A few weeks after Sam managed to turn a ridiculous situation to his advantage (literally being offered as a sacrifice to a pagan god, because apparently this is his life), Coyote turns up at Stanford to keep his end of the bargain: that is, handing over the yellow-eyed demon responsible for Mary Winchester’s death. Getting back in touch with Dean and Dad to end their vengeance quest changes things for the better. So does settling down in a house off-campus with his brother and his new friends - Jo, Jess, and Charlie, and an annoying pagan god who keeps popping up to get on Dean’s nerves. But the apocalypse is not to be so easily derailed…and why does Coyote refuse to lend a hand?
Written for the 2016 Team Free Love big bang. Art by scrollingkingfisher. The art's distributed throughout the work at appropriate places, but it's also all gathered together in a single tumblr post over here.
The first baby's laugh

Five weeks after Sam had accidentally found himself kidnapped from Stanford and offered up as a (theoretically) virgin sacrifice to a pagan god—after he’d talked his way into getting his own return for that sacrifice, namely, his whole family’s revenge, and had a night of really intense sex with a chaotic neutral deity—the grinning coywolf mark inside his left wrist heated up for a moment, and itched. When he looked at it, he found that a speech bubble had appeared beside it.

"Ten tonight, bottom of the fire escape. Time for a roadtrip!"
“I’m coming too,” said Sam’s dorm mate.

Sam scowled down at the ‘tattoo’ on his wrist. The little speech bubble faded, leaving only the coywolf, who winked. Then he looked up at Jo, resigned.

“Did you know he could do this?”

“You didn’t?” Jo was already rummaging through her chest of drawers. “Damn. Lying shit. He told me he likes to check in on all his pet projects after.”

“Well, I guess this is him checking in,” said Sam dryly. “Think he realises that most people use cells these days instead of branding words onto people’s skin? Jo, I—I don’t think you should come, okay? I mean, any demon is big scary news, way bigger than anything I’ve dealt with before, but this demon—?”

Jo turned around, with a knife in either hand.

“What was that?” she said, sweetly.

“Er,” said Sam. “Never mind.”

“That’s what I thought. Besides,” she said, and spun one of the knives on her finger. “You need me. You need this. It’s not every knife that can kill a demon. Butt-head.”

It wasn’t until he’d finished his run around the Dish and had sweat running down his back and into his gym shorts that Sam got up the courage to tap the ‘call’ button.

The afternoon sun glinted too bright off the water of the creek. Sam had to shade his eyes as he listened to the phone ring, and ring, and ring. At least the number hadn’t been disconnected.

Just when he was about to give up, the call went through.

“Winchester,” said the gruff voice on the other end.

Sam let out all his breath in a relieved huff. “Dude. You been gargling gravel or something?”

There was a tense, staticky silence. Then, “You kept this number?”

“Course I kept your number. Dumbarse.”
“What’s up?” Wary. Painfully so.

“... Yeah, hi. Nice to hear your voice too, Dean.”

“Well, apparently you coulda heard it any time in the last year. What, you suddenly realise you left your barbie collection in the trunk? ‘Cos sorry, baby brother, but I salted and burned those first chance I had.”

It was bitter, but the joke felt familiar in its jibe, affection warring with resentment; and Sam made himself swallow the urge to snap, and grumbled back instead.

“Jerk.”

“Bitch.”

“Look,” said Sam, “where are you two at the moment?”

“Enid, Oklahoma. Bunch of weird omens that Dad thought might be demonic. Why?”

“I think,” said Sam, carefully—as much because he didn’t want to let himself hope as to keep Dean from asking too much—“I think I’ve got a lead on the yellow-eyed demon.”

“... A lead.”

“Yes. I think—I think we’ve got him. Can you—”

“The hell, Sammy? You’ve been hunting alone? I thought you were at—”

“No! I just—I just kind of stumbled across the chance, okay? Look, I can’t tell you over the phone. And I’ve got to—to get in touch with somebody. My contact. I just wanted to give you and Dad the heads-up. And... you’ll hear from me tonight.”

“Sam—”

None of Jo’s old clothes quite fit her new figure, or her new bust. She and Sam had figured that going with the same oversized, shapeless clothes she’d been wearing for a few years now would help with the fiction that she was in the process of both transitioning and of coming out, without making it too obvious that she had literally got a complete sex change overnight from a pagan god.

She had a few things that fit, though, and was starting to wear them—bits and pieces here and there, as she figured out what she enjoyed, what she liked to show in what moods and what she’d rather hide.

Tonight she was wearing an old pair of jeans—too big on her even before the change—belted tight and firm, with plenty of room to move. She had sneakers and a combat jacket; but under that, she had a blue tank top, form-fitting and sleeveless, with a scooped neck.
Doe-eyed and blonde, but tough as nails. It suited her.

Sam was just denim and plaid and hidden guns, though... he did look in the mirror before he left, did frown at himself and run his hand through his hair. And then he reminded himself that this was revenge, and this was business. And any nerves about his appearance were just about seeing his brother and dad again for the first time in a year, not... not about anybody else.

After all, that somebody was business too. He’d promised only to deliver the demon, in such a way that Sam’s family could get their revenge. He hadn’t promised not to hurt anybody, or try anything subtler. Sam needed to be on the alert around him, too.

They didn’t come down the fire escape, of course. They went out the main entrance of their dorm block and walked around to the back, behind the dumpsters, towards the spidery black outline of iron stairs against bricks and sky.

There was one feeble flickering security light back there. It shook a cold grey-blue light, too stark, down over the figure slouched against the wall beside the stairs.

Jo’s eyes were sharper than Sam’s in the dark.

“You look like a hooker,” she said, loud with bravado. “Or a creeper.”

“Both true,” came the reply. All Sam saw was the flash of teeth in a curving grin, then the felt-heard snap of fingers, and a glowing red-gold light was floating in the air between them.

Coyote’s smile was bared first, as curving and cruel and curious as Sam remembered. And there was the light sprinkle of stubble over his lips and the ridge of his jaw, and the curl of his tongue against his lip, and the hook of his thumbs in his broad dark belt; and most of all, there was the gold-cold glitter of his eyes in the fiery half-darkness.

That, Sam remembered very well. Not just with his mind: with every visceral, burning inch of his body. In all of his dreams.

Which was no reason to trust him. Or to want him. Sam knew the difference between sex and sense.

It took him a moment to realise that Coyote was dressed normal, now. Relatively normal. Figure-hugging jeans and combat boots, a shirt made of some dark slouchy silky stuff open to the third button, and... still with the heavy eyeliner and gold eyeshadow. And gold earrings. And a gold torc around his neck, curving like a dark glittering snake through the shadows of his collar and chin and nestling into the soft hollow of his throat.
“Subtle,” said Sam, deadpan.

“One of my mysteriously multifarious middle names,” said the god brightly. “Right after ‘un’, and before ‘drama queen’. How goes it, kitten? Can’t the poor boy have any adventures on his own?”

“Would you let him?” asked Jo.

“Would you stop her?” Sam parried. “Where are we going? How are you keeping your promise?”

Coyote ran his eyes up and down Sam’s body in the dark, and leered, pointedly, sarcastically. “Honey, you shouldn’t have. That baggy denim, those oversized boxers underneath? Too sexy. Think of the children.”

Sam restrained the urge to cover his crotch with his hands.

“You’ve found the demon. Where is it?”

“Trussed for the slaughter. And if you’re still insisting on having your folks in at the death,” purred Coyote, with those strange lion-cold eyes flickering curiously all over Sam’s face, “then I’d suggest
their whereabouts might be more important first up, no?”

Sam arched an eyebrow. “Figured you’d be able to work that much out yourself.”

Coyote tilted his head, a sharp flickering angle of darkness between the corner of his cheek and the brick. “Still trying to find my limits, boy?”

Sam shrugged. “Everything has them.”

His mouth curved. It looked pleased, and deceptively soft. “Do they?”

“Or,” said Jo pointedly, “you could stop flirting and get on with what we came here for.”

The god’s sarcastic eyebrow and sarcastic mouth cocked exactly the same sarcastic curve.

“Oklahoma,” said Sam, half-challenging, half-amused; then, after a moment, “Enid. You need the motel and room number?”

One imperious finger lifted itself; then, “Nope,” said Coyote brightly, “I got ‘em.”

The air... shifted.

Last time, when the god had returned him to his dorm after that night, Sam had been barely awake. It had all happened like waking up from a dream. This time he felt each moment: first the change of the temperature and direction of the air, then of its very pressure, then the difference in soundscape and smells as abrupt as changing the channel.

He staggered. Jo clutched his arm beside him, but recovered herself much more quickly. She always had more to prove, after all.

Enid, Oklahoma. Apparently. A motel parking lot.

Sam breathed out slowly through his nose. Then he turned on the short, grinning figure beside him.

(He hadn’t seemed so short, that night. Not when he was lounging in his throne and shaping the room around him.)

“You said a roadtrip,” Sam said, curt and assessing. “How far from here to where you’ve got the demon? If you’ve got it?”

“Azazel,” said the god, in a bored voice. “He has a name, you know. Didn’t you ever find that out?”

Sam gave him a Look. The god rolled his eyes. He was actually kind of easy to provoke.

“Second to the right and then straight on ‘til morning,” said the god. “In other words—since we wouldn’t all fit in that lovely she-beast over there—I’ll snap up a vehicle, you persuade your hulking manly relatives to drive after me, and it’ll seem like it’s just down the road.”

“You mean a pocket dimension,” said Jo, curious but not suspicious (and she had never been suspicious of this god from the start). “You’re just going to lead us all into a pocket dimension of your own creation, which you made just for containing one of Hell’s most powerful demons?”

Coyote fluttered his eyelashes at her, warmer and more laughing than when he looked at Sam. “I like to go all out on a second date. You want I should shape it like a gingerbread house?”

Sam pulled a face at him, but his heart wasn’t into it. Because when the god had said that lovely she-
beast, he had gestured to the far side of the motel carpark. And, well. Sam wasn’t so much into anthropomorphising the car as Dean and Dad (especially Dean), but... she was something special.

“Just,” he said, and turned back to meet Coyote’s eyes. “Promise my family will be safe?”

The god stepped in close, swaying his body in toward Sam. His hands came up to brush over the buttons of Sam’s jacket, then rose, to... to fix the collar of his shirt, where it had ridden up inside his jacket.

Sam felt his own breath puffed back at him, warm, from the warm body almost pressed against him.

Coyote winked. The bronze-gold streaks across his cheekbones glittered in the dark.

“Trust me?” he purred.

“Yes,” said Sam, “to keep your promises. Creatively.”

Coyote’s mouth quirked at the edge. Then he patted Sam’s chest. “Safe as I can manage,” he said, and that was his business tone. “Got no quarrel with your family. Can’t say the same for the old Zayzay, but so long as nobody goes off the rails with stupid manly revenge show-downs it should all go smooth as you like. Execution, not taunting or duelling or letting him taunt you. Got it?”

Sam huffed. “Stupid manly revenge,” he said, and stepped back. “Doesn’t sound like my family at all.”

He trailed his fingers over the Impala’s bonnet, as he made his way toward the motel room. She felt warm under his touch: not warm as if she were cooling down from a drive, but warm like welcome, and home.

Well, at least she couldn’t be a dick about this.

He squared his shoulders, and knocked.

It was Dean who opened the door. His face did a lot of things very quickly.

Sam went in for the manly hug, because it was easier to deal with Dad when Dean was in protective-big-brother mode than when he was being a dutiful yes-man. And also because it had been over a year, and a year was a hell of a long time to be away from the centre of—from your brother.

“Dude,” Dean protested.

And Sam shouldn’t think it, because he was grown up now and this wasn’t his life anymore, but Dean still smelled like Dean and it felt like coming home.

It lasted three seconds before Dean felt obliged to pull back, and lower his voice a few notches, and punch Sam in the arm. Sam would’ve thought the occasion deserved at least five by Dean’s usual standards. Apparently living with just Dad was bad for him.

“Thought you were gonna call,” he grunted.

“Sam,” said Dad from behind him.

Just that. Just that one word. Just a fucking statement of Sam’s name. No apologies, no enthusiasm, no—

Sam tamped down the anger, and stepped into the room. “Dad,” he replied, just as neutral.
“Everything going okay?”

Dad was sitting at the tiny table with his journal. Hadn’t bothered to stand up.

“Knew college would be bad for you,” he said, looking Sam up and down. “You’ve gone soft.”

“Actually, I can bench-press a fifth more than I could when I left,” said Sam shortly, “and run two miles more without a break. Funny what regular access to a gym and a diet that isn’t just day-old takeout will do for you.”

He felt Dean go tense beside him.

“Anyway,” Sam said, before Dad could reply, “Dad, Dean, this is Jo—Jo Harvelle. Apparently you know her mom?”

“And my dad,” said Jo, with a smile that Sam didn’t quite recognise on her. “John Winchester knew my dad.”

“I did.” Dad stood up, at that, but didn’t offer to shake her hand. “Bill talked a lot about Joe. His son.”

“Yes,” said Jo, still not sparing a glance for Dean, though he was now wearing his ‘lady-killer’ smile. “He tried hard to be proud of his son. And he died before he found out he was wrong.”

The back of Sam’s neck prickled, and the inside of his wrist.

“Funny how easy it is to make that mistake, ain’t it?” drawled the other voice from the door; and Sam pretended he didn’t enjoy watching Dad’s face as he took in Coyote’s appearance.

“So you’ve been hunting,” said Dad heavily, “with the Harvelle... kid... and with this?”

“This,” said Sam, with a smile, “is the guy who actually caught the demon.”

“Hi!” said Coyote brightly. “Name’s Reynard.”

“And what do you do?”

“I,” he said, with deadpan glee, “am a janitor.”

There was a silence.

“Okay, so!” said Dean. “Who wants a drink?”

“Oh, honey,” drawled Coyote. “From a guy with an arse as cute as that? Anything.”

Dad’s face went blank.
It was an awkward drive, in the Impala.

Jo had opted to ride in the Trickster’s illusory ‘car’. Which was bubble-shaped and pink, with bright yellow upholstery. And eyelashes over the headlamps. Sam distinctly saw Dean give it a look of fascinated horror.

Dean, of course, called shotgun. Which meant Sam got to sit in the back and make eye contact with Dad in the rear-vision mirror.

“So,” said Dad, in the tone of voice that meant he hadn’t had enough to drink and was trying to be jovial, “how’s California? Met any nice girls yet?”

Sam cocked an eyebrow at the rear-vision mirror. “Plenty. Shame I’m not a nice boy, isn’t it?”

“Come on, guys, really?” muttered Dean.

“Okay,” said Sam politely. “Well, then. Jo’s a nice girl.”

Dad glowered reflexively. “Does his mom know?”

“I’m sorry,” said Sam, “whose mom?”

“Sam,” said Dean.

“Does she look like a guy to you?” Sam snapped. “And if she didn’t, would that be any of your goddamn business? Seriously, dad, I’ve had to deal with enough douches cracking jokes about her in the dorm without putting up with this shit from you too, okay?”

“Watch your tone,” said Dad, in measured, crushing syllables. “I never pretended to be ‘up with’ the slang, boy, you know that. Does Ellen know that you and her kid are… sharing a room?”

Sam crossed his arms and stared out the window.

“If you’re going to sulk about that,” droned on the familiar, dismissive voice over the familiar rumble of the Impala’s engine, and Sam could feel all that independence he’d worked on dropping away until he was that rebellious kid kicking the seat in front of him, “what about the other one? What’s he doing here? You don’t really expect me to believe that he caught a demon? He doesn’t look like he could handle a broom, let alone—”

Dad’s phone rang. Dean picked up.

“Winchester;” then, “No, his son. Dean. No—yes, ma’am—look, he left you that message because we wanted to check—uh—sorry? Look, d’you want me to put Dad on?” Already Dean’s voice had slipped from manly rumble to bashfulness. “Uh. No ma’am. And the knife that she says kills de—? Yes ma’am. Uh-huh.”

He hung up, and cleared his throat.

“Story checks out,” he said gruffly. “Apparently when her daughter decided to go to Stanford Ellen found out Sam was heading there too. Pulled some strings and got them in a dorm together figuring that if something came for one of them they’d both be safer that way.”

“Huh,” said Sam. Jo hardly ever talked about her mother, but that certainly sounded like something Jo would do if she had kids.

“They let a girl and a boy room together at that school of yours?”
“Wasn’t out as trans when she started,” said Sam, through gritted teeth.

Dean shifted in his seat. “Also she, uh. Sounds pretty pissed at you, Dad.”

“That’s Ellen for you,” grunted Dad.

“Hey,” said Dean. “Turn here. He’s—”

They swung off the road, into a lane that Sam knew all too well wasn’t there.

When they pulled up by a stereotypical decrepit old barn, Jo was leaning against Coyote’s ride. But the god, for once, wasn’t engaged, wasn’t posing. He was trailing his fingers over the wall of the barn, head tilted to one side as if he were listening; and there was a faraway frown on his face.

“Something wrong?” said Sam.

Coyote shook his head, one sharp movement. Then he turned around, and the tension melted away into his usual fluid swagger, his usual predatory grin.

“No rescue party on the way, hot stuff,” he said, and slapped Sam’s thigh. “No need to worry about your pretty little face getting all banged up.”

“You’d better stop talking to my sons like that, you goddamn fairy,” growled Dad. He stopped in front of Coyote, just a little too close not to be looming; and Dean fell in with him, shoulder to broad shoulder.

And the god stared at Dad—*gaped* at him—then burst out into a peal of laughter as close to joyous as anything Sam had ever heard from him.

“Sweetcheeks, my most righteous honey-man, if you’d ever met a real fairy you wouldn’t bother with Jehovah’s damnation,” he gasped. “But your guy’s in there, dressed for the slaughter.”

“Yeah, how do we know that?” said Dean. “Demons can possess any human. Could be anything in there and we wouldn’t know.”

(They even walked in sync, Sam noticed with an ache, and wondered if that had always been true or only since they’d got rid of their discordant third.)

“Wait, they can?” Coyote’s eyes widened comically. “Damn. I can see how you’ve lasted this long with smarts like that, cupcake. Let’s say I’ve got my own reasons for keeping tabs on this one, yeah?”

Dad looked him over, suspicious, testing. “What colour are his eyes?”

Coyote snorted. “Too easy. Anybody could find that out. D’you know what the yellow eyes means? It means he’s one of Hell’s generals.” Dean went tense, and his eyes snapped over to Sam, who felt suddenly hot and breathless. “Now, just what he’s been doing all this for I couldn’t say, but: house fires, same year as yours, across the states and worldwide, few score at least, same MO, on the night a child in that house was six months old. The ones you might’ve tracked down: Miller, in Saginaw, Michigan. Ho, New York. Beckett, Guthrie, Oklahoma. Stanuovo, in the city of angels. Then there’s a bunch of others, a whole lot of which aren’t in America so you probably wouldn’t notice them, would you Mr. Small Town And Muscle Car? More lately, he’s been active in Salvation, Iowa, and New Orleans. Four months ago, Minneapolis. He’ll hit Salvation, Iowa next. Matching your data sets yet, honeybunch? Getting through to your whiskey-soaked vengeance-plated head? This ain’t just about you, boys. This wasn’t some personal malice. This is something big Hell’s cooking up and
he’s at the heart of it. You gank him, things go haywire. Could be better, could be worse. There’ll be at least a few powerful demons gunning for you, though. You sure—you really sure you wanna get in on this?"

There was a long silence. Jo straightened up from where she was leaning on the car, mouth half-open and stunned. Then she took a few steps forward, to Sam’s side, and set her shoulder against his.

“You,” said Sam, and licked his lips. His voice felt very far away. “You never mentioned any of this.”

The god’s eyes swung toward him, golden and deep and somehow older than they had seemed even when he had been lounging in his hall.

“It was for all of you to hear. You wanna choose this, you’re all gonna be in this together.”

“Who are you?” said Dad; and he was very near to going for his gun.

The god showed his teeth in a laugh. “Someone who knows more than you,” he said. “Someone who hunts what deserves to be hunted.”

“I met him a couple of months back,” said Sam, mind still buzzing over the implications of six months old, six months old. “Some other hunters got the jump on me and he helped me out when he didn’t have to. In circumstances that—look, if he says he can deliver, I believe him.”

Dad’s gaze swung heavily toward the door of the barn, and hefted Jo’s knife in his hand.

“You boys,” he said, without looking at them, “you stay outside. This is for me to do alone.”

“Dad, no,” protested Dean. “What if he gets the jump on you?”

“That’s an order, son.”

“Like hell,” said Sam. “We’re all going in. If we do it we do it together.”

“Oh, and you get a say?” Dean snapped back at once, changing his target. “You haven’t been here for more than a year. He could have died for all you knew.”

Sam gaped at him. “He drove me away. He told me, you walk out that door, don’t even bother—”

“Buckle up, buttercup!” And suddenly there he was, all up in Sam’s face, mouth grinning, eyes deadly. “Demon time for you. What’s your priority, muffinface? Yep. Thought so.”

And a slap to the back of Sam’s jeans, and he was stumbling through the gingerbread-scented door, into the barn.

The demon—Azazel—looked normal.
Not normal like Coyote did, playing with his human appearance, making it his own and laughing at the idea of normality at the same time. No, this thing looked normal like a camouflaged snake looks normal: innocuous, and ordinary, and entirely deadly.

On the other hand, Coyote had not only hog-tied him but had actually shoved an apple in his mouth. Which… maybe Sam was just a bit light-headed by this stage, or maybe it was the effect of a lifetime spent with Dean, but he was really starting to enjoy this guy’s sense of humour.

… god. This pagan god’s sense of murderous, demeaning humour.

Azazel looked straight past Dad and Dean, and focussed right on Sam. His eyes glittered, and turned yellow.

And there was no reason for Sam to remember that colour but it ran straight to the cold, terrified core of him, the stuff of incoherent nightmares that you never remember in the morning, and he knew it was true. Six months old. This thing, standing over his cot. This thing, ripping his mother apart.

This thing, destroying his family and life.

Azazel’s teeth bit into the apple. It fell to the floor, red with a slice of white gouged out, and the demon crunched as the sweet juices ran down his chin. Then he smiled.

“My boy,” he said, purring, gentle, just for a moment so very like Coyote that it made Sam’s skin crawl with the memory of touch. “I wondered which of my special children had arranged this. Well, this is a turn-up for the books. I almost bypassed your mother altogether, she looked so… unremarkable.”

Dean shot him in the head.

“Pretty sure we get to make the ‘yo mamma’ jokes here, you yellow-eyed son of a bitch,” he growled as the demon shook his head, and there, there was the brother Sam remembered. He didn’t even have to think about circling around to mirror Dean’s movements: it just worked that way.

Azazel waggled his head about, and gaped his jaw back and forth, and winced dramatically as the hole in his forehead closed up.

“Unremarkable?” said Dad, low and dangerous. “You murdered my Mary and you can sit there and say that?”

Azazel arched a puzzled, polite eyebrow at Dad; and now there was no resemblance to Coyote. Now he was all the gentleman.

“I’m afraid I’ve played with the viscera of many unremarkable Marys. Whether any of them belonged to you…” and he was turning back to Sam, a cool dismissal of everybody else in the room, of the gun Dean had pointed at his head, of Dad’s decades-long vengeance rant, of Coyote leaning silent in the doorway.

His gaze fell on Sam with the intensity of Coyote’s, but none of the playfulness. Though it looked kind, it skewered him to the spot.

“Your mother had potential when I first met her,” he said, mild as sweet arsenic. “She had power. By the time I killed her, though, she was… domestic. She’d let your father reduce her. No, I barely remember killing her. She wasn’t important.”

Sam stepped forward, not too close to the edge of the complex circle of sigils that held the demon
trapped.

“But I was?”

“What was that creature that dragged me here?” went on the low sickening curl of the demon’s voice. “Was that you commanding it? My word, dear boy, you are farther along your path than I could ever have hoped. Oh, you will rise deliciously.”

Delicious. Sam’s eyes flickered over to Coyote, to the memory of a lascivious look and a lascivious tongue and all that it had done to him, and met eyes hard and cold as steel.

Somehow, it was reassuring to have that at his back. Especially given the way his father’s eyes were swinging back and forth between him and Azazel.

He squared his shoulders, and turned on the demon.

“He owed me a favour. What were you doing in my room that night, if you didn’t come to kill my mom?”

“Let me look at you, dear boy. You are one of my special children. The special child. I thought I would have to spend years winnowing that one grain of wheat from the chaff. But you—you.” He leaned forward, licking his lips, snaking out his tongue to lap the apple juice and blood from his chin. “Seeing you here, my boy… I only wish that you could have developed your powers further before we came to this.

“All those house fires. All those children, the same age as me?”

“Oh, they hardly matter now, do they? They can do as they like. I imagine you’re going to kill me, so who knows where they’ll end up? They weren’t due to come into their powers for another year or two. You, dear boy… you are a surprise. I have plans for you.”

“Okay, that’ll do.” Dean’s hand closed on Sam’s collar, pulling him back, breaking the hypnosis of that voice. Sam almost lashed out at him before he knew; and when he looked down he saw that the toes of his boots were almost touching the lines of the circle.

“Look at me, little brother,” and Dean’s eyes were there angry and worried in front of him, Dean’s hand warm on his chest. “Yeah, that’s it. Okay? Not listening to him. He’s just stirring you up. Demons lie, it’s what they do. We’re not here to chat.”

Dad stepped into the circle and slashed the knife across the demon’s throat.

The body jerked, and lit up like fire from the inside. The fire raced across it as it jolted in its chair, and the last thing Sam saw of Azazel was the yellow eyes wide and startled, and still fixed on Sam’s face.

Outside, thunder cracked. The ground shook.

The corpse slumped in its chair. Dean’s hand trembled on Sam’s chest.

“That was for our mom, you son of a bitch,” he growled.

Then Dad shoved Coyote up against the wall, knife to his throat.

“You’re not human.”

“Whoa,” Dean protested. “Easy, yeah?”
Coyote shrugged, grinning into Dad’s face as the wind picked up to a howl outside. “Man’s got a point. I’ve got a few extra *tricks* up my sleeve.”

Jo came running in and stopped abruptly. Sam stepped forward to catch at Dad’s shoulder, blood going from cold to racing all at once. Because maybe the wooden stake couldn’t kill a god, but that knife...?

“Dad, don’t. He’s a Trickster, okay? Which means he’s amoral but he’s got a strict sense of justice. And right now he’s on our side.”

“Okay, but *guys*, the sky—?” said Jo.

“The hell’s a Trickster?”

“Uh,” said Dean. “Pagan gods, right? Go after dicks, just desserts, that sort of thing?”

Sam blinked at him. Dean scowled, and crossed his arms defensively. “What? Some of Bobby’s books are kinda neat, okay?”

“Also,” said Coyote, smiling sweetly, “I’d suggest that right now you guys need a little extra juice to help cover your arses. Those omens you were tracking here? Prophetic. Predicting *his* death. And also the inevitable swarm and chaos that will come after. Time to move our butts, kids. We can all stab each other later.”

“Hold on,” said Sam, “you’ve kept your promise—”

Jo darted forward and grabbed his hand, tugging him toward the door. “*Gift horse*, Sam. Orthodontics when the sky isn’t filling up with black smoke, okay?”

Five disorienting space-hops across three different countries later, Coyote dropped Dean, Dad, and the Impala outside a motel in Nebraska.

Dad gave him and Jo a curt, wary nod; gave Sam a longer look, and clapped him wordlessly on the shoulder; then strode off to check in. He looked smaller from behind than Sam remembered him, and he hadn’t said a word for half an hour.

“Uh,” said Dean, and jerked a thumb over his shoulder after Dad. “He’s probably going to get pissed as soon as we’re checked in. Think it’s a whiskey night. I should...”

“Yeah,” said Sam.

They stood there for a moment.

“You’ve got my number now, right?” said Sam, kicking at a stone. “Use it. I don’t want to—look, I never meant to cut you out, okay? It was just... hard. All of it.”
Dean shrugged, but the quick look he shot from under his lashes was grateful. “Sam. Uh. You’re—
you’re taking care of yourself, right?”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Says the guy who hunts monsters for a living. Hey, you should. Uh.” He ran a
hand through his hair. “I mean, there’s no need to stay on the road now, right? You could maybe…
come to California too.”

Dean snorted. “Wouldn’t wanna cramp your style, kid.”

“Shut up,” Sam shot back, automatic. “No, really. I’d like it. Having you there. I mean, I’ve been
thinking about finding a place off campus—campus housing’s shit for the cost of it, and Jo’s not
really comfortable there, so if we were looking for a place together—and three’s cheaper than two
—”

“I—wow.” Dean looked up for a moment longer this time, something wavering and incredulous in
his look. Then he scoffed, and swaggered. “C’mon, Sammy. Can you imagine me, settling down?
Holding a job?”

“Yes,” said Sam, holding his gaze, refusing to let him laugh it off. “I can. Look, man, you’ve
basically been my home all my life. It wasn’t Dad looking after me.”

“Lay off him.” Taking refuge in the familiar grumble.

“Okay, okay.” Sam shoved his hands into his jacket pockets, huddled into its warmth. “I’m not—
just. Promise me you’ll think about it?”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Oh, put away those puppy-dogs. Fine. I’ll think about it. Just… right now I
gotta look out for Dad, y’know?”

Sam felt an unfamiliar ache. Maybe he’d never realised how deeply Dean always had to be looking
after someone. “I know,” he said. “I know. Look, Dean—about what the demon said.”

“Nope.” That made Dean look at him, sudden and certain. “Not gonna hear it. Look, Sammy. Even
if there was anything to it, whatever he had planned for you, it’s not happening now. We cut it short.
It’s done, gone. You’re fine.”

Sam huffed and looked away, unsatisfied. “Okay. Fine. Go and—go do your thing.”

He dragged Dean into another hug before they left; and this time, though Dean still grumbled,
without Dad looking on he didn’t pull away at once. Sam thought maybe he even leaned into it a bit.

Sam turned back to Coyote and Jo.

“Well?” said the god, eyes mocking; and he lifted his hand, and snapped his fingers.

The dorm block at Stanford materialised around Sam. Jo was there beside him. Coyote was nowhere
to be seen.

Sam swore.

“What?” said Jo, with a yawn.

“If he thinks he’s getting away without answering—” snapped Sam, and looked down at the coywolf
on his wrist. “Okay, so he can make the writing appear, but you sounded like you’d been talking to
him, not just hearing from him?”
“Yeah, you…” Jo reached over and laid two fingers on the tattoo. “Just touch it and you can think at him. Like a prayer, I guess. You can sort of feel it click into place. Look, I’m going to bed. Slaughtering demonic generals was fun and all but I’ve got class at ten.”

Sam grunted and nodded. Then, as she was turning to go, he reached out and put an arm around her waist.

“Thanks,” he said quietly, and hugged her. “And. Sorry my dad’s a dick.”

She leaned in against his chest and patted his arm. “You don’t have to white-knight it all the time, y’know. He’s a hunter. Big manly men. Had his type coming through Mom’s bar all the time when I was growing up. I can take it.”

“Shouldn’t have to,” Sam growled, and cupped the back of her head, and kissed her hair. “You shouldn’t have to.”

“Yep,” she said, and tapped his cheek. “You go rage at the world some more, Samson. Eventually you’ll run out of things to punch.”

When she was gone he breathed out, and stalked around to the back of the building, to the fire escape, where Coyote had waited before.

The tattoo seemed slightly raised under his fingertips. He’d noticed it before, every time he ran his fingers over it. He’d never tried to use it, though.

Jo was right. As soon as he focussed, the connection was… right there. Wide open and clear; and it felt exactly like him.

Get back here, you little shit.

“Sammy, Sammy. Is that any way to talk to your benefactor?”

He turned around.

The god was grinning down at him from the first landing of the stairs, lounging against the thin iron rail.

Sam just stared up at him, chest heaving, feeling all the surge and swell within him settle, and gather, and ready itself to focus on that one single singular target.

His fists bunched at his sides.

Coyote propped his chin on his hand. “What,” he sneered, “blood still up? You need to punch it out again?” The quirk of an eyebrow in the dark. “Fuck it out?”

Sam couldn’t help the slick wave of heat that slid through every part of his body at that word, at the way it flicked off Coyote’s lip and clicked on his tongue. He felt it deep inside him, the hot phantom shove of fingers, of tongue, of—

“Why,” said Sam, biting down on all of that, “did Azazel call me ‘special’?”

“You’d have to ask him,” said Coyote. “Oh wait, you can’t, he’s dead.”

“I’m asking you.”

“And I respect your quirky lifestyle choices.” Coyote pulled an extravagantly rainbow sucker out of
the air, and drew his tongue slowly and provocatively along its rim. “What d’you think a minor pagan god would know about the major workings of hell’s minions, honeybunch?”

But his eyes were too bright on Sam’s face: too careful.

Sam laid his hand on the banister. The cold black iron bit into his skin.

“Not asking what a minor god knows,” he said, quiet and furious. “I’m asking what you think. Seems you’ve got either a very good ear or a gift for being canny.”

Coyote’s lip curled back into a sneer. “Enjoying ordering a god around, boy?”

Sam set his foot on the bottom step, and advanced.

“Here’s what I can tell you,” said Coyote, rolling fluidly onto one elbow to watch him come. “You’re in trouble. His guys have been watching you for years, and now they’re either gonna be pissed or looking for new management. Either way, sweetheart, you’re gonna wanna brush up on your exorcism rituals. And get into the habit of saying ‘Christo’ to every new acquaintance. And hey, wear an iron ring so you can see who flinches when you shake their hand. You could even punch out ghosts. It’d be cool.”

Sam took him by the throat and shoved him up against the rail. He felt warm and lithe and fluid pinned there under Sam’s body, and there was laughter rumbling through him, though his face was pure and sarcastic curiosity. Sam bunched his fists in Coyote’s jacket, riding on the adrenalin of daring, of doing it, thudding in his head with the rage and the desire so he couldn’t tell which was which.

“My powers? What has this got to do with you, Loki? It wasn’t coincidence Gordon brought me to you, was it? You said I ‘interest’ you even before we struck a deal. What’s in all of this for you?”

And the god’s head tipped slowly to one side, and the curl slid from his mouth and the tease from his eyes, and whatever inappropriate suggestion he’d been about to make fell away. This close, Sam could see the individual flecks of gold shadowing over his lids; and he could see the surreal gold flare in the depths of his eyes, when he looked at Sam as if he were looking closer, as if he were looking through.

“My boy,” he said, low and sad; and he lifted a hand, and laid it on the side of Sam’s head, smoothing his cheekbone with the thumb. “Knew just where to hit, didn’t he? Gotta be a reason you’ve felt like a freak all your life?”

Sam tried to flinch away, but the god’s grip was suddenly iron, and his eyes filled Sam’s world. “And the paranoia too. Why does Sammy Winchester deserve good things? Can’t be just what it looks like. They’ve got their claws in you already, don’t they? You give in to that kind of thinking, kid, and they do win.”

“What do they want?” Sam growled, fighting back the prickling heat behind his eyes. “What do you want?”

“Me?” A smirk flashed across Coyote’s mouth, and he shifted his hand: pressed his thumb to Sam’s chin, guided it down to drop a kiss on his lips, almost gentle. “What’d you think I meant when I said ‘special’? ‘Cos if it’s ‘potential for grand demonic plans’ I got some news for Jo, and that baby you saw me heal, and a couple of dozen other favourites of mine around the globe. I told you, I like to keep an eye on people who interest me.”

Sam swallowed, voiceless, searching his face for signs that he was lying, but it was impossible to tell.
“Also,” said Coyote, and dropped his hand to grope at the back of Sam’s jeans, “you’ve got some great assets.”

Sam scowled reflexively and let him go, swayed back half a step, but Coyote stayed leaning comfortably against the stair rail as if there were nowhere else he’d rather be.

“And them…” he said, studying Sam closely. “Look. You really want my guess?”

“Yeah,” said Sam, and cleared his throat, and leaned against the rail beside him, not looking at him, gulping in air.

“The human soul,” said Coyote lazily. “Powerful thing. In fact, that’s where most supernatural power in the world comes from. That’s what worship does. Lends the god something of the power of the humans’ souls. Charges our batteries. All those offerings? Literal midsummer feast. Yours was a delicious dessert, by the way.”

Sam’s head snapped around. Coyote arched an eyebrow. “Ooh, don’t like that idea, do we? Relax, bucko, it’s not like a demon deal. You didn’t give me your soul. You just let me touch it. Think of it like a blood donation: you were back at full strength in a day or two. So. All that power sloshing around inside you. Most humans never consciously use it. But it’s possible. Manifests in some people. Psychics are the most common, but there’s others. Telepaths and so on. My guess would be that you’re one of those humans who has the potential to tap into that sort of power. Like all those other kids he was talking about. And he was keeping an eye on a bunch of you, hoping to persuade you to go dark side with it. For some great fancy hell scheme. That’s all.”

“That’s all?” Sam echoed, sarcastic; but the sick feeling in his chest was easing.

“Human power, remember,” drawled the god, sounding like he was getting bored with the subject, fingers trailing over Sam’s belt. “Nothing unnatural or freakish about it. Nothing evil except for those few people who decide it means they’re above petty humanity now and start acting out because they’re dicks. Or who go all angsty because they think it means they’re evil and are open to any desperate suggestion, which is obviously the line he was trying on you. If there was anything non-human in you, I’d know. Okay? Okay. Good talk.”

“Then why’d he kill Mom?” Sam demanded, one last flare of aching anger.

Coyote shrugged, and slipped his fingers up Sam’s back, under his jacket. “Vengeance quest kick-off? Fridging the woman to drive the supervillain origin arc? Cliché, but they are demons. Can we make out against the wall yet?”

Sam felt himself smile. “What are you, sixteen?”

“When you’re immortal,” declared the god, “there’s no reason to grow up. Also you’re hot when you’re angry. Which is most of the time, lucky me.”

“Hm.” Sam turned to face him, leaning on the rail with one elbow. “Thought you were a strictly one-night kind of guy, Peter Pan.”

“Ugh. That kid’s a menace. This one time he got all fascinated by me and kept following me around for almost a week until he got distracted by a butterfly and forgot about me. Got in the way of some of my best tricks.”

“Mmm. Seriously?”

“I’m never serious.” Coyote’s fingers slipped ticklishly around Sam’s waist, fanned out over his
belly. “And you’re falling asleep, aren’t you.”

“Ugh.” Sam yawned. The desire was there, burning deep in his gut, but it felt distant, hazed over by the warmth he was sinking into.

He leaned forward, blinked his eyes open, smirked down into the hazy lazy bronze of the god. Leather slipped between his fingers, almost velvety as suede, and the scent of crushed thyme (which had been giving him inappropriate reactions to herbs ever since midsummer) rose around him as he slipped his fingers around Coyote’s throat, and squeezed lightly, and lowered his head.

“I…” he breathed, almost against Coyote’s lips; and they opened, expecting, curving. “… yeah. Think I’m crashing.”

And he stepped back, and turned, and walked down the stairs.

“You should know better,” came the growled warning behind him, but this time he heard the laugh in it.

“We just killed a demon general,” he shot back over his shoulder, “so what the hell.”

Moving off campus only made sense, even if you didn’t have demons keeping an eye out for you.

Sam was barely surprised when a place came up on the market with ridiculously low rent and five rather luscious bedrooms right in the most convenient area of town. He was even less surprised, on inspecting it closely, to find discreet warding burned into all apertures, some he recognised and some he didn’t. Consequently he wasn’t surprised at all, when he and Jo signed the tenancy agreement, to find the owner’s name listed as ‘Robin Goodfellow’.

He did wonder, though, just how many favours Coyote was going to heap on them, and when he meant to call them in.
Thimbles and kisses

Chapter Notes

Yes, Jo really does need some queer theory 101: her thoughts about her own gender and sexuality here reflect her own confused relationship with her body and involve some internalised transphobia.

Jo.

“Here’s the big secret, honey,” said Jess, and tucked her perfectly styled blonde curls behind her perfect ear. “No woman anywhere ever is good at bra shopping. Like, ever.”

A girl like Jess was everything Jo should hate. Rich Malibu blonde with Daddy’s plastic? Check. All the most vapid mannerisms combined with unfairly high test scores in class? Check. Natural blonde, natural woman, naturally flirtatious and friendly, innocent of the darker things in the world and had apparently never had any troubles at all in her life: everything that Jo, with all the sharp jagged edges of her teenage years, ought to resent instead of want.

Jo? Jo was basically white trash. And also a hunter. And there was a pagan god who left groceries in her fridge every week.

Also there was that whole thing where she still wasn’t used to having breasts and not a dick.

“I don’t even know what ‘comfortable’ is meant to feel like,” she grumbled, and poked at the strange new flesh where it swelled out to fill the cup of blue lace on her chest. “How do real girls get used to feeling something squeezing their chest in all the time?”

“Well, either I’m talking to myself in this change room, darling, or you’re as real as I am,” said Jess, irrepressibly cheerful, impossible not to like, “and we just need to find you the right band size. Look —”

And then she was pulling off her own exquisitely soft cream and pink shirt to show her own bra.

It was pink too. There was a darling little white bow in the centre that kind of made Jo want to throw up with the cute. Except for how she was still stuck on the fact that a girl had just taken her top off in front of her.

… which didn’t matter because Jo was a girl now.

A lifetime of being taught that Real Men were meant to salivate over a nice cleavage didn’t go away easily just because you suddenly had ovaries and a clit. Especially when you were used to looking at them with a weird mix of lust and envy. And then feeling like a sleaze.

“—the band should sit flat like that, you see. Look—“ and she reached out to brush fingertips over the reddened skin high on Jo’s left side. “It’s digging into your side here, and riding too high. That means the band size is too small.”

“But the next size up was too large,” Jo complained.
“No, no, honey, the cup size was too large. So’s this one, look, you’re all loose up top.” Her fingers flicked upwards a little, toward the underside of Jo’s breast, then the little trail of warmth vanish and she cupped her own. It was fuller than Jo’s, luscious and plump, and as her fingers traced the edge of the lace her eyes never left Jo’s. They were warm and brown, and maybe just a bit nervous. “See, it should sit like this: just nicely filling the cup, so it looks like the lace is painted on. We can get into push-ups and strapless bras later, right now you just need something that makes you feel comfortable. And gorgeous.”

Jo felt her cheeks flush, and her hand lift. “Can I,” she said, and stopped.

Jess’ face lit up, and she grabbed Jo’s hand and squeezed it a bit, lifted it encouragingly toward her own chest. “Of course, honey. Anything you like.”

The pink lace was faintly scratchy under Jo’s work-rough fingertips; but the flesh underneath was soft.

Jess’ hand settled, feather-light, on Jo’s waist: just above the belt of her jeans, where the skin was warm.

Jo had kind of assumed she’d like boys, once she’d transitioned. Like normal girls. And Sam was definitely hot, and Jo wouldn’t turn him down, except that he was far too valuable a friend to risk and also the idea of anything actually inside her still made her feel a bit squeamish. But Sam was more like family: there wasn’t the kind of burning imperative that she’d sort of expected to feel once she was really a girl. And Jess’ touches were… very nice.

Jo bit her lip, and glanced up at Jess under her lashes. Jess’ cheeks were faintly pink, and her lips were slightly parted. Jo could see a trace of the damp inside, beyond the perfect gloss and liner. Her eyes were fixed on Jo’s; and when their eyes met, Jo couldn’t help a small grin.

Jess positively blushed, and smiled brilliantly back.

“I, uh,” said Jo, and dropped her hand. “I see. So which one do you think…”

Jess giggled. Then she turned to the chair where she’d piled an intimidating collection of textures and colours, and pulled out something of a soft dark ivory.

“There. This one should be more your size. Oh, if you think this is bad wait until we start looking at dresses for you, sweetie, I swear no two designers for women use the same sizing system. But don’t worry, I know all about it.”

“Dresses?” said Jo, alarmed. “Not here? I’m a thrift store girl, Jess, even just one or two of these is going to be more than I can—“

Jess patted her shoulder. “Don’t worry, this is my treat.”

Jo hesitated, fumbling with the clasp at her back. “I can’t—Jess, I’m not a charity case.”

Jess leaned forward to help her, reaching both arms around to flick the clasp open with practised fingers. Skin brushed skin, lace brushed lace; and Jess took the moment to drop a slightly breathless kiss on Jo’s cheek.

“Oh my god, honey, no, you’re my doll. You know I love playing dress-up and you’re indulging me wonderfully. Consider this payback for not telling me it was your birthday last week, you terrible thing.”
Jo laughed suddenly and hugged her, maybe just a bit to keep her closer and feel her there for a minute. Not even because of *that*—or not entirely. Just. It was so strange to be close and easy with someone, especially another woman. To be allowed to be here and to be *her*.

And not to feel like a predator.

“Thank you,” she said, and meant it for everything.

Jess hugged her back, tight, then helped ease the first bra off over her shoulders. “Don’t mention it. We girls have to stick together, after all.”

And that was the thing. Jess came across as a rich, entitled blonde bimbo, but she was warmly, fiercely, ever so easily just *there* for every woman. She seemed to have hundreds of friends and remember and care about every detail of the lives of every one of them, to know how to bring out all their strengths and make their day better. She *should* make Jo feel like white trash: but instead she made her feel like a girl, like *one of the girls*.

When the new bra was in place, and Jess (standing maybe a little closer than she had to even in such a small space) had helped, with light touches and murmured advice, to get it sitting just so around her torso and to tuck each breast in to sit neatly, Jo turned to look in the mirror.

Jess made a pleased noise and stood behind her, hands warm on her shoulders and breath warm in her ear.

“Look at you,” she said. “Perfect. *Beautiful*.”

Jo tried to laugh it off, but Jess rolled her eyes, and ran fingers through Jo’s hair, meeting her eyes in the mirror.

“You going to grow it out?”

“Do you think that’d work?”

“Oh yes. It’s cute at this length, but oh my god, you would be *adorable* with long hair. And it’s such fun to play with too, you can’t *imagine*.”

Jo leaned back into her, and turned her face a bit toward her. Jess’ arms slid quite naturally around her middle, high up around her belly. Jo’s skin felt hyper-sensitive, especially where it was cupped by the lace.

“So,” breathed Jo, “when’s *your* birthday?”

Jess hummed, and nuzzled in against her neck. “Two months.” Jo slid one of her hands up her own side, watching Jess’ gaze track it. It settled over Jess’ hand. “Big party at my place. You should totally come, if that’s your kind of thing.”

Jo laughed, hoarse. “Thanks but not so much. Had enough of that living with my mom. I mean, I can take it, it just… doesn’t really feel like fun to me.”

Jess smiled, and hid it in against Jo’s neck. Her fingers slid up a little higher, to brush the soft swell of skin just where the silky fabric began.

“Does this?”

*Oh.*
Jo squeezed her eyes shut at the sudden hot pulse between her legs (and shit, that was so very different to how it had felt before, was this what it was meant to be like?) and pressed back into her body. Because. It was one thing to imagine. It was another thing for Jess to actually touch her, touch her like that, to—

“I,” she said, and it came out breathless and low, hemmed in by the thought of people in the next stalls—“aren’t you into guys?”

“Oh yes.” The hand hovered where it was, not quite touching, not quite retreating. “I mean, seriously, I am incurably straight, guys are just—and your friend Sam is—but. Does it feel good? I can stop, I just. I really, really like making people feel good. And it… yes. There.”

Jo whined, as her hand (quite of its own accord) urged Jess’ higher. Cupping, holding, cradling, stroking. And, just ever so gently—exploring. Pinching.

So. That was what it felt like to get suddenly really wet.

Apparently it had taken her body a while to adapt to the idea of having different parts. But this, this felt right.

And she really, really wanted to be touched. Somehow her nipples apparently had a direct connection to—

“Uh.”

Jo went stiff, and stepped forward. Away. Stared at the door of the fitting room.

“So this isn’t because I’m really…”

“Jo, honey.” And Jess crossed her arms, and shook her head, and even laughed. “You are really a woman. A strong, amazing woman and I am so totally in awe of you. You don’t have as much experience as I do at acting like a woman, that’s all. And believe me, sweetie, it’s an act for all of us.”

Jo turned to stare at her. “Sounds kinda cynical.”

“Oh, I don’t mean that you can’t have fun with it. You’re not putting it on for their sake,” with a sweep of her hand out to the world. “You’re putting it on for yours. Because it’s fun and that’s who you like to be.”

… Huh.

Okay, so she was sweet and strong and smarter than she looked, but Jo had never got the impression that Jess had thought herself through that much.

“The sort of girl who’d get with a guy like Sam to please their mom?” she tried, half suspicious.

Jess sighed, and reached for her shirt, and pulled it back on. “Honestly, honey, Sam is the sweetest guy. And he is totally hot—I mean, right?—and Mom would adore him, with those sweet earnest eyes and the ambition and so on. Though, y’know, Daddy’d think he’s totally a gold-digger if he and I ever hooked up. He… well, I really do like him. Yes. I could totally see myself dating him.”

“But…?” Jo managed to disentangle herself from this bra on her own, and put it in the very small ‘to get’ pile before reaching for another.
“I don’t know, honey. I just don’t know. I mean, Mom’s been dropping hints about moving past this whole serial dating ‘stage’, about finding a nice guy to settle down with, maybe a ring, and…”

Jo snorted. “If Mom said that I’d walk out. I mean, not just to college.”

Jess giggled, and shook her head.

“Don’t get me wrong. I’ve dated a lot of guys, and that’s fun—and the sex is great—and I really do enjoy it. I just feel like I don’t really… feel right about them, you know? Or even about the idea of taking it further. Of love, you know. But of course everyone just says ‘Oh, wait until you meet Mr. Right, you’ll know’. Oh sweetie, that is totally your colour, just look at you.”

It was a deep rich burgundy, and when Jess turned her toward the mirror, for the first time Jo looked at herself and saw a woman. A hot, desirable woman.

She lost her breath for a moment. Then she reached back, arms crossing over her belly, and squeezed both of Jess’ hands.

“Maybe Sam is Mr. Right. If you give him a chance.”

“Maybe. It just doesn’t sound like me.”

Jo watched her own mouth in the mirror as it curved into a laugh. “Oh, I know that feeling.” Over her shoulder, Jess’ face grimaced with the realisation of irony. “Hey. You know,” said Jo, “I’m kind of an amateur at all this. I still have no idea what any of this means. You should spend more time around our place. Sam and me just got in a new housemate. And she’s gay, but she’s also—she just knows so much about how to talk and think about these things? Come back home with me for dinner.”

“Well,” said Jess, and cuddled up behind Jo with her hands around her belly, “so long as Sam isn’t cooking.”

Some months later.

“Spin the bottle?” said Sam. “Seriously? Again?”

“I like spin the bottle,” said Jo, and winked at Jess. “Charlie’s with me, aren’t you, Charlie?”

Charlie threw a peace sign back over her shoulder, and still managed to beat Dean in the last few seconds of Mario Kart.

“I would make out with fifty percent of the people who are not me in this room with relish,” she declared. “The rest of them—going to need another beer. Sorry, guys.”

“Landing on brothers means a respin,” said Dean automatically, and promptly lounged all over the couch when Charlie got up for a beer run.
“Um,” said Sam to Jess, and blushed. “My housemates. Sorry. I did say we could have gone out for post-show pizza.”

“Just because you’re dating her now doesn’t mean you get to keep her to yourself,” said Jo, and dragged Jess down onto the second couch with her. Jess promptly kicked off her heels and put her feet up on Jo’s lap.

