



Apocalyptic
Love
Songs



What is hidden, shouldn't always be found

Fic title: Apocalyptic Love Songs

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Warnings/Spoilers: An alternative ending to season 4. Goes AU after "It's a Terrible Life."
Massive Dean whumpage.

Summary: The days are ticking down to the Apocalypse, the last guardian of the Holy Grail is dead, Sam Winchester is growing closer to going Dark Side and Dean Winchester is in love with the last person he ever expected. Castiel and three mysterious women send the brothers on a cross-country quest for the four Grail treasures, while they run from both a sorcerer with grudge and a nameless monster. Injured and uncertain he can actually stop the Apocalypse, Dean struggles to save the world, his brother, and the Grail, and to find a way to be with the angel he loves.

Prologue

There is a story that hunters tell each other in bar rooms and rest stops, on dark nights around camp fires, or while drinking beers in the beds of their trucks. It's the story of two brothers -- one ordinary, one Chosen -- who faced every demon and monster imaginable before they fought their final fight.

How much of it is true, few hunters know. Some of them think none of it is. Others claim to have witnessed a scene or two.

It's a story with many endings, the way the hunters tell it, and none of them are even certain how it began. But still they tell it, and clink their beers together or nod in understanding, and thank God they're not the Winchesters.

One

*Here is the book of thy Descent
Here begins the Book of the Sangreal,
Here begin the terrors,
Here begin the miracles.*

--Perlesvaus, anonymous

Joseph Temple let himself into his apartment and then paused, feeling as if someone had rearranged his furniture while he was out. He lived alone and visitors were rare, though usually if someone came by while he'd been out they left some kind of message for him. Sophie across the hall would often invite him to dinner this way, just a note slipped under his door.

Today? Nothing. Just the feeling that made the back of his neck itch and his gaze dart from corner to doorway.

He could see nothing, and thought with a chuckle that he was getting soft and paranoid in his old age. Still, he went to the small wall safe in his living room, behind a framed set of Tarot cards from his youth, and checked on the Cup.

It was there, of course, looking like a plain clay cup someone had made by hand on a wheel and colored with a speckled white salt glaze. He touched it gently and the clay felt warm under his fingers. Joseph smiled and replied, "Good night, old friend," and started to close the safe.

They attacked him from behind, one man grabbing him with arms like iron bands, the other stunning him with a pistol cracked across his jaw. Joseph's face exploded with pain and he went limp in the big one's arms.

"Looks like nothin'," said the big man, gazing at the Cup with disdain.

"Boss says he wants it, so we get it," said the other as he took the Cup from the safe. Joseph tried to raise his head, tried to speak, to warn them, but all he could manage was a weak gurgle.

The big one poked Joseph with his toe. "And him?"

"May not go down easy," said the slim one, and Joseph gurgled again when he saw the gun in the slim man's hand and tried to wrestle out of the big one's arms. There was one quick whoosh of air and Joseph screamed as the bullet ripped through his thigh.

The slim one sighed. "Hold him still," he said in a bored tone and there was a second whoosh of air.

Joseph let his body collapse. "Huh," said the slim man. "What do you know? He went down easy." The big one dropped him to the floor, and the slim one wiped his prints off the gun and put it on the floor beside Joseph's head. They put the Cup into a briefcase and snapped it closed, and they left the apartment, closing the door behind them.

Joseph lay on the floor for several minutes, trying to find the strength for just a few minutes more. He had to warn the sisters -- he had to tell them --

He felt a hand on his forehead and tried to focus his eyes. The sisters were with him, looking at him with great sorrow and compassion, and their gentle hands eased his pain.

He tried to speak -- "They took it. They took the Cup," but the sisters hushed him with soft, soothing noises.

His head fell back on the carpet.

And so, after almost a thousand years in service to his God, Joseph Temple died.

Dean was dreaming again.

The smoke. The fires. The deafening screams. The pain -- that was always the worst, the pain of having his skin flayed off or his intestines pulled out of his belly. Or maybe the worst was knowing that tomorrow it would start all over again, and the next day, and the next, and the next.

Or maybe the worst was seeing his own hands strapping another soul onto the rack, his own hands picking up the knife to slice and tear.

Their faces blended together -- one bloody, begging soul was very like another. Their sins didn't matter to him. Their bribes and pleas and weeping were just like everyone else's. All that mattered was their pain -- the exquisite rapture that came from making another person bleed.

That was the worst. Dreaming of how he'd caused so much pain, how he'd tortured dozens of souls, hundreds, and how he'd loved it. How Alastair had watched him so proudly. Dean, his best student, corrupt to the core.

Dean wasn't sure if this was a memory or just a wish -- in his dream, Hell went silent, just for a moment, like it was drawing in a collective breath before screaming with renewed rage when a burning hand grasped Dean Winchester by the shoulder and yanked him out.

Suddenly he wasn't in Hell, and not in the pine box where he'd woken seven months before, either. He was running through a forest that was at once dense and dead -- every tree was completely stripped of leaves and blackened like it had been burned, but there were so many of them and the persistent fog was so thick he couldn't see further than the next bend in the path. If he could just run far enough, fast enough -- if he could just get away and put Hell far, far behind --

"Dean."

Dean struggled for a moment, caught in the dream, not sure if he was truly free. He blinked a few times and realized he was awake -- awake, half-dressed, lying on the floor in Bobby's living room, his jacket over his chest to keep him warm. Castiel stood at his feet. The angel smiled at him faintly, ruffled and homey as ever, looking nothing like one of the more powerful beings in the universe.

Dean got to his feet, bending to scoop up his t-shirt and pull it over his head. "Hey. Um. Thanks." Castiel tilted his head, the familiar puzzled expression on his face. "For waking me," Dean said, keeping his voice low so he wouldn't wake Sam, who was stretched out on the sofa with a book open on his chest. "I was having a nightmare."

Castiel's mouth quirked a little. His smiles were never very wide. "Oh?"

"Yeah. There was this forest . . . hell, you don't want me to bore you with my dreams. What's going on?"

"I need to take you somewhere," Castiel said.

"Do I need shoes?"

"No," Castiel replied and touched Dean's forehead with his first two fingers. When Dean opened his eyes again they were in what looked like an ordinary apartment. The neighborhood was quiet -- there was no sound of sirens, not so much as a dog barking. The air smelled like cotton candy -- or more like a cotton candy machine, hot sugar and metal. There was a man -- dark-haired, maybe a few years older than Dean, tall and solid-looking -- peering behind a long framed picture at a wall safe.

"Look," Castiel said softly.

There was a stirring in the shadows of the apartment. "Castiel?" Dean said uncertainly. "What's going on?"

The dark-haired man was attacked suddenly by two men in suits, one hulking and one slim, and Dean flinched as the first man was beaten down to his knees. Dean started towards them, to help the man, but Castiel stopped him with a hand on Dean's shoulder.

"Cas, let me go!"

"We are not here." Castiel put his hands back in his pockets.

Dean looked back at the scene, at the first man's murder at the hands of the intruders. "How can we help him?"

"We cannot. We can only look."

Dean inhaled to yell at him -- why bring him here if he couldn't help? -- but stopped when he noticed the shine in Castiel's eyes and the tear that rolled down his cheek. He put his hand on the angel's back and Castiel gave him a grateful glance.

"Look," said Castiel, and Dean watched the assailants put something small and grey into a briefcase and lock it away, then leave the man and their gun behind.

"We don't have the authority to find murderers."

"God will judge them," Castiel said. "What we need is what they took. It's precious beyond price. Find it, Dean, you must find it. It must be safe or another seal will be broken. "

"Okay," Dean said, and Castiel touched his forehead again and they were back in Bobby's house, in the kitchen. Dean exhaled and grabbed the sink to steady himself. Traveling at the speed of thought would never be easy. "Who was he? He looked so ordinary."

"Look for the name Joseph Temple in the morning."

"Joseph Temple," Dean said, supposing that was all the explanation he was going to get.

"Okay."

They looked at each other in the dark. There was still a tear track on Castiel's face, and Dean reached over to gently wipe it away with his palm. Castiel watched his hand, and when he looked back at Dean there was warmth in those calm blue eyes.

"Sleep, Dean," Castiel said softly. "No more bad dreams."

"Wait," Dean began, but Castiel touched Dean's forehead again before he could go on. Dean opened his eyes to find he was back on the floor, under his jacket. Castiel was gone and it was morning.

Morning at Bobby's, which meant sunshine through the curtains and the sound of Sam making coffee in the kitchen. Dean got up from the floor and rocked his head from side to side, wincing at the way his bones cracked. Sam looked out from the kitchen and said, "Bobby's off already -- something about a job in Oklahoma. Coffee'll be ready in a sec."

"Okay," Dean said. "Hey, Sammy?"

"Yup?" said Sam from the kitchen, where he was dropping bread into the toaster.

"Did you, um, do you remember dreaming last night?"

Sam looked at him with a smirk. "Why? Was I talking in my sleep?"

"No, I'm just curious."

"I dreamed about Miss October and some pudding, but that's not appropriate breakfast conversation." He got a jar of strawberry jam out of the fridge. "Do you want anything more for breakfast?"

"This is enough," Dean said and poured himself a cup of coffee. "So are we joining Bobby?"

"He didn't say he'd need us. I figured I'd look at the internet for our next job." When the toast popped up, Sam slathered both pieces with butter and jam, and gave one to Dean.

Dean bit into the toast. It tasted sweet and reassuring, and cleared out the aftertaste of blood and ash. *This is reality*, Dean thought, *strawberry jam and Sam's strong coffee*.

Once he'd chewed and swallowed, he said, "I have a job for us. I, um. I had a prophetic dream."

Sam's expression was serious at once. "You did? What did you see?"

"I saw a guy get murdered in his apartment. Name of Joseph Temple."

"By what? Werewolf? Vampire? Ghost?"

Dean shook his head. "By two ordinary guys. They looked kind of like Mafia by way of Central Casting, but there wasn't anything supernatural about them."

"Then it's not a job for us."

"I know, but, this guy -- he had something important, it was stolen, and we have to get it back."

Sam was watching him, his eyes both worried and skeptical. "And you got all this from a dream?"

Dean drank his coffee. "Castiel was there," he said finally. "Castiel came to me in the dream and told me about this guy and the thing they took."

"But he didn't tell you what was stolen or why," Sam said, frustrated. "Helpful. Does he come to you in your dreams a lot, Dean?"

Dean rolled his eyes. "Not a whole lot, and yeah, some information wasn't forthcoming, but we've got enough to start with. We have his name, we know he was murdered in his apartment, and that one item was stolen and they left the gun behind. We can find it, Sammy."

Sam shook his head and went to the table where he'd set up his laptop, muttering about unhelpful angels.

Dean finished his coffee, not unsympathetic. "I'll know his face when I see it."

Sam was already typing. "Can't you summon Castiel or something and ask for more details?"

"Oh, sure, do you have the spell for that?" Dean said and got up to put more bread in the toaster. Sam's eyes flicked from the computer to Dean, and he shook his head ever-so-slightly as he searched. "Comment, Sammy?"

"Nothing, Dean."

"The air smelled sweet," Dean said. "Not a town with a paper mill."

"Oh, that helps." Sam scanned the screen, then muttered, "Take a look at this," and turned the laptop toward Dean.

"What?" said Dean and moved closer to read the screen.

"Joseph Temple, murdered in his apartment last night, one item missing." Sam tapped the laptop monitor -- the website of the Bethlehem, Pennsylvania *Morning Call* showed an article with a photograph of the murdered man, taken in better times. "Is that him?"

"Yeah," Dean said softly. He'd only caught a glimpse of Joseph Temple, but he knew that face, square jaw and merry eyes and all. He looked like a guy Dean would like to have a drink with. "That's him. I guess the smell was just my imagination."

Sam looked up at him, then back at the article. "Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, is the home of Just Born Candy." At Dean's blank expression he said, "They make Peeps."

Dean laughed. "Peeps! Awesome. I love Peeps. We gotta pick some up while we're there -- it's that time of the year."

"God, you only celebrate holidays for the candy," Sam muttered. "We'll get you your Peeps." He said in a more professional tone, "The article doesn't say what was stolen. The police aren't releasing details. Why wouldn't Castiel tell you what was taken?"

"It was small and grey. But most mystical objects are more than they appear to be, right? Anyway, the important thing is getting it back." He straightened up and went back into the living room to grab his jacket. "C'mon. If we get on the road now we can be there by tomorrow afternoon."

"Wait a second, Dean," Sam said, following him. "This isn't hunting -- this is just an ordinary crime. And if we interfere with the Mafia -- dude, we will get *slaughtered*."

"I don't know if they're Mafia," Dean said tiredly. "They were just two guys in suits. Hell, sometimes we're two guys in suits and nobody thinks we're Mafia. I'm surprised we're not taken for Mormons more often, really."

"I am not reassured," Sam said slowly, as if Dean needed it explained in small words, "at the notion of chasing hired killers. We're hunters. This isn't hunting."

"It's a mission, Sam," Dean said, annoyed by his tone.

"And you're going to just trust Castiel, Dean?"

"Yes!" Dean said and then blinked a few times, surprised at them both. "Yes," he said again, more gently. "I am going to trust him. I do trust him."

Sam stared at him, a muscle in his jaw jumping, and then nodded shortly. "I'll let Bobby know we're going."

"You do that," Dean muttered and grabbed the toast when it popped up to eat as he dressed.

They couldn't stay pissed at each other for long, of course. By the time they reached Wisconsin they were singing along to Dean's mullet rock, like usual. At the motel that night, Sam looked up the article again and read it, frowning, with his chin on his hand.

"Everything about this guy is really vague. Like, it doesn't say how old he was or what he did for a living, and apparently there's no family."

"So he was a loner."

"An independently wealthy loner, it looks like." He pushed the laptop to Dean. "Read that and tell me something doesn't strike you as weird."

Dean read the article and shook his head. "They don't know who killed him or why, but we do. That's not that weird."

"Okay, Dean? I gotta say, it's really weird to me that you're tapping into the psychic dream network." He pulled the laptop back. "But what I mean is, the local police admit how little information they've got but they're not really soliciting the public for information, either. There's no anonymous tip line. It's like they don't expect to solve this."

"It's a newspaper article, Sammy," Dean said. "It's not the police report. We'll get the whole story when we get there."

"FBI?" said Sam and Dean nodded. "We'd better get the suits pressed."

"Right," said Dean. "Suits pressed, shirts clean, shoes shiny. And packing heat."

Sam looked at him, then nodded and closed his laptop.

As Dean lay in bed that night, he hoped he'd have another dream. Even the Hell dreams were worth it if Castiel would come and take him away, or just talk to him a while -- answer some questions, though with Castiel it was more likely he'd get more cryptic statements. But those were okay, too -- sometimes they talked about real things in between all the ineffability.

But if he dreamed he didn't remember it, and in the morning there was no sign of an angelic presence in the motel room.

They arrived at the former home of Joseph Temple in the early afternoon, which was an apartment building in a suburban part of Bethlehem. Like most of the country that spring, it felt more like January than March -- gardens were no more than brambles of bare shrubbery or timid silver-green crocus leaves poking out of the ground, the sky was overcast and sickly gray, grass was brown or yellow as cut hay. There was still snow in shadowy corners. In a few weeks it would be Easter, but it felt more like a desolate midwinter.

Always winter but never Christmas, Dean thought, and felt a shiver between his shoulders.

The brothers got their suits pressed and their shoes shined, and went to the crime scene, their fake badges in their pockets, wearing shoulder holsters with their very real guns. The police had finished their initial evidence collection, it appeared -- the crime scene tape was still up but the apartment was empty, and the landlord gave them the key as soon as they flashed their badges. Sam set about investigating the apartment while Dean questioned the neighbors, most of whom hadn't seen or heard a thing and didn't know Joseph Temple well enough to speculate about his death.

One did, the woman across the hall. "He was a wonderful neighbor," she said as she sat in an armchair, her back perfectly straight. She was in her sixties or so, her face lined but still pretty, silver-haired with hazel eyes. She gave her name as Sophie Fisher, and smiled to herself when Dean introduced himself as Agent Chilton. She wore an unusual piece of jewelry -- a silver ring on her right hand, set with three small circles of malachite. It seemed out of place compared to her simple blue housedress and severe bun. "He was my best friend in this place."

"Did he have any enemies?" Dean asked, sitting stiffly in the other armchair. Her apartment did not seem like a typical old lady apartment -- the chairs were dark leather, masculine, and she had no pictures of grandchildren or even cats. Instead she had books, framed maps, photographs of places like Macchu Pichu and Angor Wat. She -- or she and Mr. Fisher -- must have traveled the world at one point, Dean thought.

"Everybody has enemies," she said. "The man at the corner store thinks I'm a silly old biddy, but I doubt he'd murder me over it."

"Okay, how about, do you know of anybody who'd want Joseph Temple dead?" He smiled at her, turning on the charm. Women like Mrs. Fisher liked to pat his cheeks and give him cookies.

She, however, did not seem to have cookies handy. She picked up a book from the end table beside her chair and ran her thumb over the cover restlessly. "Yes. There's a man called Lorcan that he'd talk about sometimes."

"Lorcan what?"

"I don't know. I don't know if it's his first name or his last. But he'd come over, and then there'd be yelling, and Lorcan would leave in a rage."

"Were they . . . involved?" Dean said as delicately as he could.

Sophie laughed. It was rueful but light. "No. It was purely professional. Joseph didn't date, anyway. He had other concerns."

"Absent-minded professor type, huh?"

"You could say that. He was like a monk without orders." She paused and bit her lip. "Or like a knight without a master."

Dean said softly, "A good guy, huh?"

"The best." She looked away, tears sparkling in her eyes. "I'm going to miss him."

Dean nodded, surprised at how invasive it felt to intrude on her grief. He did this all the time, questioned the living about the dead, but today it just felt cruel. "Did you ever hear what they fought about, Mr. Temple and this Lorcan?"

"Joseph had something Lorcan wanted to buy, but Joseph wouldn't sell." Her sweet face turned hard. "I have no doubt he was killed because of that."

"Do you know what it was?" Dean said. "What was worth killing a man for?"

Mrs. Fisher looked at Dean and when she spoke her voice was different, steady and low as if she were casting a spell. "It was precious. Priceless. The most precious thing on this Earth. Men have killed for it, died for it, wandered the Earth for a glimpse of it."

Dean watched her face, confused and feeling like he was falling into a dream. "What?" he whispered.

"Are you ready to undertake this journey, Dean Winchester?" she said in that same soft, relentless tone. "Are you strong enough? Are you brave enough? There are monsters on this path, and angels, and it's hard to say which will be your doom. You follow this road to its end, Dean Winchester, and I cannot promise you will come home again."

Dean inhaled and said, "My name is -- it's Chilton. Not Winchester."

Mrs. Fisher smiled wryly and the moment was gone. "Of course. No, I don't know what they took."

Dean had to shake his head a little to clear it. "Um. Thanks. For your time. Sorry for your loss," he said and got up from the chair.

"Mister -- Agent Chilton," Mrs. Fisher said. "Joseph was my friend. Please. Find the men who killed him."

"We will, Mrs. Fisher," he said, and she smiled that half-smile again and saw him out, closing her door with a firm click.

Dean went to Joseph Temple's apartment, lifted the crime scene tape and let himself in. Sam had the EMF meter out, and it wasn't making a sound as he scanned the bookshelves.

"Anything?"

"There is this." Sam pointed to a framed piece of art on the wall.

Dean stepped closer for a better look, recognizing it from the vision. It was made up of the major arcana of Tarot cards, old ones to judge from the sepia tones of the paper, starting with the Fool and ending with the World. They were simply drawn in a medieval style, with just three colors of

ink -- dark blue, pale yellow, red dark as blood. They used medieval iconography, too -- Death was a walking skeleton, the Devil was a hairy demon, a hanging man was dressed like a squire.

"And --" Sam touched the frame and it swung away from the wall to reveal a wall safe.

"Not the most orthodox hiding place, but lots of people have safes like this." He looked at Sam.

"Do you think it means something?"

Sam looked smug and held the EMF meter to the safe. The meter buzzed loudly enough to make Dean start.

"Holy fuck! Some major mojo in that thing."

"Whatever was stolen," Sam said, "was a powerful artifact of some kind, more powerful than anything we've dealt with."

"This job just got a whole lot more interesting," said Dean.

They say in California orange blossoms froze on the trees.

They say in Montana Arctic winds swept down across the plains, causing cattle to freeze to death by the hundreds.

They say in Maine lobster fishermen pulled up broken traps.

They say in the oceans whales sang each other songs of mourning.

Two

*Do you live by the book, do you play by the rules
Do you care what is thought by others about you
If this day is all that is promised to you
Do you live for the future, the present, the past*

--"Unsung Psalm", Tracy Chapman

At the local police station, it only took flashing their badges and some sweet talk to get the police report and see the body. Joseph Temple had died of multiple gunshot wounds, one to the thigh, one to the throat.

"Though," said the pathologist, "he's seen some action. Do you see those scars?" He pointed to some fierce scars along Temple's hip bone and another in his thigh. Dean winced as he looked -- to him they looked like they'd been caused by a sharp, jagged blade, or something with nasty claws. "Whatever he did before he moved to Bethlehem, it was not safe work. That wound should have killed him, or at least taken his leg -- it opened the femoral artery."

"How long ago would you say he got that wound?" asked Sam.

"Twenty years, maybe? Maybe he was in the military. We can't find any records on the guy before he moved here."

"Joseph Temple might be an alias," Sam observed, and the pathologist nodded.

"I think you're right."

"Does the name Lorcan mean anything to you?" Dean asked him. "One of the neighbors mentioned altercations between the deceased and a guy named Lorcan."

"There's a real estate developer in the city named Lorcan Murphy," the pathologist said.

"A legitimate businessman, huh?" Dean said with a chuckle, and the pathologist raised an eyebrow at him.

"This is Pennsylvania, Agent Chilton, not New Jersey."

"Subtle," Sam murmured to him as they walked out of the station to where they'd parked the Impala. "Why not just let the detectives know we've got their murderer?"

"We don't know that," said Dean. "These were pros, in the dream." He unlocked the car and they both climbed in, slamming the doors closed in tandem. "But it wouldn't hurt to check him out, right?"

"Sure," said Sam, and they were halfway to the motel when he burst out, "So what are we going to do, Dean? Break into this guy's house, rummage around until we find something with an EMF signature, and make off with it?"

"I guess so."

"And then what?" The pissed-off muscle was jumping in his jaw again. "Then we'll have to hightail it out of the city, but where will we go?"

"I don't know," Dean said honestly. "I guess Castiel will tell me once we have whatever it is he wanted us to get."

Sam looked out the window, tapping his fingers on the glass. "I don't see why he couldn't have gotten this thing himself."

"He asked us, Sam."

"He asks and you jump," Sam muttered and Dean nearly slammed on the brakes as they came to an intersection.

"Yeah, I do," he said sternly, "because it's *Cas* and he's never asked me to do anything I was incapable of doing. Okay?" The car behind them leaned on the horn and Dean stepped on the gas. "Whatever we're getting, it's important enough to kill for. That should tell you something right there."

"Right." Sam exhaled. "And it's us in danger if we get caught, instead of someone powerful and immortal."

"When have we ever gotten caught?" Dean said and swung into the motel parking lot. "We'll be fine." Sam started to respond and Dean repeated, "We'll be fine, Sammy. We've got angels on our side."

Sam got out of the car and slammed the door, and Dean followed him. "You know what, Dean? I don't think for a second that they're on our side. We're just another pair of monkeys to them. They'll toss us aside as soon as we've done what they want us to do, and they won't help us if we get in trouble. And you --" He poked Dean in the chest. "They'll toss you back into Hell as soon as you stop being useful. And they'll kill me. You know they will."

"It's not like that," Dean said, "and unlock the damn door already. We're not talking about this in front of everybody."

Sam unlocked the door and threw off his jacket and tie as soon as he was inside. Dean followed, tugging his tie loose too. "Then what is it like, Dean? Do you really think they care? Do you think they're going to come to our rescue if whoever killed Joseph Temple comes after us? You think we're going to be protected by angels?"

