surprise.

“Are you sure?” Sam put a hand on his brother’s shoulder, and when Dean stepped back, Sam cast a glance towards the door. “What was in there?”

“I said it was nothing.” Alex stepped away from the door, and the Winchesters followed her back down the hall. “Just a monster.”
The Impala sped down the road, its headlights cutting through the cold night air. Alex shifted in her seat, drawing her legs up tighter beneath her as she looked out the window, watching the trees fly past. Her angel blade sat in her lap, her fingers curled around the handle as she held it close, and the young angel let out an impatient sigh as the car slowed down for a light.

“We got a gig.” Dean had gotten the phone call as they had dropped Ennis back off at his home. Sam had immediately voiced his concern, hesitant to leave the city of monsters, but Dean shook his head, firm on his position. “Cas has a line on Metatron. This is what we’ve been waiting for. This is our shot.”

Now, they were on their way to Monett, Missouri, as fast as the Impala could carry them. “It’s the next left up here,” Sam told his brother, and Alex shifted at the sound of his voice. “Hey.” The younger Winchester’s eyes turned to look back at her. “You doing okay? You’ve been quiet since we left.”

“I’m fine.” The angel’s gaze dropped onto her gun that lay on the seat beside her as she fell silent once again. She could still feel the metal against her trembling hands as she stared into her father’s eyes, the rift in her soul when he hadn’t tried to stop her from pulling the trigger.

The bullet had barely nicked his cheek, embedding itself in the plaster wall. Had he thought it was an act of mercy, or a warning? Or did he know that she had only missed because her hands were shaking beyond control?

“This is the address?” Dean pulled the Impala up alongside an old concrete building, and Alex narrowed her eyes to read the darkened sign. Central Municipal Power Corp.

“Yeah.” Sam got out of the Impala, and Alex quickly followed suit. A quick glance around didn’t show anything strange; there were no signs of any angels, no visible wardings.

The young hunter followed the Winchesters up to the entrance with a frown, but before she could vocalize her confusion, the door swung open. Light spilled out, revealing a tall, stoic angel. “If you’ll follow me, the Commander will see you now,” he announced, and Alex’s face twisted in puzzlement as they were ushered inside.

“The Commander?” Dean looked back at his brother as he murmured out the words, and Sam gave a small shrug, just as confused. The angel led the way down the hall and through a set of double doors, and Alex’s eyes widened as she took in the bustling control room that lay before them. All eyes turned as they entered, and she felt her face redden under so many angelic stares. “Sir?” Their guide paused at the open door of an office, and Alex slipped past Dean.

Castiel stood there talking to another angel, but at the sound of his title he turned. “Alex.” The seraph stepped forward, and Alex threw herself into his arms. Castiel pulled away after a second, giving both Sam and Dean a brief yet awkward hug before he turned back to the angel who had escorted them in. “Um … dismissed.” He turned back to them to add an apologetic, “He can be a bit stuffy,” as the angel walked away.

“So … Commander?” Dean asked, and he smirked slightly in amusement as he regarded the angel.

“Yeah, not my idea.” Castiel crossed back over to stand beside Alex. “They had no leader, and they insisted on following me.”
“Yeah. No, we get it.” Dean glanced back over his shoulder to the room full of angels, all deeply involved in their work. “You’re a rockstar.”

The seraph’s lips dipped down in a frown at the sharpness in the Winchester’s voice.

“Bartholomew is dead,” he reminded. “Malachi was murdered by Gadreel, and with Metatron as powerful as he is now, I needed to do something.”

Sam looked over at Alex, and the young angel gave a small shake of her head, unsure what to say. “So this war between angels is really gonna happen, huh?” he asked.

“Not if I can find a diplomatic option for getting rid of Metatron.”

“Good luck with that.” Dean scoffed loudly, and Alex crossed her arms, mouth opening as she got ready to snap, but Castiel put a hand on her shoulder, holding her back.

“Dean, this angel-on-angel violence … it has to end,” he insisted, his voice deep as he tried to reason with the hunter. “Someone has to say enough.”

“And that someone is you?”

Castiel nodded in accordance with Sam’s question. “That brings me to why you’re here.” He cleared his throat, uncomfortable with his next words, and Alex’s interest heightened. “We have a prisoner. It’s an angel from Metatron’s inner circle. I need to know what they’re planning, but so far, he’s revealed nothing.”

“So, you’re done with the rough stuff, and you want us to be your goons?”

“Well, you’ve had success at these situations before.” Castiel’s gaze turned from Dean up onto Sam. “If you don’t want to do it, I understand.”

Sam started to respond, but Dean quickly cut in, “Who says I don’t want to do it?” He looked around, arms coming up to cross across his broad chest. “Where is he?”

Castiel hesitated, eyes narrowed at Dean’s eagerness, but after a moment or two, he relented. “This way.” He brushed past the Winchesters on his way out the door, and Alex hurried after him, falling in step at his side while the two brothers turned to follow. “I tried calling you,” the seraph began as he led the way out of the main room and down a hallway. “You didn’t answer.”

“My phone’s dead.” Alex pulled out her broken cell, the screen cracked from her fight with her father. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Castiel paused beside a door before his voice dropped low so the brothers couldn’t hear. “Stay here in case Sam needs your help with Dean,” he murmured, but before Alex could ask why, he added, “I have something to show you when you’re done. His name is Ezra.” The seraph lifted his voice so Sam and Dean could hear. “Don’t use any more violence than is necessary.”

He unlocked the door, and Dean pushed his way into the cell. With an exchanged look of concern, Sam and Alex followed. The room was empty, filled only with a single angel bound to a wooden chair. “Ezra.” Alex walked up to the angel, whose head lifted at the sound of his name. “Nice to meet you.”

“The Winchesters.” The angel’s gaze slid past her onto the two brothers, and he scoffed. “You’re wasting your time. I have nothing to say.”
“We disagree.” Dean’s shoulder knocked Alex out of the way as he stepped forward to stand in front of Ezra. His green eyes sparkled darkly, and Alex stepped back to stand next to Sam.

“There’s no use in torturing me.” Ezra held Dean’s gaze, his voice high and cocky. “I am a trained commando. It won’t work.”

Dean leaned forward, planting one hand on the back of the chair as he held his face inches from the angel’s. “Wow. Well, you just asked me to dance.” His shoulders tensed, fist drawing back, and Sam rushed forward.

“Dean!” Sam put a hand on his brother’s shoulder and pulled him back sharply. “Dean! He won’t tell us anything if he’s dead. Besides,” he added with a glance down at the angel, “you know, I’m - I’m really starting to realize that he probably doesn’t know anything. He was probably just pretending at the bar.”

He looked over at Alex, and the young hunter stepped forward with an earnest nod. “You’re right,” she agreed. “He’s probably just a nobody. I mean, come on, Dean. Look at him.” She motioned towards the angel with a scoff. “That’s one of Metatron’s best? He was boasting about it at a bar — how does that make any sense?”

Dean’s green eyes sparkled as he caught on. “Well, only if Metatron is surrounding himself with losers,” he agreed.

“Exactly! What’s this guy even doing here?”

“He’s a wannabe.” Dean turned away from Ezra to face Alex and his brother, careful to keep his voice loud enough so the angel could still hear him. “I mean, if he was a key player, he would be up in heaven with Metatron where all the action is.”

“Exactly,” Alex agreed, but her voice was drowned out Ezra’s, “What if I’m a decoy? Or in deep cover?”

Sam went on as if the angel hadn’t spoken. “I - It’s pathetic.”

Dean nodded. “Mm, probably hasn’t even been to heaven, not since the fall.” He cast a pitiful look back towards the angel, whose eyes were wide with indignation.

“Yes, I have,” he insisted.

Alex laughed, and she shifted so she could look Ezra in the eyes. “Listen, buddy. Those gates are sealed. Absolutely no one is getting in. Not angels, not souls. Nothing.”

“Who said anything about gates?” Ezra countered, and his face grew smug. “You don’t need gates when you have a private portal.”

“Right.” Alex rolled her eyes, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “I mean, if there was a doorway here on earth, there’s no way the angels would be able to sense it. You can’t be serious, man — no one could hide that.”

“You could if it moves around from place to place, if it’s wherever the boss wants it to be.”

Silence followed his words, and Sam glanced over at his brother. “I see,” he finally said. “I got it. So, you heard a rumor about Metatron’s ‘secret portal,’ and you decided to run with it.”

“It’s not a rumor,” the angel reported hotly. “He showed me.”
“I get it.” Dean nodded as he returned Sam’s look, and a thin smile crossed his lips. “He’s a fan.” Sam agreed, and Dean took a step towards Ezra. “You’re a fan. Just cause you’re hot for Metatron … or Bieber, or Beckham … just cause you know everything about them doesn’t mean you actually know them.”

“Or that they even know you exist.”

“Ooh.” Alex winced at Sam’s words. “That — that’s just cold, man.” She cast Ezra a faux-sympathetic look, amused to find that the angel’s eyes were stretched wide.

“I was interviewed personally by Metatron for a key post,” he insisted.

“Yeah?” Sam challenged. “Oh, wow. Well, then — then maybe you can tell me why you weren’t at your key post and were hanging down here instead.”

His question was met with silence, and Ezra’s gaze flickered to the ground. Dean let out a loud, regretful breath. “Mm. Now, that blows.” He glanced over at Alex, who nodded in agreement. “He got passed over.”

The angel’s attention snapped back to Dean. “I-I was a finalist,” he defended.

“Oh, man.” Sam winced in sympathy. “To get so close and then get kicked downstairs. It sucks to be you.”

“Hardly anyone was chosen!” Ezra’s voice grew high indignantly. “And ground forces is still a very important assignment.” He paused, and after a second he added in a steadier tone, “It was an honor to have even been considered for the squad.”

“What squad?” Dean scoffed loudly. “There is no squad.”

“Yeah, says you,” the angel shot back. “It’s a highly guarded secret.”

“Yeah, sure thing.” Alex echoed Dean’s condescending scoff. “And, uh, what exactly would you be doing in this ‘squad’ of yours, huh?” She paused, but Ezra just glared back, his lips pursed tightly together. “Oh, no? You got nothing?”

“Wait a second.” Sam put a hand out as Alex stepped forward, keeping her where she was as he turned to face the angel. “Just, please, uh … clarify this for me. You desperately wanted this job, but you didn’t know what it was?” He let out a small laugh, and Alex cracked a smile at their game.

“Well,” the angel began, “until you were chosen, the exact nature of the mission was kept a secret.” Both Winchesters let out a disbelieving, “wow,” and Ezra quickly added, “And … hardly anyone was chosen.”

Dean jerked his head back towards the door, and Alex nodded, leading the way back out into the hallway. “Wow.” Her head tipped back as she let out a loud laugh. “Talk about a dim bulb. No wonder Metatron didn’t chose him.” She shook her head mirthfully as she looked up at the two brothers. “I honestly didn’t think that was going to work.”

“Yeah.” Sam chuckled before his face fell serious. “But, ground forces? Elite secret squad? What’s Metatron gearing up for?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t we shove somebody through the back door of heaven and find out,” Dean suggested scornfully. “Oh, wait. No. It’s portable and can’t be found.”
“Are we sure that he’s telling the truth?” Alex put forth after a second. “Maybe — maybe he’s not a dimwit and he’s just playing us.” She frowned at the thought, her shoulders hunching over as she narrowed her eyes.

Dean’s words offered little comfort. “I doubt it. You can’t fake that level of stupidity.” He led the way back to Castiel’s office. “Come on. Cas is gonna want to know about that.”

Alex pushed her way past Dean to reach Castiel’s office first. “Hey, Cas!” She dropped down onto the desk in front of the seraph. “We’re done — sorta.”

Castiel rose to his feet as Sam and Dean entered, and Alex moved to stand at his side. “It looks like Metatron has a doorway to heaven,” Sam announced. “Ezra says he was recruited for a special elite squad — didn’t make the cut.”

“I wonder why,” Dean added, and Alex chuckled. “Dude’s a dimwit.”

“Commander.” An angel slid to a stop outside the door, and Alex looked up in surprise. “It’s Ezra. He’s dead.”

“What?” Sam’s eyes went wide as he spun around to stare at the angel “That’s … seriously?”

He stepped back as Castiel barreled past, and Alex looked up at Dean in surprise. “What the hell? We were just there a minute ago and he was completely fine.”

Castiel returned, his face set in a deep frown, and Sam turned back to Castiel. “Cas … it’s unbelievable. I mean, he was fine when we left him.”

Alex nodded, and Dean added, “I barely touched the guy.”

“It couldn’t have been suicide.” Alex frowned as she glanced back towards the hallway that led to where Ezra had been held. “I mean, the room was bare, and he was chained to the chair with no weapon in sight.”

“No.” The seraph firmly shook his head. “This was an angel kill.”

The Winchesters exchanged looks. “Okay,” Dean finally said. “Well, I’m gonna say it. Maybe your operation’s been hacked. You know, Metatron’s got somebody on the inside.”

“I was sure everyone here was loyal.” Castiel leaned against the desk, shaking his head as he stared off into the distance. “Finally united by a common cause.”

“Well, that’s the problem.” Dean stepped forward, head held high as he met the seraph’s gaze. “See, you don’t think anybody is lying. I think everybody’s lying. It’s a gift.” He turned to his brother. “Let’s do some nosing around.”

He left the room, and Sam turned to follow, but Castiel stepped forward to intercept him. “Sam. You have a moment?”

“Yeah, what?”

“I … wanted to ask you about Gadreel.” The seraph’s voice dropped low as not to be overheard. “About the time he possessed you.”

Sam’s face darkened, and his hazel gaze flickered over to Alex before they returned to Castiel. “It’s not really something I like to —”
“Sam, please.”

“He didn’t possess me completely.” Sam’s gaze dropped down to the ground. “More like we, uh … shared housing. I was still me.”

Castiel nodded in understanding. “Did you ever sense a presence?”

“I … don’t really know what I felt,” the Winchester admitted. “I mean, maybe that I wasn’t completely alone?”

“Did you ever feel threatened?”

“No.” Sam shook his head. “More that he … wasn’t at rest, like he had unfinished business. Now that we know more about him, I-I’d say he felt … misunderstood.”

Alex nodded in agreement with Sam’s assessment. “When I talked to him, he didn’t seem hostile. I … I almost felt bad for him. He doesn’t seem like a bad guy.”

“Yeah, well I don’t think that’s the case,” Sam quickly retorted. “He killed Kevin.” The Winchester stalked away, leaving Castiel and Alex alone in the office as he made his way after Dean.

Alex watched him go, waiting until he was out of earshot before she added, “We don’t know why he did it. Anyways. What’s with the twenty questions? What are you thinking about?”

“I want to speak with Gadreel. If Sam is right, then perhaps he isn’t aware of Metatron’s plan.” Castiel fell silent for a moment, lost in thought, before he shook himself free of its hold. “Come. There is someone I want you to meet. They’re very eager to see you.”

He led the way down the hall, and Alex followed after him, her curiosity peaked. A brunette angel stood there — Alex recognized her as who Castiel had been speaking to when they had arrived. A child stood at her side, holding her hand, and Alex broke into a run, her feet carrying her to Ashiel’s side. The fledgling reached out towards her, the caution in his eyes quickly replaced by the excitement of recognition, and Alex dropped to her knees and pulled him into her arms, a hand pressing his head into her neck as she held the child close. She pressed her face into his hair, eyes closed as she felt his small hands bury themselves in her shirt, clinging on for dear life. “How …” Alex rose back to her feet, blinking back tears and hoisting the fledgling up onto her hips as she turned to face Castiel. “How did you find him? I-I thought …” Her words caught in her throat, and she shook her head.

“He was recovered from a playground in northern Iowa. We haven’t found Laura or Eremiel yet, but by his health it seems that he was on earth when Metatron’s spell hit. The small size of his grace would have prevented the spell from drawing him into heaven like the rest. He’s been able to retain both his grace and his wings.”

Alex ran her hand across the fledgling’s back, but Gabriel’s grace was too weak to detect his soft grey wings. “Good.” Her voice cracked, and she pressed a kiss against Ashiel’s temple.

Castiel stepped forward, and Ashiel stretched out a hand towards the seraph with a soft noise. “He was cared for in Bartholomew’s camp until I … killed him.” The seraph trailed off uncomfortably. “Since then, Hannah as taken him into her care until Laura and Eremiel are found. We are looking for them,” he assured.

“Thank you.” Alex smiled over at the fledgling, and she tickled his stomach playfully. “Hey-a, bud. How are you doing?”
“Good.” Ashiel let out a toothy smile as he reached out to wrap his fingers around her earlobe. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.” Alex gave the angel Hannah a thankful nod before she turned back to Castiel. “He’s talking a lot better. Aren’t ya?” she added back to Ashiel, and the fledgling giggled slightly at her playful tone.

“Mama.” He pointed towards the ground. “Down.”

“Okay, buddy.” Alex set him down onto the ground, and the young child made his way over to Castiel, fingers curling in the seraph’s trench coat as he looked up at him expectantly.