Sam opened his mouth to protest that seeing a play together hadn’t really been a date, maybe—except that he sort of hoped it had been—and he wasn’t sure it hadn’t— and Jess hadn’t protested, except he still didn’t really know how to talk to Jess so he had no idea what the world looked like from her point of view, and—only by that time Charlie had shouldered him out of the doorway and plonked their tupperware container of dips and nibbles in his arms, and Fidget had padded in after her looking hopeful in the way that only a doggy face can, and Jess and Jo were deep in discussion of their most recent girly shopping trip and Dean was looking like he wasn’t sure whether to leer or pretend not to be listening or maybe listen just a bit too well, and… well, it was better just to set out the nibbles, and pile the cushions on the floor for the game.

Fidget had come with the house. Sort of.

Coyote had turned up a few days after they’d moved in, sneered at half their furniture and replaced it with a snap of his fingers with ridiculously luxurious objects that neither of them had any idea how to clean because he was, as he said, a hedonist and needed something pretty to lounge on when he dropped by to bother them. He’d then promptly encouraged his pet coywolf to lounge all over said luxurious objects and informed them cheerily that her name was Fidget, that she wouldn’t need feeding (he’d see that her body had all the nutrients it needed) but she liked having people around the place and also belly rubs, and had left them with a dog basket and treats and a doggy tooth brush and all appropriate bits and pieces.

Except a collar and leash. Which she didn’t really need. She understood most of what you said to her, then made up her own mind about whether to go along with it. And she was sensible enough not to eat anything really bad or wander into traffic, so.

Sam wanted to be annoyed about having a dog foisted on him, but nobody would have believed him. Besides, she had this way of pretending not to be watching him in the kitchen by lying just outside and plonking her chin on the ground and edging it stealthily forward around the lintel to snuffle at whatever was going on which… yeah.

She did really love belly rubs. And finding baby birds which had fallen or hopped out of their nest and bringing them, irritated and damp, to Sam’s hands, then guarding them jealously until they were strong enough to fly away. And loping along beside Sam on his morning walks. And, for some reason, carrots.

Sam was a bit besotted. Dean cussed her out and pretended to ignore her and secretly petted her when he thought nobody was looking. Jo used her as a footrest and shamelessly exploited her not-quite-completely-a-real-animal status to tell her to fetch whatever text book or water bottle she
wanted without having to dig her way out of the blanket nest she always studied in. Charlie called her Nymeria, and had long serious conversations at her whenever she was thinking something out, and always took her along when she went out at night.

Jo had pointed out that Charlie didn’t technically need to do that, because if she was really in danger she could always call Coyote himself, but Charlie said that she *liked* having a badass scary wolf thing padding along beside her, thank you very much.

“Okay, who’s on timer?” said Charlie, dropping five cushions down next to Dean and laying claim to his shoulder to lean on.

“Timer?” said Dean.

“Got it,” said Sam, fiddling with his phone to set it to stopwatch mode.

“Right,” said Jo, “I’m starting.”

The bottle spun, and landed on Jess.

Jess laughed, and reached for the dice, and nuzzled in against Jo’s ear. “You meant to do that, didn’t you.”

“Spinning the bottle is my superpower,” said Jo smugly, and wrapped her arm around Jess’ waist.

Jess rolled a three, and pouted. Sam set the timer to thirty seconds. “Go.”

These two were used to each other, by now. Their mouths together were affectionate, and giggly, and hot. Jo hooked two fingers into the belt of Jess’ dress. Jess’ hand trailed over Jo’s stomach and up between her breasts, lingering there for a moment before it rose to cup the side of her chin and turn the kiss messy. Jo made a satisfied noise and shifted, turning in more toward Jess, one leg sliding out toward the centre of the circle.

Dean gulped quietly, and stared at the ceiling.

“Time,” said Sam.

Jess smirked against Jo’s mouth, and rubbed their noses together. Jo draped one leg over Jess’ and leaned back against the sofa with the air of a conqueror.

“Beat that, Winchester.”

Sam rolled his eyes at her, and spun the bottle.

It landed on Charlie.

“Oh, fine,” she said, and tossed back the rest of her beer, and grabbed the die. She rolled a two.
Sam set the timer to twenty and tossed his phone to Jess, because she was the least likely to do horrible things to it in the course of twenty seconds. Then he turned to Charlie and held out an arm, grinning. “Lay it on me, Red.”

She scrambled over to him and knelt up beside him, so that she had the advantage of height. He put his arm lightly around her waist to steady her, and she grinned down at him and dropped a kiss on his nose. Then she kissed his mouth, lightly and easily; and he followed her lead, rubbing circles in the small of her back, until Jess called time.

Charlie didn’t move away from him to spin the bottle: she reached over him, still leaning on his shoulder as he patted her hip, and set it clumsily circling. It only completed one sluggish turn, and stopped on… Jess.

“Yes!” said Charlie, and Sam laughed and returned her fist-bump.

Jess sat up, cross-legged, looking very prim and sly with her gorgeous salmon-cream dress falling down around her legs and just riding slightly up above one of her knees, looking like something that had nothing at all to do with Sam’s world.

She rolled a six, and laughed, and beckoned.

Charlie had been the only one he and Jo had even considered, out of the replies to their ads for a housemate. The others had obviously been too creepy, or too sloppy, or too… just dicks, pretty much.

But Charlie had just breezed right in and made everything feel normal. Within a couple of minutes she’d been chatting with both of them as if she’d known them for months; and within a week the third in their house made all the uneasy edges between Jo and Sam that came with actually running a household as opposed to just sharing a dorm room… melt away.

Charlie made the house feel like home. Even if she was hopelessly, incurably messy.

She was younger than she pretended to be, and had ‘transferred’ from somewhere on the East coast—which they learned very soon mean that she had forged her academic record on that other university’s system so that she could start at Stanford as a sophomore, because she didn’t feel like sitting around for two years going over the basics.

It wasn’t until after she’d signed in on the lease agreement that Sam saw the tattoo on the inside of her wrist. When he caught her hand, and turned it over (gently!), and looked pointedly at the coywolf and raised an eyebrow, she tried to laugh it off.

“I was drunk,” she said, “it was ComicCon. You should see the one I got of Leia in a—”

“Was it midsummer, too?” he asked; and when she went quiet, he took off the broad wristband that he usually wore to cover up his own.
“Jo too,” he told her, when she touched it, and she looked incredulous and relieved. “What—what’d you ask for? If it isn’t—”

“My parents,” she said, and shrugged, with a little laugh. “Alive again. I was fourteen. He said it’d been too long and he couldn’t. Kept an eye out for me, though. Got me out of more than a few messed-up situations. You?”

“Something my family needed,” Sam said. “Something that might come back to bite all of us in the arse. Well. Guess that’s one less secret to keep around the house.”

Charlie wasn’t too thrilled to hear that ghosts and demons and werewolves were real too, but she threw herself into learning the lore with relish.

And their family grew by one.

Jo didn’t even bother to move out of the way. When Charlie settled into Jess’ lap, Jo propped her elbow on the arm of the sofa and made herself comfortable; when Charlie giggled against Jess’ mouth, Jo’s mouth curved too, and she ran her hand up Charlie’s back; when Charlie pulled back to grin and drop hot little kisses all over Jess’ face, Jo slipped her hand up under the back of Charlie’s shirt and nuzzled in against Jess’ cheek and got more than her share.

“Uh,” said Dean, then he found his groove. “This what you get treated to every night, Sammy?”

Jo flipped him off, while kissing her way out from the corner of Charlie’s eye.

“Nah,” said Sam. “Normally there’s cocoa.”

“Cocoa sounds good,” said Jess breathlessly, between kisses, as Jo’s fingers inched up her thigh. “Twenty seconds to make it magically appear, boys.”

Dean gave her a wary look, then glanced questioningly at Sam, who shook his head, and played it light. “Can’t argue with a woman who knows what she wants.”

He got up to make the cocoa.

Dean was a newcomer, really. He’d stay for a week, begin to look around for jobs, get cold feet, suddenly discover that Dad really needed him and go haring off across the country again.
To be fair, Dad probably did need him. He kept doing his best to get a job and support himself, failing to turn up, getting drunk and aggressive, thinking someone was a monster and punching them out, or in some other way getting himself thrown out of town. And yes, it was possible Sam was bitter and sarcastic about this. The point was, there was no way Dad would actually bother to call Dean about this, so Dean never actually knew until he went to check up on Dad, and Dad definitely never told Sam, and… anyway. Basically, Dad’s vengeance quest had been tugged out from under his feet and he was crashing. Mostly, in Sam’s opinion, because he hadn’t realised that it wasn’t just his vengeance quest.

The first time he’d turned up, he’d teased Sam about Jo in the general big-brother way that meant he didn’t really think they were an item and was just trying to get a rise out of him. The second time, he looked more seriously and saw the casual affection between both of them and Charlie. The third time, when he learned how often Jess was around and saw how Sam looked at her, the teasing began again with extra force—congratulating Sam with completely inappropriate winks and comments over his two (or three?) girlfriends in a way that was obviously just… trying to work out what the truth really was.

“Charlie’s gay,” Sam told him eventually, taking pity.

Dean immediately went for the universal straight-guy eyebrow-waggle of ‘so, do they let you watch?’, so Sam rolled his eyes and kicked him.

“But she was all draped over your back yesterday morning when I got up.”

“Because I was cooking blueberry pancakes. Also she’s kind of slow and cuddly in the morning. It’s… it’s nice.”

“And last night, while we were watching that movie—?”

“She says I do better shoulder rubs than Jo.” Sam lifted one hand and wiggled his fingers in demonstration. “Bigger hands.”

“Dude. She took her top off.”

“Only her overshirt.” Sam grinned. “If you hadn’t been all jittery about it she probably would have lost the camisole too. She was wearing her Pokemon bra yesterday, and she likes showing that off.”

“Projecting much? Boobs don’t make me jittery.”

“No, you’re just only used to seeing them when you’re about to get laid.”

Dean beamed his big, shit-eating grin. “Well, yeah! Careful, little bro. They’re gonna end up thinking of you as the gay best friend, then it’ll just be you and your right hand forever.”

“We’re all just… friends, Dean.”

It was mostly true.

Just friends, with an extra warmth and comfort, and beanbag cuddle piles in front of the television with fingers stroking through hair or over shoulders and arms.

Just friends, using each other’s bellies as pillows.

Just friends, whose hands lingered warm and pleasant on each other’s skin, and who flirted and laughed about it, and who sometimes made out when they were horny and sometimes just climbed
into each other’s beds when they needed somebody to hold. Charlie was affectionate, loved to nestle in against his body and rest her head on his shoulder and even kiss his face, but had no interest in his mouth. With Jo it sometimes got more heated, kisses teasing or deepening, hands wandering a bit. It turned her on, to tease the possibility, and Sam was safe; and that was all.

Sam didn’t initiate much, because… well, he was a big scary guy, and also a guy, and he didn’t want to push. But whenever Jo draped herself into his lap, laughing, eyes gleaming—and whenever Charlie climbed into his bed and curled up against his chest and gifted him with one of her colourfully lump knitted scarves—and whenever Charlie demanded massages, or breakfast in bed, or was feeling like crap and needed to be looked after—or when Jo idly leaned against him when she was tipsy and started leaving experimental kisses down his neck—well, he did whatever they did. Because he loved it. And it was new, and special, and strange. Being allowed to stoop down as he passed their chair and drop a kiss on their forehead, or (if they tipped their head back to catch it) on their mouth. He had never in his life been trusted like this: been touched like he was important, and valued, and not just a target or a means to get off. It was heady, and warm, and… real, in a way he didn’t have a script for.

With Jess it was something different: something that had the potential for actual romance—maybe even eventually actual sex, and yeah, his right hand was getting a lot of work lately. Sure, they really didn’t have anything in common. And though she was sweet, she wasn’t the brightest. But then there was the whole “opposites attract” thing. And Sam had got out of that life, after all. Jess was the bright opposite to that. Sam could make this work.

To be what they wanted, and nothing more. Making this kind of family.

Sam overthought things, he knew that. He had no idea where this was going. And he wouldn’t ruin it for the world.

When Dean spun the bottle, it landed on Jo.

He gave her his most charming grin. “Well, hey there, little lady.”

Charlie giggled and threw a cushion at Dean. Jo snorted, and tossed her hair (it was just down to her shoulders now, and she enjoyed it), and knee-walked across the circle to Dean.

“Hey, little boy,” she said; and Dean pouted.

“Ten dollars says I’m a better kisser,” said Charlie, stretching out with her feet on Sam’s lap and her head in Jess’.

“No bet,” said Jess.

Jo rolled a five. Then she swung a knee over his lap and settled down to straddle him.

“Uh,” said Dean, trying valiantly to look smooth.
“House rules,” said Sam, sipping at his cocoa with a smirk, “girls call the shots.”

Jo draped her arms around Dean’s neck and raised a challenging eyebrow. “Someone got the timer?”

“Go.”

Dean’s hands settled awkwardly and carefully on Jo’s waist, fingers curving protectively around her ribs. Jo wasn’t nearly so cautious: she went right for it, tipping his head back and kissing straight into his mouth. Dean responded in kind, hot and strong but not pushing, mostly letting her take, as she shifted in his lap and did her best to provoke.

It was Jo who had suggested this game, the last couple of times. She was starting to get… adventurous lately. All these little nuzzles and kisses with the other girls, with people she trusted—climbing into Sam’s lap to experiment with the feel of a larger, stronger male body between her thighs—flirting with Dean and mocking him to test his reactions—it was all play. And Sam’s brief forays into the field of behavioural studies suggested that play was serious business.

“‘It’s you guys,’” she’d said to him after the last round, two weeks ago, as they’d cuddled up drunkenly together on the couch and let hands roam gently over backs and sides. “‘It’s fun. You’re not going to push and you’re not going to hate me and you’re not going to think it’s a promise ring or whatever. It’s just. We can do this. I like that.’”

Dean, of course, hadn’t been here for any of the previous occasions.

Jo dragged her nails down the back of Dean’s neck, brought the other hand up to comb through her hair and tilt his head to one side, drew back to bite his lip and settle deeper into his lap, then dove back in. Her back arched, as Dean made a pained noise and slid his hands up to the small of her back. She laughed against his mouth, and rolled her shoulders.

Dean was visibly struggling to be a gentleman.

Sam was beginning to suspect that Jo was also an exhibitionist.

When Sam called time, Dean was flushed and smirking and sort of bashful. It had never occurred to Sam that his brother, turned on, might be kind of adorable.

Jo laughed, breathless, and leaned back without moving from Dean’s lap to reach for the bottle. Her back arched, and… it brought certain parts of her chest into prominence, and Dean made a strangled noise and tightened his grip on her hips to keep her from falling over backward.

Charlie whistled. Jo winked at her upside down, and spun the bottle. Or tried to. It mostly just meandered halfway around, and stopped on Fidget.

Jo collapsed onto the floor, giggling. Jess wondered how Fidget was going to roll the die, Charlie protested that Fidget gave the best smooches anyway, Sam pointed out that Jo had claimed spin the bottle was her superpower, and Fidget lifted her head and blinked at the sudden attention. Dean struggled for a moment, still on edge, still not sure of how he fit into all this. Then he gave in and started to laugh.

Jo kicked him, a lazy shove of the foot against his ribs, and crawled over to cuddle up with the coywolf. Fidget looked tolerant, and licked her chin.

Then she pricked up her ears and stared toward the door.

“Was it me next or you?” Charlie was saying to Jess; and “I don’t know, we’ve all moved around.
Where’d my cocoa go?”

Dean was saying something too, a low amused rumble; but Sam’s attention was all on the god’s coywolf, the thrill of tension running through her body, the slight warning throb in his wrist and the itch in the back of his head.

The front door clicked.

And then there was him.

He had taken to… showing up. Sometimes every day for a week, sometimes not for weeks together. But sooner or later he’d always be there: strolling in with a snap of his fingers that changed the TV to the ‘history’ channel when Jess was watching *Matilda* again, lounging on Sam’s bed while he was getting dressed and making helpful innuendoes, leaning against the wall outside when Sam emerged from a lecture theatre, and always, always turning up in the study room while they were trying to get work done and lounging on the thick pile rug by the old fire place and reading Sam’s textbooks or the Weekly World News with exactly the same degree of snarky commentary.

Ignoring him never worked. But Sam had graduated in the school of Ignoring Annoying People Being Annoying In The Same Room As You, and it was always Jo who snapped first.

Jo and Coyote flirted, and snarked, and teased, and slapped at each other, and tested each other’s limits, and were as tactile in affection as anybody else in the house. With Jess he was the most human —perhaps because she was the only one who didn’t know what he was—chatting like amiable acquaintances, having actual conversations about her life and opinions like he couldn’t just pull them out of her head when he was curious (and he genuinely *did* seem curious). It was with Charlie that he was at his most warm: protective and gentle in a way that he never was with anybody else, even while they argued over what was and what wasn’t allowed to go on pancakes. There wasn’t a hint of power play or flirting between them: they were just comfortable like family, family who had chosen each other years ago.

Once before Coyote had turned up for spin the bottle and Charlie’s bottle had landed on him. He had waggled his eyebrows and (since Jess wasn’t there) had transformed himself into the likeness of Scarlett Johansson, in her ‘personal assistant’ outfit from *Iron Man I*. Charlie had positively squeaked; and though they’d kissed and rolled around on the floor a bit it had still been comfortable, somehow—still laughing and friendly and playful, still family.

Sam was learning that there were lots of different ways you could kiss, and lots of different ways you could love, and that sexiness being present or absent didn’t actually make that much of a difference.

As for Coyote and Sam…

Coyote flirted. Outrageously and constantly. He tested and teased, and groped various parts of Sam’s anatomy with a cheerful lack of discrimination. It felt like a game, except for the watchfulness hiding behind the laughter in the god’s eyes. Sam was being observed, and he didn’t know what for.
He turned Coyote down flat, every time, and that became a game too in its own day: Coyote thrusting and Sam parrying, Coyote striking and Sam blocking, Coyote reaching and Sam dodging. Half the time he hardly bothered to hide his smile. But it was dangerous; and all the more so because Coyote rarely reminded him of what he really was nowadays. Charlie knew him as Kit, and somehow that became his name in the house: innocuous and normal, hanging around because he was bored and wanted entertaining. He was like a tiger lolling on its back and grinning upside down while it played in an oversized cardboard box; but you never turned your back on a tiger all the same.

Fidget whined, and her ears went soft and happy, and her tail began to thump.

“Well, hello there, my wayward kids,” said Kit from behind Sam. “And this pretty young drink of water.”

Dean’s defences immediately came back up, bright and smirking and smart-arse. “Oh, baby, I don’t swing your way.”

“Please. Everybody swings my way.”

Kit circled around behind Charlie and Jess—nodded amiably to Jess, reached down to brush fingers with Charlie when she lifted her hand with a sleepy smile—winked at Sam, who lifted an eyebrow at him—and settled himself down on the floor beside Jo and Fidget. The coywolf wriggled like a pup and sat up to kiss his face. He chuckled and nuzzled her forehead, put an arm around Jo and smacked a kiss on her cheek, and sat back against the sofa with his legs stretched out in front of him, right into the middle of the circle.

“What, he just invites himself in?” said Dean.

Sam shrugged, and stretched out himself, legs long in front of him, crossed at the ankle. “Usually, yeah.”

“He’s like that raccoon that always turns up and gets into the garbage,” said Charlie happily, and nuzzled in against Jess’ belly. “I think it’s your turn.”

“Mm,” said Jess, and ran her fingers through Charlie’s hair. “I’m good right here. Pass.”

Sam watched the bright red strands falling lazily through Jess’ long, gentle fingers, and felt like this was home.

He lifted his head, to find her watching him, half smiling.

“Your turn, honey,” she said. “Charlie moved, so she comes after you.”

It was a simple thing, a tiny thing, but the way she smiled—the way her nose wrinkled—that one silly gorgeous mole right on the bridge of it—the way half her hair had come loose from its up-do and was tumbling in long open curls down around her neck—the ease with which she caressed
Charlie and above all the way she spoke, always kind, always brisk, taking no shit but always saying exactly what she meant…

Sam’s heart swelled. Was this what it felt like, being in love?

“Yeah,” he said, and ducked his head sheepishly. “Yeah, okay.”

The bottle spun. It slowed, slowed, idled past himself, past Dean, past Jo… and must surely come to a stop on Kit.

Sam looked up. Kit—Coyote—winked.

Just a little extra velocity, like it had surmounted a tiny lump in the carpet, and the bottle spun around to land on Jess.

She laughed. “I think that’s the proper way to end the night, don’t you?”

Sam found he was smiling and couldn’t stop: just the soft little smile at the edge of his mouth that had been getting so much more use lately.

Jess rolled a six.

Charlie grumbled when she moved, and Jess tucked a cushion under her head in place of her own thigh before she went to Sam. He opened his arm, and she tucked in against his side, and slipped a hand into the back pocket of his jeans.

“Hi,” she said, grinning at him from an inch away, and he said “hi” back like an idiot, and kissed her nose.

Charlie made “aww” noises, but Sam ignored her, tilted his head and nuzzled his lips gently against the side of Jess’ mouth. He always felt like a stupid teenager again when he kissed Jess, so giddy and hopeful that he wasn’t quite sure what he was doing; but she didn’t seem to mind.

She tasted sweet against his mouth, cocoa over the traces of the wine from earlier. Her mouth was soft, curved with a smile and not with laughter: this wasn’t a game, not here. Not just friends having fun getting worked up together—not between them.

At least, Sam thought so.

This was how the story was meant to go.

Jess slipped her fingers into his hair, stroked his cheek with her thumb, and deepened the kiss. Just a little, just enough to make it sensuous, as she leaned in against the weight of his body and trusted him to hold her. He cradled her, one arm around her waist and one on the side of her neck, teasing reverentially at the falling curls; and he revelled in the miracle of being allowed this. All his choices had led him here.

He prayed almost every night, and he thanked God and his angels for what his life had become.

“Seriously,” said Dean, from somewhere over there, “you guys are gonna make me throw up with the cute.”

Dean would get there. Probably. Sam wasn’t going to change for him.

*College* was meant to be daring and out there and experimental. It was meant to be dangerous, something you retired from to a ‘real’ safe sexuality and home. To Sam it felt like the safest, warmest
place he’d ever been.

(He could feel Kit’s eyes on him, with more than the weight of human eyes: he could feel it itching at the connection in his mind, in his wrist.)

He closed his eyes, and kissed Jess.

And then… the smell of metal.

A cold stabbing pain in the back of his head. A woman screamed somewhere far away in the darkness of the world, and Sam opened his eyes.

He saw Jess.

She was pinned to the ceiling, dressed all in white, hair rippling out around her like golden water. And there was a red gash across her belly. Sam scrambled backward just as the flames blossomed out around her, to the stench of burning hair.

And the real world came back.

He was backed up against the sofa, and Jess was staring at him from a little way away.

“This is why I’m the one who gets all the chicks, Sammy,” said Dean.

Sam shuddered, and scrubbed a hand over his eyes. Jess was still there when he opened them again, worried and hurt and alive.

“Hey,” said Charlie, blinking sleepily at him. “You okay?”


There was a weighted silence. Kit dropped the word “Interesting” into it like a sarcastic brick.

Jess reached over, and laid a hand on Sam’s forehead.

“You’re cold, honey. You should go to bed. And no staying up late with your physics textbook.”

He laughed, still feeling sick to his stomach, and kissed the inside of her hand. “I guess. Sorry. I—”

“Save it.” She patted his cheek. “Charlie and Jo will keep me entertained, won’t you, girls?”

“Oh sure,” said Jo. “Leave us to do your dirty work.”

Dean choked on his cocoa.

“I like him,” commented Kit to Jo. “He’s suave.”

“Yeah, well, you’re… suave,” muttered Dean.

“And a master of snappy retorts!”

“Be nice,” said Jo with a smirk, “he’s all new and delicate.”

“This is why I didn’t have sisters,” complained Dean to Charlie. “Except Sammy.”

“I’m for bed too,” said Charlie, levering herself to her feet. “Carry me, Sam?”
“Your majesty,” he agreed solemnly, and lifted her into his arms.

Her arms around his neck felt small, and strong, and warm.

When Sam turned to close the door of his own room, to shut himself in and the world out, he found himself staring into the eyes of the coywolf.

Somehow she’d slipped in behind him. And now there she sat, staring at him, not blinking. It wasn’t concern in her gaze: it was fascination, sharp enough to be predatory. Sam was pretty damn sure she wasn’t the only one looking out at him from those eyes, either.

“Out,” he growled, and pointed to the door. For a moment she didn’t move, and Sam almost thought she wouldn’t. But then she yawned, deliberate and dismissive, the curl of a tongue and the sharp snick of teeth at the end, and turned neatly on her feet to slip away into the hall beyond.

Sam was pacing. His bedroom here was just large enough for it. And even though he wasn’t in the same room anymore, he could still feel Coyote watching.

Someone knocked on the door. Kit never knocked.

“Yeah,” he said.

Dean came in, and closed the door behind him.

“Dude,” he said, “what the hell? That’s how you treat a girl? I taught you better than that.”

“Like I said,” muttered Sam. “Just tired, I guess.”

“Yeah, I call bullshit.”

“You’d know.”

“Damn straight I would. Spit it out.”

“…It was nothing.”

“Sam.”
“Look, I don’t know what happened, Dean. For a moment I thought I saw…”

Dean was watching him, sharp under the sarcasm. Sam took a deep breath, and tried not to think of golden wolf-like eyes watching him, waiting.

“D’you think a person could have flashbacks, to… to when they were just a baby?”

“You’re the one with in freshman psych, dude. I’m the high school drop-out.”


Dean said nothing.

“It was… full-on.”

Dean strolled across the room and fiddled with the phone charger on Sam’s bedside table.

“What,” said Sam lamely, “not a single Oedipus joke?”

Dean hitched up a shoulder and let it fall.

“First time this has happened?”

“Yeah.”

“So it’s coming out of the whole Azazel think. Like… PTSD. Closure. Working through suppressed guilt, you tell me.”

“Now who’s the psych major.”

“Yeah,” said Dean, the line of his shoulders tense, “and if it’s not psychological? Then what, Sammy?”

“You mean… visions? Psychic shit?”

“You tell me,” his brother repeated.

“I don’t know, Dean. This isn’t exactly covered in any of my textbooks.”

“Yeah, well. You know who would have books on it. If it’s a thing.”

“Dean, I am not getting onto Bobby about this.”

Dean shrugged. “Your call. Unless it happens again.”

Sam’s temper flared. “And if it does? You’ll go over my head and tell him? Start researching me like some kind of monster?

“Not like you’ve got the best track record with making your own decisions, dude.”

“Oh, screw you.”

“Just sayin’.”

“Look, Dean. We’ve got other things to be worrying about right now.” Sam snatched the student newspaper from his bed, because a weird case was the best way to distract Dean. “Two days ago this
ethics professor died on campus—jumped from the window of his office.”

“Yeah, I heard.”

Sam flipped to page five and pointed at a full-page spread. “Apparently there’s an old campus rumour that the building is haunted. This page is basically full of everyone telling their stories about the place. Most of it’s nonsense but the one common thread seems to be that this girl was having an affair with some professor thirty years back, he broke it off, she jumped out of that window and killed herself.”

Dean snorted, but he took the paper and scanned the page. “So either a bunch of stupid kids, or your standard ghost?”

“No, but get this. I know one of the girls on the editorial board. They got in trouble for printing this. People called it poor taste; except they left out the bit that was actually about him. Apparently the professor has a bit of a rep for seducing his students.”

Dean pulled a face. “Okay, so a ghost with a pet peeve. Kinda like a woman in white sorta deal.”

“Yeah. That’s what I thought. Was gonna get you to check the place out with me tomorrow. Except something else weird happened today, and… I got nothing for this one. There’s this frat guy in one of my classes who was apparently… he swears he was abducted by aliens last night.”

“…Dude.”

“Outside the same building.”

“Okay, so you know your school is insane, right.”

“Everywhere’s insane, Dean. So. You want to head on over there and check it out tomorrow?”

Dean shrugged. “It’s what we do.” He eyed Sam over, then opened his mouth like he was thinking about saying something else.

“Great,” said Sam, “which means that now I really do need to crash.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Fine. Good talk.”

“Jerk,” threw Sam after his retreating back. Dean flipped him off over his shoulder as he closed the door.

Sam flopped on his bed.

He stared at the ceiling.

He closed his eyes with a shudder and turned over, away from the remembered vision of flames, to bury his face in the pillow.

The thing was… Sam would almost believe the PTSD theory, far-fetched as it seemed, if it wasn’t for two things. One was the word psychic, and remembering where he’d heard it last.

The other reason was…

He pressed his thumb to his wrist.

I can still feel you watching me. Knock it off.
The coywolf tattoo yawned, and smirked. The word *Interesting* appeared beside it, a slow looping scrawl lazy enough that Sam could almost hear it coiling off Coyote’s tongue.

Yes. Whatever that had been, it hadn’t been *normal*.

One more thing for Jess to never know.
Let us build a little house around her

They interviewed the janitor at Crawford Hall. He flirted with both of them. Dean got flustered, then cocky. The janitor confirmed that the ethics professor “got more arse than a toilet seat,” and that a girl had visited him the night of his death but the janitor hadn’t seen him leave.

The frat boy, as Sam already knew, was known for bullying and hazing not only people in his fraternity but any freshers in his classes (though he’d learned early on to leave Sam and Jo the hell alone). And when they managed to get to talk to him, it turned out that—whatever had actually happened—he certainly believed he’d been abducted. And probed. Repeatedly.

“Karma, man,” Dean snorted when they left him. “These are almost poetic. Well, more like a dirty limerick. I mean—I’m still not saying they’re connected, but…”

And suddenly he gave Sam a sharp sideways look.

Then there was another death: a man with multiple counts of drunken domestic violence was killed by… a bear? A bear who left a hole in the door frame the size and shape of the Incredible Hulk. Which was, coincidentally, just what the wife thought she’d seen.

“Dude,” said Dean, when they got back into the Impala and closed the doors. “You know what this is we’re dealing with, don’t you.”

But Coyote didn’t come when Sam called him.

When Sam woke up the next morning, after a fretful sleep, there was a dick drawn on his face. He didn’t notice until after his morning run.

“Dean,” he growled, stomping in from the bathroom.

Dean looked up from the breakfast table and snickered, showing off his half-chewed mouthful of pancakes and bacon (both at once because he was an animal).

“Always knew you’d be into makeup once you tried it, Samantha,” he said, and Jo kicked him.

“Oh! Hey! Not a trans joke! Ow.”

“I’m switching your sugar and salt for weeks,” Sam grumbled.

“What, you think I did that? Dude, I had better things to do with my night. Some of us actually get laid sometimes.”

Sam glared, and stomped back off to the shower, where he did indeed make good use of his right hand.
It wasn’t actually Sam who keyed the Impala, though. He wouldn’t do that.

He did offer to mind the neighbour’s cat for the day and then kept it in Dean’s room for hours, after Dean short-sheeted his bed by cutting all the sheets in half. Allergies were totally fair game.

The study was one of Sam’s favourite rooms in the house. It faced south, with large glass windows over most of the wall, and it was light and airy and had walls lined with bookshelves which mysteriously kept filling up with more and more books every day. The heavy wooden table in the centre of the room was large enough for four people to study on at once even if they wanted to spread books and paper everywhere, the couches in the corners were perfect for curling up to read, and would be even more perfect if one was not currently occupied by Dean deliberately humming Metallica as loud as he could.

Sam sighed noisily and did his best to concentrate on his work.

Dean reached the end of one song, then started it from the beginning again.

Sam gritted his teeth and stood up.

He went over to the nearest window. He opened it. There: fresh air, outdoor noises, slightly less of the intense claustrophobia of I-must-not-punch-my-brother.

He sat down again.

… on a whoopee cushion.

“Dean.”

Dean burst out laughing, delighted and incredulous.

Sam threw it at his head.

“What?” Dean sat up, still laughing. “Dude, how could that have been me, I didn’t even move!”

“Nothing like the classics for inspiration,” drawled a voice from the other side of the room.

He was lying on the rug by the hearth, one foot propped up on the fender, wearing a sparkly purple
butterfly shirt, holding a book directly above his face with the blithe indifference of someone whose arms could never get tired. “Crushed under a giant helmet of doom in chapter one. Hm. Not bad. Pianos are so cliché. Everyone uses pianos these days.”

“Okay,” said Sam tightly. “Both of you, get the hell out of here. This essay is due tomorrow.”

“Wait, wait,” said Dean, “that was all you?”

“Of course, there’s something to be said for a good old-fashioned cliché.”

“… you’d better fix my car.”

“Relax, your delicious metal beast is fine. Can you say the same for Sam’s sheets?”

Sam pointedly turned a page. The corner tore a bit.

“Okay, dude, I gotta say. I totally dig your style—”

Coyote’s voice smirked. “You totally dug my cute butt in that outfit, didn’t you? Told you I moonlight as a janitor.”

“… I did not dig your butt.”

“You wanna?”

Dean bristled. “The fuck d’you think I am?”

“Just enjoying your lips, honey.”

“I’m not some kind of fucking twink,” Dean snarled.

“Relax, big boy. Nobody’s denying your stifling levels of toxic masculinity. Swinging both ways just means twice the arse.”

“… I,” retorted Dean, audibly blushing.

Coyote snickered. “Told you I’m everybody’s type.”

Sam slammed his chair back and stood up. Then he stalked over to the rug, grabbed the front of Coyote’s stupid shirt to haul him away from the hearth, pinned him to the ground and kissed him like a punch.

“Oh, come on!” Dean complained. “That’s just—I didn’t wanna know that!”

Coyote was laughing into Sam’s mouth, stretching out luxurious and supple underneath him, letting the book fall and tangling his fingers in the folds of Sam’s shirt, and it infuriated Sam even more. He got a hand in the god’s hair, dragged it back so that his neck was stretched out long and pale, and swallowed the gasp he got.

“And there’s the Sammy I know,” rumbled low against his mouth, all amusement, all danger.

Dean made a stunned noise that Sam vaguely registered as being exactly the same one he’d made when Jo climbed into his lap and got bossy. When Sam looked up, Dean seemed to remember himself, backing toward the door, eyes stunned wide.

“Dude, where’s the nice gentle college boy?”
Coyote rolled his head sideways on the rug to grin a lascivious, red-mouthed grin. “You’re invited too, freckles,” he called out, and Dean beat a hasty retreat.

“He is not invited,” Sam growled, and bit down on the tender column of that throat.

“What,” shuddered Coyote, shoving his hands up from Sam’s hips, under his shirt and undershirt, tugging it all in a bundle up over his ribs, “I don’t get to be the filling in a Winchester sandwich? Gonna have to do some more corrupting on you kids.”

Sam slapped his hands away, shoved him down, and swung a leg over his hips to pin him with all his weight. This time, this time, with the god between his legs, with those fake-lazy golden eyes burning up at him all sin and laughter, this time Sam was the one calling the shots. It was stupid, he knew, colossally stupid, but that thought only registered vaguely in the back of his mind, where here, under his hands, here was what he’d been imagining and dreaming in the darkness for months.

Only in the darkness, never in the daylight.

Sam dragged his shirts off over his head. Coyote’s eyes glowed, and he reached up like a child after a toy. Sam grabbed his wrists and pinned them to the rug above his head, and stretched out all his weight on top of the small, powerful body.

Coyote grinned at him, nose to nose, breaths panting hot and vicious between them.

Sam breathed in—and then, out.

“You’ve been killing on my campus,” he hissed, and pushed the weight of his shoulders up high, glaring down from above, leaving his hips heavy and hard against Coyote’s. “I should be working out how to put you down. I should be hunting you.”

The god’s head lolled back against the thick dark fur of the rug, in the thick dark light of the evening.

“God of justice,” he said, sweetly, “and hilarity.”

Sam’s hand shoved down between their bodies, and found its mark. “No more.”

“Oh—oh.” Sam pushed in, cruel if it had been a human body, eyes sharp on the face below him. It
flickered between sarcasm and pain and lust and delight. Then the dry heat around his fingers turned slick and welcoming all at once, and the mouth almost brushing his twisted up at the edges. “Oh, honey. You gonna tell Zeus to stop blowing the wind about?”

Sam wasn’t used to this kind of sex. He’d had his fingers in women (gentle, careful, insinuating) and one or two in himself (cautious, exploring). He’d never been rough. He’d never had to watch a man’s face for reactions.

Right now, he wasn’t going for sensual. He was just going for sensation.

He forced his fingers open, dragged them almost all the way out, and shoved them in again, hard.

“Zeus isn’t here in front of me. Zeus hasn’t been killing people on my land for a laugh.”

“Can’t none of us change what we are.”

Coyote’s eyes were almost closed, his mouth lolling open, his breath coming shallow. His hips rolled against Sam’s hand so that his wrist almost ached, so that there was no doubt of his pleasure.

Sam growled his frustration and tugged his fingers free. The noise was obscene over the distant sounds of the oblivious world, outside the window.

“You have choice,” he snapped. “You choose.”


“Do I?”

And all of a sudden, Sam was on his back, breathless and winded, pinned down in his turn, with a dark and glittering creature pinning him naked to a fur rug.

“Do you?”

The god’s whisper didn’t come from his mouth. It filled the room, the air, rustling out from the books and the window and the yawning mouth of the chimney, while above Sam’s face Coyote’s hovered, still and mocking and deadly serious.

Sam’s breath slunk back into his lungs too slowly, leaving him dizzy and floating in lust. Coyote’s lips curled back to show his teeth, and he planted his hands on Sam’s chest, and raised himself just enough to slide down hot and slick onto Sam’s cock. Which punched all the air back out again.

“Gonna give it to me, sweetheart?” murmured Coyote; and Sam gritted his teeth, and fastened his hands on Coyote’s hips, and drove up into him.

His body took over at once. It felt like it wasn’t Sam doing it, choosing each movement or the noises they tore out of his chest. It felt like waves driving in against the shore and battering him, and he was as helpless to stop. Or perhaps he wasn’t; but he was helpless to want to stop, which was maybe the same thing.

Coyote leaned back, mouth falling wide in pleasure and eyes half closed, arching his back and resting his hands behind him on Sam’s thighs; and Sam groaned at the shift, and slowed, and readjusted hands already slippery with sweat, and found his pace again.

How strange (a distant part of his mind registered, that tiny part that was still capable of thought) this un-gentleness with somebody else’s body, this roughness, almost violence. There was a hot shame
that came with that, at just how addictive it was (*fucking somebody you can’t hurt*), but it was a
shame that couldn’t drive away the pleasure. It only made him angrier, made him rougher, until
Coyote was laughing and moaning on top of him and he knew his muscles were going to hate him
tomorrow.

“No more killing,” Sam panted out, feeling the heat gathering in the base of his spine, in the curl of
his toes, in the shuff of the fur against his back, all over his body. “Not here.”

“I don’t—I don’t kill them.” Coyote flashed an open-mouthed breathless grin at the ceiling. “Just set
—set ‘em up to fail. Their own vices walk ‘em—right—into the trap.”

Then there was a sharp wet pattering over the muscles of Sam’s stomach, so hot it almost felt like
candle wax, and the god cried out and fell forward on top of him. He caught himself at the last
moment and laughed, nose-to-nose, hair falling forward around both their faces, as the abrupt shift
had Sam following him over the edge with a strangled sound and with nails clawing up his back to
drag him close.

Sam closed his eyes against the fire behind him, the fire in front of him, as he fought for breath and
gradually learned how to relax each limb, to sprawl almost senseless against the sweat-damp rug.

Something brushed against his lips, feather-light, so incongruous that he barely felt it and couldn’t
process what to do with it.

Fingers slid between their bodies and curled over the mess on his stomach. Then they slid between
his lips.

He didn’t resist: curled his tongue around them, and licked the strange wild salty taste off them. Then
the damp fingers slid out and traced over his chin, his jawline, up over his ear to his cheekbone and
(delicately) over his eye, to slide back into his hair and comb it free where it had stuck.

The mouth came back: firmer this time, a lingering sensuous kiss. Sam turned his head into it and
responded, clumsy, feeling the thump of his heart echoing between their chests as tongue slid against
tongue. Then he opened his eyes.

Coyote’s hair was a tangled mess, and his eyes glowed like the amber that can trap a living creature
for a million years.

He laid a finger on Sam’s lips.

Sam ignored it.

“Peter Pan,” he said, with a voice that rasped, “wasn’t too bothered about the consequences to other
people either. Not when he was having fun.”

He only realised how soft the lines of Coyote’s face had been when all that softness vanished.

“No, Sam Winchester,” he said. “I am not your plaything.”

Then he was gone.
Two days later, Coyote slipped into Sam’s bed late at night when he couldn’t sleep.

He sucked Sam off, then Sam dragged him up by the hair and made Coyote fuck him, because it was easy, and hot, and addictive.

He slept soundly after that, and if he dreamed he didn’t remember it.

Sam had learned early on not to question the sources of Charlie’s funds.

Gift cards and special offers addressed to nobody or any of them had been turning up in the mail since she’d moved in. Their membership cards for department stores always seemed to have special bonus rewards on them, and their credit cards hardly ever needed paying off. Besides that, ecological and environmental groups that Charlie was into (especially the ones with cute animals) mysteriously had funds moved into their accounts. And the local queer bar had an anonymous donor generous enough that, for their tenth anniversary, the owner and Charlie had managed to purchase together the book shop next door, and convert it to a queer coffee shop and book store for anybody who’d rather have a non-sexualised or casual queer space.

Sam was glad to see her putting down roots. He got the impression that she’d never really done that anywhere before.

Obviously, they all had to go to the opening/anniversary celebration. Charlie had made boxes full of little button pride badges in every colour of the rainbow (literally), for people to pick from. There were the normal ones like the gay and bisexual and asexual and transgender and ally ones, then some others that he’d only learned of from Charlie like aro and genderfluid, and even some for fetishes and BDSM roles, some of which Sam had never heard of. Sam wore both the pan and the bisexual ones, since he didn’t really care what it was called. Charlie had her “lesbian” one, of course, as well as the “gay” one—and the “BDSM” one, which made Jess raise her eyebrows and Dean look a bit flustered and cover it up with swagger. Jo pinned on her “transgender” and “bisexual” badges with a nonchalant sort of defiance that did a poor job at hiding just how much it meant to her to be able to wear them now with confidence, and even with something like pride. Jess’s choice of the “straight ally” badge instead of the “lesbian” or “bisexual” was unexpected, though neither Charlie nor Jo seemed surprised. And after some encouraging whispers and a hug from Charlie, she squared her shoulders and pinned on an “aromantic” badge—with half a nervous glance sideways at Sam.

Sam wasn’t quite sure how he felt about either of those badges; but on a day like this there was only one thing to be done about it, which was to put an arm around her waist and kiss her cheek when he
found himself next to her, and not say anything about it.

Kit pawed through the box, cackling happily, and ended up wearing one of all of them. Including the mutually contradictory ones.

He also went in full-on feathered drag with the most ridiculously high wig Sam had ever seen, but that surprised nobody. The glittery purple wings were an interesting touch.

How Charlie persuaded Dean to come Sam was never sure. He only took the “straight ally” badge; though Sam was sure he saw Charlie drag him aside and pin another one on the inside of his jacket, where nobody would be able to see it.

And before they left the house, Jess insisted on all of them—even Dean—wearing the polyamory badge. That one he accepted with a wink, and a drawled “Anything you like, darlin’,” which made Sam roll his eyes and hit him in the arm.

Dean spent the night on edge. He almost got into a fight with a big burly man wearing one of Charlie’s “bear” badges, though Sam was pretty sure the man had only been flirting, not actually hitting on him. As Sam pulled Dean away, Charlie and Jo did the apologising to the bear and his friend. Charlie’s mouth was definitely forming the word “closeted,” and “easing him into it”. Jo seemed to be saying something about “growing up around the kind of men who…”

And Sam wondered.

“You okay, man?” he murmured, and with his hand against Dean’s chest he could feel the button on the inside of his jacket.

“Fine,” Dean grunted, and pulled away to stomp back toward their table.

“Okay, so, try not being a dick? This is a party, Dean. Everyone’s being friendly and happy. Hell, try flirting. Have fun. No one’s going to take you up on it while you’re wearing that badge, and it might get rid of that stick up your arse.”

“There is nothing up my arse,” snapped Dean, with his usual amazing power of the witty comeback, and flopped down into his chair.

“Would you like there to be?” asked Kit brightly from the other side of the table; and Dean threw the coaster at him. It bounced off the “leather pride” and the “lipstick lesbian” badges, and fell into the lap of his skirt with a sad little “phut”.

Sam tried to keep an eye on Dean after that, as he flirted his way through pretty much every girl there who wasn’t wearing a lesbian badge. Because it wasn’t just girls that Dean was talking to, and, okay, granted, some of the people were having fun with ambiguous gender presentation, and it was hard with Dean sometimes to tell when he was being defensively smart-arse and when he was actually flirting, but Sam was pretty sure that, just now and then, some of the people he was flirting with were—

Charlie elbowed him in the ribs. “Leave him alone.”

Apparently Sam’s stealthy spying… wasn’t stealthy.

“I’m just,” he said, “… concerned. I mean, he could get into another fight. By being a dick.”

Charlie gave him a calculating look.
“You know,” she said, “I’m pretty sure that if you weren’t here, he’d have actually got it on with that cute guy in the pink vest.”

“Hey,” Sam protested. “He’s not—he knows I’d be all supportive, right? I mean, I’m here tonight. He’s seen me jump you,” to Kit across the table, who lifted an eyebrow and smirked, “and he was only weird about that for a day or so. He wouldn’t think I’d—”

“Uh-huh,” said Kit, “because he doesn’t have to impress you at all.”

Charlie’s fingers dug into his arm. “It’s not about sex,” she hissed. “It’s about gender. He still thinks he has to look like the big butch manly man, and he hasn’t got the memo that you can be big and butch while making out with other men. I’m working on him, okay?”

“I could work on him too,” offered Kit helpfully. Then he removed his BDSM badge and tossed it up into the air. “Think he’d enjoy this? I mean, he’s definitely into being manhandled.”

This time, it was Sam who threw a coaster at him. Kit fluttered his eyelashes and looked smug.

Jo ended up spending a lot of the night tipsy and giggling in Kit’s lap, making out with him with increasing heat and calling him her “safe straight experiment” to anybody who would listen. He went along with it with smirking and teasing and laughter, and a gentleness that was completely alien to Sam’s experience of him. Sam’s eyes kept being drawn back to the firm, careful curve of his fingers over the small over her back, the delicacy with which he’d tuck her hair back behind her ear—the obedience with which he let her, once, guide his hand right in under her skirt, and the warmth in his eyes as he watched every movement of her face, just to be sure, as she bit her lip and moved against him.

Jess kept fairly close to Sam all night, which was more than he had expected; and when he wasn’t watching Kit’s hands, he was watching the way her eyes sparkled when she laughed, the easy grace of her movements as she got tipsier and more relaxed, the occasional sharp flash of wit that she usually hid behind the blondest mannerisms she could manage.

That was most of what had drawn Sam to her, at first: she was rich, she was blonde, she was perfectly dressed and perfectly coiffed, and every inflection of her voice and every exclamation and flick of her hands made her look like the brainless queen of some brainless sorority. And yet she was in Stanford pre-law on a full scholarship. And she used everybody’s assumptions about her to her own advantage, and had the most generous, enthusiastic soul that Sam had ever encountered.

When she was leaning in under his arm, laughing at his clumsy anecdote of one of their professors (not the one the Trickster had killed), he took a small sip of his glass and leaned into her—breathed in the soft sweetness of her hair—and tapped the “straight ally” badge on the Peter Pan collar of her dress.

“Wouldn’t’ve picked that,” he murmured in her ear.

“Please,” she said, and turned her head, so that her smile curved in against his neck. “You don’t have to be attracted to somebody to enjoy sex with them, otherwise nobody could ever masturbate. I love the touching, and the intimacy. I love them. Sexual attraction isn’t a big thing, really.”

“Mm,” he said, and turned his mouth in against her forehead, and curled his fingers through her hair, and met Kit’s wry gaze over her head, and looked away. “It’s not nothing, though.”

“No,” she said, teasing and sweet, and slipped her hand in under his shirt, against his belly, “it’s not nothing.”
It occurred to Sam, much later, that he should have taken that moment to tell her she was a remarkable woman, instead of hitting on her.

It occurred to him, much much later, that his entire relationship with Jess so far had been about should.

Charlie danced with as many girls as she could, laughing and breathless, and left near the end of the night with a gorgeous brunette in leather and lace. Dean somehow managed to charm his way into being the third for the night with a couple of bi girls who were going steady, because Dean was disgusting and what else would he do in a queer bar but try to get in on the girl-on-girl action.

And Jess… Jess ended up in Sam’s room that night. And it was everything Sam had dreamed it would be. And with Jess, he was the caring, respectful, passionate gentleman he’d always wanted to be.

The next morning, Jo was looking very smug, and Kit stuck around for breakfast. Sam was pretty sure that much sugar on pancakes would have to rot even an immortal’s teeth.

It was Jo who brought up the idea of a contract, or at least a set of guidelines. She’d been doing research. Jess took it up enthusiastically, roped in Sam to do even more research, and Charlie ended up writing it up after making everyone (even Kit and Dean) sit down and talk about what they enjoyed about the current situation, what they wouldn’t be comfortable with, and what they’d like more of. This involved a lot of posturing and defensive sarcasm from Dean and (strangely) Coyote and blushing from Sam.

1. This is not a romantic relationship. If romance grows between any combination of participants, hooray!
2. This is not necessarily a sexual relationship. If sex/sexy fun/sexual gratification happens between any combination of participants, hooray!
3. This is a cuddle relationship. The best thing about what we have here is the physical and emotional intimacy, and the lack of physical boundaries. Getting turned on and getting off is a happy bonus.
4. This is not an exclusive relationship. Nobody has exclusive rights to anybody else’s time, body, or emotional energy. Any participant is free to have relationships or sex outside of this group, provided
5. they don’t try to keep it a secret,
6. they practice safe sex (including using protection for oral sex),
7. the feelings and rights of the other party are taken into account if the relationship becomes serious.
8. Any participant can ask for a renegotiation of these guidelines at any time, for any reason.
9. Any participant can opt out of any given activity at any given time, no questions asked. This includes witnessing Sexy Fun Times between others when they don’t want to join in. In this case it is fair for that person to ask the others to go get a room rather than being obliged to leave themself.
10. No keeping tallies.
11. Ask for what you need or want—whether that be a new sex fantasy you want to try, or help with the laundry.
12. Be careful about privacy, both within this house and out of it. Just because somebody told you something doesn’t mean they want everyone to know it.
13. Alone time is a thing, you guys! If a bedroom door is closed, knock, and don’t take offence at a “not now”. Send a text instead.
14. This is about having fun and looking after each other and ourselves and all that touchy-feely crap what no Charlie don’t write that down give me that list ugh what am I even doing here.
15. Everybody in this room is a magnificent great-hearted dragon-slaying princess who bows only to the queen and would look amazing in smoky eyeliner.

Jo, Charlie, Kit, Jess, Sam, Dean

There were no more deaths on campus. If Coyote was doing anything else he didn’t mention it, and Sam didn’t notice it. Everything was quiet (too quiet?).

Sam had other dreams. Other people, about his age, dying. It was the one with Jess that kept coming back, though.

Twice a week, or twice a month, Coyote would stop by. It might be when Sam was in bed, or it might be when Sam was in the library. If Sam was alone, they would argue, and Sam would try to draw information out of him, and he would fail, and they’d fuck.

It was much easier to have a quickie in the library when your partner could stifle the sound waves in the air around you, and make sure nobody glanced down the aisle you were currently fucking in.

Once, Coyote left a newspaper from North Dakota behind him, like it was an accident. Since he never did anything by accident Sam flipped through it. There on page three was the account of a death which matched one of his nightmare visions, down to the names on the street signs.

So then Sam had to start doing his own research on the sly, from whatever clues he could glean in those brief glimpses.