"Uh, *yeah*," Dean said. "I know we are. I told you, Sammy. Castiel wouldn't ask us to do something we couldn't do. Do you want pizza tonight or something else for dinner?"

"Pizza." Sam pulled off his shirt and toed off his wingtips, and pulled out his jeans from their duffel bag. "We'll eat pizza and then we'll go steal something this guy had someone killed for. By professionals. Great plan, Dean."

"Relax, would you? We're on a mission from God," he said in his best Blues Brothers imitation, and Sam snorted and tossed him a t-shirt.

"Change your clothes, God-boy. We've got a mission to figure out."

There was a pizza parlor down the block from their motel, and there was a pay phone near the back of the dining room. Dean flipped through the pages as they waited for their pie. There were half-dozen businesses listed in the yellow pages under various names involving Murphy -- some with pictures of the man himself, surprisingly jolly for a man who hired killers -- but there was

just one Murphy, Lorcan, in the white. Dean tore out the page and tucked it into his coat pocket as he went back to their table, where Sam was drinking a Coke and browsing the choices in the little jukebox.

"Found him," Dean said as he dropped himself into the chair. "We can find the directions on Mapquest, right?"

"Yeah, it shouldn't be hard. Dean, I don't like this. Can't we just tell Cas where it is and let him do it?"

"He asked us," Dean said, tired of this argument. "And if you don't want to go then I'll go alone."

"No, you don't have to go alone," Sam muttered. The girl behind the counter called their number and Sam got up to get their pizza. Dean drank his Coke and put a quarter into the juke box, and pressed the numbers for his favorite Johnny Cash. Sam was shaking his head as he came back to the table.

"You think I'm going to get in trouble if I go alone?" Dean said and took a piece of pepperoni from the pizza. He popped it into his mouth.

"I think we're going to get in trouble no matter what we do. I think we're going to regret this." Sam took a slice for himself.

Dean sighed and took one too, and wished Castiel was there. They ate in silence through a few slices, and finally he said, "Something happened while I was interviewing the neighbor, Mrs. Fisher. She . . . she knew my real name."

Sam lowered his slice and stared at him. "What'd you do, let it slip?"

"No, I used the alias just like usual. All these years I've never I've dropped an alias, Sammy, but she knew it. And she said . . . she said there would be monsters if we followed this road." He drank his Coke, not looking at Sam.

"What did she mean by that, monsters?"

"I don't know. She said there would be monsters and angels, and one or both might be our doom." He tried to laugh -- it was an exaggeration, right?

Sam didn't laugh. "Who was she? How could she know?"

"I don't know, but she freaked me out. She said we had to be strong and brave, and even if we were we might not get home." He ate another bite.

"What home?" Sam said and pushed his plate away. "So what's your theory?"

"I don't have one," Dean admitted. "There's no way she could have known my name. There's no way she could have known why we're here. But she did -- I think she knows more about this than we do."

"We have Castiel to thank for that," Sam muttered.

"Quit it. Eat your pizza."

Sam bit in, his expression bitchy, but Dean was too annoyed to care.

Lorcan Murphy lived in a McMansion behind a brick wall and a wrought iron gate, far from the candy factory and industrial parks. Dean parked the Impala down the block and around the corner, and they sauntered past the gate, looking for signs of dogs or an alarm system. There was a small sign outside the gate, *Protected by Wolfram Security*, but when Dean tossed pebbles over the wall there was no resulting alarm or barking.

Dean nodded to Sam and they turned the corner, which faced another McMansion behind another brick wall. They boosted themselves over the wall and dropped to the ground as quietly as possible.

The house was dark and silent, the sloping lawn neatly trimmed but still brown and dry like all the others they'd seen in the city. The boys walked up the grass, avoiding the cobbled front path, and went around the house to the back. There was a small side door that led, from the view through the window, into the laundry room.

Dean wrapped his hand in his flannel shirt and broke the glass, and they waited for a few seconds -- still no sound of alarm or dogs. "A lot of good that security system does," Dean muttered as he reached through the window to unlock the door.

"He must just have it for show."

"Or he's got something else protecting the place," Dean said. He looked over the door frames as they walked inside, but he could see no sign of herbs or charms.

"Dean," Sam said softly as they walked through the laundry room to the enormous kitchen, "what exactly are we looking for?"

"A briefcase with EMF signature," Dean said. "The hired thugs put the object in a briefcase, and I'm thinking it's still in there."

"And if it isn't? Lorcan might be sleeping with it under his pillow, for all we know."

"No," Dean murmured, "I don't think so . . ." They passed through the kitchen and dining room, and Dean paused as they entered what looked like a study. It was lined with books -- some shelves bound in matching leather covers so they were a solid wall of color -- and there was a massive desk under the window that faced the front lawn. On the desk were things like shadow boxes, old leather journals, small statues, and an astrolabe. "I think he's more the showing-it-off type."

Sam went to the desk and started opening the drawers. "He's got a hand of glory," he said and hastily shut the drawer.

"So, he's a weird old fart as well as a murderer." Dean looked along the shelves, where there were more strange objects. Fat black pillar candles, a stuffed raven and cobra flanking a skull, a mortar and pestle carved with alchemy symbols, a cow fetus floating in formaldehyde in a bell jar. "A really weird old fart who likes clichés. The EMF meter's going to go nuts in here." He took it out anyway and turned it on, and it started buzzing right away. He sighed and turned it off. "Needle in a needle stack."

"Dean," Sam said thoughtfully, "he's into magic, right? That's what all this is for -- he's studying black magic."

"Yeah, probably." Dean opened a footlocker, and couldn't hold back the look of horror when he saw the book that was on top of the pile. If this thing wasn't bound in human skin he'd eat the Impala. He moved it aside, feeling his gorge rise, and hastily looked through the other books inside. No small grey object was hidden in here.

He looked at the pictures on the walls -- mostly they were sketches so old their paper was turning yellow. Their subjects made Dean's stomach turn -- one was of a dissection in a Victorian medical school, squeamishly detailed; another was of a public hanging; another was a wide-eyed ghoul crouched at a grave, a human arm dangling from its mouth.

"So what did he steal from Joseph Temple to add to his collection?" Sam crossed his arms. "What exactly are we getting into here?"

"We're doing our job," Dean said, closing the footlocker. He chortled, "Well, hello, beautiful," when he spotted the briefcase from his dream by the sofa. "Found it." It was an ordinary leather briefcase, except for the part where it was casting golden light through the seams.

"Dean?" Sam said softly. "Why is it . . . glowing?"

"Don't know, don't care." He tried the clasps but the briefcase was locked. "Let's get out of here."

There was a growl-like sound and someone heavily tackled him, knocking Dean onto his stomach and the briefcase from his hand. Sam shouted, "Dean!" as the guy's hands wrapped around Dean's throat. Dean clawed at his fingers, gasping for breath, and Sam grabbed the guy's suit jacket and yanked him off Dean, Ruby's knife flashing in his hand.

The guy and Sam tussled, wrestling for the knife, and when it fell from Sam's hand Dean grabbed for it. The guy's hand closed around the hilt first and he laughed with triumph as he rolled away from Sam. Dean grabbed the guy's pant leg and jerked him back, and then howled with pain when the guy plunged the knife into his thigh.

"Dean!" Sam shouted again, as Dean pulled the knife from his thigh and plunged it into the guy's chest. The guy screamed, and -- not to Dean's surprise at all -- gold light flashed in his mouth

and eyes and around the wound. The body slumped to the ground as soon as the demonic light stopped flickering.

"Dean, we have to get out of here," said Sam, grabbing the briefcase. There were footsteps upstairs, on their way downstairs, fast.

"Help me, Sam!" Dean said and Sam pulled him to his feet. He limped along beside Sam as fast as he could through the house and down the front lawn, and as they opened the front gate they heard a howl of rage from inside the house.

"He knows it's gone," Sam murmured, his arm around Dean's shoulders to help him along.

"He can't do anything about it," said Dean, praying he was right.

Lorcan Murphy -- fifty-three years old, pillar of the community, amateur occultist -- stood in his study, surveying the messy remains of the burglary and fight. He poked the body with his toe, unsurprised at how it flopped onto its back. Well, a fresh dead body was an unexpected gift he was willing to accept.

First of all, there was the matter of the intruders to deal with. Fortunately one of them had been wounded. It was careless of him, but Lorcan expected no less from a couple of ignorant thieves. Lorcan pressed a clean handkerchief to the spots of blood, and folded the handkerchief into a square. He waved his fingers over it, murmuring a spell, and tucked it away in a pocket to attend to later.

He got a knife from his collection and knelt beside the body, and cut open the chest, murmuring incantations all the while. It was harder to break the ribs than the last time he'd done this, which he blamed on getting older, but easy enough to find the heart. He drew a circle on the floor with the dripping heart, and when the circle was complete he went on murmuring the incantation, swaying on his knees, his eyes closed.

He felt a rush of wind and opened his eyes. Much to his surprise, a little girl -- blonde, pretty as a china doll, eyes wide with innocence -- stood in the circle.

"You're not Bamoel," Lorcan said.

"No," the little girl chirped. "He's busy so I came instead. My name's Lilith and I'm here to help you."

"How can you help me? Who are you?"

"Oh, I'm very, very old," the girl said, shaking her blonde curls. "And I'm very, very strong. And I know who took the Cup."

"How do you know about that?" Lorcan said suspiciously.

She laughed, a tinkling sound that made Lorcan shiver -- it brought to his mind images of innocents burned at the stake, babies dashed against walls, mothers raped before their children, wells poisoned and ground sown with salt. "Oh, silly," the girl said, "I know so much. I know their names, I know their father and mother, I know what protects them, and I know how to hurt them."

"I have blood from one of them," Lorcan said, holding up the handkerchief. "I can find them myself."

She tilted her head and blinked her wide eyes. "And then what? Can you chase them? Can you find them? They run ever so fast. The one my demon wounded has an angel watching over him, and his brother is so strong. And big and mean," she added with a pout.

"Your demon?" He pointed to the body. "You sent him?"

"Yes. To get the Cup." She sighed. "Would you have given it to me if asked for it?"

"No," Lorcan said and swallowed, expecting her to blast him into a million pieces.

Instead, she only laughed. "I know. So I sent my demon. They killed him with their stupid knife and now I have to find another way."

"So you need my help," Lorcan said. "You need the help of a mortal."

"There are places even I can't go," she said darkly. "Locks even I can't break. But you can. You find them for me, and I'll take the younger brother and you can have the older brother. You can do anything you want to him. You can drink his blood, or peel his skin, or eat his eyes. He has very pretty eyes. You can have him if you promise me I get the Cup when we find them."

"But why would I want them more than the Cup?" said Lorcan. "With the cup I can live forever."

She smiled and said confidentially, "I can make you live forever without the Cup."

"You can?" Lorcan breathed, and then frowned, thinking it over. "That's all you want? Just the Cup?"

"I want you to find the brothers for me and bring me the Cup. Then I'll make it so you'll live forever and ever and ever, in a beautiful castle with your every desire attended to and more power than you can imagine. Promise me," she said urgently, "promise me you'll chase and chase them and bring them to me, no matter what."

Lorcan took a deep breath, and said, "Yes. I'll do it. I'll find them."

"Oh, hooray!" She clapped her hands together. The sound it made contained the cries of a thousand suffering souls. "His name is Dean Winchester." Her sweet smile turned feral. "And I am going to eat his heart."

In New Mexico, they say Victoria Higgins saw the face of Jesus in her toast.

In Florida, they say William Tully -- Billy to his friends -- fell five stories at his job as a window washer and got up unscathed.

In North Dakota, they say Katherine Watson, dying in a hospice, said the name of her long-dead husband and reached out her hand just before she died.

Three

*I wanna fade out gracefully
but you keep keeping me alive
to face another day*

--"I'm Not Driving Anymore," Rob Dougan

Dean's leg was pumping blood like Niagara Falls, so Sam ignored every argument Dean gave that he was perfectly capable of patching himself up, and instead drove to the city hospital. In the parking lot he wrapped Dean's arm around his shoulders and half-carried him into the emergency room, shouting, "I need help here!" as soon as they were inside.

Nurses and a doctor came running, and in a loud, panicked voice Sam told the story of how they'd been mugged and his brother stabbed as they got Dean onto a gurney. "Sammy," Dean said, reaching for his hand, and Sam gripped it tight and then let it go.

"It'll be okay. They'll take care of you. I'll see you soon, Dean."

"Sammy!" Dean said again, when the doctor laid her hand on his shoulder and he felt himself calm a little.

"Relax, sir, we'll take care of you," she said gently. "What's your name?"

"Dean," he said, "Dean --" He couldn't remember the name on their current insurance card.

"Okay, Dean, do you remember what happened to you?"

By now they were behind the curtain, shutting them off from the rest of the emergency room, and one of the nurses began cutting off his jeans. Shit, he only had two pairs now. He said, "Mugged. My brother and I were mugged. Asshole stabbed me."

"I'm sorry," she said, patting his shoulder again. "We'll call the police for you."

"No point," Dean said. "I didn't see his face." He hissed through his teeth as the nurse prepared his arm for the IV needle.

"We should still report it, sweetheart," the doctor assured him gently, and Dean looked up at her, feeling comforted. One of the nurses put a blood pressure monitor on his finger and smiled at him reassuringly, and he tried to smile back though he knew the slow beat on the machine was not a good sign.

"M' blood pressure's low."

"We know, sweetheart. Do you know your blood type?" the doctor asked him.

"O positive." He started shivering and the nurse left, returning with a warmed blanket that she lay over him.

"Good," the doctor said, smiling, "nice and common." The nurse nodded and left again, and the doctor sat down at his side and took his hand. Dean looked at her, puzzled, and noticed her name tag.

"Doctor Fisher," he said. "I think I met your mom."

"Did you? Sophie Fisher? I hope she was on her best behavior -- she can be a little touchy."

"I liked her," Dean said sleepily, when the curtain opened again and Dr. Fisher dropped his hand as the nurse came back. She set up the IV and gently pushed the needle into his arm, and then patted his shoulder. He nodded and tried to smile, woozy from exhaustion and blood loss.

"You're going to be fine, Mr. Winchester," the doctor said softly. "We'll get you stitched right up."

"Chilton," Dean said sleepily. "Name's Chilton." Whatever painkillers they had in the IV were kicking in, though, and it came out more like a buzz.

He closed his eyes and let himself sleep.

When Dean opened his eyes again, he was in a private room, his legs were elevated, he was still under a few layers of blankets, his monitor was beeping at a much more familiar pace and Sam was asleep in the chair by his bed. The briefcase was under the chair, between his feet, but what really made Dean smile was the package of purple Peeps on the tray attached to his

bed. Dean thought about waking him but decided to let him sleep, and tried for the plastic mug on the little tray beside his bed. Water first, then candy.

A hand reached out and brought the mug closer, and Dean looked up to see Castiel. "Cas," he breathed. The beeping on the monitor sped up a little and he glanced at it in embarrassment.

Castiel held the bendy straw to his lips. "Drink."

Dean sipped the water and swallowed. "I'm so glad to see you."

Castiel nodded, his usual solemn expression even graver than usual. His fingers gently brushed Dean's cheek. "I am sorry," he whispered. "I am so sorry. I thought it would be simpler."

"It's okay. I'm gonna be fine. Stay a while?"

"Yes," Castiel said and perched carefully on the side of Dean's bed. He took hold of Dean's hand and gently stroked the back with his fingertips, leaving warmth and a sweet scent that made Dean think of fresh cookies with each trail of his fingers. "Are you in much pain?"

"No," Dean said. "They've got me on the good drugs. Have you seen my stitches?"

"I have not looked."

"Do you want to?" Dean said, and Castiel smiled fondly.

"I will look."

Dean pulled back the blanket and his hospital gown, and made a repulsed noise at the sight of his stitches. "Geez, look at that. That demon got me good."

Castiel winced as well and covered them over, giving Dean's leg a gentle pat through the blanket. "I am sorry," he said again. "I sent you into the lion's den. We did not think Lilith knew that the last Guardian was dead, but obviously she did and sent one of her demons to fetch it before you could. I am sorry, Dean."

"To fetch it? Fetch what? The last guardian of what?"

Castiel drew in a slow breath. "Where is the briefcase?"

"Here," said Sam, and both Dean and Castiel looked at him, surprised that he was awake. He pulled the briefcase from under his chair. "I hope it's fucking worth it," he said grimly as he put it on Dean's bed.

"Yes," Castiel said. "It is worth it."

Sam glared at him. "Castiel. What the *fuck* is going on?"

"I will show you." Castiel left his hand clasped around Dean's as he reached across Dean to run his fingers over the top of the briefcase. The locks popped open and soft golden light spilled out.

"What the hell is in there?" said Sam.

"Take it out," said Castiel. "It won't hurt you."

Sam looked at them both, then opened the briefcase and removed a small clay cup. It had a soft white salt glaze, and the faint lines of something thrown by hand on a potter's wheel. Sam looked at Dean, confused. "It looks old," he said doubtfully.

Dean looked at Castiel, who was faintly smiling, his fond gaze on the cup. Castiel said softly, "That is the Holy Grail."

Sam looked as if he was expecting the angel to say more, but of course Castiel had said all he was going to say for the moment. "The Holy Grail -- that's just a story. It's Celtic mythology recast into Christian themes. It's a myth."

"It is in your hand," Castiel replied, unperturbed.

"The Holy Grail," Dean murmured and Castiel turned his gaze to him. "In some guy's apartment in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania."

"Joseph had a unique sense of humor," Castiel said. "He liked places that reminded him of the old world. Memphis and Athens and any Salem, of course." He paused again. "He was the last of the Grail guardians."

"What does that mean?" said Sam, and at Dean's gesture gave him the cup. It was heavier than it looked, and felt warm in his hand as if it had been sitting out in the sunshine all day.

"Since the day that Joseph of Arimathea took the cup out of Palestine, a brotherhood of monks, and then knights, has kept watch over it," Castiel explained. "The Grail grants long life to those who guard it, but they are not impervious to injury. They can die. And over the past year, the few that remain have been murdered, one by one."

"Lorcan," said Dean.

"Perhaps," Castiel said.

Dean realized he was still holding Castiel's hand, and that Sam was pointedly not looking at them holding hands, and forced himself to let it go. Castiel folded his hands in his lap. "So now what? You take it back to Heaven or something?"

Slowly Castiel shook his head. "No. The Grail is a threshold -- it joins Heaven and Earth. Think of it like a door. You cannot bring a door inside -- you can only walk through it."

"So it has to stay here, on Earth," said Sam.

"Until Judgment Day," said Castiel, nodding. "Until the day there is no veil between Heaven and Earth. That day is not yet here."

"Is that why Lilith wants it?" said Dean, and both Castiel and Sam looked at him with surprise.

"What? I'm paying attention. If it's a door, then she wants to walk through it, right?"

"And invade Heaven," said Castiel. "We believe that is her plan. I am afraid, Dean, you hold in your hand the last of the sixty-six seals."

Dean looked at the small cup, his heart beating a little faster. "Okay. So. We have to take it somewhere, right? We give it to one of these Grail guardians and they'll take care of it, right?"

"There are no other Grail guardians," Castiel said patiently. "They are dead. You and Sam are the new guardians of the Grail, and I am afraid I do not know where it, and you, are to go."

Dean looked at Sam, who frowned deeply back. "So, we just . . . take it with us?"

"Yes," Castiel said, nodding. "There is a Grail castle, but like the Grail it has a will of its own. It has been a hundred places that I know of in the last thousand years. It has likely been more. You must find the Grail castle and take the Grail there."

"Great," Sam said. "Out of the entire world we have to find one castle that's never in the same place for long. Any more impossible tasks for us, Castiel?"

Castiel turned his gaze to Sam and said mildly, "You must also find other objects that have been stolen over the years. They will lead you to the castle. There is a spear, a sword and a dish."

"Excalibur?" Dean said hopefully, and the corner of Castiel's mouth lifted a moment.

"Perhaps." He touched Dean's head again, stroking him as he had before Sam woke. "Look for signs and portents along the way. You will be helped. You will also be hindered, but you are strong enough to fight them."

"How will we know what the signs are?" Sam said, frustrated. "We can't just wander around the entire world."

"You know many things. Listen to what you have learned." He rose from the bed. "I must leave you. Dean." Dean looked at him, and he said, "Call my name when you need me. I will come."

"I will," Dean said softly. Castiel nodded and in a rush of wind and flutter of wings he was gone.

Dean carefully put the Grail back into the briefcase and closed it, and after a moment flicked closed the locks, too. Sam watched him, still frowning. "What'd you do that for?"

"We're supposed to keep it safe, right? This way we can't just spill the combination."

"It's easy to break a briefcase lock," said Sam and propped his feet on Dean's bed. "We're Sam and Dean Peterson, by the way."

"Shit. I think I said Chilton." He lay back, missing Castiel's comforting presence. The pain in his leg was a dull throb, though he'd certainly had worse.

"You were in shock. They'll understand if you were confused." He was quiet a moment. "Dean?"

"Yeah, Sam?" He covered his eyes with his hand.

"What was that about? 'Call my name and I'll come'?"

Dean removed his hand and said slowly, "I guess . . . he thought I thought he wouldn't come if I called, but I guess . . . he will."

"Great," Sam muttered. "That's just great. Now the big question is, how the hell do we find a place that's moving all the time and may not even exist?"

"We'll keep an eye out for a Grail-shaped beacon," said Dean, and at Sam's annoyed look he said, "We'll figure it out tomorrow."

"Okay. Do you need anything?"

"Nope." He picked up the package of Peeps and pulled open the plastic. He tore the marshmallow apart and gave half to Sam. "Are you going to stick around?"

"Of course I am."

"Thanks," Dean said softly, and Sam smiled a little as he bit off the chick's head.

Early in the morning, Dean opened his eyes. The room was dark, and the hallways outside was as well, but the vertical blinds were half-open and moonlight was streaming in. He could see Sam sleeping in the chair, his head fallen back and his mouth open. He could also see a slight figure outside his door, casting a wing-shaped shadow against the glass.

Dean closed his eyes again, secure in the knowledge that they were safe for the night.

Sam had bags under his eyes in the morning. "What's wrong with you?" Dean said as he carefully and painfully got out of bed.

Sam rubbed his eyes. "Had bad dreams all night." He stood carefully and stretched. "Tomorrow night I'm sleeping in a bed."

"Prophetic dreams?" Dean said, torn between worry and hope. His own dreams had been much more peaceful than usual, but they hadn't been anything significant, either. He'd be fine with Sam having prophetic dreams again -- having them himself was just too weird.

"No, I don't think so." He glanced at the briefcase, still on Dean's bed, and lumbered into the bathroom.

"Sammy?" Dean called after him, but the door was already closed and the water was running. Dean sighed and pushed himself out of bed to get the clothes Sam had placed in the cupboard for him beside the door. As he passed the door he peered through the small glass panel, but of course whoever had been there all night -- Castiel, he was sure, because who else would care enough? -- was long gone.

He had a flash as he stood there, so strong that he staggered and grabbed hold of the cupboard to keep his balance. It was like someone shoved the image into his brain, almost like he'd been trying to remember something long forgotten. It was a mountain, someplace wild and overgrown, with trees growing where houses used to be and underground chambers and stones arranged in circles to mark the solstice.

North. They had to go north.

"Dean!" said Sam behind him, and Dean shook himself out of his trance.

"Sorry. Um." He blinked a few times and shook his head, feeling like he was still caught up in the vision. "I know where we have to go."

"Dean, are you sure you can trust these dreams?" said Sam. "Since we don't know where they're coming from or why all of sudden *you* --" He stopped himself, embarrassed. "I mean, uh --"

"Why I'm special, all of a sudden?" Dean said wearily. He yanked off the hospital gown with difficulty and tried to balance on one leg to put on his jeans. He swayed and nearly fell over.

"Dean, sit," Sam said in an exasperated tone and pushed a chair to him, so Dean sat and pulled on his jeans. "I don't mean that," Sam said. "Just, you've never -- and now you're -- it's just --" He sighed.