Castiel reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small plastic lion, and the fledgling accepted it with a small squeal of delight. “It’s been nine months since Laura took him into her charge,” he said, addressing Alex’s previous statement. “He’s grown quite a bit.”

“You see that.” Alex watched as Castiel picked Ashiel up and put the fledgling on his shoulders. Ashiel giggled and placed the toy on the seraph’s head, bouncing it across his hair as he played. “Hey, Ash. What sound does a lion make?”

The child’s eyes lit up, and his mouth stretched wide in a roar. The lights above their heads flickered at his yell, and Alex tipped her head back to look up. “He’s discovering how to use his grace,” Castiel explained, reaching up with one hand to steady the child. “He blew out the power on a backup circuit two days ago.”

“Huh.” Alex followed Castiel back down the hallway. “Strong kid.” She watched as Castiel let Ashiel back down onto the ground, and the fledgling ran off into the throng of angels that occupied the main room. “So, you want to go talk to Gadreel, huh?” She watched as Hannah hurried after the fledgling, and she chuckled as the young child stopped to stare up at a tall, stoic angel who was talking down to a couple of younger recruits.

“Yes. Hopefully he’ll be willing to speak with us.” Castiel hesitated, gaze lifted towards the ceiling, and after a moment he waved over a dark-haired female angel. “Atariul. I’ve invited Gadreel to meet me at Norfolk Park. I want you to make sure that he is alone.”

“Yes, Commander.” The angel nodded quickly before she looked over at Alex. “And of her?”

“I’m coming with.” Alex crossed her arms, her grey eyes flashing firmly as she turned to face Castiel. “I’ve talked with Gadreel before. We connected a bit, you know, having both been screwed over by Lucifer.” She ignored how the angel next to her mate stiffened slightly in surprise. “And at the very least, you’ll need backup if this turns out to be a trap.”

Castiel’s face darkened, but he gave a small nod. “Okay. You’ll need your angel blade.”

“It’s in the trunk. Hey, Ash.” Alex waved the fledgling over to her and scooped him up into her arms. “Do you want to go and find Sam and Dean? I bet they’ll be happy to see you.”

“Bean!” Ashiel grinned widely and waved his toy lion around in excitement. “Hannah!” He looked back over his shoulder towards the other angel. “I-I’m gonna see — see Bean.”

“Dean,” Alex explained when Hannah’s head cocked, but she didn’t bother to correct the nickname to Ashiel. “Come on, buddy. Let’s go find them.”

“Okay.” Ashiel pointed towards the door, and Alex carried him off towards where the Winchesters had disappeared to. The fledgling’s small hand gripped the collar of her jacket tightly as he looked
Voices could be heard up ahead, and Alex turned the corner to find Dean seated at a table with Sam standing next to him. “Well?” Sam was asking. “What did Crowley say?”

“You talked to Crowley?” Alex spoke up, surprised by the news, and her gaze flickered down to Dean’s phone as both brothers turned to look at her. “What’s up with him?” Ashiel shifted in her arms, and Alex’s smile grew as her gaze flickered over to the fledgling. “Oh, yeah. Look who Cas found.” She reached up, her fingers curling around the cord that hung around his neck, and she pulled free the small bronze penny tied around his neck.

“Is that Ashiel?” Sam crossed the room to stand in front of Alex, and the fledgling stretched out his hands for the taller Winchester. “I thought he was gone.”

“Some other angels took him into their care, but no one’s seen them since the fall.” Alex handed the child to Sam, and Ashiel giggled as he showed off his toy. “I — I’m just glad he’s okay.” She turned her gaze over to Dean and asked, “What did Crowley want?”

“He’s found Abaddon. Sam and I are going to retrieve the First Blade and then go kill her.” Dean rose to his feet, and Sam turned to look back to frown at him.

“Bean!” Ashiel pointed towards Dean, and Alex chuckled at his exclamation.

“Heya, Ace.” The Winchester gave the fledgling a quick nod before his eyes flickered back to Alex. “Well? Are you in or out?”

“Out.” Alex reached up to take the child back. “Cas has a lead on Metatron, and I need to go with him. It shouldn’t take too long, though, so if you need backup, call me and I’ll come.” She watched as Dean’s face darkened, and she added, “Listen. This thing with Abaddon — it’s bad, yeah, but it’s not my battle. Right now my priorities are on finding and killing Metatron.” She held Ashiel tighter to her chest. “So … good luck, I guess.”

Sam nodded in understanding. “Yeah, you too.”

Alex left the room and made her way back to the control room where Castiel stood waiting. Hannah was beside him, her hands folded in front of her, and Ashiel smiled at the sight of her. “Are you ready?” the seraph asked.

“Yeah. I’ll grab my weapon on the way out.” Alex tucked Ashiel’s necklace back into his shirt. “Guess, what, micealaz. Cas and I are going to out for a bit. Can you stay here with Hannah?”

“N-No.” Ashiel’s head turned towards Cas. “I-I wanna — I wanna come.”

“You can’t come with.” Castiel’s voice was calm yet firm, and the fledgling’s eyes watered at the rejection. Alex set him down, and Ashiel grabbed onto Castiel’s trench coat with a choked sob.

Hannah took his hand and gently tugged the child back towards her. “I’ll look after him,” she promised. “We’ll be waiting for you to come back.”

“Thank you, Hannah.” Castiel rested a gentle hand on her shoulder, and Alex frowned slightly at the look they exchanged. However, it was short lived, and Castiel stepped back and led the way back towards the entrance of the power building. “Atariul,” he called. “We’ll meet you in the woods.”

“Yes, sir.” The other angel nodded, and with one last glance backwards, Alex followed Castiel out into the morning air.
The sun was stretching upwards towards its peak as Alex and Castiel stopped beneath the branches of a towering oak. The woods were silent, and Alex cast a wary look around through the trees as they awaited Gadreel’s arrival. “We’re … we’re sure he’s going to show, right?”

“No.” Castiel’s head was raised confidently as he patiently waited in the long grass. “But he may be our best hope for stopping Metatron.” He fell silent, and Alex turned her head to watch two figures approaching in the distance. She recognized the first as Atariul, but the second was new. “Thank you for coming.” Castiel dipped his head in greeting as they stopped in front of them. “And thank you for coming alone.”

“I’ve seen you through Sam Winchester’s eyes, and he trusts you.” The vessel was new, but Alex immediately recognized the voice as Gadreel’s. “You have a reputation for honor.” His blue eyes fell onto Alex, and her gaze traced his jawline before she dropped it to the dirt.

“In some circles. As for reputations, yours precedes you.”

“What happened in the Garden was not my doing.” Gadreel’s voice rose insistently, breaking from its stoic tone, and Alex felt his pleading eyes turn onto her. “You know of Lucifer’s deception; you must believe me.”

“I do,” Alex quietly promised, and sympathy pulsed through her veins as she lifted her head. “I know that it wasn’t your fault.”

“We know you feel misunderstood,” Castiel finished. “And you’re eager to redeem yourself and maybe more.”

“You refer to my support of Metatron’s campaign to rebuild heaven?”

“You support?” Anger rose in Castiel’s eyes. “You’ve recruited for him, you’ve killed for him. And I know you truly believe it’s for the greater good, but you’ve placed your faith in the wrong master.”

Gadreel’s lips pursed tightly together. “You don’t know him.”

“We know him too well.” Alex spoke up as her frustrations grew. “We trusted him too, once, and it cast every angel down from heaven.” She lifted her head to meet Gadreel’s gaze.

“Which led to my second chance,” the angel reminded.

“Which led to your second deception,” Alex retorted. “You’re gullible, Gadreel. Lucifer saw it in you, and now Metatron is doing the exact same thing. I know you angels weren’t made to understand lying, so you need to trust someone who was. Metatron is dicking you over.”

“Alex.” Gadreel’s body turned to face her fully. “Are you suggesting that I change loyalties?”

“We’re suggesting that you reclaim your original loyalty,” Castiel explained. “To heaven and the mission we were made to serve.”

Alex nodded in agreement, and Gadreel blinked slowly before he spoke. “I thought that was exactly what I was doing.”

“You’ve been deceived.” Castiel stepped closer to Alex, and the young angel looked up into Gadreel’s eyes to see conflict darkening his gaze. “And as bad as you’ve had it, all those centuries locked away, it will be much worse under Metatron—”
“Castiel!” The alarm cry came, and Alex spun around as two angels rushed towards them from across the grass. Alex drew her angel blade, glancing back over her shoulder in alarm as Gadreel ran away, and a fourth angel crashed into Atariul.

“Hey!” Alex charged after him, but she had barely made it ten yards before she was tackled from behind. Her angel blade flew from her hands, and the young hunter struggled, lashing out with her legs to knock away her attacker. A kick landed, and she managed to scramble another few feet through the grass before she was knocked down again. “Cas!”

She could feel the angel above her leaning up, poised to drive his weapon into her heart, but suddenly he grunted. Alex could feel heat and light spilling forth from his face as he died, and she covered her head as he collapsed on top of her. “What?” Alex scrambled free from the corpse and looked up at Gadreel, who stood above her, weapon in hand.

For a moment, fear pulsed through her, but the angel lowered his weapon and extended his hand. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.” Alex let him help her to her feet. “Thank you.”

“If was an unfair match. You would not have stood a chance against Erestrier. And you …” Gadreel hesitated. “You defended me against your friends when I possessed Sam. I trust this settles our debt.” Alex opened her mouth to respond, but the angel nodded off back towards the skirmish. “Go help your friends.”

He disappeared, and Alex scooped up her angel blade and ran back to Castiel. He was stuck in combat with two angels, and a third was locked in battle with Atariul. The angel’s face lit up in a brilliant white light as the enemy’s blade slid into her chest, and Alex took his moment of victory to tackle him to the ground. Her momentum carried her weapon into his arm, and the angel cried out in pain and alarm. Atariul’s body fell to the ground, the blade still embedded in her chest, and Alex wrenched it free and buried it into its owner’s neck.

The angel twitched once as it died, and Alex wrenched her blade out of his arm and rose to her feet. One of Castiel’s foes lay dead at his feet, and as she watched, the seraph twisted the last of Metatron’s men around, pinning him against his chest as he drove the angel’s own blade deep into his heart. “Cas.” Alex stepped over Atariul’s body as the seraph stepped back, and the body buckled to the ground.

“Are you okay?” Castiel’s eyes surveyed the battlefield, and Alex nodded as she crossed over to him, her own gaze darting warily around in search of any danger. But the woods were silent. “Where is Gadreel?”

“He ran. I — I don’t think he was expecting this, either.” Alex reached up to rub her shoulder, wincing as she felt a bruise where she had hit the ground. “He saved me from one of Metatron’s men.” She nodded off towards the body of Erestrier. “It looks like Metatron might have had him followed.”

“There’s only one way to find out.” Castiel made his way back towards the parking lot where his car was parked, and Alex sprinted after him to catch up.

“You mean — you mean talk to him. Again.” Her voice was flat as she reached out to grab Castiel’s shoulder, turning him so he could look her in the face. “So Metatron can send even more angels to kill us.”

Castiel lifted his head towards the sky, and Alex waited impatiently for an answer. “Gadreel has fled
far, but he hasn’t returned to heaven yet,” he announced, his gaze dropping back down onto her. “He’s willing to meet again in town now — before Metatron realizes he wasn’t successful.”

“If you say so,” Alex frowned, but she let go of Castiel’s shoulder. “Lead the way, I guess.” She followed him up to the parking lot and climbed into the front seat of the golden Lincoln. The engine rattled as the car came to life, and Castiel pulled it out onto the road.

“It doesn’t feel right,” he began, and Alex glanced over at him in surprise. “Leaving their bodies there. They deserve better than that.”

Alex grunted, only half agreeing with him, and she drummed her fingers against the glass window, watching as the landscape rolled by. “They made their choice, and they chose to follow Metatron instead,” she eventually said. “Actions have consequences.”

“They were misguided. Angels were made to follow; it’s not their fault they placed their faith in the wrong man.”

The car rolled into town, and Castiel parked it out back in an alley. A man stood on the pavement, awaiting their arrival, and Alex stepped out of the car to greet Gadreel. “There you are.” She slid angel blade into the back of her jeans as she looked around, adding dryly, “You sure you’re alone this time?”

“I had nothing to do with it.” The angel lifted his chin as Castiel stopped in front of him. “I never would have agreed to meet if I thought concealed assassins were going to try and attack you. I hope you know that.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Even though you and I are on opposite sides in this situation, I believe there must be honor, even in matters of war.” Something flashed in the angel’s eyes, and his face darkened slightly at his words.

Alex opened her mouth, but Castiel cut her off, a hand coming up to rest on her shoulder to keep her silent. “But what happened,” he insisted, “doesn’t it prove my point about Metatron? You met with me in good faith, but he lied, and he used you to get at me.”

“Castiel —”

“Just as poor judgement undid you all those centuries ago, your mistaken trust in Metatron will bring you down again.”

Regret weighed down the angel’s words. “I gave him my word. Do you expect me to come make war with him?”

“No. Not at all.” Castiel’s hands fell away from Alex’s arm. “I want you to stay right where you are. Just give me reports on what Metatron is planning and when he will strike.”

“And the honor we were speaking of?”

Alex scoffed loudly. “Metatron already has someone inside of our camp,” she retorted. “That’s how he killed Ezra and knew we were meeting — unless you told him.”

Castiel’s hand returned to her shoulder, silencing her sharp words. “I’m just fighting fire with fire,” he insisted. “Consider my offer.”

“I will consider it, but I cannot promise you anything at this moment.” Gadreel’s jaw twitched as he
squared it, and his gaze move between Alex and Castiel before he dipped his head. “I should be on my way before Metatron questions my whereabouts. If I have an answer, I will give it to you before the week has passed.”

“Thank you.” Castiel stepped aside to let Gadreel walk past, and Alex watched as the angel walk off down the street. “I hope to hear from you soon.”

The angel gave no notice that he had heard, and he disappeared from sight as he turned the corner. “Great.” Alex let her shoulders fall, and she looked up at Castiel with a frown. “Well, I guess we did the best we could. Let’s … let’s just get back to camp before anything else happens.”

Alex watched Ashiel run across the room, his squeal of amusement filling the air as he chased after his rubber ball. Hannah sat at a far table, one of Ashiel’s toys held in her hand as she waited for the fledgling to return, and for a fleeting moment, their eyes met. Hannah smiled, and Alex half-heartedly mimicked it before she drew her gaze away. Her new phone sat on the ground in front of her, the screen black, and Alex drummed her fingers impatiently against the floor as she waited for Sam to answer her text.

“Anything?” Castiel’s voice came from within the doorway, and Alex looked up in surprise. She shook her head, and the seraph cross the room to sit down beside her. “I’m sure Sam will call as soon as he can,” he promised, and a warm hand came to rest on her knee. “Be patient.”

“How’s everyone else doing?” Alex glanced back towards the door that led out to the control room, purposefully avoiding his words of comfort.

“They’re displeased with Metatron’s actions. Many of them are scared.” The seraph shook his head as he sighed. “I just hope that this will prevent any more angels from defecting.”

As if on cue, Alex’s phone rang, and the young hunter jumped to answer it. “Sam? What’s going on? What took you so long?”

“Abaddon’s dead.” Sam’s voice was low, almost defeated, and Alex placed him on speaker phone as she set her cell back down on the ground between her and Castiel. “Dean killed her with the Blade.”

“And?” Alex frowned at his tone. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Something — something’s wrong with Dean. The Mark is changing him. I watched him break free from Abaddon’s hold, and when he killed her, he didn’t just kill her, he …” The Winchester trailed off. “He enjoyed doing it. But that’s not just it, Alex. He lied to me and went after Abaddon on his own. I barely got there in time.”

Alex and Castiel exchanged looks, and Castiel cleared his throat. “The Mark is a powerful force,” he agreed. “Cain is the only other being to have carried it, and he wasn’t human. We have no idea what it’s capable of — or what effect it might have on him.”

“Great.”

“Yeah, that’s, uh, great news,” Alex added tightly. “That would have been a good thing to know beforehand.”

Castiel’s frown deepened as he met her gaze. “If I remember correctly, neither you nor Dean bothered to consult me before you went after Cain and the Mark,” he reminded, and Alex grunted, unable to disagree with his logic. “Sam. Keep Dean separated from the Blade as best you can;
hopefully that will help cull the effects for the present.”

“Alright. Thanks, Cas.” Sam hung up, and Alex turned her phone’s screen off before she looked up at Castiel.

The seraph stared back, and Ashiel hurried over to lean up against his shoulder as Alex asked, “You think Dean’s going to be okay? He has … he has been pretty pissy lately, more so than usual.”

“I don’t know.” Castiel fell silent as Ashiel crawled into his lap, and the fledgling yanked playfully on his tie. “It’s hard to say.” The seraph carefully disentangled the blue fabric from the child’s hands before he nudged him to his feet. “Ashiel. Why don’t you and Hannah go play outside?” he suggested.

“Come on.” Hannah rose to her feet and held out her hand towards Ashiel. “We can go look for dinosaurs again.” Ashiel screeched out his excitement as he ran towards the door, and Hannah and Castiel exchanged wordless nods of understanding before she led the fledgling out of the room.