Sometimes he found nothing. But every now and then: confirmed.
Dad got fired from his job. Drunkenness, and not turning up, and possibly attacking some guy with a silver knife.

Dad was a fuck-up, and Sam refused to take any responsibility for him.

Sam and Dean fought. Dean left, and took the Impala with him.

Whenever Dean was in Stanford, Sam chafed against him, and felt like his real home was this house, these people. When he was gone, Sam longed for the smell of the Impala’s leather, for the easy grin that he would always deny shut down all his resistance.

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Jo.

Jess drew her knees up under the oversized t-shirt of Sam’s she was wearing, and hugged them to her chest. “Well?”

Jo propped herself up on her elbow in the bed, and gave her a hard, considering sort of look.

“You thought I wouldn’t believe you?” Jo said. “Honey, that’s small beans.”

Jess stared at her, one hand running nervously up and down her own shin. Then she wrinkled her nose, and gave a self-deprecating little laugh.

Jo reached out and rested a hand on her foot, thumbing at the fine pale hair that started just above the ankle. It was prickly: growing back in. Jess performed most parts of ‘perfect’ feminine beauty more effortlessly than anybody Jo knew, from the blow-dried curls to clothes that always hung as if tailored, but she rarely bothered shaving her legs. When it wasn’t the height of summer, she only did it for dates with Sam.

Between her and Charlie, Jo was starting to get over the feeling that she was a fraud every time she didn’t do the full-on female armour thing every morning.

“My dad used to kill ghosts,” Jo said, matter-of-fact. “And a few other worse things. When other kids were learning not to touch the hot plate I was learning not to break salt lines. Mum never did as much as he did, but when I was seven something followed Dad home. Bailed me up in the wood shed. Mum took it down with the mallet, killed it with the hatchet. It changed shape three times while
I saw it.”

“Oh,” said Jess.

Jo patted her ankle. “Hold on, I’m going to text Charlie to get in here. She—”

Jess buried her face in one hand, laughing helplessly. “Charlie too?”

Jo shrugged, flopping over Jess’ feet (naked stomach on naked feet) to reach her phone. “Not got the practical experience that Sam and I do—okay, that Sam does—but by now she’s probably better than both of us at the theory. And.”

Jo paused, thumbs hovering over the screen, and looked over her shoulder at the quavering smile behind Jess’ clenched fist. Jess’ smile shouldn’t quaver. It should always be bright and full.

“Oh. Probably best not to let the Winchesters know. I mean, I grew up around their type, okay? Not saying that Sam would think you’re a monster or anything, but… he’d go straight for the dark and scary. I can introduce you to a couple of ladies. Leave the shoot-first guys out of it.”

When Charlie heard about it, she squeaked and got excited, then insisted on Jess moving into their spare room as soon as her current lease was up. After all, she spent most of her nights in there already.

Sam.

Thanksgiving brought Dean back. And with him, Bobby, and Ellen Harvelle.

Jo hid in her room for three hours and sent angry texts to Sam to pass on to Dean.

When eventually she emerged, her mother took one look at her, demanded to know where she’d got the money for surgery, took a second and pointed out that she was an inch and a half shorter and, within a minute, had winkled out the whole *got a sex change from a pagan god* thing. She didn’t take it well.

Bobby and Dean and Charlie beat a retreat to a bar for most of the evening. Sam stayed, to fight it out.

Within ten minutes the women had ganged up on him and sent him out to his room. So he put on the nice jeans and jacket that Jess had made him buy, and went out to find the others.

Sam hadn’t seen Bobby in years. He’d aged: greyer, crustier. Warmer, too. Sam didn’t know how Jo’s mom had made him leave his junkyard and come to California—hadn’t even known she knew him—but it was good to see him. Weird, but good.

Sam hadn’t realised until he’d seen him again how worried he’d been that Bobby would blame him for leaving the life, just like Dad. He also hadn’t realised how different Bobby’s priorities were.
When Bobby actually told Sam he was proud of him, Sam had to walk away for a moment. Then he cursed himself for an idiot, came back, and wrapped Bobby in a hug.

Bobby grumbled at him a bit, and patted his shoulder, then whacked him on the back of the head and hauled him over the coals for never calling when he’d needed it and also for getting involved with demigods. Sam stood there, and rubbed the back of his head, and said “yes Bobby” and “no Bobby” and “sorry Bobby,” and tried not to grin like an idiot.

Charlie seemed a bit intimidated by Bobby’s grumpy old man act, at first. But once Jess had breezed in, all heels and bouncy blonde curls and brightness and a chatty warmth that nobody could resist, and Dean had relaxed enough to lean back in his chair and fling an arm behind Charlie’s shoulders, and Charlie had stolen half his fries, and Jess had told a not-too-embarrassing story about Sam that made Dean snort and grin and cap it with a far worse one from when Sam had been fourteen, Charlie had relaxed enough to ask Bobby something about the differences in origin between shapeshifters and wendigos; and soon they had their own little huddle at the end of the table comparing notes. Charlie had quite a solid database already on various kinds of monster, but given she only had the internet and Sam’s experiences to go on, she often had a hard time working out what was real lore and what was fantasy. Bobby, meanwhile, still seemed to think the internet was something between a geeky fad and a soul-sucking demon. Sam suspected this might be the beginning of a beautiful partnership.

It was. And it wasn’t long before they started to need it.

Sam’s visions increased until he couldn’t ignore them. Person after person, all of them around his age, dying in ways that looked like accidents or sometimes in a straight-up brutal murder. And always Jess, Jess, Jess, pinned to the ceiling in her white dress while a red gash blossomed along her stomach and flameslicked out to swallow the roof.

Some of them he found were things that had happened recently. Others only happened after he dreamed it. So he had to step up.

At first he’d just tell Dean he’d found a case. But too many of the visions were about people whose life seemed completely normal up until now: there was nothing for him to point to and say “here, we should go here, this looks weird”.

Dean didn’t take the truth well—the more so because Sam hadn’t told him at once.
And most of the visions came too late to save the people anyway.

Once Dean knew, Charlie and Bobby had to be let in on it. Charlie’s google-fu was miles ahead of Sam’s, and she knew how to hack into any number of things that nobody should be able to access, so she was invaluable in tracking these kids down. But it was Bobby who worked out the connection between them: Bobby, with a lifetime’s experience in figuring out the pattern behind this sort of thing.

All of them, born in 1983. And all of them? A house fire, starting in the nursery and killing their mother, on the night they were six months old. In some cases the father or a surviving older sibling had mentioned something about an intruder.

Azazel’s children. And they were being taken out, one by one.

All except Sam. Because he was special.

He didn’t want to know why.

As for Jess? Well, her mom was still alive. She had all of them around to dinner once or twice a month, just as bright and cheery and welcoming as Jess herself. So that vision, that one must be a lie. Or at least… it was a warning to Sam, for Sam, a reminder of the connection with the death of his mother and all the other mothers. It was about Sam, not about Jess.

Jess was normal.

Christmas break; and Dad was in trouble again. Dean left, and Jo went with him.

They were getting on well, those two: half affection and half flirtation, with a shared appreciation for sarcasm and for dodging the more open and enthusiastic emotions of Charlie and Jess. Ostensibly she went because she was restless staying in one place, wanted to swing by and see her mom, wanted a road trip and maybe a hunt or two; but Sam was pretty sure she was also going along to keep an eye on Dean.

She knew better than the other girls what kind of a man John Winchester was likely to be, after all, and how a man like that would treat any man who wasn’t so perfectly manly as he should be. She’d seen, perhaps better than even Sam, just how much of himself Dean shut down when John was involved, and how much had been gradually unfolding, living with them.

(Sam had actually caught him voluntarily listening to some of Charlie’s poppy, girly music the other day. And every now and then he actually responded to Coyote’s flirting with, well, flirting, instead of getting all defensive about it.)

And Sam was almost sure she could handle herself on a hunt.

Sam was relieved to see him go, though he felt horrible about that. Because now, Sam was beginning to see… what he could only think of as auras. Moods, ideas, shapes, thoughts, hovering in the air around people. Especially people he knew well. And seeing even that much of Dean’s thoughts and feelings… that felt wrong.

Coyote was different. Apparently it only worked properly on humans, because around Coyote, all Sam could see was colours. He hadn’t worked out, yet, what those colours corresponded to. Coyote was always elusive anyway.
“Dude,” said Sam, pinning the phone between ear and shoulder as he tried not to let a stack of physics textbooks fall over. “You know I work this time Thursdays and Mondays. What’s up?”

He knew it was serious when Dean didn’t take the time to hassle him about his nerd cliché job working in the campus bookstore.

“Ran a case,” said Dean, significantly. “This demon, who was after the last kid you put us on. Caught her, tied her up, had a little chat.”

Sam started fidgeting with the books, like he was checking all the barcodes against the inventory or something. “Uh-huh. You got something?”

“You could say that.”

Dean paused. His voice was heavy and clipped—ironic—the way it always was when he was working with Dad.

“This demon,” he said, after a minute. “She talked about Yellow-eyes like a father. Never heard of demons having affections before. Connections. Y’know?”

“Yeah.” Sam frowned. “It’s all pain for the sake of pain, not—well, loyalty and long-term motivation.”

“This chick? Not so much. Or at least, not how she played it. Really sounded like she was out for revenge for us doing him in. And… some other stuff.”

“… other stuff. Like what, Dean?”

He could hear the forced casual in Dean’s voice. “Oh, just like. About your friend, the Trickster.”

The book pile scattered, and tumbled all over the floor. Sam swore, and crouched down to gather them up, and grumbled back at Dean’s sarcastic question. “Fine. Go on. What did this demon have to say?”

And there, Dean paused. His sarcasm faltered, his reserve failed.

“Look,” he said, after a minute. “We had her tied up and we were giving her the third degree, okay? It’s not just… this was her… screw it. Look. There’s this big demon, Lilith. Like, as high as you can get. Seems like… she’s making a bid for power or whatever now Azazel’s gone, and Meg and all her kind—Azazel’s old crew—they’re trying to keep her out of it. And look, I’m not saying we should trust this demon, but if even half what she says is true this Lilith is bad news. And she said—seems like your Coyote is on Lilith’s side. Working with them. Keeping an eye on you. Working you down.”

“What,” said Sam, very calmly.

“Don’t give me that tone,” snapped Dean, in exactly Dad’s voice. “Lilith has big plans and wants to use you. Coyote’s there to keep you on the right path and to train you up. Strengthen you. The bad way. Make you less human.”

Sam stood up, with his neat stack of books in his arms.
“Bullshit.”

“Sam. Sammy. She said this was the plan all along. This is—all those freaky visions of yours? The psychic crap? This is where it comes from. You need to get him away from you, okay? He’s… he’s feeding you something, I don’t know, but Sam, he’s toxic, okay? He’s working for her.”

“Okay,” said Sam, and put the books in their place. “So. Since when are you hunting demons again? I thought you were just saving the kids. The hell are you doing, Dean? You’re meant to be getting out of that life. Getting a life.”

Dean’s silence was eloquent. Then: “Well hell, Sam, someone’s gotta do it.”

“No,” said Sam. “No, that’s not it. It’s that Dad doesn’t know how not to be a hunter. He doesn’t know how to stop.” He cupped his hand over the phone and stalked out onto the street, out to where nobody would be able to overhear more than a few words at a time. “Dean, this is exactly what we’ve talked about. Don’t fall into that with him. Please. Dad—he’s—broken, okay? This thing, avenging Mom, it… it took over his life. He’s got nothing left. It doesn’t have to take over ours. We’re done with that, Dean.”

“Right,” snapped Dean. “Like you can talk. You walked out, Sam. You left, okay? You don’t get to talk about him like that.”

“No, look, y’know what? You need to hear this, so shut the hell up and listen, okay? This demon, this Meg. She was part of Azazel’s inner circle, okay? And she says, this whole thing with the special children—what makes them special—what gives you your powers? Azazel broke into your bedroom, Sam, when you were six months old, and he bled into your mouth. You’ve got demon blood in you, Sam. That’s where these so-called powers are coming from, okay? And every time you use them? They get stronger. It gets stronger. That’s what Azazel was training you all up for. Some big demon-army prince thing.”

A white sedan rumbled by. Its rear windows were dusted over with red dirt, and somebody had written “CLEAN ME” and a smiley face into it with a finger.

The pavement under Sam’s feet felt unexpectedly hard. Which was dumb. That was kind of the point of pavement, after all.

“Is,” said Sam. “This… Meg. The demon you were questioning. Did she seem… like she knew what she was talking about?”

“So far as it went,” Dean grunted. “I mean, she. Uh. She got away. Before we could gank her. But. I mean. I’m pretty sure she—”

“Because,” said Sam calmly, “I’m pretty sure. Any demon who was actually in Azazel’s inner circle. If you caught her she meant to be caught. So she also wanted you to hear or believe whatever it is she told you.”

Dean exhaled, heavy and desperate against his ear. “Seriously, Sam?”

“Yeah,” said Sam, through gritted teeth. “This freak will be using his own judgement, thanks.”

“Sam!”

“Don’t call me at work again.”
He hung up.

_D:_ Ask him why Mom had to die.

Sam slid his phone over the table to Coyote, with Dean’s lone text message open on the screen.

Coyote read it, quirked an eyebrow, and slid it back. So long as Sam didn’t look directly at them, he could see the colours trailing slowly through the air around him: right now, a soft purplish blue with large easy swirls of rose. Only it wasn’t _seeing_, not exactly; because they didn’t block his view of the back of the booth behind him, or the rest of the diner beyond. It was like it was a different sense altogether, just getting translated into the idea of “colours” because that was the only idea that could fit into his brain.

“Kinda get the feeling I’m coming in past my cue here, kiddo.”

“Apparently,” said Sam quietly, “Azazel bled into my mouth. I’ve had demon blood in me all my life. That’s all that makes me ‘special’. Not my extra-shiny soul, like you said. So. You want to change your story about how things went down that night? When my mom died?”

“Touched by your faith,” drawled Coyote, “but honey, _demigod_. And not of any mystic religion. Waaaay more practical than that. None of this mystery bullcrap. What you see, what you get. Religion for dummies and busy execs.”

“Don’t,” said Sam. “Don’t start. I’m not talking to the god. I’m talking to a friend and ally who has a hell of a lot more resources than me to find this shit out, okay? Because things are getting serious and I need to know. We need to know. All of us. We’re in this together.”

Coyote smirked. The colours split into smaller shapes and moved a little faster, dancing, almost mischievous. “That’s what _she_ said.”

“… That makes no sense.”

“Heh. That’s what _she_ said.”

“You know, that was funny maybe the first fifty times.”

“Charlie thinks it is.”
“Charlie’s sense of humour is as subtle as a cement truck.”

“That’s what she—”

“I will gag you.”

“That’s wha—”

“Apparently she didn’t say it nearly often enough.”

“Saaaaam. Live a little.”

“Don’t you trust me?”

“Should I? Hello—hunter?”

“Is that really the only reason?”

Coyote actually shut up for a moment, and eyed Sam with unaccustomed seriousness hiding behind his smirk.

“Huh. You’re worried about that again?”

“About what?”

“Kid, you’re one of the least scary humans I know.”

“… about what?”

“You think powers are what makes a person scary? Nuh-uh. It’s what they think it’s okay to do. It’s what they can justify to themselves. You, honey? You’re not a blip on the radar. Not right now.”

“What?”

“I mean, sure, you could be. Totally Slytherin. ‘Help you on your way to greatness’ and all that. You could go any way you want, but it’s all about the choice.”

“The hell are you—”

“And the temper, obviously.”

“Oh, screw you.”

“That’s what she said.” Coyote sat back and spread his hands, and smiled beatifically, as if he’d won the world. Sam struggled between laughing, and punching him, and kissing him.

“Look,” he said at last, after he’d stared deliberately at his coffee for long enough to command his voice, and for Coyote to look at him with golden laughter in his eyes. “You ever heard of a demon named Lilith?”

The laughter faded. So did the colours. They darkened, and slowed, and a deeper burnished gold hovered close around Coyote’s head and neck. “Well, shit. She’s on the field already, huh?”

“What d’you know about her?”

“Big scary demon. The first demon ever created, actually. Pretty much never comes out to play, though.”
“So… something big’s going down.”

There was a weight like sadness behind Coyote’s eyes for a moment, before he dropped them to the table. “Not my area, kiddo.”

Sam took a breath.

“Dean seems to think it is.”

One eyebrow cocked, but Coyote didn’t quite lift his gaze.

“Seems they caught a demon who said you’re a double agent. Working for Lilith. Prepping me for… for whatever they want me for.”

“Mm. You believe it?”

“Would I be sitting here asking you about it if I did?”

The corner of Coyote’s mouth twitched. “Well, loyalty *is* a weakness of yours.”

“Also,” said Sam, watching him carefully, “so far as I can tell, you’ve been kind of… doing the opposite.”

“Opposite of what?”

“The house, the girls—everything. Bringing us together and giving us a home. Looking after us, letting us look after each other.” It was a shot in the dark, but… “You’ve been trying to keep me human.”

That brought his head up; and something raw flashed in his eyes for just a moment before he leered. “Not me, kiddo. I’m not the interfering type. I’m just in it for the fun. Never grow up, remember?”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Fine. Look. Just. I get it. Why you lied about the demon blood. About what made me *special*. You didn’t want me freaking out over it, and… I get it, but dick move, okay? Don’t do that again.”

Coyote’s head tilted slowly to one side.

“Also,” said Sam, “is there any way to get this demon blood *out* of me?”

“You think I lied?” said Coyote softly. “Huh.”

The tightness that had gripped inside Sam’s chest ever since Dean had said that squeezed sharply, then seemed to ease a bit.

“Well,” said Sam roughly, “yeah. Obviously. You said there’s nothing in me but *me*, and that it was just… me having a strong soul. Or something. You said it was all human.”

“Lord save me from angsty white manpain,” said Coyote with delicious irony, rolling his eyes heavenward as the rose colours around him brightened, turned warmer. “Of course it’s all *human*. How long d’you think someone else’s blood’s going to hang around in your body? You replace all your own blood often enough.”

Sam stared at him, not daring to think.

Coyote sighed noisily: leaned forward, and tapped two fingers over Sam’s heart. “I’ve been in here,
remember? Think I wouldn’t have noticed anything foreign hanging around, any other markers on your soul? This isn’t Obelix falling into the magic potion as a boy. It’s not still hanging around turning you into Magneto or whatever. Humans can drink demon blood for a temporary power-up, but you’d have to be drinking it every few days if you wanted it to stick. My best guess? Azazel’s blood was a catalyst, that’s all. Just turning a tap on. ‘Cos I can tell you, all the water coming through it now is yours.”

“You make the weirdest metaphors,” Sam told him, and he felt himself smile a bit.

“That’s what she said.”

“Oh my god, would you shut up.”

“I–”

Then several things happened all at once.

The colours in the air around Coyote went turbulent, spun faster then coalesced into one single focussed blood-red, except for where the gold shone like thorny fire around his head. His face, too, went hard and distant, and he snapped “Quiet.” And at the same moment Sam himself felt a warning tug, a sudden urgency like something ripping at his gut, and he knew he had to get home, get home now.

“Charlie,” said Coyote, then he was reaching across the table toward Sam, and the world spun.

Sam found himself outside the front door. He only had time to register that, and to notice that he was alone, before he heard Jess scream from upstairs.

No time for stealth, then.

He ran inside, cursing Coyote internally for dropping him outside, grabbing a knife from the kitchen and wishing he had a gun, pounding up the stairs and knowing, just knowing where they were, following the pull of desperation and fear.

There was a scuffle inside his bedroom as he burst through the door, sobbing breaths and struggles. And there: Charlie, unconscious against the wall, head bleeding. A large raven (Coyote, he could feel it) crouched on the windowsill looking in, Fidget snarling from inside the locked closet and scratching frantically at the door, and—for some reason, Brady. Slumped against the other wall, whimpering, clutching at the broad gash across his belly, trying to hold his guts inside.

“Sam,” he gasped, breathy, desperate. “Sam, get out of here! Kit, your friend Kit, he’s—not human, he—”

Sam followed his horrified gaze toward the ceiling, though he already knew what he would see. He’d seen it often enough in his dreams.

White sundress, golden hair, floating out around her as if on the surface of water. Frozen, limbs crooked and awkward, but her eyes conscious and terrified, locked on Sam. And Sam… couldn’t move. Because, Mom.

Then her face contorted in pain and the first red spot appeared at the side of her belly. And, no. Sam knew what came next.

But it didn’t.
Her eyes flicked sideways to the door of the closet. The bolt slid free, and Fidget barrelled out, yelling with fury.

At the same time, the window flew open and the air was full of black wings, tawny fur, teeth and snarls. Because Fidget was flinging herself at Brady, who was—impossibly on his feet, swearing at her, trying to shove her off, and black-eyed. And even as the fire began to blossom around Jess she fell, freed, and Sam caught her because he couldn’t look away. That is, he reached for her, and they tumbled to the ground together in a heap of bruises and elbows.

Jess was scrambling to her feet at once, limping and staggering with her hand clutching her stomach. Fidget somehow had the demon pinned to the floor, and Sam put himself on instinct between them and the girls.

But then the raven turned into Coyote; and he bent, and gathered Charlie up in his arms. His mouth was hard and set, and the furious scarlet and gold of him was so bright that it took Sam a moment to realise that his eyes were really gold, all gold, with no pupils or whites to them at all.

The fire flickered out, leaving only scorch marks behind it. Then Brady—the demon—was dragged across the floor by an invisible force and up the wall, pinned there by nothing, with the coywolf standing right in front of him and staring silently at his bloodied throat.

“You hurt one of my own,” said Coyote softly.

“She was in the way.” He shouldn’t have been able to speak like that, with his throat torn out, wheezing and bubbling, and—there was no way Brady was still alive in there, probably hadn’t been since the demon had slashed his own stomach open, and had Sam ever actually known Brady at all? “I was just tidying up Azazel’s loose ends.”

“Just?” Coyote’s mouth curled. Then he laid Charlie gently on the bed, cupped her cheek until the blood on her head receded. He snapped his fingers, not looking at Jess; but she made a small noise and pressed her fingers incredulously to the bloodied cotton of her dress, feeling around for where she had been cut. “Just setting this up so this boy walks in on her burning on the ceiling, her in the corner? Did we get back too soon? You were going to let the beast out, possess her, and use her to bloody Charlie up a bit too? Make it look like this was all one deliciously cruel trick?”

The demon was writhing, gaping with his mouth, trying to smoke out; but he was caught.

“I don’t know what your angle is, Trickster,” he gurgled, “but you should get out of here while the going’s good. You’re no match for what’s coming. This isn’t your business.”

Then Coyote grins. “Oh, you’re right. I’m only sticking around here so long as it’s fun. I’m shortsighted like that. But what I’m seeing right now is that I’m more than a match for you, you oily little shit. Shall we play a game?”

He snapped his fingers. He and the demon vanished.

Jess was at Charlie’s side at once, feeling over her head, taking her pulse and checking her breath. Then she tore off her own ruined white sundress and crumpled it in disgust, running her fingers over her belly, touching her side where the abortive cut had begun, sinking onto the bed and staring at the bloodied dress on the floor.

“I felt it,” she whispered. “I felt it, Sam! He cut me. He was going to—”

“Yeah.”
Sam took the blanket from the foot of his bed and wrapped it around her shoulders. Then he sat down beside her and took her in his arms, cradling her against his body, clinging to her and feeling the wild rabbit-beat of her heart under his hands.

“You’re not crazy,” he promised. “Kit healed it. We stopped it, okay? You’re fine. It’s done. I’m so, so sorry. Just breathe for me. Explaining comes later.”

She nodded mutely, huddling against him, stroking Charlie’s hair as Charlie began to stir. Fidget whined, and pushed her nose against Jess’ knee. It left bloody smears on her bare skin, and Jess flinched.

“Hey,” said Sam, and tugged at Fidget’s ear to distract her. “Good girl. They’re both okay. You’re okay. Everybody’s fine. Well done, girl. Good girl.”

Charlie sat up with a gasp and a panicked “Christo!”, and Jess said “Oh, honey” and hugged her tight, while Sam kept up his litany of reassurances, ostensibly to the coywolf. Then Charlie giggled, half hysterical, and reached out to cuddle her (bloody muzzle and all).

“Did my Nymeria save the day?”

“I think I’m going to be sick,” said Jess, in a faraway sort of voice.

Sam fetched her his rubbish bin, and she retched into it while he rubbed her back and Charlie held her hair and asked what had happened.

“Brady was… possessed,” said Sam. “By a demon.”


Sam shook his head. “The demon killed him. Jess, I know this is a shock, but—”

“Oh, she knows,” said Charlie. “I mean, I hadn’t told her about demons but she knows that supernatural things exist, you can leave out that part.”

“What? You told her? I—”

Jess spat into the bin, then wrinkled her nose at him. “What, like it wasn’t obvious? But I didn’t realise that Kit was… some kind of a wizard? And I wasn’t expecting…” She trailed off, as her eyes went to the corner where Brady had lain. Then her body seized up, and she retched again.

Sam and Charlie exchanged looks over her head. Then Sam reached out, to rub Charlie’s shoulder. “You okay?”

Charlie bit her lip, looking very white, but she nodded with a shaky smile. “Looks like I missed the worst of it, huh.”

“Looks like,” Sam echoed. Then he took a breath. “More like… demigod, Jess. He’s not technically human. Kit’s just what Charlie calls him—short for Kitsune—and we all adopted that because it sounds more like a real name in mixed company. Jo and I, we know him as Coyote. But he’s got a lot of other names too. And… Jess. Charlie. I am so, so sorry I got you both caught up in this. I should have known—”

Charlie punched him in the arm. Then Coyote re-appeared in the room, not even bothering to pretend to use the door, and Charlie shakily climbed to her feet and went over to bury herself in his arms.
He held her carefully, possessively, cradling the back of her head as she tucked her face into his shoulder, and Fidget padded over to circle around their legs and sit down practically on his foot. And Sam watched them, and watched the flicker of deep warm purples and reds circling around them and forced down the pang of jealousy at that tenderness, that honesty, at her for receiving it, at him for knowing how to give it.

And he thought, no.

There was no way it could be true. There was no way Coyote would ever do something that might hurt Charlie. He wasn’t that much of a monster.

Coyote pressed a kiss to Charlie’s hair, then looked over her shoulder at Jess: wary, like he wasn’t quite sure he was going to be allowed to stay. Yellow and grey flickered at the edges of him, around stripes of bold orange like bravado.

“Oh wow,” Jess breathed. “Sam. Sam, we’ve, like, had threesomes with a god.”

Coyote immediately waggled his eyebrows. “And wasn’t it divine?”

“… What, seriously?”

“I can’t help it, bunny.” Coyote winked. “I’m drawn this way.”

“Oh, you did not just—” And Jess broke down into helpless giggles.

“I’m missing something?” said Sam to Charlie, who made a disgusted noise at him. “Men. Didn’t you know Jessica Rabbit is her favourite cartoon character?”

“Uh,” said Sam, who hadn’t. “Right. Yes.”

Jess reached out her hand as she laughed; and Coyote came to them, and caught it. He leaned in, and kissed the top of her head—then he pulled a face, snapped his fingers and the bin was empty and clean, and he was offering her a glass of water.

“Oh,” she said. “Thanks.”

Sip, and spit, and sip, and spit, and rinse, and spit, and swallow, and drink. Then she leaned into Sam’s side, sat up a bit, and giggled, still with her hand on her stomach.

“Well. I’ve had men come swooping to my rescue before when some other guy’s giving me grief, but it’s never been—like, literally swooping.”

The orange mingled with the grey, shaded into something warmer, easier, less jagged. And Coyote grinned.

“What can I say? I look hot in feathers. Didn’t seem like you needed much rescuing though, Matilda. You almost had it under control yourself.”

Jess blushed and ducked her head and gave Sam an uncertain sideways look. Charlie clapped her hands and squeaked, “Oh my god, you got it working?”

And Sam thought, Matilda, and heard again very clearly the click of the lock on the cupboard door before Fidget had come bursting out to break the demon’s concentration.

After all, Jess had been born in 1983 too. And, tidying up Azazel’s loose ends.
Maybe she wasn’t the ordinary one after all.

Sam was not his father. So he didn’t yell and rage and punch anything, no matter how much he wanted to (because he was a violent *freak*, always had been, no matter how hard he tried to keep it down and now he knew why). He wasn’t his father, and he *wouldn’t* be his father. And he loved her. Even if she didn’t (couldn’t) love him.

So he let out his breath slowly through his nose, and squeezed her against his side.

“Show me?” he asked.

Telekinesis. That was the word for it. Or, of course, *Matilda*.

None of them had ever told him. But of course, he hadn’t told them everything either. He’d told Jess least of all.

She didn’t have *fine* control, it emerged (as they all sat around in a pile of cushions and blankets in front of *The Empire Strikes Back*). She could shove a box of tissues off the dresser, but not pick them up steadily. Even for that, she needed to be calm. She felt like a baby swiping at toys, she said.

No fire in her nursery, no dead mother. Sam couldn’t explain that; but if the demons had come for her, then she must have been one of Azazel’s children too. One of Azazel’s loose ends.

He didn’t tell her that. Not the night for it. He just concentrated on the warm, living body of Charlie tucked against his side, and the eager animation of Jess’ face as she demonstrated her *gift*, and Coyote’s too-easy banter from where he lay half-sprawled on the sofa.

“So if demons and Hell are real,” said Jess curiously at one point, sitting cross-legged with a blanket around her shoulders and a tub of pistachio ice cream in her lap, “what about the others? Heaven, and angels and so on? Should I be going to church more?”

The god in the room snorted, and Sam flipped him off.

“I don’t know,” Sam said. “Sometimes I pray, but it’s more hope than anything, y’know? I’ve never seen any evidence. But maybe that’s the way it should be. I guess that—if they are out there, they’re not… getting involved.”

Jess turned eager eyes on Coyote. “Have you ever met an angel?”

“Not really my area,” he said, and shrugged. “Swap you for the cookies and cream?”
D: dude what the hell. charlie just rang and told me what went down last nght. I had to hear it from her?

S: was kind of busy with damage control last night, dean. and had classes and work all morning.
S: was going to ring you when I got home.
D: what, 24 hrs later?
S: well it wasn’t going to be a short simple conversation dean
D: what’s that supposed to mean
S: lots of explanations?
S: plus I knew you’d be a dick about it. like you’re doing now.
D: screw u
D: you know the fact that this happened right after I told you about the whole lilith thing is suspicious as hell right
D: like, he realised he had to prove he’s one of the good guys and he knows how to press your buttons
D: ffs sam if it’s true he set one of his demon buddies on charlie and jess
D: sammy quit sulking we need to talk about this
S: dean, I don’t want to have this argument now. this is why I didn’t ring. this paper is due tomorrow, okay?
S: you’re not the only thing in my life anymore
S: some of us have work to do
D: what, you’re too busy biting the pillow these days to have time for your own family
S: what the hell dean
S: That’s not you talking. That’s what Dad says about me, isn’t it?
S: Dean. I’m leaving the library now. I’m going to ring. You’d better pick up.
S: answer the damn phone dean.
S: does he call me a freak too? does he think I’m not trustworthy anymore?
D: dad doesn’t know the half of what’s been up with you lately. trying to keep it away from him,
okay? So you keep your mouth shut.

D: I've let him down too much already

S: what, you saying he'd want to HUNT me?

D: jesus sammy

D: just he doesn't trust you

D: you haven't really given us much reason to you know

S: Oh, so it's 'us' again now?

S: If he told you to, would you hunt me, Dean?

Time was, something woke Sam up unexpectedly? He’d have whipped out the weapon under his pillow and levelled it at them before he’d really blinked awake.

It wasn’t instinct. Instinct was innate: literally, it was what you were born with. It was reflex; and reflex was learned.

These days, Sam’s reflexes had learned… alternatives.

The wrong thing waking him up would still get the self-defence reaction (and it was hell trying to get back to sleep from the heights of adrenalin when it had just been an owl colliding with the windowsill or something like that). But more often, far more often, it went like this.

He’d wake up, or half wake, to what should be a nightmare. The dark figure, barely real at the foot of his bed—shadowed against the curtains—stealthily closing the door. And before he was awake, before he could consciously process what he’d sensed, there’d be the slow drowsy burn of pleasure, the luxurious internal hum of yes, come and get me. And he’d be spreading his legs, and curling his mouth, and letting his body float from the unconscious deliciousness of sleep towards the deeper, hotter deliciousness of sensation.

It wasn’t always Coyote. Sometimes it was Jess—once or twice, even Jo, and several times both of them at once. Charlie always insisted on sleeping with somebody whether or not sex was on the cards, so she often turned up just to use him as a body pillow. Sam was never quite sure how his brain processed that it was them, what senses picked up on it. Whether it was normal senses, or the… other ones. Something about the way they moved, perhaps, except that Coyote didn’t really move until Sam noticed him, growled at him, ordered him into the bed, dragged him in with lazy arms or nuzzled into the pillow and spread his legs and let Coyote do with his body whatever he wanted. Something before conscious thought. Something that he recognised with his mind, his feelings, his soul.

Sam rolled over onto his belly, and nestled his hands in under the pillow, and snuffled into it
luxuriously. Unconscious, he revelled in the consciousness of being conscious of being watched.

A soft exhale rippled the air. Breath, or the subtle shift of invisible colours in the back of Sam’s brain.

Sam woke, and turned his face on the pillow, warm.

“Mind if I join you?” came the low voice. Familiar voice; unfamiliar words.

“Hm,” mumbled Sam, and turned his face back into the soft cotton. “Since when’d you ask f’r an inv’tation?”

“Hey.” Falling just short of teasing: still something unfamiliar and weary behind the tone. “Consent’s important to my kind.”

Sam snorted, and held out a sleep-heavy arm. “Fine, I consent. C’mon in here.”

There was a still moment. A weird shard of gun-metal silver seemed to flinch across the muted red of Coyote’s mood. Then the air shifted.

The blanket moved, and a warm body draped itself over his left side, and a hand settled into the small of his back.

“Should be careful, saying that sort of thing,” Coyote murmured. “You don’t know what you just gave me permission to do. Never know who’s going to take you up on it.”

It was strange, having him so close: feeling that he was close, in the way he normally only was with the girls. Sam felt as if he were being touched with more than just skin: as if Coyote’s… attention was settling round him, tentative and light, and somehow lonely.

Sam made a vague noise, and nuzzled in against Coyote’s hair. It smelled of smoke, and honey, and Charlie’s shampoo.

The hand on his back hesitated. Then it whispered up and down, up and down, absent and soft; and Sam drifted, halfway between the pleasure of sleep and the pleasure of anticipation.

“Love it when you look like this,” murmured Coyote, just the shape of his usual dirty talk, but too subdued in colour. “All spread out and indulgent. Lusty little puppy who’ll just… open up for me and take it.”

The diffuse heat in Sam’s belly tightened and sharpened into a hook, hot and clear.

He huffed, and wriggled the arm that was trapped under Coyote’s body, trying to get it clear. “You and Dean,” he murmured, and curled the arm tight around Coyote’s waist, “bad as each other. Deflecting… feelings shit.”

The hand on his back stopped being diffident, and shot down into his sweat pants to grope his arse.

“Don’t compare me to that freckled orang-utan,” Coyote complained. “No feelings here. Just good old horniness and snark.”

Sam whined, and sighed, and turned his head, and kissed him to shut him up. To shut him up, and to convince him. Because he knew enough, by now—by now in knowing Coyote, by now in being Dean’s brother—to recognise defensive neediness when he saw it. And he knew the kind of language that worked best. At least in the immediate sense.
It wasn’t a challenging kiss. It wasn’t their usual competition, trading blow and parry and subversion. Nor were Sam’s hands on his face, smoothing over his shoulders, rubbing over his back, ghosting over his thighs, their usual kind of touch. The colours around Coyote were muted, sluggish, but almost trembling, humming, as if trying to reach out and not to touch him at the same time. And there was a challenge in this forthrightness, in simplicity and sincerity.

Coyote’s mouth pressed up into his. It fell open in one startled rush of heat, and Sam drew back, then took his time exploring. Convincing.

Perhaps if Sam had been completely awake, if his guards had been up, his feelings would have been more complex. The antagonism would still have been there, the wariness, the breathlessness and the otherness. But Coyote was more than ally now, more than dangerous asset or annoying housemate. What exactly he was Sam didn’t quite know, but he was Sam’s to look after. At least for now.

And… and. Somehow. He couldn’t say quite how, couldn’t analyse the senses that told him this, but right now Coyote needed. And that was unusual enough to be intoxicating.

And beyond that, in this moment, he didn’t care. He was just… warmly, sleepily thankful. That this person was here with him, in his bed, breathing out disbelieving little gasps as his breaths hitched against Sam’s mouth.

Sam was here, in this house, with these people in his life. In the morning he’d be sitting down to breakfast and suddenly find a cuddly sleepy Charlie in his lap stealing his food, Jess would have already run three miles with him but would through her mysterious powers (her girl powers, not those powers) look sexily dishevelled instead of a sweaty mess, Jo would ring sometime in the next day or two and complain at him about Dean. Somehow, even if Dean and Dad didn’t want him, there was a family here.

And also those fingers were creeping up his side and—

Sam broke off the kiss, gasping against Coyote’s cheek. He felt almost as if he were laughing and almost as if he were dreaming, because most of where he was floated in the uncertain swirls of tranquil mahogany and uncertain verdure between them. He felt like he was teasing Coyote, pressing gently, easing him towards laughter and relaxation himself; only thoughts like that sounded way too much like special children shit, so instead he spread his fingers carefully over Coyote’s skin and worshipped his body, with mouth and hands.

And if he pressed thoughts (prayers) of thanks into Coyote’s form as he did it, who the hell would know? Coyote wasn’t that sort of god. Sam’s gratitude to the world, to Heaven, could mean nothing to him. Maybe there was nobody up there at all, nobody listening. But it meant something to Sam, to make those thoughts, to give them shape and power.

And he pushed them into the flickering sarcastic magenta of Coyote’s being, mumbled against his neck, as his fingers pushed into Coyote’s body.

“C’mon,” he mumbled, and shifted to cover him, to fit easy between his legs and slide into the place prepared for him, and relish the warmth and the privilege.

“You,” breathed Coyote against his temple; but the sentence stayed unfinished. His hand clutched into Sam’s hair, and stayed there, while their faces pressed together cheek by cheek.

“Jess cursed you out today,” Sam murmured, and began to move. “Apparently you should never drape one wet, dirty dishcloth or chux over another without running boiling water over them then wringing them out? and then you have to spread them out so they’re hanging and not crumpled and
they’ll dry properly. Something like that. I don’t know, man, I’m still useless at all this household shit.”

“You’re a menace,” Coyote told him, half-laughing, half-gasping. And Sam felt something open up to the press of his mind, something new and strange and vaster than should have been possible.

“That’s what she said,” Sam acknowledged, before realising what he’d said himself and dissolving into little gasps of laughter against Coyote’s neck.

“Oh, so now it’s funny,” complained Coyote, between his snickers. “Why do I put up with you?”

“You came to my bed,” Sam pointed out, turning his face, nuzzling against the flush of his cheek, falling deeper into this other other consciousness (or power?) that apparently hid inside everything he’d ever felt of Coyote before.

_Bigger on the inside._

Coyote swore, soft and ragged, and arched under his touch, body and mind (or soul?), rippling against him dark and velvety and… longing. So very longing, and lonely. And bitter.

Then Coyote was kissing him, demanding and distracting, and the impression fled as though it had never been. Sam’s heart was pounding like he’d just come out the right side of a deadly fight, and he felt horribly tugged between tears and elation, but the hot body underneath him was moving and dragging him along with it. So he kissed him back, and pinned him to the bed, and they rode through it together on a wave that felt like _promises_ and _caring_ that might have belonged to either or both.

Coyote shoved him off, afterward, and flopped over onto his belly with a half-hearted snarky grumble just like most days. Sam could feel the walls carefully rebuilding themselves, sealing him off from whatever it was that had made Coyote come to him in the first place, vulnerable and doubting, sealing him off from the rest of that iceberg below the surface. So he rolled in against Coyote’s side, when the god buried his face in the pillow and settled down; let them catch their breath together, while he rested his cheek on Coyote’s shoulder and brushed a thumb back and forth between his shoulders.

Coyote didn’t call him out on being more overtly _cuddly_ than normal. Sam didn’t call Coyote out on it either. But the wall that Sam could feel between them (now he knew it was there, that it had always been there) didn’t get any stronger. It just sort of hovered there, like a semi-solid mist: colours muted, calmer, but still breathing a deep and abiding wistfulness.

Sam kissed Coyote’s shoulder, and the side of his neck. The movements of his hand on the god’s back became firmer, more deliberate, and Coyote made a deep pleased groan and seemed to melt into the pillow. So Sam half sat up on his elbow and made his best attempt at a one-handed massage, slow and easy, with long warm strokes in between to drag skin against damp, smooth skin. And he murmured on, telling Charlie’s story about some hilariously clueless and judgemental rich mum who’d wandered into the book store today, while he tried to remember…

That first night, that midsummer when he’d first met Coyote and struck their deal. There had been one point where _something_ had touched _something_. He’d figured later, in light of what Coyote had said when next they’d met, that must have been the god touching his soul to power up, or whatever. And this, this tonight, it felt familiar, it felt _something_ like that, but… not the same.

Like grabbing someone’s arm doesn’t feel quite like them grabbing yours.

Was it possible for a human to touch a god’s soul?
When he made his way down over the curve of Coyote’s arse, Coyote grumbled and spread his legs. His back arched, and his hips lifted in clear demand; and Sam smirked through his story and ran his knuckles over the backs of his thighs.

“Didn’t anybody ever tell you it isn’t wise to tease a god?” Coyote’s face was still hidden in the pillow, and his voice was a low curl of amusement and want.

“Must’ve skipped class that day.” Sam ran two fingertips up inside the curve of one buttock, just shy of the target. The skin was sticky with sweat and his own come. “Didn’t realise gods were such spoiled, mouthy brats either.”

Coyote’s head turned, just enough that one laughing golden eye twinkled at Sam through a fine veil of hair. “Oh, child. What myths have you been reading?”

Sam grinned at him, feeling a bit stupid with sudden unaccustomed affection, and patted the back of his thigh. “Well, I’ve kind of been putting together my own notes. I mean, there’s one that’s been pulling my pigtails for about six months now, so I’m starting to get the picture.”

“That so? Paint it for me.”

“Y’know how dogs basically have the emotional maturity of wolf puppies, because they never have to grow up?” Sam tweaked the skin under his hand, and put on his best innocent face, the one with the dimples.

The eyebrow arched. “Does that make you the owner in this scenario, sugar? Because I could grow a tail and furry ears if that turns you on.”

“Ugh. No.”

“Tentacles, then?”

Sam growled at him, and gave him the thorough fingering he was after, until he got tired of that and demanded Sam’s dick again. (And it was wonderful the recovery time you could get when your partner could tweak your internal chemistry, though Sam preferred not to think of it that was because it was kind of creepy really.)

And this time, Coyote’s face was already hidden. So the wall melted away almost at once.

This time it didn’t feel like one of them grabbing the other’s arm. This time it felt like… well, like their hands, tangling together against the headboard.

This wasn’t just sex.

This felt like flying. Like memories of wings, and the vastness of the universes inside every atom, and the ancient childish delight in the miracle that was living, and the eternal joy of being beloved, of being safe.

It felt like loss and a grief that could never be healed.

It felt like love. Not love for anybody in particular. Just love as… the centre of being. Of reason and motivation and personality.

Of course, love could lead to a whole bunch of messed-up things.

It mostly felt like the most dazzling array of coppers and browns and golds and bronzes that Sam’s
inner eye could imagine, and that was the easiest part to remember, because that was the easiest part to understand. It felt like the reach of vast pinions out around their bodies, and the sear of anguished flames around his neck and shoulders. And when Coyote came there was a vicious, brilliant flash of white that seemed to burn out the whole room, and which left spots dancing behind Sam’s eyes.

Sam groaned, and buried his face in Coyote’s hair and followed him over the edge. But the afterglow was kind of ruined when Coyote’s aura, instead of simmering down into the delicious rich shades of his usual afterglow, flashed with sudden spikes of white and yellow, and Sam was shoved off and rolled onto his back and Coyote was leaning over him before he’d even come down.

Sam grumbled and swatted at him, and the panic in Coyote’s eyes faded almost at once as he cupped the side of Sam’s face and stared at him narrowly.

“You okay in there, kiddo?”

“What’s with the light show?” Sam complained; and Coyote smirked.

“Ever heard the expression ‘he made me come so hard I saw stars’? That was the next grade up. Like, just one star, but from the inside. But hey, your eyes are still in your head, so no harm no foul.”

Sam squinted at him.

Coyote yawned indolently; and the anxious colours around him, and the faint traces of pleasure, faded into the same wistful melancholy that had surrounded him when he’d first turned up. At a snap of his fingers the bed was clean; and when he kissed Sam’s forehead and said “Guess that was an adequate performance from my sex toy—you should get back to sleep,” Sam couldn’t help following the order. But the feelings of longing and muted anger followed him far into his dreams.

That was the last he saw of Coyote for a long time.

The next day, John Winchester died in a drunken car crash; and Dean Winchester, blaming himself, sold his soul to a demon to bring him back. No ten-year deal this: the hounds came for him at once.

The next day, in other words, the Apocalypse began.
Three and a half months later.

The wall was full of windows, grubby old slats of broken blinds over the blackness of a cloudy night outside. The room was echoey, desolate in the way rooms that should be full of noise and bodies are during the hours of their emptiness.

The knife went clattering away across the classroom floor.

Sam shoved the demon back against the teacher’s desk. She gasped, and panicked, and grappled with one hand at the desk behind her. Her fingers closed on a pen—she stabbed at Sam’s shoulder—he knocked the blow aside, and sent her sprawling on her back on the desk.

The pleated skirt rode up, showing thigh on one leg and knee on the other where the kid’s sock was rumpled. She was tiny, barely fifteen and small for her age, but Sam had learned not to see the vessels of the demons he took down. It was easier, now: now that he could see the shadowy shapes of the demons’ real faces and bodies laid over the people that housed them, it was simpler to focus.

He stepped back, breathing heavily, and tightened the mental bonds around her.

He could feel her struggling—not so much to free her body but her mind, her power, looking for a weakness in his hold. But Sam had no intention of giving her an opening.

Faintly, below that hot simple pulse of the demon’s feelings Sam could sense the pounding of the kid’s heart, the skitterings of her fear. So at least this one was still alive.

Sam reached out his hand, without looking. The knife lifted from the floor and floated, slow and controlled, through the air to his waiting palm.

It was an empty threat: a display of power. He wouldn’t use the knife on her while the girl was in there; but then, he didn’t need to.

“I’ll tell you what’s going to happen here,” he said calmly. “I’m going to rip you out of your vessel and send you back to Hell where you belong. That’s inevitable. But the interesting thing is what’s going to happen before that. Because you’re going to tell me everything you know about what Lilith’s been up to—what she wants, where she’s been, where she’s likely to be—anything that I can use to track her down.”

Demons didn’t have much reaction to bodily pain, Sam had found. Physical torture they found easy to sustain. No matter how strong the sensation, it was only sensation, after all, and they weren’t that deeply embedded in their bodies. Sam kind of suspected they passed a lot of the pain, as well as the horror of bodily violation, off to their vessels—since the ones who’d already killed their vessels tended to find it harder to take.

Sam had found that using his powers to torment the demon itself usually got better results.

Half an hour in, and she was sobbing, and pleading, and spilling information about something Lilith had on the menu. Something about killing a reaper. Greybull, Wyoming. Lilith wouldn’t be there—Sam was learning that Lilith never got in on any real action herself—but it was part of her larger plan, and it was likely some of her higher-ups would show.

No further pressing could draw any information about that larger plan; and, given how easy this
demon had been to overpower, Sam decided in the end that there was nothing else she could give.

He didn’t bother listening when she begged him not to send her back to Hell, when she described its horrors and said how long it might take her to find another chance to escape. He’d heard it all before—especially the horrors.

Describing what Dean was going through down there was not the way to coax Sam Winchester into pity.

He didn’t need the exorcism chant anymore. Besides, given present company, it’d be inconvenient.

He concentrated—focused on the disjuncture between demon self and human self in the body in front of him—took one roughly from the other and flung its slimy, vicious touch downwards towards the abyss of the soul that was becoming clearer and easier to access every day.

When he had time to care, he’d worry about that. Not now.

The body lay panting on the desk. Then the girl folded herself up into a ball, too scared and stunned to cry, and just whimpered quietly with each breath.

Sam offered her a hand. She flinched away from it. He took her hand anyway and drew her to her feet, glancing at the inside of her wrist.

“You should go home,” he said. “It was all a nightmare. Nothing bad will come for you.”

There was a faint sarcastic snort from the corner of the classroom. Sam ignored it.

Somewhere in the corridors beyond the door, an alarm went off. There were footsteps, and the sound of doors.

Ruby licked salt off her fingers.

“Should’ve left the demon in her,” she commented. “Now she’s your weakness.”

Sam ignored her: picked up a desk, and flung it through one of the windows. The glass shattered, and he tore down some felt display piece on one wall and tossed it over the jagged rim.

“I’m going to give you a boost,” he said to the kid, authoritative. “When you get outside, run for home and don’t look back. You should be safe.”

She obeyed on automatic.

“Cold,” said Ruby. Then she tossed away the last of her fries and unfolded herself from where she was sitting cross-legged on one of the desks at the back. “You know we’ve got company?”

“I can tell,” said Sam absently. He rolled his shoulders and concentrated, stretching out his awareness beyond the room and corridor he was in. At least four demons, fewer than eight. Strong, some of them. Probably more than they could handle.

“So?” urged Ruby, and tugged on his belt. “Let’s go already, Sampson.”

The constant luscious temptation of her presence, of her offers, rattled against the edge of his consciousness, and he lost his focus.

He looked down at her. Tiny, almost as tiny as that schoolkid, dark hair and dark eyes as deep and velvet as sin or hope. The promise in the way she leaned in against his body, familiar and
condescending and just about the only thing he could rely on these days. And she was such a temptation.

Not in the way demons should be. Not the promises of power, or the constant unvoiced offer of sex. It was the warmth of her body that Sam found most tempting of all. It was the promise of her casual, proprietary hands: the illusion of home.

“You know that analogy does you no favours.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Cute. Can we go now?”

“No,” Sam said. “No. If they knew we were here they’re probably her higher-ups. They probably know more than she does.”

“Yeah, and,” she sighed, “you just used up more than half your energy for the night on a tiny minion, and you’re in no shape for a boss battle.”

Sam shrugged. “There’s two of us.”

“Uh-uh, sparky. Things get rough, what makes you think I won’t skip out?”

“You’ve invested too much time in me.”

“Honey, I’m immortal. Time’s all I’ve got.”

Sam just lifted an eyebrow at her, and turned to face the door.

Five demons, as it turned out. Two women, two men, then one more woman whose strength and subtlety outshone the others like a torch to candles.

He ignored them—looked only at her.

“Sammy,” she said, laughing and sexy and dismissive. “Pleasure. I mean, I’ve already made your brother’s acquaintance.”

Sam very carefully did not stab her in the face.

“Honoured,” he said, dryly. “Miss…?”

“Oh, you forget those details after the first few centuries.” She licked her lips, and looked at Ruby. “Well, hello Marilyn. Going brunette these days, are we?”

Ruby smiled, polite as a slap in the face. “Likewise, honey. How’s Lilith?”

“Well, you should know.”

“Oh, pet.” Ruby sighed with affected sympathy. “You’re that far out of the loop? Lilith and I broke up two centuries back. You really should check your inbox.”