"Mostly it's Castiel," Dean said as he pulled on his t-shirt, socks and boots, wincing as the movement strained his stitches. "But maybe not always. I don't know, maybe I'm tapped into the angel news network too." He smiled to himself, a little sadly. Castiel said that Anna was well, fully powered and on their side, but he still wished he could see her, see that she was all right for himself.

"Great, giving them more reasons to come after us," Sam muttered picked up the duffel bag. "How are you holding up?"

"Don't expect me to run anywhere. We need to go north."

Sam looked at him, nodded shortly, and swung the duffel over his shoulder. "How far north?"

"I don't know. I'll know when we get there. It's up in the mountains somewhere, where there's a lot of slate rock." Dean took a deep breath and pushed himself to his feet, pulled on his jacket, tossed Sam the keys and picked up the briefcase. He limped after Sam to the desk and signed the forms, acknowledged that he was checking out against doctor's orders, got his prescription for Percocet and settled their bill with a credit card that matched the names on their insurance.

He jittered impatiently as an intern pushed him out of the hospital in a wheelchair, and felt himself light up when they got to the Impala in the parking lot, even though he knew he'd be in the passenger seat for the next couple days. "Hello, baby," he said softly, running his hand over the roof.

When Sam opened the truck and tossed in their duffel, Dean hesitated. "I think we ought to keep it in the front with us."

"It'll be fine in the trunk, Dean. It'll be perfectly safe."

"I'll feel better if it's where I can keep an eye on it." He got into the passenger side and set the briefcase at his feet. He stretched out his legs, knowing this was going to be an uncomfortable ride no matter what he did.

Sam got into the driver's seat and started the engine, peeled out of the parking lot and was soon on the highway, northbound. After a few minutes he said, "Put in a tape?"

Dean smiled and put in a tape.

Without having to concentrate on driving, he could think, or at least watch the countryside. There wasn't much to look at out there, though -- muddy or snowy fields under a gray and sullen sky. "Sam," he said after fifty miles or so, "does anything about that strike you as weird?" He pointed out the window.

"It's just farm country. Hey, what about we stop for breakfast in the next town?"

"Sure," said Dean, "but doesn't the farm country look weird to you? I mean, shouldn't people be out planting and stuff? It's March."

"It's also cold out," Sam said. "The ground is probably still frozen and they're waiting for it to warm up."

"Yeah," Dean said. "Guess so." *Always winter and never Christmas* . . . He worried his lower lip with his thumb, watching the countryside again.

The diner where they stopped for breakfast was called Queenie's, and had oversized framed playing cards hanging on the walls -- four queens, one of each suit. The place mats on the table were printed with a simplified map of the eastern seaboard, with starred landmarks in several surrounding states. Dean put the briefcase between his feet and leaned his head on his hand, looking at the place mat. It was like a child's map of Weird New England.

The waitress came to take their order, saying cheerfully, "Good morning, I'm Maya. I'll be looking after you." She was round and brunette, her curly hair in a ponytail high on her crown, her lips painted with bright red lipstick. She winked at Dean and he grinned back.

"That's a pretty name. Maya." She smiled, pleased, and Dean said, "Hey, Maya, what's worth seeing on this?" He gestured to the map.

"Depends on what you consider worth seeing and how far you're willing to go."

"Pretty far," Dean said. "All the way."

She smiled at him again, a little more secretly, as if it was all she could do not to call him a naughty boy.

"Something up in the mountains," added Sam. "We want a hike."

"Well, if you're willing to make the drive, you might like America's Stonehenge." She clicked her pen.

"America's Stonehenge?" said Sam.

"Over in New Hampshire, near Salem. It's a tourist attraction -- standing stones, caves, that kind of thing. Some people say it was a temple, like the Druid Stonehenge over in England."

"Is this one supposed to be Druids too?" said Sam.

She shrugged and waved a hand, and Dean noticed she wore a silver ring with three green stones, just like Mrs. Fisher back in Bethlehem. "I don't know. Nobody knows. But I've been a couple times and I think it's beautiful, no matter who made it. Spooky, but beautiful. Peaceful."

"Spooky how?" Dean said.

"It's just a feeling. It feels old and mysterious -- it used to be called Mystery Hill, and I liked that name better." She winked at Dean again, and then said, "So, food?"

They both ordered pancakes, and when she walked away Dean leaned back in his chair to watch her go. Her legs were sturdy and long, curving in the most interesting way up into her skirt that covered her round, shapely ass. He sighed, knowing no matter how pretty her legs were he wouldn't even ask for her number. His heart lay elsewhere.

"Is that our stop?" Sam said. "America's Stonehenge?"

"Might be. It's worth a shot, right? I mean, we were told to watch for signs and portents."

Sam looked around them. "What portent? What sign?"

"The cards, dude. The cards on the walls." He gestured to the decorations. "Just like at Joseph Temple's."

Sam looked at them, uncertain. "Seriously? They're just playing cards."

"Which have their roots in Tarot," Dean said, annoyed. "Seriously. Just trust me, okay?"

"Okay, okay," Sam said, looking at the place mat again. "You think we're going to find clues about the Holy Grail at a Paleolithic temple in New Hampshire. Sure, why not."

"If the cup belonged in England, I'm sure we'd be sent there."

"Traditionally," said Sam, and Dean settled back for a lecture on lore, "the Grail is said to rest at either Glastonbury Tor or Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland."

"I'm not flying to Europe just because of tradition, Sam." He considered. "Though it'd be cool, wouldn't it? England? Isn't there a rock festival at Glastonbury in the summer? That'd be a hell of a vacation."

"We're not on vacation, Dean," Sam said with a sigh.

"No, of course not. We're going to New Hampshire." The briefcase between his calves warmed a little, and he felt reassured. It was the right thing to do.

"Be right back," said Sam as he pushed himself up from the table, and he went into the men's room. Dean studied the map some more -- none of the names jumped out at him.

Maya returned with their pancakes and coffee, and Dean said, "Can I ask you a question? Where did you get that ring?"

She smiled and held up her hand so the light glinted off the silver. "It's a family heirloom. My grandmother gave it to me. It's nice, isn't it? It's malachite. It's supposed to protect you from bad dreams."

"Yeah?" Dean said. "Does it work?"

"My dreams are pretty good," she said, and he knew that a year or two ago he would have asked her about her dreams. "Knowing Gran, she dug it up at a crossroads at midnight."

Dean swallowed and tried to get his smile back. "Not something to joke about there, sweetheart."

"Oh, we're fine. We're protected. No making deals we're going to regret."

The hairs on the back of his neck pricked. "How do you know about that?"

"Oh," she said again, "I know a lot of things. Gran said to keep an eye out for you, so I am -- setting you on the right path, showing you the way. That's what I do."

"Who are you?" Dean said with no flirtation in his tone.

"Maya," she said, pointing to her name tag. "Your waitress." She leaned closer and said, "Do you have it with you?"

"Yeah," Dean whispered, trying not to look at her cleavage. "Under the table."

"Good. Don't let it out of your sight. Monsters come in many shapes and forms, Dean Winchester," she said seriously, "and sometimes in very attractive packages. Sometimes with faces you know."

"Mrs. Fisher," Dean said. "That's your grandmother. And Dr. Fisher, that's your mom?"

"Close enough. They both like you a lot. Of course, pretty Grail guardians, they're Gran's weakness."

Dean said seriously, "But how is it us, Maya? We're not knights and we're definitely not monks. We don't anything about all this." He looked around, making sure no one was watching them, and said more softly, "How are we going to find the castle?"

She looked at him with something like compassion. "Have faith."

"Faith, Maya," he whispered and shook his head.

"Faith," she repeated gently. "Go to the mountain. Follow the road. Don't be afraid of what you hear in the dark." A bell sounded in the kitchen and she looked up. "Gotta get back to work. Take care, Dean Winchester. Remember," she said as she started to walk away, "there are angels on your side." She went into the kitchen, saying, "Yeah, okay, Gus, I'm here."

Dean looked after her, only slightly less confused, and was still frowning when Sam came back to the table. "What?" Sam asked and dumped some sugar in his coffee.

"Nothing," Dean said. "I'll tell you later. Eat up, Sammy -- you're a growing boy." He cut off a bite from his pancakes with his fork and shoveled it into his mouth.

Sam looked at him for a moment, like he wanted to ask but didn't know how, and then started on his pancakes.

They say there were thunderstorms in clear skies over Dayton, Ohio. They say people in the town reported strangers in black suits wandering the roads out of town -- strangers, they say, who could only be seen out of the corner of your eye and disappeared as soon as you looked at them directly.

They say that at a funeral in Waco, Texas, mysterious figures stood by the gravestones, figures in old-fashioned clothes. They say the figures disappeared if you tried to approach them.

Four

The quest for the grail is not archeology, it's a race against evil. If it is captured by the Nazis the armies of darkness will march all over the face of the earth.

--Indiana Jones & the Last Crusade, Steven Spielberg/Philip Kaufman

By the time they reached America's Stonehenge in New Hampshire it was too late to be admitted to the park, and Dean's leg was screaming with the need to stretch. They got burgers at a drive-through and found a motel in Salem, and ate while Dean propped up his wounded leg on the bed and Sam used the motel's internet connection to look up more information on the site.

"I don't know what we're going to find up there, Dean," he said at last as he leaned back in his chair and ate fries. "As far as I can tell it's just a lunar calendar -- I don't know how that's going to help us any."

"It's where we're supposed to go, Sam." He nudged his leg against the briefcase to reassure himself. "I don't know what we're going to find up there, either, but it'll help us along the way."

"How can you be so sure of that?" said Sam. "We got this intel from a waitress in a diner."

"She was telling the truth. It doesn't matter what she does for a living." He finished his burger and crumpled up the paper to drop it into the bag. "Besides, she . . . knew stuff. She knew my name."

Sam was silent a moment. "What else did she know?"

"She knew what we're looking for and why, and she told me to not be afraid of the dark."

"You've never been afraid of the dark."

"It's a clue, I think. Whatever we find up there, we're going to have to go into the dark to get it." He pushed himself up from the chair and picked up the paper bag. "You done?"

"Let me do that." Sam took the bag from him. "You relax. We've got a hike ahead of us tomorrow." He took the bag and dropped it into the garbage can in the bathroom.

"Thanks," Dean said, frowning, and moved to the bed so he could lie down. His leg felt stiff, the wound burning, but when he inspected his leg it looked fine -- there were no signs of gangrene or infection. As long as he kept the stitches cleaned he knew he should be fine, though it was hard to wait for it to heal when there was so much to do.

He pulled off his t-shirt and propped a pillow under his knee, and pulled a blanket over himself. *Going into the dark*, he thought. Sam had shown him the pictures of the site, the chambers and caverns . . . *We'll go into those*, he thought, *and see what we find*.

"Hey, Dean?" said Sam. "You asleep?"

"Nope," Dean said, forcing his eyes open. "What's up?"

Sam flopped onto the other bed, which shifted under his weight. He propped up his head on his arm. "When we find all this stuff, when we find the castle, what happens then?"

"I don't know. You know the stories, right? What happens in them?"

"In the poems? Most of them are unfinished."

"Oh, that's helpful," Dean muttered.

"Yeah. In the ones that are finished, the Fisher King gets healed or Percival becomes the new Grail king."

"And that's it? Who's the Fisher King?"

"Yeah, that's it." Sam sat up a little, alert with interest. This was his kind of geekdom. "The Fisher King is a king who's been wounded badly, but not so badly that he dies. His lands have become wastelands -- scholars think because the Celts tied the strength of the king to the health of the land -- and when Percival asks the Grail question, that somehow enables the king to be healed and the lands restored."

Dean digested this. "So what's the Grail question?"

"Whom does the Grail serve?" Sam said.

"Whom does the Grail serve?" Dean repeated. "What does that even mean?"

"I have no idea. That's the thing -- there's no answer to that question. Just asking it is the important thing. You gotta keep in mind, Grail lore is kind of . . . dreamlike. Archetypal and symbolic."

"And yet," Dean said, wrapping his arm around the briefcase, "we've got the actual, physical thing. Not a symbol, an actual cup."

"And no idea what to do with it," Sam said, his mouth grim.

Dean fell asleep with his arm over the briefcase like a pillow. He dreamed he was in the burned forest again, every bend in the path hidden in thick fog. The air reeked of smoke. He could hear footsteps behind him -- the heavy plodding footsteps of something that was big and in no hurry.

He followed the path through the forest, and reached a river. There was a man in the river, fishing from a skiff, and he watched Dean as he walked past. Dean raised a hand to him and the man raised his hand in return, and paddled the skiff to the riverbank where Dean stood. "Come with me," he said, so Dean climbed into the skiff.

"Can I help?" he said, and the man shook his head as he paddled them to the opposite side of the river. There was a dock, where the man tied up the skiff and then climbed up, awkwardly and carefully, and led Dean up a path to a castle -- an ancient-looking stronghold with towers and a single large gate.

The man took Dean into a long hall, where a table was set for a great feast though every chair and plate was empty. The man sat, and indicated to Dean to do the same. Dean sat and looked around, noticing that the figures in the tapestries on the walls seemed to move -- a maiden captured a unicorn with her girdle, a knight slew a dragon with a sword, musicians played their pipes and ladies danced complicated steps in a tight circle.

The great doors to the hall opened and two young men came out -- one carried a spear and the other a sword. They walked past Dean, pausing to show him their treasures, and then walked out the opposite door.

Dean looked at the man -- the owner of the castle, he supposed -- who watched the small parade as if he'd seen it a thousand times before. Dean wanted to ask what was going on but in the way of dreams he didn't think the question would be answered, or even taken well.

The door opened again and Maya, the waitress from Queenie's, came out. Instead of her waitress's uniform she wore a regal gown of green fabric, and she carried a silver platter before her. Like the two young men, she walked in front of the table and stopped to show the platter to Dean. It was embossed with the picture of a knight holding a battle axe. Both the knight and the axe were enormous.

She raised her eyebrows at him, as if waiting for a response, and he tried to smile though he was completely confused. Maya hitched the platter against her belly and left the hall, glancing back at him before the heavy door swung shut.

With that slamming sound, the stronghold was gone and Dean was back in the burned forest. The heavy, steady footsteps behind him only seemed closer.

Dean began to run. The footsteps sped up with him, just as heavy, just as steady.

Suddenly he saw Castiel in front of him on the path and skidded to a stop. "Castiel? Cas, where is this place?"

"Come with me," Castiel said and took his hand, and they were out of the forest and on a mountaintop.

It was peaceful and green there. Castiel stood at the edge of a cliff, his arms behind his back. Dean stood silently by him, breathing in the pine-scented air. Wind rustled through the trees down the slope and in the valleys below. Birds sang. Dean felt like he could see forever.

"Thanks," he said at last.

"You're welcome."

Dean inhaled the fresh, cool air. "I love this place. It's so beautiful."

"Yes," Castiel said simply.

"Cas." Castiel looked at him with mild blue eyes, and Dean blurted, "Is this Heaven, Cas?"

"It is a place to rest." He was quiet for a while as the wind blew, bringing with it the scent of pine and loam. "You are being watched and followed, Dean."

"I'm not afraid." He looked into Castiel's eyes -- they were like a calm blue ocean, and he wished he could lose himself in them and be someone other than Dean Winchester for a while. Maybe Castiel wanted to be someone other than Castiel for a while, too . . .

"No," Castiel said, and if Dean didn't know better he'd think Castiel sounded proud. "You are not afraid. But be cautious, Dean. Do not run into situations with guns blazing."

"I wouldn't do that," Dean said and Castiel chuckled. "Well, I can't run anywhere for a while."

"Heed my words, Dean," Castiel said gently.

"I'm heeding, I'm heeding," Dean said, and then said, "I wish I could stay here with you all the time." He smiled at Castiel a little. "Everything was beautiful and nothing hurt."

Castiel was silent beside him. The wind blew through the trees on the slopes below.

"Sorry," Dean muttered. "Guess I shouldn't bring that stuff up."

The wind stirred Castiel's hair. He said softly, "I also wish we could stay." Dean looked at him, but Castiel's gaze was on the horizon. "Here no one will judge us or get in our way. We can be ourselves. We could be happy."

Dean whispered, "I'll never have that. My life . . . it's not one with picket fences and bridge with the neighbors."

"Nor is mine." The wind stirred the trees, and Castiel sighed. "Enough. I will take you home."

"Cas," Dean said and took hold of his shoulders. "Castiel, I don't want to go yet. Please, just a few more minutes. Let me stay with you."

Castiel nodded slowly, and then leaned close to Dean, enough to rest his forehead against Dean's. Dean wrapped his arms tighter around him, his entire body warmed by Castiel's heat.

"You get tired too sometimes, huh," he whispered.

"Sometimes." Castiel straightened. "Bodies get tired. I forget." His gaze swept over Dean's face. "There is so much to do and no way to rest, unless I come here."

"Where is here?"

"There are places," Castiel said slowly, "that are outside time. They exist above or below or between what you consider real. This is one of those places."

"So it's not real?"

"Oh, it's real," Castiel said. "It's just a different kind of real."

Dean moved his hands from Castiel's shoulders to frame his face. Castiel smiled and closed his eyes, then opened them again. He said softly, "It's time to go back."

"I miss you," Dean said. "When you're not around, I miss you."

"I am never far."

"I thought you didn't perch on my shoulder." Dean smiled at him a little.

"I don't. I sit on the bed and watch you sleep." He smiled a little back.

"Maybe you should wake me up," Dean said. "And see what happens."

Castiel sighed and gently removed Dean's hands from his face. He held onto them, though, and looked down at them as he spoke. "There is work to be done, and even if there were not . . ."

"No picket fences," Dean said. "No happy endings. Not for guys like us. You'll go back to heaven and I'll . . . go on hunting until it gets me."

Castiel looked up at him, his expression sorrowful, and let go of Dean's hand to touch his fingers to Dean's forehead. "No," Dean said, "not yet," but he was already back in the hotel room and it was morning.

"Dammit," Dean said, slamming his hand against the mattress, and then he picked up the briefcase and held it in his lap, his arms wrapped around it and his chin resting on top.

"Dean?" Sam said from the other bed. "Are you okay?"

"No," Dean said. "What do you think the combination to this thing is?"

"Why?" Sam said cautiously.

"Because I want to see it, okay, Sam? I want to see it, I want to hold it my hand, I just want --" He slammed his fist against the briefcase. "I want to see it."

Sam's eyebrows furrowed but he said, "Unless you've spun the combination it should still be set. Try the catches."

Dean pressed on the locks but shook his head as they stayed firmly shut. "Dammit," he said and put the briefcase aside to shove himself out of bed. "We're being followed."

"What?"

"Followed. Don't know who by. That's twice I've been warned, though. Yesterday by Maya and again last night."

"Another vision," Sam said softly.

"Yeah." He hobbled to the duffel bag to get clean clothes for the day.

"From Castiel?" Dean didn't answer, and Sam said, even more softly, "What's going on with you two?"

"What do you mean?" Dean muttered as he put on a t-shirt.

"I mean, he was holding your hand yesterday at the hospital, and he visits you in your sleep, and -- I just don't know, Dean." He said more slowly, "I feel like I'm losing you a little more every day."

"Castiel's my friend and I trust him. That's all." He leaned on the bed so he could put on his jeans.

Sam muttered something and went into the bathroom before Dean could ask him to repeat it. Dean still frowned at him, though, and wondered if he needed to spell it out for Sam that Castiel was just . . . something impossible.

Once he was dressed Dean tried the briefcase again, going through the most obvious combinations first. It was not unlocked by 666 or 040 or even 000. He thought for a moment and tried 108, then 616.

The locks popped open.

"Murphy, you're a sick old bastard," Dean muttered and opened the briefcase. The cup was still glowing softly, and it was warm in his hand when he took it out. He held the cup to his chest, comforted by the smooth shape and the warmth it sent through his body.

Sam came out of the bathroom and saw him, and paused, clearly confused by this.

"Look," Dean said, and realized he didn't have any excuse for it. "It just makes me feel better, okay?"

"Okay, man, okay," Sam said, holding up his hands. "I'm not judging you."

"Hold it," Dean said, holding out the cup to Sam. "You'll see."

Sam took an involuntary step back, and for a moment they just stared at each other. "No," Sam said in a voice that was trying to be light and failing. "No, it's okay. Let's just get on the road, okay? America's Stonehenge opens at nine."

"Okay," Dean said and put the cup back in the briefcase, ignoring the goose bumps on his arms.

After breakfast, they drove back to America's Stonehenge and parked in front of the barnlike visitors' center. The day was overcast. There was still snow under the trees and only two other cars in the lot. A small herd of alpacas, penned near the visitors' center, came up the fence to inquisitively sniff at them and Dean couldn't resist petting a soft head or two.

He took the cup out of the briefcase and Sam put Ruby's knife in his waistband. "Do you think this will be enough?" Sam said to him, glancing over his shoulder at the visitors' center. "We don't know what we're going to find up there."

Dean put the cup in the inner pocket of his jacket, and put a silver knife in his waistband as well. "It'll have to be." He picked up a flashlight, too, and a small bag of salt. Sam took both as well, and they went into the visitors' center.

The staff member -- Cynthia, according to her name tag -- greeted them cheerfully, took their entrance fees and told them they'd be alone on the hill. "You should have been here on Friday," she said. "We always get a big crowd for astronomical events. Our biggest are the solstices, of course."

"What was Friday?" said Dean. He expected to see a malachite ring on her finger but the only jewelry she wore was a plain gold wedding band.

"Vernal equinox," Cynthia said, smiling at them brightly. "It's officially spring though you wouldn't know it to look outside."

"It's a long winter everywhere," said Sam.

There was an introductory video to watch, about the history of the hill and the theories about its functions and purpose. Dean leaned his arms on his knees and watched with a frown, worried about how his leg would take the hike as much as what they'd find once they were at the site.

Not for the first time, he wished Castiel were there, just to make things . . . bearable. Just to be there.

"Can I ask you something?" Sam said to Cynthia when the film was finished. "Has anyone ever reported anything unusual happening up there?"

"Oh, all the time," she said. "They report red eyes are watching them from the woods, or just a feeling of being watched." She looked amused at this, however. "And the usual for supposedly haunted places -- lights, mist, noises."

"Our friend who told us about this place, she said it was spooky," Dean said.

Cynthia hesitated a moment, then said in a confidential tone, "It gets spooky at night sometimes, when the sun gets low. All those shadows. But it's just the age of the place, I think. You know how it is with old places. They just feel . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"They remember," Dean said softly, and Cynthia gave him a wondering look.

"Yes. Exactly. They remember." She gave them their maps. "Enjoy yourselves up there. You may learn something about yourselves."

The boys thanked her and left the visitors center, and made their way through the snow to the head of the trail. Dean steeled himself as they started up -- the path wasn't a steep incline, but the way was rocky and his leg was still sore. He had a feeling if he looked down at his in seam there would be a small patch of blood.

Sam tried not to get far ahead but those long legs kept up a strong pace, and he had to continually stop and wait for Dean to catch up. "How are you holding up, Dean?" he said worriedly about halfway up.

"I'll sleep like the dead tonight," Dean muttered, doggedly putting one foot in front of the other.

They passed a historical marker, touting the use of the site as a lunar calendar, and then the trail ended and they were at the walls that marked the perimeter of the complex. It was like an abandoned village, stones stacked to make walls and hallways, lining long trenches, built over the entrances to caves. It was utterly silent except for the sound of wind and snow falling from trees.

"That's the oracle," Sam said as he consulted the map, and they walked through the formations to where two stacks of stones marked the opening to an underground chamber. "What do you think?"

The cup warmed against Dean's side. "That's our spot."

Sam put the map away in his back pocket and took out his flashlight. Dean zipped up his jacket, gave the cup a touch through the fabric, and followed him between the pillars and down into the chamber.

Steps made from stone slabs took them deeper underground. Dean slid his hand along the mossy wall to keep his balance, watching Sam's flashlight as he cast it around. Once the ground leveled out Dean took out his flashlight as well and turned it on, and shined the beam along the walls and the path ahead. The owners had built a wood sidewalk along the hall, and it creaked under their feet as they walked. There were pillars of stacked stones throughout the hall, dividing it into smaller rooms.

