

# This Thing of Darkness

By Xela

Part 4 of the Heartless World Verse

Live Journal ~ A03

## Prologue

The world doesn't end in a day. Sam takes his time.

The government calls them terrorist attacks. It's easy to pretend at first, but as Sam and his demons get more creative it's harder and harder to hide the truth. People start leaving the major cities, moving into smaller communities where everyone knows your name and strangers are guilty until proven innocent.

The Old Ways start creeping back, meshing with new technologies to create new weapons, protections, and ways of utilizing magic. They meet shamans protecting the trucking routes and way stations; traders disseminating occult supplies; priestesses sanctifying radio towers and factories; psychics who can relay communications from around the world. Boundary Wardens reawakening and maintaining the old wards of town and cities, hedge witches who spark with power as people remember to *believe*. Everyone wears protective amulets and gris-gris, and an unwarded house is a sure sign of trouble.

People no longer talk of the Things that Go Bump in the Night in hushed voices. You can buy silver bullets in the corner store.

The world is changing, preparing for the end.

Sam sets up shop in Philadelphia. The city of Brotherly Love.

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Six months after they lose Sam, after seeing him surrounded by demons, receiving reports of increasingly depraved acts, searching for an answer or a cure but finding nothing, Dean shuts himself in an abandoned hotel room for three days, warded against angels and demons and prying psychic eyes alike. It would have been longer,

except Mer breaks into the room on the seventh day. The room reeks of alcohol and stale air. The walls are covered with printouts and photocopies. Recent reports of supernatural attacks of various scales laid side-by-side with excerpts from the Journal and handwritten post its. It takes a few incidents to make out the pattern because Dean didn't always have the names and some of the details were lost to time. But it's there, with every body and wanton act of destruction.

Her father doesn't move from where he's slumped on the floor, braced against the bed, eyes bloodshot and face drawn, a week's worth of beard on his face. She feels tears prickling at her eyes and fights them because that's what she does.

"Oh my God," Mer breathes. Dean laughs, a dry, brittle sound that speaks to just how he feels about *God*. She sits down on the bed, staring at the walls in mute horror. Numbly she slides down the edge of the bed beside him. Dean mutely hands her a bottle of whiskey.

"When..." She has no idea where to go with her question.

"Reno," her father says hoarsely, a printout crumpled in his hand. She pries it out of his hand, has to trade the bottle for it, and Mer reads about some guy who was found crucified in his apartment beside his tongue, flayed but still alive. He'd lived for *days* longer than he should. *Police and doctors still baffled...*

"Guy called me a fag," Dean chokes out. He lets out a drunken, humorless laugh. "Years ago. Jesus, Sam's been leaving me *presents*." For every attack there's a corresponding story. And in every case, Dean experienced...unpleasantness at the hands of humanity's lesser members.

"There's a symbol--"

"Mine," Dean says, and drinks straight out of the bottle. "'s San--Sanskrit. Means mine." It's Sam's favorite ancient language, he used to spend hours drawing the symbols when he was little, enjoying the way they looped and moved. Later--later Dean would wake up, Sam's hands tracing words over his skin, the delicate Sanskrit letters flowing down his spine.

"He wants you back," Mer says, sounding lost.

That's not the message, but Dean will die before he tells her that. He's still got some sense in his head. Because it's not that Sam wants him back--it's that Sam never let him go in the first place. Dean can only run so long.

Mer pours them each a shot and keeps on through the second bottle, where they abandon pretense and each claim a bottle for themselves. Dean tells Mer this is a Winchester right of passage, drinking to the lost with your Dad. In the end, Bobby comes looking for them and Castiel and Anna have to step in to keep them both from dying of alcohol poisoning.

The next morning Dean lets Anna carve symbols into his ribs that make him invisible to all forms of supernatural tracking. He'll need every advantage he can get to save Sam.

# Chapter 1

Dean sits beside the Grand Canyon. The sun is frozen in a perpetual state of setting, the sky painted in vivid pinks and indigos. It's like a postcard. It *is* a postcard. Because this is a dream.

A lucid dream, which means that it's only a matter of time before--

"And what merits a visit to the monolith of our childhood?" Sam settles beside him, too far in Dean's personal space. Dean waits, tense, but this isn't one of those dreams where he's only along for the ride. Sam nudges Dean, his elbow too sharp, and Dean shifts away.

"Not today, Sam." They've been playing this game for--too long. Dean is exhausted. Can't even get a moment of peace in his own head.

"What are you doing?" Sam asks. He sounds concerned. His hand settles on the back of Dean's neck, large and warm, fingers massaging tense muscles. Dean's first instinct is to lean into the touch; he's given in before. Hates himself every single time but these are his dreams, none of it is real. Sam sighs, as if he knows what Dean's thinking.

"What are you going after tomorrow, Dean?" Sam asks, his breath fluttering against Dean's ear. Dean shudders, eyes sliding closed, and half-heartedly jerks away. Sam hums and runs his lips the length of Dean's neck, his fingers slipping underneath Dean's shirt. "Is it a Seal?" Sam's teeth tug lightly on Dean's ear, distracting him. "Which one?" Dean grits his teeth and turns his head away because Sam's just told him tomorrow is meaningless. Even if he saves a Seal another will break.

"Will you stop it?" Dean asks, his voice coming out hoarse and choked. Sam always asks. Dean always lies. Except once, Dean had told him. Told Sam their target in some vain hope that he'd come to Dean, for Dean. That he might want to be saved.

They'd arrived and found everything laid out for the ritual-- gleaming blades, pentacle written in lamb's blood, the sacrifices lashed to tables at each of the Watchtowers. Alive. With bows on their heads. Sam hadn't *believed* him, but he'd let a Seal go anyways. Just in case.

"If I tell you, will you stop it?"

"Say you'll stay with me," Sam whispers. "Say yes, and I'll do whatever you want."

From one moment to the next he's on the other side of the Canyon. Sam screams but his empty words sail away on the wind. Dean turns away and stares off in the distance.

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It's bright and sunny when they pull up to the high school. The roads have been long abandoned and the school's windows are boarded. Unwelcoming.

Three teams—Dean's, Bobby's and Ellen's—have come together to try and save a school full of teenagers and a Seal. No time for recon, just a cryptic call from Castiel, coordinates and a timeframe. They've got maybe two hours to save everyone. Thing is they know better than to wander into a big fuck off school without knowing the lay of the land and only a sketchy idea of what ritual they're trying to stop.

Dean takes stock of who he's working with. Ellen's got Jo, Ichi and Ash with her. They lost their fifth a few weeks ago and it shows.

There's a scar on the left side of Jo's face, purple and angry, still healing from that clusterfuck. Ichi, a stocky Japanese American kid with a mohawk and a quietly menacing demeanor, is better at close quarters combat and knife fights than with guns. He has fingerless gloves studded with ancient, blessed silver blades at the knuckles that can kill demons. Dean wants them. Ash is hovering to one side making awkward conversation with Leslie, a doctor-cum-hedge witch who jumps from group to group and is currently travelling with Bobby's team.

Bobby only runs with seasoned hunters these days. Joe Mills, Creedy and Daniel Elkins—the man that first trained John Winchester—are all names he recognizes from Before. They never stick around long, too used to the loner lifestyle, but they'll run a few hunts and spread some gossip before they drift away, only to be replaced by some other lone wolf. Dean doesn't have to worry about them, they can all take care of themselves. And if they don't, well. They made their peace long before this Apocalypse.

Most of Dean's own team comes courtesy of Mer: Danny Chu and Trixton (no last name, thanks). Picked them up after a hunt in Scranton, the two of them green but scrappy, tagging along with a gypsy caravan. They had 'nice auras' and come time to leave were ensconced in the back of the Impala, Mer giving him a scarily bland look that just dared him to argue. Dean wouldn't have; he worries about her, cut off from everyone she knows. He never wanted this life for her but they didn't have much choice. He lets Danny and Trix hang around 'cause that the easiest way he can think of to avoid all the mistakes his father made. He doesn't think he's succeeding but at least he's trying. Her penchant for collecting strays is too reminiscent of Sammy to think hard about.

"Two groups," Bobby's saying as Dean brings his attention back. "One through the front, one through the back. There's so much EMF coming off the building the radios won't work but keep 'em

on anyways. Ash and Leslie stay behind."

"Mills and Elkin'll roll with my team," Dean picks up. "Bobby, Creedy, with Ellen. We move fast, we get this done, and we get out." Everyone sets to arming themselves with their favorite weapons, acutely aware of the clock ticking down. Mer grabs a shotgun and her matching semiautomatics, returns to their little circle and sidles up to Jo.

"Hey Jo, switch teams with me?" she asks casually. No one pauses in what they're doing but she has everyone's undivided attention.

Jo glances at her mom, then Dean, who's glaring a hole in his gun, jaw tight. Bobby looks annoyed but he has more sense than to say anything. Last thing they need is a teenage showdown before this fight.

Jo glances at her Mom, who gives a slight shake of her head.

"Sure," Jo says, equally casual. Dean snaps the clip back into his Glock and primes the slide with far more aggression than necessary and Jo makes a mental note to talk to Mer about suitable times to stage displays of rebellion. Mer walks over to Bobby with a grimly satisfied look on her face.

Trix and Danny exchange a glance then play a quick game of Rock Paper Scissors. Trix loses and heads over to the other group. Ichi sees him coming and saunters towards Dean like that was the plan all along.

Ellen watches Dean stew and build up to a head. He takes an angry step towards Bobby's group but she stops him.

"Not the time," she says softly.

"Yeah? Try telling that to *her*," Dean bites out.

"You can't keep her with you forever," Ellen says. She glances at Jo who's doing her best to look like she isn't hanging on every word. "I speak from experience. Let her have this one." Dean glares into the middle distance, jaw locked.

"It's not about that. She shouldn't be contradicting an order," Dean snaps. "She's throwing off our team dynamic, it's--"

"Boy, you are not your Daddy, do not pull that good little soldier shit with me," Ellen says, low and with a distinct thread of anger in her tone. "It never saved anyone." For a moment Ellen's pain is all Dean can feel; it passes, packed away per usual, but it helps clear away some of his own anger. "We're all used to each other; none of us are green. We've all fought together before, we will be fine, you let her have her little tantrum now or she'll pull it with a team you don't know."

"This one is going to be all demons," he tries to explain. "It's a Seal, she's--"

"Why do you think she chose it?" One day she's going to sit Dean down and explain a few things about the female teenager's mindset. After they all survive today. "You've got Bobby and Creedy on her, and I think Trix would walk through fire for that girl. None of them are you, but that's the point. So you either spend ten minutes arguing, order her and have a sullen, resentful soldier at your back or you *let it go*."

Dean's face goes blank and then he nods, once. Packs his irritation away, shifting to focused Hunter between one moment and the next. He secures his weapons and steps just inside Ellen's space, his expressions drawn.

"You can find her when this is over, and you let her know this does not. happen. again." Ellen swallows, refuses to let her nerves show

in the face of this hard, unfamiliar person. He holds her gaze for a moment, probing, and then steps back. "Lets move out!"

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Dean grits his teeth and dodges a knife thrown at his head. There's far more than demons guarding this place and way more than they expected to find. It almost feels like an ambush.

"'m out. Reload!"

Dean turns to cover Ellen as she drops to one knee and loads her shotgun with practiced efficiency. He nails two black-eyed demons in quick succession. He winces as a shot goes off right by his ear, taking down a third.

"Thanks, Jo," he growls over the tinnitus in his ear. "I didn't have that covered or anything." Elkins stands and they start moving through the abandoned school again, working together with an ease born of doing this far too many times.

"I could tell," Jo hisses venomously, "from the way you were just about to get killed." Dean grunts. They all pause as several sharp reports sound from elsewhere in the school and Dean spares a thought for Mer, Bobby and the rest of their merry band.

"Keep moving," Elkins snaps, brushing between them and taking point. They can't move too quickly, there are creatures lurking in the lockers. They've already been attacked twice. Dean really hates schools. This one looks like it's been abandoned for at least a year. Lockers are rusted, ceiling's caved in, end-of-the-world graffiti everywhere. The classrooms have all been empty so far. Except for the gym where they found a desiccated corpse hanging from a noose, a chair toppled over underneath it.

"I don't suppose your *source* told you where in the school this mass

sacrifice is taking place?" Jo says at his side. They don't talk about the angels much but Jo manages to make her disdain for them glaringly apparent at every opportunity. The angels mostly stay out of their way, absorbed in some grand plan that Anna and Castiel assure them means the destruction of mankind. But the few times their paths have crossed have just solidified Dean's "All Angels Are Dicks" theory.

"No," Dean says, peering into a classroom. It's dark and doesn't look like it's been dressed for a demonic ritual sacrifice.

Footsteps scurry behind them; Jo and Dean spin around, shotguns raised. Elkins and Ichi hold position, covering their blind side. Mills shifts constantly, scanning the lockers for movement, Danny mirroring him on the other side. They listen for any warning in the silence.

A figure launches itself out of the darkness and Dean fires on instinct. It screams, skin sizzling, hitting the floor with a wet thud. It pushes itself up and its face is a decaying mess of scoured flesh and rotten teeth.

"Shit, that's a Fury!" Dean recoils back, away from the poisonous claws swiping at him. Jo calmly steps in front of him and uses a spray bottle of holy water to drench the creature. It screams, an inhuman howl that crawls up Dean's spine. It launches itself at Jo, who ducks and slams the butt of her shotgun into its face. It dents the lockers and stumbles, dazed. That gives Mills time to pull out his silver-only gun and put a bullet through the creature's heart and head.

A series of muffled gunshots cut through the silent aftermath, one shot on top of the other fired from a semiautomatic. Dean counts the shots in his head and swears when he hits the end of a clip and the sound of gunfire ceases. Another series of shots comes from

the opposite side of the school. Shit.

"They've been split." He moves towards the sounds instinctively; Elkins puts a restraining hand on his arm.

"Dean," he warns. "Stop acting the fool. The best thing you can do for them is stop this mess." Dean strains to hear anything else but the school remains eerily silent. Dean swears and turns back to the task at hand.

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"Trix!" Mer yells as a demon jabs a broken pipe into her partner's chest, a sickening squelching sound filling the room as it's pulled back out. It smirks like it's won, but Trix is a badass and shoots it in its stolen face with some of his new-and-improved demon-hurting shot. The creature screams and vacates the dead host body, streaming into the air in a shower of smoke and sparks. It's going to be at least a week before the fucker can possess anyone else. Probably longer considering Trix hit it point-blank.

Mer hears more gunfire in the school and the sound of people moving swiftly through. Not her people, more demons, and Trix is slumped against the wall, bleeding. On top of that, she has no idea where Bobby, Danny and the others went. Fucking stupid getting split like that. Amateur. Her father's going to kill her if the demons don't get them first.

"Fuck!" Mer mutters. The footsteps are coming closer. She hauls Trix up by his shirt, using a little of her powers to make it easier—he's a short guy but solid muscle. The demons can sense her if she opens up too much, but Mer can only hope they overlook the tiny amount she's using now. "Christ, you have got to lay off the candy, T."

"Then what...would be the point...of living?" Trix pants, leaning

against her. His shirt is soaked with dark blood and his eyes are going glassy. "I don't feel good."

"You got yourself stabbed by a rusty pipe," Mer accuses, hauling him into an abandoned science classroom.

"Oh right," Trix says inanely, trying to move his feet in the direction she's guiding. "Sorry about that, kiddo."

"Thank me by staying alive, Trixton." She shuts them in a storage closet and rips her top shirt off to use as a makeshift bandage. Trix muffles a scream when she presses down against his wound. With what attention she can spare Mer imagines the confines of their hideaway and tries to encourage anyone walking by not to pay it any attention. It's a long shot but there's a possibility the demons will accept the suggestion and overlook them.

"It's bad," Trix mumbles, trying to pull his shirt to one side. Mer swats his hands away and checks the wound. It's still seeping steadily, and Trix is getting paler by the moment. "You gotta leave me. I'll be fine. Find you...later." Mer snorts and ignores him. She pulls a couple of pressure bandages from one of her pockets and puts them on underneath the ruined shirt.

"Yeah, right. Not going to happen." Trix's eyes flutter and Mer feels cold fear settle in her. "T? Shit, Trix, you can't go to sleep. You need to stay awake. Trix—" She senses several demons hovering in the hallway outside their hiding place and pulls *into* herself as completely as possible. They can't find her. She doesn't have a lot of room to fight here, especially with Trix out of commission. Can't find her, can't fin her, she's invisible, can't find her.

"The brat's here somewhere," a deep voice growls in frustration. Mer really wishes they'd stop calling her that. Sam put the biggest

bounty in the world on her head, the least they could do is respect their potential meal ticket. "I want her dead."

"Then keep looking!" another voice snaps back. "We already got her away from her keepers." Heavy boots stomp across the floor. Doors are flung open and slammed shut. What must be an entire bank of lockers crashes to the floor. Mer freezes as the outer door to their classroom opens and someone comes in. Light steps—a woman's body or maybe a teenager's, given the venue. The footsteps pause. Mer tenses as the demon continues walking and stops right in front of their hideout. Fuck, what if Trix's blood left a trail.

The door swings open on silent hinges.

The demon's host was pretty, a young woman with long blonde hair and green eyes. The demon tilts its head to one side then lets her eyes flicker black. Mer's gun doesn't waiver, held in her dominant hand while the other keeps Trix's insides where they belong. Her finger tightens on the trigger until it's at the pull point.

She doesn't fire.

She can hear her father berating her in her head, but something tells her not to shoot and Dad's number one rule of hunting is to trust your instincts.

The sound of gunfire comes from farther down the hall, moving away from their hiding spot. More footsteps rush past and away, presumably towards Bobby and the rest of the team.

The demon glances towards the hallway then back at Mer. Her eyes travel to Trix and the pool of blood spreading out underneath him. She tilts her head and Mer feels dark power slide over her skin like oil, leaving goose bumps in her wake. She curls protectively over Trix and glares, but the demon just smirks and

drops two hexbags on the floor. Even practically sense-blind Mer can feel how powerful they are. The demon turns away with a wink and Mer can hear her even, unhurried steps as she saunters away.

What the fuck?

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Judging by the number of demons pouring out of the basement door and the bodies Bobby and his team have already racked up, they've found the sacrifice venue.

"Bout time y'all showed up," Bobby grunts. "I'm running out of bullets."

"I'll believe that when I see it," Ellen says and blows the head off a tall teen in a sports jersey. Dean ignores the flair of regret he feels every time he shoots a teenage host body.

They've set up a pattern—two shooting, one reloading in rotation—that's helping keep the horde at bay, mostly because only so many demons can get through the doorway at once. Dean has a sinking feeling that the wrong kind of back up is about to come pelting down the hallway and then everything's going to go, almost literally, to hell.

"Bobby? Where the fuck is my kid?" Dean asks the second he has a chance to process. A particularly determined demon clings to his body despite the herbs and rock salt and gets too close for comfort. Bobby steps forward and jams the butt of his shotgun into its face, then shoots it again. The demon abdicates with a scream.

"We got split up. She's with Trix."

There are too many demons. It looks...it looks like the entire town

was infested at once. Or at the very least, any family with a teenager in it. Dean sees Creedy take down a young girl with dirty-blonde hair and his heart seizes in his chest.

*Not Mer*, he tells himself. He'd know. Without a doubt he'd know. He takes his fear and channels it towards the demons coming for them.

"They've doubled back behind us!" Elkins yells. Ichi, Mills and Jo peel off and take position guarding their flank. Dean's watch beeps: zero hour. Ten minutes to interrupt the ritual or the Seal breaks.

"Plan F!" Ellen barks out, and they fall into position. The goal is to get to the door as fast as possible, lob a few flash-bangs down the steps and hope it's enough to stall the proceedings. They line up, four covering, two moving forwards. It's like leap frog, moving forward person-by-person, gaining ground with rapid-fire.

It takes them too long to get there.

They lay down suppression fire while Creedy, Elkins, and Ellen pull the tabs and lob the grenades over the demon's heads one right after the other. They hear screams and curses and Dean's watch beeps again. The silence is deafening, only their harsh breathing audible in the aftermath. Nothing comes out of the darkened stairwell.

No one moves.

Ichi slides more rounds into his shotgun and Dean winces at the noise.

A Fury hurtles out of the darkness and slams into Elkin's chest. He fires wild and yells when its claws sink into his ribs. It's blown away from two sides by Mills and Jo, and just like that the fight's back on, demons thirsty for blood, uncaring that they're

bottlenecked in the stairwell. Dean has the sickening feeling that they're just killing host bodies.

Without warning a bright light fills the school and the demons fall lifeless to the floor, like dominoes pointing away from Anael.

"Deus ex angelica," Jo mutters to Dean, wiping sweat off her face. Her eyes are flinty. "It's the latest fad."

"We cannot stay long," Anna announces.

"Mer?" Dean asks, fear making his tone sharp.

"Concerned for her companion's safety but unharmed. They are in the science classroom." Dean forces himself to be rational and signals for Creedy and Mills to go get them.

"And the Seal?" Ellen asks.

"Unbroken." At least they have that, Dean thinks in relief. It's short lived when they finally enter the school's basement, carefully picking their way over broken bodies. Ellen cuts off a gasp before it's fully formed.

"They didn't have to kill them," Jo says, her voice small. Of course they didn't. She knows that, but even after everything she's seen this kind of massacre will never make sense. It never should. She abruptly turns around and walks back up the stairs, her breath coming in short bursts. Ichi follows close on her heels. Ellen takes a moment to lay a hand on Dean's shoulder before following her daughter up the stairs.

Dean forces himself to take in the sight, to linger over every dead teenager in the room and to commit their faces to memory. They're all Mer's age, high schoolers who hadn't had a chance to really experience life yet. Several of them have been killed in gruesome,

painful ways—the sacrifices, Dean assumes, from the expressions frozen on their faces and the tears still gleaming wetly. Or sport, after.

He squats down and closes the eyes of a young boy. The rest of the team checks for survivors but angels are fairly blunt instruments. It's easier to destroy everything in the vessel than separate the human from the demon.

"You shouldn't linger; I have information for you." For a moment Dean is filled with complete and irrational loathing for Anael and her distance from the scene before them. She claims she's out to save humanity but its suffering never seems to touch her. He wonders if saving humanity is just a side effect of her chosen agenda. He pushes the emotions down and paves them over with concrete.

"Yeah," he manages, and his voice comes out deep and rough. He turns to go, forces himself to look away.

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Dawn has just broken when they assemble in the kitchen of an extended-stay motel that's been long abandoned. They haven't paid for a room in months. Cash stopped working months ago, skills and trades more valuable than a piece of green paper.

"Move again, Trixton, and I'll stake you to the wall." Darling Leslie, diminutive but with more than a share of Power in her, patches them up with the attitude of a drill sergeant.

"If you ever got possessed," Trix says as she sews up his shoulder, "we wouldn't be able to tell."

"Sure you would," Leslie says cheerfully, tugging at the string. "I'd just let you bleed out on the floor while I laughed." Trix smiles

crookedly, but his heart isn't in it. They're all aware of Bobby, Mills and Creedy sequestered one room away. Sitting with Elkins and doing what they can while Fury venom eats away at him. Leslie gave Elkins a shot of morphine, but he hadn't wanted more than a small dose. Said he wanted to go out of this world with his eyes open or some old Hunter bullshit like that.

Dean studies them, his team and people, and wonders morbidly what it would be like to lose them. Danny is covered in grease and has car parts spread over one of the beds; his mechanical skills border on the supernatural and are always in demand when they meet with other people, but it's too dangerous for him to work outside right now. Jo and Ellen are mixing demon repellent and filling shotgun shells under Trix's direction. Trix will play up his injury to the full extent of his laziness once Leslie's finished with him, but he's got a sharp mind and an impressive intuition when it comes to the occult that's only matched by Bobby. And Ash...better not to ask what he's doing.

Which leaves gun cleaning duties to the Winchesters, something Dean could do in his sleep and doesn't really help him forget they're loosing a good man and a good soldier.

And he's still pissed at Mer but right now he's too tired to deal with that.

"You okay?" Dean asks his kid as they settle into their tasks. Mer rolls her eyes and were it not for the guns, Dean may have been able to convince himself they were just an ordinary family for a moment. Her eyes are bright but no tears will fall; they've both lost too many brothers and sisters in arms to let it show anymore. Not even to one another and Dean doesn't even have the luxury of wondering where everything went pear-shaped. He can chart it down to the minute.

"I didn't get stabbed." *Or clawed*, she doesn't add. Dean doesn't have the words to explain how that doesn't make him feel better at all, so he changes the subject.

"Anna left us a message," Dean says. He keeps a phone on him--largely a dead technology in this day--because Anna and Cas can always get a text to him. And even when she's actually around, Anna prefers to send him information by text instead of telling him face to face.

"Oh yeah?"

"We're headed to Appalachia tomorrow. She says there's something odd we have to check out." Dean tosses her a map, the coordinates already marked off.

"An angelic geo-cache," Mer sighs. There's no time to rest these days. There's always another hunt, another Seal to save. One right after the other. "Fantastic."

The dull sound of a fist crashing into drywall comes from the other room.

## Chapter 2

Sam stares out over Philadelphia, the lights of the city blinking merrily. He can see Independence Hall from the building he transformed into his personal headquarters. It appeals to his sense of irony to be situated in the birthplace of American Independence. He traces the outline of the Hall with his finger; he leaves a crude etching in his wake. If Sam looks through the window the right way it looks like Independence Hall is burning.

He likes that imagery—one building burning merrily while the others stand untouched. Then again the reverse has merit too, everything around it reduced to ash and one building left standing as a reminder of what was. He'll have to think about it.

He closes his eyes and reaches out for Dean, ignoring Alastair's droning. He's to the West and...maybe a little South. Alive, but that's all he can tell. Dean could be bleeding out and he wouldn't know until the moment their connection was severed and that is unacceptable. The lack of knowledge, of connection, grates on him. Knowing that people are keeping them apart fills him with rage.

Sam is reaching the end of his patience with this situation. He's let Dean run around on him, waited for him to realize he's on the losing side and that he belongs to Sam. *With* Sam. And what more can he do? He's left gifts and messages. Stood outside the fortress the angels made of Dean's mind, chipping away until the wards frayed and he could slip into Dean's dreams with barely a thought. He can offer Dean so many things if he'll just *come home*. But his brother is nothing if not stubborn, and he remains firmly devoted to his spawn.

He probes along the seams of Dean's defenses, brushes up against them and feels them tremble. They won't hold forever; Sam's

already weakened them significantly. But his blood burns and his patience runs thin.

"Samael—"

"I am done talking about this," Sam snaps. Alastair talks and talks and talks, always about the same thing. Wanting Sam to do this, move faster, be better, stop worrying about his brother. To understand that once he takes the final step he can have anything he wants, he just needs to shape up and take responsibility. Alastair too often reminds Sam of John.

"Dean is distracting you from—" Sam takes Alastair's ability to talk. He slides tendrils of his power into the essence of the demon and begins to unmake him, unraveling that which makes him whole.

"You will not talk about my brother again," Sam says softly. He brings his power to bear and Alastair's eyes turn white, his powers battering futilely against Sam's. A trickle of water against the ocean's tide. He knows how much Alastair wants his brother; wants to string Dean up on his rack and make him sing. Has offered to customize Dean for Sam's pleasure. Sam had carved his refusal and displeasure deep into Alastair's twisted soul. "And if I find out you've ordered him harmed in any way you will not like the consequences."

Alastair glares, even in the face of Sam's greater power and his...creativity for torture. A creativity Alastair has been fostering and shaping but it's not enough. They have a job to do, an apocalypse to finish and a fallen angel to free. He cannot do it without Sam, but Sam is dragging his feet, whining about his brother standing by his side. Alastair doesn't bother to explain that Dean and Sam can never stand together in this—Dean is the other side's champion, Sam is theirs and never the twain shall meet.

They were created to oppose. So Alastair slowly pushes their timetable along, though he is not a patient person and occasionally rushes things—like now. There are times when he wishes Sam would destroy him, just so he never has to deal with their wayward Boy King again.

Alastair cannot back down and Sam...Sam will continue to stall until Dean is with him or dead. Alastair knows which of those will be easier to accomplish.

"Oh dear." The tension breaks, Samael's focus divided; it is not Alastair's day to die. His savior moves into the room and Alastair feels a fresh well of hate rise in him. Never in his years of becoming a demon has he wanted to hurt someone so badly and yet been so powerless to do so. "Has Alastair been a bad, bad boy today?"

"Alastair hasn't learned when to keep his mouth shut yet," Sam says. He caresses the side of Alastair's face, increases the power bearing down on the demon before letting him drop to the floor.

"Ruby," Alastair rasps, straightening. He sways, weakened, and snarls at her smirk. "I see you failed. Again." The Seal she'd been ordered to break is still standing.

Ruby sashays towards the couch, cocksure and reeking of death. She blows an insubordinate kiss at Alastair and drapes herself enticingly over the blood-red cushions. Sam returns to staring out at the city, ignoring them both.

"Failed? But I found Dean and his merry band of do-gooders," Ruby says. She studies her nails with feigned disinterest. (She chipped a nail. Damn.) Sam turns to her like a pointer catching a scent and she layers on her act so it's flawless. Alastair simmers in his loathing, torn between asking her where Sam's obsession is and

his intense hatred for her impertinence. Alastair growls, frustrated, and Ruby grins. She slowly raises her eyes to meet his and their history stretches between them.

He remembers her from Hell, frightened and stretched out on his rack. He'd stoked the fires of her hate and carved her soul into pieces. She'd screamed promises of revenge with every cut until she learned to smile with the pain, to accept the marks, and enthusiastically take to her own training with the knife. Alastair knows her and that smile is about more than the loss of the Seal and 'stumbling' upon Dean Winchester.

"When I figure out what you're doing," he says silkily, "you'll never get off my rack." He'll enjoy drawing every scream, every admission from her. Ruby smiles at him coldly; Alastair's threats don't mean much while she's Sam's favorite. She shifts on the couch. A subtle scent fills the air, a warning that Sam is quickly losing his control.

"Leave now," Sam orders, his attention riveted to Ruby. He slinks forward, gait loose, leading with his hips. Alastair contains his disgust; he can't compete with this. Samael's fetish with his brother is inconvenient enough without Ruby making it worse.

"Yes, don't you have people to torture, Ali?" Ruby mocks. Samael hovers at one end of the couch and draws in a deep breath. "Your rack must be feeling so lonely with you up here playing politics." Alastair glowers but bows low to Samael before he exits.

"He was there," Sam says. He crawls over the armrest of the couch, predatory and intent. Sam scents his way up her body until they're flush together, his nose against her neck. She smells like leather seats, gunpowder, salt and home.

"He still looks like he's twenty-eight," Ruby says, exposing her

neck; Sam smiles at the gesture, appeased. He wraps his hands around her wrists and pins her down, his hips forcing her lower body to still. She feels his power slither over her skin, seeking something she can never provide, just mimic. It's always strongest, most convincing, if she's been close to Dean, his essence bottled him up and layered him over herself. Sam buries himself in the scent and rhythm she conjures. Sometimes this is enough, the illusion taking the edge off Sam's obsession. Most of the time it only winds him up, the pre-show before the main event.

Sam huffs against her skin, losing himself in Dean's scent. She shifts, causing Sam to tighten his grip, dig his teeth into the thin skin at her neck. She whispers under her breath, *solvo*, imbues the word with meaning, and Sam surges into her. His senses tell him she smells like Dean, that her heart beats like his, that Dean is here. With him.

Ruby slips underneath his defenses for a moment, hooks a bit of her power into the fabric of his being.

The mirage begins to fall apart; Sam pushes too far, wants too much. Wants *Dean* and substitutes won't do. He growls, a deep warning moving through him, when the body beneath him starts feeling too wrong. Doesn't react like it should. His fingernails dig into Ruby's wrists, drawing blood, and his power feels like pinpricks against her skin. Ruby feels the rise in danger, the knife-edge of Sam's arousal and his fury at not having the one he really wants.

"He doesn't dream without you anymore," Ruby says, pressing up into him, the rough denim over her thigh catching on Sam's erection--a familiar move he still associates with Dean. It's enough to make Sam pause, the rise of power momentarily checked. Ruby doesn't move, all too aware of Sam's unwavering attention and barely leashed violence.

"He still won't say yes," Sam says, his veneer of control slipping back over feral foundations.

"You can convince him; he's *yours*." Ruby nips his ear sharply, enough pain to make Sam hiss and chase the final vestiges of his lust away. She breathes easier when he rolls to his feet, towering over her. "Everything in him screams for you. You are *in* him. He can't hold out."

"Set it up." She keeps her fear and relief hidden, cloaks it with the intricacies of the spell she'll be weaving. This is a dangerous path to walk and each time she emerges relatively unscathed is a victory.

Ruby carefully mixes the ingredients in an intricately carved chalice, a steady flow of Latin tripping off her tongue. Sam watches her closely and misses nothing, but Ruby's not dumb enough to try anything. Sam could snap her like kindling just because he's had a bad day.

The potion will add an additional layer to Sam's shared dream with Dean; they're already tightly bound enough that Sam can step into Dean's dreams without assistance. But this will make any agreement Dean makes in the dreamworld binding in the waking world and give Sam's suggestions extra strength and sway. She stirs in the dreamroot and the potion turns grey.

"It's ready," she says at last, letting her exhaustion show. She'll be useless for days after this but it can't be helped. She barely has enough left in her for one more spell--just enough, in fact.

Sam wordlessly picks up a silver anthame and slices along the length of his forearm. The blood spills into the bowl and the mixture begins to swirl on its own.

"Blood to blood," she intones and the brew settles, deep red. Sam

drains it in a gulp and hands her the chalice. He lays back on the bed, vision already unfocused and hazy. His eyes slide-half closed and his breathing becomes deep and even, his fingers twitching and his muscles jerking as he slips into the Dreamworld. Ruby counts backwards from ten and then starts to work.

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Dean's in a strip club. A high-class joint that's empty, just red leather chairs around small tables with individual stripper poles. Polished mirrors glitter everywhere. He's sitting right in front of the main stage, in the honey seat. A deep, rolling bass beat starts up.

"Classy, Dean." Dean's head snaps up. Sam slouches against the pole, hands shoved in his pockets and hips thrust out. He's wearing a light blue shirt and loose jeans that show his hipbones and Dean cannot look away. Sam smirks and hooks his thumbs though his belt loops, hands spreading wide to frame his crotch.

"Like what you see?" Dean drags his eyes up to Sam's face. Sam smirks and reaches above him to grab the pole. He undulates his body, a slow, burning roll that makes Dean flush. He grips the armrests of his chair. Sam laughs at him, low and dirty and far too familiar.

"You're thinking to much," Sam admonishes. He grins, dimples showing, and for a second Dean can pretend the last year never happened, but he *can't* and he tries to stand up and escape. Dean gets pressed firmly back into the chair by broad hands that aren't there. His arms stick to the armrests and his feet spread and adhere to the chair's legs. He strains against the bindings but they won't budge. He sits back, swearing; he hates when Sam gets the drop on him.