“And you should check your scrolls.” Meg smirked. “Fifteen centuries here. Right when she split with my father.”

“Really? Oh my god, I’m so sorry. I just—you know, the obsession, the way you seem to know everything she’s going to do before she does it—wow, sorry, I just presumed, I didn’t mean to blow things open before you two were ready to make the announcement.”
“Wow.” Meg smiled at Sam, easy and dark, while her four companions spread out to the corners of the room. “Where’d you pick this trash up?”

“Meg,” said Sam, settling his weight back on his heels. “How was my brother last you saw him?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “All to pieces. You’re far more interesting.”

“Not to me. Rumour has it Lilith’s got the marker on his soul. But it wasn’t Lilith playing him right before he died, Meg.”

“Oh, that?” she said carelessly. “You’re still caught up on me sending the Brady bunch in to kill your girls?”

“Funny,” said Sam, “how that sort of thing sticks in the memory.”

“Doesn’t matter now.” Meg shrugged. “Plans have moved on. Rushing towards end-game faster than anybody thought. Time was, I thought I’d be following your lead right about now. But there it is.” Her teeth flashed in a grin, charming and deadly. “You killed my father, Sam Winchester, and you’re not the one who took his place. You’ve got your own part to play now, and I’m taking over his. I’ve got the armies, boy, and guess what? I kinda like it that way. You’re just the lone wolf.”

Sam gritted his teeth, and reached out for her with everything inside him. Securing the last demon had been like closing his hand on a simple hempen rope. Grabbing for Meg was like trying to do the same on a writhing, flexing tentacle far too large for his grasp. And it burned when he tried to hold on.

“Huh,” she said, and took a step back, too fast, like she hadn’t meant to. “Good to know. Better than I’d hoped.”

Then a wall came out of nowhere and slammed him to the floor.

“The point of killing your women,” came her voice from a long way off, “was to make you mad. Trying to get a taste of your strength—that’s all. We’re on the same side, kid. We both want Lilith dead. You’re not useless, I’ll give you that, but you’re going to have to step up your game. I’m a minnow next to her.”

Then they were gone; and when Sam came to he was propped up against the wall of the classroom, with Ruby panting and bloodied on the nearest desk.

“Well,” she said, and wrinkled her nose, “she’s not wrong.”

“I’m not doing it,” said Sam. “I’ve told you before.”

“You just gotta cling to that high road, don’t you?” she said, almost affectionate; but her eyes were bright and eager. “This is the only way, Sam. You know we want the same thing. It’ll make you stronger, faster. It’s not just a feather, Dumbo: it’s a turbo-charged jet.”
He wavered, and looked away.

His phone chose that moment to buzz on the table. Bobby, again. He and Dad were the only ones who had this number: Charlie would have tracked him down by now if she’d been able to ring.

Sam ignored it. There was nothing he needed from Bobby right now.

Ruby snorted, and climbed into his lap. She was so small, and warm—always so warm. His fingers curled around her waist without his having to tell them to.

“Look at you, my conscientious little boy king,” she said, almost gentle. “You really think you could ever go dark side? It’s not the power that makes for a supervillain. It’s what you do with it. And okay, so I’m evil and all, but I’d rather see a good man in control of the nukes than someone like Lilith.”

He huffed. “Now you sound like—”

“Mm?” She was nuzzling against his temple, lithe and sensual in his lap, and she smelled good, so good.

And Coyote still hadn’t answered him. Even tonight—even that girl—and he still hadn’t showed.

Sam hadn’t realised that he’d been holding on to one last thread of hope until it was snapped.

The surge of anger brought his hands up, knotted them in Ruby’s hair and dragged her head back. He kissed her, far too rough, too rough not to hurt; but the sounds she made under his mouth were the farthest thing from a complaint.

This had happened a few times before, in anger and need, and Sam always denied it afterward and swore it wouldn’t happen again. But this time he knew it wasn’t going to stop at just fucking.

When he fastened his teeth on her neck she cried out and arched in his lap, body one supple delicious curve under his hands and hips riding hard against him, and he was so desperately hard, so furious at her, that he had no choice.

He bit down again, harder, and she laughed like a whine and wriggled back. He growled and tried to drag her back in, but she was already dragging a knife from his boot and slashing the blade across her forearm.

“Come on,” she panted, eyes shining. The rich dark blood welled in the cut, gathered like liquid chocolate in thick heady beads, until one was ripe enough to slide over the edge and trail in snaking rivulets down over her skin. “Come on, Sam. You can do it, I have faith in you.”

He licked his lips, blood pounding in his head and his cock. Everything in him seemed to be being drawn in, focussed on that one point, that urgent need: that relief, right in front of him, and the power.

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“Come on,” she panted, eyes shining. The rich dark blood welled in the cut, gathered like liquid chocolate in thick heady beads, until one was ripe enough to slide over the edge and trail in snaking rivulets down over her skin. “Come on, Sam. You can do it, I have faith in you.”

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beside him was scattered with the skeletons of leaves that had fallen months ago, and he knew, if he
turned his head, he would see the wood-god’s throne.

But he didn’t have a chance to turn his head. Because there, there after months of radio silence, there
was the god himself towering over him, with the shadows of skeletal wings looming across the walls
behind him, glowing and absolutely furious.

“Not a good idea, boy,” Coyote snarled.

Sam rolled over onto his elbows, retching, vividly aware of the bare skin on the back of his neck
exposed to the god’s hands.

“You trade your bulging Stanford brain in for a pea? How the hell do you think that plotline’s gonna
play out, huh? What, you just get a boost and drag your brother back and he thanks you for it?”

Sam growled at the dirt in front of his nose. Then he threw up again.

“I gave you a family, boy. I gave you reasons to stay. And what do you do the very first chance you
get? Running away and cutting yourself from every reason to stay human seem like a good call to
you, huh? Well, hellooooo Boromir. Guess I should’ve invested in a Pippin instead.”

Sam staggered to his feet.

Coyote had always been shorter than Sam, but he’d always felt far larger. Now he seemed to be the
size of a mountain, everything that he was stretching out far beyond the confines of the hall, seething
and tossing like a raging sea, and all concentrated into that one compact body in front of Sam. This
wasn’t Kit, the familiar teasing presence in their household, sexy and challenging and generous and
constantly irritating. This was the god, in all his fury: vast and deadly and unpredictable.

Sam punched him in the face.

“You wanted my attention, Sam Winchester? Thought maybe I didn’t notice that little stunt with
Corrie earlier? Setting up one of my own for possession—torturing the demon in her while she was
terrified and alone—sending her to run home alone without even bothering to make sure she was
okay?”

Sam opened his eyes, and glared.

“You wanted my attention, Sam Winchester? Thought maybe I didn’t notice that little stunt with
Corrie earlier? Setting up one of my own for possession—torturing the demon in her while she was
terrified and alone—sending her to run home alone without even bothering to make sure she was
okay?”

Sam opened his eyes, and glared.

“End justifies the means, is that it? Or is this just the same vengeance-fuelled obsession shit that’s
kept your Dad going all these years?”

“Maybe if you’d answered me when I called,” Sam croaked out, “any of the first fifty times—”

“Do I look like your butler?”
“I begged you, you son of a bitch. I pleaded with you to give me my brother back. Hell, even to help me find Lilith. I needed you, okay? And you—not a word.”

Coyote smirked, cruel and cold. “I know. You’re not quiet.”

Sam gaped at him. The pain was making his head fuzzy, words slipping through his fingers, and all the things he’d wanted to say, all the accusations he’d wanted to fling at Coyote (had flung at him, fingers pressed to his tattoo until it bruised) wouldn’t come.

“Let me make this very clear,” hissed the god. “I. Won’t. Interfere. This shit is big, it’s pre-scripted, it can’t be stopped. It’s going to go down whatever any of us do and it’s nothing to do with me and now it’s begun, I’m out of it. Not my business. My business is doing whatever the fuck amuses me, remember?”

“Then don’t blame me,” Sam growled, “if I do what I have to do to get my brother back.”

Coyote barked a laugh, harsh and painful. “You don’t get it, do you? This is what they want. You’re playing right into the script. They’re strengthening you up for your big finish, your Roncevaux. You’re playing your part to perfection.”

“Tell me the script,” said Sam. “Tell me what should happen so I know what to do to screw it up. Give me a clue, Kit. Give me anything.”

Coyote looked at him for a moment, eyes dark and angry.

“Fine.”

He snapped his fingers. A silver blade appeared in his hand.

“You want power, Sam Winchester?” He held out his own arm and drew the blade down over it, so that the blood dripped dark. “Guess what out-classes demon blood?”

Sam levered himself painfully to his feet, one arm cradled protectively over his chest. Coyote didn’t move: only watched him, and didn’t draw back his arm.

Sam stepped forward, swaying on his feet, and knotted his hand in the collar of Coyote’s shirt.

“Were we all just toys to you? Convenient pastime, pour s’amuser?”

Coyote sneered. “Obviously.”

“You know I can see it when you lie to me.”

The colours around Coyote felt jagged and raw enough to cut flesh, or soul. “Just drink the damned blood, Winchester. Or better, drink the not-damned blood.”

“What’s the cost?”

“It’s a gift.”

Sam scoffed in his face. “It’s never a gift, with you.”

The white-gold of anger flashed in the air around them. “Do you have any idea what I have given you? Given up for you?”

“What would it do to me?”
“And why didn’t you ask that when the demon offered?”

“Because she wasn’t lying to me.”

“Ha. Makes her trustworthy, does it?” Coyote stepped in closer, right into Sam’s space. “Got a way to go with the mind-reading, honey. No, she wasn’t lying. Doesn’t have to. She has faith in you. Hell, even loves you, as much as a demon can. You think that makes it better? I’ve known her from way back. She’s a fanatic, you idiot. She’s grooming her Roland for his Roncevaux, Sampson for his haircut. She’ll put you on that pyre and burn you and love you as she does it because she just knew you had it in you to play your part.”

The world was darkening, swimming in front of Sam’s eyes. Coyote’s strong hands on his arms were welcome, even if they were too tight, cutting into the muscle and bruising him.

“Tell me about my part.”

“The stronger the being,” Coyote said at once, almost sing-song, “the stronger the vessel has to be. You’re strong already. The demon blood would make you stronger. To one specific end, boy.”

“Possession.” Sam swallowed down bile, and blood. “By Lilith?”

“Lilith’s boss. Someone else who never lies.”

One part of Sam’s brain was automatically running through terms like sternal fracture, blunt trauma, high likelihood of damage to adjacent organs, heart or lungs, pulmonary bleeding, haemorrhaging, survival rate 50-80%. It wasn’t important, not in this context, so he tuned it out.

“You don’t—” said Sam. “He’s a myth.”

Only Coyote’s eyes were still clear in his darkening vision, burning and gold and fierce. “You’ve read Dante. You know who’s down there.”

“I thought Lilith was the first demon.”

“Well, technically he ain’t a demon. He’s what made the first demon.”

“And they want… he wants… me?”

Coyote bared his teeth in something like a grin. “Nah. Not you you. You’re just the suit he wants to wear to prom. To the last dance. Well, at least he’s got taste. I mean, I’d wear you. Just think of the accessorising. Might have to switch up the plaid.”

Sam struggled against punching him again. But Coyote wasn’t the problem here. Sam had to fight, had to fight properly, with all his strength and purpose, and every ally he could find.

He gasped for breath, as shallowly as he could behind the sharp dangerous ache in his chest, and let his forehead fall forward to rest against Coyote’s.

It was an unexpected sanctuary. It made him ache.

Coyote’s hand loosened on one of his arms. It wavered for a moment, then slid up to his shoulder, ruffling the fabric on the way. Once it was there it tightened again, punishingly hard; but there was grief in his voice, when he spoke.

“You’re not gonna give up, are you, kiddo?”
Sam drew back, enough to look him in the eye, and shook his head.

Coyote mutely lifted his bleeding arm, and cocked an eyebrow.

“Promise?” Sam whispered.

“No demonic side-effects. Stronger than anything she could give you. Just promise me you’ll stay you.”

“This is you not interfering, huh?”

“Don’t get smart with me.”

Sam wrapped his fingers around Coyote’s arm, and looked down at the deep, rich blood. It smelt thick, and sweet, and somehow very far away.

“What’s your name?”

“Huh?”

Sam shook his head, trying to dislodge the wandering thought buried somewhere in the depths of him.


“Kid. I learned centuries back never to think of myself by any name. Common nouns—that’s the way to go.”

“Isn’t that the opposite of the advice you just gave me?”

“Yeah, well. Don’t be like me. Best advice ever.”

“I’m sorry,” Sam said, and let Coyote feel how much he meant it. He reached out, with mind and soul, and tried to reach all that vast loneliness that he knew lay under the surface, all that regret and anger; but Coyote slipped away from the touch.

He bent his head, hesitated. Then he drew his tongue up along the path of one sluggish scarlet trickle.

He barely heard Coyote’s intake of breath. The taste rushed in on him, somehow a whole-body feeling, not just mouth and tongue. Wildness, and fervour, and so old that it passed all understanding. It was tangy and sweet, and almost too rich to bear; and Sam couldn’t help himself. He tightened his grip, and fastened his mouth hungrily over the cut, and went to town.

Above him he heard Coyote breathe out something that sounded like a curse, though it was no language Sam knew: ragged and breathy, the way he always sounded when he was halfway to coming and needed to speed up, needed to go faster, needed just one thing more. His hand slid up Sam’s back and knotted in his hair, holding him where he was.

The blood burned through him—the power of it—until Sam felt like he was expanding in every vein, thrumming with possibilities. The world around him seemed to expand until he felt he could reach to the stars with a thought, or turn his focus the other way and count every atom in the dirt under his fingernails. He hardly noticed the pain easing, his broken sternum knitting together and the bruises and other damage fading into nothing; and the arousal pounding through his head and stomach and
cock was almost an afterthought. He felt clean, clean in a way he could never remember feeling before, like a darkness he hadn’t even been aware of had been scattered and driven from his thoughts by some breeze cool and fresh.

When at last he licked the last of the blood from Coyote’s skin, and lifted his head, it was with a kind of dizziness. Somewhere, at some point, they’d fallen to their knees. He didn’t have time to recover himself before Coyote breathed out “Fuck I—” and they were kissing, desperate and hungry.

Even with his eyes closed he could see Coyote now, the ragged waves of colours and heat fanning out around him like wings, the white-gold that Sam had only glimpsed a few times licking around his head now steady and strong. And the depth of him was there too: still elusive but clearly ‘visible’, barricaded and disguised but there. And Sam ached for him: to have him back, and to look after him.

They broke off, panting, half an inch from each other’s mouths, foreheads pressed together and fingers tangled in hair and clothes. Sam could feel him wavering, wanting to give in, to give—something.

“Six hundred and sixty-six seals, Sam,” he growled. “Break sixty-six of them and a cage opens right in the very bottom of Hell. Break them and he walks free. He’s the one your Ruby loves, most fervently of all. Here’s the fun part: only the first and the last of them are set. The ones in between can be anything. And the first seal was broken last night. It’s started. Can’t be stopped now.”

“Come back with me,” Sam pleaded. “We—I need you.”

Coyote drew back and looked at him for a moment, with eyes bright with feelings that Sam couldn’t read.

Then he shoved him over backward, and stood up.

“Don’t forget yourself,” he drawled, hands shoved in pockets, walking casually backward. “I kinda like eager well-intentioned puppy Sam.”

Sam groaned, and stared up at the beams high overhead, and cursed all erections and capricious stubborn cowardly gods.

“You said it doesn’t matter what I choose.”

“Oh, it doesn’t. But you still get a choice.”

Sam sat up, and glared at him. “It’ll all happen anyway?”

“Yep.” Coyote raised one hand, fingers poised to snap. “Only thing you get to choose is whether you’ll still be you at the end. Isn’t that worth something?”

He snapped.

The hall vanished.

Sam was alone in a dark, damp forest of oak and ash, with years of leaf mold under his arse and no way of knowing where he was.

He sat against a tree, and breathed, and watched the stars through the lattice of branches until the pounding in his blood calmed down. The world still felt strange and vast, and he was going to have to get a handle on that soon, on just what that meant, and how strong he was. What he could do. But first…
He felt for his cell. Not there. Of course—it had been on the table back in the motel, before Coyote had pulled him away. Which meant Ruby had it, and... if Coyote was even half right about Ruby, then all of Sam’s initial mistrust of her had been justified, and more. But that was a question for later.

Well then. Next course of action?

It was when he was trying to remember which star was which and figure out if there was any point to cardinal directions when he didn’t know which one led to civilisation anyway that he felt the change in the air pressure.

It grew stronger and stronger, like electricity buzzing in the very ground under him, like life in the trees and air. And it was alive. It had thought, and purpose.

He was on his feet at once, back to the tree, knife out. Then the thing was there.

He couldn’t see it. But he could see it. Tall and bright, the size of a skyscraper, not quite formless but with a shape that he couldn’t quite comprehend. Something like wings seemed to stretch out around it, covering the sky; but at the same time, like Coyote, it was both vast and right immediately there in front of Sam, focussed on him, compressed into that moment and space.

And it was... beautiful. Somehow, impossibly beautiful.

Sam Winchester, it said, or thought, vibrating through Sam’s body and mind. Do not be afraid.

“I’m not,” said Sam, though he realised as he said it that it was only half true. “What are you?”

My name is Castiel, said the thing. I am an angel of the Lord.

“Angel?” said Sam, for what felt like the fifth or six time. “No, seriously—an angel?”

The presence hummed, flickering toward mauve. It was all colours too, like Coyote. Maybe that was just how non-human forces had to register to the human comprehension?

Is that no longer the term?

“No, I—” Sam stuttered to a halt. How did you tell an angel that it couldn’t possibly be real? “I mean, yes. It’s just—I’ve seen a lot of things most people wouldn’t believe, in my life. Sir. All of them horrifying.”

It seemed to frown. Ah. You find it difficult to believe in anything good.

“Sorry?”

And yet you pray.

“Yeah.” Sam swallowed, staring up into the warm curiosity of the lights among the branches.
“There’s a difference between having faith, and… having faith answered. I mean. All the impossible things I’ve seen. All the impossible things that turn out to be real, they’re all monstrous. I guess I sort of figured that. Well. Angels and God—maybe people just made them up to—I mean, maybe they’re just there to be the counterbalance? Just because we needed something to have faith in, so that… shit. I just mean, maybe faith is its own end, and this is really insensitive isn’t it? I’m sorry.”

There was no surge of righteous fury from the being, no rush of rejection. If anything, its focus on him deepened, tinged with something like puzzlement and something like… interest? Maybe even amusement?

You cannot offend me, Sam Winchester.

“Yeah, well,” answered Sam automatically, “you haven’t met my br—”

The word brother caught and tangled in his throat. It wasn’t that he’d forgotten. It was just that having a brother was so deeply, fundamentally a part of the reality of the world that he didn’t know how to change that part of it.

Not yet, replied the—the angel—you are my charge, for now. Where is it that you call home?

“Me?” Sam barked out a laugh. Out of all things, all the things an angel might appear for, might be able to do—“You came here for… for me?”

Do you think yourself unimportant?

“Just kind of figured I’d be of more interest to the—to the other side. Oh god. Shit. Sorry. Uh. This. Sides. This is cosmic, isn’t it? This is… this is Heaven against Hell?”

It is. And there was a fierce certainty, a righteous joy thrumming through that reply that felt nothing like what Sam knew of fighting and demons and the realities of war. The battalions of God are in motion once more against the Enemy. Come, Sam Winchester. I am to take you to your home.

“So. Hang on.” Sam slipped the knife back to his belt and pressed the heel of his hands against his eyes. “Long day. Angels. Angels are real. Angels and—Heaven, and everything. And you reappear after centuries—or whatever—and the first thing you do is offer me a taxi service?”

The angel flickered again, like a puzzled blink.

… Yes? it hazarded, after a moment.

Sam couldn’t help it. He broke down into helpless laughter: turning in against the tree, propping an arm against its trunk, and snorting endless hysterical giggles.

I received revelation, put in the angel after a moment, clearly feeling that something more was wanted of it, telling me to come here and fetch you home, and to watch over you. It has been divinely ordered.

Sam’s laughter stopped.

“Uh. Ordered. By… who? Um, whom?”

I do not know.

“Huh?”

A gusty breeze drove through the bare twigs above Sam’s head, driving a small patter of droplets
I am an angel. I know when I have been given instructions by a Higher Authority. Whether it be God or one of his archangels is irrelevant. They speak for him.

“Right,” said Sam, “of course.” He manfully resisted the temptation to add a “verily” in there. This conversation was already weird enough as it was.

“You must come with me, Sam Winchester,” said the angel solemnly, and Sam answered, “Right, you know you can just call me Sam, don’t you?”, and then the world rearranged itself around him and—he was at home.

Home.

He’d never thought of any place as home before, unless it was the back seat of the Impala. But there was that comfy sofa and his favourite arm chair, the TV in just the position that Dean and Charlie had dragged it to for the best possible gaming experience, that stupid worn-out cushion that nobody had got around to throwing away—

Jess clapped her hands over her mouth, dropping her bowl of matar paneer. Tomato and peas and cheese went all over the floor, then Sam had an armful of girl and a faceful of hair and of a bright pink and red mohair beanie that could only have been knitted by Charlie.

“Oh,” he said dumbly, as she clung to him. He’d only just remembered that he should probably hug back when she pulled back and punched him in the arm.

“You butt!”

“Um. What?”

“Don’t you give me those sad eyes, Sam Winchester. You get all fretful if you don’t hear from us for a few hours when we’re on a night out, then you think you can just up and vanish from months without keeping us in the loop? After something like that?”

“I—”

“And Jo! Did you know Jo’s been blaming herself? Oh, right, you don’t. And why’s that? Because you didn’t call. Communication, honey. It isn’t just basic courtesy, it’s what keeps people sane. It’s what keeps people people. I am so getting Charlie to track your phone. And you’re not leaving it behind again, do you hear me?”

“I’m… sorry?”

“Oh, you will be.” She pulled him in again and kissed him, warm and chaste. “You’re on dishes duty for a month.”

Something tight inside him ached and eased; and his arms slowly came up to rest on her waist. Then they slid around her and he pressed her to him, too hard, and buried his nose in her hair.

“Oh my god,” hissed Charlie, from the door. Then, “Christo!”

“Not a demon, Charlie,” mumbled Sam, and held out his other arm. She grabbed his hand and pressed her fist against it, so that the silver ring she wore dug into his skin. “Not a shapeshifter either.”
“Then you’re just a *dick,*” she declared, and he was being hugged by two girls.

*I can confirm that he is none of these things,* said the hovering presence of Castiel.

The windows shattered. So did the TV. Jess clapped her hands over her ears, and Charlie winced and looked around. “Who was that?”

*My apologies,* said Castiel, and Jess whimpered, and the light sparked out, and Sam said hastily “Maybe it’d be best if you don’t talk, Cas.”

… *Cas?*

“Um. Sorry. Is that, like, a mortal sin?” He felt the puzzled colours of the angel draw together as if in preparation to reply, and jabbed a finger at the air. “Don’t answer that.”

“Sam!” Charlie hissed, tugging on his sleeve. “What the hell?”

“… kinda the opposite, actually.”

Five minutes of explanation later (carefully avoiding all mention of Coyote), and Charlie’s eyes went bright with a sudden idea, and she dived for the scrabble board.

**THIS IS SOMEWHAT UNCONVENTIONAL** the tiles spelled out, skipping and dancing across the top of the coffee table into position.

“Too bad,” said Charlie firmly. “You’re a guest in our home, Castiel. You’re going to sit down and have a chat. It’s only polite.”

“You could write on the wall,” observed Jess, “but I don’t think Clorox shifts divine pronouncements.”

**WHAT MAKES IT POLITE**

“It’s what humans do! To get to know each other. And to, uh. Make things less weird.”

**I SEE**

**THIS WAS NOT PART OF MY INSTRUCTIONS**

Jess seemed caught between awe and wild giggles.

“Could fixing all the things you exploded be part of your instructions?” she said.

There was a pause. Then the pieces of broken glass flowed up from the carpet and reassembled themselves in the window, the TV fixed itself, and the lights came back on.

**I AM SORRY IT HAS BEEN MANY CENTURIES SINCE I HAVE HAD OCCASION TO SPEAK TO HUMANS MY TRUE VOICE CAN BE**

There was a pause. Then the tiles scattered, and reformed.

**SOMEWHAT OVERWHELMING**

**ALSO I WAS UNAWARE OF ITS EFFECT ON ELECTRICAL CIRCUITS AND GLASS**

“So, your gameplay manual needs updating.” Charlie was practically bouncing in place—not with
awe, but with the enthusiasm that Sam had grown to know and (fondly) dread: the excitement of a
new project. “But Sam, you can hear him properly, right?”

SAM IS SOMETHING SPECIAL

“Well, we knew that,” said Jess fondly, “even if he is a butt.”

NO HE IS NOT A BUTT OR A DICK

HE HAS ALL THE OTHER USUAL BODY PARTS

ALSO I HAVE NO GENDER

Sam dragged a hand over his face. “This has been a really weird day.”

“So, Castiel,” said Charlie, with a gleam in her eye, “about evolution—”

HAVE I BEEN SUFFICIENTLY POLITE

I HAVE ANOTHER ASSIGNMENT TO COMPLETE

Jess nudged Charlie’s arm. “Don’t scare the angel off with evolution questions!” she hissed.

Charlie leaned in against her. “Don’t be ridiculous,” she whispered furiously. “Evolution versus
creationism is a recent human debate, it has nothing to do with—”

Jess clapped her hand over her mouth. “Oh my god! The gay sex thing?”

“Now who’s scaring the angel off—”

“Could we maybe keep on task here?”

Sam’s voice snapped out, sharp. Both girls’ heads snapped around to him: Charlie, looking
somewhat hurt, and Jess appraising and reproachful as only she could be.

“Wait, there’s a task?” Jess said brightly.

This wasn’t who Sam was. Not when he was with them.

His mouth opened and closed again, once, while he tried to find the right tone of voice, the gentle
sort of bashful Nice Guy college kid. It had never felt like more of an act. It had never felt so far
away.

“Like, if you had a plan for what should happen in the event that an actual angel turns up and dumps
you back at home after three months MIA? I’d love to hear it.”

Jess’ sarcasm wasn’t habitual the way Jo’s was. It always came out sounding sweet and innocent,
and somehow its very rarity made it more cutting. Like she was the only one in the house that was an
actual grown-up with a conscience.

“Oh,” said Charlie—a little sound halfway between a hurt noise, and a sigh. It distracted Jess and
Sam long enough for them to look up, and see the new words formed by the tiles.

GOD HAS NO INTEREST IN SEXUAL ORIENTATION

“No, of course he doesn’t,” said Jess firmly, and wrapped an arm around Charlie’s shoulder. “And if he
did you wouldn’t be worth hearing, Castiel.”

“Look,” said Sam, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to come back here. The next thing is getting my brother out of Hell. Like always. I should go.”

“Oh, honey,” said Jess, more gently.

Sam reached out and took her free hand, and squeezed it; but he knew his face was firm and almost harsh.

“Castiel,” he said, “can you give me my brother back?”

“Sam, don’t,” said Charlie urgently. “It never works, you—”

DELIVERING DEAN WINCHESTER FROM HELL IS MY NEXT ASSIGNMENT

“I—” said Sam, feeling like the floor had collapsed under him. “What?”

“Just like that?” blurted Charlie, sitting up straight. “You can just… waltz into Jabba’s fortress and defrost him?”

THERE IS NO DEMON BY THE NAME OF, began Castiel. Then the tiles scattered, and reshaped to NO I WILL LEAD ONE OF THREE BATTALIONS OF HEAVENS WARRIORS THIS IS NO TRIFLING MATTER

GOD HAS WORK FOR HIM

“Dean is important,” Sam said numbly. “For the plans.”

AS ARE YOU SAM WINCHESTER

“How? What’s meant to go down?”

ALL WILL BE REVEALED IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME

Charlie snorted. “So Sam isn’t the only one with communication issues.”

Sam stood up.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, deliberately, “for bringing this back in on you guys. This is not your problem, and—”

“Sam, of course it’s—”

“And, I’m not letting you get involved. This is war. Serious war, on a cosmic scale, okay? You think that,” (jabbing his finger up at the mass of angel resting lightly overhead, spilling through walls and ceiling and fixing its attention on these three tiny humans in the midst of all its stature) “turned up just because I needed a lift home? This is angels against demons. Heaven against Hell. Against Lucifer. Am I wrong?” He lifted his head all of a sudden, and threw the challenge right at Castiel.

There was a pause. Then the tiles shuffled sheepishly into a new shape.

YOURE NOT WRONG

“So,” said Sam grimly, “we’re talking Apocalypse here. Lucifer walking the earth.”
The tiles stayed just as they were. Then they wriggled a bit and settled back into place, as if to reiterate.

“Okay,” said Sam, and breathed out. Everything just eased out in front of him, clear and stark and hard. “So. That’s that. That’s the fight. I have to pack and get to Illinois.”

“So we fix it,” said Jess, crossing her arms. “We fight it, and we fix it.”

“We—Jess, no. Charlie, back me up here.”

“Uh-uh,” said Charlie. “Not getting into it, you guys.”

“It’s not your world. Look. The kind of person you have to be, to fight? The kind of person you have to become?” He closed his other hand over hers, and shook his head. “I’m not having that.”

Jess tossed her hair, and sniffed, the very picture of a spoiled Malibu kid and a sweet determined undergrad, and it tugged at his heart. “Since when do you get to decide, Mr Grumpy-pants?”

“Uh?”

“I know what your hunter world is like. It’s all secrecy and small towns and testosterone. Well? Be the change you want to see in the world, and all that. Charlie, you can get us all academic leave for a semester or two if you hack into the university database, right?”

Charlie looked appalled. “I have a bookshop to run!”

“Any team needs more than just hitters,” said Jess brightly. “And by the way, the three of us girls make a killer team. I’m actually a really good actor—who knew, right? But you talk like your world isn’t part of the real world, with real people in it. Just because you hunters have been doing it one way for years doesn’t mean it’s the only way. Look at you, it’s made you all closed-off and broody.”

“That’s the job.”

Jess stood up, and poked him in the chest. “Then you need a better workplace environment, you butthead. Trust me. What’s in Illinois?”

Sam stared at her for a long moment. Then, almost without knowing why, he said, “It’s where I buried him.”
The nest of the Never bird

It was an awkward journey to Pontiac, Illinois.

Charlie stayed behind in Stanford, to keep eyes on everything that needed eyes on it, from the bookstore to Jess’ beloved tropical fish. That meant that it was up to Jess to make conversation. Which wasn’t easy, because Jo was coming too.

Jess insisted on flying, not driving. Sam was on board with it because right now he cared for nothing but getting to his brother (his brother’s corpse) as soon as possible. That made things easier; but it still meant upwards of six hours sitting next to his onetime best friend (with no leg room) and having absolutely nothing to say to her.

They’d hugged, when Jo had turned up, in a stiff, dutiful sort of way. But at the sight of him Jo had frozen up into monosyllables and shrugs, and she still hadn’t emerged. It wasn’t that Sam blamed her for what had happened to Dad, to Dean. But… but. Sam hadn’t been there. She had been. And he was still angry.

He’d sort of lost the art of casual conversation anyway, sometime since Dean’s death. And the girls didn’t seem really important just now. For months his world had been narrowed to a single sharp goal, and everything else existed through a distant layer of fog. It couldn’t touch him.

About two hours into the flight, Jess sighed audibly, clambered out over Sam’s lap into the aisle, and stood there with her hands on her hips. “You. Move,” she said, pointing imperiously to the middle seat of the three.

Sam blinked at her. She was wearing her implacable expression. He shrugged, and moved. There was even less leg room in the middle seat. Jo huffed beside him, and stared pointedly out the window.

“So, you two can be such men sometimes.”

“Hey.” Sam’s head snapped toward her—some twinge of habitual protectiveness on Jo’s behalf, niggling at him for a moment even through the fog.

Jo snickered faintly behind him, and Jess jabbed a finger at his arm, and said, “Ah-ha. Knew you were in there somewhere, Winchester.”

“You shouldn’t—” said Sam, frowning, feeling like he was lagging behind; but Jo shrugged, and went back to doing the sudoku in the inflight magazine. “Whatever. Fair call, this time.”

“Uh-huh. Like it hasn’t been pretty much every day since he popped on the One Ring? You’ve been so much better this last couple of weeks, Jo sweetie. I’m not having you slip back into caveman grunts and boy clothes just because he’s back. And don’t think I didn’t notice that you didn’t pack any makeup.”

Sam turned his head to blink at Jo, who scowled and slumped lower into her chair. “I don’t have to wear makeup.”

Jess reached across Sam’s lap to catch Jo’s hand and squeeze it. “Of course you don’t, honey. You’re still my beautiful girl whatever you wear, and you know perfectly well that isn’t what I meant. You have to stop punishing yourself.”
“What,” said Sam.

“And now Sam’s here he can tell you it wasn’t your fault,” said Jess, with an edge of steel behind her smile. “Tell her, Sam.”

Sam thunked his head back against the head rest. “This team of yours. Charlie might be the queen, but you’re the leader, huh?”

She smirked, innocent. “Jo’s the brawn. And not a bad thief. Charlie’s useless at lying, though, did you know that?”

“He’s not going to say it, Jess,” said Jo impatiently. “He can’t, okay?”

“Jo. Of course it wasn’t your fault.” His voice sounded wooden and unconvincing.

She snorted bitterly. “That’s not what you said on the phone.”

Humans were easier and harder to read than something like Coyote. They weren’t mysterious colours that Sam didn’t have a key chart for. Humans were feeling: traces of tangled emotions, health or pain (of body or mind), focus or distraction, clouded the air around them. They were complicated, and usually very hard to actually understand in any real way. It always felt like a violation to try, anyway. Animals were similar, though simpler—at least the more intelligent animals, with more of a sense of self and community and interaction, like cats and dogs. Demons felt like humans but harsher, sharper, simpler, and with something essential missing—like the difference between a photo of a thing and the thing itself.

Jess was a strong, fuzzy presence to one side of him, worry tinged with several warmer feelings. Jo, though—Jo was sharp-edged and clear on the other side, tight with self-hatred and fear and exhaustion. They felt old and ingrained, like the grooves pressed into a carpet when a heavy bookshelf has been in one place too long. And there was something else underneath, something darker and more poisonous. Like a festering wound.

“On the—” Sam sighed, and shoved his hair back off his face impatiently. “Do we have to do this? I think I need to get a drink off the flight attendants.”

“It was a bad phone conversation,” Jess said patiently. “You were both distressed and weren’t talking rationally. Sam, you were driving above the limit to get to your dad and your brother’s body, and Jo, you were in shock from seeing what the hellhounds did to Dean—”

Jo flinched, and curled in tighter. “Yeah, thanks for that. Good memory.”

Sam swallowed bile.

“So you both said things you didn’t mean and didn’t really hear what the other one was saying—”

“I heard him, okay?” Jo snapped, eyes suddenly wide and wet and angry. “I heard ‘you have to get away from my dad’, and that whole rant about how dare I let him get behind the wheel of the truck when he was drunk, like I was his keeper or something.”

“Yeah, well,” said Sam tightly, “you never told me before that whole thing about him getting your dad killed. You wouldn’t have—”

Jess pinched his arm, hard, and he stopped short. Because he knew. He knew Jo wouldn’t have let Dad get hurt on purpose, if only for his and Dean’s sake. And it wasn’t like Dad would have listened to Jo anyway. But she wouldn’t have put herself out to keep him safe.
“You dropped it on me,” he said carefully. “I didn’t react well. And when I told you to get away from Dad I meant. Dad’s not safe when he gets violent, okay? I didn’t want you near him. Didn’t know what he’d do when he found out what Dean had done to bring him back.”

“There!” said Jess, and beamed. “Doesn’t that clear the air?”

Jo rubbed her thumb back and forth over the fraying knee of her old jeans, back and forth. She didn’t say anything.

It hadn’t even occurred to Sam to think about how the girls would have been affected by this. He’d only thought of Jo with anger. And… and this was the moment when he should probably reach out and do something.

He took the fallen pen gently from her lap, picked up the magazine and slipped it into the pocket of the seat in front of her. Then he wrapped his hand around the knot that hers and Jess’ hands made together, and squeezed them carefully.

“Hey,” he said, to make Jo look up. She didn’t; and he leaned awkwardly across the seat arm to brush his lips against her hair. “Hey. Missed you.”

She made a small noise in her throat, almost lost under the rumble of the engines. Then she jerked her hand away from theirs and scrubbed it angrily over her face.

“I should have—” she muttered.

“No,” said Jess firmly. “You couldn’t have. You couldn’t have got to Dean any sooner than you did. You couldn’t have saved him from doing what he’d decided to do. And if you had stopped him once he probably would have just given you the slip and done it the next day, or the next. You’re not his keeper either, honey.”

“But if I’d worked out sooner what he was doing—”

Sam exhaled slowly. Then he put an arm around Jo’s stiff shoulders, and tugged her in against him (ignoring the resistance), and kissed her forehead.

“I was angry,” he said, and something indefinable inside of him began to ease. “I am angry. I’ve been angry at the world and everyone in it for months. That’s not your fault either. Jo. Look at me?”

She did, slowly, wariness naked and open in her dark eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I had no idea you’d take that away from that phone call. And I—I’ve been blaming myself too. Guess we’re just both a couple of dumbasses.”

She bit her lip. Then she said, “Or idjits.”

Sam snorted. Then he leaned his forehead against the top of her head and just breathed for a moment. He felt slightly less like an edged weapon.

“Well,” said Jess brightly. “That went very well. I think that went very well, don’t you?”

“You’re not cute,” Jo informed her, muffled.

“Cute as a button,” Jess laughed, and flagged down a flight attendant to get them both beers.
Jess insisted on a proper hire car, and a serviced apartment instead of a motel. Since she was footing the bill, Sam had no opinion. Besides, the focus was settling on his mind again, clean and bright. He had a brother to visit.

He listened with half an ear to Jess’ story about the hotel they’d stayed in when she and Charlie had managed to track Jo down after Dean’s demon deal. Jo, liked Dad, had turned to reckless solo hunting to cope, and they’d tracked her down somewhere in Maine when a poltergeist hunt gone wrong had landed her in the local lock-up. Sam was vaguely aware that the receptionist had given Charlie and Jess the honeymoon suite because she thought they were adorable, and that Jess had had a quiet panic after they’d sprung Jo out over her first foray into crime, but he couldn’t have pieced the rest of the story together.

Their serviced apartment here in Pontiac was neat, though a little cramped, and involved a lot of green. That was all Sam saw of it. He dumped his duffel beside the door—not even bothering to take it into one of the two bedrooms—and walked straight out again, to go buy a shovel and pick.

It took him over an hour to uncover Dean’s simple wooden coffin, under the simple wooden cross. When most of the lid was bare Sam leaned on the shovel and breathed, looking down at the wood below his feet.

He didn’t know what Castiel had meant to do. Would he build Dean a whole new body, or rebuild the old one from the… scraps? If so, would he do it here? Would it even occur to an angel to move a newly resurrected human out of the sealed underground box? And what sort of time frame were they looking at here?

*If he even succeeds*, said a small, treacherous voice in Sam’s head. After all, he’d said legions, an army fighting its way through hell. Fighting meant the possibility of losing.

And that was if he was actually an angel at all.

Well, if, if, and if. *If* he was an angel and got Dean out and brought his soul to his body again (*but though worms destroy my body yet in my flesh shall I see my God*), then it shouldn’t be underground. Sam would just have to keep vigil.

… but if he’d done it already?

Before he could think, before he could stop to imagine what that face would look like now, Sam swung the pick. It caught in the crack between lid and side, and he snapped the nails free, and wrenched the lid off.

“… huh.”
Sam sat in the chair by the bed, elbows on his knees, rubbing one thumb back and forth over the smooth old face of the amulet around his neck. Brooding. Definitely brooding.

“Uh-huh,” said Jo from the doorway, though he wasn’t sure how much later. “I’ll put him on, Bobby. Thanks.”

Sam looked up at her and grimaced. You called Bobby? he mouthed, and she shrugged and tossed him her cell, trying not to look at what lay on the bed. “Jess says you have to eat at least three slices of that pizza. And finish that water.”

Sam rolled his eyes at her, and picked up the cell.

“Bobby.”

“Not even a ‘hello’, boy? You know you’re not a surly old shit like me yet.”

“You got anything on this?”

“Tell that girl I said to smack some manners back into your thick head.” There was a rustle on the other end of the line and the faint creak of Bobby’s favourite chair. Sam could see him settling back like he always did, getting ready to talk. “This’s one of those cases where there’s too much lore, not the other way around. Problem is working out which parts are bullcrap.”

A page turned in the background. Sam reached out, and ran his fingers over the hand curled loosely on the pin-striped green hotel bedsparse.

“There’s accounts of miraculous corpse preservations in just about every culture, going back as far as we know. Now, obviously that’s going to look different somewhere like Egypt where they do a lot of preservations of their own. The Middle Ages, though: there’s hundreds of stories of saints or holy people being miraculously preserved, or not rotting, or smelling sweet days or weeks or centuries after they died and looking like they just fell asleep.”

“He.” Sam swallowed a lump in his throat, and fixed his eyes on the familiar head resting on the pillow. “That’s just what he looks like. Cold, not stiff. The—the wounds are still there. Under the shirt I dressed him in. But for the rest he’s—just the same. Shit he. I’d swear he even looks a bit better, Bobby.” His laugh sounded shaky to his own ears. “Mostly just smells of dirt, though.”

“Humph.” Bobby snorted. “Well, the Middle Ages were obsessed with good smells and bad smells having some sort of moral meaning, so that’s the sort of detail they’d add. This… this Castiel. He said they have work for Dean?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, maybe that’s all that ‘holiness’ really means, then. Someone they’re planning on bringing back for their own reasons.” A pause. Sam laughed faintly over the idea of Dean as holy. Bobby harrumphed in what was probably agreement. Then: “What d’you think of this angel business?”

“No idea. Was going to ask you that.”
“Well, there’s more lore on angels than anything else we hunt.”

“I know. But…”

He trailed off. Another pause.

“Does your dad know?”

“Wasn’t going to tell him. Not until…”

“How long since you spoke to him?”

“Only once or twice on the phone, since I stole the body to stop him burning it. He was just… he seemed to relieved to just be back into the vengeance game. Like it’s the only thing he knows how to do anymore.”

Bobby grunted. “Weren’t going to tell me either, were you?”

“I just. I don’t know what’s going to happen, Bobby.”

“What’s going to happen is that you’re going to eat and drink, y’idjit. And you’re going to sleep, not sit up staring at him all night. And you should stick with those ladies of yours. You’re sounding less like a robot already, son.”

“What?”

“Never mind. I’ll be there in the morning.”

Sam closed his eyes. “Thanks, Bobby.”

“But I’m not staying in any hotel.”

Sam dreamed.

He dozed in and out of reality, slumped against the wall beside his brother’s bed, and he remembered people.

The idea of his mother stood in front of him, flames licking around her feet like benediction, and she had Jess’ face. Because Sam was broken.

She said, “actually, I suck at cooking.”

Dad loomed out of the rosy darkness behind her, and grabbed her arm, and pushed her into the kitchen. “But you want to be good at it,” he said. “You want to feed our boys well.”

Dean stood by them, and shivered, and looked up at his mother with terrified adoration. She looked down at him and smiled; but she didn’t see Sam.
Kit stood by the kitchen counter, and he was dancing to some music Sam couldn’t hear, and he was heaping spoon after spoon of sugar into something and he was laughing at something Charlie had said.

Sam went up behind him, and smiled, and slipped his arms lightly around Kit’s waist.

Kit leaned back into him, still dancing against Sam’s body, and craned his head to drop a kiss on Sam’s jaw.

“You’re ridiculous,” he said.

“You’re ridiculous,” Sam informed him. “And that’s way too sweet. It isn’t good for the baby.”

Kit went very still under his hands. “It’s that obvious, huh?”

Sam made some sort of humming noise and nuzzled in against his neck. Kit was warm and real against him, under his hands, against his body, and he should be foreign but he pulled all the stupid jagged bits of the world together and made them into home.

Kit turned around, and Sam lost himself in rich liquid gold.

A hand settled warm on his cheek.

“You’re something else, Sam Winchester,” said Kit sadly. And Sam couldn’t stop his smile. He couldn’t stop himself cuddling Kit closer, burying himself in the warmth and strength and mischief and delight, until he was crushing Kit into nothingness.

And he felt life under his hands.

Somebody was looming against the window, a dark silhouette against the sky.

Sam gasped air into his lungs, and leaped from the floor, and tackled them to the ground. The man flipped him, and pinned him. The carpet smacked against the back of Sam’s head.

His brother grinned down at him, and the night air cut in through the open window, shocking and cool and real.

“Whoa. Easy, tiger.”

“…Dean?”

Dean laughed.

“Dean. You scared the crap out of me!”

And so it was that on the third day Dean Winchester rose from the dead, and complained that his mouth tasted like arse.
Jess had stocked up on all sorts of fresh food and dips and breads from a nearby market, in her attempt to draw Sam away from his obsessive vigil by Dean’s bedside. The first thing Dean did was cook.

Sam slouched at the table, feeling all dreamlike from sleep deprivation and the strangeness of seeing Dean bustle around the sleek modern kitchen humming Led Zep to himself, chopping mushrooms and grinning at Sam as he popped grapes into his mouth. He’d taken his shirt off almost first thing to poke at his own belly and shudder; and now he was wearing only an apron over jeans, so that every time he turned around Sam saw his back, free of all the old familiar scars.

And he saw the hand print on his left shoulder.

Was it normal to be raised from Hell and to just start cooking? To be… perky?

Not long after five Jo woke up, senses tipped off by the murmur of their voices, and crept out in pyjamas, knife in hand, to see what was up. Dean turned to her with a grin and a cheerful “Hey there kiddo,” holding out the arm that wasn’t folding eggs in with herbs and sour cream, until she stopped staring and folded in against him with a gasp.

Sam texted Bobby and Charlie to give Jo some time alone with Dean, and to stare out the window and breathe. Then he slipped into the girls’ room to wake Jess up.

By the time they’d eaten and the sun was coming up, Charlie had texted Sam back with just “!!!!!!!!!!!!!” Then she rang.

“I’ll put him on,” Sam said, as soon as he answered. Then he tossed the phone to Dean, who put it to his ear, leaned back in his chair, and belched loudly.

Sam could hear Charlie’s delighted disgust from across the table.

Bobby showed himself at eight, and Dean cooked up some things with fewer vegetables and more grease for him. Also, since when had Dean actually owned up to enjoying cooking?

Sam tried calling Dad, but he didn’t pick up. Sam didn’t bother feeling guilty about his own relief at that: he just texted Dad to call him back, said it was important, and left it at that.

“How’d we get here?” Bobby asked Sam.

Sam eyed the thing in front of them. It crouched, menacing and mysterious, symptom of an unknown and unknowable other dimension.

“Once Jess gets an idea in her head..?” he offered weakly. It was an excuse that had served a few millennia of men before him.

They unpacked the picnic hamper.
There was honest-to-(ohGodthere’sreallya)God champagne in it.

Celebrating was strange, even in the warmth of the mid-afternoon sun. Not a set-up Sam was used to.

There was Dean, snickering and bickering with Jo over the ham, looking… relaxed. Happier than Sam had seen him for a long time. Comfortable in his body, and when had Sam ever seen that? Bobby looked absolutely incongruous, lounging back there against a tree, champagne flute in hand, deep in conversation with Jess about… who knew what. And the trees were sighing overhead, soft in the early spring sunlight, and the creek was making the most cliché noises, and—Sam didn’t belong here.

Reality rippled, and the wind contorted, and then an angel was standing beside them.

It took Sam a moment to notice that this time, his energy and feelings and power were all contained (compressed, squashed, augmented, focussed) into the shape of a man.

“Hello, Dean.”

Sam was on his feet at once—Jo, just a moment behind. Bobby, the more seasoned hunter, just looked the new arrival up and down, to get the measure of him. And Dean… Dean was staring.

Tan trenchcoat. Windswept dark hair, piercingly earnest blue eyes. Shapeless office clothes over what seemed to be a surprisingly built body. And though the demeanour was impassive—almost too impassive, like somebody who hadn’t learned about the exciting world of facial expressions yet—there was something in the aura that seemed… hopeful? Pleased? Maybe even…

Could an angel be shy?

“Castiel?” Sam asked.

The angel gave him a nod, of acknowledgement or confirmation, but never looked away from Dean.

Dean rose slowly to his feet.

“Hey,” he said, and cleared his throat gruffly. “Hey, Cas.”

“Cas!” said Jess brightly. “Looking good! Though I might have to take you clothes shopping, honey, you look a bit lost in all that rumpled polyester. Have some pie.”

Castiel blinked down at his body, then at the pie. Then he looked helplessly at Dean.

“Hold on,” said Sam. “Dean. You know him?”

“Well, yeah,” said Dean, like it was obvious. “He’s the one who…”
He trailed off. Castiel picked up the end of the sentence.

“I’m the one who gripped him tight and raised him from perdition.”

Dean actually blushed, and rubbed at the back of his neck. “Yeah, that. No biggie.”

Castiel frowned, censorious and fond. “Dean. Eight of my brethren died to achieve what has not been done for two thousand years. It was a very big… ‘biggie’.” Jesus. He actually used air quotes.

“Seriously?” Dean smirked a bit. “You’re even more of a dork in person, dude.”

Castiel actually rolled his eyes—stared up at the sky, as if begging his Father for strength. But he was smiling a bit too. Like… like he and Dean were old acquaintances. Almost family.

“I mean,” said Sam loudly, turning to Dean, “you remember?”

Dean blinked at him. “… Yes?”

“I thought…” Sam floundered. “I mean. Just. For a guy who’s just been in Hell for three months, and remembers it? You’re acting kinda Stepford.”

Dean stared at him. “Three months?”

“Time in Hell works differently to time on this plane,” put in Castiel helpfully. “I believe, from Dean’s point of view, the time elapsed since his death would be closer to forty years.”

“…” said Sam blankly.

“Oh, Dean,” said Jess.

Sam’s throat clicked when he swallowed. “How,” he said, staring at his brother, half expecting to see the cuts and gouges, or the smoky face of a demon behind his smooth human skin.

Dean shrugged. “Not saying the memories are a lot of fun, dude, it’s just. They don’t seem to matter? Whatever. I’ve had time to get over it, okay?”

“How long?”

Dean raised an eyebrow at Castiel, who looked faintly sheepish. “I cradled his soul in the heart of me for eleven months as we fought our way out.”

“Dude,” Dean whined.

“My brethren recommended that I keep your soul asleep during that time,” added the angel earnestly, “while I healed its wounds and rebuilt its humanity, but I remembered that you all seemed to be of the opinion that communication and contact and love are important elements of ‘being human’”—again with the air quotes—“so I thought it best to let him know me, as fully and deeply as possible.”

“Jesus,” Dean muttered, and turned away, performing embarrassment; but there was an affectionate edge to his smile that Sam had hardly ever seen for any person but himself, the expression that said, what a goof.

Castiel looked at him (looked upon him?), and though his face was still impassive the colours around him rippled and shifted into something richer, deeper, slower. So similar, so different, to—but that sort of shift in Coyote didn’t make the colours speed up, like a heartbeat when you saw your crush. Castiel’s felt like reverence and deep acceptance.
The similarities and differences made Sam ache and itch.

“I had forgotten,” said Castiel, more softly, “that although angels have been warriors for millennia, we were in the beginning of things made of and for love, and nothing else. I have Dean to thank for that. Your brother is an extraordinary man, Sam Winchester.”