Now that they were alone, Alex shifted closer, resting her head upon Castiel’s warm shoulder. “I think I’ll stick around here for a bit with you and Ash. If that’s okay with you.”

“Of course.” The seraph’s lips pressed against her hair. “You’re always welcome to stay here with me.” Alex tilted her head, and his lips found hers. “I don’t know how comfortable you’ll find this place, though,” he added as Alex returned her cheek to his shoulder. “There’s only angels here, which means there are no beds.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll make do.” Alex nuzzled up against him, her eyes closed as she curled a hand in his coat. She felt his chin come to rest on her head, and his free hand came up to tuck a strand of blonde hair behind her ear.

For several seconds neither moved, but eventually Castiel shifted from beneath her. “I should get back out there,” he murmured, and Alex groaned as he straightened up. “They need me, too.” He pressed a gentle kiss onto her nose as he rose to his feet. “I love you.”

“Yeah, love you too.” Alex watched as Castiel walked away, and with a sigh, she grabbed her phone and pushed herself to her feet. If she couldn’t be there for Sam and Dean, then she should at least be there for Castiel’s faction. Still, a fear held her back, and she looked down at the phone in her hands. Sam was right about the Mark. Something about it brought out the worst in Dean, and without anything to hold him back, she feared that there was no telling how far the Winchester would go.
“Alex.” A hand on her shoulder had Alex jerking awake. One arm flew out, knocking away the intruder’s touch, while the other grasped her weapon. She scrambled up into a sitting position, fists clenched, and Castiel stepped back, his hands rising in an innocent gesture.

“Shit.” Alex let her angel blade fall onto the floor where she was sleeping, and she groaned as the rush of adrenaline began to fade. “What the hell, Cas? What do you want?”

“There’s been an attack.” Castiel stretched out his hand, and Alex let him help her to her feet. She winced at the pain in her back, and she looked back down at the makeshift bed of her sweatshirt and a ratty blanket that had been shoved into the corner of an empty office. “White light was reported at an ice cream shop down in Missouri, and afterwards, all occupants were found dead.”

“Angel kill.” Alex brushed her fingers through her hair and brought it back in a ponytail. “Okay, great. One of Metatron’s?”

“I don’t know. I’ve called the Winchesters, and they’ve agreed to meet us there.” The seraph led the way down the hall, and Alex followed, doing her best to smooth down her wrinkled clothes as they stepped into the main control room of Castiel’s faction. She felt all eyes turn onto her, but she ignored them as she made her way along the edge to where Castiel’s office sat, encased in walls of glass.

“Castiel.” Hannah stood beside his desk, and she gave the seraph a barely perceptible nod as they entered. “Any news?”

“Nothing yet. I’m taking Timaeus and some of his men down with me. The Winchesters will be meeting me there; their insight might be of some value.” Castiel looked down at Alex, and the young hunter gave a small nod of agreement.

“I’m guessing that Alex will be joining you as well,” Hannah concluded, and Alex narrowed her eyes slightly, unable to read the emotions on angel’s face. However, they were gone too quickly for her to decide if they were against or for her favor. “Then you won’t be at roll call,” she added as she turned back to Castiel. “Shall I stay behind and conduct it for you?”

“That would be wonderful.”

“Mama!” The sound of Ashiel’s voices had Alex turning to watch the fledgling run across the room. He almost careened into another angel, who barely sidestepped in time, muttering a word beneath his breath as he watched the fledgling continue on, unperturbed. “Mama, you — you’re up now.”

“Yes, I am.” Alex scooped him up into arm with a grin, and Ashiel giggled happily. “Where have you been, little man?”

“I-I went … out.” Ashiel wrapped his fingers in the strings of her hoodie, stumbling as he tried to express his thoughts. “I got to swing.”

“You got a swing, huh? Exciting.” Alex smiled over at Castiel before she gently extracted her sweatshirt from the fledgling’s grasp. “Hey, Ashy, Cas and I are going to go on a little trip. But
maybe when we come back we’ll have some friends for you, huh? How does that sound?”

“I … I wanna come.” Ashiel looked between her and Castiel, and his face fell into a sullen frown when neither of the angels gave in to his insistent demands. “Mama.”

“No, you have to stay here. We won’t be gone long.” Alex put him down onto the ground and knelt down next to him. “Tell you what. When I get back, we’ll go out for ice cream. I bet it’s no fun being cooped up with these boring old angels.” Her words were lost on the young child, and Alex ran her fingers through his hair lovingly before she nudged him off towards Hannah. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

“We’ll be back soon,” Castiel promised Hannah as Alex got back to her feet. “Until then, you’re in charge.” Hannah nodded, and Alex followed Castiel down the hall and out of the building.

**Dixon, Missouri**

Alex led the way up to Colonel Scoop’s ice cream parlor, straightening the collar of her blouse as she stepped beneath the yellow police tape. “Agents Sheppard and Agent Stills,” she announced to the officer standing just outside the door. “We’re here about … this.” She motioned to the scene inside, leaving the man to fill in the blanks.

The officer nodded and stepped aside, allowing the two to enter. “What about Sam and Dean?” Castiel murmured. “Shouldn’t we tell the officer that they are coming?” Alex nodded, and the seraph frowned slightly. “What aliases will they be using? I’ve noticed that they like to use the names of popular musicians.”

“Yeah. They’ll probably use …” Alex trailed off, and then she looked up at Castiel with a grin. “Tell him that Agents Spears and Aguilera will be here soon.”

Castiel nodded, missing the mischief in her smile, and he moved off to inform the guard about the Winchesters’ impending arrival. Alex crossed the room, eyes taking in the mass of white sheets that covered the floor. One was being loaded onto a stretcher, and Alex hurried to intercept them. “Whoa. One second.” Alex flashed her badge. “Can I just take a quick look here?” She didn’t wait for an answer before she lifted up the sheet to look on the body of a young man. The eyes were burned out, face twisted in agony, and the young hunter let the sheet fall back over his face. “Thank you.”

“What do you think?” Castiel stopped in front of her as the EMTs carried the body away, and Alex frowned.

“That was definitely an angel kill,” she agreed, crossing over to another body. She lifted the sheet so Castiel could see the blackened flesh on the face of a young boy, barely seven years old. “There’s no other wounds, yet.” She laid the sheet back across the body. “These were all humans.”

“Excuse me.” Castiel turned to one of the medical officers. “Do all the bodies look like this?”

“All except one.” The woman pointed to a body that lay beside the vinyl booths. “That one looks like he’s been stabbed. Better be quick though,” she added, “they’re taking him down to the coroner’s soon.”

“Thank you.” Castiel knelt down beside the corpse and drew back the sheet to look down into the face of the male. Alex stood beside him, one hand planted on his shoulder to keep her upright as she took in the unmarred features of the dark-haired man. The cause of death was a wound in his
abdomen, made from the penetration of a blade. His weapon lay at his side, stained with blood and tightly grasped in his hands.

“He’s an angel.” Alex tapped Castiel on the shoulder to emphasize her words. “Who is he? Do you recognize him?” She knelt down next to her mate, face twisted in confusion.

“Yes. His name is Oren.” The seraph rose back to his feet, his face fallen in despair. “He was one of mine.”

“Then what is he doing here?” A bell tinkled, announcing the arrival of newcomers, and Alex looked up in surprise as the seraph crossed the room to greet Sam and Dean.

“Thank you for coming.” Castiel gave Sam and Dean a warm nod as the two Winchester approached, and Alex pushed herself back to her feet, giving Sam a quick smile of greeting in the process.

“Spears and Aguilera?” Sam’s eyebrows lifted in a mixture of disgust and amusement, and Alex snickered at the names.

Castiel nodded, unaware of the Winchester’s disapproval. “I’ve noticed your aliases are usually the name of popular musicians.” He looked over at Alex as he added, “She suggested that they were the best fit.”

“I found it quite fitting,” Alex agreed, and her grin grew at Dean’s dry, “Wow.”

“Come here. Take a look at this.” Castiel led the way towards the back of the parlor where one of the bodies lay on a gurney. The EMTs stepped back as Castiel pulled back the sheet to show off the burned eye sockets. “Look. And the other bodies are the same — burned-out husks.”

He put the sheet back and stepped away so the men could finish their work. “Okay, so, what is this, some sort of mass smiting?” Dean looked around at the remaining bodies with a deep frown, but Castiel shook his head.

“I don’t know what this was,” he admitted. “I’ve never seen anything like this. Six humans died here … and one angel.”

“One of yours?”

Cas nodded. “He was a good soldier. This attack … I knew he wanted a war, but this … this is abhorrent, even for him.” He turned to look down at Alex. “I don’t know what he was doing here. This wasn’t his post.”

“Agent Stills.” One of the officers approached, carrying a cardboard box. “Sheriff King said I was to give you this. This is all evidence collected — your laboratories should be more suited for … this.” The man’s gaze swept across the room, puzzlement across his face, and Castiel accepted the box from him.

“Yes, thank you. I’ll have my men work on it immediately,” he promised, and he turned back to the hunter as the officer walked away. “If there’s nothing more to be done here,” he decided, “then I should be returning to my camp. Perhaps someone there will have information about this.”

“You two are welcome to join us,” Alex added to the Winchesters. “I’m sure Ash is looking forward to hanging out with his two favorite humans.” She ended with a playful wink, but it faded when she met Dean’s dark gaze; how long had it been since his eyes had held their warmth towards her? Was it all because of the Mark? The tap of Castiel’s hand upon her shoulder had her turning away, and
she followed him out of the parlor. Her hair prickled on the back of her neck, and she suppressed a shiver as Dean’s gaze followed her until she was out of sight.

**The Winchesters took her up on her advice, for the Impala pulled up alongside Castiel’s Continental just as Alex was getting out of the car. “Hey.” Alex gave the both of them a small wave as she and Castiel paused beside the door. “Glad you made it.”**

“Well, we’re a part of this now,” Dean agreed. “May as well see it through to the end.”

Castiel nodded his thankfulness and led the way into the building. Alex walked at his side, pushing her way through the double doors of the bustling command center, and her eyes scanned the room for the sign of her fledgling. “Commander.” Hannah stood beside Castiel’s office door, and the four approached.

Dean muttered something under his breath to his brother, but Alex didn’t catch his dry words. The angel, however, must have, for her gaze turned onto the hunters in surprise and wariness. “Sam, Dean,” Castiel introduced, “this is Hannah.”

“The Winchesters.” Hannah dipped her head in greeting. “I’ve heard so much about you.” The office door swung open as Ashiel pushed his way through, and Hannah reached down to stop him, but the fledgling evaded her grasp, waving a small plastic truck in his hands.

“What can I say?” Dean looked down at the child that had stopped in front of him, head tipped back as he stared up at the tall man. “Cas is a fan.”

An angel approached, dressed in dress slacks and a red shirt, and Alex scooped Ashiel up into his arms as the fledgling’s attention turned onto him. “I’ll start examining the evidence,” the angel — Deriah, if Alex remembers correctly — said, and Castiel handed him the cardboard box from the crime scene.

Dean started to ask a question, but Hannah spoke over him, drawing Castiel’s focus onto her. “Sir, this morning, Josiah wasn’t at roll call.”

“Uh, roll call?” Sam looked over at Castiel in surprise. “You hold, uh, roll call?”

Castiel’s gaze flitted onto the floor. “They … like to hear me say their names,” he admitted, and Alex snorted in amusement at how true his statement was.

“I know a couple women like that.”

Hannah ignored Dean’s snide joke. “No one’s seen Josiah since Ezra was murdered,” she explained. “We think that —”

“You think Josiah’s the killer, that he is the mole?” Sam finished her statement, and the angel gave a small nod.

“Well, who else?” Her attention turned back to Castiel as she finished her report. “We searched the grounds, but he’s vanished.”

“Not without wings.” Dean gave a firm shake of his head. “He’s an angel, but he’s still got to travel like he’s human, which means walking or driving — which means he’s going to leave a trail.”

Sam nodded, and he sat down at one of the room’s computers. Ashiel pointed towards the ground,
and when Alex set him down, he hurried over to climb into Sam’s lap, who reluctantly let him settle down on his thighs. “Alright. What was his vessel’s name?” he asked Castiel.

“Sean Flynn from Omaha.”

Sam typed something on the keyboard, and one hand came up to hold the fledgling against his chest, keeping the child’s small and curious hands from reaching the keys. Ashiel whined in protest, but Sam was firm. After a second, he turned the monitor around so they could see the license record. “This the guy?”

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“Alright.” Sam turned the screen back towards him as he clicked through several tabs. “Looks like someone just used his credit card at a Gas-n-Sip in Colorado.”

Dean grinned smugly as he looked over at Cas. “And that’s how we do things in the pros.”

Alex opened her mouth to respond, but before she could, the angel Deriah turned back to call for Castiel’s attention. “Commander. I have something. This phone’s memory chip has a video time-stamped just before the explosion.” He clicked a button, and a video window appeared on the screen.

Alex stepped closer to see, and she heard the chair behind her creak as Sam rose to his feet. On the screen was the man — the angel that Castiel had identified from the parlor. “And now the moment you’ve all been waiting for,” he announced, and Alex narrowed her eyes — what was he talking about?

She heard a bystander voice her confusion, but it was drowned out by the cry of a little girl. “No!” the child yelled, but the angel didn’t listen.

He ripped open his jacket to reveal his bare chest. Into the flesh was carved a sigil, clearly Enochian, and Alex leaned closer as she tried to make out its meaning. It was made clear, however, when the angel lifted an angel blade and poised it over his heart. “I do this for Castiel!” he cried, and the weapon was plunged deep into his chest.

The video exploded into white light before it fell into static, and Alex felt her jaw fall open. The room was silent; even Ashiel had fallen quiet. It was Dean who was the first to speak up, breaking the silence with a sharp, pointed question. “What the hell was that?”

“I don’t know.” Castiel was still staring at the screen, his face blank and unreadable. Suddenly he turned to face the Winchester’s, anger rising in his eyes. “I didn’t — I would never ask an angel to sacrifice himself to kill innocents.” He turned back to the screen as his voice quavered. “I’m going to be sick.”

Dean’s eyes flashed, but it was Sam who spoke. “Cas, why would an angel blow up a Colonel Scoop’s in your name?” he asked, shifting Ashiel to his other hip.

Hannah shook her head. “That’s not what he’s doing. Roll it back,” she instructed Deriah, and the angel did so. “There.” Hannah pointed to the young girl that sat alone in the booth. “That was an angel — Esther. She’s one of Metatron’s.”

Sam frowned. “So, this was some kind of hit?”

“I don’t know.”

“Stop saying you don’t know,” Dean snapped, and Castiel’s eyes narrowed hurtfully at the
Winchester’s harsh words.

“You can’t think I would allow something like this,” he insisted.

"Cas, I know you try to be the good guy, okay? I do. You try." Dean's gaze turned over the entire room of angels, who all stood watching. "But what you got here, this is a fucking cult."

"Dean."

"And the last time you had this kind of juice, you did kill humans and angels, and you did nothing but lie to me and Sam about it the whole damn time!"

"Dean!" Alex stepped forward, pushing herself between the two. "This isn't the place for that!" Her gaze flickered to Castiel's empty office, and she pressed her lips together tightly. "Let's — let's just take it inside and talk about this, okay?"

Sam nudged his brother into the office, and Alex followed, taking Ashiel from the Winchester's arms as Castiel closed the door behind them. "Will you stow the baggage, Dean?" Sam snapped as he stepped away from Alex and the fledgling. "Look, we've got a case. Let's work it." He turned back to Castiel. "Cas, did you know the angel in that video?"

The angel gave a curt nod. "Yes. His name was Oren. He was a new recruit. He worked in community outreach."

Dean scoffed loudly. "And what does that mean?"

"Some of my troops are stationed at the local hospital." Castiel turned his gaze onto Dean, eyes narrowed at the sharpness in the Winchester's tone. He turned back to Sam, and his face softened as he expounded. "They help where they can. Minor miracles — it's nothing that would attract attention."

"So what was he doing in the video, with the stabbing?"

"The Enochian runes that were carved into his chest — I ... I think they were meant to focus energy." Castiel's eyes narrowed once again as he thought, his gaze dropping onto the ground. "When he stabbed himself, it unleashed all of that power."

"So what about the girl?" Dean snapped, crossing his arms as he leaned up against the desk. "What happened to her?"

"If she was the target, if that blast was focused on her, then more likely than not, she — she was atomized." Castiel lifted his eyes onto Sam. "So, what do we do now?"

"Well, you don't do jack." Dean straightened up, his face dark with anger. "Me and Sam will head to the hospital, see if we can find somebody who knew this ... walking nuke."

He took a step forward, but Castiel was there to stop him. "Hold on. These are my people. I can help."

"Well, that's sort of the problem." The Winchester's green eyes blazed as he stared down at the seraph, but he managed to temper his tone. "I mean, the Manson girls aren't gonna give us a straight answer with Charlie in the room, so just hang back."