"Just enjoy the show, Dean," Sam says with a touch of amusement.

Sam starts taking off his shirt with one hand, the other grasping the stripper pole above his head. It's lewd the way the buttons slide out of their holes, Sam's fingers nimble and deft. Dean sucks in a breath when the shirt falls open; being evil must come with a really good gym membership because Sam's more ripped than Dean has ever seen, muscles chiseled out of granite. Sam winks and grabs hold of the pole, swinging himself around so Dean can see every side of him. He flips himself over, up the pole, wraps his legs around it and slides back down, twisting slowly, arms spread wide as if he's being crucified upside-down. Halfway down he uses his hands again and holds himself parallel to the ground, arms straining to keep him upright. A rock of his hips has him spinning lazily around the pole, down down down to the ground.

"They teach you that in demon school?" Dean asks hoarsely as Sam gets to his feet. He tries to cling to his anger, to the feelings of loss and betrayal that follow him through his days. Sam just smiles like butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. Sam's belt makes a soft sound as he pulls it free. Dean presses his lips together and breathes through his nose. Sam pops open the button on his jeans and Dean can't hold back the soft exhalation that forces its way out.

Sam steps off the stage and right into Dean's space, looming. Dean has to crane his neck back to see Sam's face, miles above him.

"If you're very good, I'll let you touch," Sam whispers, and seats himself in Dean's lap. He's hot, so hot, and Dean's sweating so much his clothes feel uncomfortable. Sam knows—always knows—and his shirt slithers off so they're bare chest to bare chest. Sam moves, twists and rubs their crotches together, licks from Dean's shoulder to his ear.

It's the most effective form of torture Sam could devise.

Sam whispers things directly into Dean's mind—reminders of other times, promises for the future, images of Dean's darkest fantasies. Reminds him that there is nothing about Dean that Sam does not know—or will not accept.

Sam lays his hand right over Dean's heart.

His touch burns. His lips seal over Dean's mouth, sucks the air from his lungs. Dean's world tightens and becomes Sam, each point of contact all encompassing. Not enough, never enough.

*Come with me*, Sam whispers in his mind, dark and heady. Dean moans and presses deeper into the kiss, to the point where Sam's teeth are almost cutting against his lips and he needs more. *You're mine. You know you're mine, Dean. Say it.* Everything in Dean wants to say yes—longs to say yes. He needs Sam, wants him, wants more of him. He strains against his invisible bonds. Touch, need to touch, need to...his eyes flutter open and Sam's eyes are no longer human. Darkness blooms in their depths in little bursts, changing Sam's familiar eye color enough that it snaps Dean out of it.

"No." The word is ripped out of him, it physically hurts to say. Sam's look of disappointed betrayal is hard to bear. Dean wants to reach out, draw him close, apologize and give him whatever he wants.

"*Dean,*" Sam says, and he sounds...he sounds like Dean feels, needy and wanting and so fucking hurt—

Dean awakens up with a gasp, sweating and shaking. He knows if he looks there will be a fading red mark in the shape of Sam's hand

somewhere on his body.

He rolls out of bed, mindful of the others sleeping in the room. He won't fall asleep again but there's always something to fix these days.

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With great care Ruby rolls Sam over onto his stomach. She pulls a small packet of ground herbs out of a hidden pocket and quickly mixes the herbs into what's left of the potion—barely enough for what she needs to do—hyper aware of her surroundings. She waits agonizing seconds for the mixture to work, the different magical elements causing the liquid to bubble. When the concoction stops roiling she bites down hard on her tongue, drawing blood, and brings the cup to her lips. She mixes in her blood and saliva and feels the magic spark.

She drags her tongue over the expanse of Sam's back, the blood-potion dark against his skin. The sigil comes together with painstaking care, each figure laid out in precise measure over the canvas of Sam's back. When it's done, Ruby checks it one last time—a misplaced symbol could be disastrous.

When she's done, she whispers, "Papnor mad homil ol." The Enochian makes her shiver. The blood signs glow gold and then disappear into Sam's skin as if they were never there. But she can feel them, a faint echo in Sam, binding with the bits of herself she's slipped past Sam's defenses and left behind.

Satisfied with her work, Ruby slips into the bathroom to remove the evidence before Sam wakes up. She needs to rest, but finds the energy to mask everything she's done because even one slip-up will end her, and Alastair is ever suspicious.

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Zachariah transitions from Dreamworld to waking world with a ruffle of his wings. Humans are so base, rutting together in such an unseemly fashion. So easily distracted. Moments later Uriel materializes next to him and snarls.

"I stink of humanity," he says disdainfully.

"We all must make sacrifices." Zachariah hums, a habit ingrained deep enough within his host that it's bled out into his own habits. A quick search of his host's memories tells him it's *How do you solve a problem like...* "Dean."

"He's weak." It will forever irk Uriel that a human--this human in particular--is so necessary to their plans.

"He's human," Zachariah says, though the terms are synonymous. "Samael is getting to him. We're running out of time"

"We should take him. I know a few places we could keep him until he's of use."

"And then Samael will focus on getting Dean back and not opening the Gates of Hell. No. We need something bigger. Something that will drive a wedge even between two people so erotically codependent on each other as Sam and Dean."

"My sources say the demons are displeased with their Boy King's...obsession with his brother." Zachariah contemplates his options. Slowly a plan comes together, ways to remove all of his obstacles at once. Sam won't move forward without Dean by his side; the demons have been slowly breaking Seals, but they need Samael's power to break the biggest ones and to throw open the Gates of Hell. Just as Dean is needed to open the Gates of Heaven. And while they play their games, Heaven's plans remain stagnated, subject to Samael's reticence.

And then there's Dean's abomination. The unprophesied child. The wild card. Zachariah hates when things are out of place and unpredictable. And that, he realizes, is the solution to all of his problems. Simple and elegant in its conception, for it has already driven a wedge between the brothers Winchester.

"Get word to your sources. I have the solution to all of our problems."

## Chapter 3

"I'm telling you, you took a wrong turn," Dean says, tracing their route with his finger. There's just enough natural light to see by, the sun breaking over the eastern Tennessee Mountains in a series of soft colors. They've driven non-stop for days to get here and while the road they're on is taking them vaguely in the right direction, he's pretty sure it's not the one they want. At least no one's around to witness their mistakes; Ellen's company is in Texas chasing leads. Bobby's crew has detoured to bury Elkins.

"We haven't made a turn for miles," Mer sighs. Damned if she's going to let Danny take the fall for this. Dean was driving when any turns were made and one day he'll learn to switch out drivers when he starts navigating by the fading white lines on the side of the road.

"I think that's his point," Danny says, glancing at her in the rearview. Mer's slumped against the window trying to take a nap and argue with her father at the same time. She catches Danny's eye and makes a face.

"Danny! Eyes on the road!" Dean orders, knuckles white on the door handle, eyes wild. Danny huffs in frustration and dutifully returns his full attention to the endlessly empty mountain road. No one travels much these days except Hunters. The civilians that do wisely move about in caravans with lots of guns, safety in numbers. And even Before this road was probably sparsely traveled, the backwoods of Appalachia. "You ever put a dent in my baby, Danny Chu—"

"Dad, you're supposed to be sleeping," Mer admonishes muzzily.

"Yeah, yeah, I'll live to regret it," Danny finishes with an eye roll. Like he hasn't heard it a million times. Like he isn't the best

precision driver and mechanic Dean's ever met; a car hasn't done something Danny didn't ask it to since he was twelve. That doesn't impress Dean when his baby's involved. It had taken months and a dozen emergencies to convince Dean that Danny could be trusted with the Impala, that he and Mer couldn't drive for days on end because rest was sometimes required and it was downright *fatal* not to have them all in as good shape as possible. Still, Trixton was never allowed to touch the wheel, not even to shine it.

"To be fair, you'll be dead before you regret it," Mer says, "but I'm sure you'll spend your afterlife contemplating your sins."

"We definitely took a wrong turn," Danny says slowly and the atmosphere turns serious in an instant. The fairly well maintained road abruptly gives way to crumbling, overgrown concrete that predates Sam's ascent to power. Danny brings the Impala to a stop just before a giant pothole that would rip the Impala's undercarriage to shreds.

"Mer, wake Trix up." Mer obediently pokes her friend into groggy awareness. Leslie had healed him as much as she could but his shoulder's still mostly held together by spelled string and prayer.

The road curves to the left and disappears from sight. Dean feels a sense of *deja vu* settle over him and...something else. He gets out of the car and walks down the road chasing the feeling. It only grows with every step. It's old but not menacing--it feels like being wrapped in a warm, familiar blanket.

"Wards," Mer says, coming up beside him. "Old wards. Really old."

"But still strong," Dean muses aloud. Mer shrugs noncommittally and looks to him for guidance.

Wards like these--not that he's ever felt anything quite like them,

but the principle stands--take time and effort. So someone's maintaining them. For a long time, according to Mer. They're not evil, so there's a good possibility the people at the other end are friendly. Ish. Might teach them how to cast these wards and maintain them. Or they could be psychotic, that seems to be an option a lot of people choose. So.

"I think we're supposed to go," Mer says. There's a niggling little impulse she identifies as not entirely her own telling her to follow the road. Not overpowering or manipulative, just a simple directive.

Dean nods once and heads back to the car. He riffles through the weapons locker because there's no way he's going in unarmed.

"Either of you feel like following the yellow brick road?" Dean asks. Trix shakes his head, pressing a hand to his injury.

"Whatever you want, Boss," Danny says with a shrug.

"Okay. Guard the car with your life." Dean takes a shotgun with him; Mer tucks a single handgun and a flare gun into her double waist holster. Dean clips a short-range walkie to his belt. "We'll be back before morning. Come get us if we call or signal."

"We'll be watching," Danny assures him. His turns to Mer and says, for her ears only, "If y'all get into trouble, I'll risk the Impala's suspension."

"I don't think you'll need to," Mer returns just as quietly, a small smile on her face, and starts down the road after her father.

The road winds deeper into the forest before it narrows, barely a car's width wide. The concrete is even more cracked and overgrown here, turning into sand in some places. Something tugs at his consciousness and Dean inhales deeply.

"Smoke," he says. Mer nods her acknowledgement; she's got an absolute shit sense of smell, which comes in handy when the things they hunt explode but the rest of the time is a handicap. "Couple miles, I think." They keep walking and the day moves into early evening.

They round a bend and walk straight into the town that time forgot without any warning. An ochre-and-white sign welcomes them to Clinch.

The town is clean and well maintained, a tidy cluster of homes spilling into the woods. The brick is worn by age and the wooden slats are hand carved. The glass in the windows is rippled instead of perfectly translucent. There's a general store, a smithy, a haberdasher, a well, a dentist-cum-doctor and a few other buildings with no sign out front. The wide main road leads to a large meeting hall.

The entire place is eerily quiet, the only sound a stream or river off in the distance.

"Where are we?" Mer asks wonderingly. The hard-packed dirt roads have wagon-wheel grooves in them and hoof prints to match. Dean signals Mer to cover him while he dodges into the general store and takes a cursory look around.

"No dust, no people, but there are things that look new in there. Fresh produce and meat. No packaging or prices on anything," he reports. "But the ledger has today's date on it. Right year and everything."

"Okay, now that's weird," Mer mutters.

"Gets weirder." Dean holds out a standard Bic ballpoint pen, white plastic body with a black cap. It seems incongruous in this place that could be on a sepia postcard from the 1930s. "It works."

The silence is abruptly cut by the sound of muffled laughter and they turn as one, alert and tense. Two people stand on the porch of the meeting hall, framed by the white doors. There's an almost palpable air of expectancy to them.

"You got a feeling about this?" Dean asks out of the corner of his mouth.

"Not a one," Mer answers, a little put out.

"Me neither." They glance at each other, a world of trepidation transmitted in that look, and head cautiously down the street.

The figures reveal themselves as a wizened man with milky, sightless eyes and an equally old lady with a cane lowering themselves into rocking chairs. The man's eyes focus on each of them in turn and Dean feels the unmistakable sensation of a consciousness brushing over him, *into* him. Mer straightens and brushes their hands together, using each other as a shield, so he knows she's feeling it too. He glances at her, sending out a little query. She shrugs sends back *still nothing; don't like that*. The woman snorts as if she can hear them.

"Well then, get on with it. We've been waiting for you," the woman says. She taps her cane imperiously on the porch.

"Uh..." Dean's always been eloquent in surprise.

"Is a shame the fate o'the world rests on youthful shoulders," the blind man sighs. "Y'all got no trainin' fer it."

"And what would the like of us do with the world, George?" the woman asks, amused. "Now, Dean Winchester, ask your questions 'fore the day is gone. You still have a ways to go." While Dean's used to his reputation preceding him these days, he doesn't think that's how this woman knows him.

"You shoulda took a left, you know," George tells them, "back at the fork."

"I told you," Dean hisses triumphantly, nudging Mer in the ribs. She scowls at him and he smirks. A polite cough draws him back to their hosts. "What is this place?" he asks, getting back on track.

"Cinch," George answers promptly.

"Ours," the woman says on top of him. She turns her gaze to Mer for the first time and her eyes are sharp. "You can call me Gran Emer." Mer nods and realizes that this is what most people must feel around her, when she plucks thoughts and impressions from the air as easy as others breathe, answering questions that haven't been asked. Gran Emer nods with something like approval.

"Is there a reason we're here?" Dean asks sharply, protective of his kid. Though he has a feeling George and Gran Emer see right through him. Gran Emer reminds him too much of Missouri for his peace of mind.

"Well, we had ta meetcha, didn't we?" Gran Emer

"Because you knew we were coming," Dean says, deciding the direct approach is probably the best here. He's pretty sure these two are the foci of the wards.

"Because we know you will come," Gran Emer answers and a chill shudders down Dean's spine, a sense of deep foreboding settling in his bones. The door opens, raucous laughter disturbing the air, and Dean's grip on his gun tightens. A slip of a girl, her long hair in a braid, and a younger boy with shaggy hair join them on the porch.

"Y'all need anything, Gran Emer?" the girl asks, flicking a glance at the newcomers. The way she says it, 'Gran' is a title of respect. She catches Dean's eye and blushes fiercely.

"You two go get our guests a plate," Gran Emer instructs. The girl bobs a curtsey and drags the boy, who's staring with unabashed interest at them, along behind her. They can hear her whispering recriminations at him until the door closes silently behind them.

"Senia and Henderson," Gran Emer says, nodding after them.

"Grandkids?" Dean asks.

"In a way. They're young but George and I will leave this town in good hands when it's time." Dean pulls his attention back to their hosts. Again he feels the familiar crawling sensation of a psychic who isn't Mer (or Sam, his treacherous mind whispers) reaching out to him, the touch clumsy and lacking in finesse.

The silence stretches between the four of them. Senia and Henderson return with four plates, each piled high with food. Dean realizes all his favorites are on his plate, and when he glances at Mer, her plate is full of food she enjoys as well.

"Not a lot happens in these parts without us knowing," George says. "'s how we like it. Quiet. It's a good life."

"But you, boy, you can't go nowhere without causin' a stir, can ya?" Gran Emer picks up, smirking at Dean. "Trouble with a capital T." Dean shifts uncomfortably; he can't shake the feeling there's an entire subtext to the conversation that he's missing.

"So then why am I here then?" Dean asks. The food, fresh and piping hot, smells like home and tastes even better. Dean thinks briefly of a small house on a sleepy lane in Iowa, the smell of fresh pancakes in the early morning air.

"Like I said, shoulda gone left," George says, and he wheezes at the end of his sentence. Dean's half afraid the old man will keel over in a strong wind. George huffs a laugh that turns into a

hacking cough. "Don' worry yer head, young buck, I's gots time left t'me yet. Don' bury me afore my time." Gran Emer pats George's leg reassuringly and Dean shields his thoughts as tight as he can.

"Now don't go gettin' huffy," Gran Emer says, amusement coloring her voice, "ain't no danger from us. Like was said, we just needed to meet you first 's all."

"First?" Mer asks suspiciously. She's bristling protectively and it's cute, even though Dean knows what she's capable of.

"Yes indeedy, little miss," George says agreeably.

"Cryptic psychic bullshit," Dean mutters under his breath.

"You say something, boy?" Gran Emer snaps and Dean straightens up automatically. Missouri has trained him to that tone far too well.

"No, ma'am," he replies, and stuffs some cornbread in his mouth. This has been the most surreal meeting...probably not ever, but definitely in the top three. "Though with respect, I don't think I'll be coming back here again. It's a little...out of my way." George and Gran Emer share a look born from years of association, the kind of look Dean remembers sharing with--someone else in his past.

"Well you might just be right about that," Gran Emer says, but she's looking sadly at Mer. Dean feels another shiver go down his spine and Mer...looks pale and defiant. He shifts so the back of his hand brushes against hers and—okay, wow, so much more than anger and they will have to have a talk about that.

"It's getting late," Mer announces, moving away from him. Folding back in on herself. She places her plate on the wide railing; she

hasn't eaten enough. Dean glances at the sky and she's right. It'll be full dark by the time they get back, but they don't have anything supernatural to fear here.

"We've got people waiting on us," Dean says cheerfully. "We should get going." Mer makes an impatient noise, already at the foot of the steps.

"Be safe, Dee," Gran Emer says. Dean pauses, but lets it go; he'll never see these people again. "And we'd be much obliged if you kept us a bit of a secret. Dark times coming."

"Coming?" Dean asks skeptically. "They're not already here?"

"Thank you for your hospitality," Mer says, years of Whitney's insistence on politeness winning out over her discomfort. She tugs on Dean's sleeve, eager to go.

"You're welcome," George calls after them. "And don't forget to go left!"

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Danny's busted out the night vision goggles and Trix is passed out in the backseat by the time they emerge from the darkness. He's plugged the hotplate into the Impala and heated up some chili.

"What'd you find?" he asks, handing them a couple bottles of water. Dean shrugs; he feels strangely unforthcoming about their time in Clinch.

"Nothing worthwhile," Mer says dismissively. Dean gets the feeling she's not just talking about the town. He also gets the feeling Danny doesn't believe them for a second but he's learned not to ask questions.

"Bobby radioed while you were doing nothing worthwhile." While texting tends to come and go, most of the hunters have gone to long-range radios, and there are new relay points scattered around the country. "He says Missouri's headed to Five. You want to meet before or after?"

Five will delay them getting to Anael's coordinates by a week or more. Two days to get there, rendezvous with Bobby and whichever other Hunters are in the area, pick up supplies and then two days back. Then again, Bobby might lose his whole team once they hit the meeting point. Dean weighs the pros of having another team (or more) at his back instead of stumbling through the woods blind, or hauling ass all the way back through the mountains.

"Hit the coordinates first. We'll bunk here for the night." They might as well take advantage of Clinch's wards while they can. "Have them meet us at the split. And go left."

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Dean trails his fingers over the accumulated things that litter their dresser. Deodorant, aftershave, a rarely used bottle of cologne, a money tray filled with coins. Dean's attention gets caught by an old macaroni-bedecked box colored with washable marker, a long-forgotten class project from happier days. He picks it up and turns it, studying its contours. Each piece of pasta is meticulously placed for maximum macaroni coverage. There's something rattling inside but when Dean tries to open the lid but it won't budge.

"I could help you with that clutter," Sam says from behind him, reaching for the box. Dean closes his hand protectively and holds it away from Sam. He can't be sure if this is really Sam or not, but he knows better than to give anything away.

"I like my 'clutter,'" Dean says pointedly, turning to face him.

Sam's eyes glitter dangerously.

"Maybe. But you *love* me, don't you?" Sam pulls Dean into a kiss by his shirt. Dean breaks his hold and tries to take over the kiss, to push Sam back, but Sam's a slippery customer and a few inches taller, which he uses to his advantage. And Dean only has one hand to really work with. Sam's hands come up and bracket Dean's face, large and encompassing. Dean grunts and tangles his free hand in Sam's hair, tugging on it sharply, but the pain just spurns Sam on.

Sam's hands move down Dean's body, bold and familiar, cupping Dean's ass and pulling him up on his toes. Dean bites down on Sam's lower lip in retaliation. It's a battle between them; this always is, these days. Dean can't keep Sam out of his head but he can let them both know he's not beaten.

One of Sam's hands cups Dean's elbow, his thumbs dragging over the sensitive skin at the crease before moving on. He circles Dean's wrist before lacing their fingers together. He uses his longer reach to tug Dean off balance, then frowns. He abruptly pulls out of the kiss and brings Dean's hand up to look at it. The box is inside Dean's palm, the image of it like a 3-D tattoo in his skin. Sam growls and rakes his teeth over the Dean's palm, sucks a bruise into the mark that obscures part of the box. Dean gasps, the scrape of teeth leaving him shaking with arousal.

"No," Sam growls when the box won't disappear. He huffs in frustration and closes Dean's hand, his grip crushing. Dean smirks and hip-checks Sam towards the bed. Sam's at his most possessive and won't be moved. He uses their momentum and spins them around until Dean goes crashing to the mattress. Sam pulls Dean's hands above his head. The headboard closes around his wrists and holds him in place. Dean snarls and bucks but Sam just balances his weight right across Dean's pelvis. Dean's cock grows fuller with the friction, the familiarity position and Sam grins with all the

mercy of a shark.

"I'm going to mark you," Sam says, and fastens his teeth on Dean's right pec. Dean hisses and writhes but Sam's like a terrier, shakes his head just enough to create deep impressions of his teeth. His tucks their hands together, then scrapes his fingernails over the sensitive pads. Sean grunts when Sam's nails draws blood right over the embedded box.

"Sam!" Dean yells, and tries to pull a defensive move with his legs. Sam blocks him easily. He uncaps a pen with his teeth, a thick felt calligraphy marker in dark red. Sam's eyes are squinty and his lips pressed together as he completes scrawling *Property of Sam W.* over Dean's collarbone.

"Possessive fucker," Dean grunts and shifts. Sam's writing skitters off, a thick black line down Dean's ribs, when Dean manages to press his thigh against Sam's balls and rub. A little more and he can plant his foot in Sam's chest and send him flying.

"You have no idea," Sam says with a sly smile. He starts drawing again, using the inadvertent mark as a guide and it takes Dean mere seconds to figure out what. Son of a--

"Penises are for black outs, Sam!" Dean yells, trying in earnest to get away. It's one of their few hard-and-fast rules, instituted after one particularly vicious summer when they almost blew a hunt because they were both too wary of the other to get enough sleep. Sam cackles and Dean feels him draw little splooge marks. He can lift his head enough to glance down his body and see the epic, veiny cock Sam drew on him. "You fucking c--"

Sam kisses him with fierce possessiveness and Dean is suddenly so achingly, astoundingly turned on he can barely breathe. Sam drags the pen over his heated skin and every stroke feels like it's drawing

a direct line between his cock and his brain. Sam drags the nib over Dean's nipple and it hurts and feels so fucking good. Dean's body shudders, almost a dry orgasm and he whines, the fight gone out of him. He needs--so much.

But Sam ignores him, concentrating on his masterpiece. His mark. Dean's fists clench reflexively and the sharp edges of the box dig into his palm; the edges cut into the scratches on his palm and his blood spills.

Sam must have finished because he surges upwards and kisses Dean, his teeth biting into Dean's lips. Dean knows this fight, they've been having it for years, and it's all the more fierce for what's happened between them. They both think the other might cave with just the right application of teeth and tongue and lips and cock; it hasn't worked yet, not even made a dent, but that doesn't stop them from trying.

Dean frees his legs and wraps them around Sam's waist, pulls the cocktease in tight. He ruts up against him, wanton and wild, breath hissing through clenches teeth. Sam grunts and lays biting, stinging kisses along Dean's neck, up to his ear where his hot breath makes Dean shudder. Sam reaches between them and the blunt head of his cock presses against Dean.

"Fuck, yes," Dean hisses. He realizes that whatever Sam's drawn on him has transferred, smeared a copy on Sam's chest, dark black lines and symbols against sex-reddened skin. For a moment Dean focuses on the symbol, something he's seen before, his hunter instincts trying to fight free but Sam surges forward, hikes Dean's leg higher and he gets lost in the feeling of Sam thrusting deeper, harder.

Dean rolls his hips and sinks his teeth right above Sam's jugular, the ones spot he knows drives Sam wild. Sam shouts and thrusts

harder, but Dean's arms are free so he uses them to flip them over. He overestimates and they tumble once, twice, the force driving Sam impossibly deep. They stop with Dean straddling Sam, his breath caught in his throat at the pleasure-pain of Sam's penetration. He's braced himself against Sam's chest and when he moves leaves behind a smear of red.

Sam doesn't give him any time to recover or adjust. He wraps his hand around Dean's dick and jacks him, thumb rubbing over the head and into the slit. Dean can't breathe, can't remember how that works and his vision swims, grays out and for a moment Dean wonders if that whole dying in your dreams thing is true.

Dean feels his orgasm coming, braces himself on Sam's chest and comes. The world around him sways, tinges white and sparkly and floods with warmth. He hears Sam cry out and arch beneath him. Dean opens his eyes and realizes he's pressed the box into Sam's chest and it's burning him. He rips it away and there's a random, chaotic imprint of the macaroni on him, bright colors seeped into the brands.

Sam pushes himself up; he's still hard, hasn't come, but for once that doesn't seem to be on his mind and Dean...Dean's forgotten what to do with that. He watches, wary, as Sam looks at him. His gaze darts from Dean's eyes and his lips, then down to his chest. He snarls and Dean flinches away.

"Dean," Sam breathes, eyes flat, and disappears. Their room is stifling in its silence.

He raises his hand and finds the box nestled there looking so innocent. Some of the color has come off on his hand, staining the skin in a riot of mixing colors. He tries the lid again. It opens easily and a small piece of paper falls out, yellowed and fragile. Even as he unfolds it bits crumble off, fading away. He can barely make

out the writing on the paper, some of the carefully formed letters in large, shaky child's font--each letter precisely and painstakingly put down--nearly non-existent.

*For Atta and Dada, Happy Father's Day! Love Mary Winchester*

The edges of his reality starting to collapse, his mind surging up to awareness, and Dean watches the paper crumble into nothing.

Sam wakes up. He rolls over and stretches, joints popping. He lays there, naked on blood red silk sheets--sometimes, it's really wonderful being a cliché--taking in the daylight.

"Good night?" Ruby's curled in a large plush chair, a very old book open on her lap.

"Fine." Sam abruptly rolls out of bed and on to his feet, bouncing with energy and still gloriously naked. She looks him up and down and he allows it; her admiration amuses him.

"You did it." Ruby draws her finger down Sam's chest and he feels a thrill of pain. The bonding mark he'd painted on Dean last night, and subsequently taken unto himself, stands out a pale pink. Though weakened by being cast in the dream state, the bond will still try and pull them together. Strengthen their ties.

Dean will fight, but Sam will win. He's almost got all his pieces in place.

Ruby frowns and reaches towards the brand high on Sam's shoulder, just under his collarbone. Sam intercepts her hand, the atmosphere turning lethal in seconds flat. There's murder in Sam's eyes, the kind of rage he only reserves for one person so she lets it go.

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Bobby looks like he needs a break and Dean hopes Anna hasn't sent them after some sort of über demon or whatever. They mix up the cars, Trix stretching out in the back of Bobby's extended cab with relief.

It takes them two days to get to their final destination. The road they're on, which wasn't well maintained to begin with, turns away from the coordinates. They find a pull off, overgrown and well hidden, that gets them a little closer but eventually they have to pitch tents for the night and continue on foot in the morning. Trix and Leslie stay behind to guard their camp.

They hike for almost three hours through dense foliage until the forest gives way to a clearing, the center of which are Anael's coordinates. The trees stop abruptly in a precise curve. The clearing itself is covered with lush grass and a few clumps of flowering shrubs—nothing that grows above the knee—dot the landscape.

"Well that ain't natural," Bobby grunts, slinging his pack between his feet. They spread out along the border, none of them setting foot onto the grass. Bobby reaches into his bag of tricks and pulls out some binoculars and an EMF, which he hands to Dean. Mills and Creedy start tossing various things past the border to see what happens, but everything just lands on the grass like normal. Mer settles down on the ground and tentatively reaches out with her mind, Danny hovering over her protectively.

"Near as I can tell, it's a perfect circle," Bobby says. He hands the binoculars to Dean. "Creedy, you wanna take a walk?" Creedy grins at them a little maniacally and disappears into the woods with barely a whisper.

"This thing isn't even bleeping," Dean grumbles. Normally everything gives off a little EMF—an impression of something left behind, the echo of an emotionally charged event. Enough to make the needle twitch. But here? Dead as a doornail.

Dean scans the edges of the clearing and frowns 'cause Bobby's right; he can make out the smooth curve of the tree line that doesn't occur in nature.

"How big do you think it is?" he asks. He reaches out a hand and pokes at the air. He doesn't encounter any resistance, no tingly feeling of a spell, no flair of warning.

"Maybe two miles wide. I don't like it." A bird caws loudly and wings its way towards the edge of the clearing; they all let out a breath when it crosses the threshold without incident, disappearing into the distance.

"You gettin' anything, Mer?" She doesn't respond which worries them both. Dean moves to her and lays a hand on her head. She's not in distress, but she's not entirely there either. Dean opens his senses as much as he can but doesn't get much of anything back. He's not surprised, he's crap at this kind of thing and it makes him itchy. He can feel Mer at his side, vibrant and very much alive, and to a lesser extent Bobby. But beyond that, he's just standing in the woods, staring at a clearing.

Mer opens her eyes and blinks languidly, pulling her awareness back in.

"Mer?" Bobby prompts.

"It doesn't feel like anything," she says with a frown.

"That a bad thing?" Bobby asks skeptically.

"It's...unusual," she says slowly. "Most things have a personality. People and animals, living things, they leave impressions. This place feels empty. Like nothing lives here, or has ever even been here." She shrugs because that's all she has. The place is just...untouched. Pristine. From the outside, at least. Neutral might be a better word. "For what it's worth, I don't think either side has something that could create this."

"You don't *think*?" Bobby says, scratching his beard. Mer rolls her eyes and turns into a stubborn, sulky teenager on him. "Well, someone's gotta go first."

Danny saunters into the clearing before they can talk it to death.

"Danny," Dean snaps, but it's half-hearted and routine. Danny has volunteered as the test dummy since he hooked up with them. Dean's too valuable to risk and if anything happens to Mer then all the things they do to keep Dean safe are moot. That doesn't stop Mer from pushing the boundaries and doing stupid things, but Danny and Trix help where they can.

Danny stops a few yards in. He waits and waits and nothing happens. He glances back at them, shrugs, and edges a little further. Eventually he's not within easy sprinting distance. He turns a slow circle, waits for the other shoe to drop. Nothing. It's actually a little disconcerting. He shuffles side-to-side, spins and does a couple of sprints. Still nothing. He passes over the boundary twice, in different places, with no ill effects, once back where he entered and the other across the way, down where Creedy was heading. No matter what he does nothing pings their hunter senses or sets off any kind trap. He jogs back towards them.

"Everything seems copacetic," he calls. A movement from the left distracts them and Mills strides into the glade a few feet down from them, his shotgun slung over one shoulder. None of his

charms or hex bags react. He glances at Bobby and shakes his head once. Nothing

"This is boring," Mer sighs, and before they can stop her she jogs into the clearing with long, ground-eating strides.

"Mary Winchester!" Dean snaps. Bobby tries to grab her but he's too slow.

"Goddamn it, Dean, see what you've done?" Bobby gripes. Damn the Winchester's and their genetic hard-headedness.

"What? How is that my—Mer?" A few steps past the threshold Mer's steps falter; she stumbles drunkenly, her momentum carrying her forward, and it's a testament to her training that she remains coordinated and moving for as long as she does. Danny's almost to her when she crashes to the ground.

"MER!" Dean struggles against Bobby, who's holding him back and yelling at him, trying to get him to stop. Dean puts his elbow into Bobby's solar plexus and scrambles over the line. The world tilts and he falls hard to his knees. The *silence* is overwhelming. He feels numb and blind and there's nothing, a vast amount of nothing that abruptly gives way into an onslaught of *everything*. Somewhere, distantly, farther away than Dean can comprehend, someone is screaming.

"Dean! Dammit, Dean—no, do not bring her out, do you hear this? Dean! Pull yourself together!" The words are too much, roaring in his ears with a vengeance, and Dean curls up to protect himself, only that doesn't help because he can't get away, it's in his head and it's so fucking *loud* and for a second—a brief, agonizing second—he feels Sam in a way he hasn't for over a year. It hurts, the way Sam floods into his mind, but it's familiar and he welcomes the pain. For a moment, a horribly glorious moment, it's the only kind

of pain Dean feels.

"Wake up!" A fist cracks across his face—fucking *Bobby*—and Dean bolts upright. His shields snap up and Sam fades into nothing. The world lurches again and his stomach roils. He grimaces and takes a long, steadyng breath. He wants to throw up so badly.

"Jesus boy, what the hell do you think you're doing?" *Bobby* demands. Dean tries to pull away but he's so weak. "Stop fighting us!"

"I'm fine. I'm fine, let go, where's Mer?" Dean struggles and *Bobby* flips him over, one of his knees digging into Dean's kidney. Dean freezes in sheer self-preservation and after a couple of breaths *Bobby* eases off of him. Dean gingerly pushes himself to his knees but keeps his head down. The world hasn't stopped spinning yet.

"What the hell happened?" *Bobby* asks gruffly.

"You didn't feel that?" Dean asks harshly. *Bobby* had crossed the boundary to get him, how could anyone have missed it? His vision finally starts working and the first thing Dean sees is Mer curled on the ground a few feet from the edge, Danny and Mills hovering protectively. Neither of them appears to have been affected.

"When you came to get me, what did you feel?"

"Nothing," *Bobby* says after sharing a glance with Creedy, and when had he gotten back? "Neither of us felt like doing a faceplant. You wanna tell us what's going on?"

"Nothing," Dean says thickly, closing his eyes against the nausea threatening to rise. "It was...quiet." He doesn't have to open his eyes to know *Bobby* and Creedy are having a silent conversation over his head. He doesn't expect them to understand.

"Um, guys?" Danny calls and Mer moans piteously.

"Mer?" Dean calls, and when Dean tries to stand Creedy just hauls him upright. Dean gets a shitload of impressions from him and pulls away with a cry.

"Oh God. Dad?" Dean winces at the sound of Mer gagging. It does not help with his own struggle to keep his lunch where it should be.

"Mer!" he yells. Danny's turned her on her side, a hand laid on her back as she shudders. Dean tries to get to her again but Bobby puts himself between Dean and the clearing, not touching him, just using his body as a barrier. Dean would have to push him to get by but the thought of touching anyone, getting a flood of unwanted impressions in his current state, is a bad idea.