“Okay, dude, can it,” grumbled Dean.

Castiel turned stern eyes on him. “We made a pact that you are not permitted to reject admiration and praise, Dean. There is nothing in you that is not beautiful. No desire, no—”

“Social boundaries, Cas.”

Jo narrowed her eyes. “So you got eleven straight months of snuggles with your angel boyfriend? Dude, you are never copping out of beanbag movie marathons again.”

“Whatever. You get to know a guy, okay?”

Jess came over, and tucked her arm around Sam’s waist. “And this is why,” she said, pecking his cheek, “you should always trust me.”

… Dean hadn’t even protested the word “boyfriend”.

“Right,” said Sam. “Are you sure it was really Dean you brought back?”

Castiel’s aura flared with offended irritation. “There was no possibility of mistake.”

“Hey,” said Dean fondly. “Calm your tits, feathers. Joke, okay? We’ve talked about this.”

Castiel glowered. Then Dean stepped forward, and held out his arms. “C’mere, buddy.”

Sam exchanged looks with Bobby, as Dean Winchester voluntarily hugged another male-shaped being. Castiel stood stiffly for a moment, until Dean muttered something at him and the angel cautiously, studiously melted into the touch. And Dean actually ruffled his hair and tapped his cheek as he stepped back.

“Scrub up kinda nice there.”

“Oh,” said Castiel, and looked down at himself again. “This? This is a vessel.”

Bobby cocked an eyebrow. “You’re possessing some sorry S. O. B.?”

Castiel sighed, edging towards exasperation. “I am not a demon. Angels require consent. He is a devout man: he prayed for this.”

Consent. Something about that word rang a faint bell in Sam’s memory, but he couldn’t work out just where it was.

“What’s his name?” asked Jess. Jo and Dean gave her puzzled looks.

“My vessel? His name is Jimmy Novak.”

Jess cocked her head and looked him up and down. “Can he hear us? Is he, like, awake in there?”

Castiel’s face took on a distant look, as if he was focussing on something other than what was in front of him. “I believe he is… somewhat overwhelmed by the experience. But yes, he is conscious.”
“Hi Jimmy!” she said brightly, and, somewhat to the angel’s puzzlement, shook his hand. “I’m Jess, and these are Sam and Dean and Bobby and Jo. If there’s anything you need, like someone to feed your dogs or time scheduled off work while you’re all busy doing angel business, you let us know and we’ll get it all taken care of, okay? Okay.”

Castiel blinked at her.

“Any friends or family who might get worried about you if you don’t show for a few days? Cas, is his cell in one of his pockets?”

Castiel frowned down at his clothes as if he’d only just realised they were there. Then he patted his way through the pockets until he found a cell and handed it to Jess. “He is concerned about his wife and daughter.”

“Oh, no no no,” said Jess. “Honey, no, you can’t possess a guy who has a family, that’s just not on.”

Jo put her hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle. Sam and Bobby exchanged looks.

“He is performing very important work for Heaven’s cause,” said Castiel with gravity, “and he has agreed to give himself over to that service.”

“Just because it’s important doesn’t mean wife and kids aren’t important too,” said Jess firmly. “Or making sure he’s got a job to get back to after you’re all done. Okay, so, I’m going to get in touch, give his wife someone to talk to so she knows what’s going on and where to go if she needs help. Sam, you get Charlie to swing something with his work—hack into whatever she has to do to get him paid leave for a while, Cas, what’s the time frame here?”

“The ‘time frame’ is preventing the end of times.”

She patted his arm. “You can’t schedule child care around the end of times, sweetie. You’re going to have to give him a couple of nights off per week to touch base with his family, okay? Any down time you get he needs to go home. Jimmy, what’s the passcode on this thing?”

Castiel blinked at her, then looked helplessly at Dean.

“Just go with it, dude,” said Dean, grinning broadly. “Steamroller Jess. It’s the only way.”

Jess pulled a face at him. The angel opened and shut his mouth. Then he took the phone and unlocked it: punching gingerly at button after button, as if he were afraid of forgetting his strength and breaking it in half. Demons were never so uncertain about using their bodies; but the awkward earnestness of Castiel’s (Jimmy’s) long, elegant fingers as they moved over the buttons and handed the phone to Jess did something to Sam, stirred something between arousal and compassion.

“His wife’s name is Amelia,” he said, “and his daughter’s name is Claire. They live two streets east of your hotel, in the house with the white veranda.” He paused. “Also, I think he is… laughing.”

“So,” said Jo, crossing her arms in a way that not coincidentally pulled her coat aside to show the gun at her belt, “why would an ‘angel’ rescue Dean from Hell?”

“Hey,” protested Dean, “I’m the complete package, honey. Cas here just laid eyes on me and was lost, weren’t you buddy? Couldn’t resist my charming smile and perky nipples.”

… which was exactly typical Dean humour, except it sounded foreign, because he only ever flirted with men sarcastically, to deflect and distance. He didn’t flirt with his friends, with men he actually wanted near him. He didn’t say that kind of thing with fondness.
Castiel sighed heavily. “Because God commanded it,” he said, “as I told your friends when we met.”

“Apparently we’ve got to stop the devil rising or something,” said Dean cheerfully, “but hey, we’ve got Cas and his family on our side now, so all we have to do is stop the demons from breaking these seals, and we’re golden.”

“I’m afraid it won’t be as simple as that,” said Castiel darkly. “Our numbers are not unlimited, and there are more than six hundred—”

“How do we know you’re an angel?” Jo interrupted. “There’s plenty of factions in Hell. Some of them have tried to get one or more of us onside before.”

“He’s not a demon,” said Sam. “Couldn’t swear to ‘angel’, but he’s far bigger and brighter than a demon.”

Bobby gave him a narrow look, which Sam did his best not to see.

Castiel tilted his head slowly to one side and turned the full force of his unblinking blue gaze on Jo, who lifted her chin defiantly and glared back. The colours around Castiel seemed to ripple slightly—amusement, Sam thought, and maybe even admiration, though his physical form registered nothing but impatience. Then the vast translucent shape of his real form, crouching around and above and beyond them in the field, shifted and solidified. It seemed to pull down and in toward his vessel, in toward the physical reality of this dimension, and power crackled through the air like lightning licking over skin. Birds scattered and broke from the trees, a fox slunk out of the undergrowth and stared, tiny wildflowers blossomed in the grass around the angel’s feet, and…

Wings. Vast silver-black wings, feathered with the darkness of galaxies, arching up and back behind the shabby tan polyester of Jimmy Novak’s coat. They had a wingspan of yards and centuries, and the air that fanned from them smelled sweet, and brought with it the kind of warmth that reminded him of the stories of Narnia he’d read when he was a kid.

“Will that do, Joanna Harvelle?” asked the angel, deep and gravelly and shaking the earth underfoot.

Jo was staring, mouth slightly open; but when he spoke her name she collected herself, and managed to shrug.

“It’s just shadows,” she said. “Shadows are the easiest illusion, everyone knows that. Anything could do it.”

“Then I suppose,” said Castiel dryly, “you’re just going to have to take it on faith.” And he vanished.

“Come on,” Dean complained after a minute. “Picnic, guys. We haven’t even got to the pie yet.”

Sam went out for a run that evening, because he needed the space. It turned into just pacing, up and down the street, running his fingers through his hair, thinking.
He needed to call Ruby. He needed to know what was going on. Whatever Coyote had said about her—okay, sure, he was probably right that Ruby shouldn’t be trusted, but she was still their best inside source, especially since Castiel hadn’t given them any details about what these seals actually were. And the warmth and energy of her—the lush coils of her hair slipping through his fingers, the sparkle in her dark eyes, the twisted honesty of her feelings behind her face. The ferocity of her devotion to Sam and only to Sam…

No, Coyote couldn’t be right. He hadn’t seen that. He hadn’t felt that.

Sam felt very lonely without it.

He didn’t fit here anymore, in that laughing, chattering, affectionate crowd upstairs, so innocent and light. Dean fit there better than Sam did now. They were reversed: this strange, happy, easy Dean, slinging an arm around Jo’s shoulders and laughing, dropping a kiss on Jess’s head as he passed, offering and accepting touch and fondness as easily as he breathed; and Sam, haunted and alert and alone, all sharp edges and hardened shell.

This was someone else’s life. It was someone else’s story.

Sam stopped under an ancient pine tree at the far end of the street. The road broke and divided around it, curved off one way and another. He slammed his fist against the ridged old wood, and rested his forehead there, and breathed.

His cell was in his pocket. All he had to do was ring the number of his other phone, the one left with Ruby—

—she’d be worrying—

and

and…

He breathed in the clean, strong scene of the pine.

_Please_, he prayed. _Please, God. I don’t know what I’m doing. I… I’ve never spoken to you before and known it was you. That you were there. Not since I was too small to think that… I don’t know. I guess most people start out thinking of you like their father. Or mother. But my Dad was never my father. That was Dean, wasn’t it? Only Dean could never be like a god. You were always far away. You were a hope. And now you’re… well, apparently you chose Dean? And Lucifer chose me. Please… I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t know where I am.

Forget that. Look. I have to do the job. Show me how to do that. I need to get Coyote on board. We need to build up our side. I need to pull Ruby and Coyote in. And if I have to play them to do that I will. Dean and Jess and Jo can be all righteous and play the angels’ game. I just need to make sure we win. I’m the one who has to do that, whatever it does to me.

The breeze coiled soft and cool across the back of his neck.

Sam pulled his cell out of his pocket and looked at it. Then he put it back, and made a call.

He pressed his fingers to his wrist, and felt for that connection, and locked on.

_So, hey. Don’t know how much you’re watching or what you see exactly, but here’s what’s been going down over here these last few days…_
It is only the gay and innocent and heartless who can fly

“Right,” said Sam into the phone. “So, if you get as many hunters as you can trust into the Roadhouse—how much do we tell them, Ellen? I mean, we can say the demons are trying to do all these spells to bust out some big ancient world-destroying evil, that’s probably the easiest to—right. Okay. Uh, Jess says she picked up that coat you wanted? Yeah, he’s kind of evangelical so hinting at angels would probably set him along the right path, but most of the rest of them are more likely to scoff at angels, I think? Okay. Okay. Yeah, most of them aren’t going to be too good at taking instruction anyway. Oh, hey Cas. Ellen, the angel just turned up in the back seat of the car. I’ll get back to you? We’ll catch up with you and Jo next week.”

“Hey there, Cas, Jimmy!” said Jess brightly. “How’d Claire go at her friend’s party last night? Smite any interesting demons today?”

“It seems that Owen Mansfield ate too much sugar and threw up in his excitement,” came Castiel’s deep rumble from the back seat, articulating every word with the same earnest importance he used for Apocalyptic pronouncements, “but Claire’s new shoes were quite a social success. And no, I have not. The demonic host has learned subtlety and stealth since last they battled Heaven’s forces. They are few in number but difficult to find, and in many cases appear to be employing human agents or dupes to serve their ends.”

“You mean, to break the seals?” asked Dean.

“About that, Cas.” Sam slipped his cell into the glove box and swivelled around, so that he could get his elbow up on the back of the shotgun seat and look at Jess and Castiel properly. “Could we get a list of them off you? Ellen and Bobby are organising a meet-up of a bunch of hunters that we can get in on this, and there’s a few others that will trust Bobby if he calls them up and puts them on a hunt in their area without needing to know more than—”

“No.”

Sam blinked at him, thrown off his rhythm by the single abrupt syllable.

“… Okay then.” Dean eyed the angel in the rear-vision mirror. “Gonna give us a ‘why’ on that, buddy? I mean, it’s gonna be kind of hard to mobilise our little posse—heh, posse—if we can’t tell them what to go for.”

“It is no part of my assignment to put into your hands a detailed set of instructions for the release of Satan,” Castiel said, rather impatiently. And was it Sam’s imagination, or had he caught a pointed glance on the word your? “We will give you your orders as and when it becomes necessary.”

“No part of your—” Dean gaped at him. Then he scowled. “I know you’re all good little soldiers up on your clouds, but you’re not captain-my-captain in this car, okay? Friends don’t give friends orders, Cas. They work together.”

“We are working together, Dean.”

“Which means trust.”

Castiel glowered right back, all darkness and blue fire. “Do you not trust me, Dean? Have I not earned your respect?”

Sam could feel Dean’s temper flare. He’d always been able to feel it, metaphorically, but now it was
literal, the mounting pressure like listening to a kettle come toward the boil. Weird. And… explained a lot about Dean, actually.

“Okay, you know what—” Dean snapped; and Sam cut in, smooth and reasonable.

“Here’s the thing, Cas. Most of the seals, they aren’t set for a specific place and time, right? So you’re going to be stretched thin trying to work out when and where someone might make a bid for any one of the hundreds left. And I’m going out on a limb here but I’m guessing mostly angels would be doing that by feeling out demonic activity, or something like that. Which is going to be harder for you if it’s humans doing the actual dirty work instead of demons, because you won’t know what these few humans among millions are doing until too late.”

“It’s not quite as simple as—”

“My point is,” Sam went on, soothing the ruffled feathers, “that’s exactly the kind of job hunters spent their lives at. Using human resources, human networks, to figure out the when and the where and the who and the what when we start off with the most basic of clues. Different skill set, Castiel; and if your soldiers and wars are anything like ours you’ll know the value of using all the different strengths of all your allies, even if it isn’t exactly how you’d do things yourself.”

“Oh yes,” put in Jess cheerfully. “Just give Charlie a list of a few weird signs and she’ll make the internet go ding when anything turns up.”

Castiel said nothing for a minute, just turned his considering, forbidding gaze from Jess, to Sam, to the back of Dean’s scowling head, and back again.

“Last time we were active among mankind,” he observed, with no particular inflection, “their attitude toward us was very different.”

Jess patted his arm. “Awe and amazement are all very well, honey, but they do make it kind of hard to get things done.”

She was a liability.

Castiel’s attention focussed itself on Dean, though his eyes were still on Jess: all his colours shifting and re-centring to flow around Dean’s tense shoulders, to puzzle (orange and speckled) over his indignant silence.

“There will be an attempt on a seal in Elko, Nevada this week,” he said slowly. “It is absolutely necessary that it be stopped. If you prove yourselves capable in this matter I will give you the information you require.”

The angel vanished.

Dean humphed grumpily.

“Okay, so,” said Sam. “We’ll drop you off with Ellen and Jo, Jess, and head on to—”

“Uh-uh, gentlemen.” Jess was already digging through her purse. “I told you, the girls and I were working cases without you. Different skill sets, honey, you said it yourself. There, I knew I had a spare earbud. One for me, one for one of you, and we and Charlie can all listen in on each other and keep in touch! It’ll be fun!”
Dean and Sam exchanged a Look.

“Don’t you go giving me that silent manly brotherly communication. This isn’t about you,” Jess added, flipping her hair back. “It’s about, like, proving that humans can pull their weight next to angels in stopping the Apocalypse. Huh. Has anybody seen my eyeliner?”

Extract from Charlie’s Multimedia Hunter Diary of Awesome, week beginning Sunday April 5 2009


Charlie: … okay, so, last night in Elko? Young man, crucified. And guys, crucified upside down.

Dean: Yikes.

Charlie: I’m sending you the police report now.

Sam: Okay, that definitely sounds like some ritual Armageddon thing—

Jess: So did he, like, die of the suffocation or did they do the whole stabbing thing too?

Sam: Uh…


Charlie: The body was drained of blood.

Jess: Ew.

Charlie: I know, right?

Dean: Do we know anything about the vic?

Charlie: You do realise it’s, like, ten in the morning and sometimes I have to sleep?

Dean: Uh. Sorry, I—

Charlie: Messing, princess, just messing. Because I am totally awesome I have all the deets. Nothing of note on him, but I’ll send you the links in case you want to go over it and see if there’s anything I missed. Basically he’s squeaky clean, nothing I could find, except for a few minor shoplifting convictions when he was a teenager.

Jess: I am, like, totally judging whoever did this right now.
Dean: Yeah, well. Evil people are evil, sweetheart. News at six.

Sam: Okay, but that can’t have been a seal breaking, right? It must have been just a part of what they have to do to break the seal. Why would Castiel send us here if it’s already broken?

Dean: I don’t know, man, who knows why angels do anything. I mean, you heard him. Big important plans. We’re just the grunts.

Charlie: Uh-oh. Trouble in Paradise?

Dean: Ha-ha.

Jess: So, we start with interviewing the family?

Dean: Yeah, sure. You gonna come with me, gorgeous? Show you the ropes?—and Sammy, there’s probably some physical records somewhere that Charlie can’t get onto in the local library or courthouse or whatever, so. That’s your kind of nerdy thing, right?

Sam: Yeah, screw you.

Dean: You wish, lover-boy. Later, Charlie!

Text messages over Thursday.

Dean: no dice here

Charlie: Turns out the ground he was found on—hill outside town? Early settler church. Deconsecrated holy ground. Significant?

Sam: Usually, yeah. Good job, Charlie! I’ll check it out.

Sam: Hex bag here. Ingredients suggest quiet and control, not direct harm. Witches bringing their victims in quietly?

Dean: man whyd it have to be witches i hate fucking witches

Charlie: have you tried making love to them instead? maybe you’re just going about it wrong :)

Dean: your hilarious today. Really.

Sam: *you’re

Dean: oh hey sammy i forgot to tell you we won $1 million

Sam: what?

Dean: when i was on your laptop this morning.

Dean: there was a pop-up saying i won
Dean: followed a pop-up through to the site
Dean: i mean the computer started making weird noises and flashing weird colours then shut down

Charlie: ...
Dean: and i couldn’t make it restart but u can fix that right? then we just have to claim our winnings

Charlie: dean oh my god
Sam: Just ignore him, Charlie.
Jess: your all hilarious ;) :) luv u guys!!!!!

Private conversation:

Sam: Hey, Charlie. Have you heard from Coyote at all? You know. Since Dean died?
Charlie: not a word.
Sam: You’ve known him longer than any of us. How would you go about finding him?
Charlie: Honestly? I wouldn’t. Not if he doesn’t want to be found, Sam.
Sam: Right.
Sam: So, would you actually tell me if you HAD seen him?
Charlie: Well, you didn’t say seen, you said heard from. ;)
Sam: Charlie. Have you seen him?
Charlie: actually technically not that either.
Charlie: sometimes he just turns up for the night if I’m alone. Shares a bed, vanishes by morning, you know how he does.
Sam: and you didn’t ASK him
Sam: anything at all? What the hell he’s up to? What he’s been doing, why he isn’t picking up?
Charlie: if I asked him he’d stop coming.

Phone call, Friday morning.
Jess: Hey there honey! How’s your morning?
Jess: Oh no! Did Fidget eat something terrible?
Charlie: No, someone brought their spoodle into the shop and it expressed its literary opinion all over Sarah Waters’ books. You out jogging?

Jess: Yes! And listening to the police scanner.

Charlie: That’s my girl! Anything interesting?

Jess: Another murder: same as before, upside-down crucifixion and drained of blood. They said his name is Frank Morrison?

Charlie: Ugh. Looking him up now.

Jess: The place is different, though—other side of town. Look, Charlie, you know what day it is, right?

Charlie: Hm?

Jess: It can’t be a coincidence, right? Inverted crucifixion? Easter Friday!

Charlie: Oooh! I can’t believe we missed that!

Jess: Well, all the angels and gore are kinda distracting. So I guess this means there’s going to be one last one—the big one.

Charlie: Sounds right. Okay, I’ve got him. Some businessman. Nothing’s jumping out at me… I’ll poke around a bit and see if there’s any connection to the other guy, anything that’ll tell us who they might target next. You finish your run, okay? Love you!

Jess: Love you too!

Diary entry:

During above conversation Castiel and his lieutenant Balthazar stopped by motel to talk to Sam and Dean. Balthazar “smyrny dick” (says Dean), protective of Castiel and suspicious of his attachment to Dean (says Sam). Angels confirmed that third murder tonight will break seal, which will open gates of Hell and let out potentially every demon in there to join Meg’s army. Don’t trust us to finish the job, told us to leave town so they could go all Sodom and Gomorrah on the place. Winchesters refused: persuaded angels to let us keep trying it instead of going down mass murder route. Note: angels kind of Biblical and not very angelic.

Text messages, Friday lunchtime:

Charlie: Okay, so, absolutely no connection between vics EXCEPT—this one swindles money off clients. Remember other guy’s shoplifting convictions?

Sam: ... So they’re both thieves? I don’t know, Charlie, that’s pretty vague.

Dean: doesn’t help narrow it down either. gotta be lots of people in this town with priors. hell, it could be any kid who once stole a cookie.
Jess: no! the third one won’t be a thief :) 

Jess: two thieves crucified

Jess: whos going to be on the cross in the middle? ;) ;)

Sam: Oh wow. That’s it!

Sam: and it opens the gates of hell because he harrowed hell between the death and resurrection, right.

Dean: so were looking for a hippie in sandals?

Charlie: I’d go with someone innocent

Jess: no problem, i’ve got something that can pass as a promise ring!!

Dean: oh hell no lady

Sam: jess maybe we should talk about this when dean and i get back to the motel

Jess: can’t wait honey, just on my way out to interview Morrison’s wife. got my earpiece in! ttfn. :) :) :) 

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Comm transcript.

[Doorbell.]

Jess: Cathy Morrison?

Cathy: That’s right.

Jess: Hi! I’m Sophie Jordan, from Frank’s office. I just came by to say I’m so sorry, honey. We’re all just so shocked, you know. And I brought you this. It can be so hard to cook for yourself when things go wrong, can’t it?

Cathy: Oh! That’s—very thoughtful. Very kind. Won’t you come in? Sophie, wasn’t it?

Jess: That’s right. Only if you’re sure! I don’t want to intrude on you at such a difficult time.

Cathy: No, no, not at all. To be honest with you, I’ve been talking to the police all morning, it’d be a relief to—and it’s so windy out, isn’t it? There, that’s right, shoes just by the door. This does smell lovely.

Jess: They’re my favourite brand! They do such good low-allergen meals? And low fat! And they still taste so delicious it’s almost sinful. Oh, what a lovely room. The light opens up the space just right.

Cathy: Thank you! Those curtains were my choice. Frank doesn’t think that—oh.
Jess: Oh, *honey.*

Cathy: I’m sorry. It’s all rather a shock, you know.

Jess: Of course it is. Here, you should sit down. I thought it might be best to come over right away and see if there’s anything you needed. If something happened to my fiancé—may God be merciful! —I can’t *bear* to think about what I’d do.

Cathy: Oh, are you engaged?

Jess: Oh yes. He’s just the sweetest thing. I thought for so long that I’d never find a good Christian man who loved me—enough to *wait,* you know—but see? He’s got one just like it. We’re going to make each other so happy.

(Sam: Jess, what are you doing?)

Cathy: That’s so sweet. You’re such a good girl, I’m sure you deserve each other. Oh, Neil—Sophie, this is my brother Neil. He’s just been here with me holding my hand all morning, you know how it is. Neil, this is Sophie, from Frank’s work. Such a sweet young woman. Quite a *pearl.*

Jess: Neil. I’m *enchanted* to meet you. I’m so sorry for your family’s loss. You’ll all be in my prayers, I promise.

Neil: That’s… sweet. Much obliged.

Cathy: Neil was just making coffee before you came, Sophie. Neil, why don’t you pour some for our guest? Your *special* brew.

(Sam: … Jess. We’re on our way over.)

Jess: You’re so lucky to have such a devoted brother. But oh, I can see you’re related! You’ve got the same *air about you.*

(Dean: Both of them witches, huh?)

(Charlie: Oh shit. How can she tell? Sam, is it a Matilda Jedi thing?)

Jess: Yes, and such lovely eyes of course. So powerful in their expression. Oh, Neil, thank you.

(Sam: Don’t drink it, Jess. Fake it if you can.)

Cathy: Nobody else makes coffee quite like my brother. He has a knack for it.

Jess: It’s delicious! So rich and *strong.*

Neil: And it won’t keep you up all night.

Cathy: Oh hush, Neil.

Jess: Now, is there anything I can do to help you with the funeral arrangements? I know that can be all sssso bewilder—excuse me, bewildrrring, and—oh, I’m sorry. A sudden dizzy spell. No, no, I’m quite alright, I…

Cathy: Are you sure, dear?
Jess: Of course, I wouldn’t want to… what was I saying? Oh, of course. I meant to ssay that I do rrrrather alotof… a lot of admin and… oh dear.

[Clatter of a coffee cup falling.]

Jess (faintly): I’m ssso sorrrrrry, I dropped…

[Slump of a body falling sideways on the sofa. A pause.]

Neil: She out?

Cathy: Yes, she’s gone.

Neil: Sure about her?

Cathy: Sweet silly innocent little virgin, twirling her promise ring and petting her crucifix all the time. She’ll do. Easier than luring your little protégé out of her study group. Get her up to the ensuite upstairs.

[Shifts and grunts of Jess being carried upstairs, then of a key turning in the lock and footsteps retreating.]

Jess (whispering): Witches have really nice bathrooms.

Sam: Thank God. You good?

Jess (whispering): Bit woozy. But I shifted the sleeping tablet out of the coffee before most of it could dissolve. Before he even came back out of the kitchen! Isn’t that neat?

Charlie: Yay! Well done you!

Dean: Okay, well, we’re almost there. We can bust you out, or—

Sam: Don’t say it, Dean. Jess, it’s too risky, we can’t let you be the sacrifice.

Jess: Sure you can. I mean, you know where they’re going to be and when, you can just burst in when they’re not expecting it and save the day! You’re good at that bit!

Dean: Oh, we’re good at all the bits, believe me.

Charlie: Stop flirting with the drugged girl, Dean.

Jess: But he’s so cute.

Sam: Right, okay, so, now we know who they are, right? The sooner we get to them the better. We can’t risk them opening this seal.

Jess: Don’t just charge in here, guys. They’re strong, I mean really strong. They felt really old too, the way some demons do. I don’t think guns will work. And the house will be protected if anywhere is.

Dean: There’s bullets that work on witches.

Sam: Yeah, if you can manage to land one.
Jess: So set the angels on them.

Sam: Not while you’re in there. They’re not exactly subtle. I mean, if they think the whole town’s acceptable collateral, how do we know they won’t just send a lightning bolt in and flatten the house?

Charlie: Hey Jess, does the room you’re in have a window? Think you could still float something up and through it if the boys bring it to outside the house? ‘Cos I found a herb here that should take their power away for a while if it’s prepared right.

Jess: I can try! And there’s a lovely herb garden out the side, all sorts of weird rare things. They might even have it.

Sam: Okay, we’re outside. What’re we looking for, Charlie?

Charlie: Bluewort. It’s kind of silvery blue and has long spikey segmented leaves, a bit like weed but they only have three lobes. Grows quite tall and leggy.

[A lot of sounds of boys creeping around trying to be stealthy like losers and Dean getting bitten by an ant.]

Sam: Think I got it. Sending you a photo, Charlie.

Charlie: That’s the one.

Jess: Hi guys! I can see you down there! Hold it up, Sam, and—okay, got it! Yay!

Sam: Awesome.

Charlie: Okay, so now you need to roll it between your hands for about fifteen minutes, to break it down with the salt and oils in your hands.

Jess: On it!

[Some time later]

Jess: Okay, I think it’s good.

Charlie: See if you can find a little bowl or something in there? Put the herb in there, spit in the bowl, add a few drops of water and stir it with something iron. I guess steel would work too? If there’s, like, a spoon or something.

Jess: Razorblade?

Sam: Should work.

Charlie: If it does it’ll turn pink. Let us know!

Jess: I have an awesome pink sludge. Oh my god. I made a potion!

Sam: So now we just have to… what, get them to drink it?

Charlie: Apparently skin contact works just as well? So maybe… get it all over your hands and when they come for you—
Jess: I wonder if I can *slip it under the door*. Oh wow, I’m awesome.

Sam: What are you doing?

Jess (giggling): Only sending a *stealth potion* floating down the stairs. This is amazing, I can actually feel where it is if I concentrate… can one of you boys see where the witches are? Like, which room and whereabouts in the room?

Dean: Kitchen, huddled around the counter. Doing some shady witch shit.

Jess: Okay, I’m easing it in there. Guys? I’m gonna toss it on the back of their necks. I don’t know if they’ll figure out what’s wrong, but you might need to move quick. I’ll say when.

Jess: Nearly… nearly…

Jess: *Go!*

[Scuffles, pounding feet, then gunshots of victory because we are the best team ever.]

Charlie: Did you get them? Did you get them?

Dean: Two dead witches. Take that, Satan.

Sam: Okay, we’d better get out of here before the police turn up. *[knocking]* Jess, you in here? *[Key turning in lock.]*

Jess: Hey tall and handsome. Wooo—standing up is fun!

Sam: Okay, okay, I got you. Wow. You’re really wobbly.

Jess: Mmm. Think I’m done. Aaaaaall out of juice. Wow. Your chest’s really warm.

Sam (softly): You’re amazing.

Castiel turned up that evening, when they were sprawled on the couch in their hotel room watching Roald Dahl’s *The Witches*. Dean and Sam were at either end of the couch, and Jess was snuggled up between them with her head in Sam’s lap and her bare feet in Dean’s.

She had poked him with her toes until he’d given in and started massaging her feet for her. And, every now and then, trailing a finger up and down her calf. Which Sam couldn’t stop watching.

When Castiel appeared, stolid in the middle of the room, he frowned at Dean’s hands for a moment, then gave Sam a puzzled look.

“Cas!” protested Jess vaguely. “TV! You’re in the way!”
Castiel blinked at the TV behind him. Before he could solve the problem by exploding it, Sam hastily reached for the remote, and paused the movie.

“Aw,” grumbled Dean, and grinned white-teethed at Jess, as he ran his knuckles down her instep. “And she was just about to reveal her Dastardly Plot too.”

“You saved the seal,” intoned Castiel gravely.

“Tomorrow we’ll try for a walrus,” said Jess, and giggled. She’d spent a lot of the last few hours giggling.

“Yeah,” said Dean, and raised his head to meet Castiel’s eyes. “Fancy that, huh? We few, we happy few feeble humans actually did shit. How about that.”

Castiel squinted at him. Then he looked at Sam—who shrugged—and back to Dean. “You are… angry?”

“What? No!” Dean smiled, tight and smug. “I mean, you only threatened to murder a few thousand people to strong-arm us into doing your dirty work for you. Which we were already going to do because we’re not dicks. And which we could’ve done a hell of a lot more easily with some angels on board instead of treating us like untrustworthy lab rats, Cas. No biggie.”

Castiel’s face didn’t change, but his aura faltered, and shrank to paler colours.

“Dean,” he said, and frowned. “I thought you understood. This was—my superiors commanded this as a test. To see what you would do.”

“No, I mean. We were instructed to offer to destroy the town. Our orders were to follow your orders, Dean. Dean. Sam, Jess. This was an experiment in the question of whether humans could be trusted in leadership on the battlefield, not merely with execution.”

Sam cocked an eyebrow at him, and ran a hand through Jess’ hair, and looked at Dean.

“Awesome,” said Dean. “I always love being experimented on by my friends.”

Castiel’s face fell. “I don’t understand. I am not a hammer, as you called me. I have doubts, and questions. I believed that this exercise would clear up some of the misunderstandings between our species. And I will pass on a list of the seals to Charlie and to Bobby Singer.”

“Okay,” said Sam, “okay. So from our point of view the whole thing was pretty damn insulting, Cas. But I get that you’re just trying to do the whole go-between thing and we’re a weird and foreign culture, so. Wanna sit down and watch the movie with us?”

Castiel turned around and squinted at the television. Sam pressed play.

After a minute of witches and bald heads and removal of wigs and scratching and cackling, Castiel said, “This is not a factual representation, is it?”

“Fiction, honey,” said Jess, and yawned. “You wanna get over here and get the rest of this sleepy pill out of my system?”

Castiel turned back to them; and after a moment, the blue of his eyes went from otherworldly to confused and soft.
Then he moved toward them—three hesitant steps—and fell carefully to his knees.

When he reached out his hand Jess put hers in his, and smiled.

“It is almost all gone,” he said. “Now you are mostly relaxed and sleepy with the after-effects of adrenalin.”

“Oh good.” Jess rolled onto her back, sliding her ankle lazily through the loose ring of Dean’s hand, tipping her head back between Sam’s thighs to smile up at him, low and delighted. “So I can totally consent to anything. You know. Hypothetically.”

Sam smirked down at her, and ran a finger around her hairline, cradling the back of her skull in his other hand. “Oh, I trust you.”

“Sit right here,” said Dean loudly. “Shouldn’t say these things in front of me, gorgeous. You know I’m totally a virgin again now, right? Cas rehymenated me. Gonna have to do something about that.”

Sam cocked an eyebrow at Dean. Dean smirked at him, and ran a toenail down the curve of Jess’ foot. She laughed, a happy hopeful pink rising in her cheeks, and curled her toes in against the touch.

“You never had a hymen, Dean,” said Castiel in a tolerant tone, though his eyes were fixed on Dean’s thumb brushing back and forth over the rise of Jess’ ankle. “I did restore your foreskin, in the process of healing all other damage done to your body since—”

“Okay,” said Dean loudly. “So, Cas. You hanging around? Gonna get in on the fun?”

“Am I the fun?” Jess wondered aloud, and slipped a hand under her own cheek to tangle with Sam’s fingers, and to look archly down the length of her body at Dean.

Dean winked at her. “I don’t know, sweetheart. We gonna get in on you?”

“I’m sorry,” said Sam to Jess. “Please understand that I’ve never met him before in my life.”

“Worried you can’t keep up with me, Sammy boy?”

“Hey, if you need some tips to help you with your first time—”

“… I’m afraid Jimmy is not comfortable with this,” said Castiel, in rather a rush. His eyes were fixed on the ceiling above their heads, and the colour was high in his cheeks.

“Poor old Jimmy,” said Jess fondly, and turned her head in to nuzzle against Sam’s belly. “You’d better take him on home, angel. Most people aren’t easy with things being easy, not even if an angel of the lord descends from the heavens to say it’s all good.”

“Does that happen often, in your experience,” grumbled Castiel. “Nobody descends to tell angels what to do.” Then he vanished.

Sam and Dean exchanged a look.

“Doesn’t God…” murmured Jess half-heartedly, and curled her fingers into Sam’s shirt. Her other hand wandered down to seek out Dean’s.

The corner of Dean’s mouth quirked from serious and thoughtful into a brotherly challenge.

Sam barely had a moment to think oh shit are we really going to do this before Dean said, “Hey,
Sammy? Is it true you got a promise ring to match hers?”

Sam laughed, and Jess pulled him down and ran her foot along Dean’s inseam, and Sam lost himself for a moment in the slow hot push and curl of her tongue.

“Well,” he murmured against the corner of her mouth, “we’re definitely a match one way or another.”

Jess grinned at him, delighted; then she tugged at Dean. And Sam’s brother leaned in on her instruction, folded himself down over the girl in Sam’s lap, ran the tips of his fingers teasingly up her stomach and kissed her while her mouth was still wet from Sam’s touch.

… and that should definitely not be a turn-on, but screw it.

No angels were descending to tell them no.

“Impress me, boys,” said Jess brightly, and ruffled the hair at the back of Dean’s head.

It was Dean’s hand that first slid up from shin to knee to thigh, with the pink and blue cotton of her skirt bunching into lazy waves to trail up after it. But it was Sam’s mouth that first kissed its way in there. He had a reputation to uphold, after all.

Dean gave him a fair run for it, though.

Sam was used to shoving Dean out of the way and bickering with him over whatever they were trying to prove on this or that day. He wasn’t used to doing it between and over and around a woman’s legs. Especially not while she tried to be sultry and kept shoving her fist into her mouth so as not to giggle while she moaned, or petted their heads and dragged one or the other up to kiss her mouth, or to tease at her half-covered breasts, or to slide their fingers in through the unbuttoned front of her shirt.

“Oh my god,” she said breathlessly. “You’re both so adorable.” And Sam lifted an eyebrow at his fuming brother, and slipped off the couch to his knees, and dragged one of her legs up over his shoulder and went to town.

Dean retaliated by slipping in behind her, cradling her warm against his body and letting his hands rove, kissing his way up and down her neck and indulging every sensation with hand and mouth.

And oh, Sam had imagined this, years ago: his first fantasies, his first wonderings, had been all about how Dean would do this or that with the girl that he boasted about, the hints he let fall. Is this part of what Sam imagined right, is this how Dean would do it, and every imagined girl as he learned to touch himself had had Dean in the picture somewhere, sliding tongue or fingers over hot skin or wrapped in the delighted clutch of her legs or sitting back and laughing and telling Sam what to do.

Jess’ clothes fell away as Sam pressed in a palm hard between his own legs, to stave off the inevitable result of seeing her splayed and happy and arching between Dean’s knees, with Dean’s hands on her thigh and breast and Dean murmuring hot and gentle in her ear and Dean’s eyes slanting down to his own with a wicked smile, and the taste of her, the taste on his mouth—

Sam reared back, and sucked his fingers into his mouth, then brought them into play.

Jess flung her head back against Dean’s shoulder and arched into Sam’s hands with an inarticulate cry.

Dean shook his head and tutted, though his mouth was slack with wanting. “Know I taught you better than that, kiddo. ‘S what comes of never giving you any proper hands-on instruction.”
Jess was laughing, breathless, and Sam’s eyes were fixed on where Dean’s hand was tugging at his own buckles and buttons, because surely Dean wouldn’t—

—and it wasn’t like Sam hadn’t seen his brother’s dick before, in just casual nudity situations or even now and then when he was getting heavy with Jo or Jess in the living room, hands down pants and up skirts or mouths between legs and even shoving and gasping their way to completion but—

—yep, that was Dean’s dick alright, curving up and eager and wet right in front of Sam’s nose, and when Sam looked up there was Dean looking down at him with something between challenge and fear as he smirked, and mouthed at Jess’ ear, and put his hands on her hips and rode up against her tailbone in suggestion.

“Oh yes,” she agreed with delight, and knitted her fingers through Sam’s where they rested on her thigh. “Just let me—there.” The work of a moment and a little rolling of the hips, and Sam had a close-up look of Dean easing his way into Jess, could feel the deep rumble of his self-satisfied groan and the gasping clench of her fingers, and Dean’s eyes were screwed shut and his face was turned in against Jess’ neck—

Well, really, there was only one answer to that.

When they were properly seated, paused for the next breath, Sam leaned in and closed his mouth over her clit (touching Dean), and sucked.

“Oh Sam,” she hissed; and Dean groaned out a matching “Fucking hell, Sam,” and Sam nipped his laughter down the inside of her thigh as their bodies jerked in against each other.

“Tell me again how much I’ve got to learn, Dean,” he purred, breathless, dark against her inner knee.

Jess laughed, and writhed, and squirmed deliciously in Dean’s lap to demand he move, and Dean positively whined and tightened his hands on her waist.

“Oh,” he panted, and ground up nice and slow into her, shifted deep inside until she moaned, and slipped a hand up over her breast, “you think you can do better, baby boy?”

That should definitely not sound hot.

(And Jess had her head thrown back and her hands braced on Dean’s knees and she was just so powerful and magnificent. And she was… so much better fitted to this life than either of them, broken dangerous creatures that they were, and why had he never seen that before?)

Sam was taken by a fit of rashness. And he got up, and lounged back onto the couch, legs kicked wide and one foot hooked up over the back in blatant display, dick standing up hot and proud, and he put his hand behind his head on the armrest and grinned down at them because why the hell not.

“Well, she and I, we’ve had some practice, you see. I know all her hot spots. Wanna come and show him, honey?”

“You two,” laughed Jess, and patted Sam’s thigh. And for a moment he thought she’d leave him hanging; but then she sighed and pulled away from Dean to the sound of his protest (and Sam knew his brother, knew him, and there was no way in hell he’d ever try to hold a woman there if she had decided to change things up), and clambered forward to straddle Sam.

She settled down over him, skirt falling around his hips. And she winked at him. Then he slammed
his head back against the arm rest because she was suddenly there, taking him all in at once, riding him hard and firm and sensual, as Dean made a breathless noise of complaint and crowded up close behind her, heavy against Sam’s shin, hand splayed hot on Sam’s ribs for balance.

“No,” she said, in response to some questing touch of his hand while he kissed at the back of her neck, “I don’t enjoy that. Wait your turn, there, now…”

And the heat and the grip of her were gone, and she was grinning at Sam and sinking back down onto Dean.

“Holy shit,” gasped Dean, burying his face in her neck; and she moaned and leaned her head back against his and dragged his hand up to her breast, as Sam ran his hands up her thighs and commented,

“You keep that up, we’re going to need the lube.”

“Mm,” she groaned, “go on then. ‘S by the bed. Float it over here, if I can do it you can too.”

It turned out she was right, and he was right. And also that it was surprisingly difficult to coordinate a rhythm of switching from one dick to another without dicks shoving in against each other, and brothers swearing, and everyone breaking down into laughter and competitiveness within two minutes.

Jess finally decreed, laughing and sprawling on the cushions on the rug, that Dean should finish first in consideration of his hymen. And so that was what Dean looked like when he fucked, the powerful slick lines of his back and the low drive of his hips and the softness of his open mouth, so much gentler than Sam had ever imagined when he’d lain in bed desperately hard with teenage hormones pretending to be asleep as big brother Dean and his girl of the day made intriguing noises in the other bed.

Only back then Dean had never thrown up his head to seek out Sam’s eyes, and grinned all bashful and cocky at once, and winked.

… Sam didn’t last long, once Dean was free to lounge beside them and watch and make lascivious eager comments about Sam’s style. He just lay back and let Jess ride him, and drove up into her with all the force and subtlety he could muster.

Jess was groaning and sore by the end, but happy, and tingling all over; which was just the way she liked it.

But when they were all in bed, Sam looked at her stretched out against his side, and at Dean nuzzling his face into the pillow on the other bed, and he felt… restless.

He remembered Kit complaining, eyes sparkling gold and mischievous up at Sam: I don’t get to be the filling in a Winchester sandwich? Gonna have to do some more corrupting on you kids.

Dean had looked at him tonight, when they were cleaning themselves up—just a quick wordless exchange of “we’re good, right?” And it wasn’t like Sam was freaking out about the whole kind-of-incest thing. If anything he’d’ve expected Dean to do that. But Dean… Dean was so fucking normal lately. Way too normal for a hunter, even one who hadn’t been to Hell. Maybe Castiel wasn’t a hammer, but Sam had been broken and reshaped into a knife in those few months, all the soft useless parts of him burnt and melted away into something bright and cold and sharp. Trying to save his brother from something that… that he’d come back from healthier than ever.

And Sam hadn’t even succeeded.
Sam let himself drift in memory: the warm weight of Jess’ arm tucked over his waist and the smell of her hair in his face, the little mumbling noises she made sometimes when she slept. And he closed his eyes and felt Kit lying on her other side, watching them sleep with fond immortal amusement.

He felt Kit’s hand running lazily up and down his bare back as he drifted in the land between sleep and waking, the warm delicious comfort of it, the assurance of home and belonging and the soft stirrings of anticipation. He felt it leave and slide over the curve of Jess’ shoulder, dragging the worn cotton of her t-shirt with it for a moment then letting it slip back into place, curling around her arm and tickling down to her elbow. Petting them both, proprietary: his strange little humans.

He felt, in his memory, Jess stir and yawn and smile, and nuzzle in against Kit’s neck. He heard lazy morning greetings turn into slow kisses, and eventually woke up himself enough to prop his head on one hand and watch them make out, sleepy and aimless, in between arguing amiably about which Hogwarts houses the characters of *Dr Sexy MD* would belong to.

Sam remembered being *that* Sam. He remembered well enough to fake him. To shove himself back into that life, and pretend to fit. That was as far as it went.

Ruby turned up, a couple of weeks after Dean came back to life: just sitting outside the motel when Sam got back from a run, perching on a railing and eating something trashy from McDonalds. She cocked an eyebrow at him, tossed her wrappers in the trash, stood up to stretch with her hands over her head, and asked him where he’d got his juice.

Sam shrugged, and pulled a gun on her, mostly to see what she’d do.

“Kinky,” she said. “You’re a hard man to find lately. Well, without running into all your new feathery friends.”

“Not your kind of people, huh?” said Sam. “Because your kind of people is Lucifer?”

There was heat around her, but more than that, there was warmth: the kind of warmth that felt glad and welcoming, a softer deeper ache under the burn of anticipation.

“Truer than you know,” she said.

She tipped her head back, dark in the bluish glow of the fluorescent lights and the muted rumble of the highway, and studied him. Her eyes were invisible in the stark shadows.

“Look at me, Sam Winchester,” Ruby murmured, with something like a laugh behind it. “What do you see?”

He lowered the gun and stepped in, drawn; and she leaned back against the railing and hooked her elbows over it, opening up her body in invitation.

Close in front of his chest she felt like the brazier that you bend over to ease the ache from your bones at night; and the curve of her mouth was like a fish hook, or a promise.

A hand closed over his eyes, and her mouth brushed the angle of his chin. “Not your eyes. You don’t need those, my prince.”

“Salt,” he murmured, “and… you. Loss. I don’t know what you want but you—you care about me. You…”
But those weren’t the right questions. Those were the kinds of things he’d looked for before, the kind that didn’t really tell you anything. He reached deeper, or broader, looked for shapes instead of things.

“You’re… not all there,” he said. “Or you’re… you don’t feel so real as you did.”

She pulled back and stared at him, eyes wide.

Her feelings ran like a demon’s—like a humans but fiercer, simpler, hotter, with more delight in cruelty and blood. Now that was still there, but simpler yet, lacking the strange flashes of depth and delight that he had seen in her from time to time, the sense that some river ran underneath that he couldn’t see beneath the surface scum.

“What,” she said, and swallowed. “What does it look like?”

He pressed in and felt her open up around him, letting him in. His mouth slipped against hers before he realised it, hands cradling her arms against the cool of the night, breaths puffing between mouths. She felt empty; but empty like a room that’s gone from full of hoarder’s junk to scrupulously cleaned, tidied and remodelled. Still her, but fresh.

“Like you know what you’re doing,” he murmured.

She snorted, a brief voiced sound of disgust and amusement amidst the breathiness of their whispers.

“They caught me,” she said after a moment, “angels. When I tried to find you. Tortured me… did something to me. I don’t know. I feel… different. Like… I don’t know. Like I’ve been burned away inside.”

Sam’s hand travelled up her arm, halfway to the kind of caress he might use on one of the others; but this was Ruby, and that was strange, so he let it fall to his side.

“Fire destroys,” he said, “but sometimes it burns things clean.”

Something warm and golden sparked inside her at that, a quick shiver of it; but it was stamped down at once.

“It just… made me think. I loved Lucifer,” she murmured, breath soft against his throat. “I still do. Loving isn’t everything. If he rises, I die. He’ll kill me. And he’ll destroy himself. It’s a shithole of a situation, Sam.”

Which was a good line. And he’d be an idiot to fall for it, if he couldn’t feel how different she was. Like now she was just a weapon, just a single purpose, with no room for ambiguities.

And just like that she slipped herself back into that aching hollow of Sam’s empty ideal life, brash and warm and challenging in all the right ways.

It was easy to forget who she was. Demon, yes, of course, but person too—right?

Coyote didn’t really know her, after all. Not like Sam did. Coyote didn’t know what she’d been there for, how often she’d stood by him when she didn’t have to. And it wasn’t like Sam was trusting her. Her information, sure, but not her. If she tipped him off about this seal or that one, it wasn’t that hard to fudge the source of his intel to the others.

April passed, May pressed on in, and they were all at war. Bobby was command central, but everything passed through Charlie, who sat at home in Stanford and worked out what and where
was at risk next. If it looked too big, or was overseas, or there were no hunters nearby, a prayer to Castiel would see the seal defended; if not, Bobby would pass the message on to a hunter or a team of hunters. Sam and Dean and Jess and Jo took on their share in the north and west, falling into a rhythm as they got to know each other’s strengths. Jess wasn’t strong in body but she had her own unique gifts. And whatever she said, everybody wanted to believe. Jo had a formidable repertoire of skills that could be applied to theft, from sleight of hand to the gymnastic ability to scale a wall and slip in through a barely-open window; and of course a word to Charlie brought in more high-tech options than Sam and Dean had ever had at their fingertips before. There were growing pains, challenges with adapting to all the new possibilities, dealing with the fear and the horror day in and day out; but they were strong together, and getting stronger all the time. In between times, Sam did all he could to keep tabs on anything that sounded like Trickster, to learn where he might be, to learn to know him better; but there was nothing. Coyote had vanished.

Dad was taking on jobs as well, here and there. Sometimes Dean and Jo would join him for a hunt or two; and when they came back, Dean was always cagey and tense, and it took all of Jess’ optimism (and a lot of skin-on-skin contact) to ease him out of it.

And just as the hunting world was finding their stride, Lilith raised the Witnesses to thin their ranks. As luck would have it, Jo and Dean were with Dad on that one; and one of the Witnesses was Bill Harvelle. Jo only got out of that one alive because of Dean; and Dad didn’t make it. When Dean got drunk enough to talk about it, he said it had looked like Dad just gave up on fighting; and this time, even Jo didn’t seem to blame herself.

Sam didn’t know how he felt. Maybe he’d given up on Dad years ago, because this didn’t feel like a surprise, or a goodbye. Just more of the same.

Dean walked out into the darkness of Bobby’s junk yard after that, and Sam didn’t follow him. When he came back, hours later, the self-hatred was gone from his eyes, and Castiel was a dark-eyed shadow at his side.

They clashed, those two, almost every time they met, butting heads over what the world should be and what it meant to fight for what was right. Each time it seemed to Sam that Dean felt personally betrayed by the fact that Castiel didn’t just know that Dean was right. But in between times and Castiel would let go of his customary silence to chatter on (even to babble) with an almost child-like delight at so many things about the world that he loved, and Dean would relax until the corners of his eyes crinkled up and make the angel eat food that he didn’t need.

The first time Castiel agreed to stay with them for a few hours and “just hang,” they were back in Stanford for a few days. Return of the Jedi was playing at a low volume on the screen, but Dean was reading on the sofa with Charlie, and Jess and Jo were stretched out on their bellies on the cushions and carpet working on an actual jigsaw puzzle that Jo had dug out of some cupboard somewhere.

Sam was busy. He was, in theory, trying to work out which of three small towns best fit the profile for the seal ominously called the Slaughter of the Innocents; but he was really frowning over a few decades-old case histories that fit Coyote’s M. O., as he’d gradually come to understand it. He was getting to know the god’s sense of humour, his appreciation for the wacky and off-beat as well as the appropriate, his moments of surprising subtlety in the midst of his sledge-hammer tactics, his preference for targeting bullies. But once you saw the patterns there were other finer details, ones that you wouldn’t see unless you already knew something about him. Here and there were references to Norse mythology, or to Egyptian, or European fairy lore, or any of the other pantheons with which Coyote had claimed an association. They were sly and oblique—a raven sighted near that corpse, another fallen outside the Egyptian wing of a museum, nothing to do with the main “plot” of the trick
—the sorts of thing that could surely only be there as private amusement to Coyote, the sorts of thing that Sam dismissed the first few times he spotted them. And there was… something else. Something that nagged at the back of Sam’s consciousness but which he couldn’t quite pin down, and…

There was a rustle of wings on the edge of hearing, and the room was suddenly more crowded than before.

“Hello,” pronounced Castiel, from the door of the den.

There was a chorus of greetings from around the room, and Dean threw one arm along the back of the couch to swivel around to see him.

“Hey, man. Pull up a piece of carpet!”

“You’re paying to have it relaid if he does,” said Jo, without looking up from the two edge pieces she was trying to fit together. “He means find a seat, Cas.”

Dean scoffed. “Where’s your sense of adventure? Lookin’ good, buddy.”

The angel was wearing jeans.