Castiel frowned, but he must have seen some sense in Dean's words, because he backed down. "So I should just sit here?"
"Pretty much?"

"No," Castiel firmly shook his head. "If you don't want my help, then I will follow Josiah's trail to Colorado. I have to do something, Dean." He looked over at Alex, and the young angel nodded in agreement.

"Alright, fine," Dean relented. "But Sam's coming with you."

Both Sam and Alex let out noises of surprise as they stared at Dean, and Castiel frowned deeply at his words. "Because you don't trust us?"

"To help." Dean pushed his way past Castiel and stalked out of the room, leaving Alex to watch him go with lifted eyebrows. She glanced over at Sam to find the same expression of surprise etched across his face.

"Well, that was dramatic." Alex reached up to tickle Ashiel's stomach, but the fledgling didn't crack a smile, eyes wide as he looked between the tense adults. "Isn't that right?" she teased, her voice light despite the frown that darkened her words. "Should, uh, one of us maybe stay here?"

Sam shook his head. "Dean wouldn't let us stay. The angels will be able to keep an eye on him." He looked over at Castiel, and the seraph nodded curtly in agreement. "Let's find Josiah. With the three of us, we should hopefully be able to wrap this up in less than a day."

"Okay." Alex gently extracted the hood of her sweatshirt from Ashiel's small hands. "Let's go get your truck and find Hannah, okay? I'd love to take you with, but you'd hate a long car ride."

"Mama, no." Ashiel pouted. "You gotta … you gotta stay." He looked over at Castiel, and Alex reached up to smooth down his black shirt.

"I'll be back soon," she promised. "You know how Mommy sometimes has to leave for work. But I always come back, don't I? Don't I?" She poked him in the stomach, and Ashiel nodded. "Good boy." She nodded over to Sam and Cas as she made her way towards the door. "We'll meet you guys out by the car."

"So." The old golden Lincoln turned the corner, and Castiel looked over at Sam, clearing his throat as he broke the silence. "Abaddon is dead."

“And then some,” Sam darkly agreed as he stared out the window, and Alex leaned over the back of his seat, mimicking his frown. Castiel's soft, "oh no," however, had him turning to glance at the seraph. “Okay … um, ominous."

“Does Dean seem different to you?"

“Yeah.” Sam looked back at Alex, and the young hunter nodded out her agreement. “Lately, he seems to be … amped up — you know, on edge.”

“Effect of the Mark?” Castiel guessed.

“What else?"

“He does seem angry,” the seraph agreed. “I mean, he’s always a little angry, but now it seems like … more.” Castiel paused before he slowly added, “I think a part of him actually believed that I ordered those angels to, you know …” His eyes turned from the road to meet the Winchester’s gaze.
“Sam, you don’t, do you?”

“No, man.” Sam quickly shook his head before he sighed. “Cas, listen. You got a weird thing going back there. Those other angels, the way they stare at you, it — it’s like you’re part rock star, part L. Ron.”

“They’ve put their faith in me.”

“And maybe that’s the problem,” Sam agreed. “I mean, people have been doing messed up crap in the name of faith — in the name of God — since forever.”

“Well … I’m not trying to … play God.” Castiel’s attention turned back to the road in front of him, his voice slow as he chose his words carefully. “I’m just trying to get my people home.” He fell silent, and Alex leaned back in her seat with a sigh. “Where do you think Josiah went?” the seraph asked after a minute, and Alex threw her legs up onto the seat as she stretched out.

“Well, it definitely seems that he’s working for Metatron.” Alex watched as Castiel guided the Lincoln off of the highway and into the parking lot of a Gas N’ Sip. “What’s up? Out of gas already?”

“We’re here.” Castiel killed the engine and threw open his door, and Alex followed him and Sam out into the night air.

“Okay, uh, just let me do the talking.” Sam gently touched Castiel on the shoulder as he passed him, and the seraph fell back with a reluctant nod. He opened the door, pausing, and Alex slipped past him and into the small station.

The smell of hotdogs filled the air, and the young hunter tipped her head back as she drew in a deep breath. “Sam.” She reached out to touch the Winchester on the back, and Sam turned his head. “We should grab some snacks while we’re here. I haven’t eaten since Kansas.”

She waited until he nodded before she moved off on her own, leaving Sam and Castiel to question the scrawny man behind the counter. “Excuse me,” she heard Sam begin. “Uh, my name is Sheriff Coulson. Do you have a minute? We’re looking for this man.” Paper rustled as Sam pulled Josiah’s picture out of his back pocket. “His name is Sean Flynn — his credit card records indicate that he was here yesterday.”

“Mm, yeah, I saw him, officer.” The man behind the counter set down his newspaper, and Alex pulled a bag of beef jerky off of the shelf. “He filled up some old, uh woody station wagon.”

“Don’t suppose you, uh, got a license plate number?”

“No.” Alex peered over the shelves to see the man shaking his head. “But he was headed to an address in Pray, Montana.”

“How do you know that?” Castiel’s head tipped to one side as he stared at the man.

The employee gave a small shrug. “Guy asked for directions. Uh, you want me to write that down?” he added when Sam’s eyebrows lifted in surprise. “

“Yes. Now. Please.” Sam cleared his throat, shifting his weight to his other foot as the man drew a pad of paper out of his drawer. Alex grabbed an energy drink out of the back wall of refrigerators and crossed over to the two of them just as the employee was tearing out the address.

“Ready to go?” she asked, dropping her items onto the counter. “Or is there anything else you want?
Hi,” she added to the man. “Officer Cane, nice to meet you.” Her introduction done, she turned back to Sam and Cas.

The man rang up their purchase, and Alex picked up the bag as she followed Sam and Castiel out to the car. “That went smoothly.” She dropped down on her seat and dug loudly through the plastic bag for her snacks. “How far away are we?”

“Only two hours.” Sam typed the address into his phone as Cas started the car, and Alex reached for her seatbelt. “We should be there a little after midnight.”

“Sweet.” Alex ripped open the package of cured meat, and she dropped a strip into Sam’s awaiting hand. “Okay, let’s get going. The sooner we find Josiah, the sooner I can have an actual hot meal. Angels don’t eat,” she reminded Sam as the Lincoln Continental moved off towards the highway. “I’ve been living off of Ramen and potato chips.”

Sam chuckled before his voice grew quiet. “They, uh, don’t seem really happy to have you around,” he began. “What’s up with that?”

Alex shrugged, casting a quick look at Castiel as she chose her next words carefully. “They don’t mind me,” she began. “But I’m a human with a hell-marked soul, so I’m not exactly the crowd they like to socialize with. And I guess there’s some rumors about Lucifer.” She fell silent when Castiel’s fingers tightened around the steering wheel. She put a hand on his shoulder and added, “It’s, uh, all bullshit of course, but I put up with it. Like Cas said; the important thing is that we get them home.”

Pray, Montana

The Continental came to a stop outside a darkened warehouse, and the engine died. Alex’s fingers closed around the door handle, and she stepped out into the night air as Sam pointed to the wooden station wagon that was parked off in front of them. “That looks like the car the guy at the gas station was talking about, right?” the Winchester asked. “Maybe Josiah’s still around.”

Sam followed Alex out of the car, but Castiel hesitated. “Sam,” he started, and Alex paused, glancing back to see the seraph staring at the empty building. “This place is … radiating power. I haven’t felt anything like this since … since heaven.” His gaze turned onto Alex, and the young hunter nodded. “We have to get in there.”

“Alright.” Sam dug his lock picks out of his pocket and crossed over to the heavy metal door, and Alex followed close at his heels, casting a wary look up at the looming building. She heard the metal clink around in the lock, and with a click, the lock sprang open. The door creaked as Sam threw his shoulder against it, but the hinges didn’t give. The Winchester tried again, throwing his weight against it, but the door remained fast.

“Step aside. I got this.” Castiel stepped forward, and Sam moved back, letting the seraph past. Castiel threw himself against the door, and Alex winced at the loud thud that rang through the air. The door didn’t budge, and Castiel jiggled the handle twice before he turned back to Sam and Alex. “I don’t got this.”

“Great.” Sam looked around with a frown. “Well, we should probably see if there’s another way in. Alex?”

“Yeah. I’ll go left, you take right.” Alex twisted her angel blade in her hand before she slipped off into the darkness. The metal was cold in her hands, and she prodded down at the tattered rags that
was the remains of Gabriel’s grace, but it refused to move. The young hunter pulled back and left it alone; it wouldn’t survive much longer in the state it was in.

The sky was dark, and, without a flashlight, it was difficult to see, but the girl moved slowly, diligently checking every inch of the brick structure. But every steel door she found refused to budge, and the windows were shut tight.

She found Sam on the other side, a frown on his face, and her shoulders fell. “Let me guess,” she began, and the Winchester’s flashlight turned onto her in surprise. “Nothing. Where’s Cas?”

Alex looked around, surprised to find that the seraph wasn’t nearby. “I thought he went with you.”

“I thought he went with you.” Sam’s gaze swept the darkened alley. “He must have stayed behind by the door.” With one last look behind him, Sam started back around the building. Alex followed, tucking her weapon into the back of her jeans. “We checked all the windows and doors,” Sam called as they rounded the corner, and Alex stepped around him to see Castiel standing in front of the door, head tilted. “No luck. What about you? You find anything?”

“I think so.” Castiel lifted his hand, and the bricks began to glow as blue writing emerged. The letters were Enochian, complex and ancient, and Alex wracked her mind for a translation, but without her grace, nothing came. “It’s Enochian,” the seraph explained to Sam, confirming Alex’s suspicions. “I believe it’s some sort of a riddle. ‘Why is six afraid of seven?’” His head tipped even further, and his eyes narrowed in thought. “Now, I assume it’s because seven is a prime number, and prime numbers can be intimidating.”

Sam’s eyebrows lifted, amused, and Alex grinned through the darkness as she let out a soft laugh. “I like that answer better,” she teased before adding, “It’s because seven eight nine, Cas.”

The door groaned loudly as it swung open, and Alex looked over at it in surprise. “It’s wordplay.” Castiel nodded to show that he understood the riddle. “And the answer is the key, like the doors of Durin in Lord of the Rings.”

“Like the what in who now?” Alex’s attention immediately turned back to Cas, her surprise intensifying. “Wait, since when do you know anything about Lord of the Rings?”

The seraph shrugged. “I’m very pop-culture savvy now.”

“Right.” Alex frowned, but she gave a reluctant nod as she remembered. “Metatron.” The girl spat the name, and her eyes narrowed, but the ringing of Sam’s phone prevented her from speaking her mind.

Sam jumped to answer it. “Hey,” he started, and when Alex caught his eye, he mouthed the word Dean. He paused to listen to his brother’s question before he shrugged. “He’s, uh … he’s Cas. What about you? How’s it going?”

Alex stepped up to Castiel’s side, leaving Sam to speak to his brother in peace. “What do you think’s in there?” she began, jerking a thumb over her shoulder towards the door. She cast a glance back as well toward the dark, gaping hallway, and a shiver passed down her spine at the thought of the horrors that could be lying in wait. She heard Sam’s surprised, “Tessa?” but she ignored it, the name meaning nothing.

Castiel’s eyes were narrowed as he studied the building, and it took him several seconds before he answered. “I don’t know. I don’t like the feel of this place. It feels … dark. Evil. Something bad has happened here.”
“Yeah. You’re telling me.” Alex frowned, displeased to find her fears echoed in the seraph in front of her, and she reached back to draw her weapon as Sam hung up. “Anything important? How’s Dean?”

Sam’s lips were set in a thin line. “You’re working with Tessa?” he asked Castiel, and Alex’s head swiveled as she looked between the two men.

“Yes.” Castiel’s head tilted as he studied Sam. “She never mentioned you. How do you know her?”

“She tried to reap Dean. A long time ago,” the Winchester quickly added when Alex’s gaze snapped onto him. “Long before you. Uh, Dean picked her up,” he explained to Castiel. “Whatever idea got into Oren’s head got to her, too. She had the same sigil carved into her chest and was about to go into a concert. Constantine is AWOL, by the way. Maybe we should go back.”

“No.” Castiel’s eyes narrowed. “That’s not possible — they can’t be …” He trailed off, his jaw setting in anger and determination. “I didn’t tell them to do this.”

“No, I — I believe you. Trust me, I do.” Sam shoved his phone back into his pocket and flicked his flashlight on. “Come on. Let’s go see what’s inside.” He led the way in through the doorway, and Alex and Castiel followed.

Alex twisted her angel blade in her hand as she walked on Sam’s left, eyes stretched wide to let in as much light as possible as she tried to take in her surroundings. The hallways were concrete, winding without end. “You sure you don’t want to go back, Cas?” Sam began as they rounded another corner. “Look, if Dean is right about Tessa …”

Castiel firmly shook his head. “No, I, uh … I do.” He cleared his throat before he stepped past the Winchester and continued down the hall. “I just … give me a second.”

Sam’s flashlight disappeared from the ground ahead of her feet, and Alex pulled up short. “Hey!” she started, and her grip tightened on her weapon as she turned to face the brother. The light was focused on scrawlings on the cement, and Alex read the words aloud. “Only the penitent man shall pass?”

“Cas, wait!” Sam’s warning rang out before Alex could piece it together, and she flinched loudly at the sound of grating metal. She jumped out of the way, back colliding with Sam as she spun to face the two spinning saw blades that exploded out of the wall. Castiel was on the ground below them, crouched as he stared up with wide eyes, and after a second the blades disappeared back into the wall just as quickly as they had appeared. “The Last Crusade.”

“Lord of the Rings, Indiana Jones?” Alex struggled to keep her voice calm as the seraph slowly rose to his feet. “What the hell is going on here?” She cautiously stepped forward, testing the ground before she hurried after Castiel. Sam followed at her heels, and Alex twisted her weapon in her hands as she fell in step beside her mate. They turned the corner, and Alex almost bumped into Cas as he stopped short. “The hell?”

She cut off at the sight of the doorway. It stood at the end of the hall, glowing with a bright, heavenly light, and Alex felt her jaw drop slightly at the sight. “Sam. We found it.”

“What?” Sam’s eyebrows lifted in confusion and surprise.

Castiel looked over at Sam, and his head tipped. “It’s the door to heaven.”

“Seriously?”
“What else would Metatron go to such great lengths to protect?” Castiel turned back and started down the hall, his strides long and rushed. “I can hear it. It’s calling to me, Sam. If we control this door, we can take the fight to Metatron.” He paused at the door, eyes trained on its window from which the white light emanated. “We may not even need to fight at all.”

He stepped forward, but Sam stretched out a hand. “Cas, wait.”

It was too late. The seraph threw open the door and stepped inside, and Alex had no choice but to run after him. She slid to a stop inside the room, weapon poised, but there was nothing.

The room was concrete, floor to ceiling. There were two tables, draped in red table cloths and stocked with food and drink. Pillar of white and gold balloons filled the air, and Alex screwed up her eyes at the spinning colors from a nearby disco ball. “The fuck?”

Sam mimicked her own as he stepped past them and approached the nearest table. A card stood there, propped open beside a bowl of punch, and the Winchester read the note aloud. “‘Welcome to your own personal heaven, Castiel. Good luck finding the real one.’”

He set the card back down with a scowl, and Castiel’s brow furrowed. “But … why?”

Sam turned, mouth open to respond, but no words came. His eyes locked on something in the corner, widening in surprise, and Alex started at his reaction. Her gaze snapped onto the corpse, and her mouth went dry. The clothing was torn, revealing skin mottled between char and raw flesh. Castiel crossed the room, and Alex followed close behind, weapon poised as she cast a look around, searching for the source of the man’s injuries. “It’s Josiah.” Castiel crouched down in front of the body. “He reeks of holy oil.”

“Yeah.” Sam motioned up towards the door through which they had entered, and Alex followed his gaze to the empty bucket that hunt there, poised beside a flame thrower. “Looks like he got Home Alone-ed.”

“Christ,” Alex cursed, and Castiel shook his head. “So all of this — it was a lie.” Anger deepened his voice, and he scowled, but before he could say anything else, Josiah jerked awake.

Alex jumped back in alarm, and Castiel looked up sharply as angel’s hand closed around his wrist. “Supposed to be here …” Josiah’s voice was rough and cracked, barely audible, and Alex knelt down beside her mate so she could hear the angel’s pained words. “Gate … he told me …” The angel’s voice grew stronger as he tightened his grip on Castiel. “After Ezra, he told me that I should come to him.” Josiah’s lower lip quivered slightly, agonized at his smoldering flesh, but his voice didn’t fail him. “Metatron told me that I could go home. I just wanted to go home.”

“Here.” Castiel reached out with his free hand, two fingers extended as they moved to rest on Josiah’s head. “Let me —”

“No!” The force behind the angel’s voice had Castiel’s hand falling back to his side. “I would rather die than owe my life to you, Castiel. You play at being noble. You play at being one of us. But I look into your eyes … and I don’t see an angel staring back at me.”