Mer sits on the ground, head between her legs, and takes a deep breath. A moment later her head snaps up, eyes wide with panic and somehow Dean knows she's *reaching* for him and finding that same wall of silence. Emptiness. Nothing. She scrambles towards him, breath coming fast and harsh.

"Dad. Dad, I can't...there's nothing there, where are you?" She can't get her legs under her and Danny's pulling her back, Bobby's yelling and everything's pretty much going to hell when Creedy's piercing whistle overrides them all.

"All right, if we're done acting like a bunch of amateurs," Creedy chastises, his New England drawl abrasive and cutting. "Danny, Mills, how you two feeling?" Mills salutes.

"I'm fine," Danny answers, arms still locked around Mer's torso, holding her in place.

"Mary?" She shakes her head in lieu of answering out loud.

"She's shaking," Danny offers helpfully, and Mer's expression twists in annoyance.

"Dean," Bobby prompts, taking control of the situation. "What happened? And don't say 'nothing' 'cause you already tried that."

"There's just...nothing. And then everything," Dean tries to explain. He sighs and lets himself feel them, just for a second. The impressions he gets back are like salt in an open wound and Dean flinches. Bobby's filled with worry, concern so deep it's a part of him; Creedy is calm, he's been in worse situations than this, and underneath he misses Elkins with a sharp, stabbing pain. But where Mer (and Mills and Danny) should be is just a wall, slick and untouchable. He wouldn't even know it's there except he can see Mer but not feel her. "It's like...like someone fired a shotgun right by your face and you can't hear or see anything. And then it's like you were born without any senses and all of a sudden you have them and it fucking sucks."

"So it's a...block?" Bobby hazards. "A psychic block?"

"Oh my God, is that what it feels like to be *normal*?" Mer demands, sounding horrified. Danny laughs and Bobby rolls his eyes. Dean feels Bobby's worry ebb, just a little 'cause Bobby never stops worrying about them.

"Well I'm glad to see you're feeling better," Bobby says sarcastically.

"*Dad*," Mer says, and there's a touch of controlled desperation in her voice. Dean gets it; fuck, does he get it. Losing the awareness of someone so abruptly, realizing you've taken it for granted and you'd do almost anything to get it back...

"Bring her over," Dean orders. He grits his teeth when Danny looks to Bobby for confirmation but keeps calm.

"Dean—" Bobby starts.

"Do not," Dean snarls, and puts some of his power behind it. It's excessive and not something he's ever tried on Bobby before. And he can tell that Bobby feels it, the bitter stab of shock like a betrayal. "Danny! Move."

Mer's steadier on her feet but she sways like there's an imbalance in her inner ear, throwing her off. Danny shadows her to the edge where she pauses, looking at Dean with wide eyes. She's scared, which he understands completely; he'd only been across the boundary for seconds and getting pulled out felt like being burned from the inside out. This is likely to be so much worse.

"It's going to rush back, all at once, and it'll hurt like hell." It occurs to him later that this is the one time in his life he could lie to her and get away with it. "I'll be right here." She takes a deep breath and steps out of the clearing.

Dean catches her when her knees buckle, wraps her in his arms and holds her close like he used to do when she was little. He's acutely aware of everyone watching them, a protective circle of hunters on high alert. Watching, feeling Mer pack away all the extrasensory input that assaults her, is painful. It certainly puts the growing pains they'd gone through when she was a baby into perspective.

"Could you stop thinking so loud?" Mer groans against his chest. Dean laughs, a strangled kind of sound, and tightens his hold. Attuned as he is, Dean can feel the exhaustion settle over her. It's going to be a long hike back but they've got daylight left so they'll damn well sit here until they're both ready to go. "Jesus, Dad, Bobby's not going to leave us here."

"I do not even want to know," Bobby says with a glare. He taps a bottle of water against Dean's head as punishment. Dean shrugs

unapologetically; doesn't count unless he says it aloud. Mer sits up and gratefully accepts her own bottle.

"Whenever you're ready to talk, we'd all love to hear it," Creedy finally says when the silence gets to be too oppressive. Mer makes a production of finishing her water one drawn out gulp at a time. Creedy's glaring bloody murder at her by the end.

"Well, for one thing, I don't think it's a block," Mer says. "I could kind of feel Danny and Mills. Just...less. I think it's more like a firewall?"

## Chapter 4

Sam's in the middle of the Vatican vaults when it disappears. He misses a breath, can't place what's wrong, just that there's no air. No air, no sound no--no *Dean*.

Though the angels can block his ability to track Dean, they are tied to him at a fundamental level. Their bond is immutable. He always knows, without a doubt, that Dean is alive, a buzz in the back of his mind.

And now he is *gone*.

Sam sends his consciousness hurtling outwards, towards Dean, acting purely on instinct. Everything in him channeled frantically into his brother, clawing at where he should be, screaming. Sam steals power from wherever he can but it's not enough never enough; it only takes moments, the space of three heartbeats, but Sam destroys every creature--supernatural or otherwise--around him, drains them dry.

The second Dean returns to him, his confusion and pain bright in Sam's mind--*close* in a way Dean hasn't been for far too long--is overwhelming. For a moment Dean is unguarded and open to him and Sam immerses himself in his brother. He surrounds himself in familiar thought patterns; the colors of Dean's very core tinged orange with pain but still the deep, unwavering mesh of green-gold-blue; the depth of Dean's affections for Sam are vast and unending, undiminished by their year of separation and Sam's possessiveness preens at that. He tries to sink in deeper but the angels' protections kick in and shove him away. He reels back, snarling, presses a hand to his eyes then tries to shake the tinny ringing out of his ears. Something slides over his lips; his nose is bleeding sluggishly.

**"Ruby!"** The command will find Ruby no matter where she is and bring her running. He ignores the broken bodies that had once housed his demons, many of them missing eyes and bleeding from their ears. He stalks to his room, folding reality around him. The percussion of the folds snapping back behind him leaves giant scars in the land as he goes.

Ruby is waiting when he arrives, the smell of dark magic already permeating the room, a body half-wedged under the bed.

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Dean wakes up in the Impala and smiles. His nose is pressed against worn leather, the smell of it bringing to mind dozens of his best memories. He loves his car for so many reasons: the welcoming give of the seats, the low rumbling purr of the engine, the amount of time he's spent inside it, making it his, the feel of skin-warmed leather against his arms, a hotter source of heat against his back.

A hand splays over Dean's chest, coming to rest over his heart, another running over his hip. He's not wearing any clothes. Neither is the person behind him, whose breath is damp along Dean's back. The hand on his hip slips down and pulls; Dean shifts, resting against the sturdy chest behind him, leg draped over someone else's hip. Dean sighs as he's filled and stretched, contentment and arousal loose in his chest.

"Sammy," he sighs, hips moving in lazy little jerks. There's no way they should be able to fit like this on the back seat of the Impala, spooned together. Dean doesn't care for that thought but it buzzes around him, incessant and -- "Sam." The hand around his chest turns constrictive and he starts to lose the hazy edges of the dream. Starts gearing up for another fight.

"You were gone," Sam says, fingers digging in right above Dean's heart but it's his voice that slides into Dean's skin like hooks. He buries his head in Dean's neck, eyelashes fluttering, and Dean remembers...the moment he stepped out of the glade, the rush of sensation and the overwhelming sense of desperate fear that wasn't quite his own. *Sam*, his mind identifies and begins picking through the memory, parting the layers and naming each one. Dean feels himself choking up, tears gather in his eyes because he has no distance from the emotions, no desire to fight today, no walls or defenses just--Sam moves, just enough for Dean to feel, to ground himself in their connection.

"Sammy--" Sam bites down on Dean's shoulder, teeth digging into him, catching and pulling and Dean can't help but push back against the pleasurable burn that chases away the last of the memory. He braces his hands against the leather of the seat and pushes so they roll off the seat and onto their bed, Dean astride Sam's hips, hands braced on his chest.

Sam smiles, lazy and just a little impish. He runs a hand from Dean's knee up to his tattoo, the one over his heart that's the twin to Sam's but here Sam's touch on the ink is electric. Dean arches back, small noises getting stuck in his throat and it feels so fucking good.

Sam sits up to mouth at Dean's throat, teeth dragging across his Adam's apple. He slides his hands behind Dean's knees and pulls, propelling him backwards. Dean curses when he lands, pressed back into the bed, Sam pushing deeper into him. Sam's strong, stronger than he ever was before, each muscle group distinct and sculpted. It's thrilling how easily he handles Dean.

"Promise me," Sam whispers, pulling Dean's leg up around his ribs. Dean hears the words but they don't stick. Sam thrusts, slow but firm, hitting Dean's prostate each time. A bead of sweat rolls

down Sam's neck and onto his chest.

Dean wants to reach out and touch it, wipe it away but his arms are over his head, the metal of the Impala's door a familiar bite, and he can't move them.

"*Dean.*" Sam drags his thumb over Dean's lips, eyes darkening (too black) when Dean sneaks a taste. His fingers glide down to Dean's neck and settle against his jugular, feeling the steady thrum beneath. Dean closes his eyes and tilts his head back. Shivers when Sam's hand settles on his throat, the dip between his thumb and pointer finger fitting perfectly above Dean's Adam's apple. Sam squeezes and Dean's can't breathe and then he can.

"Sammy," Dean tries to say, but Sam tightens his grip at the first sound. Dean arches up into Sam trying to find friction; his world grows hotter, his sweaty skin catches against the leather, and he can't move his muscles.

"Promise me," Sam pleads, licking the shell of Dean's ear. Dean sucks in a deep breath, air cool and crisp in his lungs.

"Anything," Dean gasps, hips hitching up, seeking contact. His world is the feeling of Sam's dick against his prostate and Sam's hand around his throat.

"Stay with me," Sam cajoles, reaching down and stroking the length of Dean's cock, fondling his balls. Dean hisses and strains against whatever is holding him down, curses Sam's bondage fetish. Except he's holding himself, fingers white-knuckled around the handle. Dean stretches his leg until his foot hits the passenger seat. "Promise me you'll stay. Forever." The word echoes around the space.

"I--" The buzzing's back, an alarm ringing in the distance trying to chase away the warmth and Dean... "I want that." Sam makes a

small, triumphant noise. He traces something on Dean's chest and his touch feels like the prick of a tattooist's needle. The feeling spreads along his chest and the buzzing grows.

"Come on," Sam urges, speeding his movements. He whispers on each thrust, just a puff of breath that becomes a steady, mindless chant of, "Please please please please."

"Ye--" Dean chokes on the word when the burning sensation intensifies. He wishes he could see the tattoo and a mirror appears over him but the image is warped. Wrong. Sam's too defined, too big; a pair of red and black tattooed wings loop over his back, intricate and detailed. They move independently of Sam, shifting over the muscle. Sam lifts up to pull Dean to him and Dean sees... Sam's hand leaves a red outline in the middle of his chest. Black lines pulse out from it, through his veins and into his blood. There's ancient writing in languages he'll never speak there. They move in time with Sam's wings. It's terrifying. It's beautiful.

He's not in a bed, he's on the cramped back of the Impala, Sam almost folded in two on top of him.

"I...oh, I..." Dean opens his eyes and there's Sam, looking down at him with black eyes, his irises a thin ring of green. Dean leans up, arms free, and pulls Sam into a kiss. Sam stills for a moment and then kisses Dean back, starving, demanding. Dean gives into him, twining his fingers in Sam's ridiculously long hair, pulling and tugging until Sam moans for him. They break away and before they can come back together--

"I love you," Dean says, and the world around him disappears.

Dean wakes up in his sleeping bag, hand wrapped around the butt of his favorite sawed-off. The details of the dream are already

fading but Dean knows the gist of it. Sam wants him to promise, Dean always refuses. He doesn't know what his agreement would do but he can't afford to find out.

That doesn't stop part of him from wanting to agree. To get it over and done with, to finish this fight and...

He knows from experience that sleep will be a long time coming after this and he's got last watch so he doesn't even try. He rolls out of his sleeping bag and ignores the sweat making his clothes stick uncomfortably. The night air has a bit of a bite to it.

Dean silently threads his way through sleeping bodies, signaling Creedy that everything's fine when the man's eyes slide open.

"Somethin' on yer mind?" Bobby asks, passing Dean a cup of coffee.

"Can't sleep." Bobby shoots him a skeptical look but doesn't press the issue. He'll take extra kip wherever he can find it. Bobby settles down on his fold-up army cot with a sigh and falls asleep. Dean adds wood to their small fire and settles in the chair.

Mer, Trix, and Danny are sleeping in a row, head-to-foot-to-head. They look young and innocent if one ignores the knives and firearms placed within reach.

Dean stares off into the woods and waits for sunrise. They're headed to what passes for a metropolis these days in the morning.

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There are people milling everywhere, more than he's seen in one place for over a year. That's the nature of Five. There's a giant devil's trap made of iron buried six feet under the soil here—in addition to a bunch of other very powerful wards and charms that

are constantly reinforced layered for miles around it—nearly five miles across, with smaller traps buried at random intervals. Which makes Five one of the biggest, most defensible meeting points in the country, right where Mississippi, Arkansas and Tennessee come together. There are nine spots like this spread over North America that they know of, the largest being Thrieve in Oklahoma with a ten mile radius and an actual permanent town atop it.

No one knows who made them, or why, but they're there.

These are the safest places they have, way stations where Hunters gather and rest, restock and share information. There are a handful of permanent structures in Five but it's mostly a collection of tents, an impromptu bazaar with people trading for clothes, ammunition, weapons and news. There's even a mail tent where interested parties help out the beleaguered US postal system, which is unreliable at best these days and highly volunteer. The doctors and healers talk patients and strategies and fill each other's pharmacies as best they can. Innovations and new methods of combating the dark are shared, notes compared.

They choose a camping ground near the southeast edge and almost every Hunter in the area makes it a point to stop by their corner of the universe. Bobby and Dean are famous in their own right within the Hunter circle (though as Dean's the de facto leader of Team Anti-Hell there's an added allure). The two of them together is the stuff of legend.

Mer sits on the roof of the camper they've commandeered and listens to the chatter for names she recognizes. All of them tell stories. About the people they lost the creatures they fought, the battles they've won. She likes the ones from Before best; they're like snippets of her family's history she's never heard.

A familiar voice cuts through the chatter and she sits up, alert.

"Rufus!" She slides off the car and runs to him. His wan face splits into a grin and he sweeps her up in a hug.

"Girl you are a sight for sore eyes," he says. Mer notes his team goggling in the background. Rufus is also a legend from Before, almost as much as her dad and Bobby though he likes to 'strategically downplay his experience.' He's focused and intense; Mer's never seen him smile for anyone but her. She loves it even though she suspects it's because she reminds Rufus of someone he lost—his own daughter or a sister, maybe, but she's made it a point not to pry.

"Buy a girl a drink?" she teases. He laughs and slings an arm over her shoulder. He waves to Dean who acknowledges him with a nod.

"Sure thing. And you can tell me what you've been up to. I heard you got lost in a high school?" Mer rolls her eyes and starts correcting the record with the enthusiasm of the unjustly accused.

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Dean wonders if this is what it was like to be a celebrity, people constantly wanting your attention. He lets them do most of the talking, drinking his beer and nodding when appropriate and wishing he could escape. It's hard to unwind when he feels like a zoo exhibit on display. And he can't even properly appreciate the flirty looks he gets because he hasn't slept with anyone other than Sam in almost...Jesus Christ, *13 years*. Which is just a super depressing thought on top of all the shit that comes with anything Sam-related and the fact that he only gets laid in his dreams.

He pushes it out of his head and imagines later when it'll just be him, his crew, Bobby and Rufus. He hasn't seen Rufus for almost five months now, and the grapevine says he's had a couple of close

calls. Once with a couple of angels, and Dean really wants to hear that story.

"Dean? Dean Winchester?" a woman's voice asks. Dean turns towards her, his public smile in place. She looks nervous and frail, doesn't hold herself as if she's been trained, no gun callouses on her hands or weapons on her person. She'd once dyed her hair a lighter blonde than its natural shade and the roots are showing. She's definitely not a Hunter. Most likely someone whose life has been uprooted and hasn't yet found a new place to stick. "Wow, you...you look exactly like I remember. You haven't aged at all."

"Do I...know you?" Dean asks, wincing at how lame he sounds. Though she obviously does know him and he can't deny there's something familiar about her. He just can't quite place her. Whatever it is makes sweat break out over his neck and his fight-or-flight response kick in. His hand slides down to the holster on his hip; demons can't cross the boundary but they've used humans before. Tortured and manipulated their victims into doing their bidding, or found those sick fucks who'll work for them. In the early days a suicide bomber had walked into the middle of Thrieve and detonated. Ever since, there's been an unspoken arrangement: the psychics enjoying the protection of the traps take shifts to make sure it never happens again, constantly monitoring the 'flavor' of everyone's thoughts. It makes Dean's skin crawl but he can't begrudge them their paranoia--even with those measures Dean's on his guard. He knows, at some point, Mer will settle into the back of the Impala for a few of hours to do her part.

"You don't remember me," she says neutrally. Dean mentally swears; he's met enough of his past acquaintances to have a standard speech prepared, one both Mer and Missouri have given him hell for but it's better than the alternative. The woman grimaces and runs a hand through her hair. "I didn't really expect you to, but it still hurts, you know?"

"Sorry. A lot has happened over the past few years—"

"No, I don't—" she cuts herself off with a scowl. She squares her shoulders and looks at him directly. "I don't need your brush off speech."

"Uh. Okay. How can I help you?"

"I--I'm Karen. Karen Ivers?" And Dean feels the bottom of his world drop out.

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Mer's enjoying some delicious venison when her father's distress registers. Rufus notices her stiffen and his hand strays to the gun holstered at his shoulder.

"What's wrong?" he asks, voice low. He scans the crowd for anything unusual, anyone who's walking stiffly or standing unnaturally still or just...wrong. Observes the way jackets fall, looking for any unnatural bunching or uneven hemlines. Weapons are worn openly here; anyone hiding a gun is asking for trouble.

"It's not that," Mer says, distracted, concentrating on her father. He's an odd mess of devastated, scared, and angry. A deep, old anger--the kind she usually associates with the dreams he doesn't know she knows about, but this is actually...older than that. And different. Less passionate. Or passionate in a different way it's hard to parse without really pushing into him and she doesn't do that. Rufus is talking to her, insistent enough to register and it's interrupting her concentration. "It's Dad. He's—" The tension ratchets up a notch and Mer's up and out of her seat in a moment, Rufus hot on her heels.

She rounds the corner and sees her father talking to a woman, shoulders stiff and hand on the butt of his gun. Mer skids to a halt

and takes a moment. The woman's aura is filled with uncertainty. She hasn't had an easy time of it but she's a fighter, a survivor. She's exhausted--she didn't have an easy life Before and it certainly hasn't been easy After.

"Fuck."

"Mary?" Rufus asks, voice low and tight. The potential for violence slides over her senses, a familiar promise. "Problem?"

"Not one you can help with," Mer returns. Time to face the music.

Dean starts when Mer appears beside him. He hadn't felt her approach, too wrapped up in...oh, fuck.

"Hey Dad, what's up?" Mer asks casually, flicking a glance over...Karen. Her expression settles into one of aloof disdain and Dean winces. He hasn't seen that particular look for a long time; he associates it with the worst of her teenage years and Whit at her most stubborn.

"Um. Well..." Dean hedges, glancing between the two women.

"Oh, oh you're..." There's a reverence in Karen's voice that grates on Dean's nerves "You must be Mary." He wants to tell her she doesn't deserve to sound that way, she gave up that right eighteen years ago and never looked back. Most of all he doesn't want this to hurt Mer. He'll die for her, bleed for her in a heartbeat, but he doesn't know what he can do to make this easier.

"Yeah," Mer says, her tone unusually brusque, "that's me." She touches Dean's arm and he can feel her worry/love/family/support/honestly-you-asshole. Whatever happens here today, at least Dean knows that she's a Winchester through and through.

*Okay?* filters through. He glances at her and gives a little smirk to buy time to compose himself; she's his last remaining point of stability and there are times when that's driven home so completely it hurts. He'll do anything in his power to protect her. But he can't protect her from this.

"Mer, this is...this is..." The words won't form, the parts of them stick awkwardly in his throat.

"I'm Karen Ivers," Karen jumps in. Eager. Filled with so much raw, desperate hope. "I'm. I'm...oh, God, I don't know how to say this." Dean knows exactly how she feels and hates her a bit for that commonality.

"My biological egg donor?" Mer suggests. Karen blinks at her, taken aback.

"Mer!" Dean goggles, a bubble of hysteria welling up in him. Mer's cool as a cucumber, looking at them with thinly veiled disdain.

"What?" she challenges, crossing her arms defensively.

Dean splutters, a thousand explanations, excuses, and recriminations tripping over his tongue. Karen looks like she's about to break down in the middle of their camp.

"I--I'm your mother," Karen says, emotion making her voice thick. She reaches out for Mer as if to hug her. Mer's lips twist into a sneer and she steps back, out of reach.

"My *mother*'s name was Whitney Steton," Mer says viciously, her tone icy and hard. Karen takes an involuntary step back, blinking. "She raised me. She *died* for me. You are *not* my mother." Mer spins around on her heel and stalks through the crowd. Rufus, hovering in the background, has a wordless conversation with

Dean before turning to follow her, stopping to pull a protesting Trix out of his chair.

Karen presses a hand to her mouth, eyes filling with tears. She sniffs and Dean is suddenly, achingly furious. The void Whit left hasn't gone away, he lives with it every day. Karen's presences and Mer's turmoil rakes across raw nerves.

"She's not exactly wrong," Dean says, and even he knows it's a low blow but he doesn't care.

"I know." Dean watches as Karen pulls herself together piece by piece. She's so open about it. Dean feels like voyeur watching the various emotions rise to the surface and then melt away. "I know I, I wouldn't be here if the world wasn't the way it is. I can't say I never thought about you. And her. But..." But the world has changed and whatever advantage you can find you take. He can't fault her for that, even though he desperately wants to. Somewhere inside him is the stray thought that he may have just grown up.

"Come on," Dean sighs and leads her towards the picnic tables. There's a cup of coffee in front of him and a cup of tea for her as soon as they sit down. One thing about having so many psychics around is you barely have a moment to want for anything before someone's trying to give it to you. "You can't have her."

"I think she's old enough to make her own choices and she's made that very clear," Karen says wryly, trying on a smile. It looks painful.

"Right." Dean traces the chip on his mug, ragged ceramic catching on the pad of his finger.

"I didn't mean to--"

"Yes, you did."

"Okay," Karen breathes out a lungful of air. "Okay, yes. I did mean to. And I won't apologize for that, though I am sorry for the, the pain this is causing you both."

"What do you want?" Dean asks.

"Protection. Safety. I don't know much about magic or the supernatural, but I get the sense that shared blood can be powerful. Or dangerous." Dean feels the bottom drop out of his world again because he hadn't even thought--fuck, he needs a protection detail on Karen and a safe place where no one can get to her. Immediately. The only reason she's been safe so far is because Dean's never mentioned her name to anyone that he can remember--not dad, not Sam. But too many people witnessed their reunion to keep this under wraps for long. Can you break a parental bond?

"And...maybe to get to know Mary, somewhere down the line?" The tentative question snaps Dean out of his panic.

"She goes by Mer," Dean says, but that's about all he can manage without wanting to shoot something.

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"Child, I know you are not sitting here sulking hard enough to put every psychic in a hundred miles in a bad mood too." Missouri settles herself on the ground beside Mary even though she knows she'll pay for it later.

"I don't want to talk about it," Mer says, clipped and pointed.

"All right then, let's talk about the little crush you have on Castiel." Missouri doesn't bother to hide her grin when Mer turns to her, wide eyed and spluttering.

"What are--I do NOT. You're insane. That's insane. You--oh my

god. He's an *angel*."

"Mmmhmm." Mer stares out at nothing and simmers in her own mortification. Jesus. This is just--Jesus. She runs through about a million different responses, everything from denial (which isn't going to work because she is clearly completely transparent) to trying to traumatize Missouri with talk of their future unborn angelic babies (which, judging by the snort of laughter, would not have the same effect it would have on her Dad, i.e., complete and utter horror).

"Please don't tell my dad," she settles on, resigned.

"Girl please, your father is the king of unadvised crushes," Missouri says. Mer gives her a look. "No, we won't tell Dean. Just as long as you know that your crush is going to stay just that."

"I read somewhere that teenagers get crushes on terminally unavailable people because it's a safe way to explore their blossoming sexuality without any real repercussions," Mer recites. Viv had shared that bit of wisdom from Cosmo at a sleepover but Mer shuts that line of thought down pretty quickly. She tries not to think of her friends, who may not be well. Or alive.

"Uh huh. We'll go with that." Missouri waits expectantly and Mer stares resolutely forward. Missouri finds it amusing that any of the Winchesters think they can outplay her. "He does have some very pretty eyes--"

"Ohmigod, fine. She showed up here because she wants Dad to save her from the big scary world, he's going to do it, she's not my mom and I'm dealing."

"You sure are," Missouri mutters under her breath.

"What do you want me to say?" Mer explodes. There's so much

rage and hurt and loss boiling in her. "That I hate her? That I want her dead and Whit alive and that makes me a horrible person but I *don't care* because I just, I just want my family back and--"

Missouri pulls her into a hug and rocks a bit. Mer's fingers tangle in her shirt, twisting the fabric. She gasps for air, though Missouri doesn't think she's actually crying; she's caught too firmly between loss and rage to know what she wants to do.

Missouri projects serenity and acceptance and hums a little tuneless song as Mer calms, her breath slowing, though she's still rigid with tension. She eventually pulls away and there are miles in every inch she puts between them.

"Sorry," Mer says, the word wavering in the air.

"Don't you dare apologize to me, Mary Winchester," Missouri scolds, "or I'll take my spoon to you." It pulls a weak laugh out of Mer, busy putting her defenses back in place. Missouri can practically visualize the boxes Mer uses to compartmentalize, the lids snapping shut, and her heart breaks a little. Practically, she knows it's necessary for Mer to survive. For any of them to survive, really. Doesn't make it right.

"Now you listen to me, because I'm only going to say this once." She waits for Mer's nod before continuing, "Bad things happen. And when bad things happen, we all wish that our loved ones never got hurt, or killed, or suffer. We all feel relief when we find out the person we love hasn't been hurt, even as we feel bad that someone else was. But there's always that part of us that's thankful it wasn't your dad or Bobby or anyone else you know. That doesn't make us bad people--that makes us human."

"That's kind of a shitty part of being human," Mer says. Missouri purses her lips and shrugs.

"Humans are capable of contradictory thoughts that are equally true and valid and I swear if you say something flip right now I'm going straight to your father." Mer sullenly shuts her mouth.

"Good." Missouri settles in to wait. She's found the best way to deal with Winchesters is to wait them out. She could push, but she won't about this. Neither Mer nor Dean have really had time to deal with their losses. They're usually not unbalanced enough to let anything show through but now that Mer's wall is cracked, Missouri is willing to be patient a little longer. She takes the time to mark where the rest of their extended family is.

Dean and the woman are still having their heart-to-heart. Rufus has rounded up Danny and Trix; they're tossing knives over to the side, close enough to be there in moments if Missouri calls them over. Rufus must feel her regard because he turns and catches her eye. He nods at Mer and Missouri shrugs. She stretches out, letting her consciousness brush against the rest of Five, just tasting the flavor of the group.

"I never wanted to meet her," Mer says. She's closed her eyes. Looks both incredibly young and far older than she should. "I asked Dad once how he got me. He thought I was asking about her, but that wasn't it. I just...wanted to know the story."

"You were never curious?" Missouri seriously doubts that; Mer's nature is too precocious for her to let something like this pass.

"Well, yeah. A little. But it wasn't..." Mer shakes her head glares out at the world at large. "There wasn't anything missing once, once Atta came. Everything fit, we were good. Happy. And she was just this idea, you know? People talked about having a mom and it never occurred to me they might not mean Whit." And now that Whit's gone it's even more of an affront. "Can I just pretend she doesn't exist?"

Missouri laughs in spite of the situation. "You could try. But no matter what you call her, you share blood. So unless you want to wake up blood-bound to some demon I wouldn't suggest it."

"Oh god. Do you think Dad's realized..."

"Since you're out of his sight, no." But they're surrounded by too many paranoid hunters for someone not to mention all the things one can do with mother's blood.

"Now come on, we have to figure out what to do with that woman." Mer gives her an incredulous, startled look. "What? I might feel for her, but that doesn't mean I have to *like* her."

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"You can't take her on the road, she's a liability," Rufus says.

"She's a liability anyways," Bobby argues. He hasn't stopped scowling since Dean broke the news. "Do you know how much damage she can do if the demons catch wind of this? What they can do to Mary? And god help you both if someone gets a hold of a part of you, too. We can't just leave her anywhere, and I don't trust anyone to protect her." That causes a new flurry of yelling and bruised egos with Bobby trying to play referee and just making things worse.

"Dad." The room falls silent. Mer, who had not been invited to this meeting, stands just inside the door, hands nonchalantly tucked into the pockets of her jeans. "Can I talk to you outside?" Dean glances at everyone present and clears his throat.

"Sure. Of course. We'll just, uh, be right back." The silence is oppressive as they slip outside.

"We have to take her to Clinch," Mer says.

"The town that time forgot?" Dean asks in disbelief.

"That would be why. You felt the wards. She'll be safe there, we're the only ones that really know about it and there's no reason for anyone else to go with us. Plus, we're headed back in that general direction to take Missouri and Kai to Firewall."

"Kai's coming? Since when?" Kai is one of the strongest psychics in North America and freaks Dean out like nobody's business.

"Dad. Focus," Mer snaps, rolling her eyes.

"We are not naming it Firewall. You are not allowed to name things until you're thirty," Dean says.

"*Dad.*" Dean sighs. So much for deflecting.

It's...not a bad idea, per se. He would just really rather never set foot back in that town. And no one's offered up a better idea than driving into the middle of the Badwater Salt Flats and leaving her there. (Even if it has the added bonus of being on the other side of the country from Sam.)

"It's a good idea," he admits grudgingly.

"It's our only idea," Mer counters.

"We'll have to drive with her."

"I'll charge my iPod," she says dryly.

"All right," Dean agrees with a sigh. He can't help but think this is going to come back to haunt him.

## Chapter 5

They stay at Five for almost a week waiting for Ellen to catch up with them. It's not particularly restful as there's a lot to coordinate; they've decided to set up a camp in--God help him, the name has stuck like glue--Firewall. They've lost psychics and witches and other allies with "extrasensory trauma" and Missouri is of the opinion Firewall could be a safe haven for them. A place that they can go and hide until their minds stabilize and they can heal. If nothing else, it could be a prison to keep the dangerous ones contained.

For Dean, all he cares about is that Karen's vulnerable and snatchable, and *that* means Mer's in danger. Neither of them are allowed to go anywhere without an escort.

"You worry overmuch." Dean nearly jumps out of his skin.

"Jesus. Kai." Dean steps back because Kai is not great with personal space. Or warning people. Or having a discernible gender or preferred gender pronoun. (Kai, Missouri, Mer, and both members of Kai's creepy entourage have tried to explain it to him. Kai "slides." Sometimes everyone's using 'he,' sometimes 'she,' sometimes weird words that sound like she or her or ze but aren't. They can all see whatever it is that makes Kai...Kai. He just doesn't get it.) "You're here."

"Perhaps," Kai says in a tone of voice that implies deep philosophical contemplation. Dean really, really doesn't want to know. The last time he'd asked for clarification about something, Kai's answer had fucked with his head for *months*.

"So you're going to Firewall with us." Dean searches for an escape route but Kai has pretty much blocked him in this tiny little alcove between two RVs.

"I believe I will be of value there."

"Great." Dean shifts uncomfortably but Kai shows no sign of leaving. "So, uh, where are your...companions?" Kai always travels with a guy and a girl whose names Dean can never remember.

"Mike and Lauren," Kai supplies helpfully and Dean scowls. Years of living with Mer have taught him to keep a tight reign on his thoughts but Kai always seems to see through him.

"Right. Them." Kai has some sort of connection to them that goes beyond dating or fucking or whatever. The one time he'd asked Mer he'd *felt* the ache in her chest when she'd compared them to him and Sam and Whit.

"Do you dream, Dean?" The change of topic is underhanded and dirty. Dean knows in the few unguarded moments Kai had had to sneak up on him he gave up too much, let dangerous things through the cracks.

"That is none of your business," Dean says. He shifts into an aggressive stance instinctively, ready to move the moment Kai gives him an opening.

"It is all of our business," Kai says, even and implacable. "You no longer dream without him, do you?" Dean steps into Kai's space.

"Stay out. Of my head." He sees a flicker of fear in Kai's eyes, subtle but present. The hunter in him, the killer he's been trained to be since he was four, wants to press his advantage.

"I am not in your head," Kai says. "I can see him, the shadow upon your soul. He asks and you struggle not to answer." And just like that the balance shifts. Dean leans back but Kai moves with him. "You *cannot* acquiesce." Dean's heard enough prophecy over the years to recognize them. There's a certain resonance to them, a

truth you feel bone deep.

"I won't."

"So you allege."

"So I say."

"Your sayings and your doings are antipodal."

"That's great, Akeelah, spell me another one of your ten dollar words."

"I shall. With *diminutive* lexemes so that you might comprehend. If you do not choose, you will lose everything. Those are *my* dreams."

Dean doesn't believe Kai. Not because he doubts Kai's abilities but because there's no choice for him to make. He will never stop fighting for Sam because he knows his brother is still alive. He will never do anything to hurt his daughter. That is the only way he knows how to live.

Kai steps back, mouth twisted in discontent. The abrupt withdrawal confuses Dean for a moment until he feels Mer's approach. He moves away as well, as if distance will diffuse the tension between them.

"Hey, what's going on?" Mer sidles up to Dean as if she's unaware of the tension, expression crafted into blandness. Lauren and Mike trail after her, just as casual. They flank Kai, one on either side like sentinels.

"Kai is going to Firewall with us," Dean says. Mer looks at him questioningly because she's the one who told him that. Kai's lip curls in anger.

"Dean is going to walk a lonely road to Hell." Dean's jaw flexes and locks, muscles pulsing in anger.

"As long as I take you with me."

"You will take the world with you!"

"Then I won't be alone!"

"Dad." It's like the bell in a wrestling arena. Kai and Dean retreat to their metaphorical corners. He catches the tail end of some exchange Kai and Mer have been having well over his less-psychic head. Kai makes a disgusted sound and Mer glares. A much more polite impasse than the one with Dean, though not by much.

"The only thing worse than being blinded by pride is having sight but no vision." Kai spins around and walks away, Mike and Lauren matching stride for stride, the three of them moving in sync through the settlement. That just leaves Dean and Mer and a wealth of things unsaid between them.

"We're ready to go when you are," Mer says.

"Mer..." Faced with Mer's skeptical expectancy, Dean falters. "I... It's not..."

"I like it better when we don't talk about it," Mer says. "You don't have to lie that way."