Granted, Balthazar wore jeans all the time, often purple, but it looked weirder on Castiel. Different. They were nice jeans, too; especially without that shapeless tan coat over them. Soft shirt of some material just short of being shiny with blue accents here and there, sleeves rolled up above the elbow (and he had really good arms), and… interesting. Leather bracelets.

He had good wrists too, Sam noticed. And hands.

“Good call, Jess,” Charlie said, smirking. “I like the boots. He looks dreamy, doesn’t he, Dean?”

Dean shrugged, looking slightly pink. “It’ll do.”

Jo glanced up, long enough to decide, “Needs more eyeliner.”

Dean, who’d just reached for a nonchalant sip of his beer, choked on it a bit. Castiel looked concerned.

“I love shopping for men,” said Jess happily. “Or men-shaped things. He’s so cute!”

“I like them,” said Castiel, looking down at himself with an air of faint surprise. “I find the effect… compelling.”

Despite his faint irritation at having his work interrupted, Sam couldn’t help a snort.

“It suits you,” he said. “Looks sort of proper and badass at the same time. Something you came here for?”

For some reason, Dean threw Sam a bitchface. Castiel straightened up into Serious Mode, looking faintly shifty.

“Another seal has fallen,” he said, “in Nigeria.”

“Don’t tell me,” said Jo, “a prince actually did need to escape the country and share his millions with some random old granny he met online?”

“There was no prince involved, Jo,” said Castiel, in long-suffering tones. “I simply thought I ought to
tell you that a total of thirty-one seals have now been broken.”

Charlie pulled a face. “Ugh. Keep it to the office hours.”

Sam frowned, switched to another window, and made a note. “Okay, so Bobby and Annie must have saved that one in Nebraska, then?”

“No, that is still… ‘in play’. It has merely not broken yet.”

“Right, so. Where d’you want us next?”

“We have no definite information yet.”

“Okay then, well, when we work something out we’ll—”

“Hey, Cas,” interrupted Dean pointedly, “there’s a doco about plants that’ve adapted to extreme conditions on the nature channel. Looked like your kind of nerdy shit. You wanna sit down and I’ll find it?”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Really?”

Charlie pointed a Dorito at him. “You agreed downtime was a sensible thing, Sam Winchester. Even if you never take any yourself. Besides, Cas would look adorable cooing over sundews.”

“How’s Jimmy in there?” asked Jess. “Amelia says that Claire doesn’t like the way she does her hair, so now she’s refusing to wear her hair up at school.”

Sam got on with his work.

When he next looked up, David Attenborough was talking with animation about grasses in alpine regions, Castiel was seated between Dean and Charlie, Dean was sprawling carelessly against the arm with his legs across Castiel’s lap like an afterthought, and Charlie was showing Castiel how to give a foot massage while Dean pretended not to notice and Castiel gave him curious, scrunched-up little sideways looks.

Surely it wasn’t actually possible to have a romantic relationship with an angel?

Would Castiel even know if it was?

(Were lustful thoughts about angels in the smite-worthy category, as the story of Sodom and Gomorrah would suggest? And if so, would it be up to Castiel to do the smiting? Sam’s life was still weird.)

(Sam was Hell’s dark prince. Dean was the Righteous Man and had an angel giving him amazed, adoring looks.)

They were all comfortable together, in this warm family room lighted with the half-gold of the lamp and the flickering colours of the TV.

Sam turned back to his laptop in his dark corner and frowned at his case files.

…and there it was, the thing that had been nagging at the back of his mind.

A stained-glass window in the background of a crime scene, with the archangel Michael smiting the dragon that was the devil. Somebody brained with a horribly clichéd statue of the Virgin. Exactly the same level of reference to Christian—okay, to Abrahamic—religions as to all the types of mythology
to which the Trickster belonged.

So had Sam been wrong? Was Coyote just a mythology buff of all kinds, who figured that Abrahamic mythology was as good as any and worked in references to that as much as to any other? Or had saints (including all the apocryphal ones) counted as demigods or a “pantheon” for a while, in some cultures, enough that Coyote had taken on some of those as a persona?

It wasn’t as if Sam knew all of his alter egos. And there were definitely some saints’ tales, like Julian Hospitaller, that were basically Greek myths or fairy tales reworked. He was probably just putting too much importance on this because…

Sam looked up at the real-life angel, massaging his brother’s instep with devoted intensity and considering David Attenborough’s opinions on red algae in the snow of Antarctica.

“I’m done,” decided Jess, rolling to her feet with a suppleness that Sam couldn’t have matched a few months ago, before all this hidden power that pulsed through his joints and blood. “Jo, that bowl’s foreground rocks, that’s background rocks, and this one might be rocks or might be the river.”

Jo made a vague gesture of acknowledgement. Then, when Jess touched her hair, she tipped back her face for her goodnight kiss: lingering soft and easy. Jess circled behind the sofa and laid her hands on Charlie’s and Dean’s shoulders. The kiss from Dean was more distracted than usual, warm but hardly any flirting. Charlie was sweet and affectionate. Then Jess laid a hand on Castiel’s shoulder, just enough warning to make him look up, and leaned down to slip her mouth fondly over his as well.

The angel blinked, but he didn’t pull back. His mouth opened a little against hers; and in a moment she pulled back, and patted his cheek, and came over to Sam.

Sam watched her, as she crossed the long narrow rug that divided him from the rest of the room. It seemed to take an unreasonably long time; but she smiled as if it were nothing.

He shifted his screen back to focus on the Apocalypse research, then leaned into her kiss. It was a relief, and a blessing he didn’t deserve; and as her fingers scratched through his hair, her deceptively soft brown eyes raked over his face.

“You going to join me later, honey?”

He grimaced, and shook his head. “Sorry, gorgeous. I don’t think I’ll be done here for another few hours. Just sleep, okay?”

“You too,” she said sternly, and kissed his forehead.

“Well, if it’s a bedmate you’re after…” said Charlie, and unfolded sleepily from the sofa to pad off after Jess. “I’ll learn about lichens tomorrow. Night, bitches!”

Sam didn’t know how long Castiel stayed, but Dean was up unusually late the next morning. Of course, that could have just meant that he was exhausted from the effort of not tripping and falling on Castiel’s lips.

Sam, meanwhile, went to Ruby that night.

Technically it meant he was cheating on the others, but he needed her. He needed her like air.

When he was gritting his teeth and smiling hard enough to tear the inside of his cheek, she’d be there to sprawl out irreverent and dark beside the table, and take away his bad mood with a quirk of a
sardonic eyebrow. When he felt alone in all the overwhelming determined goodness of the others, even the brother who had been tortured in Hell for decades, she was there for long winding easy chats about nothing, until he remembered who he was. And the acrid, tangy warmth of her aura, demonic but fond and powerful in subtle ways that Sam still didn’t understand, lingered in the air around her, and made him almost drunk on the taste of it.

He didn’t sleep with her often, not with Jess there. Not with Charlie slipping into his bed as often as not to use him as a body pillow, or Jo’s delight in teasing him until he pinned her against the nearest wall and took her apart with fingers and tongue, or the increasingly frequent post-hunt “stress relief” in various combinations. But sometimes the touches of these others were too intimate in their innocence, even Dean’s. A light cuff of his hand against Sam’s shoulder, Jess’ hand ruffling his hair, Castiel’s cautious enthusiasm for scalp massages both given and received, the teasing lilt of Jo’s grin as she slipped her fingers into his belt—they felt like the man they were touching was somebody who didn’t exist, like they were turning Sam inside out to find him, like he had to fight to keep all the power racing in his blood from bursting out to smother them in a burning tide.

Sometimes he just needed to slam Ruby up against a wall and be angry.
Clap your hands if you believe

Sam was obsessive. He knew it. Obsessions were a thing his brain did—thanks for that legacy, Dad. He’d gone through phases, as a kid, of devouring everything a local library could tell him about bears, or magnets, or sea shells, or the Civil War. Dean had usually been the one who had to listen to the eager recital of Sam’s latest collection of facts, but it didn’t stop him leaving Sam at libraries when he couldn’t be there to look after him.

Sam wasn’t just good at finding facts. He was good at fitting them together, giving them shape and then mapping them all onto that vast complex structure in his head, turning them into sense and storing them there to be pulled out when he needed them. And more important still, he had the fierce drive to keep going, to keep him sitting up for hours in the darkness with no slaking of the thirst for that final discovery, for understanding. For grasping his target.

Well, now Coyote was that target.

Charlie might have known him longest, but it wasn’t long before Sam was sure he could make the claim of knowing him best, in his patterns and routes and whimsies and rituals. Had anybody ever paid this much attention to Coyote before? and had anybody, before the internet, had the resources to roam so rapidly over so much of his past? A few bare lines in an old newspaper spoke to Sam, sang symphonies. He could feel it in his bones, the shape a trick would have to take from beginning to end, the mischief and the faint tang of deep old anger that drove it underneath. He knew the kind of mark Coyote would choose, the kinds of texts and pop culture and myth he’d draw on for inspiration, the way he’d spin out the story, the speed with which he was likely to travel from place to place depending on mood (as evidenced by his behaviour in the previous job). Sam could have written theses on How to Predict the Trickster.

And yet he couldn’t find him. Coyote had vanished.

Sam ‘prayed’ to him every night, pressing fingers against his tattoo and telling him everything that had happened during the day. He forced that knowledge on the god, that connection, reached in vain with his mind for something tangible on the other end of the tie that held them together, tried to feel some reaction. But no hint of Coyote’s presence brushed his senses; not until the end of May (forty-one seals broken), when they found an ethereal red-headed girl in a psychiatric ward and learned that she was a fallen angel—with a heavenly bounty on her head.

“For what it’s worth,” said Castiel, “I’m sorry.”

“You think you are,” said Anna, “but you’re not, not really. You don’t know the feeling.”

“Well, we wouldn’t, would we?” drawled Balthazar, all louche with eyes like ice. “Did you ever turn yourself into an abomination and abandon your family and your garrison, Cassie darling? Ever leave your mates in the lurch for a lark? Ever say to yourself, ‘bloody hell, I’m such a special
snowflake and nobody understands me, wonder what it’d be like to flip God the bird and have a little frolic in the mud? No, you neither? Well, how about that. I can see where your little jaunt would’ve taught you all about feeling sorry, sister.”

“I was hardly the first to abandon my post,” she said, “or the greatest. If it was him standing here, Castiel, would you strike?”

Balthazar opened his mouth again, but one hard look from Castiel cut off the flurry of sarcasm before it could begin.

“His disappearance ought to have been a reason for you to stay, not to go. We needed each other, Anna, all of us. We needed you.”

“I needed me too. I needed to find who I was when I wasn’t just one of a garrison. Making my own choices. You should try it some day.”

The colours around Castiel prickled, spiked through with orange and the shade of blue that Sam had come to associate with embarrassment. A cloud of red began at the centre, and determinedly chased it out. “I have faith, Anna,” he snapped. “I will not repeat your mistakes.”

And there was something—something tickling the edge of Sam’s awareness, something filtering through him. Something he’d spent months searching for.

Deep in the back of his mind, in the faint warmth of his wrist, he felt the familiar tickle of Coyote’s attention.

He let his breath out, half-closed his eyes, and didn’t reach for it: instead, he made himself passive, opened himself up, made of himself a clear and open channel between that faint distant presence and the events here and now.

“Just make it quick, Castiel.”

Anna sounded regal as a martyr. Castiel sounded harassed as a schoolteacher.

“You have no comprehension of the extent of your treachery anymore, do you? Your memories are only fact, not feeling. You have become one of them.”

“The hell, Cas?” Dean burst out. “You’re a heartless son of a bitch sometimes, you know that?”

Castiel’s burning blue gaze swung around to him.

“As a matter of fact, I am. And?”

Betrayal and familiar fury were spiking in Dean, as he stepped forward to go nose-to-nose with Castiel, but they were feeding into something else: the slower, hotter burn of excitement, of anticipation, building up for action and a clash. “So now you’re just going to kill her? For asking questions? For, what, wanting to actually get out there and enjoy the world your Dad made instead of sitting around on her arse with you lot playing at soldiers?”

“I take no pleasure in obeying this order. But our Father’s commands are immutable.”

“She said only four angels have ever spoken to God. Four, in the history of forever, and I’m guessing one of them ain’t you, you poor stupid son of a bitch. How’d you know he wants her dead? Someone in middle management ticked a box? Taking a lot on faith here, Cas.”
Castiel’s eyes slid away from Dean’s for a flickering, telling second; but Balthazar was smirking.

“Cute, isn’t it, brother, the way you’ve taught your puppy to believe it’s thinking. Might want to try teaching it to piss in its own corner, though, instead of all over you.”

Somewhere beyond telling, Coyote slipped into the forefront of Sam’s mind, into his blood and thoughts, moving lighter than darkness. He touched Sam’s heart, or maybe his soul—wherever it was that the centre of his power hid—and asked a wordless question.

Dean reached out and knocked his fingers against Castiel’s chin, silently demanding the raising of his head, the steadiness of his eyes.

“I know something about taking orders, okay?” he barrelled on, ignoring Balthazar. “It makes the world a whole a lot simpler. Hell, you never even have to think if you don’t want to. Don’t have to wonder about right or wrong, about consequences, because somebody else has already made the call. Time to grow up, buddy.”

“Dean,” said Castiel, with something old and lonely weighing him down, “I must ask you to step out of the way.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“I do not understand. There is no reason for her to mean anything to you.”

Sam handed control over to Coyote.

“Maybe not. Maybe. I know damn well you do, and Cas, I’m not letting you do that to yourself.”

Castiel’s eyes squinted confusion; and the vial of Anna’s grace spun away from Balthazar’s hand and smashed on the floor.

Cover Dean’s eyes, came the urgent imperative, half Coyote’s voice and half something Sam just knew he had to do, right the hell now. And he was darting forward and dragging Dean away from the sudden dazzling white cloud spiralling up from the vial, hand clamped fast over his eyes and whispering in his ear “don’t fight, don’t look,” as Anna gasped and almost screamed and was enveloped in the light.

Then she was gone.

When Sam could see again, Balthazar was examining his nails, and Castiel was looking at Sam thoughtfully.

Sam cleared his throat, and gave Castiel a winning smile, and stepped back away from Dean, who rubbed his eyes and squinted around the room.

“Can we toss them into Hell yet, Cassie?” asked Balthazar sweetly.

“No.”

“Not even Purgatory?”

Dean crossed his arms and glared at Castiel, one eyebrow raised; and Castiel hesitated, as if he were about to say something to him. Then he turned away, and he and Balthazar vanished.

“Don’t think you’re getting out of talking about this, Cas, so help me,” Dean yelled at the air. Nothing happened. Dean stood there breathing through his nose and glowering for a moment, as
nothing continued to happen, then turned on Sam.

“Okay. What the hell was that?”

“I think,” said Sam cautiously, “Coyote smashed the vial, to give Anna back her grace. Then she ran and hid.”

“So she’s all angeled up again,” Dean muttered, and ran a hand through his hair. “‘Cos that’s going to make her so happy. Shit.”

Sam agreed absently, groping after the vanished presence of Coyote. There was nothing there, only the nagging feeling that Coyote’s attention was now focussed on something else altogether, and… and.

Why?

So far, the only thing that had drawn him out had been one of his own in danger. But Anna had had no tattoo on her wrist, no sign of a deal with Coyote, no history of any dealings with the supernatural —besides the obvious. And this couldn’t have been to save Sam, or even Dean, because Castiel could have easily put them both to sleep and done whatever he liked to Anna.

This was just to save Anna. Or maybe, if he followed Dean’s logic, to save Cas. Either way, it was about the angels—and on that note, how did the trickiest of Tricksters trump angel senses when it came to pulling something like that right under their noses?

Consent, Sam thought; and he came up with a hypothesis.

It was in a ghost town in Arizona that Meg caught up with them.

Literally, a ghost town. For some reason that was a seal too. Everybody had been slaughtered, their bodies burned, and the whole town smelled of smoke and abandonment. It was quiet, except for the groaning of crows; and Sam could feel the ghosts already stirring.

They were weak so far, most of them, because they hadn’t been dead long. It was a matter of hours to work out that hair and teeth had been taken from the corpses and twisted into crude, eerie dolls that hung in a row from the porch of the town hall, swinging in the wind like evil faceless gingerbread men.

No attempt had been made to hide them, though the demons must have known the hunters were coming. It was like a mockery: you can set the ghosts to rest, but the seal is broken. And maybe they should have worked out that it was a trap. But it was only when their own bonfire was dying down —stinking of burnt hair—and all the ghosts were fading around them, that Sam heard the low purr of Meg’s voice behind them.

“Shouldn’t’ve come here, boys.”
Sam was stronger now, oh so much stronger. His power sang in his veins as he turned to face her, ready and responsive, straining to get at her. He could take her, he knew it. It would be hard, they’d be almost an even match—but if nothing went wrong, if he wasn’t distracted, if they could just go head to head on pure strength—

It was a wide, empty main street. On one side was a giant billboard, saying Anti-God is anti-American. Meg was smiling, excitement bubbling under the viciousness, hands in her back pockets, rocking back and forward on her heels.

Jo had her demon knife in her hand, and Dean’s salt gun was trained on Meg.

“Hell, I could say the same for you,” he said, smirking.

“Dean,” said Sam, warning and worry in the name.

Dean spared him half a glance sideways, not having to speak the question or acknowledge the warning aloud.

“Something else,” Sam said in a low voice, eyes skating around the road, straining his senses toward the empty Kostco, the bottle shop, the bus shelter. “Here, but not here. Like it’s… waiting in the wings. No, not it. They.”

An empty packet blew across the road behind her, into a clump of scrawny dead bushes.

Sam? asked Charlie in his ear, her voice frantic and tinny over the comm line. What’s going on? Jo?

“You thought I’d come alone?” Meg’s mouth curved into a brilliant grin. “Got some friends of yours here, Deano, who didn’t want to miss the chance. What say we have a little reunion?”

“Friends,” drawled Dean. “Sorry, sweetheart, I’ve been a bit out of touch with all my demon buddies. Lost my address book somewhere around the fifth circle on the way out.”

Something growled like a rumble of the earth. Dean’s jaw clenched; and on Sam’s other side, Jo went pale.

“No,” Jo whispered, and stumbled back a step or three.
Meg snapped her fingers and whistled—and then they were there, coalescing out of silvery-grey smoke, visible only to Sam’s second sight. Something like dogs, but the size of a small bear. Teeth flashing like jagged steel, skulls half-visible through the fur sliding off their faces, backs ridged and ragged and long lashing tails like the tails of lions. And their paws kneaded the ground without leaving tracks, and from the pads of their feet slid long silver claws, and their breath puffed out like smoke into the air.

The comms fizzled and went down.

“Hellhounds,” Sam said, through gritted teeth.

Meg patted the monstrosity beside her. “That’s right, wonder boy. You can see them, huh? Must feel good to put a face to the things that ripped your brother up last time. Let’s see—there’s no contracts in the business this time, so they can do what they like. You think they’ll go for him, or for her?”

Sam stepped forward, and let his pistol fall to his side.

“What’re you here for, Meg?”
A hound snarled, just below the level of human hearing, poised to spring—and Meg jerked something like an invisible leash, tugging it back under control.

“You, boy king. Just you.”

Sam smirked grimly, gathering the hot deep wellspring of his eternal anger into his hands. “What, didn’t get enough last time?” Stalling, stalling, because he could hear Dean muttering a prayer to Castiel behind him, and now he could feel those invisible threads connecting Meg to the beasts, controlling them, and he might not be able to take her, and he definitely couldn’t take her and them, but if he could just—

Here and now, this was his moment, this was what he was ready for. The world sung around him, poised in the balance.

“Left me wanting more, sweetheart. So many promises.” Meg’s tongue flickered out, curled over her lips. And there, just there, the intangible point where all her control on them coalesced… “Sam, Sam, we’re gonna win. Can you feel it? Those cloud-hopping pansies are losing the whole damn universe. Lucifer’s gonna take over Heaven. We’re going to Heaven, Sam. Isn’t that worth everything?”

Sam coiled his mind around it, soft as he possibly could, honing the rage to a fine weapon. The possibilities raced away in front of him, heady, carrying him along with them. A pack of invisible hounds at his bidding—fighting Hell with its own weapons—a torrent of silvery-sleek bodies pouring over his enemies—teeth flashing—Meg screaming, her body spinning away into red ribbons, her face tearing from her skull—

And it was only then that Sam heard what Meg had said. It was only with that thought that he saw the hunger and the joy in her dark eyes, the delight in all that attention fastened right back on him.

He remembered Ruby yesterday, lying on his bed in the motel room with her head hanging off the end, reading a magazine upside down and laughing at him, complaining about being bored, saying fondly “God, you’re such a loser. Sure, you’re all full of hate and anger. You’re basically still a teenager. Get over it.”

“The others don’t—”

“The others are pretty princesses and self-righteous pricks. This is why you need me as a friend too. They make you do that cute broody face. You and me, we know what it’s like to want to make anger work for us and tear things up. That anger, that’s a strength. It might not be pure, or noble, or kind, but it’s your strength. It’ll do what needs to be done. Make it work for you. Don’t let it work you.”

If Sam took this control—if he took control of hellhounds and used them to kill—

For a moment he saw the face of his dad, shuttered and suspicious and blank. But then all at once it was Coyote, and I learned not to think of myself by any name, and the furious sorrow in his eyes.

The only thing you get to choose is whether you’ll still be you at the end.

This is my strength. All of me. I can save my people my way.

Sam raised his pistol, and fired.

The largest hellhound yelped, and black blood splattered to the ground. Then they charged.

“Go, go, go,” snapped Sam, and Dean growled frustration and fired off two shots that somehow almost managed to hit. They were running, Sam trying to run and cover the other two at the same
time, but the hounds were faster. And they were dogs: they herded, they surrounded.

“Dean, ten o’clock.” Sam yelled, and Dean aimed and fired without breaking stride. The salt rounds send the hound tumbling, but Sam couldn’t wait to see any more because another one barrelled into him from the side. They won’t kill me, he reminded himself, shoving at the snarling panting weight above him, the fetid rotting breath. One massive paw was crushing his chest, and he got a leg up under him and kicked it hard between the belly and the groin. It yiped, and he shot it in the throat as it fell back, even as Jo yelled out Dean’s name.

Sam was on his feet at once, wiping burning black blood from his face. Dean was down on his face, struggling to roll over, while a hellhound yanked him backward by the boot. Sam shot the other one darting in from the side, but Jo was running toward Dean armed with only her knife, and she was between Sam and the hound.

“Jo, get out,” Sam yelled, running too. Then several things happened in slow motion.

Jo tackled the hound she couldn’t see, hitting it knife-first: slicing too high, up over its backbone instead of into its throat. It snarled and sizzled and turned on her as Dean rolled and fired, hitting it in the shoulder. The hound staggered back just as the third hound collided with it and lashed at Jo. Jo screamed, Sam let the full force of his gathered rage fly like a fireball toward the hound which tumbled over and over and exploded what the fuck, and Jo was clutching her hand to her side and reaching for Dean.

Dean and Sam exchanged a quick look. Then Sam fired on another hound, Dean scooped Jo into his arms, Sam snatched up her knife, and they were falling back into the empty echoing bus station as Sam covered their retreat. Then it was a few more shots, the slam of the doors, dragging heavy bins in front of them as they rattled—

“C’mon, Cas, where the hell are you?” Dean roared somewhere behind him.

Dean’s hands were slippery with blood.

Jo was slumped back against a concrete column, and her face was far too pale. Sam had hardly taken two steps toward her when he smelled it. Gut wound, perforated intestines. Death was hanging in the air around her. Sam was almost sure he could see the Reaper, dark in the shadows, waiting.

“Sam,” Jo breathed, lifting one shaking hand, “can you—”

“Got you covered, kids,” came Meg’s cheerful voice from the outside. “Take your time. The angels have got another battle, I’m afraid. And this place is all warded against angels and pagans, so your little pets can’t get in to help you.”

Sam went down on his knees beside Jo, and looked into her watery smile as the hellhounds hurled their bodies against the door.

“You should go,” she said, but her voice quavered. “Find a—a way out.”

“No,” said Dean. “No way.”

Sam slid his hand over Jo’s where it pressed against her side, and leaned forward to rest his forehead against her temple. The anger that had driven him for weeks, for months, maybe years, seemed to have all drained away in that one explosive rush, leaving him cold and hollow and weak. But when he breathed in the smell of her hair, her sweat, her blood, the shuddering of her breath, there was something else there instead: warm, but in this moment far too painful to bear without sobbing.
Was this what affection had used to feel like? Even love?

He could feel the pulse of life inside her, faint and stuttering; and when he flexed his fingers he could feel the bright white spiderweb of damage underneath, the phantom of pain flaring out like a starburst. And for a moment—one wild moment—he almost knew what to do, just where to pull to make this bit or that bit knit together, if only he had the strength, but—no. Magic didn’t work like that. Even if he sealed up the damage inside and out the poisons were already leaking out from her bowels into the blood stream. She was still dying. And it would take a miracle.

His fingers brushed the mark on the inside of Jo’s wrist.

He kissed her forehead, then her mouth, and said, “Not gonna happen, sweetheart. Dean, keep calling Cas.”

Then he stood up, and aimed his gun at the splintering door.

Wasn’t going to hold, so he might as well make sure it broke in just the right places. He hadn’t caught more than a glimpse of the outside of the doors as they’d run in, but he could guess where someone would make the marks, triangulate that against the faint impression in his memory, work out where the main weight of the hellhounds was battering, calculate the stresses in the wood and… there.

(This was Sam’s strength too.)

Once, twice. Three holes in the door. Not at where the angel-warding was, not exactly—he couldn’t be precise enough for that—but at just the point where the impact of the beasts would send up long cracks to shatter it at the moment they entered. Let them use the strength of Hell against themselves.

When it broke, two of them came tumbling in at once, scattered amongst the splinters and beams of the door. Then four more behind them, then another three, then Meg with five more, and Sam stopped counting because he was shooting.

Only then there came another snarl, deeper and more terrible, shuddering through the building like a roar; and just as Sam braced himself for impact the first hound was torn out of the air mid-spring. It spun away across the floor, leaving skid-marks of black blood behind it. Then the massive coywolf, with the size of a carthorse and the jaws of a bear, was turning to face down the other hounds. It roared—then it charged.

Well, thought Sam, still warded against pagans and he gets in anyway.

He took a step back and pulled from his belt a flask that he’d been carrying for some time. “Dean. Make a circle of that around her.”

“What—”

“Trust me. Make it big.”

Turned out putting a giant pagan coywolf demigod in with hellhounds was pretty much exactly a “cat amongst the pigeons” scenario, only with fewer feathers and more oozy black. Coyote was silent after that first battle cry, just tearing and slashing and panting while the hounds yelped and bayed and snarled and whimpered around him. Sam stood between the fight and his people, tracking every hound in case one of them got past. But where Coyote swung his paw, a hellhound vanished into ribbons of black and silver gore, and when he snapped and shook one like a terrier with a rat it sailed across the room and hit the wall like a broken sack. Their bodies shimmered and dissolved into smoke, and the blood seeped away through the floor; and in the middle of the mêlée stood Meg, eyes
flicking here and there. Then she turned and fled.

Without thinking, Sam reached out his hand and clenched it, hard. She froze in place, struggling. Then the last of her beasts was down and with one bound Coyote was on her, slamming her to the ground, massive dripping jaws lowering to bite.

Except he didn’t. He stopped, and closed his mouth, and nudged at the back of her neck. Then—a shimmer of power in the air—and the black demon smoke was twisting up out of the vessel, darting frantically back and forth for one moment before Coyote snapped. And it was gone.

The vessel—the woman, still alive—drew in a gasping breath as Coyote let her up. She stared at him, and fainted. Which was probably the most sensible thing anyone had done all day.

Then he turned, and came toward them.

He met Sam’s eyes. A long look passed between them—and his eyes, his eyes were always the same colour, no matter what shape he was in—and Sam stepped aside.

Dean, cradling Jo against his chest, raised his head to look at Coyote suspiciously. Everything stank of blood and guts and acrid gunpowder, masking anything else, and the great grizzled head was lowering to rest its heavy muzzle against Jo’s chest.

She lifted a shaking hand and clutched at the head, at the fur behind the ear, holding on like it was her only strength. Sam held his breath; and the cool hair-raising rush of healing power swept over him, as Jo gasped and arched under the huge crouching body, Dean’s hand wary in her hair.

Sam drew the lighter from his pocket and flicked it down onto the ground. Around the tableau, a flickering ring of holy fire sprung up.

Dean didn’t react: just held Coyote’s stare, a challenge and a bit of a smirk. Jo was leaning her head back against his shoulder, still gasping and shuddering, still with a hand knotted in long fur that looked copper in the firelight.

Coyote stood up and shook himself, glancing around the circle. His chuckle echoed eerily around the concrete and steel, not quite human. “This is a new desperate low even for you, kid.”

Sam shrugged. “Call it an educated guess.”

Coyote blinked at him, long dark lashes sweeping down over sparkling golden eyes, and his muzzle split into a wide, toothy grin, ears flicking to the sides. “What, you don’t think—hah! Really? That’s—an angel? Me? Have you met me?”

Sam lifted an eyebrow. Coyote looked away.

Dean hefted the half-conscious Jo in his arms and rose to his feet with a bit of a stagger. His mouth was set in a grim line. “Yeah, well,” he said. “Just you follow me out of this circle and we’ll call it our mistake.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” snapped the coywolf. “Nothing can step out of holy fire, that doesn’t prove—Dean, don’t.”

“Not what Cas said.” Dean smirked darkly, then stepped easily over the bright crackling ring and out to stand beside Sam. “Gonna join us, chuckles, or make like a shrimp and hang around on the barbecue?”
The coywolf ignored him—stared at Sam, then at Jo. Then it laughed, a sharp bitter bark of a thing, and changed shape.

Coyote stuck his hands into the pockets of his jeans, and shrugged. Firelight played across his hair and over the gold glitter on his voluminous purple button-down, but his face for once was bare of make-up. The colours in his aura dimmed into drab resignation, but his smirk didn’t falter.

“Go on then.”

“Huh?”

“Let’s hear it. Give me the pleading-eyes bleeding-heart let’s-save-the-world speech. C’mon, it’s time to bring the anti-hero into the fold.”

“Put me down,” Jo gasped, and Dean lowered her feet carefully to the floor. She tested them, leaning on the arm still circling her waist. Then she frowned at Coyote. “Angel, huh?”

He shrugged.

So did she, steely and pissed. “Okay.”

“Wait, what.” Dean stared at her. “Okay?”

“What? We already knew he wasn’t telling us the whole story and that he wasn’t going to pitch in to help. What’s one name more or less? He’s got a foot in every other pantheon.”

“You’re good at this,” said Sam quietly. “You don’t look like an angel. I mean, you’re obviously more than a human or a demon but the shape of you…” He gestured vaguely to the human-shaped body, to the colours in the air around him, to the lack of the vast unseen being that always seemed to crouch behind and inside Castiel and the other angels even when they were riding a vessel.

Coyote’s whiskey-gold eyes locked on him. Then everything shifted around them. Those familiar, aching eyes were the one still centre in a sliding, glowing kaleidoscope of unfolding light, colours, feelings, grace, far more disorienting than the mere shift of his physical body. Larger, larger by far than Castiel, vast shimmering wings and parts of him that Sam couldn’t quite see unfurling around him.

“Well,” said Coyote, and winked. “I am the Trickster. I can trick more senses than just your eyes.”

“You know size isn’t everything,” commented Dean, eyes tracing the faint shadows of the real wings that raced and loomed along the walls.

“You tell your boytoy that,” snapped the angel. And yet, despite its size, despite the sheer awesomeness of its light, it still seemed to Sam to be… tight, contained, still curled in on itself. Because of the holy fire, perhaps; or perhaps not.

Sam sank into the muted glowing flame of those eyes, which was as good as shutting his own, and… felt. It was so strange, not to be angry.

“What’s your name up in cloud city, then?” Jo asked, somewhere in the background; but Sam felt every vibration, every spasm and pang of the answer.

_ I learned centuries ago not to—_

“Gabriel, okay. They call me Gabriel.”
Dean’s startled dismay, Jo’s jolt of thrilled recognition, barely registered next to the sarcastic resignation in front of him.

“Gabriel,” said Dean flatly. “The archangel Gabriel?”

Of course you are, Sam thought, not knowing whether he was heard or not. Who else could you possibly be?

Coyote’s mouth curled bitterly. “Guilty.”

And the resonances of that word sent dark discoloured shivers all the way through him, until his wings curled in and mantled, sharp and tight.

“Okay, and you, what, just thought you’d screw around with us down here then fuck off when the world really needed you?”

Coyote—Gabriel—finally tore his gaze away from Sam. He made finger guns at Dean, and winked. “Knew you’d got an IQ in there somewhere, kid. Everyone’s gotta have a hobby, right? Couple of pets, pass the time until Daddy calls in all the bills.”
Jo crossed her arms, and scowled. “Right. Sure. So we had our very own guardian angel and it was just a hobby. Because you haven’t said that before. Because angels never have ulterior motives they won’t share with the lowly apes.”

Dean took a heavy step forward. “All the other angels are trying to fight back Hell.”

One quick, bright glance. “Are they?”

“And you’re just sitting here. Whose side are you really on, huh?”

Gabriel shrugged, and picked nonchalantly at his nails, as the red and the black swirled fiercer and darker, battering at the cool blue ring hemming them in. “Oh, I’m not on either side. I just like to mock everybody from the bleachers.”

“You wanna see the end of the world?”

“I want it to be over,” he said, cool and deliberate. Then he lifted his head, and his eyes burned. “I have to sit back and watch my own brothers kill each other. Just like I’ve always had to do. Just like I left Heaven to get away from. As it is written, so it has always been, so it was always going to be. You think I give a damn who wins? Michael kills Lucifer, Lucifer kills Michael, the world is burned to a crisp, one of my brothers is dead and the other is destroyed and there’s nothing left behind and it was always going to be like that, so I just want it to be over.”

It wasn’t loud, not exactly, but it shook the air and the ground and the sky overhead, and plaster dust rained down on them, turning the ground to snow, making the fire blaze higher.

Sam laid two fingers against the coywolf tattoo, focussing on the bond that Gabriel himself had made between them. There it was, there was the link: and now, if he took away his fingers and clung to the idea of it, to the name Gabriel, he could hold onto it. Not even a prayer: something more substantial than that.

Sam reached out through that bond to soothe the sharp edges of him, but Gabriel lashed out, sending Sam’s mind cringing back into itself like a snail whose antlers have been touched.

Dean sneered. “What did Daddy say when you ran off and joined the pagans?”

Gabriel narrowed his eyes, and smiled. It wasn’t a friendly smile. “Daddy doesn’t say anything about anything.”

“Dean,” said Sam softly, warning.

The strange thing was, he still didn’t look exactly like an angel. It was as if there were two of him: the angel, and something other inside him. The pagan, the other powers, the other identities and laughter and ferocity.

“So why did you run away?” Jo put in.

“Do you blame him?” said Dean. “I mean, his brothers are heavyweight douchenozzles.”

The full weight of Gabriel’s attention, of his fury, swung around to close in on Dean. “Shut your cakehole,” he hissed. “You don’t know anything about my family. I love my father, my brothers. Love them. But watching them turn on each other? Tear at each other’s throats? I couldn’t bear it! Okay? So I left. And now it’s happening all over again.”

“Then help us stop it,” pleaded Jo.
Gabriel scoffed. “It can’t be stopped. It’s written, kids! It’s in the stars, the books, stone tablets, what the fuck ever. Que sera and so on. Only thing to do is smash some gongs while you’re waiting and fuck around with people’s heads for shits and giggles.”

“Must be nice,” growled Dean. “To be so sure of yourselves.”

“Yeah, well, tell me something, Winchester. When your father gave you an order, didn’t you obey?”

“Don’t you fucking dare say a word about my dad.”

“Of course you did. The perfect son, the perfect soldier. Funny thing, I got a brother like that too. Ever wonder why it was you who got dragged up out of the Pit?”

Sam’s head snapped around to look at Dean.

“The Michael sword,” purred Gabriel, cold and mocking. “Sam, starring as Lucifer! Dean, starring as Michael! The ultimate prize fight It’s your destiny, kids. Two brothers who loved each other and destroyed each other. That’s just the way it’s gotta be.”

“No,” said Dean, flat and shocked. “Not gonna happen.”

“It doesn’t have to be like that,” Sam said, and his voice croaked, rusty as if with disuse. “There has to be some way to—to pull the plug.”

“There isn’t,” said Gabriel flatly. “I’m sorry. But there isn’t.”

He almost seemed to mean it; only…

… only when Gabriel’s colours changed, the colours of the other thing inside him didn’t. Or they only changed in response: anxiety, when he was agitated. Questioning. And—and there was something in him that reached out to it, and soothed it.

Dean’s mouth opened. Then it shut, and his face lit up into solid fury.

Jo stepped in front of him. “You know how many weird, amazing things are out there. Not just in human societies, but things like—I don’t know, that one lizard where they’re all female and they reproduce by gay sex and parthenogenesis. And the mushroom that explodes like an octopus. And octopuses too. Octopodes? Those things. We still haven’t worked out just how they manage to camouflage like that when they’re mostly colour-blind, you know. The kind of stupid cute doco Castiel likes to watch even though he knows everything about everything already. You can’t seriously believe that God wants all that to just be wiped out. Even if he did once—the Father you knew, the Father you remember, can you really believe he’d want that?”

Gabriel stared at her, ancient and strange and unfathomable. And his hand lifted from where it hung beside his thigh, and curled in a weirdly protective gesture in front of his belly. And Sam felt a strange flashback, a dream, his hands over Gabriel’s stomach, and under them…

Is it that obvious?

But all Gabriel said was: “You know, I almost didn’t come here today. Figured I knew exactly what was going to go down. Doesn’t matter if one of you dies or not. Sam or Dean, they’ll just bring back. Jo? You don’t matter, kiddo. Nothing I do matters. I can’t interfere.”

… Sam had done his research on angels. He’d reach the Book of Enoch. He’d traced that story all the way back through the mythologies of so many cultures, through its different appearances—the
race of giants begotten by the descendants of Cain, or as a result of Albina and her sisters by mating with spirits of the air, slaughtered by the prodigal descendent of Aeneas to found a new Britain, slaughtered by Beowulf or—

*The angel Gabriel*...

“Is this written?” he snapped out.

Gabriel’s eyes turned to him, far too slowly, dragged back by the weight of the inevitable.

Sam glanced pointedly down at Gabriel’s belly, then laid a fist over his own.

“Is that part of the story, Gabriel? Part of the Apocalypse?”

Gabriel tightened and sharpened, everything in him backing away, tensing up for denial, so Sam barrelled on: “It’s mine, isn’t it? That last night before you vanished. You didn’t mean for it to happen, and you weren’t going to tell me.”

And all the defiance and snarl in the archangel flickered and died, and there was just this one defeated *person* staring at him with gold in his eyes and nothing to say.

“The hell, Sam?” growled Dean, flicking his eyes back and forth between the two of them. But Jo had got it—Jo had cottoned on, of course she had—and Jo’s hand was hovering over her own lower belly below disbelieving, wondering eyes.

“Lucifer’s vessel,” said Gabriel at last, distant and mocking. Then he shrugged and dropped his eyes, hand still firm against his belly. “You will be devoured. The world will end. Who gives a fuck. Me, I’m not getting involved. Screw this marble, I’m going to check out Pandora.”

“Not getting involved?” Jo arched a mocking, perfect eyebrow. “Good job with that.”

Which was exactly when Castiel turned up.

“Dean,” he said, rough and frantic, hands already reaching to steady Jo. “I came as soon as—”

Then he stopped. And he stared. And everything in him flushed white-pink, reached out with tentative wonder and dismay.

“This just isn’t my day, is it?” said Gabriel to the ceiling, which declined to commit itself one way or the other.

“Hey feathers. You ever hear of punctuality?” said Jo, and tucked her arm through Castiel’s unresponsive arm. “So, Cas, meet Kit. You know, that Trickster we told you about?”

“That,” said Castiel grimly, “is not a Trickster.”

“Yeah,” said Dean, gesturing at the holy fire: “we noticed.”

“Hello. Gabriel.”

“Well hey there, bro.” Gabriel smirked. “How’s that whole divided loyalty thing working for you? Managed to screw everyone over with the best of intentions yet or are you saving that for something special?”

“Yeah, about that,” growled Dean, rounding on Castiel, “the hell, Cas? I’m meant to be Michael’s vessel? That’s why you brought me back, to be an angel condom for your boss?”
“What,” said Castiel, cross then shocked. “No, you’re meant to—”

Then he stopped, and his gaze fell heavily on Gabriel. He blazed orange and white for a moment, then it was tamped down and honed into a burning, narrow focus. “You have been hiding all this time. And you reveal yourself under compulsion and tell us that.”

“Well, this has been fun,” drawled Gabriel. “Gonna let me out now, kids? You know how it is, places to go, dickheads to slaughter.”

“A world to save,” said Castiel pointedly. “Lucifer to defeat.”

“Been there, done that. Don’t want to be greedy and keep you kids from having all the brother-slaughtering fun this time around, do I?”

Sam took a heavy step forward. “Was it really you,” he said, “who led the slaughter of the nephilim?”

Castiel, who seemed about to say something else, closed his mouth with a snap and stared at Sam with narrow-eyed speculation. Then his gaze swung back to Gabriel, and Sam felt the moment when he realised.

“What, that’s the first thing you worry about, not the number of its legs?” Gabriel clicked his tongue, but though his hand stayed at his side the wings shrank in and curled protectively around his body. “You need to spend more time with the classics.”

“Gabriel,” said Castiel, more softly, with centuries of pleading behind it, and Sam felt his words and his grace reaching inaudibly out toward the archangel, and felt Gabriel close himself against them.

“Not anymore,” said Gabriel. “Sorry, little bro.”

“What,” said Dean, “you want us to be angel condoms to your Daddy’s favourites?”

“How many conversations am I meant to be having at once? This script needs some serious editing. Kills the dramatic tension. Yes, and yes, and it was always going to be you two. Why d’you think I took so much interest in you, right from the start? One of you has to kill the other. Cain and Abel, Michael and Lucifer, Sam and Dean. That’s just the way it’s gonna be.”

“Ohay,” said Dean tightly, “we’re out of here. C’mon, Cas.”

He and Castiel shared one of those long, lingering looks, almost tender, like they’d been doing more and more often lately. Then Castiel sighed, and gestured. Half a door slid out from a pile of debris and slapped down over the flames, breaking the circle. Gabriel took one step forward, hesitating.

“And for the record,” Dean added, “this isn’t about some prize fight between your brothers, or some destiny that can’t be stopped. This is about you being too afraid to stand up to your family.”

Gabriel glared. Dean turned and stalked out, self-righteous and impervious, followed by Castiel who gathered up Meg’s abandoned vessel with one final disappointed glance at Gabriel. Jo grimaced—looked at Sam, looked at Gabriel, and shrugged.

“You really—?” She gestured at her belly.

He winked, but the smirk on his face was sharp and hard. “Jealous, baby girl?”

“Kinda. Which is dumb. I mean, all I’d have to do is, you know, go off the pill.”
“Also not get your insides ripped up,” he said, and jabbed a finger at her. “Don’t do that again. I put a lot of work into those ovaries.”

She rolled her eyes. “Miss you too. Dick.”

Whatever snappy retort Gabriel had been about to make quivered and died, and something painful spiked through his aura. His eyes slid to Sam for a moment, and Sam wasn’t sure whether the sudden surge of loneliness that hit him was his own or the angel’s. Then all the *angel* parts were pulled abruptly inwards, shoved viciously back under their wraps, and the air shimmered, and Coyote was gone.

Jo whirled on Sam. “You,” she hissed, almost laughing, and punched him in the chest. “You *knocked up an archangel* in the middle of the Apocalypse!”

“Ow,” said Sam, still staring at where Gabriel had been. “I. Yeah. Looks like.”

“That’s some epic shit right there, Sam.”

“Yeah,” he said again. Then he looked down at her, and felt something warm begin to grow inside him. “So. Screw destiny, right?”

“I’m going to be an auntie.” she snickered, wide-eyed. “To a half-angel. Well, that’s worth surviving for, anyway.”

*Auntie* was a much easier word than *father*.

Sam ignored that word. It wasn’t relevant yet, anyway. If the world was destroyed and a pregnant archangel ran away to another planet, you weren’t a father. And you didn’t have to deal with terrifying potential nephilim problems. Other things came first.

… Sam wasn’t a coward. He was just good at prioritising.
It was only a couple of hours’ drive back to Stanford, but Dean was fuming and needed to yell at Castiel, so he and Jo decided to go on with the original plan: meet up with Jess in a nearby town, take off the next day for another job. Sam, though, got Castiel to zap him back home. He wanted to tell Charlie in person.

He didn’t mention the… the *nephilim* thing. But even without that there was enough matter to go over and over for a couple of hours: sitting up together in Charlie’s bed with pizza and hot chocolates with chilli and far too many cushions, while Charlie frowned and pondered and analysed and had moments of delighted excitement and moments of annoyance, and generally reconsidered all her memories of Kit for the past decade, and Sam let her thinking mask and excuse his own.

“You know, I was furious at him,” said Sam eventually, in a lull. “One of the most powerful and canny beings we know and he wouldn’t step in to help. And now—he makes Castiel feel like a candle next to a bonfire—and it’s more *his* business than anybody’s, and… I’m not angry anymore. It’s weird.”

Charlie tucked herself under his arm and yawned. “Well, good. You were kind of a dick about it, no offence.”

Sam rolled his eyes at the top of her head. Then he kissed it, because if there was one thing he loved about Charlie it was how easy she was to talk to. Even when she was busy poking apart the way he looked at the world. “I still don’t get how you had him hanging around for years and never tried to activate him. Not just for you—all those social justice things you do by yourself and so on, and you never tried to say to him, ‘please get in on this’?”

Charlie wrinkled her nose. “It always felt kind of creepy. Like turning him into a *thing*. Though he is a big fan of orang utans. I’m still not sure he didn’t make Terry Pratchett invent the Librarian just to get more people in on saving them.”

“Ask someone to step up and take responsibility for the world he’s a part of isn’t the same thing as turning them into a weapon,” Sam objected half-heartedly.

“See, I thought about this,” said Charlie, patting his knee sleepily. “The way I figure it, after Mom and Dad died I grew up wanting no favours from anybody, right? He was my sanity. So he had to be a *person*, not a force. And I couldn’t take advantage of that, or I wasn’t a person either. And you—”

“Our childhoods weren’t that different,” Sam put in, for the sake of the argument, because though he didn’t know exactly where she was going with this the shape of it was a familiar one and he was happy, here and now wrapped in an old fuzzy orange blanket, to be her foil. “Trying to fit ourselves into what all the other kids thought was ‘normal’? I know Dean scrounged for a hell of a lot more than he ever let me notice at the time, but I was the one who was always playing nice with the mums of other kids at the schools we went to, being the poor sad new kid, getting invites over to their house and scoring things like old text books and clothes from their mums. We had to look out for ourselves.”

“One big difference? You were *guys*. Nah-uh, don’t look at me like that. You boys had a mission. You say you were on the edge, but you grew up like that and you learned that you were the centre and everyone else was on the edge. I mean, you can say what you like about your dad now but you got that from him at least. The two of you, nothing’s more important than what you decide is the job. And I’m not saying that’s all bad. I’m saying that growing up as a girl, as a woman? You don’t make
yourself the centre of the world. You learn to blend in. You adapt you to the people around you, not the other way around. Or at least you look like you do. You keep the part that’s you close and careful. No way was I going to be in debt to any other human, let alone something as big as that. See?” Charlie waved a vague hand. “You let other people be their own thing and you make your own you that fits up against it, more or less. You don’t bend everybody to be part of your story. That’s the difference.”

Sam was quiet for a while, stroking her hair in an absent kind of way, staring at the lines of the plaster roses around the light fitting on the ceiling.

“I think,” he said at last, “it’s sort of like he’s more of a person now. With a life and a history. Only at the same time he’s so much more than a person that... I can’t really be angry at him. I don’t know what I feel. I think I’m just kinda stunned right now. It’s like he’s got so much more going on than I ever took into account and—I mean, who makes demands of an archangel?”

“Mmm.” Charlie slipped her mug onto the bedside table and burrowed down against his chest, because she never used real pillows if she could possibly get a person to do the job. “I’m guessing Dean.”

Sam snorted. “If Dean came face to face with God he’d yell at him for everything that’s wrong with the world. Probably guilt him into doing something about it, too.”

“So if Lucifer does get out,” Charlie murmured dozily, “all we need to do is set Dean on him.”

“Castiel’s disappointed face is kind of a deadly weapon too.” Sam obediently settled down into the bed and arranged himself for pillowhood.

“I missed you,” he said quietly.

“That’s because you’ve been absent, you dork,” she mumbled. “Now shut up and go to sleep.”

Charlie had barely been asleep five minutes before Castiel himself showed up, and stood awkward and agitated at the side of the bed.

“Sam,” he said, then stopped and scowled at nothing.

Sam put a finger to his lips, and pointed at Charlie. Castiel sighed loudly like the human need for sleep was an inconvenience created specifically to bother him, and nodded.

Sam held out his free arm—then, when Castiel moved to sit down on the bed as he was, glared at the coat and shoes until those at least were removed and set carefully on the floor by the foot of the bed.

Castiel tilted his head wordlessly against Sam’s shoulder, turning his face in for the greeting kiss that was now becoming almost usual; but this time, Sam lifted his free hand and rested the backs of his fingers on Castiel’s cheek, a light guide as he pressed in a bit deeper, a bit more careful.

Castiel sighed, and opened deep blue eyes that had fallen half closed.

“Dean okay?” Sam murmured.

One of Castiel’s eyebrows lifted slightly. “So he claims,” he said—a low, frustrated rumble.

“Yeah.” Sam leaned in for another kiss, because he was thrumming with frustration and Castiel’s body was warm against his and his power thrummed hot and welcoming, and his mouth was inquisitive and yielding. Jimmy had, apparently, vetoed anything more than kisses, and it would have
been creepy with him there in any case; but this was delicious. Are you okay?

Castiel drew back far enough to give Sam a stern, quizzical look; but he answered like for like, a soft silvery thread vibrating through Sam’s thoughts like a song. Dean told me everything Gabriel said. I am… perplexed.

Dean works through things by yelling. It doesn’t really mean he’s angry at you.

Perhaps not. But I am.

Yeah, said Sam, watching him, and he’s also pretty crap at letting other people have a chance to work things through by being angry.

I want to be quite sure, Sam: what exactly did Gabriel say about the Michael sword? Did he say that Dean could be Michael’s destined vessel, or that he is?

The last, said Sam. He said there was no way out of it: Lucifer and Michael take our bodies and one of them kills the other. Tell me you didn’t know about this?

Castiel’s glower darkened, and the dark red anger strengthened around him. But it was fractured and agitated, darting from thought to thought.

I knew— he said, frustrated, then broke off. I knew that… I don’t know quite what I knew. Not anymore. What I knew and what I was told are suddenly two very different things, when they never were before. Sam—

Just then something moved on the floor—a little scratching, a little whimpering noise—and Castiel started with a little flash of something that looked like guilt.

He slipped from the bed and went over to his coat, bent down, and came back with something small and furry cradled reverently against his chest. As he settled back in beside Sam, the tiny creature turned and nuzzled in against him, questing with its nose up toward his throat, then butting into the crevice between arm and chest.

“Is that—Cas.” Sam covered his mouth to keep from waking Charlie with incredulous laughter. Is that a baby sea otter?

The aquarium where he lived was destroyed in today’s battle, said Castiel—a little defensively, Sam thought. He is an orphan now.