"Dean?" Sam said softly, his voice echoing. "What are we looking for?"

"I have no idea." He thought about his dream, and said, "A dish. It'll be big and silver."

"Somebody would have found it long ago," Sam said, shining his light at the chamber's stone ceiling.

"I don't think so," Dean said. "I think it's waiting for us." He thought about his dream, trying to remember if there were any clues or hints in what had happened. But there was no river, no drawings on the walls . . .

Sam took out the map again and squinted at it, the flashlight in his mouth. He took it out and said, "At the back there's what they call the secret bed."

"Let's have a look." Dean followed the hall to the very end, where the secret bed was marked with a white spray-painted C. He felt around inside, grimacing as his fingers slid on slick moss and cold stone.

"Nothing," he muttered. "I'm going in." He put the flashlight away and crawled into the tiny opening in the stone wall.

"Careful, Dean," Sam said, shining the flashlight behind him so he could have a little light. Dean pulled himself along until his hands met the wall, and he felt along the stones carefully, thinking it might just be tucked away . . .

"Well, hello," he whispered when his fingers met metal through the moss, and he carefully worked and pulled until he'd dislodged the dish. He ran his fingers over the inside -- he could feel the embossed decoration in the metal, and he guessed when he saw it in the light it would be a picture of a knight with a battle axe. He tucked it inside his jacket and tried to crawl out, but the narrowness of the little bed and the weakness of his leg made it impossible. "Sammy? Give me a tug?"

"Hold on," Sam said and grabbed his ankles, and yanked him out of the bed. Dean stumbled when his feet hit the ground, and Sam said, "Dean!" and grabbed him by the waist.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," Dean began, and then held up his hand, frowning. He heard a sound outside, something low and plodding and steady, heavy enough to make the ground tremble.

Sam whispered, "Cynthia said people hear noises."

"Does that sound like a ghost to you?" Dean said and Sam tightened his grip on the flashlight and took Ruby's knife out of his waistband. They both barely breathed as the heavy footsteps grew closer, and then stopped right overhead.

"Dean," Sam whispered, "whatever that is, it's big."

"I've heard that before," Dean said, keeping his voice low, and faced the hall, salt in one hand and his silver knife in the other. The footsteps wandered back and forth overhead, and then they heard what sounded like hooves on the stones outside the oracle chamber. Dean made his way slowly to the bottom of the steps, and Sam turned off his flashlight and stood close behind him.

A great snout poked through the opening, and Dean stared and held his breath as it sniffed the air. The smell of the thing was overwhelming, gamy and rich like a cattle yard.

"I would kill for a shotgun right now," Sam breathed.

"I don't think salt rounds would help with this," Dean muttered, and the snout pulled back and the heavy footsteps plodded away.

Sam exhaled. "What. The. *Hell.*"

"I don't know," Dean said, "I don't care. Let's get out of here." He climbed up the steps and leaned against the opening pillars as the pain in his leg intensified, as if someone was poking into the wound with their fingers.

"Dean, you've gone white," Sam said, wrapping an arm around him.

"I'm fine. Just hurts." He exhaled, blowing out his cheeks, and straightened up. "Okay."

"Dean?" Sam said softly. "Can I see it?"

Dean looked around. There was no one else in the complex, but he still felt his neck prickle as if someone was sneaking up on him. "Not here. Let's get back to the hotel."

Sam nodded and put the flashlight away, and they hiked back down to the visitors' center as quickly as they could.

They say psychics and sensitives around the country paused in their business, felt a shiver down their backs, and couldn't say why.

They say a million people's dreams had a strange new image that night: a great beast, plodding along, poking its snout in to sniff around, plodding away.

Five

*And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts,
And I looked and behold: a pale horse.
And his name that sat on him was Death.
And Hell followed with him.*

--"The Man Comes Around," Johnny Cash

Once they were safely in the motel room, Dean unzipped his jacket and put both the dish and the Grail on the bed. Sam kicked off his boots and sat cross-legged on the bed, and picked up the dish to inspect it. He wiped off some moss and dirt with his sleeve and turned it to the light.

Dean lay on the bed too and propped a pillow under his leg. He thought about asking Sam to get him some aspirin -- or even the Percocet they'd given him at the hospital, which he'd been avoiding to stay alert -- but he didn't want Sam to know how much it was hurting him. "So," he said, "what is it?"

"It's more Arthurian poetry," Sam said. "*Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight*. That's Gawaine, there," he pointed to one of the knights, "and that's the Green Knight." He pointed to the other, bigger knight, the one holding a battle axe, and Dean made a face.

"They messed up. His head's gone."

"He takes it off in the poem," Sam said.

Dean leaned closer. What he had thought was a helmet under the knight's arm was, yes, in fact a bearded head. "Great. What's that mean?"

"Well," Sam said slowly, "scholars think the Green Knight was a fertility symbol of some kind. And it was spring equinox a few days ago, and . . ." He shook his head and laughed. "Fuck if I know, Dean. How does this tell us where we're supposed to go next?"

"Fuck if I know, Sam," Dean said in the same tone.

Sam shook his head, glanced at him, and got up. He went into the bathroom, and came back with a plastic cup of water and some aspirin in his cupped hand. "Take these, Dean."

"I'm fine, Sam."

"You're in so much pain your lips are white. Just take the damn pills."

Dean sat up and took the pills and water. He shoved them into his mouth and gulped the water, and gave the cup back to Sam. "Happy now?"

"Not really," Sam said, exasperated. "We're being chased -- apparently by a *thing* that can *smell* us! This isn't just being followed. This is being hunted. It's *hunting* us."

"Okay," Dean said wearily, "we're being hunted. But we're also being guarded, so stop throwing a hissy fit and calm down. We have to figure out the next place to go."

The muscle in Sam's jaw started jumping again, and Sam threw down the cup and left the room, slamming the door behind him. Dean sighed, shoved himself up and opened the door. He shouted at Sam's back, "Bitch all you want, Sam! We're hitting the road today!"

Sam didn't turn, but held up one hand to give him the bird.

"Yeah, you too," Dean muttered and slammed the door shut himself. He turned the locks and scratched his hand through his hair, and then picked up the dish and the cup and put them into the briefcase. He clicked the locks, and after a moment's thought hid the briefcase inside the duffel and zipped it closed. It wasn't much of a hiding place but it was better than no hiding place at all.

There was a knock at the door as soon as Dean started getting comfortable on the bed again, and he thought about letting Sam just sit out there and stew for a while. Instead he heaved a sigh and pushed himself up, and said, "Next time, don't storm off without your key, bitch," as he unhooked the chain and unlocked the door.

Sam was not outside the door. Instead there were the two thugs from his dream of Joseph Temple's murder, who forced their way inside the room before Dean could get the door closed.

They were followed by their boss, who strolled in casually behind them as the big one grabbed Dean and the little one subdued him with several hard punches to the face and kidneys.

Their boss sat on the bed and adjusted the crease in his trousers while Dean gasped for breath. "Dean Winchester," he said.

"Lorcan Murphy," Dean spat and pulled against the big one's viselike grip.

Lorcan Murphy smiled a moment. "Isn't that nice? You figured it out. Of course, it's not difficult. I've just come to reclaim my property. Hand it over and I won't even press charges for breaking and entering."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Dean said, and at Lorcan's nod the slim thug punched Dean in the solar plexus.

"Let's try that again," Lorcan said as Dean lay groaning on the floor where the big one dropped him. "I'm going to ask you for my property. You're going to say yes, sir, here it is, and hand it over."

"Fuck you," Dean muttered to the carpet.

Lorcan inhaled slowly, and the slim one said, "I've got my pointy-toed shoes on, Mr. Murphy."

"No, thank you, it won't be necessary. I have something else. Would you leave us, gentlemen?"

The two thugs glanced at each other, but left the room to stand guard outside the door. Lorcan sighed again and got onto the floor beside Dean, sitting cross-legged as Dean struggled to push himself upright. "There's something you should know about me," Lorcan began.

"I know enough about you," Dean said. "I know you use black magic. I know it's how you found us."

"Black magic," Lorcan said. "That's fair. I prefer to think of them as the arcane arts, but it's just semantics. And part of magic, of course, is blood magic." He took a handkerchief out of his breast pocket and unfolded it on his knee. "You should have cleaned up your blood, Dean Winchester."

Dean swallowed. "That's a lame-ass voodoo doll."

"It's better than voodoo." He crumpled the handkerchief in his hand and the wound in Dean's leg shot pain throughout his body, strong enough to make him collapse, sobbing. "See? Of course, a human stabbed with a demon knife, that's bad mojo already, but I can make it do all kind of things. I can reopen it as much as I want." He twisted the handkerchief and Dean thought he would pass out from the pain. "I can find you no matter where you go, and when I find you, I can do this." He twisted the handkerchief tighter in his fist and Dean screamed. "So I'm going to ask you one more time, Dean Winchester, and then I'm going to get really nasty." He lay down on his stomach so he could look into Dean's eyes, and he yanked Dean's head up by the hair. "Where is the cup?"

Dean stared at him, and then started to laugh despite the pain. "All that magic," he said, gasping, "and you can't find a piece of pottery."

"That's it," Lorcan said, throwing down Dean's head, and he got clumsily to his feet. "You are going to die screaming, boy."

There was a quiet flutter of wings and gust of wind, and a soft voice said, "Stop."

Lorcan whirled. Dean was close to weeping with relief when he saw Castiel, rumpled raincoat and all. "Who the hell are you?" Lorcan growled at him.

"An angel of the Lord," Castiel said, "and Dean Winchester is in my charge." Before Lorcan could shout or react Castiel reached out and touched Lorcan's forehead, and the man disappeared. Castiel exhaled, and knelt at Dean's side. "Are you in pain?"

"Yes," Dean said, though Castiel's presence helped ease that -- even more so when Castiel wrapped an arm around him and helped him to his feet. "He's got my blood. That's bad news, isn't it?"

Castiel nodded solemnly. "He can cause you harm with that."

"No, really?" Dean sank into the bed, groaning. "Tell me you sent him to the top of Everest."

"I only sent him home, he and his men." Castiel regarded him, frowning. "Everest might be better. I will remember that if it happens again." He sat on the bed and started stroking Dean's back. "Where is Sam?"

"We had a fight." Dean exhaled and arched his back a little. "He's walking it off."

"You should not separate. You're not safe."

"Yeah, yeah . . ." Dean lay down, hoping his head would stop spinning.

"You cannot stay here. Lorcan can find you too easily."

"If he can find us anywhere --"

"No, not anywhere. Anywhere unprotected. Your friend Bobby's home is safe. Go there for a while."

"Okay. Bobby's." He closed his eyes, hoping the various aches would subside soon. "Hey, Cas? That beast that Lorcan sent after us, what was that thing?"

"Beast?" Castiel said in such a surprised tone that Dean opened his eyes.

"Yeah. This big . . . thing with hooves, that followed us to America's Stonehenge. I thought that was his."

"No," Castiel said, shaking his head. "I know nothing about that. I will find out."

Dean felt his mouth go dry, and he sipped hopefully at the cup for the last drops of water. "We're in so much trouble," he said quietly. "If you don't even know what it was --"

"I will find out," Castiel repeated. "I will not let you be harmed, Dean." Before Dean could remark on that he added, "More than you have been, anyway."

"Thanks," Dean said and tried not to sound too sarcastic. There was another knock at the door, this one much softer than Lorcan's earlier, and Dean started up. "That's Sam."

Castiel opened the door and there stood Sam, his head ducked and his hands in his pockets as if preparing to apologize. At the sight of Castiel and Dean, though, his face hardened and he demanded, "What did you do him?" as he crowded into Castiel's space.

Castiel didn't move, only gazed up at Sam mildly. "He was attacked. We were waiting for you. You mustn't stay here, Sam."

"He's bleeding!"

"Yes," Castiel said slowly, "he was attacked. You cannot stay here. Take him to Bobby's."

"Lorcan Murphy is using magic to track us," Dean said. "And the critter isn't his."

"Better and better," said Sam, glaring at them both. "We're in way over our heads, you realize this, right, Dean?"

"It's just another job," Dean muttered and put his hand over his eyes.

Sam said accusingly to Castiel, "You're going to get us killed."

"Perhaps," Castiel said and Dean lowered his hand to look at him. "But you are not dead yet, and you will not be if you listen to me. Go. Now. Bobby's place is safe and Dean needs to rest and heal. I will return when I can." And then he was gone.

Sam stalked around the room a moment or two, and then punched the wall, hard enough to dent the drywall. "Shit," he muttered and shook his hand.

"Try not to punch the walls, Sammy," Dean said.

"Every time he says jump you ask how high! And he just admitted it, he doesn't know if we're going to come out of this one!"

"Sam," Dean said, "we never know if we're going to come out of any one. And sometimes we haven't. God know, I should be dead a thousand times over and you're just as bad. But we're not dead yet and we've got a job to do. So, how about we take Castiel's advice and get the hell out of here? I don't want to face Lorcan again anytime soon. Man's a dick."

"Right, fine," Sam said. "Going to do anything about the bleeding first?"

"New bandage," Dean said and wobbled into the bathroom. He pulled down his jeans, wincing at how the cotton pulled on the wound, and clumsily changed the bandage. The bleeding wasn't as heavy as he feared, but it had bled through the bandage and jeans.

He could hear Sam rattle around the room, throwing books into his bag and checking the drawers for their possessions, and sighed. He'd had friends Sam didn't like before -- hell, Sam had had friends Dean didn't like, too, look at Ruby -- but this was different. Sam's instincts had turned out okay before, but this was Castiel. An angel, for God's sake. One of the good guys, one of the few people to be completely honest with him, and Dean sometimes thought Castiel was turning into one of those best friends guys always had in movies. Someone you could say anything to, who wouldn't judge you, someone who was always on your side no matter how one-sided the fight.

He was tired of defending Castiel to Sam, make no mistake about that. He didn't know what else Castiel could do to prove he wasn't going to abandon them.

Sam rapped on the door. "You ready yet?"

"Yeah," Dean said and pulled up his jeans. "You'd better drive. I'm hoping the Percocet will set in soon."

"Okay," Sam said, hefting the duffel bag. "Do you want the briefcase up front with you again?"

"Yeah, please." He hesitated as Sam unzipped the duffel and took the briefcase out. "Hey. Sam. About earlier --"

"Forget it," Sam said. "We keep having the same fight over and over and I'm sick of it. Just . . . be careful, Dean, okay? Please? We still don't really know what he wants from you."

"We know he wants us to stop the Apocalypse," Dean said as he put on his jacket. "That's enough for me."

Sam started to answer, but just pressed his lips together and took the keys when Dean held them out.

Lorcan paced his study, seething. On the sofa, his two employees were comforting each other as best they could without looking at his memorabilia, as they made no bones about the fact that it gave them the willies. Grady, whose brain was as slow-moving as his fists were big, was having a particularly hard time of it -- who would have guessed that a hired killer would have such strong feelings about tangling with angels?

Jerome was patting his back and saying, "Now, now," and Lorcan stopped in front of them, his hands on his hips. "Mr. Murphy," Jerome began.

"Shut up and listen. This doesn't mean anything. Nothing's different. They still have the Cup and we still have to get it back."

"Sir," Jerome said, and even though Lorcan glared at him he went doggedly on. "This is the real thing, sir. It's more than my brother can take."

"All of this," Lorcan said, sweeping out his arm to indicate all of his artifacts, "is the real thing, too. Don't be scared off by one little angel! We're working for something bigger here!"

"Mr. Murphy," said Grady, wringing his hamlike hands, "what's bigger than God? I can't do this."

"God is dead," Lorcan said and Grady looked even more distressed. "I serve another master. And you boys serve me, let's keep in mind. You're not going to let one guy scare you off a lucrative job, are you? One little guy?"

"An angel," Grady said. "That's what you said. An angel is protecting those guys."

"What my brother is trying to say," said Jerome, "is that we may need to renegotiate our pay, if we're going to face something so . . . unusual."

"No, that's not what I'm saying," Grady said and Jerome hushed him. "Well, it's not," he muttered sulkily.

Lorcan continued standing there, his hands on his hips, unbelieving. "Renegotiate our pay," he repeated, and told himself he needed these two alive and functioning until he got the Cup. After

he got the Cup, he'd find another use for them. Zombie slaves, maybe. Grady would make a good zombie. He said, "Okay. We'll renegotiate, but I'm not paying you another cent until the Cup is in my hands and that smug Winchester bastard is good and dead. Preferably on my altar. Get out of here, you cowards."

They practically fell over each other in their eagerness to get out of the study, and Lorcan sat at his desk with his head in his hand. After a moment he got out the bloody handkerchief, but the thought of torturing Dean Winchester where he couldn't watch held no appeal. It was so much better when he could hear them scream.

He sighed and put it away again, promising himself to he'd enjoy it later, and stiffened when a little girl's voice chirped, "Hi, Lorcan!"

"Mistress," he said and slowly turned in his chair to see Lilith, blond and rosy-cheeked and darling as a china doll, swinging her feet as she perched on his sofa. "I failed today, mistress, but I'll catch them. I will."

"Oh, I know you will, but I wanted to tell you I decided to give you some help. I've got a lovely pet that's ever so good at finding things. He found the boys today and he can find them again. Do you want me to send him to you?"

There was a sound through the house like great hoof beats, steady and plodding, and the walls shook. Lorcan swallowed. "I appreciate the help," he said carefully, "but I'm more familiar with my own methods."

"Oh well," Lilith said and waved her hand, and the heavy footsteps faded away. "I'll send him to keep an eye on them, anyway. It won't be easy for him, though -- they're ever so tricky, Lorcan. Tricky and cunning."

"Mistress," Lorcan said, "there's an angel with them."

For a moment her eyes blazed with flames and smoke, and Lorcan shrank back. That moment ended quickly and she laughed. "One little angel," she said. "When I have all of Hell on my side? Do you think that scares me, Lorcan? One little angel, all by himself? I'll tear off his wings with my bare hands."

"Then I won't fear him, mistress," Lorcan said

"Yay!" she said, clapping her hands. "I knew you were the one to help me. Oh, you're going to love living forever, Lorcan!"

"Yes, mistress," he said faintly and suppressed a shiver.

Sam wanted to drive straight through back to South Dakota, but Dean insisted they stop once Sam started nodding off. Sam pulled into a rest stop and they both huddled under their jackets, and Dean tried not to make any sounds no matter how much his leg hurt so he wouldn't keep Sam awake.

They were up and on the road again long before sunrise, and it was afternoon by the time they reached Bobby's. He came out onto the front porch as Sam was helping Dean out of the Impala, and said, "What happened to you, boy?" as he put an arm around Dean to support him too.

"Stabbed with Ruby's knife," Dean said and looked at Sam, who was grim and irritated again. "And it's been all kinds of awful since we left, Bobby."

"Come in, come in," Bobby said. They got Dean up the porch steps and into the living room, which was as cluttered and dusty as ever, and laid him on the couch so he could prop up his leg.

"I'll get the briefcase," said Sam and went out again, and Bobby sat on the couch, frowning.

"You're in crappy shape, Dean."

"Yes, sir." Dean put his hand over his eyes, groggy from painkillers and pain the pills didn't quite kill. "We're in a mess."

"What was this job? One cryptic note, no phone calls . . ." His voice trailed off as Sam came back into the house with the briefcase, which was glowing faintly through the seams again.

"What the hell?" Bobby breathed.

"Just wait," Sam said and knelt on the floor so he could put the briefcase down. He popped open the locks and opened the case, letting Bobby get the full effect of the glow; and then took out the cup and gave it to Bobby.

Bobby was silent with awe, his eyes wide, as he turned over the cup in his hands. "Beautiful, isn't it?" Dean said softly.

"Yeah. Beautiful. It's -- is this what I think it is?"

"Castiel said it's the Holy Grail," Sam said.

Bobby slowly shook his head. "Never thought I'd see this. Never." He glanced at Dean. "Did you know this was the job, when you left?"

"No," Dean said. "I thought it was just a murder -- somebody important to the angels, but Castiel didn't say why."

"And now we've got a whole quest to go on," Sam said. "Only Dean can hardly move and I --" He shoved his hands in his pockets and looked away.

"We could die doing this," Dean said bluntly. "Though when *aren't* our lives threatened?"

"This is more than just a job, boys," Bobby said, still cradling the Grail in his hands. "This is heavy-duty stuff. This is legend."

"If we fail," Dean said, nodding, "it could mean the end of the world."

Sam looked up, and then away again. He said gruffly, "But first Dean has to heal a little. He can barely walk. You saw, Bobby. The guy we stole the Grail from, he's into black magic and he got some of Dean's blood."

Bobby looked shocked. "He's using blood magic on you, Dean?"

"Yeah. He's got a few drops of my blood on a handkerchief and he showed me how he can use it to torture me. He said he'd reopen the stab wound and he could find us anywhere. But Castiel said your place was protected from him, so . . ."

"Of course you can stay," Bobby said, "but we'll have to find you some protections when you're ready to leave, too. Blood magic is bad news."

"Tell me about it," Dean muttered.

Sam took the dish out of the briefcase and gave it to Bobby. "That's the next clue of where we need to go. We're supposed to find the four treasures that were stolen, but the hardest part, I think, is going to be figuring where the hell we're going."

Reluctantly Bobby put the cup down on the couch, and held the dish so he could inspect the embossing. "It's the Green Knight," he said, "but that could mean a lot of stuff."

"We might have to investigate this one," Dead said to Sam. "I don't think we can count of helpful waitresses showing up whenever we need them."

"Helpful waitresses?" asked Bobby, so Dean told him about Maya Fisher. When he was done Sam looked peeved again that he hadn't gone into so much detail earlier, but just got up to get a book from Bobby's shelves and start leafing through it.

"Here," he said and gave it to Dean. It was a long poem, illustrated with woodcuts -- the story of the Green Knight translated from Middle English. In the first illustration the Green Knight held a sword over a knight's neck, preparing to cut off his head.

Dean sighed. "Great. Homework."

"Just read, jerk," Sam said. "I'll read too and see if we can figure out anything." He went back outside to get their bags.

Dean read a few lines and then looked at Bobby, who was still studying the dish. "Bobby?" he said quietly.

"Still here."

Dean gnawed his lip a moment. "Thanks for taking us in."

Bobby glanced up and said gruffly, "We're family, boy. And you look like hell. I think sleep is more important than research right now."

"I'm fine," Dean said but despite this Bobby took the book from his hands and helped him to his feet.

"You're lying down in my bed until you get some color back. No arguing. Sam and I will work this out."

"Yes, sir," Dean said, surprisingly fine with letting someone else look after him, and let Bobby help him up the stairs to the master bedroom. It was just as cluttered and book-filled as the rest of the house, but the sheets were clean and the pillows smelled like fabric softener. He sank into them gratefully.

"I'll bring you some food in a couple hours," Bobby said. "Get some sleep."

"Thanks, Bobby," Dean said, closed his eyes and did just that.

In California, they say Luke Voorhees started bleeding from his palms in the middle of his algebra class.

In Arizona, they say it snowed in the desert. In Sedona, they say people couldn't stop watching the sky.

In Rhode Island, they say three-year-old Molly Lubin dreamed of angels and woke from her afternoon nap, sobbing about the end of the world.

Six

*When tomorrow has been stolen and you can't lift your head
And summer feels like winter your heart is full of stone
Though all your hopes have fallen your skin is now your only armour
Wear your scars like medals defender of the faith*

--"When All Around Has Fallen," Delirious?

Dean slept until evening, ate the scrambled eggs and toast Bobby brought him, took another Percocet and slept again. His dreams were strange, stranger than usual, even. The reoccurring dream of life with Lisa and Ben, the dream he treasured and adored, now involved Ben hunting and Lisa hating him for bringing her son into this life. When he dreamed of Hell -- and eventually he always dreamed of Hell -- he dreamed of Ben on the rack and no matter how hard he tried he couldn't wake himself from that one, even when he screamed Castiel's name.