Castiel faltered, and anger pulsed through Alex’s veins. She leaned forward, one hand planted on the wall beside the angel’s head as she threw her weight forward, driving the angel blade into Josiah’s chest. “Don’t talk to him like that,” she murmured, lips up against his ear as the angel died. His face lit up as his grace burned away, and Alex flinched away from the heat, but she didn’t pull away completely.
Sam’s hands around her shoulders were what finally tugged her away. “What the hell?” he snapped, but the vexation in his voice seemed fake, forced as if his heart wasn’t behind it.

Alex pushed herself to her feet and brushed off her hands on her jeans. “He didn’t know anything, and he didn’t want to be saved. I just put him out of his misery.” She wiped her blade off with a look of disgust before she slid it into the back of her pants. “Come on. We should get back to Missouri.”

“You just want to leave him here?” Castiel rose to his feet and turned away from the body, and Alex gave it a quick look as she shrugged. “He was an angel.”

“Yeah. A traitor. And that?” Alex motioned down to the corpse that lay at the seraph’s feet. “That is a human who got suckereded into being a vessel. And now both are dead, and there’s nothing left inside but a hunk of grilled meat.”

Castiel’s lips turned downwards into a deep frown at her words, but before he could response his phone rang, and he reluctantly excused himself from the conversation. Alex watched him cross the room, and with a shake of her head, she glanced up at Sam. The Winchester’s face was unreadable, and Alex kicked angrily at a stone on the ground. “What?” she muttered up at him. “He was going to die anyways.”

“Sam.” Castiel’s voice rang through the air, and both hunters looked up at the urgency in his voice. “We need to get back to Missouri now.”

“What? What about Josiah —”

“It’s Dean.” Castiel crossed over to the door in two strides. “He killed Tessa with the First Blade. My men have him subdued and restrained for now, but …” The seraph shook his head, anger in his eyes, and Alex broke into a run after him.

“Fuck.” The curse left Sam’s mouth as he hurried after them. “I told him to leave it — he promised that he left that thing behind.” He ran out of the building, and Alex pushed herself faster to follow as the Winchester threw open the car door and got inside. “Did they say — did they say why he did it?”

“No.” Castiel got in beside the Winchester, and the car started as he slid the key into the ignition. “He hasn’t said a word to them. They’re waiting until we get back.” Headlights flickered on, and the Continental tore away from the warehouse and back towards the highway.

The doors to the Municipal Power building flew open, and Alex followed Castiel into the command center, eyes blazing. “Where’s Dean?” The seraph’s voice rang out through the room, and all eyes turned onto them.

“Commander.” Hannah stepped out from the office, and five strides carried the seraph across the room. “It’s about time you got back.” Her sharp gaze flitted over to Sam and Alex, and Alex narrowed her eyes. “Follow me.”

She led the way down the hall, and Alex followed, sticking to Castiel’s side as she threw a glance back over her shoulder at the rest of the angels; they sat there, silent, their faces dark. “What happened?”

Hannah didn’t look back to answer Castiel’s question, but she picked up her pace as they turned down the hall. “Dean Winchester killed Tessa.” Her voice was sharp with anger, and Alex frowned. “We’ve confiscated the First Blade; it’s in your office.” She opened a door, and Sam rushed through, Castiel at his heels. Alex followed more slowly, circling around to stand at Castiel’s side as Hannah
added, “He put up a fight.”

“Get out.” Castiel’s voice dropped low in authority, and the door creaked as Hannah left.

The moment it closed behind her, Sam was at his brother’s side, ripping off the duct tape that covered his mouth. “Ah!” The Winchester let out a noise of alarm at the sudden pain, and he tugged angrily at the handcuffs that bound him to a metal chair. He shot a glare towards the closed door before his attention turned back to his brother. “You should have seen the other ten guys.”

His voice was light, and Alex felt Castiel bristle beside her. “They said you killed Tessa?”

Dean scoffed angrily, and Sam turned his attention to the handcuffs. “Not so much,” he retorted. “She knifed herself. I was just holding the blade.”

“Yeah?” The handcuffs fell away, and Sam stood back up, his voice flat with disbelief. “Why would she do that, Dean?”

“I don’t know, Sam.” Dean’s hands went out in a gesture of confused innocence as he steadily held his brother’s gaze. “She was saying all kinds of crap.” He rubbed his sore wrists with a scowl as he pushed himself to his feet, turning his hands over as he searched of any sign of abrasion.

“So that’s why you brought out the First Blade?” Sam’s words had Dean’s hands dropping back to his side, and the younger Winchester crossed his arms.

Dean frowned, shooting another low glare towards the metal door where Hannah had disappeared from. “They told you about that, huh?”

“We had a deal!”

“Yeah, well it was a stupid deal.”

“Really?” Sam’s voice grew sharp, and Dean rolled his eyes “Cause if you’d stuck to it, Tessa would still be alive. Without her, we ain’t got jack.”

“Yeah, you think I don’t know that?” Dean’s tone dropped, grating and angry, his green eyes flashing as he leaned up to stare into his brother’s eyes. “You think I wanted that to happen?”

“I don’t know, Dean. Did you?”

“All right, that’s enough.” Castiel stepped forward, breaking into the brother’s fight, and Dean stepped back, fists curled at his side. “Stop it.”

Sam dropped his gaze to the floor, and Alex let out a slow breath as the tension began to dissipate. Before she could speak up, however, the door opened, and Hannah stepped inside. “Commander, I’m sorry,” she began, and Castiel’s shoulders rolled back as he turned to face her, “but you have a call … from Metatron.”

“Fucking great.” Alex pushed her way past Hannah, and Castiel followed. “What does he want?”

No answer came to her question, and Alex shoved her hands into her pockets as she shot a look back towards the angel. “Hannah. Did he say what he wanted?”

Hannah looked over at Castiel, and the seraph nodded. “He didn’t say.” Hannah lengthened her stride to pass Alex and take the lead. “But he said that it was important.” She turned the corner, and the hall opened up into the command center. Alex slowed, letting Castiel catch up before she entered, eyes flickering around until it landed on the computer screen with that old, familiar face.
“Castiel.” The angel’s lips were pulled into a sour frown, and his gaze flickered across their faces. “Bet you’re not happy to see me.” He leaned back in his arm chair, elbows propped up against the desk, and Alex tilted her head, confused as to what had put the angel into such a dark mood.

“Is anyone ever?”

Metatron shook his head, exasperated at the Winchester’s quip. “Dean, always with the B-grade 80’s action movie wit.”

“Mama.” A small hand tugged at the corner of Alex’s jacket, and the young hunter reached down to pull Ashiel up into his arms. She placed him on his hip, and the fledgling pointed towards the video call. “Mama, who —”

Alex cut him off with a soft, “shhh,” but not before his presence was noticed by Metatron. “Is that a fledgling?” Something sparkled in his eyes, and Alex shifted Ashiel to her other hip so he was partially hidden by Castiel. “I didn’t know any had survived.”

“And whose fault is that?” Alex’s eyes flashed with rage as she stepped forward. “How many would still be alive? Azrael, Ezekiel —” Her voice quavered, and Castiel put a hand on her shoulder to pull her back to his side.

“What do you want, Metatron?” Sam drew the angel’s attention onto him, and Alex grit her teeth together as she tried to quell her anger.

Metatron scoffed, his head turning to stare back at Castiel. “Just to tell Ass-tiel there that I’m still alive. His bomber failed.” His voice rose so all could hear, and Alex bristled as the gazes of all the angels turned onto her and her mate.

“My bomber?” Castiel blinked in surprise, and his head tipped to one side.

“The crazy guy. Big knife. Kablooey. I’m fine, thanks for asking, but Gadreel is wounded, and Tyrus … R.I.P. His followers are not your biggest fans, by the way. They’ve all come over to my team.”

“What?” Alex looked up into Castiel’s face. “Who’s Tyrus?”

“He was the leader of the biggest independent faction of angels other than mine and Metatron’s.” The seraph’s voice was low, only loud enough for her and the Winchesters to hear, and when Alex nodded in understanding, he turned back to the screen. “I didn’t send anyone to kill you.”

“Oh, stop lying, Castiel.”

“Who are you to lecture me on lying?” The seraph’s voice rose, and Alex felt his grace crackle through the air. “Your deception led to the fall.”

Metatron’s eyebrows turned upwards, and Alex huffed at the faux-innocence on his face. “I did what I had to do,” he insisted. “I have always done what I have to do, for God and for the angels.”

“Sure.” Dean scoffed loudly. “Yeah, you’re Mother Teresa with a neck beard.”

The angel ignored Dean’s cold retort. “What I did was neither good nor bad,” he insisted, voice lifted so all of the angels in the command center could hear. “It was necessary — a small hardship to make us all stronger, to make us a family again.”

“Yeah, right.” Alex rolled her eyes, and she looked around the room, surprised to find that the angels
were exchanging hesitant looks. “A family? What about the angels that died when you threw them out of their home? What about the angels you had Gadreel kill? You slaughtered them after you promised them heaven. What about them?” She set Ashiel down as she stepped forward towards the screen, and the fledgling whimpered slightly as he ran to Castiel. The seraph picked him up, pressing him tightly against his coat to hide his face from Metatron.

Metatron’s hands went up defensively, and Castiel reached out to touch her shoulder. “Okay, yes,” the scibe began. “Maybe I got a little carried away at first, but those days are over. A near-death experience makes you re-evaluate,” he insisted when Alex scoffed angrily. “So, one time only, I’m offering amnesty. Every angel, no matter what their sin, may join me and return to heaven. I will be their God, and they may be my heavenly host.”

“Why would anyone do that?” Castiel’s hand tightened on Alex’s shoulder, and she shrugged him off. “You, God? I’d rather follow —”

“Who? Lucifer? I think we all already knew that.” Metatron’s words had Alex falling silent, and she felt heat rush to her cheeks. “Look around; you’ve seen earth.” The angel raised his voice so all could hear again. “You’ve had a taste of free will. I got to ask you — do you like it? I mean, the way you’ve flocked off to follow Castiel tells me you need to follow someone. It’s in your DNA.” Metatron paused, and Alex’s gaze flickered to the ground, unable to deny the truth in his words. “But Cas … he’s not what you think he is. He sends angels out to die.” Castiel opened his mouth to protest, but Metatron spoke first. “Have you told them about your stolen grace, Castiel? How it’s fading away, and when it burns out, so will you?”

Alex looked around at shock in the angels’ gazes, and Castiel’s gaze fell to the ground.

“So … no, then.” Triumph flickered across Metatron’s face, and he turned to address the faction. “I’m not the best, but I’m the best you’ve got. You want to stay with Castiel, fine, but he’s playing you, because at the end of the day, the only thing he cares about is his disloyal mate and the Hardy boys there. You’ve got a choice to make. Make the right one.”

The screen went black, and the eyes of all of the angels turned onto Castiel. The seraph hesitated, faced with the gazes of his faction. “He’s lying,” he finally insisted, and Alex stepped back to press her shoulder into his.

“About the grace?”

“I-it’s complicated.” Castiel turned to face Hannah as he stammered out his reply, and Alex quickly jumped to his rescue.

“That part — that part’s true. But everything else was a lie. You — you guys can’t honestly believe that Metatron is the better option. Look at what he did! He, he’s worse than — than —“

“Than Lucifer.” Hannah’s voice was flat, and the corner of Alex’s lip turned up in a snarl to find the angel regurgitating Metatron’s argument. “And you would know about that. Wouldn’t you?”

“Maybe I would.” Alex stalked up to the brunette, grey eyes sparkling with a cold rage. “You don’t know what I’ve been through with him — when’s the last time you — any of you — have seen Lucifer? Or Metatron? How much do you remember? So maybe, yeah, I’d rather follow Lucifer than Metatron. And that should tell you just how bad that asshat really fucking is!”

“Alex, please.” Castiel’s gentle voice quelled the fire in her chest, and Alex stepped down, jaw squared tightly. “Who they follow is their choice. I can’t force them to stay loyal.”
Hannah’s gaze slid past Alex. “I want to believe you,” she admitted to Castiel, “but I … we need proof.”

The angels around them nodded in agreement, and Castiel set Ashiel down on the ground, holding the fledgling by the hand. “Name it.”

“Punish him.” Hannah’s finger came up to point at Dean, and the Winchester’s eyes widened in surprise. “He murdered Tessa. He broke our rules.”

Anger flashed in Dean’s eyes, and he let out a crude scoff. “Y’all can all go to hell.”

He turned, starting towards the exit, brushing past Castiel. “Dean,” the seraph started, but before Dean made it three feet, two angels were there to block his path. The Winchester tried to force his way through, but their hands gripped his jacket, spinning him around to face Castiel and holding him still despite his struggles.

“Wait a sec —” Sam stepped forward, but an angel pushed him back by the shoulder, keeping him subdued and away from his brother. Hands buried themselves in the hood of her sweatshirt and dragged her back, and Alex cried out in alarm as an angel pulled her back against a table.

Castiel’s gaze snapped over to her in surprise, and Hannah lifted her chin. “You gave us order, Castiel,” she insisted, and the seraph turned back to face her. “And we gave you our trust. Don’t lose it over one man.” An angel blade slid out of her sleeve, and she held it out. “This is justice.”

Castiel’s fingers closed around the handle of the blade, and Hannah dropped her arm back down to her side. Ashiel tugged himself free of the seraph’s hold and hurried over to her, and Hannah picked him up in her arms as Castiel turned to face Dean. The Winchester’s face was blank with shock as he stared at the seraph, and Alex watched as Castiel’s jaw twitched as indecision battled in his eyes. “You all are insane,” she hissed, cutting off as the angel behind her tugged sharply on her hood.

Castiel lifted his chin as he met Dean’s gaze before he looked away. “No. I can’t.” The weapon dropped down to his side.

Hannah’s shoulders dropped, and when she spoke again, her voice was soft. “Goodbye, Castiel.” She disappeared towards the door, and Alex’s struggling began anew.

“Hey!” She tore herself free from the angel’s hold and stumbled, feet catching on the leg of a chair. She hit the solid ground with a thud, and staggered back to her feet as the other angels began to file out after Hannah. “No, no, no! Ashiel!”

She tripped again, her haste driving her through another chair, and Castiel caught her in his arms. “Alex.” His voice was calm, devoid of emotion, and Alex pushed herself free from his grasp. “Let them go.”

“She’s taking him to Metatron!” Alex’s fists balled as she faced her mate, and she repressed the sudden urge to take a swing at him — how could he just stand there and let Ashiel leave? “You said it yourself — last time Metatron promised angels heaven he had them all killed! What if — what if Gadreel’s going to kill them?” Her eyes stung, and Alex’s bottom lip trembled before her struggling began anew.

Castiel stepped forward, blocking her path, and his voice dropped so only Alex could hear. “Gadreel wouldn’t kill a child,” he murmured. “Not even he is that cold-hearted. The angels will keep him safe for now.” A hand came up to rest on her cheek, and Alex leaned into the warmth. “We will stop Metatron, and we will get him back.”
“I know.” Alex drew in a shaky breath to regain her composure before she turned to face Sam and Dean. The entire building was empty, silent for the first time in weeks, and the ex-angel suppressed a shiver. “Well?” she snapped. “What are we standing around for? Let’s get out of here.” She shoved her hands in her pockets and made her way towards the exit, and Castiel joined her at her side. “This place gives me the creeps.”

Alex let the bunker door swing closed behind her, eyes falling closed as she breathed in the familiar scent of home. The stairs creaked beneath the Winchesters’ feet as they descended, but the young hunter remained where she was. A sense of pride and joy rushed through her as she looked down at the room below, warm and comforting, and her fingertips danced along the metal railing. After everything, it was good to see that this place still remained the same.

The feeling disappeared the next moment when Sam began to speak. “So, Dean, uh … are we gonna talk about this, or what?”

Alex groaned, the feelings lost, and she quietly made her way down after Castiel. The car ride had been completely silent — not a single word spoken — but she knew it wouldn’t be long before this confrontation began. “About what?” Dean dropped his duffle bag onto the table, and for a second, his gaze locked with Alex’s. She frowned, and Dean rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I lied, but you were being an infant.”

He turned to face his brother, and Sam’s eyes widened in surprise. “Wow. Even for you, that apology sucked.”

“Oh, I’m not apologizing. I’m telling you how it’s gonna be.”

“Dean,” Alex started, moving forward to stand by Sam as her gaze flickered over to Castiel. The seraph had made his way into the library, uninterested in their argument, and she crossed her arms. “That Blade —”

Dean cut her off roughly, and Alex grit her teeth. “That Blade’s the only thing that can kill Metatron, and I am the only one who can use it … so from here on out, I’m calling the shots. Capisce?” His eyes flashed, and Alex dropped her gaze. She brushed past the Winchester, intentionally bumping his shoulder on her way past as she made her way over to Castiel. The seraph was sitting at the table, and she dropped down into the chair next him. “Look,” Dean continued, his voice sharp with authority, “until I jam that Blade through that douchebag’s heart, we are not a team. This is a dictatorship. Now, you don’t have to like it, but that’s how it’s gonna be.”

Dean turned away, and Sam spun around and stalked off down the hallway. Alex listened to his angry footfalls fade away, muttering, “Nice one,” under her breath.