Sam reached out to touch. The fuzzy, quizzical face turned toward him and sniffed at his fingers. Angels, man. Doing really well on the not getting involved.

Castiel let the little thing wriggle into Sam’s arms, and produced a bottle of milk from somewhere. I’d say wiping out half a city block to prevent the summoning of the Beast qualifies as getting involved, Sam, he said, rather tartly.

Not the same thing, Cas. Sam took the bottle and offered it to the baby, who had obviously been fed like this before. It grabbed at the top with both little hands and latched on immediately to suckle.

Definitely adorable. Charlie and Jess would go into raptures.

I am a warrior, came the faint sound of Castiel’s song, muttering, as if to himself. To fight against my Father’s enemies is a joy. This is his plan for the world: the defeat of the darkness through our hands. The colours around him were dim, pulsing slowly, so many different colours threaded so finely in with each other that it was difficult to tell one from the other. It is a plan so vast and
magnificent that none of us can comprehend it, or know why individuals must suffer, angel or human, or... any creature. So I told Dean. And yet we know that our Father cares for the fall of every sparrow. But there are consequences. There are costs. Dean is angry, always angry, and his anger is a brighter beacon than Michael’s grace. Surely the only thing worth fighting for is an end to fighting. It shouldn’t be a joy in itself. It ought not.

Then he picked up Sam’s hand and turned it over between his, cradling it with a frown as if it were something precious and inexplicable.

Sam swallowed, throat suddenly dry; and Castiel trailed a thumb down the centre of his palm, following one of the lines.

“You are not what I expected, Sam,” he said aloud. “We were told to expect an abomination in you.”

It was so matter-of-fact that it took a moment for the words to register; and when they did, Sam couldn’t find the breath to reply.

Castiel glanced up at him, one sharp flash of blue under a squinting frown. You flinched. Was I being insensitive again?

Sam huffed, and curled his fingers around Castiel’s. Little bit.

“I meant,” Castiel amended, a little impatient, “that by this time we expected to see the face of a demon half-formed inside you, and your soul corrupted with demon blood. But instead you shine in our sight, as brightly as your brother.” His thumb shifted, slid down to press lightly over the pulse point on Sam’s wrist. “It’s Gabriel’s blood inside you, isn’t it? That is why you feel like something more than human, but without the taint and twist of Hell. That is why you can talk to me and hear my voice.”

“I didn’t know he was an angel when he gave it to me.”

“That is irrelevant. Sam. Here is what I believed that I knew.” Castiel turned half toward him, earnest and grouchy and with just the beginnings of hope creeping in around the sheer determination of his aspect. You were to be the King of Hell: that is, you would lead Lucifer’s armies under Azazel’s guidance. You were also to be instrumental in the attempt to release him, and in the event of Lucifer rising, you would be his vessel. Of course, we would defeat him before—

Sam exhaled. “Thanks, Cas. Love the sugar coating.”

Castiel frowned at him. “Sam, it has not come to pass.”

“Because of Gabriel.”

“Only in the most superficial sense.” Dean, on the other hand—Dean is the Righteous Man who unwittingly broke the first seal in Hell—

—he what?

Ah. You didn’t know? Never mind, that part is irrelevant now. And I believe you would say that it is his story to tell. What matters is that by playing that part he became, or rather showed himself to be, the foretold Righteous Man who must be raised from Hell to play his part in the coming events and to lead the earthly battle against the minions of the Devil. Ultimately, he would be the one to defeat Lilith and thereby prevent the rising of Lucifer.

Of course, it would be Dean. The good son, as Gabriel had said.
There was an old, ingrained bitterness there; but for some reason the sting of it just didn’t come, not under Castiel’s gentle, scrutinising gaze.

“Hm,” said Sam, mostly to the otter. *And the Michael sword?*

*Is the name given to the foretold vessel of Michael for the end of the world. The point is, Sam, that we were told it was inevitable that Lucifer’s rise would be prevented this time. Therefore the Michael sword ought not to have been born. That he be not only here in the centre of things but also the Righteous Man and the brother of Lucifer’s vessel suggests that—*

“Gabriel’s right,” said Sam heavily. “That this is it. We’re destined to fail.”

Castiel drummed his fingers on his knee. *Yes. And… no. More than that. It means that my superiors have either been mistaken or they have been deliberately misleading us to some end. And it means…*

Yes?

*That a difference of opinion is possible.*

And you had to know something about angels to realise why that was so monumental a sentence to pronounce.

Sam studied him for a minute, with eyes and with other senses. Castiel was frowning at the far wall, or at something much nearer or much farther away; and Sam reached out his free hand, and ran it up the back of Castiel’s neck, tangling in the dark hair above the collar of his shirt.

*Cas,* he said—distracting him from his thoughts, but not demanding them. *Did you tell them upstairs about Gabriel?*

No. *His continued existence would sow discord, even if he were to return—and his lack of desire to do so would be unfathomable to most angels.* The replies were crisp and considered, but then Castiel added, more slowly, settling back against the headboard, *His present condition, of course, would be… open to misconstruction.*

Sam smiled a bit, dumbly, letting the otter settle into his lap and steadying the bottle with one hand so he could stroke it with the other. *Pretty sure I’m misconstruing it a different way every minute. How’s it possible, Cas?*

*I don’t know. That is, I know several ways it could be possible, but the Gabriel I saw in there had not been only an angel for a very long time. I hardly know what he is by now, or what he is capable of.*

*I kind of figured the last nephilim—or the race of giants, or whatever version of the myth you go with—they usually say that they were begotten by angels, or devils, or spirits, or monsters, on human women. Not by human men on the… other things.* Castiel was quiet, thoughtful; and Sam added after a moment, *Though I guess that’s the sort of rationalisation after the fact you’d get either way.*

*It is not in his body that the child is growing,* came Castiel’s distant reply.

The otter stopped sucking, looked around, and made a little chirruping kind of whimper. Sam hushed it on instinct, rubbing at its ears and back until it nuzzled in against his hand for comfort.

“It felt—” Sam stopped, feeling awkward, and the baby in his lap let go of the teat and turned to nibble and suck on one of his fingers instead. “Sorry, little guy. No, look, over here.” Its bones, its fur, were so delicate under his clumsy touch. It would be so easy to destroy this tiny vulnerable
trusting thing, before he even knew he’d done it.

Last time we were together, before Dean died. It felt like I touched his soul. Or whatever angels have.

Soul is as good a word as any. Though it is not the same as the soul of a human. Castiel let Sam’s hand go; and his fingers, which Sam had seen wield a blade with deadly efficiency or burn a demon from its host, curled tenderly over the hunched back of the tiny animal. It is possible, I think, that the spark of life could come from such a moment of contact. Life is a mystery that lies in the gift of our Father. The division and reproduction of cells to produce a body is a relatively minor matter beside that: once that possibility for another life was cradled in his grace, there is no reason why a body could not begin to form around it from the genetic material of your semen and his vessel.

“This is surreal,” Sam commented aloud, about his life in general. Even if he didn’t hurt the baby, it would be so easy to do the wrong thing by it. Just by not knowing what to do. By not being there at the right moment. By—

He looked down at the inquisitive bundle of fur. His own hands looked massive by comparison, so powerful they could damage it or end it with one wrong movement.

He thought about strength, and the wrong kinds of strength.

But it wasn’t really about strength, was it? Anybody could find a way to hurt somebody else if they really wanted to. Anybody could screw up, and go down the wrong path. And Sam had family, people who loved him and whose judgement he trusted. If he listened to them when they warned him he was going wrong…

If he had the strength to turn back.

Maybe strength could be a virtue, not a danger. Maybe he could use it to fight.

Sam ran his thumb only the tiny throat and rubbed the otter gently under the chin. It squeaked disapproval and squirmed its way back to the bottle.

“Don’t be impatient,” chided Castiel in a low rumble, and cupped his hand over the little hunched back. The baby broke off—turned away from the nipple to nuzzle in against Castiel’s hand and do a happy little pleading wriggle, which made Castiel’s colours flush warm and wondering.

Sam nudged him in the side, and grinned. “Wait until Dean sees you being cute with a baby otter.”

Castiel made a thoughtful noise, and turned rosier. Then he lifted his hand and touched Sam’s chin gently, tilting his head until their mouths met again. Not sexual, not quite, but definitely sensual. Sam had a feeling that Castiel might yet have the makings of a hedonist, until all that stiffness and uncertainty.

Nothing about this has gone as expected, since I first obeyed the summons to go to you in the woods, he said; and though his touch was soft there was a fierce gladness behind his mental voice that burned brightly in the air around him. This was all written out long ago, so the archangels tell us as if with our Father’s voice, but nothing has followed the script. Not you and your brother, not my expectations of humanity. And not Gabriel.

Sam breathed, and rested his forehead against the angel’s. So it can be changed.

If we were to learn from you, from his most beloved creations—Castiel pulled back, eyes lowered, the thread of his voice faltering, as if the conclusion of that thought were too big to voice.
I must find Anna, he said. I must... I must look into this further. It is imperative that we reconsider. Or rather, that we consider at all. Then, rather sheepishly, “Will you take care of Fitzwilliam? I will fetch enough of his formula to—”

“You named him Fitzwilliam,” said Sam, the laughter bubbling up inside him like butterflies in his stomach. “Of course you did. Cas. I. What if I can’t look after him?”

Castiel didn’t look at him, but purple-grey tendrils slipped into Sam’s consciousness, like a hand laid reassuringly on an arm. There are many of you. You shore each other up. And, unspoken but implicit: I have more faith in you to raise a child than in any other family I know.

Which logically wasn’t much of a recommendation, given how many families Castiel had to compare them to. But. Still...

“Yeah, Cas, he can stay. Fidget’ll be ecstatic to have something tiny and fluffy to fuss over.”

Castiel smiled one of his rare smiles, eyes crinkling up at the corners though his mouth hardly moved, and his body melted in against Sam’s as he took one last kiss. Then he was gone; and Sam leaned back in the bed with a baby otter suckling at a bottle on his chest, and his head spinning, and Charlie snoring faintly against his shoulder.
The trouble was…

With Meg gone, Ruby’s information was useless. Demons weren’t organised anymore. They scattered, fought their own vicious petty scraps, broke all their fragile ties with each other because Lilith was no general, and yet—seals were still falling.

And then angels started dying.
For the first time in her life, Claire Novak was sent to the principal’s office for fighting. She was terrified; but Miss Wyndham seemed more worried than cross.

Claire refused to be the kind of kid that the teachers worried about.

When she got home, Claire locked herself in her room. She put on her best dress (like going to church) and wondered for a moment whether she should borrow some of her mum’s makeup. But she hadn’t got the hang of the eyeliner yet, and she always ended up looking like a clown.

And he probably wouldn’t care.

If it’s an emergency, Jess had said last time she’d rung, and Castiel can’t help, pray to Gabriel. He can’t resist an emergency.

Claire had a feeling that this wasn’t exactly the kind of emergency Jess had meant, but she stomped on it angrily.

She knelt down by her bed, with her hands clasped like a good little girl, and prayed.

**Gabriel, who… Archangel Gabriel, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy… um. Please, sir. Castiel said we’d all be okay. He promised Dad! But Mom’s not okay. She’s been sent home from work twice this week and she keeps staring into space like she’s forgotten I’m there and it’s really scary. Also I have to catch the bus home from school like one of the losers because Dad isn’t there to pick me up and Bobbie and Margot said today it’s because my parents are breaking up and it’s not fair! And—**

“You know,” said somebody behind her, “I haven’t actually been in Heaven for a good long while.”

Claire opened her eyes, and stared at her clasped hands.

“Um,” she said, “why not? It’s Heaven.”

“Playing the harp and singing *glory glory glory* gets old after a few billion years, y’know?”

“Oh,” she said, and considered this. It made sense. “But I don’t think you’re supposed to say that.”

“Things are more interesting down here, kitten,” he said. “You got people, for a start. Gonna stare at your bedspread all day?”

She scowled, and turned around, and plonked her butt down on her bed to stare at him.

He was sitting on her chest of drawers, right next to the fuzzy pink cat her dad had given her last year as a joke. Dad’s jokes were always a bit dumb, but she liked them anyway. The angel was smaller than she’d expected, and more like a real person. He looked… kind of warm, like he was laughing at you but you could trust him, and he wasn’t looking at her like she was a kid.

“What does hallowed mean?” she asked.

He cocked his head. “Old word for holy. Blessed, praised, all that. Same word as in ‘halloween’—they used to use ‘hallows’ to mean ‘saints’—the holy ones, you know—and the first of November is All Hallows Day—the day of all saints at once—so the day before is the *eve* of All Hallows. Hallow-e’n, see.”

“But if it’s holy, why is it all about ghosts and vampires?” she demanded.

“Because people come up with the weirdest shit.” A grin spread across his face. It seemed to make
the room sparkle, and made her want to laugh with him. “Said I love it down here, didn’t I? What was it you’re after, kitten?”

Her scowl came back, but it felt wrong to glare at an angel, so she looked down at her hands. “I thought you’re supposed to know. Give us what we need, not what we ask for. Work in mysterious ways.”

“Maybe I’m just a very polite angel,” he said, “and think it’s kinda rude to just steal the answers out of people’s heads when we could just have a friendly chat instead.”

Claire Novak wasn’t dumb. She hated math because the numbers didn’t make any sense and seemed to move around on the page, and her spelling was really bad because the letters did the same thing, but she wasn’t dumb. She’d worked out the connection between the Gabriel Charlie and Jess talked about like an absent friend and the Kit they’d talked about before. And Charlie had told her once, when she’d been babysitting—she’d said how there were a lot of other things in the world beside angels and demons but that she didn’t have to worry because a lot of them were friendly. Like their friend Kit, who had special powers and sometimes gave people gifts in exchange for offerings, like something out of a fairy tale.

Even at the time Claire had figured out that that was the fairy-tale version, the don’t-scare-the-kid way of telling the story. And even in fairy tales that sort of bargain had a way of working out badly. But he was an angel too. How bad could it be?

“I want my dad back,” she said, and her voice felt very small in her mouth.

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands dangling down between them. “You know your Dad’s busy. You know Heaven needs him.”

“I don’t care.” She lifted her chin, and found to her distress that she was shaking a bit, and her eyes felt prickly and hot. “I want Dad. He’s ours, not theirs. It’s not fair. I’ll do anything. I don’t care what it takes.”

“Never say that, Claire Novak,” he said, serious for the first time. “You never know who’ll take you up on it.”

He held out his hand in a command that she understood, but her knees wobbled when she stood up. He waited, eyes steady and hand held out; and she took the two steps across the room to him, and his hand closed around her left wrist.

He drew her close, and whispered in her ear. Then she bit her lip, and nodded, and tried to hold his gaze but his eyes made her feel like she was drowning.

“I accept,” he murmured, and his lips felt hot on the inside of her wrist.

Ruby swung her heels against the edge of the garden wall, and popped a fry in her mouth, and
“Have you tried turning it off and on again?”

“I will throw this charcoal briquette in your perfect face,” puffed Charlie, and Ruby threw back her head in the spring sunlight and laughed. For a moment her aura flickered, thickened from the strange unreality that seemed to hover over it nowadays until it pulsed warm and deep and real. Those moments were happening more and more lately, and they were what turned her into a friend, not a tool. Those moments, like Castiel’s rare smile, that made Sam want to reach out and revel in it, want to do anything to make it come back, make her touchable and real.

He shook his head at her, grinning a bit himself as he shoved the old barbecue into place. “The girl with demon strength isn’t going to help us here?”

She pointed a fry at him. “Manly muscles. Glistening sweat. Shirtless.” The fry disappeared into her mouth. “If I’m a very good girl same might go for Charlie.”

Charlie crouched down and squinted at the connections for the gas pipes. “You just want to see my Princess Leia tattoo again. Hand me that spanner?”

“Hey,” said Dean from the back door. His hair was ruffled and his face had pillow creases on it, and he was squinting vaguely against the afternoon light. “Any of you guys seen Cas? What’s she doing here? Thought we warded this place against her lot after the Brady thing.”

“Only the house, Dean,” said Sam in his usual long-suffering brother tones.

“Which I find racist, by the way,” put in Ruby. “Lost your prom date, sweetheart?”

“Oh hey, this bit’s all corroded,” said Charlie, sounding pleased, and wrestled the old squishy pipe thing loose. (So sue him, Sam didn’t need to know the names of things to know how to fix them.)

Dean ignored Ruby, which was the first sign that he was actually worried. “Dude. He turned up in my dreams last night when I stopped for a few minutes of shut-eye off the highway. Went all cryptic doom on me. Said it was important and he’d meet me back here where it was safer.

“Huh.” Sam frowned. “Is it just me or has he been kind of cagey lately.”

“Twice last week he didn’t turn up when I called him,” grumbled Dean.

Sam frowned. “So he’s AWOL. Some big angel battle? Things haven’t been going great lately, he’s probably—”

“Yeah,” snapped Dean, “and angels have been killed. That shouldn’t be possible, right? He sounded like he was right in the middle of something, what if—”

He broke off, and shoved a hand through his hair.

For a moment, the fry in Ruby’s hand seemed to have the bright artificial colouring of something candy-like. Then she popped it into her mouth, and snorted.

“Well, if it’s going to be all angel angst here, I’m going somewhere fun.”

She vanished. Dean glared at Sam.
“Why do we have her around?”

Castiel didn’t turn up that day. But Anna turned up, a few hours later—though they hadn’t seen her since she’d got herself all graced up—and interrogated Dean thoroughly about what Castiel had said, how he’d looked.

Sam noticed that, though neither he nor Dean had mentioned dream, only Cas said, Anna used the word dream. Twice.

“He’s been a bit closed-off lately,” said Sam, testing.

Charlie went for the less subtle approach. “Did you know he was looking into the angel deaths?” she asked Anna, leaning her elbows on the table. “I mean, that’s gotta get a guy down, right? Death’s hard enough for humans, but we always know it’s going to happen. It has to be worse for people who are immortal. Or—‘indefinitely longeval’.”

Sam raised an eyebrow at her. She snorted. “Don’t tell me you haven’t read the Silmarillion. Or at least the Appendices.”

Dean cleared his throat pointedly, and glared at them both.

“That’s not all he’s been looking into,” said Anna quietly. All four of them looked at her; and she folded her long pale fingers around her coffee mug to hold it steady, as Jess re-poured.

“Don’t you see? The only thing—almost the only thing—that can kill an angel is another angel. An angel’s sword.”

Dean sat back, and his face went stony. “Angels killing angels.”

“It’s more than that,” said Anna. She was silent for a moment—looked around at them, hesitated, then took the plunge. “I think—Angels killing angels and breaking seals. There aren’t enough demons to do the job anymore. So angels are taking over.”

“Hold on, hold on.” Dean’s voice rang out, clipped and furious. “Heaven’s trying to pop Lucifer out of the box?”

Jess clicked her tongue. “Well, that’s just unpleasant,” she said decidedly.

Sam stared at the ceiling, thinking. “Not every angel. Cas was trying to work out what was up, and most of the angels we’ve met—they haven’t been lying about trying to save seals. They really believed. So whoever’s up to this… they haven’t been telling most of the angels on the ground. Either it’s a small rebel faction of… someone high up wants Michael and Lucifer to go head to head.”

There was no contradiction, only silence.
Dean looked at Anna with a question in his eyes.

“I don’t know,” she said, and bit her lip. “But I suspect—”

Ruby leaned in over the open sill of the dining room, framed by the dark wood and the wisteria that was all hazed over with new purple and green—taking Sam by surprise, since he hadn’t felt her approaching.

“Hey gang,” she drawled, and winked at Anna as if she always dropped in when angels were about. Anna looked at her then away, and her face twisted slowly into something disgusted and unsure. “Sooo, guess what. Sixty-five down and there’s only one seal left.”

“Already?” exclaimed Charlie, grabbing for her laptop. “No, wait, that can’t be right, I was—shit. And Iowa—wow. Guys, Iowa’s basically… all off the grid. And—what happened in New Mexico?” And she was gone, fingers flying, clicking and frowning and gasping her way through the internet faster than her mouth could keep up.

Just for a moment, Sam thought he felt a flicker of communication between Ruby and Anna, something below the level of human consciousness; but they didn’t look at each other again.

“All the seals but one,” said Dean. “Impressive score. That’s right up there with the Washington generals.”

“It couldn’t have happened so fast,” said Anna, with conviction, “not unless an archangel ordered it. Raphael, or Michael, or both: they want the seals to fall. They want Lucifer back. Or they just want the Apocalypse to happen.”

“Yeah, I’m going to have to go with the angel on this one,” said Ruby. “All your guys who’ve died? They’re the ones most likely to ask questions, or to think for themselves.”

… And how would she know that, Sam wondered, but he didn’t get a chance to ask before Jess was saying, “But why? Why would anybody want to bring the Apocalypse?”

Ruby shrugged. “One side wins, they take over the world. Heaven on earth. Or hell. Judgement day.”

“We always knew it would happen in the end,” said Anna. “I suppose when you’re thinking about it from an angel point of view—even some humans—it sounds glorious.”

“And where’s God in all this?” Dean growled.

“No ordinary angel can even begin to comprehend him, or ever stood in his presence. It was always just the archangels, for us.”

“Daddy doesn’t say anything about anything,” said Sam distantly. “That’s what Gabriel said. And Gabriel’s been away from Heaven for centuries anyway. Who knows how long he waited after his dad stopped picking up the phone to take off?”

“God has left the building,” drawled Ruby, mouth mocking, eyes cold.

So then. Hell wasn’t the only enemy. Heaven was against them as well. This whole world was just their chosen battlefield.

How could anybody find arguments that would work against that?
Charlie glanced from Anna to Dean, but her eyes slipped away from him almost at once. “And that means Cas—”

*Castiel was in the way,* Sam thought, and stomped down on that at once.

Anna shook her head. “He isn’t dead. Every angel feels it when an angel dies. So—”

Sam met Dean’s eyes, hard and resigned. Dean lifted an eyebrow, smirked with all the cockiness that last chances and final showdowns always brought out in him, and tipped his chair back to rest his elbow on the window sill.

“So, one seal to go. Wouldn’t know what it is, would you, sweetheart?”

“Duh.” Ruby patted his head condescendingly. “It’s only the final seal. Lilith’s breaking it tonight, by the look of things. Has to be her. St. Mary’s Convent, Ilchester, Maryland. That’s where the Cage is going to open.”

Charlie, who’d been biting her lip, immediately hit the internet, like she was relieved to have something positive to do.

Jess went pale. “Tonight?”

“So that’s where we’re going to be,” said Sam at once.


Ruby smirked. “What’s black and white and red all over?”

“Not funny,” said Sam.

“Come on, it’s a little funny.”

Charlie pulled a face and kept reading. “The priest said it wasn’t his fault: he said a demon made him so it so that he could talk to Satan. And—oh.”

She looked up at Sam. “He remembered the demon’s name. Uh. Azazel.”

Sam exhaled. “Great. Well, at least he’s out of the picture now. So we just get there first and gank Lilith before she can do the summoning, right?”

“Yeah, and we’re down one angel,” Dean snapped.

“Yes.” Anna rose, light and elegant. “I’m going to find him.”

“Nuh-uh.” Ruby jabbed a finger toward Jess, then Sam. “You, and you, come with me. The rest of you should hang around here and do your Scooby planning.”

And the oddest thing about it was that, though Anna looked properly affronted at the idea of taking orders from a demon, at the same time she straightened her back like a soldier going in for battle. And every colour inside her was warm and spinning, yearning towards Ruby like a song.

“Us?” said Jess. “Why?”

“Clue-hunting.” Ruby grinned. “Guess who I found?”
Sam had wondered, a bit, about how much of Jimmy Novak was in Castiel. Or at least, in what Sam thought of as ‘Castiel’. Even when you could glimpse the real angel behind the vessel it was hard not to think of him with blue eyes, with an irritable squint, with the chapped lips and messy hair, with those gentle careful hands that mysteriously matched the handprint on Dean’s shoulder (even though it had appeared before Castiel had slipped into Jimmy).

It turned out that Jimmy looked nothing like Castiel. Apart from the trifling fact of being technically identical in every feature.

This would have been more disconcerting if Sam hadn’t been already intimately acquainted with the way a corpse looks so different from a living person—the difference, that is, that habit and muscle memory and sheer personality make in appearance. After all, what you see is what is left after your brain filters all its first impressions. And Jimmy was… brisk, and precise, and used his mouth and eyes like a father, and used his hands with certainty in everyday things, and spoke with what wasn’t technically a different accent to Castiel’s but which came across as one because it meant something different about his life and experiences, and—

“All I remember is—a flash of light,” said Jimmy, drawing the razor carefully around the curve of his chin. “I woke up and I was just, you know, like—me, again.”

He wasn’t Castiel.

“That’s all you remember?” asked Sam carefully, leaning in the door of the bathroom.

Jimmy’s eyes flicked sideways to where his daughter was sitting on the edge of the bath—silent, huddled, immovable. Her eyes were fixed on him like she thought he’d vanish if she blinked.

“Having an angel inside you,” he said, lightly, as if it didn’t matter, “is like—como estar encadenado ad un cometa.”

Claire gave him an unimpressed look, without raising her head from her arms.

“Like being—” Sam began, then stopped. Encadenado wasn’t a word he’d come across much in Spanish, but he worked with Latin-derived languages enough to figure out the term for tied when he heard it.

“By the look of the warehouse where we found you,” he said, “it was angel on angel.”

Jimmy’s eyes met his in the mirror, and he nodded, minutely.

Claire unwound herself abruptly from her huddle and threw herself at her father, arms curling around his waist, knocking him off balance. Jimmy let out a pained little huff as he nicked his chin, but he dropped the razor and wrapped one arm around her shoulder, strong and desperate.

Sam handed him a tissue, and he dabbed at the red that blossomed on his chin.
“I’m sorry,” cried Claire, muffled. “I missed you. I shouldn’t have—I’m sorry.”

Jimmy’s eyes clouded over, and he turned to take her properly in his arms. “It’s just a tiny cut, munchkin. No harm done. I missed you too.”

Claire snuffled into his chest; and Sam almost missed the moment when her hand snaked out, snatched up the bloodied tissue, and slipped it into her pocket.

Almost—not quite.

He didn’t miss seeing her wrist, either.

The warm family home all around him felt suddenly like an illusion, something sly and tricky in the midst of a cold world. The murmuring voices of Ruby and Jess and Amelia downstairs seemed suddenly harsh and stark, a distant jangle on the senses; and even in the child’s distress there was no truth.

“Claire,” he said, as gently as he could, “what did you ask him for—when he gave you that mark?” But he knew already.

Castiel was gone. Jimmy was here. How did Gabriel grant wishes, after all?

Jimmy went very still as his daughter pulled away and drew sullen rebellion down over herself like a cloud. Then he reached out and took the hand that she was trying to hide against her skirt. Small white fingers uncurled, and Jimmy turned the coywolf tattoo to the light.

Perhaps Jimmy didn’t remember everything from his time as a vessel, but the stark fear in the look he flashed toward Sam showed that he remembered enough.

“Claire, honey,” he said, steady and low, “what did he ask for in return?”

She rolled her eyes, and pulled her hand away, and crossed her arms uncomfortably over her chest. “I’m not a kid, Dad,” she grumbled. “I’m not an idiot. Ten minutes of my time: that’s all. That’s all.”

Would Gabriel hand Castiel over to rogue angels? How firmly was he committed to his belief that this end was inevitable—that struggling against it only made things harder for everyone?

Castiel rescued baby otters, for Christ’s sake.

“Sam!”

Jess clattered up the stairs clutching her cell, followed by Amelia and, at a less urgent pace, by Ruby.

“Charlie called,” she exclaimed, putting a hand on her hip and rolling her eyes. “Apparently they’re in Maryland now. Anna flew them all over, but Balthazar turned up even before they summoned him. It wasn’t rogue angels at all. It’s someone much higher up. Castiel was getting too close to us and he’s been dragged back to Heaven, for reconditioning. It sounds really unpleasant. And Balthazar got perfectly snide about it, blaming Dean for the whole business.”

Sam and Jimmy exchanged looks.

“Heaven does reconditioning?” Sam wondered.

“Explains why they’re all such perfect little model soldiers,” drawled Ruby, but her eyes and attention were sharp on Jess. “Why’d Balthazar come to them?”
“For Anna, Charlie said. He and a couple of other angels loyal to Cas are going to try to break him out, and wanted her help.” Jess hesitated, and Sam felt the weight of something deep and dreadful hovering unsaid behind her.

“What,” he said, harsher than he meant. “What is it?”

Jess met his eyes. “Dean went with them.”

“To Heaven?”

“Shit.” Ruby was stiff, white-purple alarm and fury radiating off her all of a sudden, burning through the careless façade. “Why do I hang around with all you dumbasses. They’re going to just charge straight in the front door, get everyone killed.” A snap of the fingers and she vanished, leaving Sam staring at the spot where she’d been. A moment later they staggered as, like an afterthought, the walls of Jimmy’s house in Illinois vanished around them, and they were standing in a tiny motel room with Charlie and Jo.

“Well,” said Jess brightly, “this must be Maryland. Hi girls!”

Sam blinked at the air, as the girls’ voices washed around him, unheard in the sudden rush of suspicion.

Ilchester, Maryland, nine in the evening; and Sam sat on the roof of the ordinary white sedan that Jess had hired, looking out over the distant convent in the dusk, as the girls busied themselves making plans and organising things and doing whatever they were doing that he fully intended to ignore because he wasn’t letting any of them come in with him. Because there was feminism, and then there was the plain fact that this was his problem. The demons would kill them and not him, because Lucifer apparently needed him alive, and he could work better without worrying about them.

And if everything went south… well, at least Dean was as far out of the range of fire as you could get.

Sam looked up at the first faint speckles of stars in the sky, and knitted his hands together on his lap. There wasn’t any point in touching the coywolf tattoo. He wasn’t talking to Coyote: he was talking to Gabriel, and he could feel that sweet, humming thread that bound them together without needing the touch.

We’re going in, he said, and felt the words echo along that thread. No response; but he knew they were heard.

(Would there be some bond like that with the baby? Would Sam be able to feel it?)
Look. I get it. We’re just a tiny part of your life and always have been, because you’ve always been careful to make sure that’s true. And you keep your heart locked away, and you make sure not to count any promise to a mortal as a real promise.

Of course, an archangel would get used to hearing prayers and letting them slide by like water.

You do what you think ‘you’ would do, the ‘you’ that you want to look like. For each of the characters you play. And because you’re a kind of shapeshifter you use other parts of you to do what other parts of you think needs to be done.

And so you hold yourself together. You’ve probably been doing it for centuries. But I grew up with Dean, Kit. I’m used to people using self-hatred as a weapon. You just have this idea of how things have to go, hammered into you since you were born, or made, or whatever. And you don’t know how to turn aside. Not with your real face.

You’ve been trying to bring it about because you wanted everything to end, right? And at the same time you were trying to prevent it, here and there, in bits and pieces, because you care. You can’t help caring until it tears you in two.

I know you. And I need you. I’ve needed you all the time. You’re forgiven, okay?

Just one last step, Gabriel. Tell us the last seal. You’re practically there already. We’ve swept this all off course.

Second to the right. One more and we can get this derailed. Or is that too big for you?

Minutes ticked by, minutes upon minutes. The stars wheeled their ageless slow dance overhead, and there was no reply. Time crept on until the time when Sam would have to move; and Charlie called his name.

Straight on ‘til morning. To the morning star.

Sam sighed, and uncurled his stiff limbs from the car roof.

Okay then. No turning aside.
It wasn’t until the pain receded that Castiel could identify it as pain. It had been everything, his whole world, his whole fractured fragmented self, for longer than he could understand.

But it retreated: first into discrete parts, into bright shards of white-hot dissonance spearing through what had once been the harmony of his being, and then pulling back into softness and warmth, into the strong fiercer angrier loving notes of the song of his friends around him.

Balthazar, holding him steady. Ezekiel, Hannah, yes. He know those chords. Anna—Anna? Strange. And. And then.

A stronger song, deeper and older and—and more. One he hadn’t felt for many years.

… Strange how, just a few short months in a vessel, and even here in Heaven, even without Jimmy, Castiel was thinking of his body in human terms. He opened his eyes (gathered his senses) and leaned into the healing touch of Gabriel’s hand against his cheek (against the heart of him).

Gabriel was crouching here in front of him, surrounded by the stark white lines of—of this room, whatever it was, wherever he was. The other angels too, ranged protectively around where Castiel was chained. And somebody else, a sixth presence, overlapping with Gabriel’s and—

Gabriel did have hands. Gabriel was here in a vessel, but it wasn’t his usual form.

Dean?

Dean smiled—and it was him, the speaking love and worry in his bright eyes inches from Castiel’s own, the curve of his smile, even as Gabriel cradled Castiel’s face with Dean’s hands and sent Gabriel’s grace rippling through his being, soothing the pain, healing the fissures.

“Okay, buddy,” said Dean. “Okay. There you are.”

Castiel closed his eyes and sank into relief and the touch of love all around him, let his forehead fall forward to rest against Dean’s-Gabriel’s, trusted his weight to their hands and Balthazar’s.

Where else would I be, he grumbled. Dean, why are you here, this is foolish. Why did you consent to Gabriel, I thought you didn’t trust him, you’re meant to be Michael’s vessel. Shouldn’t you all be stopping the Apocalypse around about now.

He felt the warm, worried tremor of Balthazar’s amusement against him—Hannah’s affection, more reserved but no less strong—the ferocious protectiveness and muted fury thrumming through Gabriel, and singing out above and beyond them all, the vast depths of the soul of Dean Winchester, loving and laughing and rejoicing, reaching out to him (to him, Castiel), all openness and trust.

Father, how had he earned this benison?

“Yeah, well—we thought we’d change up the script,” said Dean. Then—“Funny thing,” said Gabriel, lighter and more ironic with Dean’s voice than Dean was himself. “Guess some folks just find you inspirational. Han Solo here was ready to get himself killed so he could join in with the run on the Death Star—”

“I was happy to help with that,” Balthazar put in. “Really, darling, you’ve got a terrible taste in men.”
“—until yours truly waltzed in and pointed out that if he said yes to me he could get out of the resurrection paperwork, plus sneak in an undercover archangel who knows all the back doors.”

Castiel looked into him, into his eyes and heart and the subtle rhythms underlining the grace notes of his speech—and at the counterpoint that Dean provided, though Dean didn’t know it. And just for a moment, between Castiel’s gaze and Dean’s heartbeat, Gabriel’s song faltered. Not like something startled: like something brought finally, wordlessly, to the edge of a decision that had been a long time coming.

There was stillness, for a long moment. Castiel raised his hand, and laid it over Gabriel’s—Dean’s—where it pressed against his cheek.

Then everything changed. For the first time in millennia Castiel felt the deep, joyful bass thunder of an archangel prepared to join his song with that of the seraphs, the heady powerful surge of the rhythm that had always been meant to hold them all together. “Ready to go save the final seal, cupcake?”

Castiel gazed upon the archangel in wonder and gladness; but not without interrogation in his song.

Gabriel shrugged—as comfortable in Dean’s body as Dean was, trading off muscles and intentionality with his host (not vessel, but host) in a way that Castiel had never seen—slipped away from the question, and winked. “Want to trade, kiddo?”

I beg your pardon?

“You need a vessel. I’ve got some other business up here, and Winchester’s hot and eager to let you all up in his—oh, fuck you, Gabriel—don’t pretend you haven’t thought about it, little brother. It’s nice in here. Soul strong enough to house Michael himself. Patch up all those shaky bits and pieces for you.”

Gabriel, said Castiel firmly, do be quiet. Dean?

“Yeah, that’s the plan,” Dean replied, and there was half a shake in his voice but his eyes were steady, and the hands gripping Castiel’s shoulders were just his now. “C’mon, Cas. Let’s go do this together. You an’ me, right?”

And, as Gabriel retreated, as he slipped away to other parts of Heaven, Castiel sank easy and welcome into the sanctuary of the Righteous Man’s body and soul.

Dean felt—nothing like Jimmy Novak. Everything like himself.

There you are, said Dean inside him. Damn. Bigger than I expected. And the thought was accompanied by something like a leer, as if it had been a dirty joke.

I don’t know how to—give you control, as Gabriel does, said Castiel to him, apologetic.

Now Dean’s soul was testing its bounds—settling in against Castiel, intimate and shy. Don’t sweat it. The smile in his voice was gentler: not the bravado that Castiel was so used to, but something more tentative—miraculous. Hey. Déjà vu much?

Castiel often had trouble following the tangents of Dean’s thoughts, but like this—tangled together, two in one—he knew just what Dean was remembering. All those weeks, months, of cradling together, of holding him safe, against the hordes—

It’s only fair that you should have your turn, he confessed, to give me strength, and raise me up, and
And in the face of Dean’s embarrassment and deflection he gathered his might, and rose to look upon his companions.

“Where is Sam Winchester?” he said. “Where are we to go?”

Sam opened his eyes, and looked at Jess.

“I hoped if we got here early we might have time to set an ambush,” he said, “but I didn’t know there were that many demons left in the world.”

“At least you know they won’t hurt you,” she said brightly. “And if they’re all in one place we can kill them all at once.”

“That’s… sweet,” said Jo, tucking a gun into her thigh holster. “Creepy. But sweet.”

“Jo,” said Sam, “you’re not coming in with me.”

She just rolled her eyes, and checked the strapping on the tough leather vest under her shirt. It was threaded through with fine steel wires, and salt was sewn into the seams, which would stop demons doing things like choking her with mind control but wouldn’t stop a blade.

“No,” said Sam, “seriously. I need you out here with these two in case the angels turn up and try to stop us.”

“No you don’t,” said Jo. “You want me out here so you can do the lone manly hero thing. And if I get badly hurt, well, that’s our best chance at pulling Gabriel into this thing, right? Right. Good talk.”

“Never argue with a blonde with knives,” said Charlie absently, as she fiddled with the comms. “Okay, well. These should work, at least until you hit a really high-level demon, because they seem to vibrate at a weird different frequency to the normal ones, and I haven’t worked it out yet and so they’ll probably fritz and—”

“Hey,” said Jo, and folded Charlie’s hands together over the tiny earpieces, to stop the babble. “Keep them. No point ruining them for nothing. It’s not like there’s going to be anything you can do when we’re in there anyway.”

Charlie looked at her helplessly. Then Jess wrapped her arms around them both and pulled them in tight.

Charlie clung; Jo leaned into them and squeezed their arms; and Jess kissed Jo lingeringly on the cheek.

“Go save the world,” she said.
Sam wrapped his arms around Charlie from behind and pressed his lips to her hair. She leaned back into him for a moment, small and trembling. Then she turned around, and stood up straight.

“I love you,” she said solemnly.

He rolled his eyes, and winked. “I know.”

Jess took his hand and squeezed it. “Go kick it in the arse,” she said; and he looked into the warmth of her eyes, and leaned in for the strength he could draw from a kiss.

The convent had been abandoned for years, locked up and secured, the yard overgrown. The cloisters were thick with demons, and they clustered around all the doors; and it took half an hour of stealth work and sweat and nettle-stings and held breath and all Sam could do to mask demonic senses for him and Jo to creep up to the broken windows of the dormitories, and slip inside.

It felt haunted in here: evil, bloodied, dark. Jo, whose night vision was better than Sam’s, pointed silently toward one end of the long room with its line of narrow beds; and he let her go first, trusting her to pick out the obstacles that might trip them up and send them clattering to the ground.

Up one corridor—a creaking door that almost gave them away—a night guard with a demon inside him, who almost spotted them before they slipped into an alcove beside a statue—the shuddering realisation that there were dark old tracks running from the statue’s eyes, as if it had wept blood—breathless noiseless movement, guessing where the chapel might lie, feeling where the centre of the evil was but never choosing the right doors until at last, at last—

And then they were trapped. Three, five, eight demons, powerful all, and Sam could have taken down one or two but he needed to save his strength, and—

There was a grip like iron around his throat, and he stopped struggling, and locked eyes with Jo. She was held between three demons, one of whom was plastered along her back and sliding his hands around her belly with unpleasant intent. Jo just smiled grimly at him, and gave a little shrug.

He nodded minutely, and slipped into the mind of the demon who seemed to be in charge. Just enough of a nudge, and instead of kill the spare the demon was ordering the others to take them both in to Lilith.

*Jedi mind tricks,* Sam thought, a bit smug. Probably Lilith would still use Jo’s pain to get to him, but this bought them time at least. Getting both of them alive into Lilith’s presence was better than he could have hoped.

… yes, it was, wasn’t it?

Something niggled at the back of his mind. What’s wrong with this picture.

And here was the chapel, and Sam staggered as he was dragged in—almost gagged, and the weight of evil and horror in the air, echoing up and down the years like a ghost in its own right. Lilith was turning, gliding down the aisle to meet them in her virginal white dress. And Sam would have known her anywhere: old, older than any demon, older than anything he’d met before. Even the angels didn’t feel old like this: they didn’t belong to time, but Lilith was a thing twisted and warped out of what she ought to have been, a human distorted into monstrosity. The first one.

And she felt… oddly pure. Not as messy and grotesque as other demons. Like a skeleton when all the horror of rotting flesh has faded away, leaning only clean white bone.

“Perfect,” she said, and laid a fine hand on his cheek. “You’ve come for mass. So have I.”
“Yeah,” said Sam, itching not to strain his head back and away, out of her touch. “Was planning on making a bit of a sacrifice.”

She smiled, secret and sly like they were in on this together. “Let’s make it together. Eat of her flesh and drink of her blood, and the flame of his spirit will pass into thee.”

And at her nod, the demons holding Jo dragged her to the altar, and laid her out.

“Really?” Jo spat, as her wrists and ankles were tied. “Isn’t this a bit old-school, the blonde girl on the altar? Sam’s the one you want for virgin sacrifices, he makes a habit of it.”

“Thanks, honey,” said Sam. Then there was a constriction around all his limbs, biting and prickling, binding his senses, as somebody behind him slipped a band around his head.

It felt like a leather strap—nothing remarkable, not particularly painful—but he kicked out on instinct as somebody grabbed for his foot. Lilith stepped back, smiling and neat, as four demons wrestled the thin leather cuffs onto his feet and fastened them to the pews on either side of the aisle. Then it was his hands, fastened in front of him: and when he looked down he could see symbols cut into the leather.

Nothing he recognised—maybe Enochian?—but they bound his every power and all senses but the human, and kept him immobilised here, in the middle of the aisle, feet spread, helpless to do anything but watch.

“You this welcoming to all your guests?” Sam asked, fighting back the panic at the sudden sensory deprivation. After all, he didn’t need all of that. He was human. He could deal with sticking to sight and sound and all that.

“Well, you’re a little early,” said Lilith, turning back to the altar. She dismissed the other demons with a casual wave, and ran her finger along the marble by Jo’s side. “I’m not quite ready yet. There’s more preparations to be made before the Cage can be ready to unlock. Midnight, I think—midnight will be the moment when I break the last seal.” And she smiled down at Jo, whose fists clenched in their bindings.

“That’s an hour away,” Jo gritted out, trying to sound snarky. “You don’t think things might change between now and then? You don’t think you’ll get what’s coming to you?”

Lilith reached out and ran her fingers through Jo’s hair, combing it out over the altar. “You’re honestly adorable.”

“So what’s left to do?” Sam asked, discreetly testing the strength of the leather. Strong, but not too strong, with that much time to go—especially since the symbols were cut into the leather, not drawn on. That meant weak points, and stress concentrated here and there, especially if he twisted it. “How’re we going to pass the time?”

“Well, I am an old-school kind of woman,” said Lilith, and drew her fingers down the inside of Jo’s forearm: circled her wrist for a moment, then let it go. “I thought perhaps a slow roast.”

“Yeah, we ate before we came,” Jo snarked back; and Lilith drifted around the altar, and knelt down, and did something on the ground at the far side.

Something crackled, and there was a soft humming noise. Then the lowest parts of the altar began to glow red-hot.

Jo craned her neck from side to side, then fixed her eyes on Sam. What, she mouthed. What did she
Sam shook his head helplessly, and twisted his wrists hard against the leather.

“It should begin to feel warm in a minute or two,” said Lilith, soothing and soft. “Hot? Intolerable? Well, that depends on what the frog feels in the boiling pot. Does he know he’s boiling? Maybe he feels it boiling before it’s luke-warm, if you tell him. You let me know, beautiful, when you begin to sweat.”

Jo gritted her teeth. Sam’s fingernails cut into his palms.

But they had time. Lilith turned back to the altar, and Lilith murmured her ritual words, as Jo squirmed and bit her lip and flinched her back off the slowly warming marble.

And Sam prayed. He prayed to Castiel, to let him know what they were at. He prayed to Balthazar, short status updates. He prayed to Gabriel, curter still. And maybe, as he felt the hands of the clock tick down—maybe, now and then, he prayed to God.

Until Lilith’s gentle, honey-smooth voice wound to a close, and she looked up at the clock on the wall, and the first stroke of midnight tolled overhead. And Sam tested the weak point he’d worn in his cuffs (and ignored the bloody grooves drawn into his wrists), as the flames leaped up under the altar and Jo hissed and flinched and arched in pain.

Sam, whispered Castiel in his mind. Sam. We’re outside.

“You’re an idiot,” Jo growled. “Haven’t you been watching? We’ve got friends. Kit will come. You’re going to be annihilated.”

Lilith turned toward Sam and smiled, a perfect shape perfectly framed against the burning light of the altar.

“I do hope they’ll try,” she said.

Sam breathed slowly in through his nose, holding her gaze, and out.

Dean? he asked, in prayer, hoping Castiel could still hear him, bound as he was.

With me, whispered Castiel. Safe.

Sam breathed out, and looked up towards the crumbling dark ceiling.

“So what would happen,” he said out loud, “if an archangel were to turn up here and now? Y’know. Just for curiosity’s sake.”

“Sam,” Jo groaned.

“An archangel?” she mused, leaning back against the altar, hands sliding over the marble by Jo’s shoulder and hip. “Heaven’s most devastating weapons. I suppose, Sam Winchester, that they would do as they were bid, by their father. By God.”

A demon pushed her way in through the doors, and—despite the ferocity in Lilith’s glare—hurried up to whisper in her ear.

Lilith lifted an eyebrow. “Which angels?”

“Rebels, my lady. A small band of rebels. Not acting by Heaven’s orders.”
She reached out without looking, and snapped the demon’s neck.

Quietly, with no fanfare, the weakened leather gave under the strain of Sam’s steady flex.

“Uh-huh,” he said, giving no sign, watching the grimace of Jo’s face. A woman, yes, but years of being brought up as a man—of learning not to show pain, feeling, weakness. She wouldn’t scream until she couldn’t bite it back anymore. “How do you think that would turn out?”

Sam winked—no idea where he was going with this, making it up as he went along, keeping her attention on his eyes.

_Ezekiel_, said Castiel, with grief in his voice. _Ezekiel has fallen. We are pressing in from the east flank, Jo and Charlie and Anna have taken the cloisters, and—_

Lilith cocked her head. Indulgent. Curious. Thinking she’d already won, and that he was some rare prize to observe.

“Kit will come,” insisted Jo, a pained whisper on the edge of hearing.

“What if,” said Sam, drawing it out slow and careful, listening to the tickle of Castiel’s words in the back of his mind, to the rage and the clamour of the battle drawing near, “what if one of the archangels had made a bargain. Long ago. A bargain that guaranteed that archangel’s protection to a certain person. A person here in this room.”

_Archangel._

As he spoke the word for the second time a horn sounded, well below and beyond human hearing. It began as a low sweet note but grew instead of fading, deeper and brighter and more joyous with every instant until it seemed to shake the world around them, shake the roots of Sam’s teeth and soul.

Lilith’s face calmed into an ice-perfect smile. “An archangel,” she said. “All will proceed as written, Sam Winchester. Don’t you know? You will play your part as they will. If they promised you your protection they spoke with forked tongues.”

Forked tongues. Speaking one thing, meaning another. Double meanings in one word. Archangels, like Lucifer.

Jo screamed, a long low sobbing sound..

Sam knitted his fingers around the leather, keeping it in place, and returned her smile as the note of the horn thumbed into silence, leaving behind it only energy and activity.

“I didn’t mean me, my lady. I’m the obvious chess piece, right? I’m the knight. You’ve got the rook behind you. And she’s got the archangel’s promise blazoned into her wrist.”

Which of the four archangels traditionally wielded a horn?

“He’s coming,” sobbed Jo, grinning through gritted teeth. “He’s coming for me.”

Lilith stared at him. Then she turned to look at Jo. And just as she did Sam flung the leather away, and dragged the band from his temples, and the world came rushing back in full colour and glory.

He felt Castiel’s fierce joy ring through him—fifty angels at least, flocking innocent and wondering behind the banner of a long-lost archangel, cutting through the demons, rallying to the fight—and, as Lilith slammed her palms down on the altar, the vast dark gape of the Pit beneath them, the creak of
the door of the Cage, nine-tenths of the way to open.

Almost open. Almost there.

He reached out his hand and mind and slammed Lilith against the altar.

She gasped, trying to laugh.

“What—what’s it going to be, Sam? Save her, or kill me? You can’t do both. That demon slut’s blood—you’re not strong enough.”

Sam ignored her. This was important, no time to lose, no time to let his concentration waver. With the one half of him, holding her pinned and helpless (and he was strong, he had the power, he could do this); while with the other he pulled up the cold from the stones under his feet, made himself the still centre—balance, balance—and sent it flooding through the marble of the altar.

The glow of it flickered, and died. Jo let out one soft agonised breath, and lay still, panting.

Then Sam drew in his breath, drew in the thrum of life in the land deep under his feet, drew on the burning steady flame in the centre of him and the strength of the archangel singing through his blood, and took Lilith’s heart in his hand.


It sped up. She tipped her head back against the altar, white-blonde hair flowing over Jess’ stomach, and laughed at him through the pain, until she began to scream. And the power of it rang through him, clamouring higher and higher, soaring, delicious.

But there was something wrong. She felt—she felt like triumph. She felt like joy.

Sam faltered.

Lilith drew a shuddering breath, and spat blood to one side.

“Can’t do it,” she whispered, “when it comes to the crunch? Turned yourself—into a freak for nothing.”

“Sam,” Jo said, and her eyes are all fierceness and trust. “You can. You can.”

Ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum ba-dum—

“Go on then, boy king,” purred Lilith. “Give it your best shot.”

At which point there was a brief scuffle outside the door, and Ruby burst into the chapel.

The restraints whipped open around Sam’s feet and he found himself flung across the room, pinned against a wall, breathless, immobile.

“Sorry honey,” said Ruby, and winked. “Change of plan. Can’t let you kill her.”

Lilith stared, eyes flicking from one to the other. The Pit growled below them, vast and ready. Sam could almost feel the presence straining on the other side, a weight like a monumental reservoir straining at the gates of the dam, waiting for that one last lock to snap.

“What,” snapped Jo, “what. I might have known, you—”
“Cool it, Starbuck. She’s the final seal. First demon bites it? The Cage opens.”

And yes, that was it. That was the answer that Sam had been reaching for. And here came the surge of anger and power from Lilith—stronger by far than anything she’d used to pretend to resist him—lashing out across the space like a sonic boom, and Ruby staggered.

“You traitor,” hissed Lilith, and Sam was free.

He struck out, tangling the vicious black threads of Lilith’s power as they whipped toward Ruby, stepping up behind her, pinning her arms to her sides. Then Ruby rallied, drew herself up, spread her arms and her fingers. And every iron nail in the pews came barreling toward Lilith and Sam, circling them like a flashing gun-grey whirlwind for a moment before they all dropped to the floor. Iron: iron that melted where it touched, turning into a glowing liquid circle that hemmed them in.