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Dean stares at the bed, rumpled and messy. He knows this bed. Not just the bed, but every fold of the cloth, the haphazard way the pillows sit on the mattress, the shirt he can see peaking out from underneath the bedclothes. It's been twenty years and he still feels overwhelming guilt.

He watches, heart in his throat, when a younger version of himself stumbles in the room, drunk off his ass and using Sam as a human walking stick. Fuck, he doesn't want to see this. It always comes back, like an old penny. Or that damned cat. He tries to ignore it whenever he can but he can't outrun himself. This is his penance, the one action he knows he can never atone for.

They're so young. Sam's eighteen (*Mer's age*, his treacherous mind whispers) and he's barely twenty-two. And stupid, so stupid. Drunk and horny and he knew better than to come home like that. One or the other, but never both.

He watches Sam--gangly and awkward from a growth spurt that made him of a height with his big brother, so proud about that fact--maneuver them towards the bed. He trips and they fall on the bed together, and Dean remembers this too, how nice it felt to feel Sam's heat under his cheek, how he ignored Sam's efforts to push him off, threw a leg over Sammy's hips and heard him gasp and his only thought was *I want that*.

He no sooner thinks the words than they're kissing, Sam's lips and tongue and teeth and Dean can't breathe for it. His world spins and he tries to pull away but he can't leave. He's wanted for so long and not even air can make him really pull away. So he pushes closer, deeper, holds Sam down and takes and takes and takes.

After that it's a blur, just sense-memory and scraps of clothes. Moans and groans, and Dean hears himself start to beg Sam, sees Sam pause then give in because Sam gave him everything. Now, he can see Sam's hesitancy, how unsure he was.

Dean, standing at the foot of the bed, forces himself to relive his wretched drunken mistake. He can't regret where they ended up but this should never have happened.

"And what are we feeling guilty about today?" Sam wraps his arms around Dean's hips and rests his head on Dean's shoulder. Dean stiffens but Sam doesn't let go.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Sam sighs, a familiar and well-worn kind of exasperation tinged with so much of their history.

"Of course you don't." Sam used to get mad at these transparent lies Dean insists on telling. He nuzzles the skin behind Dean's ear, feels the tension start to shift to something more charged and decides today. Now. They're going to talk about *that night* and Dean doesn't get to wiggle out of it. "You were so mad the next day."

*How can you touch me?* Dean wonders. Sam pointedly slips a hand underneath the hem of Dean's shirt, right over his stomach.

"I was drunk," Dean confesses. Like that's an excuse.

"I noticed," Sam says dryly, a laugh gusting against Dean's ear. Dean tries to jerk out of Sam's hold but Sam just pulls him closer. The anger simmering below the surface continues to boil, Sam's words only stoking the fires. "What happened?" Dean shrugs and watches his younger self pin Sam's arms above his head. Sam strains against it, eyes so wide.

"You have to ask?" Dean asks. Sam's forgiven him but that doesn't absolve him.

"Yes."

"You left." Dean's not answering the question Sam asked, but it suffices as an answer regardless because Sam *always leaves*.

"You looked at me like I destroyed your world," Sam whispers.

“You *felt* like I’d destroyed your world.”

“I did.” Sam spins Dean around and presses him against the wall, blocks his view of the bed. He can still hear and every moan is a recrimination.

“Is this your festival of atonement?” Sam asks, so angry. Dean accepts it, loves it, because he deserves it and so much more. And he’s angry too, so angry about so many things. He shoves Sam back, hard enough to make him stumble.

“I never should have touched you.” Not then, not ever again, especially not now that Sam has gone darkside but Dean’s pretty much come to terms with the fact that he’ll take Sam however he can get him. The first time, though? Can never be right.

Sam jerks Dean’s head back, thick fingers pulling at his hair, and claims Dean’s mouth in a dominating kiss. Dean submits, lets Sam do what he will, before pushing back. Sam runs his nails over Dean’s chest, leaving marks that’ll carry over in the waking world. Dean grunts when he’s pushed back into the wall.

“I wanted you,” Sam says, slipping a hand into Dean’s pants. He mouths along Dean’s neck, knows how sensitive it is. He jerks Dean off, knows exactly how to touch to bring Dean right to the edge and leave him there. “Every time you came home smelling like sex I’d get jealous. I’d wonder what she had that I didn’t, especially after that night. I thought it was *special*. That it meant you felt everything I did. I burned for you and then you fucked anything that wasn’t me. You stared at my back but refused to look at me when I was right there in front of you. *You left me, Dean.*”

He makes Dean come and the cry wrenched from him isn’t totally pleasure, but not all pain either. He’s ruthless in coaxing every last second of orgasm from Dean’s body. If this is going to be an

atonement Dean can at least apologize for the right reasons.

He waits, hand still wrapped around Dean's dick, for those pretty green eyes to flutter open.

"I could have accepted you fucking around. Us never fucking around again. The only thing I didn't want was for you to cut me out." He steps back and flicks his wrist, come splattering over the two figures clenched on the bed. "I will not let you leave me again." Sam keeps backing up and Dean reaches out, blind with panic. He wasn't the only one who left.

*Promise*, Dean thinks, surging forward, *promise, promise, promise*.

*I do*. They kiss and Dean feels something strengthen between them, intangible but present. His Sammy, his everything. He feels Sam smile into the kiss just before it breaks. Sam cups his face and runs his thumbs over Dean's cheeks.

"Almost," he says, and then pushes Dean back. Dean falls on to the bed, between two bodies moving in tandem, watches his guilt shatter around him and wakes up feeling both relief and dread.

Just what, exactly, had Sam promised?

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The trip to Clinch is, in a word, strained. Karen spends the whole trip trying to engage Mer, who either ignores her or answers in monosyllabic grunts. She looks more and more strained with every failed conversation, but Dean can't bring himself to say much of anything. The ground under his feet is unsteady enough without Karen making things worse.

George and Gran Emer are already waiting at the edge of the wards when they arrive, their teenage doppelgängers hovering in the

background. Karen has a death grip on her bag, eyes taking in the pot-filled road and crumbling asphalt. Mer parks herself against a tree, arms crossed and feet planted firmly on the ground. She's spoiling for a fight.

"I don't know if I can do this," Karen says in a rush. A horse whinnies in the distance and she starts. "It's too much."

"It's, uh, probably going to be weird but you should be okay," Dean says, knowing he's missing reassuring by a mile. That was never his strength. "These people can protect you. Give you a place to stay, everything you need. That's what you wanted, isn't it?"

"It's...I don't know..." Dean grits his teeth because they'd agreed. Yeah, he'd sensed Karen's reservations and maybe his hope that the drive there would magically impress on her the importance of this decision was a long shot, but this had been the agreement and if he has to, he'll order her to stay. But that doesn't mean she'll *listen*.

Mer sighs, sounding very put upon, and stalks up to Karen.

"I need you to do this." Mer's irritation is a palpable, living thing. "We are fighting a war and you could get me killed, or turned into a mindless slave, or some horrifying combination of both, which means he is going to do something stupid and get killed and that would mean the end of *everything*. So I need you to stay here and be safe because this is the only option we have. I am asking you to do this for me." Karen looks startled, which is understandable as that is the most Mer's said to her since they met. Karen shakes her head and then straightens.

"Yes." She carries herself with conviction, no longer shrinking away. "I'm sorry, of course I'll stay." Mer nods and slips back into the sullen teenager but Karen stops her with a gentle hand on her arm. "Please be careful. Stay safe?" Dean catches the momentary

flicker of surprise only because he taught her how to hide them, and knows her well enough to see the tiny cracks that have already formed in her defenses.

"Yeah." Mer clears her throat and draws away from Karen's touch. "Yeah, of course." She beats a hasty retreat and makes it a point not to look at them again.

"So, uh," Dean says, fidgeting. He leans so he can see around Karen to where George and Gran Emer watch them closely. "Thank you for this."

"Don't you think nothin' on it," George says.

"New people are a joy to this town," Gran Emer agrees. "Now, come here, girl, and let young Senia give you the grand walkabout." Senia takes Karen's hand and leads her up the path, towards the town. Karen spares one last, longing glance at Mer. As she disappears around the bend and Dean heaves a sigh of relief. At least that's over.

"Thank you," Dean says to George and Gran Emer. "And hey, I guess you were right about seeing me again." The not-joke falls flat and Dean feels like someone walked over his grave.

"You're welcome here any time, Dean Winchester," Gran Emer says. There's a ring of formality to her words that doesn't sit well with Dean.

"Thank you. I'll be sure to remember that." Dean shuffles his feet, eager to get out of here. "So, uh, thanks again and I'll, uh...see you next time."

"Yes," Gran Emer says.

"Don't forget--"

"To go left, thank you, George," Dean says with a wave, and heads down the path. It's a silent walk back to the Impala. The tension stays with Dean even after George and Gran Emer have disappeared. Mer makes him stop right at the edge of the wards. She kneels on the ground, one knee on each side of the wardline so that she straddles the divide.

"What are you doing?" Dean asks.

"Something Kai taught me," Mer murmurs. It just looks like Mer's kneeling in the middle of a dilapidated road with her eyes closed. Dean has no idea what she's doing, or if she's even really doing anything--Dean wouldn't be surprised to find out she's fucking with him half the time. He straightens and scans the road. It's practically impassable, large chunks of it missing, slabs of concrete bulging where roots have pushed them up. The car would never have made it over such rough terrain and Dean has a brief panic attack about his baby's suspension and the state of her--

"Dad." A hand lands on his shoulder. Dean snaps out of his spiraling thoughts and focuses on Mer. "It's a suggestion. You see the road as worse than it is--the flaws that are already there just seem...more. The Impala is fine. The *road* is fine."

Dean looks at the road again, keeping his emotions in check. He finds himself getting absorbed in the damage, a pothole suddenly looking like the Grand Canyon, a small plant growing from a crack turning into a tree. He turns away when his mind gets too caught up in the dissonance of what he knows and what he thinks he sees.

"That's some trick," Dean says, rubbing his eyes. Mer steps away from him once again stony and closed off.

"Yeah, well. Kai's got a mean streak," Mer says. Dean grunts; he's well acquainted with Kai's mean streak. "Come on, they're waiting

for us at Firewall."

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It's much easier to get to the glade now that someone's hacked a rough path through the forest. The line of demarcation is spray painted orange and hunters are busy cutting down surrounding trees, giving the psychics more room to move without accidentally crossing into the glade.

"It's about time you two made it." Ellen is sweaty, hair wild and dirt smudged on her face.

"You're looking...fresh," Dean says and gets punched in the shoulder.

"You try cutting up trees with a handsaw and see how fresh you look."

"We're saving the chainsaws for the bigger trees?" Dean guesses. Oil's a precious commodity these days, no telling when shipments will make it through. Helps that a lot of people aren't driving anymore.

"Yeah. Missouri and Kai have cooked up some scheme for this place--some sort of Psychic Hospital. They want log cabins."

"Can this place support that?" Dean asks in lieu of *when did our lives become a bad soap opera?*

"Well, we found a stream not too far away. It'll do for water until we can get a cistern in here. Kai's put out the word so there are more people headed this way with supplies; we set Danny and Trix to widening the path up, all the spare wood's being stripped and cured for building. It'll take a while, but it's doable." It's a big undertaking but Missouri and Kai are more than up for the task.

"How are we going to demon-proof it with the..." Dean winces and bites the bullet, "firewall around it."

"Ah," Ellen says, grinning smugly. "I'll let Ash demonstrate. ASH! GETCHER RATS OVER HERE!" Ash comes bounding up to them, a large plastic cage with some big ass, mean looking rats in hand.

"Heeeeey! Dean! Alright alright alright."

"Ash, show the man your party trick," Ellen orders with fond exasperation.

"Oh, okay, so this is rad. Seriously, it's gonna blow your mind, man."

"Ash. These are not just rats." Mer pokes at the cage and recoils when the creatures throw themselves at her finger. Their pointed teeth leave scratches on the glass. She watches in horror as one tooth cracks under the pressure but the rat doesn't stop.

"They're demonic rats," Ash says with a sociopathic kind of glee. Dean sees all his own reservations mirrored in Mer's expression. He shrugs helplessly, also at a loss.

"Okay, Willard, why do you have them?" Dean asks, face twisting in disgust.

"Watch." Dean holds up the cage and steps across the barrier. The rat without the tooth starts screaming in pain, a terrible sound that means every hunter in the area focuses on them in an instant. The other rats stop moving, emitting high-pitched sounds of fear and panic. One of them tries to walk but its movements are wobbly and uncertain. Coltish.

"Are they..." Mer hovers just short of the barrier line, leaning in to

look at them more closely.

"Trapped!" Ash says. "They become one with the host." Ash does a ridiculous samurai-style bow, jostling the cage and sending the rats into a greater frenzy.

"So any demons that cross would essentially be...human," Mer says, a slow smile growing.

"Yep. Opens up a world of possibilities," Ellen says, grinning back.

"Now we just have to be able to cross it without puking our guts out," Dean says. He doesn't want to rain on their parade but if they have to go through what he and Mer did the first time...

"Missouri hasn't had any problems," Ellen says with a shrug. Dean and Mer exchange a skeptical look and go off to find Missouri.

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"I'm sorry, I can't hear you. Too much interference." Missouri smiles beatifically.

"It's a mental barrier," Mer says. "It doesn't affect your hearing."

"What?"

"Missouri." Dean does not have time for this shit.

"Yes, Dean?" He sighs, thoroughly annoyed with the turn this conversation has taken. "If you want to talk to me, you have to come in here."

"I am not crossing that barrier," Mer says. She folds her arms over her chest and plants her feet on the ground. Missouri can tell them

all she wants about habituation, taking it slow or whatever, but Mer remembers the abrupt cessation of awareness and is in no rush to repeat the experience.

"Fear paralyzes." Kai materializes from the trees wearing a construction tool belt and a hardhat. Dean keeps his attention focused on Missouri. "Curiosity empowers."

"This is an access point. It's possible to come in through here without getting ripped apart, just take it slow," Missouri says.

Kai steps forward, just inside the barrier and pauses. Mer counts to five before Kai steps forward again, then three, then two. With each successive step Kai's aura seems to shrink in on itself until it's just a faint glow instead of the expansive, inquisitive extension of Kai she's used to. If that's what happens to them when they cross over it's no wonder it hurts so much. But the change had been gradual and if it's just about gradual habituation...

"See?" Kai calls. "Simple. One step at a time. Only fools rush."

"Bullshit," Dean mutters under his breath.

"I've thought many things of your family over the years," Missouri says, "but I never took you for cowards." Both Mer and Dean straighten, predictable to a fault. The gauntlet has been thrown and one of them will step up, if not both.

"It's, uh, gradient? Like, it gets worse the farther in you go. Kai's aura compressed more with each step, so...in theory if we take it slow it shouldn't be as disorienting." Mer shrugs. Dean looks at the spray-painted border suspiciously.

"No." He's happy that Missouri and Kai are building their little psychic hospital or whatever, but it's not for him. It's too dangerous. He remembers, vividly, what it felt like to cross over

and cross back. Holding Mer while she shook.

And every time he thinks of it, Sam's quiet desperation the night after he'd crossed comes back to haunt him. The wildness, the vulnerability. He could concoct some justification for what would happen--Sam might take his fury out on an entire city leaving destruction in his wake, innocents would suffer--but the reality is that *Sam* would suffer.

Dean glances at Mer and flinches. She knows. He sees the set of her jaw, the tension in the muscles of her neck and the tightness around her eyes, but all of that is negligible compared to the mental block between them. It *stings* when Dean brushes against it, like an electrified fence.

Mer holds his gaze while she squares her shoulders and steps sideways, straddling the line of demarcation. He can tell she's nervous and he wants to so much to reassure her but Dean finds himself rooted to the spot, unable to say or do anything. Not that he has any clue what he can do.

Swallowing nervously she takes her first full step just over the line. She sways a little and Dean reaches for her but pulls back short of the boundary. He watches her closely as she takes her next step, sees the way she tenses as her abilities are stripped away and then relaxes into it when she gets used to it. The worst part is he thinks she's waiting to see what he'll do--testing him and he's failing.

She takes a second step and pauses, unmoving.

"Mer?" Missouri calls. Mer starts and shakes her head.

"I'm good," she says, the words dry. With one last piercing look at Dean she takes another step into the glade. Then another. With every step that takes her farther from him Dean tenses until he's positive his shoulders are around his ears.

"Well?" Missouri asks and Dean has to work to hear them. Mer stretches each muscle group, testing them. Her balance is off and judging by her diminished flexibility, she's very tense.

"Feels weird," she says. She smirks at Missouri and Kai, shrugging off her discomfort. "But manageable." Missouri extends her hand and Mer takes it. She gives a soft 'oh' when they make contact. "That's...stronger than normal."

"Mmhmm. The whole senses getting sharper when you take one away theory. Can't repress the skin-to-skin." Mer reluctantly takes her hand away from Missouri's though she casts a longing look its way.

"And you, Dean?" Kai asks coolly. "Shall you test its quelling powers? Perhaps a doze in the afternoon sun?"

"I had enough last time," Dean evades. "Gives me the shivers just seeing you three in there."

Mer's disappointment follows him through the rest of the day, even though he can't feel her.

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Mer saws wood with single-minded focus, losing herself in the simple back-and-forth motion and burn of overworked muscles.

"Can you set things on fire with your brain?" Jo settles on a stack of wood, whittling down a stake with her knife. Mer pauses and considers the question.

"I've never actually tried." She starts thinking about fire, warmth and heat and excited molecules, dredging up everything she remembers about combustion from school and--

"Yeah, let's not test that out right now, okay?" Jo suggests. She tries to remember if that dark spot was there before Mer started staring at it. Mer smirks at her and starts sawing again, using a bit of telekinesis to move the board forward every time she finished a section; it's her weakest power, and she gets to exercise it and make her chores go faster. "You know, your dad--"

"Let's not do this," Mer says, giving a vicious push that cracks the wood and leaves jagged, unusable edges. Mer grabs the useless section and throws it into the woods as hard as she can, her entire body dedicated to this one act of violence.

Jo continues, undaunted, "You're his kid. That's not something you can stop. Trust me--it never stops." She waves in the general direction of her mom, currently discussing farming practices with a guy they only know as Johnny Appleseed.

"At least she treats you like a *hunter*," Mer grumbles.

"Ha, right. You think she double checks Ichi's guns, or reminds him to double knot his shoe laces, or steps in front of him when things get dicey?" Jo shakes her head and yearns for a cigarette. It's her secret bad habit, one she doesn't indulge in a lot, but she wants one desperately right now. "It never stops, but you do get older. And don't give me that look, I know it sounds stupid but I'm telling you the truth."

"Telling me I just have to grow up doesn't really help."

"Yeah, well. Sucks to be you." Jo has no sympathy for her; she survived her teenage years, and Mary will too. Or at least, it won't be what kills her. Which is a disturbing thought Jo shouldn't have so easily. Mer knocks the board off the sawhorse and decides to do something else.

"You know, he might not be able to stop it, but he could sure as

hell refuse to act on it," Mer says bitterly. "People do it all the time. This is like an addiction."

"I thought--I'm talking about the high school. What are you talking about?" Mer ignores her, moving on to splitting logs because the violence appeals to her right now. Jo consciously refrains from grinding her teeth together. Dentists are expensive and hard to find these days. Which means keeping things in is even more of a health hazard these days so, "What the hell is your problem?"

Mer rests her axe on the ground and massages her hands.

"I don't know," Mer sighs. She drops down beside Jo. "Everything's a complete mess."

"Well, allow me to give you a very adult answer: that's life. Apocalypse or no, it's all a giant clusterfuck that everyone's trying to figure out. It's not like anyone has a giant book of answers," Jo says. Mer flinches, drops the axe and presses the heel of her hand to her head. She has the strangest sense of remembering something she never knew. "Mer? You okay?" Jo shakes her by the shoulder and Mer starts, her eyes slow in focusing.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm good." She smiles crookedly, still looking off-kilter. She laughs and shakes her head. "You know, for a second there, I thought I did have a book with all the answers." Jo rolls her eyes and socks Mer in the shoulder, though the blank look in Mer's eyes stays with her.

"We'll figure it out though, right?" Mer asks.

"Yeah," she says, pulling her into a one-armed hug. "We'll do fine."

There's a commotion from the other side of the staging area, and then the familiar sounds of Trix being threatened by an irate

mother, the leech. They both head over to save him and Mer's strange little interlude fades from memory.

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Dean slips away from the group when the sun sets too low for them to work. They've managed to erect a couple of frames and started digging the foundations of the more robust structures. He takes stock of his people. Mer, Danny and Trix are baiting Ash into telling increasingly implausible stories, many of which Dean's pretty sure involve chemical aid. Bobby and a few of the others are already sacked out, enjoying the relative safety of this place while they can. Missouri, Kai, and a few other psychics who filtered in are having some sort of experimental mind-orgy at the edge of the barrier. Assured of everyone's safety Dean wanders away from the camp; not too far, but far enough to have the illusion of solitude.

He stretches, spine cracking, and lets out a deep breath as he settles on a decaying log, stretching his legs out in front of him. The weariness he fights to keep at bay starts creeping in while his defenses are lowered. A dull throb starts in behind his eyes. He needs to sleep--he always needs to sleep--but that's a venture fraught with danger these days.

"You need a break." A bottle of home brew appears in his line of sight. Dean accepts it and Ellen settles on the log beside him, sticks a few more into the loam for later. He takes a long pull from the...

"What the fuck, Ellen?" he rasps. Shit's eating away at his esophagus and from the way it's settling in his belly, warm and effusive, it's going to kick like a bitch. Ellen grins at him and takes a slug, swallows it without any hardship. He drinks more gingerly next time. "We just spent a week in Five. Can't afford to waste any time."

"That was not relaxing, Dean. You spent half the time networking and the other half organizing supply runs and hunts. And the Apocalypse isn't going anywhere. It's a hard truth, but you know as well as me this thing is chugging along at its own pace and, unless you've stumbled on something big, what we're doing is making a small wave in a very large ocean." Dean scoffs but she's right. He counts every person they save as a victory but there are over 666 Seals and only 66 need to break. There are more than 66 outside of the US, beyond his reach.

Ellen lays a hand on his shoulder. The warmth bleeds through his shirt. "Stay here. No hunting, just...build a couple of cabins. Work with your hands. Don't fire a gun. Talk to your kid and spend some time with her. Get some real sleep."

Dean ignores the last part. He doesn't think Ellen means anything by it--not like Kai--other than his sleeping habits are shitty enough to attract attention.

"She's barely ever out of my sight," Dean points out.

"Yeah, so, let her out of your sight. Send her to haul wood without you. Or don't send her at all, let her make her own decisions."

"You think letting her choose between 'haul wood up a mountain' or 'stack wood into a house shape' is going to solve all our problems?" Dean asks.

"No. I think treating her like you do Trix or Danny is going to solve most of your problems, short-term. I think the goal here is to try and avoid another High School Incident." Dean scowls and his grip on the bottle tightens. He's been ignoring the High School Incident since it happened. With the loss of Elkins and everything else that's happened in the interim he hasn't had the time to dwell on it. Postmortems of hunts are a luxury they can't afford any more

and talking to Mer is something of a minefield.

They drink in silence for a while. The stars are bright and vivid against the night sky. Dean idly picks out a few constellations. Whit had loved the sky. She used to take Mer out and tell her the stories behind all the mythological figures.

"How did you survive Jo?" Dean asks. Ellen snorts and starts shaking and Dean realizes that she's *laughing*. Dean rolls his eyes and shakes his head, but Ellen's near-silent laughter is infectious and soon enough he's grinning around his beer bottle. Ellen manages to reign in her mirth, but not before she's given her stomach muscles one hell of a workout.

"Dean," she says, getting back to the question at hand, "what the hell makes you think I have? Jo scares the shit out of me every single day." Dean thumbs at his beer bottle and she knows if it were a brand with a label he'd be peeling it off.

"It never goes away, does it?" He sounds resigned.

"They never tell you that when you sign up for kids you'll worry every second for the rest of your life." It's the biggest scam on the planet, parenthood.

"So what do I do?"

"Take a few days and pretend you've got a normal life for a while." Dean shakes his head. 'Normal' had never been his shtick. Ironically, he's probably the Winchester who'd come closest those years with him and Whit and Mer.

But taking a break couldn't hurt. There are other hunters out there to take up the slack and building that needs to be done here. Uncomplicated things away from the breakneck pace they've set towards the End Times.

His cellphone chimes. The mechanical sound rings loud and unnatural amongst the crickets and creatures of the woods. Ellen catches his hand before he can reach into his pocket.

"Don't read it. Don't look at it, don't think about it, don't even acknowledge it's there." She tugs on his wrist, forces him to look at her. "Stay here. Just for a few days." His phone chimes again.

The text is from Anna. There's a Seal breaking in Connecticut, something involving an artifact that might come in useful later on.

"I can't."

## Chapter 6

They haul ass to Hawleyville, Connecticut, just off I-84. It takes them about 19 hours straight through, switching between three drivers. (Trix still hasn't proven himself Impala-competent and seems pretty content with the set up, lazy bastard.)

Anael eventually provides them with coordinates that lead them to an aging suburban neighborhood. The area still has power though there aren't any people hanging around at two in the morning. The target house looks like any other on the block. There are a few porch lights on, though none inside the house; lacy curtains in the windows of the ground floor; a portable soccer goal on one side of the lawn, a trampoline on the other.

"Lights," Dean orders. His favorite shotgun now has a modified aluminum-alloy flashlight holder on it, courtesy of Danny. Mer's semi has a laser sight/flashlight combo, as does Trix's. Danny prefers the heft of a Maglite paired with a Walther P99--his '007 gun! "Nobody goes anywhere alone, we clear the rooms as a team and do not get split up. Clear?"

"Crystal," Danny says. He buckles a rifle to his back and grabs a few extra clips.

"Trix? Trixton!" Trix startles; he's been staring at the house since they got out of the car, brow furrowed.

"Yeah. Yeah, gotcha." He shakes his head and starts choosing his weapons. He's got a blessed machete that will kill just about anything, but he augments them with a gun.

"Get your head in the game, Trix. We can't have you distracted," Dean says, harsh with nerves.

"I won't be," he promises, but his gaze keeps sliding towards the house.

"Alright, this Seal involves 'The Fanatical Family.' Apparently someone has convinced an entire family of crazy people to sacrifice themselves and their kids to 'God' using some sort of special knife." Dean has long stopped being shocked by the level of stupidity people are capable of.

"God being Satan?" Mer says. She glances at Trix, who's usually on top of every horrible joke they make, but he's not playing along. Mer shoots him a worried glance but there's nothing they can do about it short of making him stay in the car and they need him.

The front door isn't locked. Dean makes an executive decision to turn on the lights as they go; might as well use electricity while it's around. A chandelier illuminates the entryway; the long hall runner that leads to the back of the house is bunched up and askew. There's a small den to the left and a dining room off to the right. The remnants of a half-eaten dinner are still on the table. A couple of glasses are over turned, one of the chair backs has broken, and the hall rug is askew.

"There's something very wrong here." Trix can be relied on for sarcasm and general unflappability; his skittishness and paranoia are off putting, adding to the general feel of foreboding.

"Dad, if these people are supposed to be willing..." Mer's starting to get scared, and Danny looks grimmer than Dean's ever seen before.

"Yeah, I see it." His instincts are screaming at him. There's a closed swinging door at the back of the dining room, probably leading to a kitchen, stairs to the second floor and a hallway to the rest of the house. The second floor is just a black hole of possible

traps. The entire house is silent. "We should go." Trix starts backing out of the room immediately, machete raised. Danny follows after him, the two of them covering each other. Mer slides in behind them, covering her dad's blindside.

A crash and a whimper comes from further inside the house. They all pause, tense and ready for an attack. Trix draws his gun and keeps his machete steady. A low, constant sobbing filters to them.

"No," Trix says. His knuckles are white around his machete. "It's a trap." A tortured scream tears through the air. Ragged around the edges; hoarse and worn. Not the first one. It's coming from this floor and Dean starts down the hallway.

"Dad..." He glances over his shoulder. Mer, Danny and Trix are all watching him. None of them have moved. Mer shakes her head.

"You want us to leave these people to whatever's got them?" he asks. Mer meets his gaze but soon looks away. She squares her shoulders and then steps forward, game face on.

"Of course not."

"Trix? Danny?" Trix looks like he's about to bolt and a small part of Dean wouldn't blame him.

"We're in," Danny says, dragging Trix forward. Dean nods and trusts them to fall in behind him.

They clear a bathroom, a closet, and a side porch; the kitchen is filled with too many shadows but the door swings out, so Danny shoves a couple of blocks underneath it so that if anyone tries to come out they'll hear them coming. That just leaves whatever this back room is. Based on the layout it stretches the width of the house, parallel to the kitchen.

"On three?" he asks Mer, who nods.

Dean kicks in the door. Mer drops to one knee, pressed against the doorjamb, ready to shoot. Her flashlight cuts a swath through the darkness but the beam seems weaker than it should be. Mer's sweep shows nothing unusual.

"Cover," Dean orders. He doesn't move until he feels Danny at his back. Dean steps into the room, gun aimed behind the door in case there's anyone hiding there.

The house disappears.

Dean stumbles, his mind playing catch up with his change of local.

"Dean Winchester." Dean spins around, gun raised, and pumps six rounds into the guy's chest. Human or demon, it should be enough to put either one of them out. The stranger--tall, balding, white guy in an overly expensive suit--doesn't flinch, just brushes his fingers over the holes and makes them disappear. "Now that you've gotten that out of your system. I'm Zachariah. I thought it was time we had a little chat about expectations."

"Send me back." He keeps his gun leveled on the man even though he knows it's pointless. Fucking angels. Anael's always said they'll come for him eventually, that she can only keep them off his back for so long.

"Oh, that wouldn't be in anyone's best interests. Have a seat."

"I think I'll pass," Dean says cheerfully. Zachariah smiles, oily and fake. Dean's legs collapse under him, no longer able to bear his weight. He misses the chair and ends up on the floor--because he *has no bones*, he realizes in horror.

"I don't make requests." Zachariah pulls the chair around and seats

himself in it. "I take it you know what I am, but just in case you're as dense as I think you are, I'm an Angel of the Lord. I'd ask you who's been slipping you information and put those pretty little symbols all over your chest, but we already figured that out. Now, let's talk about your role in this little apocalypse. You and your brother have been meandering through the end days like we have all the time in the world. I'm tired of waiting."

"My heart bleeds for you," Dean says. He struggles to keep his mind blank, all thoughts of good angels and information hidden behind a wall of *you're all epic dicks*.

"It's time to pull the trigger, Dean-o. Get this party started in true form."

"I'm not starting the freaking apocalypse for you."

"Oh, that's not an issue--we already did that. Granted, not as we'd originally planned, but Heaven, like all good bureaucracies, is filled with redundancies."

"You *planned* this?" Dean calculates the number of people that have died, the cities he's seen destroyed and--Anael hadn't mentioned that Heaven had engineered this thing. Dean had always assumed the apocalypse was the result of aggressive neglect.

"Of course we planned this, apocalypses don't just happen. No, I've had to get creative to keep this on track. And I do hate creativity."

"What got in your way?"

"Don't you know?" Zachariah asks. Dean really doesn't like the smarmy smile that spreads across his face. "We're about eighteen years behind schedule."

"Mer," Dean breathes, fear crashing through him.

"Mary Winchester, junior model. Who helped you with that, by the way?" Zachariah pulls a silver sword from his sleeve and flips it. It looks simple but there's something quietly sinister about the weapon.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Dean says. His mind races--both he and Mer are untraceable by angelic means but Zachariah obviously knew where to find him tonight. That means they know where Mer is. And Dean would bet his car that Zach is a vengeful fuckhead who won't hesitate to take out a 'delay' like Mer.

"Oh, come on, Dean. Don't play coy now. Unplanned pregnancies happen to you animals all the time, but not to people as important as you. We watch over you far too carefully for that. Don't get me wrong, there have been a few, because free will is a bitch, but you weren't one of them. No, what really gave away the game was the mother. Do you know how long we've been trying to find little Mary's mommy? What's her name...Karen? Someone's been hiding her from us for years. Not an easy thing to do when the whole of Heaven is looking for you. And I admit, we didn't keep as close a watch on you as we should have, so the question remains--who gave you Mer?"

Dean can't...the angel's messing with his head. Has to be. Mer is not a pawn in whatever game Heaven and Hell are fighting with earth as the board. No more than the rest of them. She can't be.

"You really don't know," Zachariah muses. "Interesting. Someone out there threw quite a spanner in the works with that one. Very tricksy. But not insurmountable and there's a silver lining."

"More time for you to be a douche?" Dean suggests.

"If you don't cooperate, we can always use your darling little girl."

Dean jerks towards Zachariah, reaching for a weapon, his protective instincts warring with his physical limitations.

"Pathetic," a new voice says. There's an angel behind him, looking down at him with even more disdain than Zachariah.

"Ah, Uriel. How are things?"

"The abomination and this mud monkey's spawn are fighting." The asshole looks right at Dean and smirks. "The girl is losing."

"Let me go you son of a bitch!" Dean glares and projects as much anger as he can towards the angels. He's never been as good at this as S--the others, but he can pack a punch.

"What's stopping you?" Dean stares suspiciously at Zachariah and then tests his legs. They work again, the bones restored. He scrambles to his feet.

"Dean! Do try to remember that it hurts less if you cooperate," Zachariah says.

"Fuck you." Dean ignores the laughter that follows him out of the room.

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"Dad? DAD!" Mer charges into the room with reckless abandon, Danny and Trix hot on her heels.

"Holy shit, where'd he go?" Danny shoulders in beside her, gun raised. The room was probably a den or living room but all the furniture has been removed. There are still marks in the plush carpet and detritus scattered over the floor.

"There's a transportation spell on the ceiling." Trix shines his

flashlight upward. The spell's burned out, leaving only a charred outline.

"Person specific or first body through the door?" Mer asks, words clipped.

"Can't tell. I'd need to get a closer--" Three demons burst through the opposite door. Black eyes, two female bodies, one male. None of them are fazed by the demon-shot, and each demon heads towards a hunter with dedicated focus.

"Shit." Mer flattens her demon's nose with the butt of her shotgun. It breaks the demon's momentum but it gets right back up. There's something odd in how she moves. It's very singular, repetitive. Less fighting and more...brute strength. Almost mindless. Like Ash's rats, throwing themselves at her finger without regard or intelligence.

Danny blows half his demon's hand off but it doesn't even flinch. Danny catches the demon in a sleeper hold. He spins it around until they're facing Trix, who does a superkick that sends his demon flying, both feet planted center mass. The force sends them both crashing to the floor, square on their backs. He flips himself up and runs Danny's demon through with his machete. The demon flashes as it dies, the smell of sulfur filling the air.