Being awake was worse. Being awake hurt. His leg throbbed, his face ached, his stitches itched, and his body felt like a single mass of bruises.

In the morning he got up long enough to piss, eat some instant oatmeal and take another Percocet before going back to sleep. The dreams were even worse -- the burned forest, the plodding footsteps, the miles and miles of chains. He wanted Castiel to come and take him away -- why wouldn't he take him away? -- but he couldn't run fast enough to escape the smoke and fire.

When he woke again it was evening. Bobby's bedroom was purple with shadows, and Sam sat at the foot of the bed, reading a book by a pen-sized flashlight. "Hey, Dean," he said softly when he saw Dean was awake, and shut the book and put it aside. "How're you feeling?"

"Like hell," Dean said without irony.

Sam winced. "Yeah. Hey. A job's come up for Bobby -- there's a violent ghost over in Minnesota that he wants to take care of -- and he wants me to come with him. But I'm worried about leaving you alone."

"All I'm doing is sleeping."

"I know," Sam said, "but you're not getting better."

Dean couldn't argue with that. He wasn't getting better. He hurt too much, his sleep wasn't restful, and even if they were protected from being found at Bobby's he wasn't protected from Lorcan's long distance torture. He had a feeling that Lorcan sat in his real estate office all day, crushing the handkerchief in his hand, hurting Dean just because he could.

"Go do the job," he told Sam. "I'll be fine. I should've waited longer to go hiking than a day, I guess."

"This isn't just from overdoing it, Dean," Sam said. "I know it's not. He's still hurting you, isn't he?"

"Maybe," Dean said, "but I'm fighting it the only way I can, okay? Go do the job."

"But --"

"But what, Sam? What can you do?"

Sam looked away, tense, and said, "I can go back to Bethlehem and kill Lorcan Murphy."

Dean closed his eyes and set his jaw. "He's not a demon."

"Maybe I can sweat out some information from him first about where to find the next Grail castle, because this," he waved the book, "isn't telling us jack."

"You're not going back to Bethlehem."

Sam made an exasperated sound. "I'm not going to learn anything on the job."

"If you go back to Bethlehem, Lorcan Murphy will find you and he will kill you. And he'll probably take his time doing it, too. I can't protect you right now, Sam."

Sam got off the bed to pace in frustration, long arms waving. "You're the one who needs protecting! Murphy's after *you*, not me. I'd bet the beast is after you, too, and Castiel's focus is on you, and nobody trusts me with anything anymore. Least of all you. You want me to go with Bobby so you don't have to worry about me."

Dean sighed. "Yeah. You're right. Bobby will look after you when I can't."

"I don't need looking after!"

"Yes," Dean said, "you do."

"If you two are done screaming at each other," Bobby said from the doorway, "I've made burgers." He had a plate in one hand for Dean, and Dean pushed himself up to eat.

"Thanks, Bobby."

"Yeah," Bobby said, "and Sam, you're coming with me. I could use a hand and you two could use the time apart. Nothing drives you crazy like living each other's back pockets. Come on." He tugged on the back of Sam's shirt. Sam rolled his eyes but followed him downstairs anyway.

In the morning Dean saw them off and then curled up on Bobby's couch, desperate for some real rest -- a dreamless sleep, preferably, something so deep he wouldn't remember any of his dreams.

Instead he fell into something light and restless, the same dream as always -- the screaming, the fires, and he could only weep in frustration. "I hate this place, I hate this place, I hate this place," he whispered, unsure if he was asleep or awake. "Castiel. Castiel. Please come and get me, Castiel. Please, please, please . . ."

He felt a hand in his hair and opened his eyes. Castiel was sitting on the sofa, gazing at him and gently stroking his hair to wake him. Castiel gave him a patient smile. "Hello, Dean."

"Cas," Dean said, sitting up, and before he could stop himself he was holding Castiel's face and kissing him. Castiel made a soft sound in his throat and held Dean's shoulders, and when Dean touched Castiel's lips with his tongue they parted and Castiel moaned a little louder. Dean tasted his mouth as Castiel kneaded his shoulders, and Dean felt Castiel shiver under his fingers.

Dean pulled back and took his hands away from Castiel's face, feeling himself blush. "Sorry," he muttered. "Sorry. I'm just so glad to see you."

"I am glad to see you, too." Castiel dropped his hands from Dean's shoulders and tilted his head, the familiar puzzled expression on his face. "You look terrible."

"Yeah," Dean said, happy to put the kiss aside to deal with later. Much, much later. Like, never, maybe. "I'm not healing too well. Or sleeping much."

"I thought that was the case," Castiel said, pulling a leather cord from under his collar.

"How did you --" Castiel gave him another patient look as he paused in undoing the clasp.

"Yeah. Right. We're -- yeah." He nodded to the necklace. "What's that?"

"It is a gift for you." He held it up and Dean bowed his head so Castiel could fasten it around his neck.

"Oh. Castiel. That's -- that's very --"

"It's not from me." Dean looked up at him and Castiel smiled again. "We have mutual friends. When they heard what Lorcan Murphy is doing to you they created that and blessed it, to protect you."

"Tell them thanks for me." He looked down at the amulet that hung from the cord -- it was a small disk of malachite, set in silver. "It's nice," he said softly. "Malachite. Protection from bad dreams, right?"

"Yes," Castiel said. "Also for healing, and for guarding people who are in physical danger."

"Appropriate." He smiled at Castiel. "Who gave this to you? Someone you trust?"

"Someone I trust," Castiel said with a nod. "Three someones I trust. The Fisher sisters."

Dean frowned, confused. "Sisters? I thought they were grandma, mother and daughter."

"Yes," Castiel said placidly. "And sometimes they are sisters. It is confusing, but it is their way."

"But who are they?"

"They are the Fisher sisters. They have other names. Come," he said, rising, "they gave me more malachite to put where you sleep." Dean took him upstairs and got into bed, and Castiel put polished stones of malachite the size of golf balls in the windowsills. "That should protect you from him while you're sleeping."

"Thanks," Dean said quietly, leaning back against the headboard. "Could you . . . stay with me a while?"

"For a little while," Castiel said and sat on the edge of the bed, his hands folded. "Until you sleep."

"Thanks," Dean repeated and wished he'd sit closer. "Hey. Um. About earlier." Castiel looked at him, his face as unreadable as ever, and Dean said, "I have no idea what to say."

"You expressed affection," Castiel said. "Mortals do that."

"Yeah," Dean said. "But, see, the thing is, I really fuckin' miss you when you're not around. Which is dumb because you're around all the time now, like you can't get enough of me either."

Castiel looked down at his hands. He said quietly, "I also miss you."

"Oh," Dean breathed.

Castiel raised his head. "But the more important thing is our work, not what we want."

"Castiel," Dean whispered, "what do we want?"

They stared at each other a moment or two. Castiel said, "I want to go home. But I'm not sure where that is anymore."

Dean swallowed. "I'm sorry."

"I was warned. You cannot walk the Earth and remain unchanged." He gave another of his faint smiles. "It's blood. Blood makes you feel and hunger and -- and live."

"Angels don't have blood?" Dean said softly.

"No. No blood." He was quiet a moment. "We are made of light and thought and energy. I always thought a body was so limiting. How could you function when you were held back by flesh? But, oh, Dean . . ." He looked at Dean, with an expression Dean could only describe as awe. "You are infinite inside."

Dean reached out and wrapped his hand around Castiel's wrist, where he could feel Castiel's pulse pumping under his warm skin. "You're infinite too."

Castiel looked down at his wrist, then back up at Dean. "Close your eyes, Dean. Rest."

"Yeah," Dean muttered and scooted down under the sheets. "Will he be able to hurt me anymore? I mean, it'll be great not to have nightmares anymore but --"

"No," Castiel said. "You are protected."

"Okay," Dean said. "Thank you. And thanks for coming when I called you."

"I told you I would," Castiel said simply and leaned over him, hesitated, and then kissed his forehead. "Sleep," he murmured and Dean closed his eyes and slept.

When he awoke again it was evening, dark enough in the bedroom that he could only see the furniture as shapes, and he felt like he'd slept for a week. A good week, too, so that his head felt clearer than it had been for days. And he was hungry and he wanted a shower, and he wished Sam and Bobby would come back so they could get on the road.

Dean made himself a peanut butter and banana sandwich, and when he'd eaten he wrapped some plastic wrap around his leg to protect his stitches and took that shower, singing Bon Jovi and Elvis to amuse himself as he soaped up. Clean and in fresh clothes -- old sweats and a t-shirt, he wasn't feeling up to jeans just yet -- he turned on Bobby's dusty T.V. and got the book Sam had shown him with the poem about the Green Knight.

It was a strange story, even for a medieval poem, full of symbols and allusions he didn't understand, though the end notes explained things well enough. As far as he could figure, it was another pagan story that had been transformed like Sam said the Grail stories were --

characters threatened to chop off each other's heads and there were attempted seductions and a way-too-detailed description of a boar hunt.

Medieval people, Dean thought, were weird.

It didn't help with the search any, though. The Grail wasn't mentioned in the poem. Part of it took place at Arthur's court and Sir Gawain was the main character, but that was the only connection.

Dean played with the malachite amulet and wondered why this stone kept turning up lately. He wondered who the Fisher sisters really were. He wondered if Castiel would come because he wanted him, not only if he needed him.

He wondered what he would do with Castiel if he did.

He sighed, turned off the television and went back to bed.

It felt like early, early morning -- the sun was barely up and the light in the room was still pale and gentle -- when Dean woke again, this time to the flutter of great wings. He said, "Castiel," and felt the bed dip as Castiel joined him.

"How do you feel?" Castiel said.

"Good. Better. Leg still hurts like fuck but no nightmares and no feeling like someone's digging their fingers into the wound, you know?"

"Good." He started to speak, paused, and said, "I have been thinking."

"I have too. I read the whole Green Knight poem. Of course, I'm no closer to what any of it all means, but --"

"About you and I," Castiel said and Dean closed his mouth. Castiel said slowly, "I do not know, quite, what it all means either."

"Hey," Dean said, "why don't you get under the covers with me, and we can talk about this proper."

Castiel nodded and took off his raincoat and shoes, and Dean moved aside to make room for him. Castiel lay stiffly on his back a moment, and then moved onto his side, closer to Dean. He said softly, "I have known your name since the moment it was given you."

Dean blinked. "I didn't know that."

"There are many things I have not told you." He exhaled. "We have watched you every day of your life, you and Sam. We have watched every lesson you've learned, every mistake you've made --" Dean huffed at this, and Castiel laid a hand on his side to comfort him. "And every good deed that you've done. They are many, Dean. You have grown into a more than worthy champion for the mortal realm." He paused a moment and Dean watched him, frowning. "You tell me you're not strong enough to face what's coming, but, Dean, you are so much stronger than you know."

Dean felt his eyes grow damp and wiped them ruthlessly with the back of his hand. "Cas, I'm not."

"You are. I know you. I know what lies in store for you," Castiel said slowly, "and I weep for you. I have watched you through every moment of your life, every torment and every pain, and now I have flesh that desires and a heart that beats . . ."

He fell silent. Dean hesitated, then traced the otherworldly angles of Castiel's face with his fingertips. "Cas," he said softly, and Castiel made a pained sound and moved into his arms.

"I will not stop sending you into danger," he muttered against Dean's neck. "The fate of the world is at stake. But I hate it with every breath that's in me."

"But you won't rebel, will you," Dean whispered as he started stroking Castiel's hair. "Not my Castiel. Obedient till the end."

"Yes," Castiel said, sounding no happier. "I wish I did not *feel* so much, Dean."

"It's just being human," Dean said. "Which, like it or not, you kind of are."

"I am not," Castiel said. "I'm not really an angel anymore, either. I'm something in between."

"But when you go home --"

"I will know what I have lost." He propped himself up on his elbow. "Don't you see, Dean? Why do you suppose I was chosen to fetch you out of Hell?" Dean watched him, his eyes wide and his lips parted, and Castiel said in a broken tone, "I have known you all of your life, longer than your life. I have always loved you as a child of my Father. But from the moment I put on this body I have loved you as one man to another, and it is killing me."

"No," Dean said, taking Castiel's face in his hands, "no, it's not killing you. It's bringing you to life," and he kissed Castiel hard and fierce.

Castiel whimpered and wound his arms around Dean's neck. His lips parted at the touch of Dean's tongue, and when Dean stroked his tongue along Castiel's, Castiel clutched at his hair and pushed Dean into his back. He kissed Dean desperately, his hands framing Dean's face and moving down his chest.

"Ow," Dean muttered into his mouth, moving his thigh from under Castiel's knee, and Castiel backed off, breathing hard.

"I am sorry. I have hurt you."

"It's okay. I swear it's okay." He pulled Castiel back to him by the hips. "C'mere."

Castiel lay on top of him again, much more carefully than before, and leaned on his arms. He dipped his head and kissed Dean with what Dean could only call reverence, and it made him smile. He tugged open Castiel's tie so he could unbutton his collar and taste his throat, and then unbuttoned his shirt and kissed down Castiel's chest. Castiel whimpered and threw back his head, his eyes closed and his face flushing. He brought Dean's mouth back to his and kissed him, so Dean slid his hand down Castiel's chest and hip to palm between his legs. Castiel trembled and groaned, and pulled away to lie on his back. His eyes were wide and he gasped for breath as he ran his hand over his face.

"What?" Dean said, pushing himself up. "What's wrong?"

"This," Castiel said. "This is wrong. This is not my body, Dean."

"Oh," Dean said, deflated. "Yeah. I kind of forgot."

"As did I." He turned away from Dean to sit up and hang his legs over the edge of the bed, and he raked a hand through his hair. "I cannot use the body for this, no matter how much I want to."

"So . . . no sex at all?" Castiel shook his head, and Dean said vehemently, "This *sucks*, Cas."

"I know."

"Because I really -- I mean --" He huffed in frustration. "Damn it, why'd you have to be so hot?"

Castiel ducked his head and smiled. "My vessel has beautiful parents." He buttoned up his shirt.

"Yeah," Dean muttered and held his forehead as he took a deep breath and let it out. "I've been thinking about this since yesterday, about you and me and what we want, and it never even occurred to me, that this isn't your body. If you were in your own body --"

"I do not have my own body," Castiel said quietly as he knotted his tie.

"Yeah. So we're screwed. Only, completely not screwed. We're . . . platonic."

"Yes. I'm sorry."

Dean dropped his hand and looked at Castiel, who was methodically tying his shoes. "Cas? Would you, maybe, kiss me sometimes?"

Castiel looked at him and nodded. "Yes. I think that will be all right."

"Like, maybe, now?"

Castiel leaned close and kissed him sweetly. Dean held Castiel by the collar so that their foreheads touched, and when Castiel finally pulled away he looked sorrowful and weary. "I only meant to be certain the amulet was working," he said softly. "But here we are."

"Don't go, Cas. Stay with me a little longer." Dean ran his hand up Castiel's neck and brushed his fingers through Castiel's hair. "Please."

"If I stay --" He shook his head. "I long for you, Dean. I do. I miss you when we're apart, and I live for the times I will see you again."

Dean smiled at him, touched and pleased. "Me, too. Fuck, I miss you. This is just going to make it worse, isn't it?"

Castiel closed his eyes a moment, then smiled at him again, rueful. "Rest and heal, Dean. I will see you soon." He rose from the bed and put on his raincoat.

"Cas," Dean said quickly, before he could disappear, and Castiel looked at him, waiting. "I, um. I --" He exhaled, frustrated. "Don't be long, okay?"

"I will do my best, Dean," Castiel said, and was gone in a flutter of invisible wings.

Dean groaned and threw himself back onto the bed, turned off the light and closed his eyes. He didn't think he'd fall asleep quickly, but his body was still exhausted and he was asleep in moments.

In a motel in Minnesota, they say Bobby Singer woke early and checked the other bed for Sam. They say he was relieved when he saw Sam was still there, sound asleep. They say he didn't know why he expected Sam to be gone.

Seven

The search for the Grail is the search for the divine in all of us. But if you want facts, Indy, I've none to give you. At my age, I'm prepared to take a few things on faith.

--Indiana Jones & the Last Crusade, Steven Spielberg/Philip Kaufman

The phone woke him. Dean picked it up and clicked it on, greeting the caller with a blunt, "What?"

"Good morning, sunshine," Sam said. "How are you doing?"

"I'm okay. Still alive and relatively pain-free."

"How many Percocet are you taking?" Sam sounded worried -- and a little suspicious.

"Just four a day like I'm supposed to. Castiel brought me something and it's helping a lot. I can walk and stuff."

"What did he bring you? He told me he couldn't do miracles."

"He brought me an amulet. It's a long story." He sat up and rubbed his eyes. "What about you two?"

"It's a pretty run-of-the-mill haunting," Sam said. Bobby grumbled something in the background and Sam added, "Except for the dead teenagers, of course."

"Do you need me to look up something for you?"

"I think we're covered for research. I was just calling to check on you. So you're okay? You're eating?"

"I'm eating," Dean said. "I'm okay. I'll be ready to hit the road again by the time you get back. When will that be, do you think?"

"Three or four days, at most. Do you have another job for us already?"

"No," Dean said. "I mean, wherever we're going next. For the Grail, dude, we're still working on the Grail." Sam sighed, and there was a long enough pause that Dean said, "Sam? Did the call drop?"

"I'm here," Sam said. "Dean, we have no idea where to go. I've read the poem over and over, and it doesn't tell me a thing."

"Maybe it's not in the poem. Maybe it's something else."

"Like what?"

"I don't know . . . something like America's Stonehenge. An old place with a strange history. We just have to figure out which one could have been a Grail castle."

"Yeah, Dean, do you have any idea how many old places with strange histories there are in the U.S. alone? And we haven't even considered the possibility that we may have to go to other countries."

"A lot," Dean said, "and we just have to narrow it down. I'll work on that. I will," he said more firmly to Sam's huff. "I'll figure something out." He wished Ellen's roadhouse was still around -- research from books and the internet was fine, but there were so many things no one wrote down, knowledge passed on in stories told over beers and pizza. Still, they had the next best thing. "Sam, do you have Dad's journal?"

"No, I left it with you."

"Okay." He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I'll look at it."

"I don't remember anything about the Holy Grail in Dad's journal."

"Do you have every page memorized?" Dean pointed out.

"No," Sam muttered.

"Okay, then. I'll look through Dad's journal for anything helpful and if I don't find anything there we'll hit the books again when you get back. Maybe you'll see something I missed."

"Okay," Sam said. "We should be back Tuesday or so." Bobby grumbled something again and Sam added, "Bobby says take care, get plenty of rest and don't overdo anything."

"Tell him I said thanks," Dean said, smiling, and hung up.

Dean hadn't looked at the Grail since the day they arrived at Bobby's -- Sam had put it in the panic room once Dean was attended to -- so now Dean went downstairs to the basement and stepped into the tiny room. The briefcase sat on the desk, unopened, looking perfectly ordinary, and John's journal was on top of it. Dean picked up the journal and tucked it under his arm, hesitated, and then spun the combination and popped the locks on the briefcase. He opened it slowly, smiling when he saw the familiar glow.

He picked up the cup and cradled it in his hands, feeling it spread warmth down his arms and through his body. He held it to his chest a moment, then said softly, "I know you're bored. I know you want to be out there, doing whatever it is that you do. We're trying to find your home, honest. Don't suppose you can give me any hints, can you?"

The cup warmed in his hands but that was all. Dean didn't expect anything more, anyway. He put the cup carefully back in the case and shut the lid, locked it and spun the combination again.

He took the journal upstairs, poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down to read.

Dean had gone through two mugs of coffee and another peanut butter and banana sandwich when he found it. It was just in passing, just a few words, but he went back and reread them over and over, knowing it was another sign.

"Spent three days in Chicago, looking for a way to the Hanging Man. I didn't find it, but didn't expect to. I'll try another route. I hear promising things about Sedona."

Dean marked the page with a Post-It and rubbed his mouth in thought. It was early on in his father's career as a hunter -- he'd only been about six, himself -- and John didn't say another word about who the Hanging Man was or if he found him in Sedona.

Dean closed the journal and rubbed the bridge of his nose, head aching from cabin fever and too much coffee. He supposed he should sleep -- everybody kept telling him to rest -- but surely he was doing okay enough to go out.

Except everybody was telling him to stay at Bobby's, too. It was safe -- everywhere else was not. His foot twitched at the memory of the pain Lorcan had been causing him, and he sighed, sick of these walls and Bobby's many, many books.

A few hours would be okay. Just enough to get something to eat that wasn't peanut butter.

He limped upstairs, put on jeans and a fresh t-shirt and boots, grabbed his jacket and went out to the Impala. "Hey, baby," he said softly and started the engine, smiling as the Impala purred to life. He drove out of the wrecking yard on the road toward the city. He knew just the diner, a place that had great meatloaf and Oreo pie.

There was a crossroads on the way, and Dean stepped harder on the gas to get it past it quickly. His leg ached but he ignored it and tightened his hands on the wheel.

The back of his neck pricked and he glanced in his rear view mirror. There was a shape at the side of the road, hunched and dark and big. "Shit," Dean muttered and stepped harder on the gas. "Come on, baby," he whispered. "Come on. Please, baby." The engine roared as the Impala accelerated and Dean whispered, "Thank you," as he floored it away from the crossroads.

His hands shook as he drove.

The meatloaf was as good as he remembered, with creamy mashed potatoes and green beans, as was the Oreo pie; but Dean couldn't enjoy either of them. He had to think about the drive back to Bobby's. He had to figure out a way to get past the crossroads, where he had no doubt the beast was waiting for him.

He was drinking down the last of his Coke and crunching ice cubes when he noticed the walls of the diner. It had always been decorated the same way, for as long as he could remember -- old highway and street signs, vintage tin ads for things like Coca-Cola and Morton's salt.

They had added something new -- a copper face made of leaves. Dean blinked a few times, trying to remember where he'd seen that before, and said to a passing waitress, "What is that?" as he pointed to the face.

"It's kind of creepy," the waitress said with a nod. "Our new cook brought it in. It's the Green Man. It's a tree god thing, or something."

"The Green Man," Dean said. He'd read that name before, too -- it had come up in research for one thing or another. "What's it for?"

The waitress shrugged, disinterested. "Good luck, I guess. Or a good garden. I don't know. Do you want another slice of pie, sugar?"

"No, thanks," Dean said and left a bigger tip than usual since she'd been so willing to answer questions. Not that he knew what it meant -- it was like trying to put a jigsaw puzzle together when you don't have a picture on the box.

He paused on his way out, and then went back to the kitchen. The cook looked up from the griddle when Dean poked his head inside, and Dean said, "I just wanted to compliment the cook. The meatloaf was great."

"Thanks," the cook said and flipped a pancake.

"Hey, um, were you the one who brought in the Green Man head? The waitress I asked said it was a cook."

"Yeah," the cook said, and paused a moment, looking embarrassed. "I picked it up on the way out here, when I moved. People think it's weird, but I don't know, I like it. It makes me feel like somebody's watching over me, you know?"

"I know," Dean said. "Where did you get it?"

"A home store in Chicago." He flipped another pancake onto a plate and put the plate on the counter, and rang the bell. "They had lots. I can't remember the name, though. It wasn't one of those big chains -- it was a little place I found completely by accident. Sorry."

"Thanks," Dean said and got out the kitchen. He sat for a moment in the Impala before he turned the engine on, thinking. The Green Man, the Green Knight, the Hanging Man, Chicago . . . it all meant something and he couldn't figure out what.

He was pretty sure their next destination was Chicago, but he had no idea what they would look for when they got there.

But first he had to get home, and the sun was setting.

He got onto the road back to Bobby's place, driving fast, but even so it seemed the sun set faster than it should have and the darkness was absolute. Dean flipped on the lights, and felt his heart speed up as he approached the crossroads. "Stay with me, baby," he whispered, and then, "No, baby, don't break my heart," as the engine rattled and the Impala rolled to a stop, dead center in the middle of the crossroads. "No. Dammit." He slammed his hand against the steering wheel, and then stroked the dashboard in apology. "Not your fault, baby. Should've known something would want to fuck with me."