Dean ignored her. “So,” he began to Castiel, “batteries …”

“I’m fine,” he started, but Dean shook his head.

“No, you’re not.” He tossed his other bag into an empty chair before he dropped down across from Cas, leaning back slightly as he looked the seraph up and down. “How long you got?”

“Long enough to destroy Metatron, I hope.” Dean looked mildly unconvincing, and Castiel shook his head as searched for the right words. “But without an army …”

“Well, hey, you still got us.”
Castiel shifted in his chair, and after a second he leaned forward, his voice quiet and sorrowful. “Dean. Those bombers … you don’t really think that I—”

Dean shook his head. “Cas, you just gave up an entire army for one guy. No, there’s no way that you blew those people away.” His gaze flickered over to Alex, and the young hunter lifted her eyebrows, surprised by the calm reason in his words.

Castiel’s shoulders fell, relieved, and after a moment or two he just stared at the table, lost in thought. “You really believe we four will be enough?”

“We always have been.”

“Guys!” Sam’s sharp cry had Alex jumping up, knocking back her wooden chair as she scrambled to her feet. She pushed herself past Castiel and Dean, jumping down the library stairs to stand in front of Gadreel.

The angel stood in the center of the room, hands raised in a show of innocence as he looked between the four of them. “I’m not here to fight,” he began calmly, and Alex’s hands froze on the handle of her angel blade. The angel’s gaze turned onto Castiel, and when he spoke, his words addressed the seraph alone. “I thought about what you said. You’re right. Metatron, he’s … something needs to be done.”

“And should we trust you why?” Sam’s voice shook with anger, and Gadreel’s eyes narrowed slightly in an unreadable emotion for the briefest of seconds.

“Because I can give him to you,” he replied. “I know where Metatron is. I know everything. I know the bombers.” His eyes turned back to Castiel, and the seraph’s face darkened. “They were his agents, not yours.” He paused, looking around, and Alex glanced back to see the Winchesters exchanging hesitant looks. Castiel’s gaze was on the ground, lips pursed, and Alex’s shoulders dropped. Gadreel’s voice hardened with urgency. “You don’t trust me, fine. I understand. I’ve … made mistakes.” His gaze turned onto Sam, and his voice softened with regret. “But haven’t you? Haven’t we all? At least give me a chance.”

Alex looked back at Sam, her eyes pleading, but the Winchester’s only sign of assent was the slight upturning of his eyebrows. After a second, Dean stepped forward, and Alex shifted out of the way to let him through. The eldest hunter stopped in front of the angel, and as Alex watched, his left hand came out.

Relief flooded through Gadreel’s eyes, and he returned the gesture, locking hands with Dean in a firm handshake. Alex let out a tense breath, and she opened her mouth to make a promise, but the words died in her throat. Dean’s right hand, hidden behind his back, gripped the First Blade, and before Alex could react, it lashed out.

The Blade slashed through Gadreel’s chest, and the wound glowed with a white light as the angel was flung back at the sheer force. “Dean!” Alex launched herself forward, hands going out to wrestle away the weapon as the Winchester lunged for the angel again.

“Get out of my way!” An arm came out of nowhere, and a bony elbow rammed into her nose; the force sent Alex backwards with a cry. She tripped over Dean’s bag and fell, and her skull cracked as it collided with the corner of the table. Her body hit the floor, the wind knocked from her lungs, and the last thing Alex saw was Dean, struggling against Sam and Castiel’s grip with a roar or rage, before the darkness overtook her, and she spiraled into unconsciousness.
“Drop the blade, Dean!” Sam’s voice broke through the darkness, urgent and pleading. “Dean. Look at me!” There was a cry of alarm, and Alex groaned, trying to open her eyes, but her body was unresponsive, too shocked to move. “Let it go!” she heard the Winchester insisted. “Let it go! Let it go.”

The voices faded away, and the next thing she knew, her eyes were opening, but the brothers were nowhere in sight. Alex blinked twice, her vision swimming, and she curled her toes in her boots at the throbbing in her head. What had happened? She could taste blood, and the young hunter reluctantly flicked out her tongue to taste her lips. Definitely blood.

That was right. Dean’s elbow had knocked her out. Right after he had attacked Gadreel. Alex’s eyes fell closed as footsteps approached, her stomach roiling nauseously. “Are you okay?” The voice was Castiel’s, and Alex cracked open an eye to see that the seraph was kneeling in front of her, his face dark with concern.

Her mouth initially refused to form words, and the young angel could only groan. She struggled to sit up, grunting out her thanks as Castiel held her steady. “Where’s Dean?” Her head throbbed, protesting the change in position, and Alex gingerly touched the side of her head.

“Downstairs. We’ve confined him to the dungeon for the moment.” Concern still laced his voice, and after a moment’s pause, Castiel added, “Can I get you anything?”

“Uh, uh — yeah. There’s an icepack in the freezer.” Alex brushed off Castiel’s help as she pushed herself to her feet. “Where’s the First Blade?” Her gaze followed Cas’ on the ground, and she bent down to pick up the jaw bone as the seraph walked away. It was the first time she had held it, and the young angel ran her fingers down the length of the mylohyoid line, ending at the leather straps that enveloped the handle. “We should keep this far away from him.” Her fist closed around the handle, eyes closed as she tried to feel the power that lay within the bone, but there was nothing.

Footsteps approached, and Alex looked up as Castiel returned, ice pack in hand. “You should put that down.” The seraph held out the cold compress, and Alex pressed it up against her temple.

“Crowley wanted me to have the Mark, you know.” Alex twisted the Blade again, watching how the yellowed teeth caught in the light. “Cain insisted on giving it to Dean.”

“I’m glad he did.” Castiel’s hand covered hers, and Alex reluctantly relinquished her grasp on the weapon. “Look at what it’s done.” His touch lingered on the back of her hand for only a second longer before it pulled away, and the seraph placed the Blade down onto the table. His gaze flickered past hers before he added, “We’ll find Gadreel after I have a word with Dean.”

Gadreel. She had completely forgotten about the injured warrior. Alex’s head snapped back to where the angel had fallen, but he was nowhere in sight; only a pool of blood remained on the floor. “W-where’d he go?”

“I don’t know.” Castiel disappeared down the hall, and Alex followed, unsteady at first, but gaining her footing as she went. They circled past the living quarters and descended the stairs, and Alex hesitated as they stepped into the storage room. The door was closed, and Castiel knocked on the
metal shelves. “Sam. It’s us.”

The doors opened, and Alex stepped into the dungeon. Dean was standing there, arms folded across his chest as he glared at the three of them. “The hell if you think I’m riding the pine on this one, guys.”

“Something’s wrong with you, Dean.” Sam’s voice was sharp with exasperation, and Dean’s lips curled angrily. “And until we figure out what, this is where you have to stay.”

“And you two are gonna do what? Take on Metatron yourselves?” Dean scoffed loudly, and Alex shoved her hands into her pockets with a scowl. “That’s smart — oh, no, wait.” He nodded towards Castiel. “No, you — you lost your angel army. And you,” he added to Sam, “— now you’re trying to lock up the one guy who has a shot at killing the son of a bitch! Hell of a plan, fellas.”

Sam’s arm brushed hers as he exited the room, and Alex pressed the ice pack back up against her head as Castiel followed after the Winchester. “Thanks for the concussion,” she spat.

The doors closed behind her as she stepped out of the dungeon, and Dean’s voice was muffled by the thick metal. “Hey! Guys! I’m sorry, okay? Alex!”

Sam’s hand came to rest on her shoulder, and Alex met his sympathetic look before she sighed. “We should go find Gadreel. He couldn’t have gotten far, injured like that.” She led the way back up the stairs, and her hand fell back to her side, the quickly-warming ice pack held loosely in her grip.

“Sam.” Castiel’s soft voice came from behind them as they approached the library, and Alex chanced a look back. “Dean … wasn’t wrong. My followers have abandoned us.” Castiel picked up the First Blade off of the table and carried it over to a steel box.

Sam took it from the seraph and laid it inside, closing the lid and locking it tight. “Yeah,” he began as Alex made her way into the war room, “but Gadreel says he can help us. From where I sit, that’s more than an even trade.”

“That is, if we still find Gadreel before he either bleeds or goes back to Metatron.” Alex muttered out the dark thought as she followed the trail of blood across the floor and up the metal stairs. The bunker door was ajar, and the young hunter waved her companions after her as she stepped outside.

The dirt was dark with blood, and Alex broke into a run as she caught sight of a figure laying motionless in the tall grass ten yards from the bunker, feet carrying her across a ditch and to the Gadreel’s side. The angel jerked into consciousness at her loud and rushed appearance, and he weakly tried to scramble away, eyes wide as his free hand tried in vain to stem the blood flow, but the wound was too deep. “Please,” he begged as Sam and Castiel stopped beside her, looming over the fallen angel. “I’ll leave you alone, I swear.”

“We’re not going to hurt you.” Castiel crouched down beside Alex, one hand stretching out towards Gadreel, but the angel weakly knocked it away.

“No,” he insisted. “Your grace. Healing me will only weaken you.”

Alex nudged the seraph out of the way as she placed her hand Gadreel’s chest. Before the angel could protest again, she willed the last of Gabriel’s grace out from beneath her soul and into the wound. Gadreel’s eyes fell closed with a groan as his flesh was stitched back together. The last tendril of the archangel’s warm essence disappeared, and Alex slumped into the grass, a shudder passing through her body at the empty pit in her stomach. “Did you hear him?” she heard
Gadreel asked, and she let herself fall back into the grass beside the angel, grunting out her own confusion.

“Metatron,” Castiel explained to her before he turned back to Gadreel. “And yes. Where is he going? What does he want?”

“I’m afraid … humanity.” Gadreel sat up beside her, and Alex cracked open her eyes to look up into his solemn face. “You shouldn’t have used the last of your grace to save me. How is your head?”

“Hurts like a bitch.” Alex grimaced as she forced herself to sit up; with her grace gone, the full effect of her concussion was almost too much to bear.

“Let me help.” Gadreel reached out to place two fingers on her head. “It is the least that I can offer.”

His grace flowed inwards, warm yet weak, and the pressure in her head disappeared. “Thanks.” Alex reached up to feel her temple, but the pain was gone. “You — you didn’t have to, though. I figured, after you fixed my heart in Rexford, I should return the favor.”

“Of course,” she heard Castiel murmur, and she glanced over at him to find a newfound respect glowing in the seraph’s eyes. “It was you.” He helped Alex to her feet, and the young hunter felt a shiver run down her spine despite the warmth of the sun on her face.

“Where is Dean?” Wariness lined Gadreel’s words, and he looked around the empty field. “Perhaps if I can just reason with him …”

“No, it — it’s okay. We took care of Dean.” Sam started back across the field, and Alex followed him back to the bunker. She stepped carefully over the drying blood as she entered. “Oh, no.” Sam’s noise of dismay had her looking up in surprise as the Winchester hurried down the stairs and into the library.

She followed close at his heels, eyes going wide at the sight of the box on the library table. The lid was thrown back, revealing the emptiness inside. The First Blade was gone. “What’s that smell?”

Gadreel’s voice had Alex’s head tipping back, and she sniffed at the air.

“Sulfur.” Sam’s word came at the same time as Alex growled out, “Crowley.” The thought of the demon had anger rising in her chest before her eyes stretched wide. “Dean.” Alex took off down the hall and jumped down the stairs, Sam close at her heels. The storage door was closed, but the metal door to the dungeon was flung wide open. The light was on, and Alex slid to a stop outside of the room.

“The Impala is gone.” Castiel’s voice came from the doorway as Alex crossed into the dungeon, kneeling down beside the array of empty vials and bowls. A burnt match lay off to the side, and Alex picked up the metal bowl beside it and sniffed at the charred ashes inside. “Demon summoning spell.” The girl’s nose wrinkled at the pungent smell. “Son of a bitch.” Her gaze turned to the wall behind her where a red liquid pooled on the ground. “Sam.”

“Blood.” Sam knelt down beside her, concern darkening his face. “Great.” The Winchester pulled out his cell phone and hurried back out into the hallway, and Alex turned her head to listen to his footsteps retreat back up the stairs. She pushed herself back up to her feet, and Castiel’s hand reached out to rest on her shoulder to steady her before she brushed off his support.

“Where’s Gadreel?” She looked around for the angel, but he was nowhere in sight. “Did you leave him upstairs?”

“He doesn’t need supervision.” Castiel turned to go after Sam, and Alex followed, flipping off the
lights before she sprinted past him up the stairs.

“Dean, pick up the phone.” Sam was sitting down at the library table, leaning forward with his cell pressed up tightly against his ear. “Call me back. I’m not kidding, alright? Don’t do this. Not like this.”

“Are you sure it was Crowley?” Castiel stopped in front of Sam as the Winchester hung up with a scowl.

Alex nodded, and Sam’s gaze flickered over to her before he shrugged. “Who else would he summon?” he replied darkly. “I mean, he and Crowley have been bromancing over the Blade ever since Dean got the Mark.”

“The Mark?” Gadreel stepped into view from the hallway, and Alex turned, surprised to find him nearby.

“The Mark of Cain,” she explained, and the angel’s face darkened gravely. “It was given to him by ... well, Cain.”

“Yes, I know about the Mark.” Gadreel’s eyes turned to Castiel as they grew thoughtful. “So that’s what Dean cut me with — the First Blade. In a way that could be useful.” He was shaken from his thoughts by Sam’s noise of surprise, and explained, “Well, Metatron is more powerful than ever, but if Dean has the First Blade and the Mark, that might give us our best chance.”

“Y-You’re joking, right?” Sam rose to his feet and turned to face the angel. “A few minutes ago, we were ready to throw Dean in a padded cell, and now you say he’s our best chance?”

Castiel stepped forward, ready to intercept the brother if necessary. “Hear him out, Sam.”

“Oh, right. Excuse me.” Sam’s hazel eyes flashed angrily as he glared at the three of them. “Sorry, guys — uh, sorry I’m a little less than eager to hear out that our best chance is — is arming the warhead and hoping it hits the mark. This is not a bomb we’re talking about. This is my brother!”

“And your brother would not be in this alone,” Gadreel promised. ‘We can help.”

“How?”

The angel kept his head held high, unfazed by the Winchester’s challenge. “I believe Metatron has found a way to tap into the Angel tablet, harnessing its power to give him powers equivalent to —”

“God, right?” Sam finished. “I mean, that’s what this is all about, isn’t it? Metatron wants to be God.” Gadreel nodded, and Sam’s lips pursed in a thin frown. “Great, well, that basically makes him unstoppable.”

“Well, not if we can get to the tablet and destroy it.” Alex looked up at Castiel and Gadreel, eyebrows lifted as she put forth her suggestion.

Gadreel’s head tipped, but Castiel nodded. “Perhaps we don’t even have to go that far,” he added. “If we could just break the connection between Metatron and the tablet, that would make him just an ordinary angel.” He turned to Gadreel and asked, “Where is he keeping it?”

“In his office.” The angel’s blue eyes lit up as Castiel’s plan began to take form. “In heaven. I can get us to the door.”

“And then what?” Sam broke into the two’s planning. “I mean, why would they let you in? If
Metatron’s number two shows up with heaven’s most wanted, the gig is up.” He motioned to Castiel as he spoke, and the seraph’s eyes narrowed.

“Sam,” he insisted, “we have to try. This might be our only option.”

“What else could we do?” Alex added. “With Metatron juiced up, he — he’s like Cas when he was high on those souls. The only thing that slowed him down was Death. And it’s not like we can just summon him again,” she quickly added when Sam’s eyes lit up. “We barely survived, and that was with Dean. I think this plan will work.” She turned to look up at Castiel. “After all, how hard can breaking into heaven be?”

The brakes squealed ominously as the Lincoln Continental rolled to a stop alongside the curb, and Alex looked out the window to see a playground laying on the other side of the field. Sunlight reflected on the shining metal of the swing set, which rocked and swayed as a young girl swung gently, aided by her mother. “This … this is the gate to heaven?” Alex leaned forward in between Castiel and Gadreel, eyes narrowed in confusion. “It’s a playground.”

“And it’s guarded by two of Metatron’s most loyal. I recruited them myself.” Gadreel nodded towards the mother and daughter before his gaze turned to Castiel. “So, you said you had a plan … how we might convince them to let us pass.”

“Wookie.” Castiel reached into the pocket of his trench coat and pulled out a pair of handcuffs. Alex chuckled, her mind spinning as the plan came to mind, but Gadreel’s face remained blank with confusion. “Brother, I have no idea what that means.”

“It’s a references to Star Wars — I’d show it to you later but it’d go right over your head.” Alex patted Gadreel on the shoulder twice before she leaned back in her seat. “Alright, so we sneak into heaven under the guise of being Gadreel’s prisoners.”

“Metatron left heaven earlier this morning,” Gadreel added. “He insisted he would not be back until tomorrow, and I have had no other news of his return, so his presence will not be a problem.”

“Okay, great. Let’s go.” Alex reached down to unbuckle her seatbelt. “Hopefully we can be out of there before Metatron returns. We just need … here. I’ve got another pair of handcuffs stashed back here somewhere.” She ducked down to feel under the seat before she popped back up with a grin, but her enthusiasm died at the look on the angels’ faces. “What?”