Mer uses the demons' mindlessness against it, sweeping its feet from underneath it and blasting its kneecaps away. It squeals and crawls towards her, snarling. She leads it away from Danny and Trix, not wanting to get in their way as they work. She catches movement out of the corner of her eye. There's another demon in the room. White eyes. Fuck.

She barely has time to process the thought when his power tosses her to the side. Her demon goes flying the opposite way, straight

into Trix and Danny. They end up in a pile, two demons and two hunters, subsequently swept out the door which slams shut.

The demon turns to her and Mer scrambles to her feet, searching for her gun. She spies it a few feet away and lunges for it, rolls on the ground and comes up on her knees. Aiming at air. White Eyes has disappeared.

Mer backs up until she hits the wall. There's no way her father disappearing and her separation from Danny and Trix are random.

"Hello, Mer-bear." Mer jerks at the sound of that voice, a chill seeping into her bones. Sam stands at the other end of the room. He's wearing a pristine white suit and shiny white shoes, a pocket square the color of blood, hair brushed back.

"A hat and you could pass for one of the Village People," Mer says. Her voice comes out even, which is something considering her racing heart and how much she wants to run far, far away. One of the fundamental rules of hunting is do not show fear. The way Sam smiles at her, sharp at the edges, tells her she's not doing a good job.

"Weak. You can do better than that." He ambles slowly to the center of the room, the picture of unconcerned nonchalance with his hands tucked in his pockets. Mer glances to the exits and Sam's smile sharpens. No way out. She puts some steel in her spine and stands tall. Proud. Like a Winchester. Sam tilts his head to one side and considers her. "How does it feel, knowing you're going to die? I think I've forgotten."

"I'd be happy to help you revisit it," Mer says with forced cheer. Sam laughs and the sound crawls up her spine and settles in the part of her brain that screams *danger, run*.

"You are not as powerful as me." Sam makes his point by slowly

starting to crush Mer's chest from several feet away. She gasps, scrabbling at the wall and trying to breathe. She desperately tries to use her own abilities to combat Sam's but it's like pitting an alley cat against a lion. He watches her gasp with detached indifference. "I should have done this long ago."

"Why...didn't...you?" she pants. Her vision darkens around the edges; she can feel tears gathering in her eyes. The only thing keeping her upright at the moment is the vice Sam's put her in.

"I don't care about you," Sam says and fuck, Mer thought he'd already done all the damage he could. He touches her cheek, tenderly, wipes away her tears like when she was little and had a bad dream. He even smells the same, which is a ridiculous thing to focus on. It's so familiar.

"Atta," Mer breathes and closes her eyes in surrender. God, this is going to end *so poorly*. Everything feels hyper-real: the feel of his hand around her throat, the wall cold against her back, her ribs bending almost to their breaking point. And she waits.

Sam makes a small noise so inconsistent with what she'd expect she forgets herself and opens her eyes.

His eyes are green. Clear.

"Mer?" He looks confused, almost...scared. The band around her chest disappears. The hand around her throat weakens. Sam's brow furrows and he draws his fingers over the marks he left there, light and apologetic. He makes a low, aborted noise and looks into Mer's eyes.

Mer summons every ounce of power at her disposal and sends him flying across the room. Sam dents the drywall.

Her first attempt to get off the floor fails; pain flairs brightly in her

ribs and steals her breath. She presses her hand to the worst of the pain, the compression allowing her to at least move, and scrambles towards freedom. She shatters the door Danny and Trix disappeared through with a thought, though her exit consists of chasing her center of gravity, falling forward in a semi-controlled fashion. She makes it through the house, her only goal to get out and go. The world around her swims because she can't breathe, there's not enough air.

Something hits her, full-tilt, sweeps her right off her feet and Mer screams. The world around her goes cold and swirls away. She thinks she can hear the flap of wings and when she finds the ground beneath her feet again she's somewhere else, lying on her back. Her lungs don't want to work. Maybe she's forgotten how. There's wetness seeping through her shirt and her chest fucking *hurts*.

"Mer, come on, you're really freaking us out here." She blinks and Danny's in front of her, a finger held in front of her mouth, testing for breath, Trix peering over his shoulder. "Breathe or I'm starting CPR." It takes a moment but Mer manages to take a long, excruciating breath.

"Thank god," Danny says. He puts a hand on Mer's ribs, just below her heart, and it steals her breath all over again.

"Danny! Move!" Trix shoves him out of the way and brushes his fingers through Mer's hair. It's comforting, soothing. She closes her eyes and works at controlling the pain, packing it away and steeling herself against it. She only comes back when Trix's words, the soft susurrus of sound he's kept up this whole time, start making sense.

This time Trix is in front and Danny's hovering.

"Welcome back," Trix says and it's a knife in her belly, ripping through her guts and twisting through bundles of nerves.

"He came back," Mer says, and only then becomes aware of her tears.

## Chapter 7

Sam lays on the ground, stunned, confused. His mind moves sluggishly, thoughts swirling around each other, colliding and overlapping and none of them make any sense together. Apart, they're all terrifying. He thinks about moving but his limbs are too heavy.

Someone appears over him, just a shadow against the bright light. There are sounds, maybe words, but his own breath is the loudest thing he can hear. Something wet and warm rains down on his forehead. Sam tries to speak and some of it gets in his mouth. Tastes like copper. Tastes like power.

And he burns.

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Alastair chants, a frantic litany of words tripping over his tongue. He slashes his hand and lets the blood anoint Samael's head and mouth. The Boy-King screams, arching up off the ground like it sears through him. He rolls to his knees and tears off his shirt.

"That *bitch*." There's a cleansing sigil glowing on Samael's back. A very skilled magic user has been trying to remove the demonic taint. Had almost succeeded from the looks of it. He's going to have to expend an unnecessary amount of effort to break whatever's affected Samael. Alastair uses his knife to carve a deep cut down the center of it, then reopens the wound on his hand and mixes their blood. Sam raises up on his knees and howls like a wounded animal. The green of his eyes are swallowed by darkness as the taint surges back. Alastair almost loses himself. Samael craves more, wants all that he has. His power sweeps out of him through the cut on his hand and there's something he should be remembering--

Alastair rips his hand away, stumbling back, dizzy and disconnected. Drained.

The howling stops. Samael stands, his movements fluid and easy, as if gravity is a suggestion he's currently humoring. He cracks his neck, left then right, the sounds loud in the still room.

"Ruby." Samael places his hand over Alastair's heart and replaces everything he lost and then some. It's the most painful thing Alastair has ever felt. He strains at the overload and power arcs between his fingers tips. The world smells metallic and every moment is the most exquisite form of agony.

After an eternity Samael releases him and Alastair flails weakly on the ground, sucking in unneeded air. He feels like he could destroy the world with a thought. Like he would follow Samael wherever he might lead because they are *invincible*.

He staggers to his feet and laughs. Samael smiles--a feral expression tinged with gory anticipation. At the very least Alastair will have his revenge.

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Ruby feels her spell break. She has so much of herself wrapped up in it that it rips out a part of her, power she'll never regain; she stumbles into the wall, her world spinning. The body she's in starts gagging instinctively.

Shit.

She feels them coming. Samael's wrath precedes him, colors the hallways and sets the hell hounds braying. Alastair is far more subtle; she'll never know where he is until the second knife is in her.

She flees to her room, activating spells she left behind to impede their progress and gain her valuable seconds. There's a bag underneath her bed, packed and ready for this very occasion and without it she won't survive. She also needs her knife, and the two crystals on her bedside table.

She's just gathered everything when door opens and Alastair steps in. Good; she has a chance.

"Ambitious," he says, taking in everything. He is wholly unconcerned and feels...different. Changed. She has no idea what happened to him, but it frightens her. "It never would have worked."

"Yes. It would've." She'd seen the signs even if no one else had. She was bringing Sam back and pushing Samael to the side. The fact that's he's here first, asked Sam for the right of first blood and won it tells her that much. She rubs the crystals together and feels the spell in them activate, warming the quartz and making them vibrate in her hands.

Alastair steps forward and she dashes the crystals at her feet. They explode with enough force to tear a hole in the fabric of the world. Ruby's sucked into the vortex the spell creates, a portal to anywhere-but-here. A random destination that no one can track.

She hits rocky, arid ground with a thud, rolls along the ground until she hits a rock, something in her arm making a sickening, wet squelch. She takes a moment to orient herself. It's night, the stars are bright points in the sky, and the air is freezing. If she were human, she'd die of exposure as she's had the good luck to appear in the middle of a desert.

She takes stock of her body. She's scraped off a good chunk of the skin on her left arm in addition to shattering the ulna. She pushes a

piece of ragged, exposed bone back under the skin. She has no practice in setting bones but she manipulates what's left into a vague semblance of normalcy. It hurts to the point where she can't quite ignore it and her body starts to sweat. She watches her blood pool on the ground below her, the arid soil soaking up the moisture.

Enough. She has work to do.

Ruby turns in a circle, trying to see if there are any lights in the distance that mean civilization. Nothing. So she picks a direction and starts walking.

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Dean has no idea where he is. The air is wetter than it should be, the temperature much colder. Fuck, Zachariah could have transported him anywhere. Another country, even.

Something lightly brushes against Dean's back and the feeling of distortion makes his vision swim. When he focuses again he's not where he was. He looks around, on guard for another of Zachariah's tricks, but there's no one there. He's just been transported somewhere new.

"Anna? Cas?" Snatching him from right under Zachariah's nose would be a pretty ballsy move, and his two angels aren't really known for taking risks. He gets no answer. There's really nothing left to do but start moving.

He's at the base of a steep hill. The ground crumbles underneath his boots, the short grass not enough to keep the soil together. Swearing, Dean stumbles over the crest.

"Son of a bitch." Dean's in Thrieve, a thousand miles away from where he's supposed to be. He has no idea why they dropped him

here but--

"Dean?" Danny's hands are full of wood. He's got a large purple bruise over half his face. And he's looking at Dean like he's seen a ghost.

"Jesus, Danny. Is Mer okay?"

"No, come on." He starts down the path and Dean follows. "Sam was there, he tried to kill her, but he didn't and she won't tell us what happened. And then you were gone and we all ended up here and we're freaking out."

Fuck. That...that is not good. Uriel's comments come back with tormenting clarity.

"How did everyone get here?" Here is what they've dubbed Bobby's house, the one they visit when they need some esoteric book or to do some serious research, on the outskirts of Thrieve. Only a handful of people know it exists and it's got the most heavy-duty anti-demon security they can manage, even with the protective circle.

"We're assuming Angel Express?" Danny says.

"Me too," Dean sighs.

"Yeah. It's, uh, intense," Danny settles on. The back door flies open upon their approach, someone barreling out at full speed.

"Dan, we need--holy shit." Trix trips over his feet he stops so fast. Dean grabs him by the arm to stop him from falling on his face. "You disappeared! We thought Sam got you! Where'd you go? How'd you get here?"

"He didn't. Where's Mer?" He pushes past Trix and into the house.

It's fairly open and simple; it's not wired as there's no electricity here, just the fire and a series of camp lights and oil lamps.

He spies her sleeping on the couch in front of the fireplace, hidden under a couple of blankets. There's a cut on her chin with a dark bruise forming on around. Her bottom lip is swollen; probably has a cut from her teeth on the inside. He touches the tender spots lightly but Mer still flinches away.

He feels the moment she wakes up, her entire body tensing for action. He stays still and immobile until she identifies him as a non-threat.

"Dad." She tries to sit up and gasps, clutching her ribs. Dean helps her up and slips a second pillow behind her back. She won't let go of his shirt.

He does his own check of her ribs to make sure they aren't cracked. She stifles a cry but the sound still sears through him. How can they fight Hell when Heaven's lurking in the shadows? Zachariah made it clear they expect Dean to fall in line for the end game or face the consequences. And what happens if Heaven and Hell are working *together*?

A chill goes through Dean because there's no way the angels snatching him and Sam showing up were independent events. That was a concerted, joint effort. He doesn't think Sam knew--Sam would choose grabbing Dean over killing Mer any day. ...right?

Trix slips in with a cold pack and salve. He hands it to Dean, offering Mer a small smile before he grabs Danny and drags him out, leaving the two of them alone. Dean holds the compress to her ribs, winces in sympathy when she hisses. They'll need to wrap 'em tomorrow.

Mer takes over holding the compress and Dean starts rubbing the

salve over her bruises. He smells comfrey, arnica, and what he suspects is mullein. Identifying the ingredients and going through their properties--a hold over from the time Leslie thought he should learn how to brew his own medicine--keeps him from completely freaking the fuck out.

He takes his time, making sure he doesn't miss any spots. But there's a question burning between them that he can't ignore anymore. Mer's eyes are closed, her breathing even and steady. Not asleep.

"How'd you get away?" Mer's expression oscillates between torment and attempted stoicism. She never opens her eyes but tears leak out of the corners.

"He...he stopped."

"What?" She looks at him, so broken that he automatically responds in kind, reacting to her pain as if it's his own.

"It--it wasn't him. It was *Atta*." She loses her control and her sobs have to hurt, straining cracked ribs and tender bruises. Dean pulls her close, trying to be gentle. "Atta came back. He came back and I just ran away."

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Dean leaves Mer on the couch, the fire banked for the night. He picks one of the empty bedrooms off the main room and flips on the overhead light. He toes off his boots and pulls off his shirt. The carpet is incredibly soft.

He wanders into the bathroom, already steamed up from the shower. The water is almost scalding but that's how Dean likes it.

Dean lets the water beat down on his shoulders, loosening the

tension there. It feels so good.

He rubs shampoo on his head, the faint scent of orange pervading the room.

Dean reaches up and kneads his traps, the self-massage not quite what he's looking for. He moans when strong fingers dig into tense, knotted muscles. God, that's brilliant. Dean tilts his head a little to the left and the fingers obligingly follow his lead. He has a tendency to get large knots on the right side of his neck, the muscle bulging obscenely from the tension. If he lets it go too long he starts getting crippling, nauseating headaches.

The fingers coax him into leaning back, into their pressure and against the firm body behind him. Scalding water sluices off his chest, just enough splashing on his neck to keep the heat up.

"Sam," Dean sighs. Lips brush against his neck. He lets himself relax fully. Sam's hands slide down his chest and come to rest over his stomach. Sam nibbles on his ear and Dean huffs a laugh.

There's something he should be remembering, but thoughts float away the second he has them. All he can focus on is how nice the shower is, how wonderful the heat. His mind is as thick as the steam fogging up the bathroom.

"There's something you should know," Sam whispers. Dean shivers at the feeling of Sam's hot breath over his ear and the seductive promise of Sam's tone. He tries to get Sam to do it again but he won't, would rather trail kisses down Dean's neck and bite lightly at the juncture of his neck. "Ask me." Sam's fingers slide along Dean's obliques and settle against his hipbones.

"Ask you what?" Dean asks softly. He pushes his ass into Sam's erection and grins when Sam's grip tightens. He hopes there are bruises; he likes bruises.

"What you should know." Dean wiggles and Sam steps back, holding him at arm's length, body too far away, until Dean sighs and complies.

"Fine, what should I know?" Sam propels them forward, smashing Dean into the wall and pinning him there. He presses against Dean's back, hotter than the water, and the tile is bitingly cold against Dean's front. Dean struggles, the breath knocked out of him. He snaps his head back into Sam's nose, hears the bone break. Feels Sam's blood drip like lava onto his skin. Sam just laughs and digs his teeth onto Dean's shoulder, drawing blood.

Dean pushes off the wall and sends them both falling over the edge of the tub, Dean landing hard on top. He throws a few elbows getting up, enjoying Sam's pained grunt, and scrambles away from Sam's obnoxiously long limbs.

They've fought and fucked and blurred the line between both in these waking-dreams but this is different. The difference between sparring and fighting to maim.

Dean doesn't get far. Sam catches up with him and pushes him into the wall; Dean thinks that, were this reality, he'd have matching bruises on either side of his face Sam digs his fingers into the thin skin at Dean's wrist and then spins him. He looks up at Sam--

Black eyes with vivid green irises. Dean tries to jerk away but Sam holds him in place. There's a too-tight hand around Dean's throat, controlling and unrelenting.

"I'm coming for you." Sam kisses him, brutal and merciless, and Dean falls into darkness.

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Alastair arrives at the given coordinates late to make a point.

Someone has drawn a smiley face with a blood splotch where he's supposed to stand. Cute. Probably Uriel, who is five inches away from falling. Alastair would happily help him out if he weren't so fucking useful as an angel.

He feels the once-familiar jerk of a heavenly transportation spell pull him through the different aspects of the world and deposit him *between*. His senses are dulled though his manipulation of the space around him has increased exponentially.

The room they've dropped him in is the very definition of ostentatious. What the humans would call 'Old World.' Gilt furniture and hand-carved trim and obnoxious murals painted on the walls. Upon closer inspection, the murals all depict fluffy-winged angels with halos playing harps. Clearly designed to hold some hapless human and decorated by someone with a sharper wit than Uriel.

"You failed to deliver." Alastair straightens slowly, keeping his back to the two angels just to show that he's not intimidated by them. He conjures a red Sharpie and sketches a few improvements onto the painting. Only when he's well and truly done does he turn around and smirk. Uriel is there but the one who captures his attention is the other. Zachariah. A relatively low-ranking seraph who navigated the rigidly bureaucratic hierarchy of Heaven and is basically running the garrison on Earth. He'd make a fantastic demon.

"It seems we both had traitors in our midst." Alastair manifests a bottle of alcohol and seats himself at the table.

"We know who they are," Uriel says menacingly. Uriel makes fantastic cannon fodder.

"And we are using all of our resources to find them," Zachariah

says. Alastair salutes him with his drink; so the angels had more than one traitor working against them. Interesting. Given the angelic propensity for blind faith Alastair wouldn't estimate the number to be above three individuals working against the common cause.

"And how's that going?" he asks mockingly.

"I suspect as well as the hunt for your traitor." Zachariah favors him with a mocking smile.

"She may be running, but she's powerless now. A neutralized threat. Did you bring me to your nether regions to chat about our minions' lack of perspective or something worth my time?"

"We are displeased with the pace of this Apocalypse. It does not appear to be gaining momentum."

"Meandering towards stagnation." That's as close as Alastair will ever go to agreeing with an angel, simply on principle.

"And what are we going to do about it?" Zachariah asks.

"We?" Alastair enjoys the way Zachariah's face pinches. His eyes almost disappear. He lets the word and all its implications hang between them for some time, but one should not play waiting games with immortal beings. "If *we* are going to do something then the first move is yours."

"What do you want?" Zachariah asks. He almost seems amused.

"Dean Winchester. Samael will not budge until he has his consort at his side. Nothing will sway or distract him. And trickery doesn't work; he's annoyingly perceptive for a pawn."

"We need him."

"You have a spare."

"This is how it's supposed to be, brother against brother. How it's always been and always will be. Besides, the symmetry is appealing." Not to mention Zachariah can't stand Dean's obnoxious offspring. She's suspiciously powerful and a foil to all of his best laid plans.

"Appealing. You're going to derail the Apocalypse for *appealing*." Alastair's lip curls in disdain. It's very human.

"It's not our problem that you can't control your--"

"The *problem* is that Sammy loves Deanie. Doesn't just lust after his tight little ass and fairly average-sized cock. He's obsessive and possessive and wants to hurt your too-pretty Michael suit in the worst ways and he still *loves* him with every fiber of his black little heart and there is nothing I can do to exorcise it. Believe me, I have tried, but they've sunk so far in each other the loss will either drive them mad or kill them. That is both of our problem if you want this thing to happen."

Zachariah steeples his fingers and regards Alastair evenly. Inside he rages with vicious satisfaction. He warned Dean about going against them.

"We will use the girl as Heaven's instrument. Samael can have his consort. We withdraw all protection from Dean Winchester." A scroll appears on the table, the golden lettering of their pact appearing before their eyes. A drop of Zachariah's blood and a dash of Alastair's and it is done. Alastair raises his tumbler in a toast as the two angels disappear. It's time to light a fire under this apocalypse, and he knows just how to do it.

## Chapter 8

"--the hell are..." Anna and Castiel appear with Bobby in tow. Bobby boggles, looking around his house with wide, shocked eyes. Dean and Mer both have guns trained on them, but that's just a reflex; they're staring at Anna and Castiel a little widely as the two angels rarely appear together for fear of being caught. They've also never introduced themselves to Bobby or given any indication that they know he exists.

"We have been discovered," Castiel says. He's holding himself even more stiffly than usual, which is a feat in and of itself. Bobby wrenches his arm from Castiel's grip and stumbles into one of the kitchen chairs.

"Son of a bitch." He looks a bit green around the gills.

"And how was your flight with Air Angel today?" Dean asks with a smirk, holstering his gun. He snags the whiskey off the table; Bobby looks like he could use it.

Bobby shakes his head and grips the table. Angels are all fine a good in theory, but he's never wanted to associate with them. They like to talk to Dean or, if he's unavailable, Mer and act like the rest of them don't exist.

"Damn thing just appeared in the middle of the woods and zapped me here without a by-your-leave," he grumbles, glaring at Castiel.

"We had no time to explain," Anael says from where she's materialized beside Mer. Her hands glow faintly with healing light; Mer's eyes are tightly shut and her lips are pressed together in an effort to suppress her pain. Anael's healing comes with a price. "Zachariah has discovered our duplicity. We could not rescue Dean without revealing ourselves. We are being searched for even

now."

"Connecticut?" Dean asks, though he already knows. He keeps his back to the angels and takes a deep, calming breath.

"A well-laid trap," Anael confirms. "I did not send you those coordinates. By the time we discovered Zachariah's deception it was too late."

"So Zachariah really is working with Sam." Dean feels Bobby's incredulous gaze; his fear, dismay and pessimism like a Gordian knot in the back of Dean's mind.

"If not directly then with someone very close to him," Anael says. Dean scowls and turns to look at Anael but finds that Castiel has snuck up behind him without regard for personal space. He takes a step back, then around Cas, who just pivots on his heel so Dean is never out of his line of sight. It's creepy.

"That's really not good, right?" Their attention is drawn to the door, where Danny stands holding a bunch of bandages and a basket of vegetables. "I mean, if Heaven and Hell have joined forces, then we're totally fucked. They can't be working together, it's not *fair* we--" Danny's eyes roll into the back of his head and he collapses on the ground. Castiel looks down at his crumpled form, arm still extended with two fingers poised where Danny's head had been. A tomato rolls across the floor.

"What the fuck, Cas?" Dean demands. He checks Danny's pulse by habit and then hoists him up over his shoulder. He glares at Castiel who stares back blankly.

"His mental state was not conducive to the conversation." Dean rolls his eyes and carries Danny into the other room, dropping him unceremoniously onto the bed. Fucking *angels*. He takes a moment to breathe and pack away some of the revelations of the night. He'll

deal with them later.

He turns to the door and almost collides with Anael.

"Christ, wear a bell!" he hisses, less out of fear for waking Danny--he'll be out for a good couple of hours, Dean knows this from experience--and more because he's pretty sure Anael's cornered him for an uncomfortable reason. Also, personal space. "I thought you at least understood about personal bubbles."

"You do collect strange and unique amongst humanity," Anael says before turning her attention fully on Dean. "Your dreams are troubled." Dean bristles.

"What is with you people and my dreams?" Dean demands. Anael cocks her head slightly to the side and her body goes still. It's times like these that Dean remembers the angels use host bodies just like demons do, though with a slightly different set of rules. It's unnatural, this stillness.

"I cannot keep him from your mind, though there are ways to block--"

"No." Dean's had enough of people fucking with his head--Kai, the angels, Missouri, Mer. He's not letting Anael touch it.

"The reticence you feel is not entirely your own, Dean," Anael says and that's how Dean knows she's trying to whammy him. Anael can fake human like a champ, but it takes effort, and the only time she uses his name other than to capture his attention is when she's trying to coerce him into a specific course of action. Some sort of psychological bullshit that he'd actually fallen for before he caught on to her.

"No." Dean has had it with being manipulated. By everyone.

"Dad!" Mer calls, effectively stopping their conversation. He smirks at the flash of annoyance on Anael's face and brushes past her.

Mer's shirt is off and Bobby is testing the give of her ribs. Most of the bruises have faded into grotesque yellow-green splotches. She looks at him and grimaces. "I could pass for a Vulcan." Dean musters a weak smile but he can't take his eyes off her injuries. Just a little more, a moment later--

Dean pulls himself away from that train of thought; they have too much to do for him to waste time like that.

"So what now?" he asks the room at large. Everyone glances at one another, blank-faced. Bobby shakes his head and pours himself a drink. "Come on. There has to be something we can do. A plan, a Seal we can save. Cas? Anna? Bueller?" The silence is heavy and unrelenting. They seem frozen in place, wax statues only emulating life. Dean's eyes are immediately drawn to Anael when she shifts uncomfortably, a strikingly human gesture.

"Mary, do you still have the Book of Parcae?" Anael asks. Mer's brow furrows. She throws Dean a questioning look but he's at a loss as well.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." But there's hesitation there at the end, a worried line between her eyes that means she's not quite sure.

"Aw, hell," Bobby says. He scrubs at his face and when he turns towards them again he looks ancient and ashen. "Not *that* thing again."

"Yes," Anael says and Bobby pours himself a bigger drink.

"What book?" Dean asks. No one answers him. Castiel's too busy

hovering in the background looking stoic. Bobby is muttering cranky nothings into his tumbler. Mer and Anael are having some sort of staring contest from across the room. An uneasy feeling settles in Dean's stomach, growing into alarm when Mer's eyes widen with understanding. He reads both surprise and fear there.

"The Impala is outside," Anael says. Mer spins on her heel and disappears, the screen door slamming closed behind her.

"You want to tell me what the hell is going on?" Dean asks. He rocks onto the balls of his feet, ready for anything, stifling the impulse to follow after his kid. His attention sharpens, every detail in the room standing out in stark clarity. He feels the weight of every weapon on his body. And Anael just *shrugs* as if Dean isn't two seconds from an overprotective rage.

Mer comes back before he can get truly worked up, duffel in hand, which she promptly dumps onto the ground. Her belongings spill haphazardly across the floor, clothes and the odd tool falling into a pile until she's down to the very bottom, the forgotten things that rarely see the light of day. A leather satchel, covered with symbols, falls to the floor and surrenders its contents. Dean can *feel* the Book. There's no way to describe it, but everything in him is aware of it.

"What the fuck is that?" Dean asks, stepping away from it.

"You've been carrying that all this time?" Bobby demands. His first instinct is to shoot the damn thing and call it a day. It's been years since he saw it and he'd've died happy had he never seen it again. Mer shrugs, staring down at the book with an odd expression.

"You know what it is?" Dean asks Bobby.

"Yeah, I know it." Bobby resigns himself to going through this

again. He doesn't believe for a moment that Dean'll be any smarter than his daddy, and double or nothing Mer'll be jumping on the bandwagon too. "Thing got your father killed."

"I think...I think he sent it to me," Mer says. "I can't remember..."

"Yeah, don't strain yourself. It messes with reality; if it doesn't want you to remember, you won't." Bobby clears a place on his desk. "Well, bring it over here." Mer and Dean eye each other over the relic and Bobby sighs. "Girl, you've been carrying that thing around for years, pick it up and bring it over." Mer makes a face but does as instructed, trying to minimize contact by holding one corner. Really, she should know better.

Bobby peels the protective wrap from around the Book. From the way both Dean and Mer flinch the thing is screaming at them; just another reason he's glad there's not a psychic bone in his body. He opens the book at random and begins flipping through the pages.

None of it makes any sense.

Each page looks like a jumble of symbols and languages, written on top of each other, sideways, upside down with an occasional swirl of incomprehensible images. If he pauses too long and makes an effort to differentiate between the languages his head starts to hurt, a sharp stabbing pain right behind his eyes.

"This is stupid, who needs a book no one can read?" Dean huffs in frustration.

"There is a page written for every human in the world," Anael says. She and Castiel keep a respectful distance from the artifact. "Keep going until you find it."

"You can't be serious," Dean says. He eyes the Book warily, still fighting the urge to get away from it. He notices Bobby hesitate at

one page, fingers twitching before he continues on. Dean files it away but doesn't say anything; if Bobby doesn't want to translate his future Dean's certainly not going to make him. They're not a third of the way through the Book when Dean registers something other than nonsense and squiggles.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Dean says. This page...the words seem to straighten in front of his eyes. They unfurl from the tight, dense knot they had been, order forming from chaos. It's still a mishmash of languages, but there's a pattern to them. He recognizes some, can pick out a few words he's already familiar with, but translating this is going to be a bitch.

"Well?" Bobby asks.

"It looks like writing, but it's like some ten-year-old with ADD sat down and wrote it in every random language they could think of," Dean says. He reads out a few of the words--judging by Bobby's winces his pronunciation is atrocious--and names some of the languages he recognizes. It's mostly Greek to him.

"Fuck," Bobby sums up.

"Nothing comes without effort." Everyone turns to look at Castiel.

"Thank you, Yoda," Dean says. "Wait, don't you speak every language ever known? Come translate this."

Anael shakes her head. "We cannot help."

"Bullshit, Heaven doesn't want you, Hell won't take you. I think you've got bigger issues than breaking a few rules," Dean says.

"Angels are agents of chance and fate, but we are not its keeper. We may influence but not know."

"That's great, but what the hell does it mean?" Dean asks, frustrated by all the prevaricating. Anael demonstrates by approaching the Book. The pages go blank, the ink fading from sight. Bobby flips through it and all the pages are the same. She moves away and the lettering slowly returns. It looks like someone's writing the Book at that moment, stroke-by-stroke.

"I've seen some freaky things in my time," Bobby says faintly, "but this takes the cake."

"So why do we need this?" Mer asks.

"Castiel and I are no longer privy to Heaven's plans. It seems we have not been, in the way we thought, for some time. The Book never lies. It's the only guide we have at the moment." Anael hesitates, discomposed enough to let her uncertainty show on her host. "And I fully expect Zachariah's efforts to escalate."

"You mean he wasn't bringing his A-game *before*?" Dean asks.

"How do we even know this will work?" Mer says, preempting the derailment she sees coming.

"Dean is a cornerstone of this Apocalypse. His fate is irrevocably tied to its resolution."

"Well in that case, I'll do mine as well," Mer says

"Mer--" The glare she turns on him is searing. He swallows the rest of his protest; they don't have time for the fight that will ensue otherwise. He tries to take Ellen's advice and accept her decision. Mostly. "Fine. I'll copy down mine first--"

"It will not be that simple. The Book will protect its secrets." Dean sighs and even though he knows Anael or Castiel *can't* just give them all this information, he can't help his frustration.

"Well. Then I guess we have some research to do."

\*\*\*

Bobby doesn't have all the resources they need, but luckily they've acquired two fugitive angels who have nothing better to do than run errands. Soon the dining room table is groaning with old tomes and manuscripts, the musty smell permeating the room, and they have to convert one of the bedrooms into a study. Danny woke up, shot them all a wounded, traumatized look, and took off with a "network and stock supplies." Which was probably code for crash with Trix's port-in-the-storm out here, as far from the angels as they could get.

Dean attempts his translation but research has never been his strong suit and as no one but Dean can read his page, he has no choice but to do all the legwork himself. Despite Anael's warnings he tries to copy the whole of his prophecy onto sheets of paper. This results in migraines, gibberish, and crippling spontaneous carpal tunnel. There's no discernible pattern to what he can get down; sometimes it's almost a full line, other times it's word-by-word. Bobby helps with most of the more esoteric translations; the figure out a few cheats and work arounds that tend to work.

The different languages come together in a way that requires some creative thinking to interpret, which means the angels are fairly useless for anything other than a straight forward translations or fact checking. It's all a moot point anyways. The farther Dean gets into his own prophecy the less inclined he is to ask for help. Soon the only way he can get through the next word is to forget what came before. Or to jump around and translate at random.

He works steadily, only stopping when Mer insists he get some sleep, often times sitting down at the table and refusing to sleep or move until he does. Something about this setup reminds him

achingly of his father and Sam, sat at a similar kind of table with Sam adamant about his school and John caught between acknowledging the futility of Dean's education and actually being a father. He doesn't have the heart to tell her he barely manages to nap, the image of the future that's being written before his eyes and the ever-present threat of Heaven and Hell--working together, *fuck them* that is totally against the rules--fueling his insomnia.

Dean finishes his translation around four AM on the seventh day. He stares at the words he's written.

He burns the paper and walks away.

---

Bobby doesn't ask why Dean's decided to drink his weight in whisky at eight in the morning. He'd stocked up the moment Dean started working on that damnable Book. So he does the only thing he can and sits across from Dean at the kitchen table and doesn't ask.

The really troubling thing is that after half a bottle Dean summons Castiel. Bobby feels his eyebrows lift of their own volition when Dean slurs out a request for sobriety, which Castiel grants, and then demands the angel take them somewhere no one can follow, but to not even tell Dean where they're going. He doesn't say a word when they disappear, the Book tucked underneath Dean's jacket. He only hopes they put that thing somewhere *no one* will ever find it and that neither one of them breathes a word of it to anyone else.

Bobby just sighs and pours a stiff drink for when Dean gets back, slumping down in his seat. There's amber liquid left in his own tumbler, untouched, because there's drinking and there's *drinking* and not even Hunters should drink alone if they can help it.

"I need you to check a translation." Aw, hell. Bobby glances up at Mer and takes the paper without a word. The original languages are written meticulously above their English counterparts, which shouldn't be possible. "It doesn't seem to care about the original once you've already translated it." Bobby shrugs 'cause that makes as much sense as any other magical thing in the world.

He reads through the prophecy. He's so fucking grateful he's already been drinking when he reads through it again. He must not be keeping up a very good front because she curses softly and downs what was supposed to be Dean's drink.

"Mary..." She waits for him to finish but he can't. What could he possibly say that wouldn't be an empty platitude or blatant lie?

"Check it."

He already knows it's right. He's one of the ones who trained her how to research, after all. And there's no way Mer hasn't checked this twice. Three times. Not when it says...

Bobby checks the fucking translation. It doesn't take long because Mer's marked all the books, the pages have little tabs with corresponding, cross-indexed labels sticking out of them and Bobby has a moment because this is Sam's system. The same mesh of law school prep and hunter logic.

Bobby works through the translation stoically taking it phrase-by-phrase (he'd realized pretty early on that word-by-word wasn't going to work with Mer's prophecy). Towards the end his lettering looks a bit shaky, but that's just because his hand is cramping.

Bobby pours another drink for Mer and doubles up on his own. Staring at the glass, hands hidden beneath the table, she looks eighteen. It's so easy to forget how young she is. How young most of them are--Danny, even Trix. That little doctor that flits about.

People who would never be in this life if not for Sam.

He abruptly flips the translation over so he doesn't have to see it. So it's not looking at him, damning him by association. Mer laughs, a dry, cracked sound, and doesn't touch her drink.

They sit there in silence until the heavy sound of boots comes up the steps. Mer starts breathing hard, her fingers curling around the edges of the table and she sways in her seat. Bobby glances between her and the door, tense and ready for violence.