He got out of the car and went to the trunk, opened the false bottom and got out a shotgun. He loaded it with salt pellets, looking around at the dark night, waiting for the beast or whatever was coming.

It wasn't long before he felt the ground shaking beneath his feet -- the slow, steady plod he had heard so many times in his dreams and on the mountain in New Hampshire. He tightened his grip on the shotgun and pointed it into the darkness, whispering, "Bring it," as he put his finger on the trigger.

A dark shape humped up the road, with broad sloping shoulders and massive horns. Dean could hear it breathe, could hear it sniffing its way up the road, could hear the clop-clop sound of its hooves against the asphalt. Dean took a deep breath and raised the shotgun to his shoulder, telling himself not to fire until he was sure he would hit it.

A figure stepped in front of the shotgun, holding up her hands. "Don't shoot."

Dean tensed and moved his finger from the trigger. "Maya?"

Maya Fisher smiled at him with exasperation. "You were supposed to stay at Bobby's."

"I know," Dean whispered. "I got restless. Maya, do you hear that -- that thing out there?"

She turned and looked up the road, then put her hand over the muzzle of the shotgun. "You can't hurt it with this, Dean."

"Then what do I do?"

"You wait." She moved out of the way to lean against the trunk with him. "Don't move or speak when it comes close."

"Is it blind?"

"It's been in the dark for a very long time."

Dean tried not to breathe loudly as he clutched the shotgun. Maya was calm beside him, warm and soft and smelling of peaches, and she wrapped a hand around his elbow in reassurance.

The beast humped closer, its great head winging back and forth as it snorted at the ground, and then it veered around the Impala on slow, heavy hooves. Dean's eyes widened as he watched it pass -- it had to be at least six feet of something bristly and stinking. He held his breath until the beast had passed the Impala and its footsteps faded away.

Dean sucked in a breath and said, "Jesus," as he slumped against the car.

Maya quietly laughed. "Not quite."

"How come it ignored me?"

"You're wearing your amulet." Dean touched the malachite amulet, and Maya said, "It protects those in physical danger."

"Thanks," Dean said. "For giving it to me, I mean. Thank you."

"It's what I'm here for."

He looked at her, puzzled. "You're a part of all this in ways I just don't get, you know. How do you know Castiel?"

"I'm not an angel, if that's what you're asking."

"Yeah, I guess it is. He said sometimes you're sisters, and sometimes you're daughter, mother and grandmother. How does that even work?"

"Does it help if I said we're usually referred to as maiden, mother and crone?" He looked at her blankly and she shrugged and dismissed it. "Never mind. Just trust that we have a vested interest in this world being okay. Now get back to Bobby's before you get yourself killed."

"Yes, ma'am," Dean said and opened the driver's side door. "Can I drop you anywhere?"

"No," she said with amusement and in the blink of an eye was gone.

Dean let out his breath, told himself his life was no weirder than usual, and drove back to Bobby's as fast as he could.

That was Sunday night. On Monday afternoon Dean heard the rattle of Bobby's truck and went out onto the front porch to greet him and Sam, bursting with the need to tell them of his discoveries.

"You look better," Bobby said with approval, and tilted his head, listening. "What's that running?"

"I have the washing machine going. I'm washing your sheets."

"Above and beyond," Bobby said with wonder, grinned and gave Dean's head a gentle shove.

"So what did you get up to while we were out?"

Sam had thrown himself onto the floor and was stretching out, restless from sitting so long, but he looked up curiously at this question.

"Oh, you know," Dean said, flopping onto the floor beside Sam. "Reading, sleeping, figuring out where to go next, seeing that beastie that's following us --"

"What?" Sam exclaimed.

"I saw it. Last night."

"It came here?" Bobby said, frowning.

"No, I --" He had to look away, embarrassed. "I went out. I was hungry for something other than what you've got here, so I went out to dinner, and at the crossroads on the way back the car stalled and the critter came sniffing by."

"And it didn't attack you?" said Sam.

"Nope. Castiel gave me this." He pulled the malachite amulet from under his shirt. "It's protection."

"An angel," Bobby said slowly, "believes in mineral lore?"

"I don't know if he believes it or not," Dean said. "All I know is that it works. And it's originally from the Fishers, anyway, and we know they're not your average, everyday women."

Sam shook his head. "This job just keeps getting weirder."

"There's more of it upstairs," Dean told Bobby. "I thought I'd leave one with you and take the rest with us. You might get besieged after we go."

"Thanks," Bobby said. "Malachite. That's a new one. So, you said you've figured out the next stop?"

"Yeah -- it's just one line in Dad's journal, but I think it's enough. He said he went to Chicago to find a way to the Hanging Man, but didn't find one so he would try Sedona. And then he didn't say anything more about it, so I guess he didn't find him."

"The Hanging Man," Bobby said softly. "That's a story I haven't heard in a long time."

"Who is he?" Sam asked.

"It's not a he, it's a place. A pub."

"So we just look in the yellow pages," Sam said. "It shouldn't be hard to find."

"You're not listening," Bobby said. "It's not in regular Chicago." He took a deep breath at both of their blank looks, and explained, "There are cities in the world that are said to have second versions above or below or between them, even. Sedona's the best known -- I've heard it about London, Kyoto, Auckland, Clarksville, Odessa and Chicago, too. You can only get there if you know the way, and it's not like the normal version of the city most people know. It's -- I can't believe I'm spouting this New Age crap, either -- more magical."

"Magical versions," Sam said slowly, "of ordinary cities. Great. So how do we get there?"

"I don't know," Bobby said. "I've never met anyone who's been, and only heard second- and third-hand stories about people who did. It's like fairy tales -- you fall asleep under the wrong tree and suddenly you wake up in a different world."

"We can't just fall asleep under random trees," Dean said thoughtfully, "but we can follow the signs, same as we have been. We can look for the Green Man and the Green Knight, and more cards, and anything about the Grail. We're being led."

"I wish we'd just be told what the hell is going on," Sam said and shoved himself to his feet. "If we leave now we can get to Chicago by tonight. Ready to get on the road, Dean?"

"Yeah, as soon as you are."

"Let me hit the can and get something to eat and I will be." He went up the stairs. Dean got to his feet as well and started gathering books and clothes.

Bobby said, "How are you boys doing for cash?"

"We're . . . not great," Dean admitted, "but I know a couple places in Chicago that have pool tables and gullible clientele, so we'll be better. Bobby, I swear we're okay," he added when Bobby got up from the sofa and went to his cookie jar.

"Just take the money, Dean," Bobby said and took out a few bills. "I worry about you boys. I worry about Sam." He hesitated, looking down at the bills, and said softly, "I had dreams every night we were on that job, Dean. Dreams about Sam. The same dream over and over, really, Sam in a thunderstorm and covered with blood, and his eyes -- they weren't Sam's eyes, Dean."

Dean shivered. "He's fine, Bobby."

"Is he?" Bobby said, looking at him keenly.

"I'm not going to let anything happen to him."

"I think," Bobby said, "the question is more what he's going to make happen." He put the bills in Dean's hand.

"Thanks, Bobby," Dean said quietly. "I'm trying to keep him from going dark side. I am."

"I know," Bobby said, "but no matter how much we love someone, we can't make them do what we want."

"Yeah," Dean muttered and stuffed the cash into his back pocket. "People keep telling me that."

"Dean!" Sam called from the top of the stairs. "Ready?"

"Just about. Just need to get the Grail. Will you get the malachite stones from Bobby's bedroom? All but one."

"Sure," Sam said and disappeared again.

As he went down to the panic room, Dean wondered about Bobby's dreams -- he'd had similar dreams himself, but that was out of fear, not prophecy. He didn't have prophetic dreams unless Castiel was giving them to him, but Bobby was a different case. Who knew what beings might be on Bobby's side, nudging him here and there, guiding him along.

He picked up the briefcase and checked the locks, gave it a pat and went back upstairs.

They say across the country stained glass windows cracked but did not break.

They say across the country prayer candles blew themselves out, and altar boys dropped to the ground, twitching and speaking in tongues.

They say across the country statues of Mary wept tears of blood.

Eight

Remember your name.

Do not lose hope — what you seek will be found.

*Trust ghosts. Trust those that you have helped
to help you in their turn.*

Trust dreams.

Trust your heart, and trust your story.

--"Instructions," Neil Gaiman

They arrived late Monday night in Chicago, found a motel (not one they'd stayed at before, because that was only asking for trouble) and spent all of Tuesday trying to find the specialty garden store the cook had mentioned that sold Green Man ornaments.

The search was not successful. At least pool was -- on Tuesday night they got up a good-sized bankroll between the two of them, enough to fund a few days in what was not a cheap city. But if Chicago didn't work out, Dean thought, he didn't know where to go next. Other cities might have ways to the Hanging Man but the Winchesters had no way to get Kyoto, for instance -- and all the clues they'd gotten said Chicago.

On top of this, Sam was visibly Not Saying Anything, and it was driving Dean crazy. During the day he just asked questions, his voice pitched low and gentle like he always did to get people to talk to him. At the hotel that night he had the book open and occasionally turned pages, but he spent so much time looking at Dean that he couldn't have spent any time actually reading.

"What?" Dean said finally from the bed, where he had his leg propped up on his pillows and a book on his chest.

"The Hanging Man. It's a story even Bobby doesn't believe," Sam said.

"Bobby just doesn't know if it's true or not," Dean said. "If he didn't think it was worth looking into he wouldn't have let us come here."

"Right," Sam said. "And what has Castiel told you about this?"

"Nothing," Dean said and swallowed. "He hasn't said a thing." He hadn't seen Castiel, not even in his dreams, since the day they kissed -- the day Castiel said he wouldn't have sex in another man's body.

"So how do you know, how do you believe, that we're not being on a wild goose chase? That we're not being diverted from something more important?"

"Sammy," Dean began in exasperation.

"No, really, Dean. I mean, the Holy Grail? Really? Are you sure it is what we're being told it is?"

"Yes," Dean said and hauled the briefcase over from the other side of the bed. "I'm sure. Just hold it Sammy, just hold it for a minute, let it--"

"No!" Sam said, holding up his hands. "No. I don't want to hold it. I don't want to touch it, Dean."

"Why not?"

"Because --" He shook his head and when he looked at Dean his eyes were full. "Because every night I sleep in the same room as that thing, it gives me bad dreams. Dreams I don't want and that don't make any sense."

"What do you see?" Dean whispered, holding the briefcase to his chest.

"I see you holding a sword to my throat," Sam said. "I see a monster with a little girl in its mouth. I see you, lynched, and your body burning." He pointed to the briefcase. "That thing wants me to fail. It wants me to turn dark side and -- and -- and --"

"Sam, stop," Dean said wearily. "Please stop. You heard what Castiel said -- the Grail is a door. We can't control what comes through."

"So why is it sending all this ugliness to me?" Sam whispered. "What did we do to deserve this, Dean?"

Dean put the briefcase aside and went to Sam, put his hands on Sam's shoulders and leaned his chin against Sam's head. Sam exhaled shakily. "Our family," Dean whispered, "was chosen by Azazel to carry out his plans."

"I know that, Dean."

"I know you do, but you forget the same thing that he forgot. Choice, Sammy. Free will. We may have a destiny but we can still say no. You can still refuse."

"I'm scared," Sam whispered, leaning back in his chair. "When all this comes down, and you know it will, I don't know what's going to happen and it scares me."

"What's gonna happen," Dean said, "is you're gonna make the right choice."

Sam sniffed and chuckled and moved out of the chair. Moment over. "The right choice, huh? Screw destiny and all of it. I wish I had your belief."

"You do, Sam," Dean said. "You've got all of it."

Sam looked at him and gave a sad little smile, and went into the bathroom and shut the door. Dean sighed and got back into bed, and put his hand on the briefcase. It was warm under his palm.

He closed his eyes, wishing there was a way to make Sam understand. It was just a plain clay cup, small and insignificant, but every time he held it, it made him feel -- just -- loved.

That was the word. It made him feel loved.

"Send him good dreams," he whispered to the cup and turned onto his side. He didn't fall asleep until he was sure Sam was asleep himself.

In the grand tradition of their family on April Fool's Day, in the morning Dean expected to have cayenne pepper in his shorts or Superglue on his toothbrush. When he woke Sam was still asleep, flopped like a rag doll on the other bed. He thought about sticking Sam's hand in a bowl of warm water, but decided to just let the day pass unremarked. There were more important things to think about than one-upping Sam in their ongoing prank war.

Dean shoved himself up and went into the bathroom, wishing he'd thought to get some plastic wrap at Bobby's to protect his stitches so he could take a shower. He was sick of bathing from

the sink. Still, a washcloth and soap were always available, and he could wash his hair under the tap in the bathtub even though kneeling made his leg ache even more than usual.

Once he was cleaned up for the day he shaved and brushed his teeth, and when he came out again Sam was awake, sitting on the edge of the bed and sleepily blinking. "Up and at 'em, Sammy!" Dean said with as much cheer as he could muster and sat on the bed to pull on his boots.

"If there's blue dye in the shower I'm shaving off your eyebrows," Sam muttered and lumbered into the bathroom. Dean just laughed.

"Hey," he said as they were walking to breakfast, "do you remember that website you showed me a while back, Doors to Hell?"

"Yeah," Sam said, giving him an odd look.

"Do you think it's still around? Maybe we could see if they have any doors in Chicago and start . . . trying them," he finished weakly, as Sam's odd look only grew odder.

"You want to start trying random doors," Sam said.

"I'm a little low on ideas," Dean admitted.

"How long did Dad say he was here, looking for a way in?"

"A couple days."

Sam frowned at the sidewalk. "See, he probably had more ideas of what to look for than we do. Somebody must have told him about the Hanging Man to begin with and how to find it."

"Yeah," Dean said, "or he just heard the story and decided to give it a try." He wished they could turn to Pamela -- she might have had connections in the spirit world to explain about the other side. He sighed, shoving his hands in his pockets.

The little coffee shop down the street from their motel didn't have any cards or Green Man ornaments hanging on the walls, and Dean didn't bother hiding his disappointment. There'd

always been something, but there wasn't so much as a green postcard or a chess piece to guide them.

"How'd you sleep last night?" he asked Sam quietly after their waitress took their order. "More bad dreams?"

Sam flipped through the laminated menu of desserts, frowning. "I don't think I slept much."

Dean sighed, exasperated. "Sam," he said quietly, "this is a holy object. It's sacred. It doesn't have it in for you."

"Could we talk about something else, please?" Sam said, pushing the menu aside. "Like, anything else? Like finding a door that doesn't exist?"

"I told you my idea. Doors to Hell." He nodded.

"How about something real?" Sam said and then frowned and looked up as another patron pulled over a chair to sit at their booth. "Uh, hi?"

"Oh," the young man said, "don't tell me you don't remember." He beamed at them.

"Trickster," Sam growled, and Dean frowned too -- it had been a long time but he remembered how utterly normal the guy looked except for his superior smirk. "Don't you have April Fool's pranks to play? Jerks to kill?"

"That is the irony of my life," said the Trickster, looking disgruntled. "April Fool's Day is the day that I'm bound. I have to behave today. Plus somebody asked me to look after you guys. Hey, do they have tater tots here? I like tater tots."

"They do deep-fried hash browns," Dean said, starting to smile.

"Who asked you?" Sam said, still suspicious.

"Nobody I'll say no to, believe me." He turned around and gestured to the waitress. "Have you guys got cash? I don't carry money."

"We can treat you to breakfast," said Dean.

"Dean," Sam said and glared at him.

"He's here to help," said Dean. "We're buying him pancakes."

The Trickster looked smugly at Sam. "Blueberry pancakes," he said when the waitress came to their table. "And coffee. Keep it coming."

"So what's it going to take to get to the Hanged Man?" Dean asked the Trickster after she left. "Is there an herb we take, or a spell? An incantation of some kind? Maybe a key?"

"No." The Trickster shook his head. "It's just a matter of opening the right door the right way."

"We've looked all over downtown for the right door," Sam said.

"It's not something you find if you're looking for it," the Trickster said, exasperated. "You know how there are some things you can only see out of the corner of your eye? It's like that."

"So how do we find it?"

"Fortunately for you guys, I know where to look." He paused. "Do you have it with you? The Cup?"

"It's back at the motel," Dean said.

The Trickster reached over and rapped his knuckles on the top of Dean's head. "No!" he said like he was scolding a naughty puppy. "You don't leave the cup unattended, even for breakfast." There was a faint thumping sound and Dean felt the briefcase between his feet. "That's better," the Trickster said and grinned at the waitress when she returned with their coffee. Dean reached down and touched the top of the briefcase.

"How do you know about this?" Sam said. "You're not even -- I mean, I always thought you were Loki or something."

"My stories are long gone," the Trickster said, waving his hand. "Doesn't matter -- I still have a good time. I know because we all know. There's a whole world, you know, that you only see when it intersects with yours. We have our own concerns and our own hierarchy --"

"Like the person you won't say no to," Dean said. "Is it Castiel?"

The Trickster looked annoyed. "Like I'd follow the orders of an angel. Please. There are older and more powerful beings. And the cup and the Apocalypse, it affects all of us, even the ones who've been around longer than Jesus. The rules change, the new boss moves in, you know how it goes."

"So you care about the Apocalypse," Sam said.

"Of course I do. Do you think they have a place in Hell for people like me? The answer to that, by the way, is no. Hell has no sense of humor and it's nothing but pompous pricks wrestling for domination. Boring. I'd rather keep the Earth nice and normal and full of suckers."

"Wow," Sam said. "That's almost selfless."

The Trickster shrugged, smiling, and drank some coffee. "I like the world," he said simply. "There's plenty of things worth saving, like pancakes and Hershey's Kisses and hot girls in lingerie. You know what Hell's got?" He didn't wait for an answer. "It's got pain and fire and smoke. And the screaming." He rolled his eyes. "I'm not crazy about the screaming." He saw Dean's expression and muttered, "Sorry. Yeah, of course you know."

"s okay," Dean said. Sam was looking at him with the compassionate expression he usually used on witnesses, and Dean scowled at him. "I'm okay."

"So," the Trickster said, "we eat, and then we're going for a walk. You boys ever been to the art museum?"

Dean had to pay for the Trickster's admission to the museum as well, and the Winchesters followed him up the stairs. "Seriously?" Sam said. "The door's in a museum?"

"A door is in the museum," the Trickster said. "The simplest one to find is." He led them through the galleries, and paused in front of a small wing with a huge Georges Seurat at the end.

"Is it here?" Dean said, peering into the gallery.

"No. I just really like that picture. This way." He hurried on.

Dean tucked the briefcase under his arm and strode after him, wondering if they weren't being tricked somehow after all. He exchanged a look with Sam, who just shrugged and kept up with the Trickster easily with his long legs.

The Trickster led them to the textiles wing and stopped in front of a large tapestry. "This is six hundred years old," he said quietly. "Just a blink, in the grand scheme of things."

"This is our door," Sam said, speaking softly too. The tapestry portrayed a similar scene to the dish -- the Green Knight at King Arthur's court, holding his decapitated head as other knights looked on. Dean held the briefcase a little closer to him and felt the warmth of the cup through the leather.

"This is the door." The Trickster looked as serious as they'd ever seen him. "Now. When we go through the door we will be in the marketplace. Stay with me. Got that? Stay. With. Me. No matter how tempting or shiny things look, do not stop, do not bargain, do not pick up anything even to look at it. The merchants will eat you alive if they think they can. It's not far to the Hanging Man but that doesn't mean it's not dangerous."

"Why is it dangerous?" Sam said.

"Because it's the other side, dumbass," the Trickster said. "And you're mortals. Mostly," he added, eyeing Sam, and Sam narrowed his eyes at him. "Oh, don't give me that look. You know it as well as I do. Now, when we reach the Hanging Man, let me do the talking. Don't touch anything, speak when spoken to, and don't eat anything or you'll never be allowed to leave. Got it?"

"Got it," Sam said and Dean echoed, "Got it."

"Okay." He took a deep breath, glanced around, and reached into the tapestry and took hold of the latch in the tiny woven door in the castle's wall. Dean's eyes widened as the Trickster pulled the door forward to the top of the tapestry, until it covered the surface of the tapestry and was big enough to step through. "And do not," the Trickster added, "do *not* let go of that briefcase, Dean." He opened the door. "Hurry!"

Sam stepped through the door, and Dean gave the Trickster an uncertain look before he followed.

It might have lasted the blink of an eye.

It might have lasted a thousand years.

Dean landed heavily on his knees and fell against Sam's back, gasping for breath. Behind him the Trickster stepped nimbly through the doorway and then held out his hands to help them up. Dean took hold of his forearm to yank himself up, and Sam nearly pulled him off his feet as he staggered upright.

"Ouch," the Trickster said pointedly and shook out his arm. Dean held the briefcase under his arm with his hand in his pocket, as secure as he could get it, and gave the Trickster a nod to his questioning look.

"I'm ready."

"Remember what I said," the Trickster admonished them and they moved out of the dark little alley and into the Marketplace.

Whatever Dean was expecting from such an ordinary name as the Marketplace, it wasn't what they saw. It seemed to be indoors and outdoors at once. The sky overhead was dark as night and the stars were out, though Dean couldn't see where the walls and roof ended -- they just seemed to blend into the trees that in turn seemed to just blend into the sky. He could see no moon, not even a sliver of the first quarter.

Torches or bright paper lanterns blazed in front of shops and little stalls. There were buildings behind the market stalls as well, two or three floors at most, some of plain wood with empty windows, some of marble with filigreed silver or gold screens. Few of these had signs, and those that did read things like the Seven Dancing Brothers and Zephyr of the East.

It could be any marketplace in any small city, Dean supposed, except for the people. They were like every children's novel come to life, except darker somehow, harder. There were tiny gnomes and ethereal fae, winged and wrinkled naked women he supposed were harpies, a tall woman with snakes in her hair who hid her face behind a silk veil. In one stall a squat man cooked game hens on a rotisserie, from fire provided by a salamander. A forest god, green and glowing, cooled its feet in the central fountain while its dryads ate chestnuts on the fountain's edge. They nudged and whispered to each other as the Winchesters and the Trickster walked past. Dean almost stopped to say hello but the Trickster glared at him, so he gave them a "sorry, ladies" look and kept moving.

"So," Sam said to the Trickster, "all those stories with, like, London Below or an Inn Between Worlds, there's some actual truth to them?"

"Of course," the Trickster said. "Where do you suppose collective memory comes from? This way." He led them to an alley off the main thoroughfare.

"Are we sure this is safe?" Sam whispered to Dean.

"I think the last thing we are is safe," Dean said, "but we can't stop now." He followed the Trickster into the alley.

One of the buildings looked like a thatched cottage, and had a sign hanging over the door -- the Hanging Man. Instead of a man hanging by a rope from his neck, like Dean expected, it was a man hanging upside-down from a pole by his foot, with his other leg bent at the knee.

"Tarot," Sam said from behind Dean as he paused on the front steps.

"Yeah," Dean said. "I guess it means we're on the right path." He looked back at Sam, who just raised his eyebrows at him skeptically, and then went into the pub.

Inside, it was just as crowded and unbelievable as outside -- the patrons were elves and sirens and changelings, none of them bothering to hide their true faces away from mortal eyes. Some were perfectly ordinary-looking people, like the Trickster, so Dean assumed they had to be ousted gods. Some were beings of fire, some of ice, some trailing ivy from their limbs, some made of living stone.

The pub fell utterly silent when they entered, and every head turned to them. A few of the patrons got to their feet, chairs scraping against the wood floor.

"Hello!" the Trickster said cheerfully. "These are the Winchesters. They're here to see himself. Is he in?"

There was a long silence and no one moved.

The Trickster sighed. "We have to do this the hard way, then. You know who sent me. Do I have to call her to get you guys in line?"

One fae, her hair and skin silver and her clothes spangled like the night sky, pointed to the stairs.

"Thanks," the Trickster said, still annoyed, and turned to go up the stairs.