“Alec,” Castiel began gravely, but Gadreel spoke at the same time, his eyes squinted in confusion as he stared at her. “Why do you keep handcuffs hidden in the car?”

“Cause — cause bad guys.” Alex shook the metal cuffs so that they jingled. “Look, t-they’re even warded.”

“Alec, you’re not coming with.” Castiel’s voice deepened as he frowned. “I thought we had this discussion back at the bunker with Sam.”

“And … I agreed to stay in the car just to get him to shut up.” Alex scoffed loudly as she toyed with the latch on the handcuffs. “I thought that was obvious, considering I backed down in, like, ten seconds.” She dropped the metal cuffs onto the seat between the two angels. “Come on, I’m not just going to sit here while you two risk your life.”

“I agree with Castiel,” Gadreel began slowly. “If this fails, you would be safer the further away from
heaven you are.”

Alex looked between the two angels, her jaw hanging open before she snapped her mouth shut. “Oh my God.” Her shoulders fell, and her head rolled back in exasperation. “You two are worse than Sam and Dean.”

Castiel and Gadreel exchanged looks, and Castiel’s jaw tightened slightly. “I don’t know if that’s an insult,” he began, “but you’re not coming with.”

“Um, yeah, I am.” Alex narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms. “Otherwise I’m going after you.” She picked up her angel blade for emphasis, casting a low glare towards the two guardians of the playground. “And it’s going to be far less tactful.” Her cold grey eyes turned back onto Castiel. “Your call.”

The flicker in the seraph’s eyes was the sign that Alex had won, and the young hunter tossed her weapon back onto the seat before throwing open the door. “Great.”

“Does she always push you around like that, brother?” Gadreel’s voice was a low murmur as Alex pulled herself out of the car. She couldn’t hear Castiel’s response, but after a second, Gadreel replied, “Yes, I can see that.” The car door opened, and the angel stepped out, eyes scanning the park in the distance. “Actually, Alex has given me an idea. If Asariel and Purah do doubt, perhaps seeing my loyalty for themselves will convince them of our deception.”

“What are you talking about?” Castiel turned to Gadreel, a frown of confusion upon his face. The angel ignored him as he looked down at Alex. “If I had been able to capture Castiel,” he began, “you would stop at nothing to get him back, correct?” Alex nodded, and Gadreel’s face grew thoughtful. “They will believe our deception if they witness me capturing Alex while she attempts to rescue you.” His blue eyes turned onto Castiel. “Does that sound plausible? I do not know your mate as well as you do.”

“It does.” Castiel’s gaze flickered across Alex’s face, terse with displeasure, before it returned to his brother. “Here.” He clamped the handcuffs around his wrists. “Let’s go.”

Alex handed her own set of handcuffs to Gadreel, surprised to find that the angel was holding out her weapon. “You should approach from the trees. Only do so if it appears they will not let us through; I do not want to risk bloodshed if we do not have to. If it becomes necessary, attack me only; do not hurt them, and they will not hurt you.”

“Yeah, okay.” Alex slipped off towards the woods with a roll of her eyes. There was no way she wasn’t going to attack; Gadreel and Castiel weren’t going to go to heaven alone. She drew in several deep breaths to force a sense of panic, trying to get in the mindset as she stepped in among the trees. They had taken her mate and were bringing him to Metatron. She hurried through the underbrush and broke into a run as she circled around to the playground, repeating her mantra in her head. They had taken her mate and were bringing him to Metatron.

She paused at the edge of the trees and peered out onto the playground. The mother and daughter had ceased swinging and risen to their feet to meet Gadreel, who was leading Castiel towards the sandbox. She could see Gadreel’s mouth moving, but couldn’t make out any sounds. The guardians had a frown upon their faces, and Alex slipped out of the trees, sneaking closer and hiding behind the playground equipment until she was close enough to hear Gadreel’s words. “And who do you think gave the order to capture Castiel?” he was challenging. “Unless you think Metatron isn’t interested in questioning the lead of the rebellion?”
Alex sprang forward, weapon gripped tightly in her hands as she lunged for Gadreel. She swung it high, giving him enough time to duck out of the way. His hands grabbed hers, wrestling away the weapon, and anger pulsed through her at the struggle. One hand left the blade and flew out, colliding with Gadreel’s nose as a snarl left her throat.

Hands wrapped around her, drawing her back and throwing her onto the ground, and Alex’s eyes rolled into the back of her head as the wind was knocked out of her lungs. An angel blade flashed in the air, and Alex struggled to draw oxygen back into her chest as one of Metatron’s angels knelt over her, weapon poised to be thrust into her heart.

“Purah!” Gadreel reached out to stop the young girl, and the corner of Alex’s lip curled up into a disgusted snarl as the angel hesitated. “Stop.”

“What is she doing here?” The angel hissed out her sentence, and Alex struggled in vain against her tight grip.

“She’s been following us since Kansas. The only way to draw her out was to bring Castiel into the open.” Gadreel didn’t relinquish his grasp on Purah’s shoulder until her weapon dropped back to her side. “Do not harm her. She is more use to Metatron alive than dead.”

“What use could Metatron have for a half-breed like her?” Purah’s voice was scornful, and Alex scowled, but Gadreel remained unfazed.

“What use could Metatron have for the one person that our enemy cares for the most?” he repeated. “Perhaps your short sightedness is the reason that you are down here guarding the door instead of serving in heaven.” It was Purah’s turn to scowl, and Gadreel reached into his pocket and pulled out the handcuffs that Alex had given him. “Here.” He handed them down to the angel. “Secure her and redraw the sigil.”

“Asariel.” Purah jerked her head back towards the sandbox, and Alex turned her head to watch the angel draw in the sand with a stick as the angel above her secured her wrists with the warded cuffs. She stifled a hiss as the metal dug too tightly into her skin, but she refused to flinch away from the angel’s stare.

Purah roughly pulled Alex to her feet, and the hunter shrugged the angel off as she stalked over to stand at Castiel’s side. Asariel finished the sigil, and it began to glow with a brilliant blue light. Gadreel nudged her forward, and Alex snapped out a, “Watch it!” as she was shoved towards the sandbox. Gadreel’s only response was to tighten his grip on her and her mate, and together the three of them stepped onto the sand.

The sound of rushing wind filled her ears as she stepped into the light, followed by a great, crushing pressure that disappeared as quickly as it had come. The world disappeared in a flash of white, and when Alex blinked, she was standing in an elevator. The door was opening, and Alex blinked again in surprise to find herself standing outside a shining white office. Angels bustled around, and Alex followed Gadreel out of the elevator and into the room. "This is heaven?" She looked around with a frown. "No wonder you guys are so lame. Pandemonium is way cooler than this."

"You've been to Pandemonium?" Castiel's voice was low with confusion mixed with anger, and Alex gave a small shrug.

"Lucifer showed me;" she explained. “Said he based it off of heaven, but I don't see the resemblance."

"Naomi had the place redone when she took Michael's place." Hannah walked up to them,
accompanied by another angel, and Alex's face darkened into a scowl at the sight of her. "The new structure has become much more efficient."

"Well, you know what they say about corruption in corporations." Alex's grey eyes flashed, and satisfaction shot through her when Hannah looked away.

"Well done." The angel who had accompanied Hannah spoke up, ignoring Alex as she addressed Gadreel. "We've sent word to Metatron. He'll be back shortly. You can wait inside." She motioned to a door on the other side of the room, and Gadreel dipped his head in respect.

"Thank you, Ingrid." Gadreel nudged Castiel and Alex ahead of him as they crossed the room, and Alex pushed her way through the door and into Metatron's office.

The doors closed behind them, and Alex looked around the ornate office with a nod. She turned back to Gadreel, but even as she did so, the room quivered. The walls slipped away, and heavy stone exploded into being, encircling them and arching above their heads. Iron bars pushed up through the ground, and Alex stepped away from them with a cry of surprise. "What the hell is going on?"

"No, no, no, no!" Gadreel's plead had her brushing past Castiel to press up against the bars, trying to catch a glimpse of the angel in the cell beside them. "Not here!"

"Did you really think your little ruse would work?" Ingrid looked scornfully over at Gadreel, and Alex heard him plead again as her attention turned onto Alex and Cas. "Welcome to heaven's jail, Castiel. I believe Gadreel can give you the tour."

"Please!" Gadreel's voice cracked as Ingrid walked away, and Alex heard him slump against the wall in despair.

"Hey." Alex crouched down next to the bars, leaning her shoulder against the wall they shared. "We're gonna get out of this." Panic constricted her chest as she wrapped a hand around the steel bars, but she kept her voice as calm as she could. "Metatron's not going to get away with what he's done." Her eyes hardened as they lifted up onto Hannah's face, who stood there watching. "What do you want?" She rose to her feet, anger bringing heat to her face. "It's bad enough you're working for the asshole who killed Oren and Josiah and — and a hundred other angels! So now you're just here to, what? Mock us?"

"Oren killed himself." Hannah's gaze turned onto Cas. "He did it for Castiel."

Alex threw her head back with a loud, exasperated groan. "Angels. I swear." She pointed over to Gadreel's cell. "Gadreel, tell her. Tell her what you told us."

No response came from the other cell, and Castiel stepped forward. "Hannah. Metatron recruited Oren as a double agent. He did the same with Tessa, Constantine, and Josiah. He was the one who convinced them to blow themselves up in my name to make me look like the bad one. Gadreel came to me after he realized the truth; he was the one who recruited them."

"Is that true?" Hannah looked over at Gadreel's cell, and Alex leaned forward, but the angel didn't speak. He must have given some signal of assent, because Hannah turned back to them. "Okay, so you're telling me that Metatron set you up, arranged those suicide bombers to make himself look like the victim."

Castiel nodded. "Gadreel was his second in command. For what other reason than the truth would he turn against Metatron?"

"So now I'm expected to trust the word of an angel who's only ever thought of himself since the
Garden, and you two?" Hannah's eyes narrowed. "You told us not a single angel more would die in this fight."

Castiel stepped forward, and Alex shifted to make room for him at the steel door. "What do you think I have been trying to do?"

"Trying?" Hannah's voice was scornful. "By killing Metatron?"

"We don't need to kill him." Alex's fingers dug into the fabric of her jacket. "I just want to talk to him. Violently. With my fists."

"Alex." Castiel nudged her backwards, and Alex reluctantly stepped away with a scowl. "Hannah, he is the reason for all of our suffering."

"Nothing you say matters."

"For fuck's sake!" Alex threw her head back. "This is ridiculous. You're all insane — you can't even see deception when it's sitting right in front of you." She pushed her way past Castiel to grasp the bars. "You're making the same mistake Gadreel made with Lucifer and you don't even know it."

"Give us a chance," Castiel added more softly. "Let us out, Hannah. Please."

"I'm sorry." Hannah leaned against the wall, arms crossed as she watched them, and Alex returned the stare with a dark glare.

"Like shit you're sorry," she muttered, and she dropped back down onto the ground. "You need better friends, Cas." She dug into her pockets and pulled out the keys for the handcuffs that she was wearing. "Guess we don't need these anymore." She popped off the cuffs, rubbing her sore wrists as she held the key out to her mate. "Here you go. Gadreel? Hey, you still okay over there?" There was no response, and she sighed, her voice growing softer. "Okay, well just sit tight then. We're not going to leave you here alone; we'll get you out of here." She leaned her back against the wall, hugging her knees up against her chest as she tucked her head into them.

"I sat in this hole for thousands of years, thinking of nothing but redemption, of reclaiming my good name. I thought of nobody, no cause, other than my own." Footsteps echoed on the ground as Gadreel rose to his feet, pacing back and forth in his cell.

"You've been redeemed, my friend," Castiel promised, and Alex murmured out her own agreement.

"The only thing that matters in the end is the mission," Gadreel continued, and his voice strengthened in resolve, "protecting those who would not and cannot protect themselves — the humans. None of us is bigger than that. And we will not let our fears, our self-absorption prevent us from seeing it through. Not anymore."

"No, of course not." Alex lifted her head. "Don't worry. We're going to stop Metatron if its the last thing we do. These cells can't hold us forever."

"You're right." Gadreel's pacing ceased. "Now move to the other side of your cell and keep your head down."

"What?" Alex's head snapped to the side as she tried to look back at the angel through the white stone wall. "Gadreel? What are you talking about?"

"When they say my name, perhaps I won't just be the one who let the serpent in." Alex pushed herself to her feet as footsteps rushed up to them, and she peered through the bars to see Hannah
fumbling with the keys to Gadreel's cell.

"Gadreel?" Alex reached through the bars. "What are you doing?" Her eyes stretched wide at the urgency in Hannah's movements, and she shook the bars in desperation. "Please, don't do anything stupid."

"Perhaps I will be known as one of many who gave heaven a second chance." Gadreel spoke over her words, and Alex struggled harder. "Run, sister."

Castiel's hands pulled her back, and Alex reached out towards the wall, trying to struggle free. "Please!" she begged as Castiel threw her to the ground, kneeling over her protectively as the world shook with an earth-shattering bang. The wall of the cell cracked and broke, sending a cloud of dust into the air, and Alex turned her face into Castiel's chest.

The dust settled, and the young hunter coughed, pushing Castiel away so she could stagger to her feet. "Gadreel?" She stumbled forward through what remained of the wall, and her legs shook to find the angel nowhere in sight. "What did he do? What did he do?" She turned onto Hannah, who was slowly pulling herself back to her feet.

"He … he blew himself up. He used the same sigil as the bombers." Hannah looked over at Alex with wide eyes.

The girl's legs shook, and she took a step back. "That son of a bitch." Her voice shook, and Alex pushed away Castiel's offered hand of support as she glared over at Hannah. "You didn't want any more angels to die? Well, I hope you're happy!" she yelled, and her feet carried her over the rubble as she reached out, shoving Hannah up against the stone wall. "Do you believe him now?" First Ezekiel, then Kevin, now Gadreel. "Because his death is on you!"

"Alex." Castiel pulled her away, and Alex wiped away her tears as she roughly pushed free to get away from him. "I'm sorry." Alex turned to face the wall, tears stinging her eyes as the seraph’s voice grew soft, and she felt him approach, hands resting on her shoulders as his voice murmured in her ear. "But we have to go before the rest of Metatron's followers realize what has happened."

"No." Hannah dusted off her blazer, straightening the fabric that had been creased during Alex's attack. "I'll take you to Metatron's office." Her blue eyes looked up into Castiel's face as the seraph turned to look at her. "I never should have doubted you, Castiel. I'm sorry."

Alex looked up into her mate's face, waiting with terse frown to see if he accepted the apology, but the seraph only nodded. "Take us there. We need to find the angel tablet."

Hannah nodded and led the way off towards a flight of stairs. Alex took a step in her direction but faltered, unable to tear her gaze from the mess of stone and dust that covered the floor. There was no sign of Gadreel's vessel, and her eyes rested on the a bloody shard of rock that he had used to carve the sigil. "Let's go." Castiel gently nudged her towards the stairs, and Alex reluctantly fell in step beside him. They crossed through the winding halls, and Alex moved closer to her mate as they reappeared in the glowing office. Hannah led the way across the room, ignoring the looks from the angels around them, and Alex paused beside the door, wary of a trap that lay behind.

"Metatron's office is in here." Hannah turned to face them, her hand on the door handle. "So is Ingrid, but perhaps she knows where the tablet is." She opened the door and led the way through, and Castiel followed, leaving Alex to take up the rear.

"What are they doing here?" Ingrid rose to her feet, eyes narrowed in anger as she looked between Castiel and Alex, and an angel blade fell into Hannah's hand as she surged forward, twisting Ingrid
around and poising the angel blade at her throat.

Castiel stalked forward, and Alex followed, her eyes narrowed in rage. "Where is it?" His voice was low in a growl, but Ingrid held her head high, lips pursed as she held the seraph's glare. "Remove her."

He turned away as Hannah led the angel out of the office, and Alex looked around at the stacks of books. "It's got to be here somewhere." She stepped up to a bookshelf and pulled off a book. "Start looking." She threw the book down on the ground and reached for another, dropping them onto the carpet. "And destroy as much as you can while you're at it." She kicked at a stack of papers on the ground, sending them flying haphazardly in the air. "I'm going to fucking kill him."

"Find the tablet first." The sound of books hitting the ground signaled the start of Castiel's own frantic search. "The sooner it is destroyed, the better chance Dean will stand."

"Yeah." Alex swiped the shelf of books onto the ground, jumping out of their way as she moved over to the next stack. She pounded her fist against the back of the bookshelf, searching for any hidden alcove, but there was nothing. "Dammit."

"Nothing." Castiel ran his hand across the mantle of the fireplace, fingers dancing across the bumps and crevices in search of a hidden latch. "There's nothing here."

Alex crossed over to the desk and threw open the drawers, but the only thing inside was blank paper and pens. She dropped to her knees and peered inside the cabinets, scowling in disgust. "The desk is empty." She looked up at Castiel, who was pulling books off of the last bookcase. "Now what?"