"Hey! I had Cas swing by that wing place in..." Dean pauses on the threshold, caught between fleeing from the danger inside and standing his ground. Dean's shit at hiding things where his family's concerned so Bobby sees the moment it registers for him--Mer knows.

"It doesn't matter," Dean says. Like saying it will make it true.

"You knew." She hurls the words with precision, weapons sent to maim him. "You knew, and you weren't going to tell me that you're going to ask me—"

"It doesn't matter!" he repeats, his anger a searing counter part to hers.

"How can you say that—"

"Because I would never ask you to--" He sucks in a breath, panting like he ran a marathon. Mer's eyes drift to her translation and Dean follows her gaze. "There is nothing in this world that could ever make me ask you to do that. Nothing."

"The Book—"

"No. It does. Not. Matter. We make our own destiny." He snatches

her translation up and rips it in half, throws the pieces in the tumbler of alcohol. His hand disappears into his pocket, searching. Dean finds what he's looking for, his silver Zippo, and ignites the alcohol-soaked paper.

"That does not make it go away," Mer says icily. *"And so she shall have no kin to hold close, with one strike to fell him the child sortiarius must do as the Father asks or the world will burn in the fires of Revelation."*

"There is no such thing as fate."

"Funny how you weren't saying that when you didn't know what the Book said." They stare at each other across the table, neither of them giving any ground. "Your hypocrisy is astounding." Mer knocks against him as she storms out the door, the screen slamming shut behind her. Dean stares at the flaming glass, the alcohol almost burned away.

"Dean," Bobby says. The word snaps him out of his stupor and straight into fury. He picks up a chair and throws it against the wall, kindling falling to the floor. He disappears into one of the bedrooms and Bobby's left to contemplate the best way to mend what's left of his little family when the fabric's almost worn through.

---

Mer paces the crest of the hill behind the house. She's bitten several of her fingernails to the quick but the throb of pain isn't sharp enough to be satisfying. She's jittery and on edge--she hasn't slept in days, her nights dedicated to translating while everyone else was asleep, her days spent catching cat-naps and acting like she wasn't about to collapse on the nearest soft surface so no one got suspicious. The Adderall she'd gotten from Trix--sworn to

secrecy--had helped.

And she can't. She can't do this. This cannot be the only way to defeat Sam.

She *will not*.

"Anna. Anael! An--"

"I am here." The angel looks calm. Unfazed. Vacant.

"I won't do it." Anael doesn't move, simply regards her with an air of patient indifference. "You can't...you can't ask me to do that."

"I won't be the one asking," Anael says. Mer feels her eyes burn but refuses to give into the tears; this is not the time for crying.

"Tell me how I save him."

"It cannot be done." That's not true. Mer *knows* it's not true. Words she's heard before, somewhere, bounce around in her head.

"Anything is possible if you're willing to pay the price," Mer says, her veneer of control shattering. "Tell me how to save him. Anything. I just--I can't lose him too. Please." The despair and fear subsume her anger, drain it out of her and leaves her hollowed out and empty because it's been such a steadfast companion she doesn't know what to do without it.

Anael considers this course of action, looks at the complex intersections of the world and separates the consequences of her decision. There is no clear course, no one thread that stands out amongst the others. But considering Mary's provenance that is not unexpected.

"There are many kinds of loss," she says, but Mary does not hear

her meaning.

"If you don't help me, I will find someone who will." Anael sees the truth of her words, the different paths her immeasurable dedication to family might lead to, and makes her choice.

"We must first retrieve a spear." Anael extends her hand and when Mer takes it they both disappear.

\*\*\*

Ruby slips through the shadows of what was once Chicago. She's traded arid desert for freezing rain and biting wind which, in her near-powerless state, is a pretty shitty deal. But she got what she came for, the Herald's Trumpet nestled under her arm, Excalibur strapped to her back (not as big as the movies make it out to be), a kills-anything gun tucked in the waistband of her jeans and a few other knickknacks she's picked up along the way. Most of these objects represent Seals that Alastair and Sam no longer have the option of breaking. Stupid of them not to have better protection; they should have learned when she wiped out the first stash.

Footsteps come up behind her, fast and purposeful. She ducks into an alley and breaks into a run. The shouts are joined by growls; calling in the hell hounds has been the one instance of creative thought her pursuers have shown.

She hears the warning growl moments before the hound leaps at her. She spins around and throws herself to the ground, knife held in front of her. The hound impales itself with its own weight, its outline visible to the human eye as the last of its power sparks in its death throes.

She pulls up with the knife and splits the hound down the center, hot blood and entrails soaking through her clothes. She shoves it off and keeps running, searching for a place to hide; the smell of

death will buy her a few minutes from the rest of the pack. With the heavy rain maybe even shake them completely. It all depends on luck, which Ruby knows is a fool's game but she might just be the biggest fool she's ever met. This would be so much easier if she was at even quarter strength. Being mostly human blows.

She veers abruptly to the left when she hears voices ahead. Another dirty little alley, crumbling buildings too close together for comfort. She's a few feet from another intersection when her ankle turns. Her speed sends her careening into one of the abandoned buildings, rotting plywood disintegrating around her.

She swears and presses herself against the wall as footsteps approach and move on, fading in the distance. She holds her place, afraid to move lest her luck be a trap. In fact, she may never move, just waste away in this building clutching the Horn with a magical short sword digging into her back.

A small sound further in the building catches her attention. Her heart races and she realizes she's manifesting a physical reaction to fear. That makes her angry enough to chase after the source, as if that will make the fear go away.

She slinks forward, approaching with caution. There's barely enough light to make out shapes so the flicker of a candle underneath a door is very noticeable. She hears bodies moving around inside, the muted sound of rustling clothes and light breaths.

She pushes the door open, unsurprised the well-oiled hinges make no sound.

An emaciated teenage boy with a face full of acne and shaggy long hair aims a rusty rifle at her, hands trembling. She leans to one side so she can get a look at the...six children huddling behind him.

"You must be joking." What the fuck is a band of kids doing running around Chicago? The demon activity aside, the humans that stuck around this place aren't exactly pleasant.

"Go away!" He jabs the gun towards her, the movement awkward and unpracticed. "I'll shoot you, I swear!"

"Really?" Ruby leans forward and lets her eyes go black. The younger kids scream and shrink back, hiding behind an equally frail looking girl brandishing a Bowie knife. She's got to give it to the kid with the gun: he doesn't back down.

"It's got demon-killing bullets in it," the kid lies. "It does!"

"Yeah, y'all are just a regular bunch a hunters, ain't you?" Ruby drawls in the manner of her (former, long-dead) host. The sudden onset of a Texas accent confuses the boy, who looks towards the girl giving Ruby the perfect opportunity to snatch the rifle out of his hands.

"This isn't even loaded."

"We, uh. Ran out of bullets. A couple days ago." The kid shifts uncomfortably, like Ruby's a teacher who caught him ditching school.

"Who died?" No way these kids have been on their own long. They've got the survival instincts of a moth near a bonfire.

"Jim." It's the girl this time, running a soothing hand through a six-year-old's tangled hair and looking at her in challenge. "He was my brother. Bunch of those rage zombies caught him scavenging. Beat his brains out."

"Right." Of all the cities in the world, she picked the one where Alistair's testing his pestilential cocktail of zombified crazy. Great.

Ruby turns around and walks out of the room. The kids don't follow. She sighs and sticks her head back in the room. "Coming? I'm not hanging around much longer."

She's just going to use the kids to get out of the city. No one will think to look for her travelling with a bunch of orphans.

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Dean glares out the window. He's suppressing the urge to pace even though he's already driven everyone out of the living room.

"I have been unable to locate Anael." Dean turns and finds Castiel mere inches away. He doesn't react, just stares at the angel and matches his silence. They've been doing this song and dance for days. Since Mer disappeared and Anael dropped off the grid.

"That's enough, Castiel. He's not fit for angelic company." Dean wonders what spark of humanity made Cas retrieve Missouri. Probably Bobby. "Honestly, he's not fit for any company, but we make exceptions for family." Castiel hovers uncertainly, at a loss with so much free will at his disposal, and looks bemused as Missouri ushers him out of the room.

"I shall search again for Anael," he announces.

"You go and do that, honey," Missouri says, patting him on the back. Castiel nods and disappears. Dean gives in and starts pacing, Missouri watching him from her place by the fire. Just when her gaze starts getting too heavy she speaks. "She'll come back when she's ready."

"So you keep telling me." The point is she shouldn't have *left*. She should have had more discipline than that. He'd never have considered pulling that shit when he was her age, ditching his father in the middle of a hunt much less a full-fledged Apocalypse.

Missouri sighs and eases down into the chair. Dean has the thought that she's getting old.

"Don't you dare put me in my grave before my time, Dean Winchester," she warns. Dean rolls his shoulders and turns his thoughts back to his daughter, an ever-deepening spiral of anger, betrayal, and frustration. Time for a change of subject, then. "But while we're on the subject of getting old—"

"Not now, I don't—"

"Just what are you going to do when Mer starts looking less like your child and more like your sister?" Missouri says right over him. Dean grits his teeth and rests his head against the window. Why do all the people in his life insist on making him *talk* about things. He was doing just fine ignoring it.

"You really think no one's noticed you've gone back in time? And that you're staying there?" Missouri asks in that voice which means she finds him incredibly dense. Dean smacks his head into the glass. "Where do you think he stopped? Early thirties by my guess, I could—"

"Stop it," Dean snarls, spinning away. "Just. Just stop. That's the least of my concerns right now."

"Yeah, I'm getting that," Missouri returns evenly. "But I've let it slide for over a year, Dean. And I think *you* need to think about what it means that Sam went and froze you in time. The power and conviction it takes to do that kind of reversal and binding. It's the first thing he did when he gave in to whatever blackness got hold of him."

"No," Dean says, returning to his vigil. "The first things he did was try to kill my kid."

## Chapter 9

Alastair sits in his 'seat of honor' and refrains from gouging his eyes out with his soupspoon. He's learned from long experience that one must let Lilith play her games out; apparently Lilu, the Collector of Souls and Lilith's first born, is acting out some extended grieving process for Mummy Dearest. Alastair wonders what would have happened if he just skipped ahead to the inevitable bloody ending.

"What do you think mommy?" Alastair sighs and turns his attention to the terrified human sitting rigidly at the table.

"I...I think that sounds great, sweetie." Her voice breaks on that last word and Alastair steels himself for a fresh flood of tears from the woman. She surprises him by showing a bit of spine and forcing herself to calm down.

The husband isn't fairing so well. He's shaking, the sound of his silverware striking the plate grating and, more importantly, not in line with the happy laughing family Lilith liked to role-play. She'd have already killed the man by now, but Lilu just keeps dragging it all out.

"Daddy?" The man drops his fork. Lilu smiles, just a slight quirk of his lips, but it's enough to make the husband start hyperventilating and if the wife holds onto her glass any harder it'll shatter.

"Lilu?" Alastair interrupts, voice smooth as silk. "Why don't we let Mommy and Daddy clear the table? I've got presents for you after all."

"Okay!" Lilu slips out of his seat and skips around the table. He takes Alastair's hand and drags him out of the room. He stops at

the threshold to look at his 'parents.' "Don't forget, a clean home is a happy home!"

"O-of course, dear. You just go with Un-Uncle Al, okay?" Lilu leads him to the couch. A few moments later Alastair hears a devastated, hysterical scream and the sound of plates crashing to the floor.

"And what was that?" he asks.

"I didn't like my siblings," Lilu says with a shrug. He settles in front of a large Barbie's playhouse and starts arranging the dolls in increasingly disturbing scenarios, complete with real blood.

"Samael is--"

"MOMMY!"

It takes almost a full minute for the housewife to come out. Her eyes are large and red-rimmed, face pale with shock.

"Ice cream?" Lilu chirps. The woman nods woodenly and turns to go. "Oh, and Mommy?"

Lulu waits for the woman to turn back around. Alastair realizes her black pants are wet with blood. Lilu ducks his head and looks up through his lashes, an adorable little guileless boy.

"I love you!" The woman makes a small, trapped sound and stumbles away. Alastair laughs and raises his tumbler in appreciation; that was quite masterfully done.

"So we need to talk about Samael." As amusing as the evening's entertainment has been, they have much bigger issues.

"You always want to talk about Samael," Lilu says with a scowl.

He decapitates one of the dolls and throws it away. Subtle.

"He's being annoyingly uncooperative."

"Then *make* him cooperative. That is your job."

"My job," Alastair snarls, "is to pave the way for Lucifer's reign on Earth. As is yours." He watches the little boy persona fall away.

"Are you insinuating--" the sibilant word crawls up his spine and wraps around him "--that I am not doing my part?"

"Here's your--" The woman stops, her survival instincts insisting she remain as small and motionless as possible. Lilu flicks his wrist and the woman's head twists around 180 degrees.

"Terrorizing families is all fun and games, but I have a problem because we cannot bring Hell and our Master to Earth without Samael."

"And what does that have to do with me?" Lilu asks. He's like a teenager in a six year old's body. A teenager sired and raised by Lilith, who sacrificed herself to bring his youngest brother into the world.

"Samael will not move forward without his brother. I need you to help me give him what he wants because Dean will not choose us of his own volition." Luce knows Sam's spent enough of his time and energy *trying* to bring Dean over. Something Alistair was happy to indulge while it suited but is proving to be an insurmountable obstacle as they enter the final stretch of this ordeal. Lilu studies Alastair quizzically, then grins in childlike delight.

"Daddy, could you come here for a minute?" The husband trips over his wife's body, screams and scuttles away from her like a

crab, right into the couch. He looks up in blind panic, only registering that his possessed son is standing over him after a delay. He tries to run but Lilu wraps his hand around the man's neck and pulls him close. He opens his mouth, his jaw cracking as it unhinges, and thick black smoke pours out through his eyes and mouth, right into the man.

The boy's body crumples to the ground. Lilu, once again possessed of a grown up's body, shifts and tests his new limits. He opens his eyes and they're milky white.

"Good. Now let's talk about what it would take to turn Dean Winchester into a demon," Alistair says.

---

Alastair watches the Boy-King carve into the demon stretched on his rack. Alastair shifts his vision so he sees the corporeal body straining against its bounds as well as the blackened soul trapped inside. Sam's knife, one of Alastair's most inspired creations, creates wounds on two different planes.

This demon was one of Ruby's cohorts but they both know they'll get nothing out of him. This is just a bit of fun. A way for Samael to vent his frustrations and for Alastair to guide him. He could be great, their Samael. Lucifer's chosen.

"Feeling nostalgic?" Samael asks, turning and licking the blade of his knife. Ah, if only he'd had shown such interest when this started. They certainly would have moved well past shock-value actions. Admittedly, that's a step in the grooming process, one everyone goes through. His thoughts take a decidedly indulgent turn and he wonders if this is what it feels like to be a father watching his child grow up.

"Take notes," Alastair says. "I'll break him in thirteen minutes and-

"

"Thirty-six seconds." Alastair accepts the challenge with the first flick of the knife. Five carefully placed cuts, varying lengths and depths made along specific nerve clusters and he knows exactly what it will take to break the demon. And what it would take to mold him.

He stretches out the dance, shows off a little for Samael. By the time they're in the homestretch the demon's as fragile as cracked glass. He meets Samael's eyes as the seconds tick down and away.

He brushes his fingers lightly against the demon's ear when the clock hits zero, the barest of touches, and the demon falls into a thousand pieces. Alastair smiles and runs his hands lightly over his swain's back and whispers endearments in his ear, words of love and affection. He looks over his shoulder, gratified to see Samael's respect and admiration.

"A one of a kind piece of art," he says, taking in the cuts and marks.

"Well look at that. There's poetry in your soul, Samael." Sam throws his head back and laughs.

"What do you want?" Sam asks, wiping the corner of his eyes. There's a smudge of blood on his brow, a sanguine benediction. Alastair reaches up and draws a bloody thumb down through it, making an inverted cross.

"This is your day of repentance," Alastair says, pleased with the symbolism. "I want to make a deal."

"You want to negotiate with me?" Samael's amusement isn't the pure human emotion he's expressed in the past. This is lethal.

"I want," Alastair says, and Samael is a *child* when it comes to embracing his sadism, "to give you everything you need to fling wide the gates of Hell so the King of Glory might come in."

"You want to give me Dean."

"I want to give you the world. But I'll start with Dean."

\*\*\*

Mer appears in the house seven full days after she left, dirty, disheveled, and exhausted. Dean discovers her curled up on his bed fast asleep. Her knuckles are raw, there are twigs and leaves tangled in unkempt hair, and she's got a few very impressive bruises on her arms and torso. There's a deep cut across her palm, the kind of thing that makes him think of a ritual. She so deeply asleep she doesn't even register his mental intrusion, save for an instinctive acceptance that fades into deep sleep.

He camps out at her bedside in a very uncomfortable chair for thirty-three hours. He's aware of Bobby, Trix, and Danny poking their heads in from time to time, but other than ordering Bobby to find him a way to summon the angels--both of whom have conveniently disappeared--Dean ignores them all. He vacillates between rage and fear, visions where she never wakes up filling his head.

He stares at her and wonders where his little girl went.

He falls asleep in spite of himself and wakes up at the closing of a door, disoriented and confused until--Mer isn't in bed. He rockets to his feet, reaching for the gun tucked at his back.

"Dad." Her voice comes from behind him, an octave lower than normal and strained. She sways on her feet, still drained and exhausted.

"Mary, get back in bed!" He slips an arm around her waist and guides her back to the bed. Her eye-roll is half-hearted at best which says more about how she feels than anything else. But once he's got her tucked in safely his worry fades and the anger rushes back.

"Mary." She regards him unflinchingly. Calmly.

"Dad." The evenness of her tone just serves to fuel his fury.

"You lied to me."

"I didn't."

"You went behind my back to translate a very dangerous book that doesn't even--"

"Hypocrisy does not make for a very good argument," Mer says. Dean swears he hears a "*you asshole*" echo in his head. "And you do not get to unilaterally order me around."

"You betrayed my trust--"

"Yeah, well you betrayed mine!" Mer snaps, her exterior of calm crumbling into righteous indignation. "And I don't regret anything!"

And it's Dean's turn to shut down, pack his fiery emotions behind a frigid glare. "What did you do?"

"Nothing." Bullshit. Dean knows that one, has *used* that tone before. He can practically see the secret Mer's protecting behind the opaque walls she's hiding behind.

"What. Did. You. Do."

"I got angry, I blew off some steam, started a bar fight. Fucked everything that moved, started another bar fight, and then dragged my ass home. I've learned some *stellar* coping mechanisms over the years, can you tell?" Dean stands up, his chair clattering to the floor, but all he can do is glare in impotent rage. Her stoic behavior grates on him all the more.

"Do we have a hunt to go on?" she asks when the silence has built. Trick question, there's always a hunt to go on.

Dean considers and discards a hundred answers before deciding he's too angry to have this conversation. "You're in no condition to hunt." She looks down at her bandaged knuckles and shrugs.

"It's not that bad." She makes a fist though the gauze stops her from completing the movement.

"How'd you--"

"No."

"Mary--"

"No, Dad. I'm not going to tell you anything. I took some time to deal with the knowledge that--"

"Don't you bring that up." She looks at him, no hint of emotion on her face save where her lips are pressed into a thin line. Dean feels himself brace for the blow he can see coming.

"You're going to ask me to kill you." She closes her eyes and takes a breath, before continuing. "I have processed and I have dealt. Now I'm back, I don't want to talk about it anymore, and I would like for us to get out of this giant Devil's Trap and beat the shit out of some evil assholes."

Dean flips the chair upright with a flick of his foot and stalks right out of the house without a word. He's pulled and thrown the first knife before he consciously acknowledges the urge. His second and third follow quickly, clustered tightly together in the trunk of a young tree. He jogs to the tree, pulls them out, and repeats until he's worked himself into a sweat.

He becomes aware of Bobby sitting on the porch watching him. When his arm aches and his throws start to turn instead of hitting true he gives up. He drops heavily next to Bobby, eyeing the bottle of booze.

"I don't want any," he says.

"Well good, 'cause I wasn't offering," Bobby says. Dean shakes his head, a small smile pulling at his lips. The silence between them isn't relaxing; there are too many things unsaid between them and far too much knowledge about the future for anyone's peace of mind. And Dean's can't shake the feeling that this is not how it was supposed to be.

"There's something wrong," Dean says. A sad, inaccurate summation but the words are all he has; he knows Mer's done something. He just doesn't know what. Bobby looks at him, amusement and pity filling the spaces of his face.

"Well that's the most ridiculous thing you've ever said," Bobby says. Dean glares at him but that's like firing a pellet gun at a mountain. "Son, things have been *wrong* for a helluva long time. Not my fault you're just figuring it out."

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Ellen takes stock of their surroundings trying to think like a vampire. This coven has set up camp in some abandoned warehouses, half of which are burned-out and clearly empty. The

leader of the nearby town had asked them to come by in exchange for provisions and a good bit of refined oil.

"The building on the east side is protected from most of the sun. A couple of the windows are covered," Jo says.

"Sounds like we've got a winner. Ichi!"

"Yes ma'am."

"We have any blueprints for these buildings?"

"Nothing trustworthy, but it's better than nothing." The prints are just sketches, years old. The warehouse is half open floor and then a series of administrative offices.

"Right, well, ain't nothing we haven't seen before. Don't do anything stupid. Ash! On our six." Ash is pretty good with a gun but he's better at standing back and picking off problems than close quarters combat. He's also built a pair of heat and night vision goggles that lets him warn them. They have a system. It works.

The open area is standard vampire nest. Broken pieces of furniture, dirty mattresses, blood stains on everything. Shackles hang from the ceiling and come out from the walls and support posts. But it's empty.

"Move on," Ellen orders and they head towards the first door they see.

"Uh, anyone else smell that?" Ash asks nervously. It's impossible to miss, the rancid stench of something decaying. Could be bodies but vampires have a heightened sense of smell and while they don't mind death, they do mind decom. But this doesn't smell like your normal decom.

They approach the inner offices, doors closed tight. The smell gets stronger.

"Ash?" Ellen calls.

"Everything's cool," he says. No residual traces of heat.

"Watch yourselves," Ellen orders and they fan out into position. She nods as Ichi who takes a step back then kicks through the door, spinning off to the side while Jo and Ellen, using the wall as cover and dropping low to surprise anyone inside, take point.

They almost choke on the odor; it's so strong they can taste it on their tongues, heavy and disgusting. Ellen hears Ash heave in the background but that's the only sound. She jerks her head forward and Jo immediately moves in, Ichi covering her back. Ellen follows, shifting between covering them both.

It's a bloodbath.

Someone got here before them and ripped the nest to shreds. Literally. Those with heads intact have all exposed their fangs. There's not a single piece of furniture standing as it should.

"Mom," Jo says, backing into her.

"Yeah," Ellen says. This is not the work of any human. "We're getting out of here. Now."

They'd go but Ash is blocking the doorway. Ellen's senses are telling her that something's wrong; they're going haywire, actually, a cold sense of dread suffusing through her.

"Ash?" she says, trying not to startle him. He sways a little and takes a stuttering step forward. A dark stain spreads out on his shirt. Ellen knows before he even starts to fall the boy's dead.

"ASH!" Jo darts forward and catches Ash as he falls. A long, thin blade has been shoved under his ribs, up through his heart. Behind him is a little boy with curly red hair wearing baby blue checkered overalls. His eyes are completely white. Jo rocks Ash in her arms, a litany of denial spilling softly through her lips.

There are other figures in the room, too many. They could put up a good fight but she doesn't think they'll fair any better than the vampires. And despite Ash, Ellen's pretty sure the demons don't want them dead. That scares her most of all.

"This is going to be fun!" the little boy says, clapping excitedly. There's red blood all over the front of his gingham outfit.

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"I always wanted a crystal ball," Sam says. He taps the side of the orb and grins when the dark, thick smoke inside butts against the glass trying to get to him. It's almost alive and it pulses with power, little lightening storms gathering in its depths and discharging, lighting up the cloud of smoke. It reminds him of the Smoke Monster from *Lost*; Sam wonders idly if he could make a real Smoke Monster, a kind of guard dog let loose on the world to destroy all the pure of heart.

It took them six demons to make this one; he could probably get himself a real semi-intelligent monster with about fifty. Doable.

"We don't have time for distractions," Alastair says. "When Hell reigns on Earth, you may do whatever you want."

Sam strokes the glass tenderly, sees how it tries again to reunite with him. The purest essence of the demonic imbued with his own power. It wants to rejoin him, bind to him. Never leave him.

"Do you know the difference between may and can?" Sam picks

up the orb with both hands and the smoke goes wild, torn between the twin contact points of his hands. He closes his eyes and concentrates on the power, wraps it up and draws it into himself, embeds it under his skin. He feels it settle, a living tattoo that moves restlessly over the expanse of his skin.

He brushes it with his power and feels it reach out for him; it would be so easy to accept it. But this is for Dean and he tells it that, whispers his name and feels the *want* that knowledge engenders. It yearns for Dean in the same way he does and Sam promises soon. Soon.

He pulls his consciousness away, eager and pleased with himself. He feels Alastair's anger and jealousy at how easy it was for him. He revels in the smell of *desire* and envy.

"When Hell reigns on Earth, I won't need anyone's permission."

He enjoys the way Alastair fails to hide his anger. Alastair is used to being the baddest boss on the block, and that's convenient for Sam who has no interest in delving into the politics of Hell. But Sam will not be controlled or manipulated. He spent most of his life dancing to his father's tune, and Dean had absorbed their father's obedience to the point that he let it tear them apart. Sam is not a pawn and he has more power than Alastair knows.

"Have you found a way to get to him?" There's no need for Sam to clarify who he's talking about.

"Oh yes." Alastair sweeps around, his most chilling smile on his face, ever the drama queen. "We found his favorite Mother-Daughter crime fighting team."

"And how are Ellen and Jo?" Sam asks.

"Alive," Alastair says with a disinterested shrug. Their relative

well being is necessary to the plan, but aside from their value in that respect they hold no interest for him. The extra team member Alastair has claimed for himself. He'll make a find, upstanding demon.

"We have the bait. Where shall we lay the trap?" Sam stands before a large map of the world. It covers the expanse of the wall and someone has meticulously charted out every broken Seal on it. He lets his finger wander over the map until he comes to a small town most people would overlook. Yes. That'll do. Better yet, if Sam plays his cards right, it'll bring Dean running without a second thought.

"And they say you can never go home again," Alistair says, laughing.

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Dean and Mary Winchester have been cutting a swath through the supernatural ranks. People nervously whisper stories of their exploits, the sheer fury with which they fell every evil thing that crosses their path, as if speaking about them brings down their wrath. Sometimes it must seem that way, news of their exploits arriving only moments before they do. So while it's not hard to track where they've been, it's much harder to predict where they'll go. But the moment Ruby sets foot in Stillwater, Arkansas, she knows they're around.

She's never known a hunter to affect the atmosphere of a place so much. Hunters survive by blending in, slipping from one guise to another, using the law to circumvent it. They track the changes in the atmosphere, the ripples amongst small communities, the portents that follow around the most powerful demons. They don't usually blanket a town in overt aggression, marking it as surely as Weres mark their territory.

It takes a bit of time to work her way through the ley lines protecting the town, but someone's come through before her, though she can't tell if they were coming or going. This town is close-knit but it doesn't have many magic users; these wards were forged by someone from the general area but not the town itself. They lack the strength that true attachment to the land and people brings. She finds the weak points and slips through them. She hesitates and then shores them up where she passes through, though keys herself into those sections. Wouldn't do to slow down a potential escape route.

The stench hits her the moment she crosses the final ward. There are several Abiku here, demons that eat children and then torture their parents by randomly appearing as their dead victims, giving hope where there is none. Some devour the parents when they've tired of their game.

And then, she feels the faintest pull of her own magic. She follows it but instead of hiding in the shadows she walks along the lit paths, ever alert. She's hoping whatever townspeople are left will mistake her for a hunter should they look out of their windows.

There's a loud crash as someone gets thrown into a metal trashcan and rolls onto the pavement. A small figure hurtles around the corner of a house, fingers extended like claws prepared to gouge. The person on the ground swings the can's lid like a shield. The metal crumples and the creature flies back, winded. Ruby approaches cautiously, not wanting to draw the attention of either party.

A loud shot sounds from down the street and that's the only reason Ruby sees the second small figure racing towards the first two. Mary Winchester isn't going to see it.

Ruby watches the creature gather speed, its eyes starting to glow a

sickly yellow, fangs bared. She glances between where Mary grapples with her own opponent and the second creature.

She steps in and drives her knife into its belly. The creature gives a high, reedy scream and a black smoke, not dissimilar to her own incorporeal form, evaporates into the air. She yanks out her knife, the small body crumpling at her feet. Lucifer be damned, she hadn't realized they ate the bodies from the inside out.

She turns away to find a gun pointed at her face.

"Step back," Mary orders. Ruby wipes her knife on her jeans and does as she's told. The light from a street lamp falls across her face. Smart girl. She sees suspicious recognition flash through Mer's eyes. "I know you."

"You've changed." Ruby can see Mer's aura, muted by her abilities to shield her thoughts, but it's changed. There's something...a color pattern that's missing, she decides. One that was subtle but present, and she can't quite decipher what.

"That's enough," Mer snaps and her aura shifts. It's the damnedest thing, Ruby has never seen anything like it but it's almost like a mental block where one shows only a select set of thoughts or some repetitive, mundane image.

"How did you do that?" she asks before she can stop herself.

"Who the hell are you?" Mer snaps.

"I'm the girl that just saved your ass," Ruby snaps right back. "And I'm here to help."

"But you're a demon."

"Don't be racist." The look on baby Winchester's face is priceless,

affronted and indignant. Ruby smirks and sheaths her knife.

"Why should I trust you?" Mary asks, and Ruby refrains from pointing out that this is the second time the girl's pointed a gun at her and not pulled the trigger. Also...

"This is the third time I've saved your life." Mary scowls and makes a point to shift her grip on the gun. "But really, you shouldn't. I'm a demon. Manipulative's kind of in the job description."

"Third?" Mary says. "You miss those remedial math classes in Hell?"

Ruby makes a big point of counting on her fingers. "Well let's see. The high school, check. The baby-possessing family-torturing Abiku, check. And there was one more, what was it...oh, right. Your little show down with Sammy-kins that ruined *months* of a very complex detoxification spell." That breaks through the kid's wall of badass.

"You..." She chokes, swallows loud enough Ruby can hear it. "You were bringing him back?"

"Breaking down the foundations of the hold they had on him," she confirms. She sees the question coming from a mile away. "Won't work again, Alastair did a pretty thorough job of tainting every inch of him. If there's anything left of your Sam, it's buried so far you'll never find it. Or get close enough to work the spell."

"Why," Mary chokes, and her gun wavers precariously. "Why are you doing this?"

There are an infinite number of reasons and justifications she could give right now. Her first instinct is to tell her to go screw herself; she owes no one an explanation for her actions. But that would be

counterproductive for what she's trying to accomplish. "Because I remember."

"And the rest of them don't?"

"That's what Hell is. Forgetting." And why that's what gets Mary Winchester to drop her gun Ruby will never know. Of course that's the moment her trigger-happy father comes careening around the corner. He misses a step when he sees them together, Mary's gun loose at her side. He breaks into a sprint when he realizes Ruby's not human.

"Dad--"

"Mer! Step back!" The only reason Ruby hasn't been shot is at this range he'd also hit Mary.

"Dad, would you--" He muscles Mer aside and Ruby steels herself for the blast, not sure she has enough in her to vacate the body she's inhabiting. Which means she'll either wake up recorporalized in hell or, depending on the mix, the ingredients will eat away at her true self until she expires. And that is not a way she'd choose to go; she'd helped Alastair run the tests on his underlings.

The blast almost deafens her, sharp and unforgiving, and something stings her cheek, but she's still in one piece. Not burning pain spreading through her, eating her from the inside out. She looks down at her chest, delightfully blood free with clothing in tact. Which is awesome because this shirt makes her chest look good.

She looks up at the Winchesters caught up in a detente. Mary has a hand on the barrel of Dean's shotgun, keeping it pointed at the sky instead of Ruby. Dean glares angrily at her, his jaw just about ready to shatter if he clenches it any harder.

"What. The fuck." Dean wrenches the gun out of Mary's grip but doesn't raise it, which Ruby counts as a point in her favor.

"I was having a civil conversation," Mer says.

"With a demon?"

"She's barely a demon."

"Hey!" Ruby protests. Mer gives her a flat look. "Okay, that may be a fair assessment, but you really don't have to rub it in."

"You found yourself an impotent demon?" Dean throws the comment at her, eyes narrow.

"Oh, you don't want to discuss *impotence* with me, Dean-o." She has a lot to say about his twisted little relationship with Sam, and the fact that he never took any steps to protect his dreamstate from invasion. Dean growls and brings his gun up.

"Send me a postcard from Hell."

"Dad."

"No. I've let you get away with a lot because Ellen said--"

"Ellen? Why are you talking about me behind my--"

"*Said* I should give you some space but this? Getting chummy with a demon? I will not let you--"

"Let me? You can't stop me, I'll do whatever I--"

"I've got the Horn of Gabriel." That pulls their attention to her with a snap, argument forgotten for the moment.

"Bullshit. Where?" Dean says suspiciously.

"Well not here, dumbass," Ruby says. "Is that the face you make when you're annoyed?"

"Yes," Mary says, and smiles like candy wouldn't melt in her mouth at the betrayed look Dean shoots her.

"And we're just supposed to believe you?" Dean scoffs.

"I believe her." Ruby stills under the weight of Mary's inspection.  
"But we don't want it."

"You don't?"

"We don't?" Dean looks like he's going to have an aneurysm.

"What are we going to do with it?" Mary asks. Which is a fair question. The Horn starts the end of the Apocalypse. Calls the forces of Heaven to battle. The opposite of their stated intention. Dean looks like he wants to protest so Ruby moves this scintillating conversation right along.

"I've got other things too. Also, there's something big going down that's probably got to do with Daddykins over here."

"Like what?" Dean says, posturing. Ruby rolls her eyes.

"Obviously, if I knew, I'd tell you. I'm not exactly Sammy's favorite person--"

She should have known that would break him. Dean shoves her back into a lamppost. It takes her a minute to remember how to breathe--and the fact that she kind of needs to is just bullshit--and Dean's gun is--

"Well aren't you a happy camper?" she says; her voice comes out husky due to the lack of air but it works. Dean's face twists into disgust.

"Never talk about him again." And wow, this is exactly like Sam.

"Touchy," she says with a smirk. She glances at Mary, her only real ally here, but she's closed off and hard. So she's found one of the lines, hard and immovable. She'll deal with Dean's attitude later; for now she just needs the in. "Fine. No sharing."

Dean lets Mary draw him away but if looks could kill Ruby would have spontaneously combusted.