"Is it because we're hunters?" Dean whispered to him as he jogged along behind. "They know we'd kill them on the other side?"

The Trickster rolled his eyes. "Don't flatter yourself. It's because you're mortals. Mortals only come here when we're all in deep shit." He stopped in front of the door at the end of the passageway and took a deep breath.

"Why are you nervous?" Sam said. "Aren't you a god?"

The Trickster looked at him, incredulous. "So is he!" He straightened his shoulders and knocked on the door. "Besides," he added more softly, "he scares the living daylights out of me." At the brusque "Come!" from inside, the Trickster pushed open the door, and Sam and Dean followed him into a long, narrow, candle-lit room.

The Green Knight sat at the end of a long plank table that was lined with attendants, more fae and gnomes and dryads and knights. They all fell silent at the sight of the newcomers, and the Green Knight set down his gold flagon and got to his feet.

He was big and green, no false advertising there. His green hair flowed down to his shoulders and his green beard flowed down to his chest, his jerkin and breeches were green leather, even his skin was green as an emerald. "So," he said. "Who are these children?"

"Sam and Dean Winchester," the Trickster said and glanced from one to the other.

"And why have you brought them to me?"

"On her orders."

This caused murmuring up and down the table, which the Green Knight silenced with a gesture. "What would she have me do with them? The day for sacrifices has passed."

Sam gulped and Dean wished he had a gun. The briefcase warmed under his arm and he felt a little better.

The Trickster said, "She wants you to help them."

The Green Knight looked none too pleased at this. "Alpha and Omega," he said. "The beginning and the end. You've put us all in a precarious position, the two of you. If we're cut off from the mortal world, we'll continue to exist for a few centuries, but we'll fade and grow dim until we wink entirely out of existence. And that's only if Lucifer decides to ignore us instead of lay siege and drag us into his kingdom."

Sam started to speak, but the Trickster made a warning noise and Sam shut his mouth. Dean took a deep breath, and then stepped up to the end of the table and laid the briefcase on it. Gasps went around through the Green Knight's guests.

"Is that it?" the Green Knight said softly.

"Yes, sir," Dean said. "The cup and the dish are in here. We've come for the sword."

"No, no, no," the Trickster muttered, but the Green Knight only laughed. He stood and drew a great sword from the scabbard at his waist, and laid it on the table. It shined in the dark room, and the jewels in its pommel glittered in the candlelight.

Dean unlocked the briefcase and opened it. The dish looked the same -- silver and delicate -- but the cup was not the same clay cup Dean knew. It was bigger and heavier, shining like beaten gold, set with jewels, a thing of beauty.

He closed the briefcase and set the cup on top of it. The cup and sword both glowed as if in recognition.

The Green Knight said in a wondering tone, "I have not seen that for many a year. It was once in my keeping, when the world was dark, but it passed on to the next guardian long ago."

"This place was once a Grail castle?" Sam asked.

"Yes. Once." The Green Knight gazed at the cup, lost in memories. "Those were strange and wonderful days." He focused keen green eyes on them. "What do you know about the monster that's following you?"

"Nothing," Sam said.

"I saw it once," Dean said. "It's big and smelly."

"A creature was stolen from its home and was made into a slave. Now this slave tracks you for its mistress and it knows the scent of your blood. Not only that, but a sorcerer has marked you -- especially you, Dean."

"I know," Dean said quietly and took the malachite amulet from under his shirt. "I'm being looked after."

"Yes," the Green Knight murmured. "She would do that."

Dean thought, *This is too easy*, but said, "If we can just take the sword we'll get back to stopping the Apocalypse."

The Trickster made another warning noise and the Green Knight burst into hearty laughter. "Nothing is that simple," the Green Knight said. "Especially not this. First you must earn the sword. First you must prove yourselves."

Dean sighed. "You know what? I've spent my entire life hunting the supernatural and I spent forty years in Hell. I don't know what more I have to do to prove myself. And Castiel said --"

"Castiel is only an angel, boy," the Green Knight growled, starting to rise. "I am a god."

"And I'm Dean fucking Winchester," Dean began, and the Trickster quietly groaned as the knights of all sizes stood, knocking over benches and chairs, and drew their swords.

"Dean," Sam whispered behind him.

There was a soft sound in the doorway -- a woman clearing her throat. Every head turned to her as she walked quietly into the room, and Dean didn't know if he should be relieved or more worried when he saw it was Maya Fisher. She touched Dean's arm as she passed, and walked down the length of the table to where the Green Knight stood. As she moved, the knights quietly put their swords away.

The two -- the small young woman, the enormous knight -- stood quietly looking at one another, and the Green Knight bowed his head and sank into his chair again. "I will test them," she said softly. "Please clear the table."

"You heard the lady," the Green Knight said, so every lady and knight and creature took away their plates and cups, clearing the way for Sam and Dean to sit across from Maya. She situated herself at the Green Knight's right hand -- who, of course, did not move -- and put a silk bag on the table.

"So . . . I don't understand," said Sam, and Dean put the Grail back in the briefcase to cover that he didn't get it, either.

"You are going to be tested," Maya said as she untied the silk bag. "Every hero is tested. You have passed the first -- you found the Grail and have vowed to be its guardians. You have passed the second -- you found the dish despite physical pain and emotional doubt." She took out a deck of Tarot cards and spread the bag, now just a square of green silk, on the table. "Now you must pass the third -- to keep your heads."

They say in San Francisco there is a labyrinth set in the paving stones of the courtyard of a church. They say on that day, observant tourists noticed a strange shimmer over the courtyard, as if for a moment great stone walls appeared and then were gone.

Nine

"My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.

"Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.

"What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?

"I never know what you are thinking. Think."

--"The Wasteland," T.S. Eliot

"I don't like the sound of this," Sam muttered to Dean.

"Me neither," said Dean, "but what choice have we got?" He sat across from Maya and put the briefcase between his feet. Sam sat at his side, his eyes on the Green Knight.

Maya looked at the Trickster, who hadn't moved. "You, too."

"I'm not a part of this," the Trickster protested. "You just asked me guide them. You didn't say anything about tests."

"We're all a part of this," Maya said calmly, so the Trickster sat at Dean's other side with a frustrated sigh.

"Wait," said Dean, "you asked him?"

"Yes." She nodded and put the deck of cards in front of Sam. "Shuffle them, please."

He took the deck and shuffled them, and Dean said, "Who are you? Really?"

"I'm Maya," she said patiently and thanked Sam when he gave her the deck.

"Yeah, but --"

"I'm Maya," she said again, looking into his eyes, and Dean thought, maybe, he understood.

"Each of you take a card, please."

"You know what I'm going to get," the Trickster said as he took a card.

"Yes, I do, but do it anyway, please. Sam, Dean." They both took cards, and she said, "Turn them over, please."

The Trickster turned over his. "The Fool. Big surprise."

"Isn't it terrible to be an archetype," Maya said, smiling at him.

Sam turned his over hesitantly, and exhaled when he saw it. "The Tower."

Dean looked at Maya a moment more, and then the Green Knight whose hand was resting on the handle of his battle axe. He turned over his card and frowned, confused. "The Hanging Man."

"Okay," Maya said. "Good. Good start. You, of course, know your path and your destiny," she said to the Trickster, who nodded and leaned his head on his hand, bored. "Now, Sam. Yours."

"I'm just happy it's not the devil card," Sam said quietly.

Maya reached over and patted his hand. "Don't be complacent just because it looks benign. The tower is about pride." Sam frowned and looked down at the card again. "Pride is what keeps us blind to our own faults and to the changes we need to make to be happy. Or in your case, to refuse your destiny."

"I don't want my destiny," Sam said. "I don't want to be the Antichrist."

"And yet," Maya said softly, "you don't refuse the gifts that come along with the title, do you? Not the powers, the weapons, the strengths . . . the lover."

The Green Knight narrowed his eyes at Sam and fingered the handle of his axe a little more blatantly.

"How am I supposed to fight without the advantages I've got?" Sam exclaimed. "We are up against something so big --"

"I know what you're up against," Maya said. "I know. I also know who and what are on your side. Sam, you've been warned time and time again about using those powers, and yet you continue,

and you always tell yourself, 'I'm strong enough. I won't be tempted.' But are you, Sam? In your heart, are you?"

Sam's jaw clenched, and Dean said, "He is," in a low voice.

"Oh, Dean," Maya said gently. "Your faith is one of the best things about you." She said to Sam, "I'm going to give you three words to think about. Pride. Illusion. Change. Okay?"

"Okay," Sam said. Maya looked at the Green Knight, who was still watching Sam; his gaze met Maya's and he gave a tiny nod.

"Dean," Maya said, affection in her tone, and Dean grinned at her. "This is the second time I've had to rescue you."

His grin faded. "I know. I'm sorry."

"I should have guessed helping you would be a full-time job. You're a born world-shaker. Oddly enough, this card isn't about trouble. It's about contemplation."

"I keep seeing this," Dean said. "Hanging men. From trees, from gallows -- it's creeping me out."

"As well it should. The symbol is following you. I wonder why," she added softly. She pointed to the card. "Look at his face, though. He's not suffering. It's a sacrifice, not an execution. The hanging man sacrifices himself for knowledge and wisdom."

Dean swallowed hard. "I did that already."

"But not for wisdom," Maya said. "For love. Noble, but not the same thing. You'd do anything for love, Dean, which is why you're wonderful, and also where you're weak. All cards have many possible meanings," she explained, "both positive and negative. The hanging man means self-sacrifice for wisdom, but it can mean letting yourself be pushed along by fate. It can mean giving up. Leaving yourself hanging. Take another card."

"No one else did."

"You're special and I'm curious," Maya said with a smile, so Dean took another card. It was the Star, and he frowned, not understanding. "This is the person you love," Maya said and Dean looked up at her. "Someone who makes you happy and gives you peace."

Dean swallowed again and couldn't answer. For a moment the wound in his leg ached even worse than usual.

"It scares you, doesn't it," Maya said. "Loving someone who expects so much but asks so little. You don't feel worthy of it."

Dean felt his eyes fill and he begged Maya silently to stop.

She didn't, of course. "This is where the passivity comes in," she said, pointing to the hanging man card. "You feel it's hopeless. Not just love, but everything. Your fate, your dreams, your hopes. Everything."

"I thought," Dean had to clear his throat, "I thought my faith was the best part of me."

"It is," Maya said, "but you fight it so hard."

Dean frowned and inhaled, and said as lightly as he could, "What three words am I supposed to concentrate on?"

Maya said slowly, "Don't give up."

Dean looked at her, looked down at the two cards, and nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

Maya glanced again at the Green Knight, who gave another small nod. He got up from his chair and took from behind it a large double-headed axe.

"Hey!" Sam said. "We did the reading, we answered your questions --"

"We're not done yet," Maya said. "He's going to ask each of you a question. Answer it truthfully or he'll take your head."

"I hate this part," the Trickster said, tilting his head from one side to the other.

"That's because you're such a practiced liar," the Green Knight said, holding the blade of the axe to the Trickster's neck. "Why are you here? The most selfish and gluttonous, and least altruistic, god I've ever met. Why would you help these two boys prevent the end of the world?"

"They bought me pancakes," the Trickster said and the Green Knight held the blade a little closer to his skin. "I mean it! Blueberry! With maple syrup. It was delicious."

"Tell the truth," Maya said, who sounded amused by the whole thing.

The Trickster gestured to her. "She asked me. And maybe . . . maybe I'd miss the world if it were gone. Snickers bars and video games and hot women and my dog. You know, chocolate melts in Hell."

"Admit it," Maya said, "you like people."

"One question," the Trickster said, holding up a finger. "One question is all you get. And I told the truth." He looked up at the Green Knight. "For once."

"For once," the Green Knight said and moved on to Sam, whose eyes very wide. He held himself as stiffly as possible as the Green Knight held the axe to his neck. "You," the Green Knight said softly. "Sam Winchester."

"Yes, sir," Sam said, shaking with the effort to keep calm.

"What do you desire, Sam Winchester? Really? When the lights are off and you're alone, what is it you think about?"

Sam tried to look at Dean but the axe was in the way. "I," he said shakily, "I want -- I desire -- everything to be different." He took a deep breath. "I want it to stop. I don't want to know about the end of the world. I want to be innocent. Ignorant, even. I don't want to be a part of it."

Dean exhaled and closed his eyes -- they flew open when the Green Knight said, "You lie," and raised the axe to swing it at Sam's neck.

"Hey! No!" Dean shouted, leaping to his feet, and Maya stood as well, her hand out.

"Dean! Do not interfere."

"Tell the truth," the Green Knight said. "Tell the darkest secret of your heart, Sam."

Sam froze, his face flushed, and said, "All right! All right. You know what I want most, when it's dark and I'm alone? I want the end to come so I can defeat all those demons who're after us. I want the angels to leave us alone. I want my brother to be the man he used to be. That's what I want."

Dean sat on the bench again, feeling like he'd been punched in the face.

"Better," the Green Knight said, and moved on to Dean.

Dean closed his eyes. His throat felt tight. "Ask," he growled. The blade of the axe felt sharp and cold against his neck.

The Green Knight bent close to whisper in his ear, "You, Dean Winchester, are a righteous man. That's what they tell me. That's what they say." He bent closer. "But I ask you, Dean. Are you in fact a righteous man?"

Dean closed his eyes and whispered, "No."

"Dean!" Sam exclaimed.

Dean felt the blade press closer to his neck and he inhaled. "I'm the reason why we're all in this mess. I shed blood in hell, I tortured souls -- I tortured souls for ten years. And somehow I'm supposed to save the world and I don't know how." His voice broke and he felt tears prick his eyelids.

The Green Knight removed the axe from his throat. "He tells the truth and yet he still is wrong. Are you sure this is our champion?"

"I am sure," Maya said gently. "I'm quite sure. Are you satisfied?"

"Yes," the Green Knight said and Dean opened his eyes, confused. The Green Knight picked up the sword and held it out to him. "You are worthy, Dean Winchester."

Dean looked at him, still confused, and then took the sword and held it, careful of the blade. The gems sparkled and the blade glowed, and though Dean knew little about swords he knew this

was a rare and beautiful piece. "Thank you," he said quietly. "Um, I'm not sure how we'll get this back to the motel."

"It'll fit into the briefcase," Maya assured him. "It's kind of a bag of holding."

Dean chuckled dryly and put the briefcase on the table. He opened it and laid the sword inside. His eyes told him it shouldn't fit, but it did, snug between the cup and the dish. "Just the spear left," he said and looked at the Green Knight. "How do we find that? Do you know where the next castle was?"

"Let's see what chance says," the Green Knight said and took the top card from the Tarot deck. He showed it to all of them -- it was the Wheel of Fortune.

"A TV studio?" Dean said hopelessly.

"Deeper meaning than that," Maya said. "Think about it for a while -- you'll figure it out."

"So are we done?" the Trickster said. "I don't know about you guys, but I'd like to get back to the real world. The other world," he added at the Green Knight's growl. "Where they have candy. If everything's going to fall apart in a week, I want to enjoy myself as much as possible."

"Go on, Trickster," Maya said. "I'll take them home."

He stood and, much to Dean's surprise, bowed to her. "If we don't meet again," he began, and then couldn't continue and just swallowed hard.

"Fare thee well," Maya said, and the Trickster nodded and left the little room. Maya gathered up her cards and tied them back into the silk scarf, and then stood herself and curtsied a little to the Green Knight. "Thank you."

"Lady," he answered, bowing deep, and stood aside as she led Sam and Dean out of the room.

"Okay," Dean said, once they were out of the pub, "really. Who are you?"

"I'm Maya," she said in a mild tone.

"You keep saying that," Dean said and stopped walking. It was darker out than when they'd gone into the pub -- the stalls were closed and their torches doused, the tree god and his dryads were gone from the fountain, and there was hardly a sound except for scurrying in the alleys.

"But really. Who are you? Why are you helping us? How can you do all of this? How can you get those guys," he gestured back to the pub, "to respect you? You're just a kid!"

"I'm a little older than most kids," Maya said. Sam crossed his arms, waiting for both of them to finish. "Dean, is it really that important?"

"Yes! I like to know who I'm dealing with! What is with you supernatural beings never answering a fucking question!"

Maya sighed and sat at the edge of the fountain. "Boys," she said and patted the stone at her sides. Sam came and sat beside her and after a moment Dean did too, the briefcase on his knees. "I am very old," she said quietly. "And I never thought we would face this day. Not really - no matter how much we talked about it, I never thought anyone would actually break the first seal."

"I'm sorry," Dean said.

"Stop that. I know you're sorry. Sam knows you're sorry. Everybody who knows you knows you're sorry. It's time for you stop being sorry and start being a hero." He looked at her, and she smiled and then reached over to take Sam's hand. "How are you doing, big guy?"

"I don't know," Sam said. "I kind of feel like I've had my foundations shaken."

"Oh, honey," Maya said gently. "That's what the Tower does."

"Yeah," Sam muttered and wouldn't look at Dean.

"You still haven't answered my question," Dean said. "Castiel said sometimes you're sisters, sometimes you're grandmother, mother and daughter, and sometimes you're one woman. He said you have many names. You're some kind of goddess, right?"

She sighed and took Dean's hand, and held them both loosely as she looked out at the empty marketplace. "Some kind, yes."

"Sophie Fisher and Doctor Fisher, they're you."

"They're me, I'm them . . . six of one, half-a-dozen of the other. Most women have many faces, even if they're not divine." She held their hands closer together. "I feel very maternal toward most people, but toward the both of you in particular. I've watched you all of your lives, you know." Sam looked at her sharply and she smiled. "It's not just demons that are interested in you. Not just the armies of Heaven, either."

Sam lowered his head and wiped his eyes with his free hand. "So you're something in between," he said gruffly.

"Neither angel nor demon. Just . . . me." She exhaled. "You know, I believe neither of you are beyond redemption. I believe you can choose your destiny -- refuse or accept it. Embrace it or walk away. Though I know neither of you will walk away."

"Am I doomed?" Sam said, and Dean could see Sam's hand shaking in Maya's.

"Oh, Sammy, no. No. But the road isn't ended and has many twists and forks, and you can't always see which path is the right one."

"Yeah," Sam muttered.

"The Green Knight's question had a purpose, Sam. When it comes down to it, you are going to ask yourself what it is you really want. Is it power? Is it something else? Do you want to remake the world?"

"Sometimes I think I do," Sam said.

"Well, stop it. A lot of tyrants set out to form Utopia and end up building Pandemonium."

"I would never be a tyrant," Sam whispered.

"Sam," Maya said gently, "think about who Lucifer was, before he Fell. The most beautiful of the angels, the light-bearer, the son of the morning. He was beloved and favored. And then because he was too proud to obey, he was cast out."

"I'm not Lucifer," Sam said. "And I'm not the fucking Antichrist."

"Language," Maya said mildly.

"Sorry," Sam muttered and she patted his hand.

"You're a beloved child, Sam. Never forget that." He nodded and she leaned over to kiss his cheek. "Now. Dean."

"I know. Stop being sorry. Start being a hero."

"I'm glad you were listening," Maya said. "But what I was going to say is talk to your brother."

Dean clenched his jaw a moment, wishing they'd leave the marketplace and get back to reality. He said, "I didn't know you were still using your powers, Sam."

"I know," Sam said. "Not just using. Developing. Making them strong."

"And that's exactly what Maya is talking about," Dean said. "You're not supposed to use the gifts from the demons."

"Then how else am I supposed to fight, Dean? I don't have an angel giving me medallions to protect me."

"God! Sam!" Dean said and yanked his hand from Maya's so he could talk a few steps away. He shoved his hands into his hair. "But you do have a demon doing God only knows what for you -- and with you --"

"Who's the star card, Dean?" Sam said, his hands hanging between his knees. "It's Castiel, isn't it? I mean, who else would it be? Unless you've been in touch with Cassie or Lisa without telling me."

"Right," Dean said. "I'm in love with a guy. An angel. Because that makes perfect sense, Sam. Why not fuck up my life a little more and long for the impossible." His voice shook and he scuffed his foot on the cobbles. "I'd give anything for something I could actually keep."

Maya made a soft sound at this. She'd been listening without commenting or even making a gesture, her chin on her hand. Dean glared at her and she smiled a tiny bit. "Be careful making wishes here, Dean."

"Right," he muttered. "Here's one. I wish my brother would tell me the fucking truth."

"And this angel, who you trust more than anyone, who you *love*," Sam said, his voice cold. "He knew."

Dean looked at Sam, incredulous, and then at Maya. "He knows?" She nodded, her expression pained, and Dean looked up at the unfamiliar stars.

Sam went on, relentless and relishing it, "And he didn't tell you that he saw me kill Alastair -- not just exorcise him, but kill him, with nothing more than my will."

Dean whispered, "God damn," and wondered if anyone had ever told him something true.

"And you," Sam said, "didn't tell me about the fact that you started this."

"Sam," Maya said.

"You didn't tell me this is your fault."

"Sam!" Maya said more sternly and he closed his mouth and looked away. "Do you want to hate each other?"

"No," Dean whispered. "I don't."

She looked at Sam, and he said quietly, "No."

"Then stop lying to each other. Tell each other the truth. Stop punishing each other. Sam, Dean has a mission, and he needs you." Sam nodded, frowning. Maya held out her hand to Dean, and he came back to the fountain and took it. "Dean. This is your brother. Your blood. No matter what else he may be, he will always be that."

Dean nodded too, and then bent and kissed the top of Sam's shaggy head. "Sorry, man."

"Me, too," Sam said. "I'm sorry." He looked at Maya. "Can we get out of here? I'm so tired, Maya."

"Of course," she said gently and took his hand.

It was faster than through the tapestry, and much more direct -- one moment they were in the marketplace, the next they were in front of their motel, the briefcase at Dean's feet. It had been midmorning when they left but it was night now, and the city felt restless around them.

There was no sign of Maya.

Dean picked up the briefcase, which only felt a little heavier with the addition of the sword. They walked silently through the lobby to the elevator and pressed the Up button.

"Weird day," Sam said, watching the arrow descend to the main floor.

"Very weird."

"You know . . ." The elevator arrived and the door slid open, and they both got in. Sam pressed the number of their floor. "Most of those things we saw in the Marketplace? Anywhere else, we'd be hunting them."

"I know." The elevator rose creakily, and Dean put a hand on the wall to support himself. "I'm exhausted," he said quietly.

"Me too. I feel like I could sleep for a year." The elevator came to a stop and they stepped out and went to their room. Dean had to hunt in his pockets for their keys.

"Dean?" Sam said quietly. "Tell me the truth. Are you in love with him?"

Dean put the key in the lock and turned it. He looked back at Sam. "I don't know." He pushed open the door and flipped on the light -- and smelled sulfur.

Ruby started up from the bed. "I thought you guys were dead!" she exclaimed and went to Sam. Her arms started to go around him, but she stopped herself and crossed them over her chest. "I couldn't locate you no matter what spell I used."

"Why were you looking for us?" Sam said, looking down at her. "We haven't been gone that long."

"You've been gone for three days," Ruby stated flatly. "Where have you been?"

Sam looked at Dean helplessly. "Dean, could we --?"

"Yeah," Dean said. "I'll get another room."

"I have one," Ruby said. "I've been here for a while. Come on, Sam." She tugged on his hand and led him down the hall.

Dean closed the door behind them and locked it, put the briefcase on his bed and sat on the edge. He held his head in his hands as he wondered what Sam would tell her. It didn't surprise him, not really, that Sam couldn't just tell Ruby to leave -- they still had a weird sort of connection. He was pretty sure Sam didn't love her. He wondered sometimes if Ruby loved him or if she were in it for something else.

He looked up at a rush of wind and a flutter of wings and saw Castiel sitting on the other bed.

"I was worried," Castiel said without preamble.

"Yeah," said Dean. "Ruby said we were gone for three days."

There was a slight twitch of disapproval on Castiel's mouth. "To the other side."

"Crazy place."

"Yes." He paused, studying Dean. "You are not well."

"No," Dean said wearily, "I am not well."

"Do you . . . desire comfort?"