Castiel turned back, running a hand through his short, messy hair as he thought, and his blue eyes landed on the typewriter on the desk. "There." He crossed to the desk, and Alex rose to her feet as he lifted off the top.

The angel tablet sat inside, its Enochian scrawlings glowing like embers. They sparked as Castiel lifted the smooth rock from its home and tossed it to the wooden floor, and the tablet shattered like glass. "Great." Alex wiped her feet off of her jeans. "Now we just wait for Dean to kill this son of a bitch."

"Or for Metatron to return here." Castiel's gaze swept across the room. "There's a chance that he'll attempt to come back once he feels that the tablet has been destroyed."

"Well, in that case, I'll need a weapon." Alex crossed over to the door and stepped out into the office, unsurprised to find that all of the angel's gazes turned onto her. "Hey. You." She pointed to the nearest angel, narrowing her eyes as she rolled back her shoulders. "I need your angel blade."

The angel's gaze turned onto Hannah, who stood at the other end of the room. "Give her whatever she needs." Her words were accompanied by a short nod, and the angel let his weapon fall into his hands as he held out the blade.

"Thank you. If Meta-dick shows back up, we'll be in here waiting." Alex kicked the door closed behind her as she stepped back into the office. She twisted the weapon in her hands as she crossed back over to Castiel. "What's that?"

The seraph was toying with a phonograph that sat beside the desk, his eyes narrowed in concentration. "I don't know …" he slowly began, "but I believe it's what Metatron used to broadcast his message across all of angel radio. Perhaps we can use this to our advantage."

"Oh yeah. You and Gadreel mentioned you heard him." Alex thought back to that morning before
she frowned. "Looks pretty rustic, though."

Castiel made a small noise agreement as he fell back into his thought, and Alex crossed over to the fire. The flames crackled through the air, warm and homey, and for a moment the hunter let herself get lost in the flickering tongues before she tightened her grip on her weapon. Gadreel should be here with them. "You work on that," she said, her voice tight with anger. "I'm going to destroy some more of Metatron's precious books before he gets back." She twisted the blade in her hand as she turned away, adding under her breath, "And when he does, I'll kill him myself."

Before she could take two steps towards the last remaining stacks of books, however, a voice had her spinning around. "Well played, Castiel." Metatron stood in the center of the room, his gaze fixed upon the seraph who now sat behind the desk. "Obviously, you and Gadreel managed to turn a few dead enders against me."

"Gadreel's dead!" Alex sprang forward, but Metatron sent her flying across the room with a flick of his wrist. Her back hit the wall, and she slumped to the floor with a groan.

"Ah." The angel straightened the collar of his worn, oversized coat that he wore over a dusty sweatshirt. "So Gadreel bites the dust." He ignored Alex's hiss of anger at his disrespect, choosing instead to look down at the shattered tablet at his feet. "And the angel tablet — arguably the most powerful instrument in the history of the universe — is in pieces, and for what again?" Metatron's face scrunched up in faux-confusion for the briefest of seconds. "Oh, that's right — to save Dean Winchester. That was your goal, right? I mean, you draped yourself in the flag of heaven, but ultimately, it was all about saving one human, right? Well, guess what. He's dead, too."

"Liar." Alex squeezed the handle of her weapon so tightly her knuckles turned white. "Liar!" she yelled, and her feet carried her forward. A force like a brick wall sent her back, the impact knocking the angel blade from her hand and pinning her up against the wall.

"Ah ah." Metatron waggled a finger in her direction as the girl struggled against the invisible hand holding her off of the ground, and his gaze turned onto Castiel. "And you're sitting in my chair."

Handcuffs sprang from thin air, clamping around the seraph's wrists. "Dean isn't dead!" Alex strained against her bonds, her heart racing in her chest as panic built up inside of her lungs. "You lying piece of shit —"

"Say one more word and I'll take your tongue," Metatron warned. "Dean is very much dead." A chuckle rose in his throat, and he added, "He put up quite the valiant fight, but even with the First Blade, he wasn't strong enough." He lifted his hands to show his bloodied knuckles, and Alex snarled to hide her trembling jaw. "I put this right through his heart." A bloodied angel blade fell into Metatron's hands, and the angel placed it on the desk in front of Cas. "Even Winchesters die, Castiel."

"No." Alex pushed against the force with all her might as her vision ran red. "I'm going to fucking kill you, you hear me!" Her fists clenched as she strained, but Metatron's grace didn't give. "I'll finish what he fucking started!"

"Okay." The invisible hand disappeared, and Alex fell to the ground. "You're all out of juice, sweetheart. What's one more dead rebel?"

"Alex, don't." Castiel's voice had Alex freezing where she knelt, hand curled around the handle of the blade. "Set it down."
"He's killed enough people today." Alex pushed herself to her shaking feet. "I'm not letting him take any more. He's not going to get away with this."

A hand grabbed her shoulder from behind, and Alex gasped as an angel blade tore through her skin, passing through her ribs and out the other side. Her weapon clattered to the ground, and she looked down at the silver protruding from her chest, stained with hers and Dean's blood. "I already have."

Metatron withdrew his weapon, and Alex staggered. She dropped to her knees, hands clutching her bleeding chest as she fought to breathe through her punctured lung. "So what?" Metatron placed the blade back onto the desk in front of Castiel, who struggled violently against his bonds. "You told a silly story to a group of less-than-believers. I'll clean up your mess in an hour."

Alex tried to speak, but blood bubbled up from her lungs, its acrid tang burning against her tongue. "C-Cas." She leaned her head forward, letting the thick red liquid trickle from her lips and onto the ground. "Cr-Crowley …" Her muscles screamed in protest, and she fell silent, lifting her head to meet the seraph's eyes, begging for him to understand.

Castiel's blue eyes flickered, and his jaw set in anger as he whipped his head back to look at Metatron. "You give our brothers and sisters far too little credit," he snapped. "They will soon learn that you have been playing them."

"And then?" Metatron rolled his eyes, and Alex pressed her forehead into Castiel's foot as her vision blurred. "They will do nothing because they are frightened little sheep following my crook wherever it leads. And where I'm taking them, back to our rightful place atop this mountain of human shame and excrement — when that happens, trust me, they're not gonna care how they got there."

Alex gasped weakly, and Castiel sharply yanked at his handcuffs. "Make your point," he growled, and Alex curled her hand around his ankle, squeezing it with what remained of her strength. *Hurry up,* she begged.

Metatron chuckled, circling around the desk, and Alex groaned as his foot connected with her knee, knocking it out from under her and sending her keeling off to the side; the impact knocked away her hand, and blood poured from her wound. "You know why you could never quite pull it together, Castiel? While you're sitting here with your grace slowly burning away and your reputation long extinguished? No curiosity." He stopped back on the other side of the desk, leaning forward to hold Castiel's gaze. "You didn't read enough. You never learned to tell a good story."

"But you did." Triumph sparked in Castiel's eyes, and they flickered over to the microphone that sat on the desk. The doors flew open with a bang, and Alex's eyes rolled into the back of her head as angels rushed in, weapons drawn. Castiel ripped of the handcuffs, and agony tore through Alex's ribs as she was drawn up into his arms. "Put him in jail." The seraph's voice was tight as he gave Metatron a contemptuous look. "I'll deal with him later."

"You can't save her, Castiel." Metatron's scornful voice followed them across the room. "No doctor's going to be able to help."

"Good thing we don't need a doctor." Castiel stepped into the elevator, and Alex closed her eyes as the room flashed white. A sharp pressure surrounded her, crushing her lungs, and the young hunter's head lolled back limply against her mate's chest as they stepped out of the sandbox.

"Castiel." Purah and Asariel were there at their side, and Alex cried out as the seraph laid her down in the grass.

"Stand back." Castiel waved the two angels away as Alex curled up in agony as her blood seeped into the grass. "Metatron attacked her." His fingers threaded through hers, and Alex gripped his hand
tight as her body convulsed in a spasm that tore at her bones. "She's dying."

"C-Cas ..." Alex gasped out her mate's name, reaching up to grab the nape of his neck as the seraph leaned over her in concern. "B-Blade." She curled her hand on his neck, fingernails digging into her skin. "G-Give m—"

She cut off with a choked cry, and Castiel looked over at Asariel. "Give me your weapon," he demanded, but when neither angel moved, his voice sharpened in urgency. "Now!"

There was movement, and Alex felt the smooth handle of an angel blade against her palm as Castiel pressed the weapon into her fingers. Her hand shook, bloodless and cold, and Alex dug her teeth into her bottom lip as she pressed the tip against her chest with trembling hands. She drew in a deep breath, and with the last remaining bit of her strength, she drove the blade into her flesh.

The tip pierced the skin and disappeared, melting from her grasp, and Alex gasped as ice rushed through her veins. Her flesh stung as it was roughly stitched back into place, and she shivered violently as the cold was yanked away. "You're welcome." Crowley pushed her away and rose back to his feet, straightening the cuffs of his jacket with a frown. "Next time, make an appointment."

Alex coughed, hacking up blood as she pushed herself up onto her knees. "Dean ..." She wiped her mouth off on her sleeve, and she reached out to steady herself on Castiel as the world spun from the blood loss.

"Dean's dead." Crowley shrugged off her cough of surprise as he wiped off his hand on his handkerchief. "Anything else? No? Good. Don't bother me again." The King of Hell disappeared, and Alex let herself collapse back onto the grass.

Castiel crouched down beside her, and Alex trembled as his hand came to rest on her shoulder. How could Dean Winchester be dead? He — he was invincible; even in her worst nightmares, the hunter had escaped unscathed. Tears stung at her eyes, and she stifled a sob that twitched through her chest. Castiel's hand gently massaged her arm, and he finally spoke up. "I need to return to heaven to speak with Metatron," he murmured. "And then I can take you to see Sam. Do you want to wait here?"

Alex shook her head, not trusting her voice as she struggled to her feet. Castiel was there, a solid, calm presence, and the young hunter struggled to push back her tears as she followed him into the sandbox. The pressure had her lightheaded, and she leaned heavily against her mate as they stepped out of the elevator.

"You're back." Hannah was at their side, and Alex turned her head away to hide her face. "And you're well." Skepticism and hesitation lined her voice, but she didn't ask for an explanation. "Metatron is down in a cell. I can take you there now if you wish."

"Yes, please. We can't stay long." Castiel followed Hannah down the hallway, his arm wrapped tightly around Alex to help her traverse the heavenly corridors, and slowly yet surely, they made their way down to heaven's prison.

"The angels are awaiting your decision," Hannah explained. "Either we can execute him, or we can keep him in his cell."

"We'll keep him alive." Castiel stopped outside the bars, and Alex lifted her head to stare into Metatron's cold eyes. "I told you that no more angels would die. And that includes him."

Alex pushed herself free from her mate's hold as Hannah nodded. "You're doing the right thing," she promised, "letting him live. It's what a leader would do."
"I'm no leader, Hannah. I never was." Castiel's voice was soft with regret, and Alex stopped in front of the bars, drawing in a deep, painful breath as she stood in front of Dean's murderer. "I just want to be an angel."

"And your grace?" Hannah's voice lowered to match his. "What will you do about that? You will die if you don't replenish it."

"Speaking of dying," Metatron lifted his head, and Alex reached out to grab onto the bars, scowling as the angel spoke. "You're looking quite well."

"I've got a few tricks up my sleeve." Alex's voice shook, and she fought back the sudden urge to try and break down the door. "I guess demon deals have their use after all. And since my soul's off to hell anyways … there's nothing stopping me from doing anything."

Metatron chuckled, and Alex pulled her lips back in a silent snarl. "And you call yourself an angel. You're a disgrace."

"And yet somehow, I'm the one out here." Alex stepped back and turned to Castiel, steadying herself on the wall as her feet faltered slightly. "Take me to Dean."

Alex pushed her way through the bunker door, letting the heavy iron slab swing closed behind her as she reached out to steady herself on the railing. Castiel had dropped her off, promising to return after heaven had regained its stability, but personally, Alex believed that the seraph couldn't bring himself to see what remained of his friend. "Sam?" She hurried down the stairs, concern fueling her movements as she stepped into the library.

The Winchester sat at the table, a bottle of whiskey in front of him, and Alex felt her jaw tremble at the hunter's red, puffy eyes. "Sam …" Her voice cracked, and Sam pushed himself to his feet. His arms enveloped her, holding her tight in a sudden, desperate hug, and Alex pulled him close, her eyes watering as she felt Sam's chest rise and fall in a shaky breath. "I'm so sorry." She buried her fingers in the Winchester's shirt, pressing her face into her chest as tears slipped past her eyelids. "Where is he?"

Sam's face pressed into her hair, and Alex dug her fingers into his back, massaging tight circles as his breathing grew ragged. "It's okay." Her own voice sounded low and broken, but she couldn't seem to push past the lump that tightened her throat. "We'll get him back. We … we always do."

She hoped her voice sounded more confident than she felt, and she sniffled as she pressed her cheek against Sam's sternum. "I … I put him in his room." Sam's voice cracked, rough with grief, and when Alex gave a small, gentle nod, she felt him straighten with resolve. "I need to figure out what to do." He stepped away, wiping his tears off on his sleeve as he cleared his throat. "Maybe there'll be something in the archives."

He walked away, and Alex's shoulders fell as she watched him leave. Her feet carried her down the hall towards Dean's bedroom, but her mind felt in a daze, whirling with questions she didn't want to be answered. She had seen Dean's body once before, back when she had first arrived, but back then … his death hadn't meant anything. It was supposed to happen, a piece of a script destined to play out. But this …

She stopped outside the door, her heart thudding in her chest as her fingers wrapped around the cold door handle. Could she really bring herself to step inside? It still didn't feel real, but seeing his body, cold and lifeless … Alex flinched at the sudden pulse of grief that constricted her heart, and her grip
on the door handle lessened. She wouldn't be able to deny it any longer.

A voice drifted through the air, soft and low, and Alex's eyes snapped open. It was coming from the room in front of her, the words muffled by the heavy door, and the young hunter's heart pounded in her chest in a rush of hope. "Dean?" She pushed her way into the darkly lit room, pulling up short at the sight of the dark, stocky figure.

Crowley's eyes glittered at her entrance, but Alex's gaze slid past him onto the body of her friend. He lay on his bed, eyes closed like he was sleeping, and Alex tried to will her feet to move her closer to no avail. "Sam, bless his soul," Crowley began, "is summoning me as I speak. Make a deal, bring you back." His gaze fell back down onto Dean, and Alex clenched her teeth to bite back the tears. "It's exactly what I was talking about, isn't it? It's all become so … expected."

His gaze turned onto Alex, and the young hunter narrowed her eyes in anger, but when she couldn't trust her voice enough to speak, the demon turned back to Dean.

"You have to believe me," he continued quietly. "When I suggested you take on the Mark of Cain, I didn't know this was going to happen. Not really. I mean, I might not have told you the entire truth. But I never lied. I never lied, Dean. That's important. It's fundamental."

"Why are you talking to him like he can hear you?" Alex's anger exploded, her fists tightening at her side. "He's dead, Crowley! Do something about it!"

"Shh." Crowley brought a finger up to his lips, willing the hunter to be silent. "You see, there's one story about Cain that I might have forgotten to tell you. Apparently he, too, was willing to accept death rather than becoming the killer the Mark wanted him to be. So he took his own life with the Blade. He died. Except, as rumor has it, the Mark never quite let go. You can understand why I never spoke of this. Why set hearts aflutter at mere speculation? It wasn't until you summoned me this morning … No, it wasn't truly until you left that cheeseburger uneaten … that I began to let myself believe. Maybe miracles do come true."

The demon stepped forward, unwrapping the leather pouch he held in his hands to reveal the First Blade. He held it up, the lamplight catching on the grooves in the ancient bone, and Crowley quietly placed the weapon in Dean's cold hand. "Listen to me, Dean Winchester," he whispered, "what you're feeling right now — it's not death. It's life, a new kind of life. Open your eyes, Dean." His voice rose, and Alex shifted backwards, scared by the intensity in his words. "See what I see. Feel what I feel. And let's go take a howl at that moon."

Dean's eyes snapped open, black as ink, and Alex felt fear run down her spine. No, this wasn't real. Her back hit the wall and her throat closed, choking around empty air. She could feel Crowley's triumph as Dean sat up, a cold, biting chill that filled the room as she struggled to breath. "No — no."

"Yes." Crowley turned to face her with gleaming eyes as he addressed the demon at his side. "I think it's time, Dean Winchester, that we go. And as for you," he added to Alex, "I think it's time you fulfilled another part of your duty." He beckoned her forward with a cocked finger, and Alex's feet carried her towards him against her will. Dean stood up, his black eyes locking onto hers, and the ex-angel's skin grew cold beneath his stare as Crowley chuckled. "Time to go. The three of us have a little hell to raise."

Chapter End Notes
And so ends this season. Hope you guys enjoyed it! If you're interested, I've made the next part and attached a little prologue -- just go ahead and bookmark it so you'll get a notification when I start posting again.

Otherwise, I'll be back with season 10 in the next few months. See you then!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!