"Keep the Horn safe. Whoever help us if we actually have to use this. And take this." Mary tosses Ruby a phone. "You need to get in touch--"

"I've got my ways," Ruby says, but pockets the phone. "I'll let you know if I run across anything interesting. Send you a list of the goodies you might want."

"You do that." Ruby nods and walks away.

"I don't trust you!" Dean calls after her. The frustration oozes out of him; this whole 'you have no control over me' thing Mary's got going on must be really new.

"Then you're smarter than you look, Dean-o!" she calls over her shoulder.

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Anael pulls her true self back into her human body, tucks away her wings and takes a moment to orient herself. The area around her is bare, the plant life burned away by her power leaving only

blackened earth. She wants walls around this place she's created and they appear, a building forming itself from the air. Utilitarian but functional. No windows.

She needs an altar and one rises from the ground. She places the various relics, oils, and sacred objects she's gathered over many years on the altar. Each one pulses with power and potential, chosen specifically for her needs. Before she begins she takes a moment to check on Castiel; she's set him on a rigged mission, one he cannot accomplish because she has the relic he seeks and she has laid down a false trail that will continue to propagate until she interrupts. He is well on his way

Satisfied, she prepares to begin. She lets her grace flow out, learns every nuance of this place and makes it her own. She maps the space with her eyes, notes each point, mentally overlays her design on the floor. She lights the incense used in the first tabernacle and kneels upon the altar until it permeates the air, the sign that her ritual may begin.

She walks the perimeter three times, her journey starting at the Eastern watchtower, Sealing the circle and all within to her power. With her outer perimeter established she begins to define the inner sections. She calls two triangles with apexes at the East and West; beginnings and endings intersecting. At their exact center lies her altar.

The lines she's drawn glow golden in the shape of a pentagram, imbued with her Grace. She opens wounds on her feet and hands and lets the blood spill onto the ground.

She retreats to the altar to prepare for the next leg and await the second day. This will be her last respite for the next two days, wherein she will use every ounce of power she has to finish her circle. She puts each of her chosen relics in the spaces they'll be

used, then lays upon the altar to gather her strength.

At Dawn's song she rises and, walking along the lines she laid yesterday, stops at the North-Eastern Intermediary. Here where the Song of the World swells with the fresh sounds of morning she Calls the outer triangle and marks it with the blessed myrrh gifted Jesus Christ upon his birth, speaking words of Healing as she goes. Within the space she mixes her blood with the myrrh and draws symbols from a thousand different cultures, all of them representing life and health.

She works steadily, blending the Song into her work, until the day inexorably waxes into Noon, and the tenor shifts.

She rises and follows the line that connects the North-Eastern Intermediary to the Southeastern point, pausing only to exchange the myrrh for a well of ink used by Mohammad Ibn Musa al-Khawarizmi, with which he changed the course of the world.

She uses the ink to Call this space and consecrate it to Teaching. She writes in whatever language strikes her the secrets of the world. Everything she thinks a General of the Apocalypse might need to know. Her Grace swirls with the ink and makes it sparkle, bits of incandescent silver mixing in with the black. At the height of its power the Sun influences the flow of her words, illumination of the mind and the land. She works even as the sun moves across the sky until her senses warn her that Dusk is fast approaching.

At the South-West Intermediary she Calls on Love. She has an arrow from the first Cupid's bow and a vial of Ananchel's tears. She etches reminders in the ground, that the greatest of these is love so that it will not be forgotten. She pours her own love and passion for humanity, with all of her Father's creation, into every stroke. She writes of the things she has witnessed, the wonder humans are capable of. For all of the horrors, there is such

greatness here and that must never be overlooked.

She feels the approach of Midnight and stands. Her steps falter and exhaustion sets in but she cannot stop; when she reaches for her fourth relic she sees that her fingers are cut, her blood making the arrow red. Appropriate.

She Calls for Judgment at the North-West Intermediary and Seals the three sides with the oil used to anoint Solomon at his crowning. She writes of Solomon, Daozang, Epictetus, Averroes, Socrates, Zuhuangzi, Mencius, Nagarjuna, and dozens of names that history doesn't remember. Wisdom and philosophy, all that which informs her actions, compiling a series of direct writings and first-hand memories and entrusting them to the earth.

With that Dawn comes again and she enters the final stage of her ritual.

She chooses four spaces on the outer perimeter and links them directly to her core, makes them syncs--empty repositories that thirst for her power. She buries a pinion feather, manifested into this world but so much more, at the center of each, then writes her very being into the ground. She bares everything to the world at large, each action she has ever made because this will be her judgment and her legacy.

It takes her half the day, which leaves her twelve hours to Call each of the Elements in order to Seal the Circle.

At the Northern point she invokes Air. The incense in the room, which has turned the entire room hazy with smoke, ripples and then contracts, the whole of it condensing into the Northern space.

She lights a match and sets the Fire triangle alight, its apex at the Eastern Watchtower. It burns bright, flames shooting up to the ceiling. When it calms, the ley lines are no longer gold but red and

blue, the fire contained within them. Writing appears on the ground, ever changing as the fire consumes itself only to flair to life in the empty spaces, seeking new ground.

She uses the sweat from her own brow to invoke Water in the South, the space boiling and churning until it settles into a glassy, perfectly calm surface. She leans over to look at it and sees eddies beneath the smooth surface forming symbols and letters before swirling away.

Earth she invokes from the West. She drops soil from the Garden of Eden as the summons and watches as the area trembles and shifts, the topography morphing as mountain rise and fall, canyons gape wide then close in on themselves, pits and hills and plains, dips and valleys. Anael sees herself reflected in its mesmerizing movements.

She steps back until her legs hit the altar. She sits heavily, the exhaustion she's kept at bay by sheer force of will slamming into her. All that is left is to call the Spirit, to put the most powerful spell her kind has wrought to devastating effect. Not yet. Now, she will sleep. And when she wakes she will continue to fight.

## Chapter 10

Dean punches the nearest wall, lets the pain cut through his fury and horror. There's an unbroken Seal in the other room and a pile of dead bodies. This Seal had required the sacrifice of 15 green-eyed virgins. Sam had sacrificed 14 and left the last one hanging from the ceiling, barely alive. Cutting him down had killed him.

It's the third such Seal they've found in as many weeks, unbroken but with a clear message attached.

Mer clears out of the room, jaw clenched and eyes hard. Danny and Trix trail after her looking stricken. Trix in particular's been having a hard time lately.

Dean glances at Bobby and Mills, busy cutting down the last body; the others are already laid out and covered with cloth. Dean watches them lay them down, nameless casualties in this war they're fighting. They range in age from preteens to a guy in his thirties, the only one they'd found with an ID: Wallace Chaffen of Missouri. Dean tucks the ID away; he'll drop it off at the next safe point so that someone can try and find his family. Give them some closure if not any relief. The others...their families will always wonder.

Dean feels his nails bite into his palms when Bobby throws lighter fluid over the bodies. This house will be the only grave Wallace and the others get. He watches the yellow flames lick over the floorboards and up the walls.

Bobby has to bodily drag Dean out of the house and into the yard. They stay and watch the house burn to make sure the fire doesn't spread. As the flames grow so does Dean's fury.

"We have to stop reacting." His words are quiet but everyone hears

them. "We can't let--" He closes his eyes and sucks in a breath; the air is hot and tastes of ashes. He's been such an idiot thinking he could ever get Sam back. "We can't let Sam keep baiting us. We have to take the fight to him."

"You're a dollar short and a day late," Bobby says.

"And just what is that supposed to mean?" Dean asks, his hackles up.

"We've known where Sam holed up for a year, Dean. And in all that time you stayed as far away as you could with your thumb up your ass and now that Sam's in the wind you finally feel like doing something? It doesn't work like that, son."

"So this is my fault? If you felt that strongly you should've just called up your buddies and stormed the castle."

"Sometimes I wonder how hard your daddy dropped you on your head as a child. This whole thing revolves around you, Dean. You and Sam and your whole damn family. *There is no one else.* We take our cues from you because there's not a single hunter in this country who doesn't know the Apocalypse hinges on you. And don't try to pretend you don't know that. I let you get away with a lot, son, but don't you dare say *that* to my face."

There's a part of Dean that wants to pitch a fit, stomp his feet and yell about how it's not fair. He's *one* person and *he* is not responsible for the whole of the world. But in the glow of a house where fifteen people died to send him a message, Dean can't feel any truth in that.

He looks at Bobby, hair more silver than brown, deep lines in his face. Mer standing off to the side watching, inscrutable, a stranger he trusts with his life. He can almost see Ellen and Jo looking between them, glaring at him like he's fucked this all up, Jo's scar a

livid reminder of the life they lead now. Missouri'd be right beside Bobby looking at him with sympathetic frustration, Kai beside her and far more unyielding. And all the nameless people who have died, horrifically, many directly because of him and the twisted messages Sam keep leaving him and Dean...

Dean still wants to save Sam. After all that, in the face of the wreck this world has become. Even though not sure there's anything left to save anymore.

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Ruby gets a lucky break (for a certain value of "lucky") and catches Furcas, First Knight of Hell, after skulking along the edges of a battle with some angels. He's fatally wounded, but even so she's seen him giggle through a session with Alastair. So the fact that it hadn't taken much for him to tell her about Ellen and Jo and the "demonstration" being planned for Lawrence, Kansas worries her.

Wisely, she'd kept him alive long enough for Dean to hear it from the demon's mouth.

"You travel with an entourage now?" Ruby asks, eyeing the string of hunters trailing after Dean like ducklings.

"Shut up," Dean snarls, pushing past her. Ruby snarls back, feels her eyes go black with rage.

"Stop it," Mer hisses, shoving her out of the doorway. "We haven't told them."

"So I'm the Winchester family's newest dirty little secret, huh? Keep your father on a shorter leash if you want my help," Ruby says, wrenching her arm out of Mary's grasp. Mer spreads her arms dramatically, incredulous

"Um, hello? I'm the kid here."

"If you were any other family you might be able to get away with that one," Ruby says and stalks into the living, leaving Mer to follow behind her.

--wish you were dead, Winchester," Furcas hisses. The wards she's put up around him are the only thing keeping him alive but he's dying by inches. His host has deep contusions all over it and the ropes have sunk into its skin. Some of the flesh is peeling away.

"Your lack of creativity is really insulting," Dean says. "Don't I at least deserve some unique threats?" Bobby rolls his eyes and continues to inspect the modified Devil's trap Ruby had created to keep Furcas talking long enough for them to hear.

"Ruby," Furcas spits out, globs of bloody phlegm dribbling out of his mouth. "You know the bounty on you is second only to his?" He starts to curse her in Latin and Etruscan, and Ruby finds herself in agreement with Dean: Furcas has no creativity. She smirks and etches a little sigil of her own making onto the ground and sighs in contentment when Furcas screams.

It doesn't take as long as normal to break him. This specialized Devil's Trap has sped up the process beautifully. It's not long until Furcas tells Dean, blood running from his eyes and nose, about the capture of Ellen and Jo, and the very public execution Sam's lined up for them.

"You boys hear what you needed to hear?" Ruby asks after the fourth description of what he'll do with her entrails.

Dean shrugs, "Ellen, Jo, Sam, Lawrence, everyone's going to die horribly. Same old, same old." His flippancy isn't fooling anyone.

"Good." She walks over and scuffs the outer part of the circle. Containment breaks with a loud crack and a visible flash of light. (Lucky for her this spell derives most of its power from the symbols and not her; she'd be on the floor right now were that the case.) Furcas explodes out of the body, his incorporeal form violently rending apart in the air and fading away before it hits the ground. It's probably a painful death. At least, that's how Ruby engineered the energy backlash to work. The body begins to collapse in on itself, decaying quickly without its demonic host.

"Where'd you find this?" Bobby asks, finally able to step into the circle and study it closer. It's brilliantly done, and includes a bunch of symbols he can't place. Some of which he's sure he's never seen before. It's a masterwork.

"I made it," Ruby says.

"*Made* it?" Bobby looks at this slip of a girl who he's never heard of. "Who are you?" His tone's as close to awe as anyone's ever heard from him. Dean recoils because no way.

"This is Mary's demon friend," Dean says.

"Dad!" Mer yells. Bobby immediately aims his gun at the demon and curses when Mer steps between him and his target.

"Girl, are you out of your mind?" Bobby thunders. Mer's face shuts down, expression hard as granite, and settles in for a telling-to. Part of Dean can admit he finds it amusing how stone-faced Mer remains in the face of Bobby's righteous indignation. Though he's totally on Bobby's side. "Demons lie. They lie even when they tell the truth, what are you thinking? You shoot first and ask questions only if you have to. You don't make friends!"

"She is not my *friend*." The look on Bobby's face quite eloquently conveys his disbelief. "She's a source who just delivered some

very important information and has gone out of her way to save my life several times. I don't trust her, but I won't ignore her, either. She's an asset."

"She is standing right here in all her demony glory." Ruby is, in fact, sitting on a table. "Oops, wait, I lied."

"We can't believe anything she says, and I sure as hell don't trust that other one's information now," Bobby says. Dean twitches because while pointing a gun at Ruby is respectable, no one gets to point one at his kid. "How do we know they aren't working together? That this isn't an elaborate ruse to get you both to rush head long into danger?"

"It doesn't really matter. Sam's going to Lawrence." Dean steps forward and forces Bobby to lower his weapon.

"We don't know that," Bobby starts.

"I know that." He glances at the demon and wishes she were anywhere else because this particular conversation is far too revealing. "That's where it started. That's where we returned. That's where it's going to end." They always end up back in Lawrence. Like homing pigeons. "We can scry for Ellen and Jo to confirm, but they're there. And it is a trap."

Dean knows it's a trap. Bobby knows it's a trap, which he repeats for about an hour straight in the ensuing bitchfest. And then Ruby agrees with him, which sparks an epic bout of scowling, but not a reversal of opinion. A five year old would know it's a trap. Which means the demons that have Ellen and Jo--i.e, Sam--know that Dean knows that it's a trap. So really, it's not a trap. It's a dare.

Everyone also knows Dean's going anyways.

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Ruby tags along with them. Or, rather, she pops up where they've made camp whenever the hell she feels like it and almost gets shot every single time. Dean suspects she's grooming them because Bobby has given up complaining, though both he and Rufus--the only other hunter in the know--keep their guns in plain view. Ruby just smirks at them in her infuriatingly demonic way.

Their plan of action, for what it's worth, is to descend as a group and go in guns blazing. In Ruby's opinion this is less a rescue mission and more group suicide but no one's listening to her.

"I need a weapon," Dean says. "Something that can kill..." He can feel the judgment all around him as he's unable to finish his thought.

"Hell's favorite Lilim?" Ruby suggests blithely and Dean fucking hates her.

"What's a lilim?" Rufus asks. Save for his hand always being on his gun while she's around, he's taken to treating Ruby like any other hunter.

"Sam," Ruby answers blithely. Dean rises up, radiating violence, and Mer drags him back, glaring at Ruby. Ruby raises her hands defensively, but can't help the instinctive smirk. Baiting Dean is just so much *fun*. "Lilim, capital-L. Mamma's favorites. Little-L lilim are just Lilith's bitches, the demons she took a fancy to. Sam? Lilith gave everything to him."

"Oh, hell," Bobby says, paling.

"Yep," Ruby says, sounding like a proud schoolteacher, "got it in one. Good boy."

"What?" Dean demands. He really doesn't like Bobby's tone.

"Lilith was the first demon Lucifer created after he Fell," Bobby says, voice shaking. "Lucifer...gave unto her the essence of himself so that she might defile the world." Dean looks at Bobby blankly. Clearly a quote, but he doesn't know what it means.

"Sammy is running around with a giant sliver of Lucifer's Grace inside him," Ruby says when it becomes clear none of the rest of them have two brain cells to rub together. God, the amount of prevaricating and the self-deceit in this group. She blames Dean's handlers, mostly; they'd let him wallow in his delusions, let him convince himself that he could save Sam, that the man he knew would magically reappear and oust the darkness of Lucifer's taint. None of them will ever acknowledge that she's the *only one* who came close to stopping this whole thing. And then baby Winchester fucked it all up.

She watches Dean closely, sees the weight of her revelation settle over him. The anguish, the shock and pain. Watches him pack it away until he's not so torn between family and duty. There's no overbearing guilt or torment left. He feels nothing. It's both impressive as hell and really fucking disconcerting.

"How do I stop him?" She can hear the emptiness in his words and wonders that none of the others can. Mer's wrapped up in her own little world of teenage angst but Bobby should know better. If it gets Sam dead Ruby's not too concerned about it, she just needs him to hang on to the numbness long enough to put a bullet in his brother; but these things have a way of making people behave in unpredictable manners.

"I got you covered." Ruby reaches behind her back and tosses a very old gun onto the table, one of the relics she liberated from Sam's various lieutenants. A Colt Texas Paterson six-shooter, rotating barrel, skitters across the polished wood. Old, well maintained. Etchings in the metal. Kills anything.

"Aw, you shouldn't have," Mer says with a false smile; she shoots Dean a quick, assessing look but his eyes are riveted on the gun.

"This, you condescending jackass, is a *special* gun," Ruby says, speaking slowly and with great care. She watches Mer open herself to the gun, probing it and feeling its magical spark. She shivers, just a bit, at the weapon's potency. Idiot child. "Samuel Colt, Halley's Comet, boring details and voila! Once in a lifetime gun that can kill anything. There is only one."

"You expect us to believe this?" Bobby asks.

"I come in good faith," Ruby says mockingly.

"Yeah, because demons are so trustworthy," Rufus butts in, crossing his arms over his chest. That's the first thing he's said about it, and his tone isn't any different than any other time he's talked to her.

"I had a friend like you once." Ruby taps her lip with her finger, then snaps her finger in an overly dramatic 'ah ha!' moment. "I suddenly remember why I killed him." Rufus and Bobby give her twin glares of loathing. Ruby shivers like it sends little tingles up her spine.

"Can we move on?" Mer demands. How she ended up the mature one in this group is beyond her comprehension. "How does this work?"

"Point, big bang, death."

"You're sure?" Mer asks, looking at the gun with suspicion; her gaze flicks between her father and the gun. Dean continues boring holes into the gun on the table. "Even...even Grace?"

"I think that counts as 'anything.' It's a hot little number. Stole it

from this bitch named Meg. You should probably watch out for her, she's vengeful. Anyhoo! You've got seven shots to kill little Sammy before you're fucked."

Dean picks up the gun and turns it over. *Non timebo mala.* I will fear no evil. There's a pentagram etched on the butt of the gun and when Dean dumps the bullets in the hand they're warm to the touch. They each have numbers etched on them, and he lines them up with the spare sitting on the table. Seven through thirteen.

Dean's going to kill his brother with it.

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They stage out of a small two-story hotel thirty minutes outside of Lawrence. Dean plots out the last few 'Seals' they chased down and realizes that Sam has been leading him here, a straight line across the country to the little town in Kansas they can't seem to break away from.

Bobby and Rufus work their way through their mutual rolodexes to fill out their strike force. They end up with twenty people prepared to stage a suicidal search-and-destroy mission. There had been more, people willing to risk their lives to end this war, who were willing to put their faith in Dean to do the right thing. They'd tried to summon the angels, but neither of them responded to prayers or summons. Figures they're going into their first major action against Samael with a demon as back up.

Bobby quietly verifies the provenance of the gun. They kill a demon with it and somehow Bobby digs up Samuel Colt's very own journal--man's got a system for post that the government would envy even before Sam fucked up the world--a hundred years old and one of the most thorough hunting manuals Dean's seen since his father's. He reads a little about how Colt made the gun,

but most of it goes beyond him; the hunting though, his cases? Dean feels a kinship to the man even through the space of years, which is a weird and foreign feeling to him. Bobby mutters something about Sams that Dean chooses not to hear.

Ruby claims she knows a way to mute Sam's powers, even the playing field a little. They're all skeptical but Bobby verifies that the spell, at the very least, can't hurt. It won't hold for long, either, but a bullet from a Colt revolver travels at roughly 800 feet per second so they don't need all that much time.

And now they're thirty minutes from a house he never wanted to see again, gearing up for a battle he's been trying to avoid.

Dean moves by rote--he assembles shotgun cartridges, casts and consecrates silver bullets, soaks all his clothing and anything absorbent in holy water. He adds the hex bag Ruby offers to his collection with prudent trepidation, though neither he, Mer or Bobby can find anything evil about them.

Dean introduces himself to all the hunters Bobby and Rufus have pulled in, every one of them with that grizzled, paranoid glint Dean recognizes from his father.

They'll be ready to move out in the morning.

Dean sharpens his knife, mostly because he's too wired to sleep just yet and he needs something to do with his hands. Something to concentrate on. He senses Mer hovering in the doorway but ignores her until she comes up beside him.

"We could wait. For Anna and Cas."

"No." He's fought the supernatural without angelic back up for most of his life. They want to pick and choose when they show up that's fine. But he's not relying on any help from them.

"He might not be here--"

"He's here." Dean knows that with absolute certainty. Mer falls silent, but there's a weight to her silence. Dean puts down the knife and whetstone, his signal for her to say whatever she's here to say.

"Can you do this?" Dean pauses, the weight of her question seeping into him. It's been years since anyone's questioned his abilities. He almost forgot what that felt like, having to justify every decision, his movements weighed and judged and constantly found wanting. He resumes his sharpening with carefully controlled savagery, the grate of metal on stone loud in the silent room. She turns to go and he lets her. She feels more and more like a stranger. She pauses at the threshold and Dean holds his action, waiting.

"You think he'd rather die than let whatever's inside him keep riding his meatsuit around?"

He waits until she's out of the room before letting the knife fly. It slams into the wall, buried to the hilt at head height.

He stares at it for a long moment before yanking his shirt off and climbing into bed. For the first time in over a year, Dean falls asleep because he wants to.

He wakes up by a lake, the sand beneath him warm from the sun (which isn't too hot) and his wrap-around sunglasses protecting him from the light. A breeze keeps him from getting overheated and water laps gently against the rocks. There's a pier framed between his feet, a couple of foldout chairs and some rods there if he wants them.

Dean toys with the thought of taking a dip, getting wet and losing

himself in the swim. It's one of his favorite forms of exercise, and not easy to do regularly with his lifestyle. But that would also require him to move which would be really dumb considering how comfortable he is.

He feels a shadow fall over him, blocking the sun and giving him a small chill. He frowns.

"Move it, gigantor. You're blocking my sunlight."

"Oh?" Dean grunts when dead weight lands on his stomach. He pushes at Sam's chest, but the asshole snatches his glasses off and tosses them over his shoulder.

"Sammy--" Sam cuts him off with a demanding, hungry kiss. Dean doesn't try to fight, gives everything Sam throws at him right back. Dean uses his legs to flip them over, but Sam's having none of that and they go rolling into the water. Dean lands on top, his knees clamped around Sam's hips. He winds his fingers in Sam's hair and pulls him up into a kiss.

It's hot and wet and totally unrefined. They rut together and Dean laughs breathlessly when he realizes Sam's in a black speedo that's peeling away from his body with every move.

"Sammy," Dean says, amusement audible in his words.

Dean smiles and sweetens the kiss, turns it playful and seductive. He feels and hears Sam's laugh against his lips, nips and Sam's lower lip. He pulls back and gently curls his fingers around Sam's skull, the pads resting right behind his ears. His thumbs caress the vulnerable orbital bones, across Sam's cheeks. Lets everything he feels for Sam show through, unguarded. Sam's breath catches, his hands around Dean's hips tightening.

"What?" Sam asks, voice low and reverent. Dean leans in, right

against Sam's ear.

"I'm coming for you," Dean says, and twists Samael's neck until it cracks.

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Dean stands at the window, facing in the general direction of Lawrence, and lets the seconds slide by. Everyone else is asleep, the motel silent in preparation for tomorrow. He should be probably sleeping but that may never happen again. He can still feel Sam's neck breaking under his hands. Hear the vertebrae pop.

He can do this. He *will* do this.

The smooth metal of the Colt presses into the skin at his hip. He imagines *non timebo mala* branded indelibly into his skin. I will fear no evil. It says nothing of love.

He catches movement out of the corner of his eye and turns, drawing the Colt in the same motion. It's Anael.

"Dean."

"Where the hell have you--"

"You must leave. Now!" She looks...frantic. Discomposed. Her hair is out of place and her eyes are wide. "They have ch--" She disappears with a flash, torn away from the world, her startled expression lingering in Dean's mind. There's a moment of complete calm and then all of the windows shatter, an unnatural wind filling the room and disrupting their salt lines. The building shakes, the floors and ceilings cracking so the devil's traps are rendered useless.

Dean realizes with sickening clarity just how well he's been

played.

He thought Sam would play by the rules and wait for them on the battlefield. And he might have, because Sam is nothing if not dramatic, but Dean had to go and have the last word. They'd let themselves feel safe here, to take a breath before battle and they're too spread out and careless.

The first demon launches itself through the window and Dean stabs him through the eye with his knife. It's followed quickly by two more, black-eyed cannon fodder. Dean throws his bag of salt at the first one and shoots the other one in the face with a blessed silver bullet. He stabs them both, up through the chin and into the brain.

He's busy redrawing the devil's trap underneath the sill when he hears the distinctive sound of a demon dying coming from behind him. He throws himself to the side and comes up in a crouch, and wings his target.

"You." He considers shooting her again on principle; he doesn't trust Ruby, information and dead demons aside. But the enemy you know is better than the one you don't, though he won't let her see his back.

"You're welcome," Ruby says, wiping a wicked looking knife on the demon she just killed. She shoots an annoyed look at the graze on her shoulder. "You need to leave. Sam's on his way."

"Then get away from me," Dean says, stashing as many weapons as he can carry on his person while never looking away from her. Ruby grabs him by the arm.

"We don't have any way to mitigate Sam's power. We have to run."

"This is what we wanted," Dean says, shoving her away. "We're ending this, one way or the other."

"I really don't think you fully appreciate how powerful he is. Because it's going to be *the other*." Dean primes his handgun pointedly and double checks the Colt's barrel. "Fine."

She spins on her heel and stalks towards the door. He lets her take point and clear the hall; better she get picked off than him. She motions him forwards and Dean steps cautiously through the doorway. Nothing's moving, the halls empty and silent. He notices that Ruby's eyes are black and wonders, not for the first time, what exactly that means for demons. He doesn't hear any gunshots or sounds of fighting which means everyone else is dead, or they've taken great pains to isolate him.

"Since you're dedicated to this awful plan, we need to get to the ballroom. I can try and cast the binding spell from there."

"Oh, I think it's a little too late for that." Sam steps into the corridor and Dean's first reaction--after the ingrained aiming of his gun--is pure, unbridled lust. Sam cracks his neck as he undresses Dean with his eyes, and Dean flushes. "How ya doing, big brother?"

"Seriously?" Ruby says. Dean glares at Ruby, who drops her gaze pointedly to Dean's crotch and this is *so not the time*. "You boys went through all that just to make moon eyes at each other?"

"I don't think we need an audience. Do you, Dean?" Sam asks. He raises his hand and makes an indolent twisting motion. Ruby's neck breaks, twisted almost all the way around, and her body falls to the floor, paralyzed. But not dead. Trapped, conscious in a body she cannot move, facing away from the action. "Alastair will pick you up. Eventually." Inside, Ruby rages and seethes, but there's nothing she can do. She slowly sinks into herself trying to find some hidden reserve of power that might save her life.

"I'm surprised you let her anywhere near you, Dean. That's not your style." Sam takes off the jacket and hangs it on a light fixture. The top few buttons of his maroon shirt are open showing a bit of skin. There's a cream pocket square in his breast pocket. A target.

Dean shoots Sam right through the heart before he can stop himself. Sam stumbles back and blinks. He looks down at the perfect round hole in his button-up and handkerchief, expression slipping into betrayal as he presses his hand over his heart. He looks back up at Dean. And tisks.

"You honestly thought that would work." Sam digs around with blunt fingers, not even flinching, and comes up with a slightly bloody bullet.

*Bitch lied about the gun*, Dean thinks, numb. Sam flicks the bullet away and turns his attention to the Colt. Dean jerks forward as the gun goes sailing into Sam's hand. It looks small and fragile.

"I've been looking for this," Sam says, and tucks the gun in his pocket. "Someone stole it." He glances at Ruby and Dean hears the unmistakable sound of bones cracking and tendons snapping. Her body jerks and emits a high, pained noise that makes Dean's skin crawl. Sam looks entirely too pleased with himself and begins straightening his clothes: re-positioning the pocket square, pulling down his cuffs, fixing the hole in his shirt. Slicking back his hair. And only when he's done does he looks to Dean, held captive by his own inertia.

He starts his perusal at Dean's feet and Dean feels every second of it. Feels when Sam lingers on his crotch, on the tattoo over Dean's heart and the curve of his neck. A smile slides across Sam's face. It lacks any warmth or affection, any humor--it's a purely predatory expression that makes Dean's blood run cold.

"Look at you." There's palpable hunger in the words, a possessive undercurrent Dean responds to. Has always responded to.

The anti-possession tattoo starts to burn. Dean gasps and claws at his shirt, suddenly too scratchy and heavy against his skin. The material tears in his frantic effort to get it off and away but it doesn't matter it just needs to be gone and--he watches in horror as the ink of his tattoo rises to the surface, bubbling up, and oozes down his chest, a dark maroon color because it's mixed with his blood, until all that's left behind is a raised red burn, angry and throbbing. Mindlessly Dean raises his hand to touch it but his wrist is forced away by something hard and unyielding. Inhuman. Its touch fills him with revulsion and that's Sam--or whatever Sam has become.

"No touching," Sam says mildly. Dean can only stare as he's manipulated my Sam's power, his hands pinned at his side, feet rooted to the earth. His speechlessness though, that's all Dean's fault.

How had he missed this?

Sam moves around him, taking him in but not touching. He's close enough to smell but all Dean gets is sulfur.

"I made something from you," Sam says, stopping in front of him. "And really, fair is fair." He starts to take off his shirt, one button at a time in an indecent striptease. He lets the material drop and Dean...Sam's got tribal tattoos over his entire body. Which is almost unnaturally muscular, like Sam on Hell-flavored steroids. But that doesn't stop part of Dean from wanting to trace the contours of every muscle, find out how far down the tattoo goes. Dean closes his eyes, trying to organize his swimming thoughts. They're sliding away too quickly, he shouldn't be this compromised. He starts when Sam tenderly strokes the back of his

fingers over Dean's cheek, his lips, eyes flying open.

"Don't fight it." And this time he feels Sam slip into his head, chase away coherency. Take away his choice.

"Sammy. Please." Sam leans in close and Dean can feel the warmth of his breath. The kiss is gentle and barely there. Dean hates the way he yearns to give into it even now.

Sam's lips move to his ear, the tip of his tongue lightly tracing the shell.

"Everything has been for you," Sam whispers. Dean jerks but he can't say whether it's towards Sam or away from him.

"Everything." Dean flinches and his body is pulled up, stretched on an invisible rack until he's splayed out, the muscles of his neck charded and tense.

Sam steps back, a twisted smile on his face and spreads his arms. The tattoos wrapped around his body start to move, swirling and writhing over his body and they're not tattoos, they're *alive*. Eager. The darkness flows into his hands and then out, rising up, coalescing in front of him, leaving Sam's skin pale and unmarked.

It solidifies into a ball and everything in Dean cringes from it. It's made of...made of evil, that's the only word Dean can think of. A swirling, living mass of everything terrible in the world that Dean can *sense*. It fills him with dread and he knows what Sam's going to do with it.

"Sam," Dean says, desperate and frightened. The ball spins and move and it's not alive like the demons he's seen, but it's close. So close. And Dean can't get away. "Sam, don't do this."

"Don't worry," Sam says. He's smiling but it doesn't reach his eyes. They're devoid of anything human. "You're mine." And the ball

surges forward and Dean can feel himself being subsumed. It slides into him, sneaking under his skin, into his eyes and mouth and nose and ears and down into his bones. It settles in him, eating away at Dean's core, and the goodness there; at Dean's soul. Leaving him changed.

His vision starts to grey, the colors dimming and he sees Sam's smile again, the wrong one though he can't remember why it's wrong. He breathes and he can feel the air in his lungs, in then out. It's getting hard, though, but he's not afraid; he's not even sure he still needs to breathe. He can smell so many different things in the air, different people and demons. Deep in one corner of his mind, as-yet untouched by the smoke, what's left of Dean screams for help. This is his worst fear come to pass, multiplied by a thousand. He's not being possessed by a demon, he's becoming a demon.

He senses something off to one side, that pulls at what's left of him like a magnet, and he slowly—why is the world around him so *slow*?—turns his head.

He recognizes the girl there, the young woman with long blonde hair and green eyes that are so vibrant against the grey of the world it hurts to look at her. But he does, focuses on her because there's something he remembers even though he's forgotten himself.

"Mer," he breathes, and it comes out as a plea even though he's not quite sure what he's asking her for. He reaches out for her, begs her silently until that last thought is consumed by that terrifyingly angry blankness. All the colors fade to grey and then there's nothing as Mary Winchester raises her gun and shoots her father in the head.

Dean falls to the ground, limp and broken. Like his strings have been cut, clouded eyes staring at the ceiling. For a moment he's calm in death, still as he rarely was in life. Then his body jerks

spasmodically as the demonic essence in him is obliterated by the powerful spell woven into the bullet, his nerve endings firing one last time. He is gone, completely. There is no soul for Heaven to reincarnate or for Hell to summon.

Dean Winchester is no more.

## Chapter 11

The world should stop. Freeze in its rotation, pause in its mourning, do something dramatic to mark what just happened. Mer waits for it, but she's still breathing, the world's still spinning.

Bobby and Rufus round the corner at a sprint and almost careen into Mer, braced in her shooting stance with her gun still raised. They register Sam on the other side of the room, rigid and staring down at the body crumpled on the floor in disbelief. At Dean. Bobby finally registers the dark red hole in the center of Dean's forehead.

"Mer," Bobby says softly, horrified. She doesn't move or react, just stares at her father. "Oh, Mary."

Her gaze drifts towards him, her movements slow and dissociated, not really registering anything around her. Bobby can't help but glance back at Dean and she mimics him, looking back at the scene. There's so little blood. She starts to shake.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, a tear rolling down her cheeks, and it breaks Bobby's heart because this was anything but her fault. He reaches out and gently takes the gun.

Sam slides to his knees, mouth open in a silent scream but projecting so much pain even Bobby feels it settle in his bones. Mer gasps and stumbles back, clutching at Bobby's arm, and swaying. She won't look away even though her nose starts bleeding.

Sam lurches forward on his hands and knees and gathers Dean to his breast, a high, wrenching wail starting deep in his chest, ripped out of him, a primal sound of savage loss. Bobby doubles over, clutching his head; the sounds cuts through him and the maelstrom

of Sam's emotions threatens to subsume him. His own grief is dwarfed by what he feels from Sam. One of Bobby's eardrums bursts and he tastes copper at the back of his throat; he vaguely registers Rufus collapsing beside him, body shaking with seizure. The disorientation soon forces him to his knees and his brain might melt out of his head.