Sam let his arms fall, and stepped smartly out of the circle; but the bonds of his mind he didn’t loosen.

Then he met Ruby’s eyes deliberately, and laid two fingers on the coywolf tattoo on his wrist.

_Tell me why I should believe you this time_, he thought.

If he’d been expecting a flinch, he didn’t get it. For a moment Ruby was very still, strength and heat centred on her tiny body. Then her eyes flickered gold.

“Because you’ve got no other choice,” she said.

“Not good enough,” said Sam, low. “Not good enough, _Gabriel_.”

A little familiar smile curled the corner of her mouth; and now when she stepped forward her feet were heavy and soft, thrumming through the stone underfoot, as if she was so much more solidly and firmly _present_ than anybody Sam had ever seen before.

“Turns out,” she said, light and warm, “this is me. Choosing a side.”

Jo laughed, a little hysterical edge to the noise. And—“_Gabriel?_” said Lilith, blank and stunned.

“Hey there, niece of mine,” said Ruby, and winked at Lilith. “Remember that deal we struck back in 1423 when you thought I was just a witch? Good times. Even gave me a feed of your own power. Thanks for that. Really helped in establishing this whole demonic alter ego. And she’s been useful, over the years. It’s easy to convince even the most powerful demons that you’re a Lucifer loyalist when you really do love the guy.”

“Lucifer?” said Jo. “Seriously?”

“Well, sure. He’s my brother. That doesn’t mean he isn’t also a big bag of dicks.”

Then came the rush of triumph and jubilation, sweeping through the convent and the world. Angel voices rang out in song.

“Hear that?” said Sam, stepping backward toward Jo to fumble at the ties on her wrist. “That’s the sound of you being left all alone. Last demon outside of Hell. Handy of you to gather them all together like that.”

Lilith shrugged. “They’re pawns. He doesn’t need them.” She didn’t look around at Sam: only stood, ringed with molten iron and bathed in candle-light, with her eyes fixed on Ruby.
The doors swung open again and Dean strode in. No, not only Dean. It was—

Sam blinked, distracted, as behind him Jo half-sat up and unfastened her other wrist, then tugged at the bindings on her feet.

Dean was an angel. There was an angel inside him. And Sam was almost sure it felt like Castiel.

Lilith ignored that too.

“What was your plan, angel?” she said softly. “Stopping Sam, tonight? As it is written, so it must be. If Sam doesn’t kill me and break the final seal, do you think that you can find a way to keep me alive tomorrow? next week? in a year?”

Ruby stuck her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. “Yeah, we’re doing our own script-writing now.”

“And what of your brothers? What of your father?”

“Our Father,” said Castiel—and that was distinctly Castiel, even if he spoke with Dean’s mouth and voice, and that was deeply disturbing—“our Father taught us love, before anything else. He taught us to care for the fall of a sparrow. Not to wipe the world clean in the hope of building something better. I believe that he has left us, now, to make our own choices.” He stepped up square behind Ruby.

“And that means we have a duty to make them well.”

But: “She’s got a point,” said Ruby. “I mean, guys. I wasn’t exactly planning ahead here. Just couldn’t let you do the thing, Sam. She will find a way to die, and Lucifer will rise.”

Sam watched Ruby—Gabriel—doubting, thoughtful, cautiously proud.

“And he’ll kill you, you said. Like you could see the future. Why would your own brother kill you?”

Ruby shrugged, casual, but more certain and centred than Gabriel or Coyote had ever been before. “I will stand against him. Sooner or later. And he’ll tear me apart.”

Cas, Sam heard—Dean’s voice, rattling inside his head, irritated. Cas, I gotta—

—Dean, I don’t know how to let you speak—

Then Gabriel’s voice, as Ruby tilted her head. What’s up, Winchester?

You can hear me? Right. Okay. You’re going to stand against him? So do it now.

Ruby rolled her eyes.

Doing that, champ.

She’s the only way to open the cage? Well, Lucifer’s not dead, right? Can’t die where he is. And this is as close to open as it’s ever gonna get. You telling me you can’t slip her in there to keep with him?

Ruby whipped around and stared at Castiel-Dean. Then she threw back her head and laughed, shaking herself, her body changing shape and flushing through with gold and white until it was Gabriel standing there, Gabriel-Coyote-Kit, and behind and around and within him the vast fierce savage joy of the archangel, clear and unbridled for the first time.

And Sam ached to touch him, sudden and deep and tingling in the roots of his teeth.
Gabriel kissed Dean, brief and delicious and deep, and Castiel blinked and curled Dean’s hands cautiously around Gabriel’s face. Then he turned, and winked at Sam.

“What’s going on?”

“What,” said Jo crossly, “what’s going on?”

Sam couldn’t help himself: he laughed. The brilliance of the colours curling off Gabriel was like nothing he’d seen, and his eyes were bright and lion-gold and deep, such purpose and so many millennia in his wild grin that there was nothing to resist.

He reached out, answering the touch of Gabriel’s mind with his, wrapping tight around him in an intimate sensuous spiral, feeling each other and the door to the Pit. And together they took the first of demons, and wrestled her strength down, and sent her in to join the lord and father that she had spent so long in seeking out.

The door slammed closed.

Sam opened his eyes, panting, drained.

Gabriel winked at him from the other end of the aisle, leaning on one of the pews for strength.

“Honey, I’m home,” he crooned.

“Liar,” said Sam, knowing it to his bones but grinning stupidly anyway.

“Gabriel,” snapped Castiel. He was staring at the ceiling, senses flying wide, and he was on high alert.

Gabriel was still for a moment. Then Sam felt it: the pressure in the air, the beginnings of trembling in the earth, the electricity sparking around them. The approach of an unvesselled angel—and one far larger than Castiel.

Gabriel turned his head back over his shoulder. His voice was light, but his eyes were hard.

“Hey, Cas? Get the humans out of here.”

The world spun, and changed. Then it was electric lights and the smell of grilled cheese.

They all stood in the Novaks’ living room, looking at each other. Charlie gave a squeak and threw herself into Sam’s arms.

“Is anybody going to heal my back?” asked Jo.

“So,” said Jimmy, picking awkwardly at his grilled cheese. “No Lucifer, then?”

He stole a sideways glance at Castiel. He’d been doing that ever since they’d sat down around the
table. Castiel was sitting stiff and distant in Dean’s body, rarely speaking, his focus far away on whatever was going down on angel radio.

Sam was trying not to look at him—at either of them. Jimmy without Castiel in him looked strange. Dean with Castiel in him was deeply disturbing. And the world felt… on edge. Waiting. Grilled cheese and cheap red wine and tea at half past midnight didn’t really cut it.

“’Nope!’” said Charlie happily, though her chair was pushed right up beside Sam’s and her knee was firm against his under the table. “Apparent Gabriel pushed Lilith into the Cage with Lucifer? Or something. Like tossing the only key into the cell, only there’s no lock on the inside. So now they’re stuck!”

Amelia fidgeted with the sleeves of her dressing gown. “Does this mean we’re actually… disobeying God now?”

Sam glanced at Castiel, who was frowning at nothing and didn’t reply.

“No,” he said instead. “Seems like it’s ages since God decided anything. The angels have just been… trying to follow the rule book on their own. And a few higher-ups decided to bring on the end of days, because they thought that was what God would want.”

“’Higher-ups’,“ muttered Jimmy incredulously, shaking his head, running his fingers through his hair.

Jess nudged him, and topped up his glass. “C’mon, honey. You should be over the whole angel thing by now.”

Jimmy huffed a half-chuckle, and his eyes flicked uneasily toward Castiel and away. “So now—?”

“Now,” said Jo, smiling bright and hard as steel, “Gabriel’s busy trying to persuade some other archangel not to destroy us all for screwing up their prom plans.”

“Michael,” said Castiel distantly. “That was Michael.”

“Michael,” Amelia shuddered, and dragged her dressing gown tighter around her. “Saint Michael. How can angels disagree? Isn’t it—isn’t that what led to—”

“Is it over?” asked Claire from the door. She was wearing Aladdin pyjamas, and had her arms crossed defensively over her chest.

“Go back to bed, honey,” said Amelia at once.

“I’ve been lying in bed for hours, Mom,” Claire complained. “It’s not like I’m going to sleep. And if the world blows up I don’t have to go to school tomorrow, right?”

“Ames,” said Jimmy quietly, and rose. “It’s in her blood, same as mine.”

They had a brief, complicated conversation with only their eyes. Then Amelia nodded briefly, mouth tight, and Jimmy went over to wrap their daughter in his arms.

“Oh,” said Sam, trying to work out how to adjust his voice down to ‘being gentle with the kid’ level, “yeah. Yeah, Claire. Sort of. We stopped the Apocalypse. We just don’t know what the fall-out—what some of the more traditional angels are going to say about it.”

Jimmy took a deep breath, and looked squarely at Castiel-Dean.
“So,” he said, “are you staying in—will you need me again?” But as he said it, his arms tightened around Claire.

Castiel looked at them. “No,” he said, “and no. I can’t ask that of you. But I can’t stay in Dean either. He is not the sort of man to—that is, while he is fully capable of housing me he would be unable to voluntarily subjugate his will for long.”

Jo smirked. “Are you saying Jimmy’s a pushover?”

Castiel-Dean blinked at her—Castiel’s bewilderment with Dean’s impatient half-glower. But Amelia was bristling, and Castiel’s eyes slid to her before he said carefully, “Dean does not have Jimmy’s… patience.”

Charlie snorted.

“Um,” said Claire, wavering between sarcastic and uncertain like the teenager she almost was. She looked at ‘Dean’; looked at Jess, then at Sam. “Uh. Didn’t Gabriel tell you?”

“That’s… really creepy,” Jimmy decided, after a dumbfounded minute or two.

“Really have to agree,” said Charlie. “And you wouldn’t believe how many special effects I’ve scoffed at.”

Claire had stored it in the attic.

It was hidden under a large orange towel—not even a sheet—and when it was pulled back, the features of Jimmy Novak (laid out on a couple of book crates on the attic floor) were plain for all to see.

Except, they were white. Not white like normal white-person pallor, but white-grey. Even a hint of blue. The colour of pale clay. Something that seemed natural if you thought it was just a sleeping statue, but that changed into some low-key creeping horror when you saw that… it moved.

It breathed.

Claire Novak was standing beside a sleeping monochrome figure of her father, which was breathing.

“Claire, honey,” said Jimmy carefully, “just when did you—he—how long has this been here?”

Claire shrugged, mutinous. “Since just before you came back. Duh. Not like you ever come up here.”

“Ew,” said Jess helpfully. “Okay, so, Gabriel did this, to help get you your father back?”

The look Claire shot her was grumpy and grateful.
“It’s a vessel, without a soul. He said he has one the same. Made of Mesopotamian clay, and, and—animated with the breath of an archangel. He said to wait to do the last bit until Castiel was ready to—um. Move in.”

Castiel tilted Dean’s head curiously, sceptically. “What is the… last bit?”

Claire shot a guilty look at her father. Then she pulled a crumpled tissue from the pocket of her dressing gown. There was dried blood on it.

“My blood,” said Jimmy, with a resigned sigh. “You know you could have just told me and asked, munchkin.”

Claire hunched up and glared. “Well, it wasn’t like either of you would talk to me about these things.”

“What did he tell you, Claire honey?” Jess interposed. “About how to finish it, I mean.”

“Just to…”

Claire moved forward, and laid the crispy tissue on the chest of the weird corpse-statue thing.

The blood brightened from dry old brown through to liquid red, and dripped down onto the ‘skin’ of the creature.

It seeped in.

Colour trickled out from the heart, running like lines of flame down the stomach, up to the shoulders, down the arms and along the throat. Dead white flushed pink then tan, chapped lips warmed to rose, and the strange pale strands of hair darkened and stirred into healthy locks.

When even the fine veins on the back of the eyelids were visible and alive, Jo leaned down and pulled one up. Whites, pupil, and the vivid blue of Jimmy Novak’s irises; but unresponsive.

“Cool,” she said; and Claire half giggled.

“Jo,” scolded Charlie. “Normal people present!”

Castiel-Dean stood by the packing crates, and laid a curious hand on the belly of the empty vessel.

“I didn’t know this was still possible,” he said. “Although I suppose of all angels Gabriel would be the one to—”

“Is this how the first people were made?” Claire burst out, as if she’d been waiting for days to ask. “Adam and Eve?”

Castiel blinked down at her. “You evolved from apes, in Africa.”

Jimmy made a little sound halfway between a snort and a laugh.

“That is,” Castiel added, with the precision of a natural pedant, “there was a period of the world’s history, once humans began to spread across the globe, where our Father did in fact build one or two humans from nothing, to found a new people or culture. As did many other deities, in their own ways. Most cultures’ creation myths have some seed of truth in—yes, of course Dean. My apologies.” He looked around. “Amelia, Jess, Jo—you should cover your eyes.”

Charlie gave him a puzzled look, and covered her eyes too.
Then there was the vivid rush of unvesselled angel in the room, just for a moment—Dean staggered and almost fell—Jimmy was suddenly there to catch him—and the figure on the packing crates opened its eyes.

It worked its jaw, lifted a hand to look at it, then licked its lips, and frowned.

“Strange,” said Castiel, and sat up.

“I’ll say,” said Jimmy, looking his double over.

“I meant,” said Castiel, a little impatient, “being alone in here.”

He looked up, and his eyes immediately locked on Dean’s.

Jo clapped him on the shoulder. “You good, angel?”

He looked up at her, and his eyes crinkled at the edges.

“Hello, Jo,” he said, and laid his hand over hers. “Yes. Yes, I think I am.”

“That’s awesome!” cried Jess, and leaned in to kiss him. “I am so psyched for you! But you should probably get dressed, honey.”

Amelia cleared her throat, and looked pointedly down at where the towel had fallen across Castiel’s lap. Castiel followed her gaze.

“Oh,” he said, thoughtful. Then he looked vague for a moment; and when he rose to his feet he was wearing his jeans, a casual black button-down with blue buttons and piping that Jess had bought him, and a sparkly blue and green scarf of Charlie’s design.

“Much better,” said Sam, not bothering to hide his grin. And he and Charlie swept the angel up for a firm group hug.

It took a moment for Castiel to return the embrace, to melt from the stiffness he’d taken so long to unlearn into the clinging eagerness of the dorky, earnest, passionate, sarcastic guy who’d worked his way into their family. When they pulled back, Castiel met his eyes for a moment. Sam smirked slightly. Castiel rolled his eyes and kissed him, hard.

Sam laughed into the kiss, running his hand up Castiel’s back. It was hot, and there was meaning there. Definitely a sense of a restraining influence removed, and an intention to do something about it at the earliest opportunity. And Sam was really, really down with that.

It only lasted a moment, and this time when they pulled apart Castiel’s eyebrow was cocked in a decidedly commanding way that went straight to Sam’s dick. Sam winked at him, still laughing a bit, and clapped him on the shoulder.

Castiel looked at Charlie, who rolled her eyes, and kissed him too, with fondness but far less heat.

Then Castiel turned to Dean.

“Okay,” said Jimmy hastily, looking a bit pink and avoiding Amelia’s eyes. “Claire, definitely time for bed.”

“Looking good, buddy,” said Dean, cocky as if everything in him wasn’t straining toward Castiel. “Not so handsome as your last outfit, but—”
“Shut up, Dean,” said Castiel, and crossed the space between them with two steps.

Only they never touched.

Suddenly there was the weight of presence that Sam had felt once already that night, and lo, an angel of the lord came upon them and Gabriel was standing there, and Sam was going to pretend that his heart didn’t leap at that. And there was someone else with him, someone as vast and terrifying as Gabriel himself, but only partly present. Like a giant peeking in the window, to keep from smashing the house.

“Hail, hail, the gang’s all here,” said Gabriel. “Big brother wants a word.”

*Don’t call me that,* grumbled the Archangel Michael.

“So I told him,” said Gabriel brightly, “if you don’t believe me that Dad wouldn’t want the world wiped out, I know this really interesting little bunch of humans—and one angel, looking good Cas, hope it fits because I didn’t get a receipt—ten minutes of chatter with them should convince anybody. Clairebear, I’m gonna need to cash in.”

There was a moment’s silence. Then, “No,” said Jimmy. “Absolutely not.”

“Oh, relax.” Gabriel rolled his eyes. “Ten minutes only, he promised. On the dot. And unlike some angels, Mikey *does* know how to tread gentle.”

*Gabriel. Don’t call me that either.*

*You missed it, bro, don’t lie.*

“Take me instead.”

“Your daughter’s stronger than you, bucko. And I want you in on this conversation.”

“Dad,” said Claire, “I’m literally standing right here. I’m okay with it.” She looked at Gabriel, excited and a little scared. “If you promise it’ll be okay. I want to know what it feels like.”

“Claire, honey,” said Amelia, looking back and forward between Jimmy and her daughter. “Jimmy —archangels?”

“I promise, kiddo,” said Gabriel, more gently. “Pinkie swear, no take-backsies.”

“What do I have to do?”

“Just say yes.”

“Okay,” she said, tiny and fierce. “Yes.”
As soon as Michael opened his eyes in her face, they swung around to fix on Castiel.

Dean shoved his shoulder in front of him and glared daggers at the archangel.

“I already promised Gabriel not to destroy the world,” Michael said, each word far heavier in Claire’s light voice than it had any right to be. “But Castiel has disobeyed, and must be punished.”

“Uh-uh.” Gabriel stepped between them, and Sam felt the vastness of his wings unfold. “Castiel, dear brother of mine, has received truer revelation than you or I have for millennia. Don’t fuck this up.”

“Language,” said Jess.

Michael tilted his—her—head and squinted at Gabriel. Around him buzzed rose colours with the low vibration of perplexity, threaded through with a faint buzz of iridescent annoyance.

“Since you ask it,” he grumbled; and Jess stepped forward smartly, hand outstretched, and dropped a little bow.

“Michael! We’re all honoured, really. So, not blowing up the world, that’s a great starting point. What’d you want to talk about, sir?”

Michael turned his bewildered, grouchy stare on her. Then on Dean.

“Tell me, all of you,” he said, after a moment, “how you met Gabriel.”

“Ooh.” Gabriel shuddered melodramatically. “Ears burning. I’ll leave you guys to it.” And he slipped out and down the ladder to the house below.

… sending Sam a significant glance as he did so.

Sam looked at the trapdoor.

Sam looked at Charlie.

Charlie gave him two thumbs up and an enormous grin.

Sam rolled his eyes.

Sam left them to it.

They could convince the archangel of the wonders of creation without him.

Gabriel was raiding the pantry. Of fucking course.

Sam swivelled around one of the kitchen chairs and straddled it, arms crossed on the back, watching him.
“Ridiculously healthy,” said Gabriel without looking at him, in tones of deep disgust. “Look at this, they have kale chips.”

“So is it salts or sweets now?” asked Sam. “Fries or candy?”

Gabriel was wearing a long white tunic belted around the waist with something ornate and metal. Something that looked Celtic, or very old English. There was more gold that looked like burial-mound jewellery threaded through his head and slung around his neck; and a baldric was slung around shoulder and waist, from which hung a leather pouch shaped like a horn.

But underneath it all were stone-washed jeans over black high-heeled boots.

Gabriel stuck a packet of dried apricots into the top of the horn, and shrugged.

“You know, that actually depends on the body. Different taste buds, see. The oral fixation, though—that hangs about.” He turned around, and grinned, broad and dirty. “Speaking of. Did Dean mention I rode in to Heaven in his body? The cravings that boy has…”

He whistled.

Sam lifted an eyebrow. “Yeah, I don’t wanna know, thanks.”

Gabriel smirked. “Well, I was just talking about food, but if you wanna go there…”

Sam gave him a Look. Gabriel winked, beamed as innocent as a murderer in an Agatha Christie book, and turned back to the pantry.

He was so fucking beautiful it took Sam’s breath away. And he was tense—tensed for Sam’s hatred and rejection.

“Can’t you just snap up anything you want?”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“Fair point.” Sam rested his chin on one fist. “So. Castiel adopted a baby otter. Called him Fitzwilliam.”

“Hah.” He could hear Gabriel’s snicker. “Fidget and Fitzwilliam.”

“Yeah,” said Sam. “And all along you were playing a double game.”

Gabriel actually relaxed a bit at that. At hearing what he expected.

“Had to keep an eye on you. Didn’t matter what you thought of me. Or would if you knew.”

Sam shook his head, still watching the shape of Gabriel’s shoulders from behind. “Not on me. On yourself. You thought you were keeping out of it, that the little things you did to help us or the little hints you gave me about staying me? They didn’t matter. And then, on the other hand—just doing little things to nudge us toward the end game. To get it over with.”

Gabriel stopped pretending to paw through the pantry.

He turned around, and leaned against the kitchen counter, and looked at Sam.

“Close enough.”
Sam studied him, and let down his walls: let Gabriel study him in return.

He’d never seen Gabriel like this.

He looked like a warrior—sure, centred, golden-bright, more powerful than any force Sam knew—but there was a gentleness there too. The gentleness of something so strong it barely had to fight; and another kind, more personal. More tentative.

“You’re holding together,” Gabriel said. Not a question.

“Yeah,” said Sam, a bit surprised. “Think I am. Think I’m gonna be fine.”

The corner of Gabriel’s mouth lifted. “Family, huh?”

“One of them,” said Sam, “keeps running away.”

“Will they ever learn,” said Gabriel sweetly.

Sam shrugged. “Thanks for that,” he said, “by the way. You were right. I mean, I’ve been kind of a dick to them, and a bit of a sociopath—not feeling or doing or saying what I should—but if they hadn’t been there I know I would have been a hell of a lot worse. And I’m going to do better now. I am.”

Gabriel was still. Watching him.

Sam ran a thumb over his lips, and smiled behind it. “Not easy to do, mind. Takes a hell of a lot of courage.”

Gabriel rolled his eyes with a huff, and looked toward the ceiling. “Father save me from the preachers.”

“No,” said Sam, “really. Thank you. For… all of it. Though,” a little less certainly, “I still don’t get the whole… you know. Trying to persuade me to drink demon blood, then whaling on me when I gave in.”

Gabriel took a step forward. “Easy to be in two minds about something when you’ve got two bodies as well,” he said. “Easy to back out at the last moment from what you’ve convinced yourself has to be done. We were too early in the timeline, and housing Lucifer’s a big deal. You needed strength you didn’t have.”

“If I’d drunk your blood as Ruby, would it have been different?”

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answer to,” he growled, advancing. “And you would have believed you’d drunk demon blood. That’s half the point.”

Sam didn’t flinch as Gabriel came to him: just tipped his head back, and looked up.

It seemed a very long time since Coyote had leaped up onto the table and stalked toward him, grinning and predatory, threatening something between rape and adventure. Bargaining.

Gabriel still wasn’t safe. In some ways, he was even less trustworthy. There was so much more behind him, so many more factors to take into account. So many more reasons why he might choose to prioritise something else over his word to you. Sam had been naïve, first time around.

And Sam’s instincts had been right. And Sam trusted him.
Maybe that was a strength too.

Sam reached out, and wrapped his hands around the backs of Gabriel’s thighs, and drew him closer. Gabriel’s mouth twisted into something loose and stunned, but he didn’t resist.

Sam dropped his forehead, very gently, against Gabriel’s belly.

The… the child still wasn’t in there. Not technically. But he could feel the double-life thrumming somewhere around them, the extra potential. Part of Gabriel, but not the same as him.

“Why did you change your mind?” asked Sam softly.

One of Gabriel’s hands settled, very softly, into his hair.

“This is where I say ‘because of you’, isn’t it?” he murmured. “Only that’s not really true. It’d be romantic, sure. Wouldn’t mean as much, though. Romance fades. People die.”

Sam smiled, despite himself. “You say the sweetest things.”

Gabriel huffed, a puff of breath under Sam’s forehead, and tugged at his hair. “Sam. I’ve spent a few thousand years teaching myself not to get attached. It didn’t come naturally. Now it does.”

Sam slid a hand up to brush over Gabriel’s. “Liar,” he whispered.

“Maybe,” said Gabriel. “Habits, you know. But put it like this. You gave me a reason to rethink, okay. All of you. And…” His other hand slid over his belly, brushed against Sam’s forehead until he lifted it to watch it curve protectively over where the child would be if it was. “And her.”

Sam swallowed, ears suddenly buzzing. “Her?”

“Seems like.”

Gabriel’s voice was too casual. The kind of casual that shakes.

Sam looked up at him.

“I, uh. I’ll have to build her a womb, soon,” said the archangel, about Sam’s daughter. “Carry her inside me properly. She’s developing a brain. Senses. All that jazz. She’ll need to be somewhere physical so she can start processing—well. Physics.”

“You’ll stay,” Sam blurted out. “With us, I mean. Won’t you?”

Gabriel shook his head. “Other things to do, kid.”

Sam swallowed. “Heaven things?”

Gabriel snorted. “Ugh. No. I mean, I won’t be able to go full undercover again but I’m not being dragged back into that clusterfuck.”

“Right, well.” Sam cleared his throat. “Whatever you end up doing. Just. Remember—you’ve got a home, okay? You can come home in between times.”

“Cute,” said Gabriel, and traced the side of Sam’s cheek with his finger. “Almost sounds like you mean it.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Look. It’s screwed up, Gabriel. And I’m not going to pretend it’s going to be
easy to trust you with some things. Like thinking you know best. Making those choices for other people. But I get it. Okay?”

He lifted his hand and caught Gabriel’s, just as it tried to pull away.

“Gabriel. I know where your heart is. And I know how deep you were already tangled up by the time you started to rethink.”

Gabriel scoffed, and slid his eyes away. Sam squeezed his hand, and the back of his thigh.

“I just. I’m not saying don’t do what you need to do,” he said. “Hell, I’m going back to school next semester and that’s gotta be harder on the schedule than juggling being an angel and a handful of gods. But maybe. Turn up from time to time? Gabriel. I. I want to have you around.”

That made Gabriel look at him, eyebrows arching, sceptical and ironic. And something in that look made Sam falter. In the face of that wariness, that weariness, he didn’t know how to say, we’re both screwed up. Maybe not in quite the same way, but in ways that we can both understand. In ways the others can’t. I like having you here.

Gabriel smiled a bit, and the sheer bright-gold certainty flared about him again, as his hand bunched in the shoulder of Sam’s shirt. “Sorry, kiddo. I’m going to find Dad. See where he’s been hiding. Make things change.”

“You what,” said Sam. “Okay, that’s just. Uh. Today’s had a lot of big thoughts in it, okay, and I think that’s one too many. Just. Good luck with that, but—”

I’d be worse without you.

“What about her?”

“Ten minutes,” said Gabriel, and winked. “Aaand Michael’s gone. Time for you to get back upstairs. Be seeing you, kid. Somewhere down the line.”

He vanished.

Sam laughed. Then he swore, and dropped his head into his hands as his heartbeat gradually slowed.

His wrist itched.

He looked at it.

Three little words had appeared under the coywolf. They faded as soon as he saw them.

I love you, they said.

Sam’s stomach clenched.

Then, again: I love you. I love you. Scrawled fierce and fast like words pressed desperately against skin in the dark.

And they vanished. Like Gabriel had done.

What the hell was he meant to do with that?
... And straight on 'til morning

Some weeks later.

“Coffee?” asked Sam, sticking his head through the door.

Jess was jogging on the treadmill with a textbook perched in front of her, frowning at it adorably under the pink sweatband around her forehead.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, and hopped down. “Honey, you are a lifesaver, I want to finish this chapter tonight, ugh.”

“Well, your butt looks really cute in those sweats,” he told her, handing over her mug and dropping a kiss on her forehead, because he could. “Just promise you won’t overdo it, okay? That cough’s still hanging about.”

“You’re too sweet!” She winked at him, turned the machine off and sat down on the side of it, cupping her coffee in her hands. “I feel fine. If a girl can’t come down with completely unflattering sniffles after helping stop the end of days, when can she?”

Sam laughed and sat down beside her with his own mug. Jess was warm and comfortable and just the right kind of challenging; and when she was in the room, it always felt brighter.

“Anyway,” she said, after a couple of minutes of companionable silence, “speaking of effects hanging around. I thought you were in Jo’s bedroom getting all hot and sweaty with her and Cas?”

Sam sighed. “Yeah. I was. I just… not really in the mood, y’know?”

She watched him over the lip of her cup, eyes deep and brown and innocent and entirely too knowing.

He smiled, not quite meaning to. “Hey, stop that. If a guy can’t have a few weeks of being kind of restless after helping stop the end of days, when can he?”

She snorted and nudged his side with her elbow, until he put his arm around her shoulders and kissed her temple.

“You’re all sweaty and gross,” he told her fondly.

“You smell of sex,” she returned, and kissed him. “Did Dean say when he’d be back?”

“Stayed behind at the shop to help Charlie with close,” said Sam. “Sooner or later he’s going to have to admit that he’s more or less earning an honest wage. Or would be if he had a bank account.”

“Well, you know, Winchester men take a while to adjust to these things.”

Sam eyed her over. She blinked at him sweetly. Then she patted his arm.

“So. Midsummer tomorrow.”

“… yes,” agreed Sam cautiously.

“That, honey, is your shifty face,” she informed him. “Just so you know, we’re all coming with you.”
“I,” he said guiltily. “Coming where?”

She handed her empty mug back to him. “You’re not big lone heroes anymore, Sam. And in fact it’s our business just as much as yours.”

“But—”

“Uh-uh. We’ve all talked about this—”

“—you *what*?”

“—and it’s perfectly settled. Family outing.”

Sam gaped at her, touched and annoyed, as she stood up and nudged him off the treadmill to get back to her workout.

“Don’t worry,” she said, and gave him a dazzling smile. “I’ll bake cookies!”

Sam wavered on the edge of blurting out *I love you*. He hadn’t said it since he’d been nine.

It was true, of course. He knew it was true, for all of them, in different ways. But instead he laughed, and caught Jess’ hand to kiss her knuckles, and looked at her with that feeling in his eyes and said, “What would I do without you?”

Because somehow that meant more, right now, with her.

“Hm.” She winked at him, and tucked sweaty hair back into her headband. “Crash and burn.”

“Yeah,” he said, and stepped back to let her do her thing. “I guess I would have.”

The god spread his legs wide on his throne, and surveyed his crowded hall under the rays of the midsummer moon breaking through the oak boughs overhead. And he smirked.

It helped him ignore that group over there, clustered companionably around the end of one long bench near the front.

“I accept,” he said, so that it rang through the hall, into the ears of every witness. And the witch bowed to him, and offered up the rare magical trinket she’d brought with her, and the bargain was made.

Those who made their way here, at the summer equinox? The god gave them what they wanted for what they offered.

Sam remembered this. Most of it was the same as last year.

There were differences, though.
Gabriel—Coyote, here and now, or any of his other names—had changed his shape. Same face, but more slender, more androgynous. Last year with every swagger and every glance he had exuded masculine dominance, overpowering as a stag in rut. Now, his breasts were just a little too full for a male chest, and the faint curve to his belly and waist wasn’t the shape of extra fat. And he wasn’t trying to hide it: he was topless, and the faint intricate swirls of gold that coiled their way across his body drew attention to his belly more than they disguised it. Feathers and cobwebs and bright green leaves spilled down over one shoulder, spreading out under the curve of his abdomen to wrap around his hips and fall in lush, verdant curtains down around his thighs. He wore no crown this year; but small antlers sprouted from his head, forked and sharp, and golden leaves peeked from the darker gold of his hair as if they had grown there.

He looked to Sam like a strange mixture of those hefty female fertility statues, all curves and power, and last year’s woodland god: a joyous, dangerous mish-mash of ideas and personalities, all rolled into one careless lounging lazy-eyed form with a laugh always hidden at the corner of his mouth. It suited him. He was gorgeous.

... and that was another difference, of course. This year Sam wasn’t sitting here waiting for a psychopath to hand him over to a sadist. He wasn’t watching the god with the eyes of the prey, waiting for the moment to fight. Now he was watching Gabriel and wanting: imagining trailing his fingers over that skin, discovering the texture and the strength of whatever held those clothes together, learning the new shapes of his body or leaning down from behind the throne to press a kiss to the side of his throat, wordlessly sharing in anger or amusement at the stories his petitioners told.

There was also the fact that the coywolf, Fidget, wasn’t just lying by the god’s throne this time. Periodically she had to get up and stalk between the tables—or even hop up onto one—and fetch back a mischievous, energetic little otter pup who thought everything about this outing was the most exciting thing ever.

She’d had to fish him out of vast bowls of mead three times already.

Oh, and last year there hadn’t been an ongoing commentary at Sam’s table rating each bargain the god sealed from one to five stars.

“Four,” declared Charlie. “That was a genuine eighteenth-century vampire talisman, dude. And nice plot twist, the way he gave her what she needed instead of what she said she wanted, but without changing terms of the bargain.”

“Oh hell no,” said Dean, with his mouth full. “Witches? Minus two stars right there.”

“That’s so sexist.” Charlie was lying full length on the bench next to Dean with her head cushioned on his thigh.

“What? I hate man-witches too.”

“The prejudice against witches comes from centuries of misogyny and anxieties about female power.”

“My prejudice against witches comes from the fact that they’re creepy-arse bitches who—ow! Fine. Unpleasant people—who do unsanitary things with disgusting bits of dead people.”

“He can hear every word they’re saying, can’t he,” said Sam to Castiel.

“Undoubtedly.”
Sam chuckled. “Downside of inviting your family to work for the day, huh?”

Gabriel’s eyes slid to him for a moment, one brief golden impatient glare to convey just how very much he had not invited them. Sam’s blood thrilled at that one instant of attention, and he winked at Gabriel.

Gabriel’s eyes narrowed; but his mouth twitched. He looked away.

Well, if that was how he wanted to play it...

Gabriel had been doing very well at ignoring them so far tonight, of pretending he didn’t know they were there. But the sight of him there, on that throne that Sam remembered so very well...

Sam hadn’t been a virgin, not technically, but it had been the first time he’d been fucked. And the danger and strength of those hands on his body, of the thighs between his knees, pressing against his buttocks when he’d sunk all the way down—the mischievous glint of those golden eyes, the curl of the tongue behind the teeth, the hot impossible claim of fullness inside him, the clench of his own hands on the back of the throne and the stubborn determination not to give in, not to let the god do all the work, to rise and fall in his lap and not look away and take that heat back inside him every single time—oh, Sam remembered that all very well indeed.

He let the memories rise in him, every sensation and thrill associated with that throne, and lazily let the feel of them flow through the bond that had been created that night.

Gabriel shifted in his throne, and stared up at the ceiling for a moment.

“Now, that’s just playing dirty,” said Balthazar admiringly from the end of the table.

Sam flipped him off.

“Sarah Hastings,” purred Gabriel, low and delicious, and turned his gaze toward a grey-haired woman at the back of the room. “Come here and let’s chat.”

As the night wore on the crowd thinned out, and the deals got darker and dirtier. Balthazar took to drifting amongst the other tables, flirting and winking and topping up his glass, looking into cleavages and souls. The faint pounding background rhythm of drums or the dark heart of the earth got faster, deeper, a vibration that went straight to the bones and the groin. People were lazily making out (or more) in the corners. Castiel wasn’t sitting beside Sam anymore: he was leaning back against Dean’s chest, eyes heavy-lidded and mouth wet, as Dean kissed his unhurried way up and down his throat.

Jess was wandering like Balthazar, but with different intent. She would slip into an empty space on a bench and chatter, sweet and sympathetic and bright, a stranger who made this strange surreal place less strange, more natural. And people told her their secrets, what they’d come here for, what had driven them to extremes. Some she invited back to their table for a while and introduced them and
left them with Jo; others she’d whisper to for a long time, heads close together, an arm around their shoulders; and some she’d remember for later, Sam knew, to check in and make sure they got back on their feet.

Gabriel, too, was on his feet now, moving between the tables, murmuring things in one ear or another, striking bargains less loud and obvious, sinking here and there into a lap to tip a petitioner’s head back for a long and filthy kiss as their deal was made—or cupping a face in his hands and pressing to a forehead a kiss like a benediction, all tender ferocity and promise.

He did it well. This was his element: the freedom of judgement, and of power.

This was something Sam knew better now than to ask him to give up.

If you wanted somebody in your life—if you loved them—it had to be all of them, in all their mad terrifying glorious vastness. You couldn’t just cut out the bit that fit neatly into what you thought your life should be, and try to keep that.

Fidget trotted up to Charlie, looking impatient, and dropped Fitzwilliam in her lap. The little otter squirmed and protested, sending up the smell of mead, and Fidget pinned him down against Charlie’s thigh with one paw and licked him vigorously.

“That are not pools. They are for drinking. You’ll make Fidget drunk with cleaning you, who had the raising of you, you are so uncivilised.”

Fidget huffed disgust and licked her lips. Then she hopped up onto the table and sniffed hopefully at the platter that had once held most of a roast goose.

“Silly,” said Charlie, scooping him up. “Those are not pools. They are for drinking. You’ll make Fidget drunk with cleaning you, who had the raising of you, you are so uncivilised.”

Fidget huffed disgust and licked her lips. Then she hopped up onto the table and sniffed hopefully at the platter that had once held most of a roast goose.

You know, thought Sam at the god, next year you should add a wave pool. Keep the otter out of the mead bowls. Entertain the kids.

His wrist itched. Then the familiar speech bubble appeared by the coywolf’s head.

Everyone’s inviting their pets along this year. Even the pets.

Sam’s stomach did a happy little squirm of triumph. Then he smirked. This place is going to the dogs, huh?

“What’re you grinning about?” said Jess, slipping back into place beside him.

He tipped his wrist toward her, just as the words changed.

That’s what she said.

“Oh my god,” said Sam. He was suddenly having trouble breathing: smiling too hard, fighting through an aching wave of sheer love. “I take it back, let’s go home. I don’t want him, he’s a menace.”

Jess laughed and leaned in against him, scratched that spot behind his ear that she’d discovered. And Gabriel turned his head.

Sam lifted an eyebrow at him. Gabriel returned it—mocking, twinkling. Sam rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t stop grinning. Then he let his eyes travel around the table.

On one side of the bench, Dean: turned sideways to straddle the seat, elbow leaning on the table, his
other arm draped loosely around the waist of the angel who was lounging back against his chest. Beside them, Charlie was leaning across the table to argue with Jo (on Sam’s other side) over the sketch they’d made on the table top with charcoal sticks from the fire. So far as Sam had gathered, they were trying to design an RPG around the description that Castiel had been giving of the culture and civic structure of ancient Babylon. Dean, mostly focussed on sleepy nuzzles into his angel’s neck, would ever now and then get so offended by what one or the other of the girls said that he’d have to interject and have a virulent opinion, then pretend he was too cool for that shit and back off into cuddles again. Castiel was mostly occupied in watching, stroking the back of Dean’s hand, correcting historical facts upon appeal, and moving glasses and bottles out of the way of emphatic gestures.

And Jess… Jess was leaning against Sam’s other side, contented and slightly buzzed, perfectly curled locks slipping across his throat, fingers with perfectly polished nails twined loosely through his.

“Won’t they need a foundry?” she put in. “I mean, all that metal’s got to be processed somewhere, right?”

Sam closed his eyes, and opened his other senses.

There were… threads, running between them all. Like cat’s cradle. Bonds. Love. Whatever you wanted to call them.

Connection.

They all fitted together, and it wasn’t like some soulmate thing, or the all-in-one investment of a marriage. This was a network, a cobweb, strength in sharing strength.

Perhaps each individual thread wasn’t necessarily stronger than a pair-bond could be—or perhaps it was—but they were all more supple. They all looped around each other, took many turns, had different points of strength and weakness. Any crisis would be more complex to resolve; but then, in a crisis, they’d lean on each other.

And nobody had to find their happiness and their love in just one other person. Nobody had to be shaped to be the other half of their “whole”.

The bond between Dean and Castiel was maybe the strongest bond between two individuals. Or maybe it was the one between Sam and Dean. But the girls were all woven in together, and Sam was tangled up on the edge of that, and Castiel had surprisingly sweet ties to Jess and Charlie and Jo as well—and, of course, to Sam. Balthazar had almost nothing except for the fierce burning loyalty to Castiel (and to Jo, which Sam hadn’t expected).

And then—there was something tentative or loving or laughing stretching out from almost all of them to one open space. Which was Gabriel.

Charlie looked at Dean, and laughed, and Castiel reached out with a tolerant expression and combed his fingers through her hair.

It was… a map. All of it, a strange and unexpected terrain with weird mountains and valleys constructed of nothing but human feelings, and Sam gathered it all up, gently as he could, and—instead of lust—sent the idea of that to Gabriel.

He didn’t look for the response. He just… let him know.

This space, here. And a place for you.
Gabriel gave no visible sign; but a few minutes later, the words wrote themselves on Sam’s skin:

*You know. If you were an angel. I’d call that singing.*

Sam smiled. Then he leaned his head against Jessica’s, and drifted.

He woke up when Gabriel made his way back toward the front of the hall, passing almost-but-not-quite by their table; and Balthazar sleazed back in their direction in time to hail him.

“Evening, captain. The antlers suit you.” He waved his glass in the general direction of Gabriel’s abdomen, and wrinkled his nose. *“That’s bloody plebeian, though.”*

Gabriel gave him a withering look. “Who let the tomcat in here?”

“Don’t look at me,” said Dean, all wary bravado. “Dick keeps tagging along after Cas.”

Balthazar grinned, unsquashable. “Came for the party, stayed for the free show.”

Gabriel snorted, and leaned over Jess’ shoulder to steal one of the cookies she’d brought along. “Just pick up after him if he shits on the floor.”

Jess rapped the back of his knuckles. “Uh-uh. I call those Persephone cookies.”

Gabriel sniffed at one, and quirked an appreciative eyebrow. *“Pomegranate molasses?”*  

“Uh-huh!” Jess beamed. *“You eat them, you have to hang around.”*

Gabriel tossed it to Fidget, who caught it out of the air with a happy snap, and shook his finger at Jess. *“Not your turn to bargain yet, you little minx.”* Then he was gone, sweeping away back about his business.

Sam narrowed his eyes at his back. So that was how he was going to play it. It had to be a deal. Well, Sam had more or less expected that.

To win, they had to draw him into the excuse of obligation. And they’d come prepared.

The evening wound on. Fidget was curled up by Charlie’s feet with her nose tucked into her tail. Fitzwilliam was using her as a mattress, and chewing at her ear in his sleep.

The last petitioner asked for his sister’s wife to wake from her coma. He offered the first painting he’d made of the couple after their wedding.

“I accept,” said the god, and the deal was struck.

The man left. The hall was left empty but for them.

The god settled back into his throne, laid his hand over his stomach, and let out a long breath.
Then his gaze swung, slow and heavy, to land on them.

Sam tilted his cheek against his hand, and returned the look.

“You know, I don’t really do group petitions,” said the god. “It’s a thing.”

Sam swung to his feet, and stretched, hands above his head. The god raked his eyes over Sam’s body, and licked his lips, with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

And wow but that brought back memories. Memories that made Sam’s jeans feel tight. Only this time, the balance of power was very different.

Sam could work with that.

Jo rose, apparently not tired at all, and paced straight toward the throne. Sam followed behind her, with Dean and Charlie in their wake. Gabriel looked at them, and drew them in.

Castiel didn’t bother to rise. He kept his seat, narrow-eyed and faintly impatient. Jess stayed curled up against his side; but she watched.

Jo walked straight up the steps. For a moment she looked like she was going to just get right up in his face, but at the last moment she dropped to one knee. And stared up at him, unblinking, from the space between his feet.

“So,” she said, and grinned a challenge. “We come to desire—or require, we didn’t really agree on the wording—”

“Smooth,” he said.

Sam stood behind Jo, arms crossed, looking at Gabriel. Gabriel pretended he was only watching Jo. His fingers were trailing slow lines on the arm of the chair, one after the other.

“Family,” said Jo. “That’s the request.”

She left it for a beat or two, as Gabriel arched an eyebrow, and pointedly lifted his gaze to Sam, to Dean and Charlie, to Jess and Cas, and even beyond to the where Balthazar must have been draping his disturbing self all over one of the benches, and watching. As if to say, you ask for what I have already given.

“Family,” said Jo sweetly, “with you in it.”

And there dropped the expected penny. Gabriel laughed, fake and prepared.

“On what grounds?”

“The grounds that you’re part of this fucking mess,” said Dean, and Castiel sighed noisily behind them. “Dean. The grounds, Gabriel, that you’re my brother—a title which in your case has meaning that I would like to explore and redefine relative to what it has meant for me for a very long time and what it means to me now—and something different and meaningful to each of the rest of them.”

Gabriel’s mouth curled, and he nibbled at his own thumb.

“With what terms?”

“Well, you kinda know them,” said Charlie pointedly. “You signed the contract too, hot stuff. And you’re rocking the woodland princess look, bee tee dubs.”
A lifted eyebrow. No other response but the formal: “And what do you offer?”

Jess yawned, muffled against some part of Castiel’s body. “Oh, you know. Hot chocolate every now and then. A place in the dishes roster. Cookies.”


“To win,” said Sam; and Gabriel’s attention fell on him like a stone.

Sam took a step forward: upwards, half a foot, toward the throne.

“You’ve been tweaking the board from the beginning,” he said. “Sure, a whole bunch of the pieces got away from you. And the terms of victory changed. But we’re all still here, and so are you. You made that happen. You made victory.” Gabriel’s face was stony, but Sam felt the flinch and the desire. “You even made victory’s prize,” said Sam, “long before you thought it’d be claimed. So? Come and claim it.”

Gabriel’s eyes bored into him like white-hot coals.

Sam stepped up one more step. Then he shrugged, and grinned a diffident and sheepish kid’s grin.

“You gave us a home and a family, Gabriel. Come home. Join us.”

“I have no home,” drawled the lost archangel. But his eyes were a test and a laugh, with something questioning behind.

“Oh,” said Sam, “huh. Right. So, offerings, is it?”

He turned, and stood to the side of the throne. And he looked at them all.

Dean huffed and rolled his eyes. Charlie grinned madly. Castiel met Sam’s gaze steadily.

Jess stood up, and rubbed her eyes, and came toward them, drawing something from her pocket.

“Matilda,” she said, and beamed shyly. “My dad gave me this copy. When I was, four? I think. It’s a thing, you know.”

Gabriel lifted an eyebrow, and looked at Charlie.

“Well, we’ve got a tradition going, haven’t we?” she said, grinning. Scissors appeared from the pocket of her jeans, and she gestured vaguely with them in the direction of her long red locks. “I mean, last time, you said you couldn’t do it. Mum and Dad? They’d been dead too long. You couldn’t give me back my family. So, turns out, you became family instead, right? I mean, it wasn’t the bargain. You just hung around. You refused the whole Rapunzel thing last time. But hey. I think I’d look cute with short hair. So, same as last time. Up for it, Scarlett?”

Gabriel drew back—leaned heavily against the back of the chair, spreading his hands out on its arms—and looked, wordless, at Dean.

Dean grumbled.

“Seriously? Fine. Okay. Look.” He lifted the thong from around his neck. “Right, so, I only half like you, and I’m so not going to come out with the other L word. But you’re a part of what we’ve got going on. And. Well. You’re a dick. But not a treacherous one like I thought. I mean, you’re worth keeping around. Probably. Unless you screw Sam over again. So. Apparently you’re looking for your dad, and. I know what that’s like, and Cas said this might help. Take it or leave it.”
He weighed the amulet in his hand. Then he crossed his arms over his chest and glared daggers at Gabriel.

“Huh,” said Gabriel quietly. “It counts.”

Then he looked at Castiel.

Castiel rose, and came forward, to stand with his shoulder set solidly against Dean’s.

“No concrete offer, I’m afraid,” Castiel said. “I have nothing physical that means anything to me, except for this body you made. And things that don’t belong to me—Sam, Charlie, Jess, Jo. Only.”

He laced his hands together and looked gravely at Gabriel. And he made his offer.

Even now Sam could hardly parse its intricacies, or the sweet, aching weight of it. He could only see glimpses of family, and grace, and forgiving, and hoping, and love.

Gabriel’s face quivered. And the colours around him fled, to hide behind a fragile trembling wall of defiance.

Castiel didn’t look away.

Gabriel laughed, and looked at Jo.

She winked at him, and lifted her chin.

Then she pulled a stick from her pocket, and handed it to him.

“I peed on it,” she said brightly.

“Oh my god, seriously?” muttered Dean, and palmed his own face. Charlie whacked him on the arm.

Gabriel looked at the stick.

Then he looked at Jo. Then he looked down at her stomach.

“So, I did good,” he said, somewhere between blankness and laughing.

“I swear I didn’t go off the pill,” she complained. “I don’t even know which one of them is the dad yet. And maybe it won’t last, but. And I know this isn’t the kind of thing I should want, but, I want it. I’m keeping it, okay? And it’d sure as hell better have a cousin hanging around, you hear me angel?”

Gabriel looked at her for a long moment. Then his eyes flicked every so briefly to Sam, and back again.

The god rose from his throne, and came toward her. She watched him come, with confidence and joy.

He reached out, and laid his hand splayed and firm over her flat belly.

Then he smiled. And looked at Castiel.

“I did do good,” he purred. Then he tilted her chin up, and kissed her hot and deep.

Sam cleared his throat.
Gabriel flipped him off, without looking up. They took their sweet time. All the colours around him were gathering and solidifying into one well-defended, sarcastic kaleidoscope of blue and red.

Then Sam and Gabriel’s gazes met.

Yeah. Time to do the thing.

Sam put his hand into a pocket, heart pounding in his throat. Then he dropped to one knee.

“We want you to come home,” he said.

Gabriel stayed still. All of him. Colours, face, body, voice. Nothing.

Sam offered the archangel his mother’s ring.

And again, for another moment, there was nothing. Then the archangel’s brightness splintered into brilliant shards.

“Hah,” said Gabriel, and his mouth tugged into a wicked weak curve. “You just don’t want the kid to be born in sin.”

Sam didn’t rise to the joke.

“I want both of you,” he said, serious as he knew how to be. “I want you. Not just the kid. Gabriel. Look.”

He rose, and came forward. Gabriel, one arm still around Jo, the other curled protectively over his belly, moved nothing but his eyes as Sam came toward him.

Sam stopped, a little way out, and sent up a silent plea to anybody but Gabriel that he knew what to say next.

“I. I’m not going to say that that gives me some right to tell you what to do, some kind of claim on your body, any more than I would to a woman. That’d be a dick move. But, please. I want to get to know that kid. I know you do too.”

And that was a flinch, right there: too sensitive, back up.

Sam reached out a hand, and laid it over Gabriel’s where it rested on Jo’s arm.

“There’s a whole world out there I want to explore,” he said. “I want you to show me the places you love, and I want to show it to you, Gabriel. As a person, with your hands and your breath, not as some all-knowing creature laughing at us from behind a wall. Maybe you weren’t trying to get attached but you chose already, long ago. Face up to it, yeah? Please.”

Gabriel lifted an eyebrow at him.

Sam opened his mouth and closed it again—huffed out a sigh, and found no more words.

“That all you got?” said the archangel Gabriel.

But there was a warm thread running through that—a vibration like laughter in all the frozen colours around him—that made Sam narrow his eyes. And shove at Gabriel’s shoulder.

“You,” he said. “You dick.”
Gabriel tipped his head back, and laughed.

“Oh, honey. You still think the only senses I can trick are your eyes and ears? I can fool everything except that brain of yours.”

And it all rippled out from him, the delight and the wonder and the joy and the love. The sheer vastness of adoration that an archangel was meant to be.

Sam reached for him, or Gabriel reached back, and Charlie laughed and was tugged in against their sides, and Dean swore and said something rude and Jo and Cas and Jess were right there and—

“I accept,” declared the god.

And the words rang through the hall, before they were smothered against Sam’s mouth.

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