His vision swims, but he feels Mer let go and move away. He flails after her but it's a lost cause. He forces his eyes open and can just make out the blobs that must be Sam and Mer but he can't track them. Sounds fight through the pain, warped and indistinct, he can't make sense of them... And then the world explodes in silence.

The force throws Bobby against the wall, Rufus slamming into him a moment after. Debris rain down on them but there's till no sound. He passes out and the next thing he knows he's blinking grit from his eyes and the world is tinged pink. He must have popped a blood vessel in his eye.

He doesn't remember how to breathe at first, the wind knocked out of him. His first, shuddering breath is filled with dust. Coughing hurts and Rufus is lying on his stomach. He shoves Rufus off and performs a perfunctory field assessment: man's got a head wound, his shoulder's dislocated, and a few serious lacerations where bits of hotel struck but Bobby knows for a fact the old codger's had worse. Bobby stumbles to his feet. He flinches as his hearing rushes back, the tinnitus loud. His balance is off.

It looks like a very big bomb went off, which for all he knows is the truth. Bobby stumbles forward, swaying without the wall for support, and gapes at the carnage. The wall that had been behind Sam is completely gone, the roof's caved in and rubble lies haphazardly on the ground. There's no sign of Sam. In fact, there's no sign of any Winchester.

"Mer!" Bobby calls, but it comes out a harsh, unintelligible croak. "Mary!" He shifts through the rubble. The stones tear up his fingers but he keeps searching, looking for a sign. He pulls a muscle shoving a large slab of cement aside. There's nothing under it. Nothing at all.

He freezes, his lizard brain warning him to stay still and silent, as small as possible. The hair on the back of his arms lifts, responding to some subtle shift in the air that sets his senses on edge. It feels like someone's walked over his grave. He needs to get Rufus and regroup.

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Mer snaps out of her daze when Sam lurches towards her father's body. He's broadcasting his pain strong enough to overload her psychic senses but she's still more coordinated than he is; she was expecting this, after all. She marshals all her energy and flings Sam away from the lifeless body in his arms.

Sam leaves a dent in the wall and comes up angry. He moves fast, almost too fast for her to track, and lashes out, landing a hard blow to the side of her face. But there's no thought behind his flailing and she avoids his other blows. She sweeps his feet from under him and, making sure she stays between Sam and her father, follows up with a solid right hook to his nose, the full weight of her power behind it. It knocks Sam back, his body convinced he's drowning as blood floods his sinus cavities, and earns her enough time to scramble to her father's side.

Sam spits blood onto the floor and snarls, rolling into a crouch. He glares at the person who murdered what was his and he *hates*. She stole Dean and hid him away, then killed him just when Sam was going to get him back. Sam wants nothing more than to make her pay, to feel his pain and hundredfold. He feels his power rise

through him wild and unchecked. It crackles beneath his skin, his rage feeding it and he wants this to *hurt*.

"You will regret this," he says, the words a heavy twist on his tongue. His eyes smolder; Mer swears she can see the fires of Hell in their depths.

"You first," she snarls back. She says the words Anael taught her, her High Enochian inelegant but passable. The sigil Anael set on Mer's back with her own Grace activates, a cold so deep it burns.

They disappear just as Sam's power breaks loose.

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They manifest a few feet above the ground and Mer can't hold back the cry of pain when she hits the hard-packed earth, the dead weight of her father's body landing hard on top of her. Something gives in her arm but there's no time to dwell on it; the faster she can get him to Anael the better off he'll be. They're in front of a building in the middle of a wooded glade. No path in or out, no signs of civilization.

She slings him over her shoulder and staggers towards the door. She has to kick it open and almost falls back when the body pulls her off balance. Her *father's* body. Mer fights off the panic that threatens to overwhelm her because if this doesn't work---

It *has* to work. There is no other option.

"Anael!" The inside of the warehouse is dim; there are no windows and only one light source hanging over a raised table in the center of the room. Mer works her way towards it, muscles burning with every step. "Anael!" She lays her father down upon the altar, wincing at the graceless thump he makes, and takes a moment to arrange his arms so they fold across his chest.

"Is it come to this already?" a voice breathes from the shadows and Mer spins around, heart racing. Anael is half cloaked in darkness, her face obscured. Mer steps forward nervously, one hand anchored to her father, afraid if she lets go he'll disappear.

"Jesus, Anael. I got him here as fast as I could, what do we need to do?" Anael steps into the pool of light, past Mer and right up to the altar. She runs her fingers through Dean's hair, an odd smile on her face.

"Hello, Dean." Mer makes a frustrated noise. When they'd come up with this crazy scheme, Anael had impressed on her the importance of *time*. Every second counts, hence the incredibly painful process of letting Anael mark her, Grace burning into her mortal skin like the worst of burns. And now they're here and Anael is wasting what little they have.

"Anna," Mer pleads. Something in her is urging her to back away. Whispering at her to run.

"I'm sorry," the angel says, still smoothing Dean's hair. Mer's sense of unease grows. Anael looks drawn in spite of the beatific smile on her face. Her eyes seem strangely unfocused, as if she's looking at something Beyond.

"For what?" Mer asks, voice small and bewildered. "I don't—we have to save him, you said this would save him, we *do not have time for this*." Anael ignores her, leaning over to kiss Dean's head in benediction, right over the entry wound. Warning bells are going off, there's something very wrong here, but Mer can't bring herself to leave the only chance she has to save her dad and what the fuck is Anael's problem? This is not the time for an angelic breakdown. This is not the time for *Mer* to breakdown and she's barely hanging on.

Anael stands and turns to Mer; she has tears gathering in her eyes. Mer has never seen an angel cry. Anael lets her gaze trace the contours of Mer's face; coming from a creature capable of taking in the whole of creation it is a most disconcerting sensation.

"You were never supposed to exist." Mer feels like she's falling without anything to stop her, the hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach growing with every breath. Anael reaches out and cups her cheek. She wants to move away, to run, but she also needs to see this through because it's the only way, so she remains frozen in place, caught in a spiral of deeply conflicting emotions.

"What?"

"Neither side expected you. None of them knew how you fit, didn't know what to make of you. How could they? You were the biggest diversion I could come up with." Anael smiles, brilliant and carefree, so at odds with the tears tracking down her face.

"Anna..." Mer says, the emotions she's been repressing shoving at her control. She *shot her father in the head*. She shot him and now Anael is telling her--she's not sure but she can't think about it now because her father is *dead*. "Did you lie to me?" The bullet had been made from the Spear of Longinus and consecrated with a willing sacrifice, her willing sacrifice, which Anael had *sworn* would allow them to resurrect him. The guilt Anael allows her to see is like a knife in her heart. She steps back, away from her father, away from what she's done.

"Dean should have been the one. The only one, with Sam as his counterpoint. I watched him for so long. It took so many of us to keep them alive, to keep them both safe. The road to Paradise was well paved but all it took was a spark and you came along and there were possibilities, so many, we couldn't track them all. You could have travelled so many different paths--you could have been

Heaven's or Hell's or no one's. There was no easy place to put you, my brilliant little monkey wrench." Anael reaches out again and brushes away a tear. Mer hadn't realized she'd been crying, tears slipping freely down her cheeks. She jerks away but Anael is relentless, pulls Mer close into a smothering hug. "It was supposed to be Sam and Dean. At the Final Battle, just Sam and Dean facing each other, brother to brother. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, amen. But for *you*."

Mer feels the tendrils of angelic power, subtle but there, nudging at the edges of her consciousness. Her back itches. She realizes that the space around her has gradually grown brighter, light coming from below, and looks down. There are symbols etched on the ground, some she recognizes but most are older than recorded history, filling every available inch. They stretch to the end of the warehouse, illuminated by a growing gold glow, and hum with devastating power.

She needs to be as far away from here as possible. She feels that certitude in every cell of her Anael-inspired being.

"Anael, what are you doing?" Mer asks. Her voice comes out hoarse and trembling.

"I hope..." Anael shakes her head and steps back. She reaches into her jacket and pulls out a short silver sword. "I hope you'll forgive me this one day." The runes blaze, their hum turning into a crystalline song. Mer turns and runs.

Anael drives her sword into her heart.

The warehouse burns as bright as the sun, Anael's power and the force of her sacrifice igniting the symbols in a holy conflagration. They ignite with a sharp white flame. Mer screams and is consumed.



## Chapter 12

There's energy everywhere. Even in the vacuum of space where

$$A = 4\pi \cdot R^2 = 4\pi \cdot \left( G \frac{2 \cdot M}{c^2} \right)^2 = 4\pi \cdot G^2 \frac{4 \cdot M^2}{c^4} = 16\pi \cdot G^2 \frac{M^2}{c^4}$$

Darkness isn't visible it's...the closest word she has is *luminous* but that's wrong, so wrong, because it's actually

$$L = \sigma \cdot A \cdot T^4 = \frac{2 \cdot \pi^5 k^4}{15 \cdot h^3 c^2} \cdot A \cdot T^4$$

When she turns her head she sees

$$H = -\frac{\hbar^2}{2m} \int d^3r \phi^\dagger(\mathbf{r}) \nabla^2 \phi(\mathbf{r}) + \frac{1}{2} \int d^3r \int d^3r' \phi^\dagger(\mathbf{r}) \phi^\dagger(\mathbf{r}') U(|\mathbf{r} - \mathbf{r}'|) \phi(\mathbf{r}') \phi(\mathbf{r}).$$

The world is so much more complex than she ever thought. She can see how it fits together at the smallest level, a place for everything and everything in its place. She looks at her hand and stares in wonder. Past the skin to the pull of the muscles, the tendons and the bones, to the very cells beneath. A complex formula slides into the fold of skin at her knuckle, reappears on the other side, a language so precise there's no room for misinterpretation but mistakes are devastating.

She breathes in and can feel the air moving in her lungs, oxygenating her cells, her blood rushing through her veins to different parts of her body and knows that too. She could probably track the path of a single cell if she wanted. Might be able to look farther, to the very stuff that makes up the universe if she wants. Could lose herself in--

The language twists and whines at being forced to accommodate another being and there's an angel here. She snarls and melts into

the shadows, becomes a shadow. She can't remember why she hates them, but they fill her with fury.

\*\*\*

Castiel feels the moment Anael dies. He's battling alongside a few of the Chosen in Jerusalem at her order, trying to prevent Alastair from completing the Destruction of 144,000 Faithful--all pilgrims to the Holy City unexpectedly battling for their lives. It's one of the more powerful Seals on Lucifer's prison.

He leaves the battle without hesitation.

The land is charred and dead, burned out not only by the sheer amount of power that flowed through it but the way it was released. The remnants are still ebbing, sinking into the Earth itself, and this is not the byproduct of an angelic demise. Anael's death resonates disharmoniously, a psychic imprint that will take millennia to fade. What has happened here goes against everything in his Father's plan.

There's a warehouse in the center of the blast radius, but it barely exists, the barest suggestion of walls; Anael had willed it into being and her hold is fading. The acidic smell of ozone and sulfur invades his senses. Castiel steals himself to step over the threshold. The wrongness crawls over him but he ignores it.

There's an altar at the center of the room and Castiel can make out a body laid upon it. He can't sense much else, as limited as a human due to the fallout. He walks gingerly over the ghost of symbols he can feel imprinted on the ground; an echo of their power remains here and will for some time, though he doesn't recognize the ritual. Doesn't know what Anael was trying to accomplish, nor is he interested in driving his consciousness through the morass.

He's already well inside the warehouse, moving steadily towards whoever is on the altar, when a force more powerful than anything he has ever felt slams into him, pins him in midair. Its power dwarfs him, overwhelms him, and he wonders for an insane moment if this is God.

*Angel* he hears in the language of his people, and it chills him.

"Did you know?" The voice sears through him, discordant in a way an angel could never manage because they were made to sing. It blinds him, further mutes his senses, forces him deeper into the body he inhabits. Castiel opens his human eyes.

Mary Winchester has--has changed. Her eyes glow, lit from the inside by Anael's Grace. Castiel sees it, recognizes it, transmuted through it is. It's joined with her human soul and together those forces are exponentially greater than they are apart.

"What have you done?" Castiel asks reflexively, dumbly. Her grip tightens, Grace and anger spilling over and scalding Castiel, who girds himself to fight even though he cannot win. He pulls at her fingers, trying to peel them from his body, but his struggles have no effect.

*Mary*, he tries. There's no word for her in his language--rather, it's the series of impressions and shared memories that differentiate her from everyone else, how he sees her--saw her. It's a panicked, automatic reaction but it works. She pulls back and considers Castiel, looks *into* him to gauge his sincerity and that...she peels the layers away from Castiel and sees everything within him. All of existence encapsulated in a single being and she sees it all, each action that brought Castiel to this very moment. He gasps, struggling against her grip, and when his most inner self flushes dark with agony she realizes she's been causing him pain with her intrusion, that she's touching the very depths of him without even

trying. He should have shields, she thinks, and when she looks sees them shattered in the wake of her passage. She lets him go and stumbles away, trying to stopper the power, push it down and shut it tight but it wells up and spills over and will not be contained.

She can't...this won't be controlled. She tries to hang on to herself, to this awareness, but it rises like a tsunami, inexorable and dragging her sanity with it. Abruptly the warehouse around them disappears as if it never existed. Because it never was, always just a suggestion, a bit of showy prestidigitation. She laughs and sees the sound instead of hearing it, waves lengthening and shortening,

$$\lambda_3 = \frac{4}{3}L \Rightarrow f_3 = \frac{V_s}{\lambda_2} = \frac{3V_s}{4L} = 3f_1$$

. Watches the notes and the cadence flow out from her and knock into the eddies of the air around them, bounce off the skeleton of a leaf and shake it into loose ash.

She can see how everything in the world fits except for her. She is an abomination the world curves to accommodate instead of the other way around. She could destroy this place if she wanted, leave it stripped and incomplete; could unmake the entire world under the right circumstances, pulling the right thread. Circumstances that are fast approaching. She smiles and reaches out.

Fate swirls around her, a maelstrom where the lines get tangled and change and then surge out again. There's one line in constant flux that she follows to--

"Father." She doesn't have to physically move; intent and want are synonymous with movement now, and she appears beside him. He's...he's breathing. A flattened lump of ancient iron, melted and forged by her own hand, sits atop his forehead. There's a small knot of faded scar tissue between his eyes but other than that he is perfect. There are no scars, no age fatigue or wear in his joints. His cells are young and healthy, and she sets the telomeres with a fleeting thought. She feels relief and grief all at once, too much to

process, so she gently sets it aside. His body is as perfect and human as it can be.

"You did this," Castiel accuses, his voice rough. Her hand print stands out livid and pink at his throat. He can't look at Dean; his space is a gaping vortex of emptiness, Castiel either gets lost trying to parse him or his eyes skitter right over his space. His very being rejects whatever mockery Anael and Mary have made of Dean's sacrifice. He reaches for the bullet, its history calling to him, but Mer closes her hand around it.

"I could not let him die." Mortal languages are so achingly imprecise, she finds. They convey nothing of the anguish the very thought causes; nothing of the encompassing sense of loss. She pulls her father's amulet from underneath his shirt. She turns the bullet into a charm, hanging alongside the talisman, imbued with protection.

"You should not have done this. I have learned much from Dean. He values his freedom over all things."

"Except his family," Mer says, smoothing Dean's hair from his forehead. She seems entranced. "He'll always be a slave to family."

"A choice. A sacrifice. You took that from him."

"Then you'll have to apologize for me," she says, her tone distant and absent. Castiel feels anger rise in him at her unwillingness to acknowledge the obscenity she has abetted.

"That was not your place--" Mer turns on him, righteous anger burning brighter and hotter than it did before. It lashes out at Castiel, scouring his true form. He stumbles backwards.

"Do not tell me of my *place*," Mer says in a language never before spoken on Earth. Grace begins to leak out around her edges. "It

was not your *place* to create me!" Thunder rolls and the earth shakes. Even unconscious Dean cringes and whimpers at the assault, which probably saves Castiel's life when Mer abruptly turns back to her father, anger abating as quickly as it arose. She carefully--far more carefully than she did with Castiel--begins to peel back the layers that make up her father, checking to ensure he is unharmed.

"I...do not understand," Castiel says, wary of the mercurial being before him. He knows her now. Knows what she is, what Anael gave her life and her Grace to create. She is the first of her kind to set foot on the earth in over ten thousand years, though he has never heard of a nephilim being created in this way.

Mer looks at him, suspicious. Castiel watches the suspicion grow and twist into fear, paranoia, and burgeoning violence. The emotions consume and inflame her. For the first time Castiel realizes that he is truly in grave danger, that this newborn creature has no control and the power to obliterate him. He reacts on instinct and swells, true form emerging, trusting Dean is too injured to see him. His true voice shakes the trees.

**::A fool expresses all his anger, but a wise man holds it back and calms himself.::** Said vehemently enough to startle Mary out of the violent spiral her thoughts have taken. Castiel gazes down sternly at her, filled with righteousness. **::Remember the lessons of your Father. Be still.::**

Mer closes her eyes and inhales, dives into the depths of her mind and centers herself. She finds the quiet, emotionless place that allows her the clarity of thought to acknowledge that Castiel does not deserve her fury. That *no one* deserves what she was about to do, and that scares her.

"I know," she says softly, feeling the truth of Castiel's confusion as

to what happened here. And she truly does know; the past unfurls in her mind as if it were always there. Anael had treated them all like pawns on a chess board, moving and manipulating them to an agenda only she understood, often pasting it together on the fly. She had no grand unified plan, no exit strategy--she'd done whatever she could to derail both sides, hoping to delay things enough to prevent the Apocalypse. Mer feels a certain amount of grudging, resentful respect for her ruthlessness. Perhaps she should learn from it.

But her new found understanding also underscores how inevitable this Apocalypse has become. She needs a plan and a lack of distractions.

"I have to go," she says to Castiel. He looks so lost, standing in the middle of the warehouse, charred ground beneath his feet. There's a vicious kind of smugness in knowing someone's as lost as she. She ruthlessly tamps it down.

Mer slings her father over her shoulder and walks a thousand miles in a step. Castiel can only watch her go.

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Karen's washing dishes when her house suddenly shakes. She drops a plate in the sink and sees it shatter, only to watch time pause then reverse itself, the plate sealing back together and jumping into her hands as if nothing happened.

"You will do this for me." Karen spins around, reconstituted plate clutched to her chest. Mer stands in front of her, a much larger person draped over her shoulder, almost dwarfing her though she's not struggling with the weight. She looks dangerous. Hard.

"Mary! What on Earth--" Mer glides past her and careful lays the body onto the kitchen table. Karen gapes for a moment because it's

Dean and he looks dead. "Oh my God, what happened?" Karen takes Dean's pulse, finds it steady and strong. He's pale and too thin, dark smudges under his eyes. There's a silver knot of scar tissue in the middle of his forehead, an old scar but new to her, that she reaches out to touch. She shivers and draws her hand away quickly.

Karen shifts her attention to her...Dean's daughter. Mary looks more unforgiving than ever and there's an unnatural stillness about her. Karen wants to ask what's happened in the world since they banished her here, how the fight's going, but she stops herself. Baby steps, let Mary come to her. This is the first time she's seen anyone not of Clinch in months. Months that have run together until she can't keep track of them.

But with Mer staring at her father like she's never going to see him again, Karen can't help but push.

"You should sit down, I'll get--"

"I am leaving," Mer says abruptly. "Take care of him."

"Where are you going?" Karen asks. She shivers under Mer's gaze. There's a frightening amount of gravitas to it.

"He will not remember. When he wakes up. There is a--spell, a powerful one. The town will remember Dee. He has been their handyman since his family died when he was young. You will remember him too, but you will also know the truth. You are the only other person in the world who knows who he really is. Don't fuck it up." She touches the scar then turns to go. Panic seizes Karen and she reaches out to grab Mer's arm.

"No! You can't just leave him here!" Mer turns with her grip, follows it right into Karen's space, crowding close and eyes flashing. *Glowing*.

"I am leaving the only thing I love in this world with you," she says, low and soft. Karen can't be sure but she thinks the house is trembling; she finds herself unable to look away from Mer's eyes, pinpoints of light where dark pupils should be. "I need him to be safe. And I am trusting *you*." Karen covers her mouth, her heart breaking at the rawness in Mer's voice. She can only nod, because she can't refuse.

Impulsively, Karen pulls Mer into a hug. The girl is stiff her arms but Karen isn't deterred. Eventually she has to let go and force herself to step away. To let this young woman she desperately wants to know go. Mer turns her head sharply to the south, eyes unfocused and far away.

"Sam," she says, like a curse, and it's the most human she's sounded since she got here. "I have to--promise me." Karen glances at Dean, breathing slowly on her kitchen table, and then to Mer and the wild, barely-leashed air of danger around her.

"He'll be safe here," she promises, dogging Mer's quick steps through the house. "I will do whatever I can." Mer pauses at the door, looks at her and nods.

"You will both be protected." Karen shivers, something hot racing over her nerve endings. Mer turns and walks down the road without looking back. Her steps leave deep footprints in the hard-packed Earth.

"Who's that?" Karen starts, heart beating rapidly, and turns around. Dee--Dean, no, that's...he's Dee, the boy who is of all but belongs to none. He came here late last night because her sink pump jammed, they'd shared a drink and he crashed on her couch. He bashfully rubs his neck and smiles at her through his lashes. "Sorry about intruding on you. Didn't think the cider would hit me that hard."

"It's...it's no problem," Karen says, pasting a tremulous smile on her face whilst desperately trying to keep disparate strains of knowledge straight in her head. He's Dee and he's Dean; but he's not Dean anymore. Not yet.

"Your sink is fixed. Let me know if it gives you any problems." She watches him glance in the direction Mer went, brow wrinkling when he can't place her amongst the denizens of Clinch. "Friend of yours?"

"What? Oh, it's...complicated. I'd like to know her better."

"So she's someone worth knowing, then?" Dee asks, gently teasing her. Karen smiles and touches his face. She knows the history of Dee, who lost his family in a winter storm when he was four, who was raised by a village, so smart but never able to commit to just one thing, which is what makes him such a good handyman. The most eligible bachelor in Clinch but aside from a smattering of dalliances he never did settle down. Behind those memories, so vivid and bright, is the story of Dean, a man who loved so strongly he built himself a family and then lost them all. Even himself.

"I think you'd love her," Karen says with absolute conviction. Dean shrugs, already starting to forget.

\*\*\*

Sam's eyes are wide and unseeing, cast to places Alistair cannot fathom. Lilu pokes him in the shoulder but Samael doesn't react. Doesn't react to anything--pain, pleasure, blood, illusion, summoning rituals. He's still in there somewhere, Alastair knows it, but he's inaccessible.

This, he reminds himself, is why he didn't just have Dean Winchester removed in the first place.

He sits back and thinks. There's a way to salvage this. There has to be.

---

There's no pain. That's the worst part, that it doesn't hurt. Just miles of numbness and a single memory on repeat.

Dean's death should have come with fire and brimstone and shards of glass cutting into his skin. Loud explosions and chaotic mess, a blaze of glory. Instead it was a neat red circle in the middle of his forehead and the gentle welling of dark red blood.

Sam watches the moment right before the bullet hit, Dean bent backwards and looking off to one side. The bullet, round at the top, just barely presses a dent into Dean's skin. It rotates slowly.

Sam steps forward to look at it. The bullet shines with power; there are etchings on it, runes. Death, obliteration. He allows time to speed up a little, watches it split Dean's skin, the heat of it slightly cauterizing the wound, breaking through the brittle skull and piercing the brain.

Dean falls, blood falls--and this close Sam can see the grayish brain matter mixed in with the red--and the world rewinds.

Sam watches Mary fire the gun, face blank. Sees the bullet explode from the barrel and speed towards Dean.

No matter what he does he cannot change things. So he sits in his memory, relives it from every angle. Watches Dean die knowing he could have stopped it.

Sam never thought Mer could. Or would. And that is Sam's fault for underestimating her.

He touches Dean for the first time in too long, tracing the contours of his brother's face, and he feels a spark. He feels *life*. It takes some searching but he tracks it down, a paper-thin thread that resonates Dean, fleeting and ephemeral. A brush against the world. He finds others, some stronger, some faded, some barely recognizable as his brother. But as he digs and learns what to look for he laughs.

There are a hundred Deans. A thousand. An infinite number of them. But he only needs one. He finds the brightest, biggest thread and tugs.

---

Sam snaps back to awareness and stands abruptly, a manic grin on his face.

"Samael!" Alastair scrambles to his feet. Sam turns towards him, just slightly, but Alastair can *feel* his regard. "Good. What better way to take revenge than--"

"I will have Dean," Samael says, his voice a deep rasp. He reaches out, grasps the string, and lets it carry him away. He disappears before Alastair can say anything.

"So *dramatic*," Alastair sighs, irritated. His minions start coming out from the woodwork now that Sam's awake and gone. Alastair hums, and thinks. He can give Sam...three weeks to have his post-Dean temper-tantrum. That will put them on a fairly tight timeline to raise Lucifer but he can convince Zachariah to break a few of the Seals himself. Controlling bastard probably prefers it that way. And by the time they're done Alastair will make sure Samael is gagging for Lucifer to take him.

There's a moment of complete silence before the ground beneath his feet lurches, the Earth actually stalling for a moment before

shuddering forward. Alastair's awareness of Sam snaps; the power backlash drives him up and out of his host, drained and disoriented. He feels weaker than the first time his eyes had gone black. Sam has left the *world*.

"Sa-am. Sammy Sam Sam," Lilu sing-songs, arching up into the overload and moaning obscenely through the pain. The crazy fucker managed to retain his body and he collapses in a giggling heap, buries his face in a cowering hellhound's fur. He looks up at Alistair and sticks his tongue out. "Sammy did a bad, bad thing."

Alastair gathers his wits and throws himself back in his host body, only a little worse for the wear. He sits up; the demons closest to him are either disorporated or drooling vegetables.

"SAM!" Alastair howls. He kicks at Lilu, still moaning and rolling on the ground.

"When Sam is bad he's very, very bad!" Lilu says mock-seriously, then giggles, high and hysterical. Lilu reaches into one of the empty, brain-dead black eyed demons and pulls out what's left. He starts stripping it down for parts. "He's going to steal fair maiden's heart and turn the world to fire and brimstone!"

Alastair is tempted to rend Lilu limb from limb but right now it's testing his limits to just possess this body. Sam is gone.

Sam is *gone*. And he's taken all of Alastair's carefully laid plans for him and *ruined the Apocalypse*. The one he's spent countless generations organization, which has survived several major setbacks and illegal moves but cannot go forward *without its linchpin*.

Alastair roars his frustration, leveling the room around him, then settles. He needs a plan. He is very good at planning, just look at the world. If he can't have the Apocalypse, then he will rend this

world to the bone and suck out the marrow just because he can.

\*\*\*

Mer walks from Karen's house to the town's boundary, weaving her power into the place. The wards slide over her skin, straining around her as she stops them from tripping--she pushed her luck barreling through them the first time. The only reason they didn't break because they knew her.

Gran Emer and George are waiting for her.

"Oh, my child," George says, heartbreak in his voice.

"Not yours," Mer says.

"Not anymore," Gran Emer agrees, harder than her counterpart. His balance. "But he is. And you'll bind him to us tight if you're to do this thing."

"You could not stop me," she says.

"Foolish child," Gran Emer hisses, and the sudden up swell of power makes Mer stagger back and away, hand raised in automatic defense. The land roils beneath her feet, rejects her very presence. "You are newborn. You know not what power lives in us." They join hands and they burn. Mer looks down at her hand, blistered and red. The feeling recedes and her flesh knits back together. She looks at them, eyes wide, and here is the girl they met not so long ago.

"Keep him happy," she says, as much a plea as she is capable of.

"We accept this burden; we will keep him. Love him. He will be content, but he will never be happy here, Mary Winchester."

“Then keep him safe.”

“Aye,” George says. Gran Emer shakes out the quilt wrapped around her shoulders. George takes the other side and the spread it between them. “That we can do. Tell us about Dee, child.”

The quilt is thread and cloth and skill and the people of Clinch. It’s their stories, their lives, worked into the fabric by George and Gran Emer’s own hands. The metaphorical fabric of the town in literal form.

Despite the urgency--she's not quite sure what Sam's up to but whatever it is is really fucking stupid and currently unraveling parts of the world--she adds her own layer, working Dee's history into the very foundation of the town's protections, encouraging it to accept him as its own. She bolsters the existing wards while she's at it, gleaning more of the town's history from them, and encourages them to stay strong. She finds Emer and George, the town's Wardens so intrinsically tied to this place that they can never leave, and gives them a gift: they'll be the longest serving Wardens this place has ever known.

Finished, she takes a moment to herself, caressing the colorful patch that represents Dee. He doesn't look like Dean, not really. But enough. George and Gran Emer inspect her work and find it satisfactory.

“Go, child. Or this will be for naught.” George tucks the quilt around her thin shoulders, and the two of them share a private smile. With one last look at Mer they turn and begin a slow, measured walk back towards Clench. Mer hides their memories of herself and a man named Dean Winchester, the knowledge fading with every step they take.

When they’re out of sight she continues down the mangled

concrete road. Behind her the path to Clinch gets swallowed by the forest, saplings unfurling and growing tall. Ferns cover the ground in lush foliage. The crops will grow plentifully and the weather will always be mild. Elsewhere in the world, maps fade and change, and this place becomes just another expanse of empty forest in the mountains, no roads leading to or from. Certain books lose paragraphs, web pages vanish into the ether and an angel slowly forgets something he once knew.

Mer closes her eyes and steps through the world directly into Sam's path, into the space between worlds.

**"This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine." ~Shakespeare**

## Epilogue

"I can honestly say I didn't see that coming," Alastair says, fingers drumming against the table. The High Circle of Hell surrounds him. "Mary would be my favorite if she weren't so inconvenient." Alastair sighs. There's always a spot on his racks for a parricide. They make the best demons, too.

"We have lost," Moloch hisses. He briefly loses his control, the walls cracking and lights flickering. "And you *didn't see it coming?*"

"Third time's a charm," Alastair says nonchalantly, smirking. "We can't unleash Lucifer without the Winchesters, it's true. But that doesn't mean we can't still have an apocalypse." Abaddon leans forward, eyes sparking with interest, tasting the slant of Alastair's thoughts. Always thirsting for violence and wanton destruction. Where Abaddon goes, Belial, Astaroth, and Pythius follow. Moloch doesn't command the same following.

"And technically, the Apocalypse is still on, the climax is just delayed."

"Another millennia watching this seething pit of putrid feculence try and prove their relevance in the cosmos while we wait for Lucifer to pick at the screws of his cage?" Moloch challenges. "For the Bloodlines to come together again?" He Fell with Lucifer, one of the lesser angels thoroughly disgusted with humanity, and Alastair can see his dark wings winking in and out of existence behind him. It would be so easy draw his blade down the length of the Fallen's back, sever the wings at the root and watch Asmodeus die screaming.

They've spent several thousand years setting this Apocalypse up, laying the foundation until there was no option but to see it through

till the end once the first part had been set in motion, like a tidal wave building far out at sea and only detectable when it gets near land. They've already made the wave; it's only a matter of *when* it breaks at this point.

"Well, only if you *want* to wait for Lucy to get his act together. I, personally, have waited long enough."

"You have an alternative." Abaddon's beady eyes gleam in anticipation. Alastair conjures a gold piece--one of the ones paid unto Judas--and lets it dance across his knuckles.

"I think we should take a look at this little graveyard in Wyoming. With the right Key, Lucifer will walk this world again. And in the mean time, no one said we had to wait for *him* to eradicate humanity."

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He hates this house. It's a forlorn place, filled with broken dreams and the weight of other people's memories. The loneliness follows him into the waking world and lingers with him. Is it the waking world? Is this the dream and that the truth?

He likes the other place better; it's filled with people who know him, warm days and pot-luck dinners. He's got work and a purpose and he doesn't *need* family. Doesn't matter that sometimes it feels fake and wrong. That someone forgot to fill in his colors and has left him grey and shadowed in a light-filled world. It's better than this place. This emptiness.

He huddles against the front door, which never opens. There's dust everywhere, even in the air. He can see it moving through the low light that makes its way past the grime on the windows, a sickly yellow.

There's a break in the filth where he wiped away some of the dirt the first time he dreamed this place. That's another thing, how his dreams here carry over, like his footprints on the floor or a few of the objects he's moved from the table in front of him. He never remembers his dreams. Except for this one. Which never seems to end, the hours stretching before him, trapped in a foyer. He calls it a dream because he does not eat. Feels no hunger, no thirst, no needs. This cannot be real. (Right?)

He considers, briefly, going up the stairs and he's seized with such terror that he hyperventilates and passes out. Weird, that you can do that in a dream. But this is not the first time. He glares balefully at the shadowed steps and waits to wake up. To feel warmth again.

A thump cuts through the gloomy atmosphere and his heart beats double-time. He's never heard a sound here, unless he made it himself. He strains to hear more. After a moment he hears footsteps, light and muffled. He shrinks back into a corner as far as he can go and tries to make himself wake up, though that's never worked before.

He wishes he were anywhere but *here*.

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Sam and Mer have disappeared. Heaven and Hell can find no trace of them in all of the cosmos. Alastair plots, and Zachariah levels Tokyo in his wrath. The world receives a brief respite--seven days and seven nights where the supernatural world remains quiet and the war pauses.

Then Alastair releases a virus that turns people into extras from *28 Days Later*. It wipes out the entire population of Lawrence, Kansas, then crops up in London and Cairo and Los Angeles all at once. It spreads quickly, ruthless and efficient. There is no cure,

nor any chance of one: science is not the basis for this disease.

Castiel finds Bobby and Missouri and what is left of Dean's Hunters. He inoculates whom he can, cleanses the infection before it can really take hold, but he's weakening every day, cut off from Heaven and hiding from his brethren. Zachariah has put a bounty on him. He must conserve his strength. There's only so much they can do so humanity retreats, hides behind high fences and locked doors.

Castiel almost destroys himself setting up a haven for what's left of the hinters. A place Bobby knew called Camp Chitaqua, that offers lodging and defenses for their community, and by the time Castiel is done it's nearly impervious to both demonic and angelic forces. He's overstretched and exhausted in the aftermath and stumbles into a trap. He fights, blindly, wildly, with no hope of survival. He's still not sure how he escaped, what or who saved him. Maybe it wasn't anyone and just luck. He doesn't have time to wonder--the fight rages on.

The only thing he does know is it wasn't God.

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Bobby has taken up leadership of the middle of the country, Kai is running things on the East Coast and Rufus is marshaling the Western states. Missouri moves between them, her powers shifting and changing as she adapts to this new environment.

More and more Seals break, more and more demons walk the Earth, and humanity's numbers are dwindling. But they fight on, tenacious and adamant, with no Savior to lead them.