Dean closed his eyes a moment. It would be perfect, wouldn't it, to lose himself in Castiel for a while, to be held and kissed and told he was worth saving -- but he said, "No. I desire answers," and hated himself.

"I see," Castiel said. "What are the questions?"

"Why didn't you tell me Sam was using his powers again? The demon mojo? It's only going to make things worse for him, Cas."

"I know." Castiel leaned forward to rest his chin on his hands "You had just learned you started the Apocalypse. I thought you didn't need more bad news."

"Right," Dean said, "so instead I had to find it out from a -- whatever the hell the Green Knight is --"

"I believe he is a fertility god," Castiel said. "It is hard to tell sometimes, with the old ones."

"Well, you know, I really don't care what kind of god he is because he could have cut off my head."

"You were safe there," Castiel said gravely.

"You've got a weird definition of safe." Dean sighed and scrubbed his hand over his face. "Why can't we just leave the Grail there? He said he was a Grail guardian once."

"Yes, in a very dark time," Castiel said. "The Earth is better when it is here."

Dean dropped his hand. "The Earth is a craphole, Cas."

Castiel gazed at him steadily. "Imagine how much worse it would be if the Grail were gone."

"Stop the Apocalypse," Dean muttered, "save the world. Same old song and dance."

"Dean," Castiel said, "tell me how you feel when you hold the Cup."

"I feel . . . good. I feel really good. I feel like somebody loves me." He looked away, embarrassed.

"A great many people do love you, Dean. Myself, your brother, your family, people that you have helped and saved."

"And what about all the people that I've failed?" Dean said bitterly. "Do they curse my name?"

"I am not concerned with the people you have failed."

"Look," Dean said, holding up his hands, "you can tell me all you want that love is all you need and whatever, but I --" He stopped and rubbed his mouth. "I'm going to die doing this. Aren't I? Tell me the truth."

"I don't know," Castiel said. "I hope not."

"Great," Dean said. "You hope not. That's just great."

"If you do, it is because I have failed you." Dean looked at him, and Castiel said quietly, "You will not face this alone, Dean. It may be only you and me against all the forces of Hell, but we will give them a good fight."

"You can't die," Dean said. "Kind of takes away the intention, I think."

"They can still hurt me," Castiel said, his gaze dropping. "And they will. Dean. I am alone in this. My superiors no longer contact me. My brothers scorn me. Anna is rogue -- I cannot rely on her. I am doing what I can with what I know and what help is offered, but not even the Fisher sisters know everything."

"Yeah, and who are they again? Maya talks in riddles when I ask her. She's as bad as you."

Castiel smiled faintly. "We ineffable creatures like our aura of mystery."

"You like it too much, if you ask me." He rubbed his hands over his face. "Cas. Look. I know you want to stick around and comfort me or whatever, but I really want to be alone."

"Are you certain?"

"Yeah. I'm certain. I just need to think." He had to be honest. "And I am so pissed at you."

"I see," Castiel said softly, lowering his gaze. "Because of Sam."

"Yeah. Because of Sam."

Castiel stood, and said, putting a hand on Dean's shoulder, "For what it's worth, I would rather stay." There was a flutter of wings and he was gone.

Dean sat there a moment, hating his life with every cell in his body, then threw off his clothes and crawled under the covers. He turned out the light, glad to be enveloped in the dark.

Dean woke abruptly. It was still dark out, and for a moment he couldn't think of what could have disturbed his sleep -- and then he felt the walls shake.

He climbed out of bed and knelt in front of the window to peer through the blinds. The window looked down at the street, and as Dean watched he could see a large dark shape nosing around the cars and trees. His eyes couldn't make sense of it -- it looked sometimes like a man, sometimes like . . . he had no idea what. It was heavy enough that each footstep reverberated up the brick walls from the sidewalk, and even three floors up Dean could smell its gamey stench.

It raised its head and Dean's eyes widened when he saw the curled horns and outline of a muzzle, like an enormous ox of prehistoric size. It seemed to sniff the air, and Dean pressed himself against the wall, away from the window, and prayed it couldn't smell him from the street.

The walls trembled as the beast continued on down the street, until finally it faded away.

Dean wiped his hand over his face, not surprised to find that he was sweating, and then crawled back into bed. It took him a long time to fall asleep again.

They say Lilith raged.

They say she sent a million demons to lay siege on the Other Side. They say she called out to the Green Knight, "Knight! You owe God no loyalty. He usurped your place in men's hearts centuries ago. Renounce God and join me, and I'll give you powers over all the climes and seasons as you once had."

They say the Green Knight laughed at her offer, laughed as he tossed aside demons left and right, and that he was still laughing when Lilith plunged her hand into his chest and ripped out his heart.

They say the denizens of the Other Side fled into the mortal world, so afraid of Lilith and her demons that they would risk the wrath of hunters.

Ten

*If everything we've got is blowing away
We've got a rock and a rock till our dying day
I'm holding on to you, holding on to me
Maybe it's all we got but it's all I need*

--"All I Need," Mat Kearny

Dean blinked awake, feeling like he'd been asleep for a week. He looked at the other bed, which was still neatly made. Well, there was no need to wonder where Sam had spent the night.

Dean got out of bed, washed up, packed, dressed, and went to the lobby to settle their bill.

"Good morning," the clerk said cheerfully. "Did you feel the earthquake this morning?"

"Earthquake?" Dean said blankly, and then smiled and said, "Yeah, freaky, wasn't it? I didn't think you guys got earthquakes out here."

"I didn't either," she said, eyes widening. "But they said on the news it was an earthquake, so I guess that's what it was. Weird, though, huh?"

"Weird," Dean agreed and signed them out.

He took the stairs down to the parking garage and put their bags into the trunk of the Impala, and then got into the driver's seat to wait for Sam. He put in a tape -- .38 Special and Led Zep and Johnny Cash -- and got out their Tarot deck. He searched through the cards until he found the Wheel of Fortune.

Okay, he thought. Something round, that possibly rotates. Maybe it's a miller's wheel? We should find an old mill?

He leaned back in the seat and rubbed his forehead. The other clues seemed obvious looking back, so it was probably something simple -- something he'd feel like an idiot for not seeing earlier.

It happened fast -- like the vision he'd been given before, a series of images, no longer than blips, that still made his eyes burn and his teeth throb. He pressed his fingers to his temples as he was shown images of mountains --tall, rocky, bare mountains, towering over deep green valleys and thorny foothills.

West, the images told him. Go west.

Someone pounded on the roof of the Impala and Dean looked up as the vision fled. It was Sam, of course, while Ruby hung back, her arms crossed. "Hey. Did you sleep here?"

"No," Dean said. "I've just been here a few minutes. Ready to go?"

"I'm ready." He turned back to Ruby. "See you soon, okay?"

"Right," she said. "Watch your back, Sam."

"I will," he said and got into the passenger side. He looked at Dean. "Are you sure you're up to driving? You look like hell again."

"Yeah, I'm fine," Dean muttered and started the engine. "We're going west."

"Okay," Sam said slowly. "Did you have another dream?"

"More like a vision," Dean said as he pulled out of the parking space. He glanced in the rear-view mirror -- Ruby was still watching them. "Hey, did you feel an earthquake last night?"

"No. Must've slept through it. Did you see an earthquake in your vision?"

"No, no, I saw mountains. Look . . ." He steered out of the parking garage and onto the street, heading for the highway. "The beast that's following us came by last night."

Sam looked at him and then looked away again. "Yeah?" he said quietly.

"Yeah. The clerk said people thought it was an earthquake. But I saw it -- hell, I smelled it."

"I remember the smell, yeah."

"Yeah. And isn't it weird that it tracked us down again so fast?"

Sam looked at him again. "And what are you implying?"

"I'm implying, how much do you trust your girlfriend?"

Sam glared at him. "She's not my girlfriend."

"Yeah? What were you doing last night? Having tea?" Sam rolled his eyes, and Dean said, "Or practicing? Has it not occurred to you yet that if you keep using the demon mojo you might as well hang a big Come Find Us sign?"

"Ruby doesn't know anything about all of this," Sam said. "She didn't even know we've got the Grail."

"And you told her?" Dean exclaimed.

Sam flexed his fist. "Yes, Dean. I tell her stuff. I tell her things that are going on with me. I tell her what we're working on so she can help, if she can."

"Can she help with this? Does she know where the next Grail castle is?"

"No, she doesn't," Sam said. "But she said she'd ask around for us."

"Great. And everybody she asks will tell Liliith where to find us."

"Dammit, Dean," Sam said, exasperated, "do you want her help or don't you? We have a card to go on. A *card*."

Dean tossed his cell phone to Sam. "Call Bobby. He knew about the Hanged Man -- maybe he can help with this, too. And call Ruby and tell her we're laying low, so no querying every demon she's had lunch with."

Sam muttered something and dialed the phone. "Bobby," he said after a few minutes. "It's me. We're okay. Back in the real world. It was . . ." He glanced at Dean. "I don't know. Like falling into Brothers Grimm. Anyway, we're back and we've got one clue about the next Grail castle."

"Two clues," Dean said.

Sam moved the phone away from his mouth. "What?"

"Two clues. That's why we're going west."

"Right. Two clues. We're going west, to the Rockies. And somewhere in the Rockies is a Wheel of Fortune kind of thing." He listens a moment. "Yes. Wheel of Fortune. Like the Tarot card." He listened for a longer moment, then got out his notebook and started writing things down. "Okay. Okay. We'll research when we stop for the night. Thanks, Bobby." He hung up the phone and said to Dean, "Medicine wheels."

"What?"

"Medicine wheels. They're all over the intermountain west. Native American solar calendars."

"More calendars," Dean said. "Do you think that's a theme?"

"I'm sure it is." He tapped the phone against his mouth, thinking. "They date Easter as the first Sunday after the first full moon after spring equinox."

"Okay . . ."

"And Easter took the place of a pagan holiday. And the climaxes of a lot of Grail stories take place on Good Friday."

"A lot of little things and no answers," Dean said. "When is Easter this year?"

"Soon. The twelfth."

"Just over a week." His leg was starting to protest -- it was going to make a long drive longer, this ache. He might have to hand over the wheel to Sam before they got out of Illinois.

He gave the wheel to Sam before they got out of Illinois.

They got sidetracked to Eagle Lake, where a ghost needed to be salted and burned, and that added another day to their journey. They stopped by Bobby's on the way, and he gave them pictures of various medicine wheels so they'd know what to look for and books of Native American mythology so they'd know the stories.

"The one they think is the first is in Wyoming, in the Big Horn Mountains near Yellowstone," he told them, and while Sam was in the john and Dean was putting a few bills back into Bobby's cookie jar, he said, "How is Sam doing?"

"He's fine. We're doing okay." Which was close enough to the truth, he supposed.

"Good, 'cause . . . the bad dreams aren't stopping, Dean." He took off his trucker cap and scratched his head. "I'm worried about the boy."

"So am I," Dean confessed, and wished he could get Castiel to come by so they could talk.

But there was no Castiel, not in his dreams and not when he was awake. The malachite amulet kept the nightmares at bay, but he would rather have had Castiel -- just to talk to, even if they never touched each other again.

But, he told himself as they drove west, first he had an Apocalypse to stop and a world to save. Then Castiel would go back to Heaven and Dean could go back to waitresses and bartenders and the occasional very grateful mother.

Life would go back to normal.

He didn't want normal.

They arrived in Lovell, Wyoming, late the night of the fifth, and checked into a motel where the rooms were decorated with fake timber and silhouettes of cowboys. They bunked down for the night, and Sam studied the pamphlet from the front desk about the park where the medicine wheel was located.

"Dean," he said, "problem."

"What's that?"

"The road will probably closed due to snow." He tossed aside the pamphlet and rolled onto his back.

"Fuck," Dean said sincerely. "We'll just have to go around."

"Dean," Sam said, "it's a national park. It'll have rangers."

"We can get around rangers."

"In the Impala. And then on foot. We'll be sent back, Dean."

"If we tell them it's important --"

"We're not Native Americans," Sam said patiently. "We can't use the ceremonial excuse."

"Well, I don't know, Sam," Dean said, not patiently at all. "All I know is that we have to get there." He laid his hand on the briefcase, which rarely left his side now. "We'll figure it out. Worst case scenario, we'll improvise."

"Right. Improvise." Sam lay there for a few minutes, and Dean stroked the briefcase. "Dean?" Sam said softly. "Do you ever wonder how all this is going to end?"

"Yeah," Dean said. "We'll find the final Grail castle and give it to someone else, I hope."

"And if Lilith can't break the last seal," Sam said, "then the Apocalypse won't come. It's not much of a plan."

"I know the angels don't know exactly what's going to happen either," Dean said. "We're all in the dark."

"Yeah." Sam was quiet again.

Dean turned onto his side and stretched out his leg, wincing as his wound ached. He put his hand back on the briefcase, but instead of the usual comforting warmth, he was filled with melancholy and longing, like the worst homesickness he'd ever had. He inhaled sharply and turned his face into the pillow, telling himself he was not going to cry like a little girl just because he was confused and worried.

"Dean," Sam said again, soft, "you miss him."

"What?" Dean muttered.

"Castiel. You miss him."

"Shut up," Dean said and reached over to turn off the lamp between their beds. "Go to sleep."

"I'm okay with it, you know," Sam said as if he hadn't spoken. "You being bi. I'm okay."

Dean said quietly, "Castiel will go back to heaven when all this is over, if we succeed. If we don't, it won't matter anyway."

"Wow. Talk about hopeless. Maya was right."

"Of course she was, Sam," Dean said wearily. "I don't even know if I'm going to survive this. I think . . ." He inhaled. "I think sometimes that's why nobody will tell me any details. They think I won't do it if I know I'm going to die."

"You're not going to die, Dean."

"One of us is, Sam, and it's not going to be you. I won't let them kill you."

Sam looked over at him with a slight smile. "Do you ever think, Dean, that the reason I've got this strength, these powers, is to protect you?"

Dean looked right back at him, not smiling at all. "No, I think you've got those powers because Azazel chose you. And you were supposed to stop using them, Sam."

"Well, I haven't, Dean. And you're going to need me that strong and that powerful when we get to the end of this. The angels, they don't know everything, and they don't know what Azazel's plan was -- maybe it was this, to keep Lucifer from rising."

Dean stared at him. "Azazel wanted you to rule hell, Sam."

"Right! That's exactly it. Me instead of Lucifer. Maybe he thought if someone who was human ruled Hell some mercy would come into it, you know? Not just all the torture and awfulness."

"Are you fucking serious?" Dean said. "You're giving *Azazel*-- the demon who killed our mother and your fiancée and our father -- good intentions?"

Sam shook his head. "Maybe he was trying to make a better world. He just did it the way he knew how."

"You're insane," Dean said flatly and lay down on his back.

"I'm not!" Sam exhaled. "I'm just trying to make sense of it all."

"You're not making sense! You're scaring me. Look, no matter what you want to believe, the forces of Hell do not want good things for you. Stop talking like you think they're just misunderstood."

Sam looked at him, frowning, and then rolled onto his side, his back to Dean. "Long drive tomorrow. Lots of switchbacks. Maybe we should get a Jeep."

"Yeah," Dean muttered. "Maybe." He rubbed his forehead, looking at Sam, and then got up to close the curtains. He looked out at the parking lot, expecting to see a dark horned shape, but there was only softly falling snow.

"Get a Jeep," of course, was Winchester-speak for going to the local forestry service headquarters before sunrise and hotwiring a Jeep from their vehicle fleet. Sam had maps he'd downloaded from websites about the medicine wheel, and they set out on Highway 14.

It was a tricky drive, and Dean suspected it would be the same even without the snow dusting the asphalt. He put the Jeep into a low gear and took the steep inclines slowly, his foot hovering over the brake pedal in case they started sliding.

Sam said little, though he kept a hand on the briefcase to keep it from sliding, too. "Feeling better about the cup?" Dean asked him finally.

"No," Sam said. "Still gives me bad dreams. But you're right, it's something sacred, so that must mean something."

"Maybe it's a warning," Dean said and slowed the Jeep as the road dipped.

Thirty miles up the highway they turned off into a gravel road, despite the sign warning them that the road was closed until June, and took it slowly and carefully. Snow and gravel crunched beneath the tires. Dean's grip was white-knuckle tight on the steering wheel.

"Dude, you're humming Metallica again," Sam murmured.

"Just trying to ease the tension, dude." He stopped humming for a few minutes, and then started again.

The gravel road ended at a ranger station and visitors' center, two ordinary wood cabins with a notice board that said the park was closed until summer. There were directions on the notice board as well, how to walk up to the medicine wheel and how to show the site proper respect once they got there. The boys shouldered their duffel bag -- briefcase, tools and weapons stowed inside -- and zipped up their jackets and looked at each other grimly.

"Can you manage the walk?" Sam said.

"It's a cakewalk," Dean answered. "It's just a pleasant stroll. Come on."

It was not just a pleasant stroll, of course -- it was a rocky, snowy, steep hike, and Dean was limping by the time they reached the ridge. Below, in the faint light of the rising sun, they could see the medicine wheel itself -- cairns and spokes made from pale stones, arranged like a wagon wheel and grey against the snow. A fence had been built around the wheel, and brightly-colored pieces of cloth were tied to the wires strung between the posts.

Dean leaned against a post and looked at the wheel, regaining his breath. "How're you holding up?" Sam asked him, and Dean managed to smile reassuringly.

"Just fine."

"Have some water," Sam said and took the duffel from his shoulder to get out a water bottle.

Dean nodded and drank, put the bottle away and got out the briefcase. "I think, if there's anything here to find, the other objects will let us know."

"Like a dowsing rod," Sam said, and took out the sword. In the Hanging Man it had looked enormous and rich, shining silver and studded with gems; here, it looked like something old and well-used, its blade blunted, its pommel plain and worn. The cup looked ordinary as well, no longer the rich vessel it had been on the Other Side -- it was just the plain clay cup again. Only the dish looked the same, silver and gleaming, though Dean thought the picture on it had subtly changed. Instead of the Green Knight holding his head, it now showed the hanging man in the forefront and women weeping behind him.

"Try dowsing," Dean said, so Sam nodded and climbed over the fence. He went to the center of the wheel and held the sword in both hands, point facing outward, and slowly turned in a circle. "Dean, it's shaking," he said with excitement as he faced the northeast spoke. "Dean! Come here!"

Dean climbed over the fence and went to join him, his feet slipping a little on the snowy rocks, and joined Sam at the center of the wheel. The cup got warmer in his hand the closer he got to Sam, and even the dish seemed to ring, just faintly, in anticipation of reunion.

"That cairn," Sam said, pointing in the same direction as the sword and carefully balancing the sword in his other hand. "Try that one."

"Try it?"

"Look and see what's inside. We'll put it back together," Sam said. "No one will know we were here."

"Right, right," Dean muttered and followed the spoke out to the northernmost cairn. He put the dish and the cup carefully in the snow and brushed more snow off the stones. He started dismantling them, hoping this wasn't sacrilege.

The cup began to glow.

Sam made his way down the spoke to help, and stuck the sword into the ground. He started removing stones, a look on his face like he was about to get the best toy in the cereal box.

Deep within the pile they saw a gleam. Sam shone his flashlight on it and Dean moved aside the last few stones so he could pull out the shining point. It was not the entire spear, only the tip, but it was sharp and lethal-looking nonetheless.

"The last object," Dean whispered. "Separated centuries ago and together at last." He looked at Sam and smiled, and then put the spear point in the snow beside the cup, dish and sword. The rising sun hit all four, making them shine.

"What now?" Sam said as they hiked back down to the ranger station, all four objects safe in the briefcase. "There's no one to ask where to go next."

"Maybe I'll get another vision," Dean said.

"Let's hope," Sam said. "Otherwise we'll carry this stuff around with us for the rest of our lives, and I don't know about you but that doesn't sound like any fun to me."

"Hey, my baby would make a great Grail castle," Dean began, and then saw the ranger station. "Shit."

There were two more Jeeps in front of the wood building, and two police officers stood outside, gunbelts at their waists. Sam and Dean looked at each other -- they couldn't walk the thirty-plus miles in the snow back to Lovell.

"We'll just have to explain and hope for the best." Dean hiked the duffel bag up his shoulder and strode the rest of the way down with a big, friendly grin. "Good morning, officers! Great day for a hike!"

"Come with us, please," one of the officers said and they both took Sam and Dean inside.

Dean expected to find other rangers inside, and thought they would scold them about respecting Closed Road signs and public lands, and hopefully they'd get off with a fine. Instead, Dean stepped back into the officers the moment he saw Lorcan Murphy and his two goons waiting inside. "Not you again," Dean said and one of the officers grabbed hold of his arms.

"How the hell did you find us?" Sam said, held fast by the officer and one of the rangers. The eyes of both men, it was no surprise to see, were now completely black.

"A little bit of help and little bit of magic." Lorcan walked closer to them. "My mistress's pet tracked you down, I followed, and here we are. And this . . ." He took the duffel from Dean's shoulder and knelt to unzip it. "Here it is," he said reverently and unsnapped the locks. "And look at all the pretty things you've given me, too," he said, pleased, and took out the spear point. "I never thought I'd see this in my lifetime."

"Put that back!" Dean shouted, and at Lorcan's nod his big goon punched Dean in the face.

"Dean!" Sam shouted, and turned his glare on the possessed officers. One of them flew across the room and slammed into the mounted display of arrowheads.

"You're going to be a problem, I see," Lorcan said and put his hand on Sam's forehead. In a moment Sam crumpled, his eyes rolling back in his head, and even the goons looked scared.

"No! Sam!" Dean shouted. "You kill my brother and I swear to God I will fucking end you."

"I'm not going to kill him," Lorcan said, closing the briefcase again. One of the rangers swung Sam's limp body over his shoulders in a fireman's hold, but the goons still held onto Dean. He braced himself, trying to prepare for what he knew was coming. "I need him alive until my mistress is done with him. But you, you're just proving to be more trouble than you're worth. On the other hand . . ." He smiled and took out the handkerchief with Dean's blood on it, and crumpled it in his fist.

Dean groaned as his leg blazed with pain, and he collapsed in the big goon's grip.

"That's much better," Lorcan said, and took out a lighter. "Grady, leave him some souvenirs, would you?"

"Yes, Mr. Murphy," the big goon said, and leveled his fist at Dean's face. He beat on Dean as Lorcan set the handkerchief on fire and dropped it on a desk. Between the stars exploding in Dean's vision and the screaming pain through his body, Dean saw the desk blaze up and the flame leap from the desk to the chair to the wall.

Worse still, the possessed rangers carried Sam out of the station and Dean couldn't do anything more than gasp Sam's name.

The station was half ablaze and Dean's face felt like one enormous bruise when Lorcan said, "That's enough, Grady."

"What do you want us to do with him, Mr. Murphy?" said the little one, holding Dean's head up by the hair.

"Just leave him. They'll find him after the snow melts." He bent and patted Dean's cheek, and Dean tried to spit some blood at him. It dribbled down his chin. "Thanks for gathering all the treasures, Dean. I'm sorry you won't get to say goodbye to your brother -- oh, wait, no. I'm actually not sorry at all. Goodbye, Dean." He nodded to his goons and they dropped Dean on the floor and left the station.

Bits of ash were falling on him, and he reached back as best he could to brush them off his neck. He tried to push himself upright, but his leg wouldn't hold his weight. He dragged himself to the door and tried to turn the knob, only to find that Lorcan had locked it from the outside. He slid down the door and closed his eyes, and then pulled off his jacket, hissing with pain, and wrapped it over his nose and mouth.

I'll die of asphyxiation before I burn to death, he thought. His body hurt everywhere, and the rafters were starting to creak and splinter. One could fall at any moment, could pin him beneath it, could block his only means of escape.

Dean pulled himself across the floor and wedged himself under the desk, and the metal of the desk felt searing hot against his skin.

He whispered, "Castiel, if you ever loved me, help me. Help me now, Cas. Please. I don't want to die like this. Castiel, help me. Please, Castiel."

Wrapping his arms around himself as best he could, Dean watched the fire blaze and prayed.

They say in Hell, demons held their breath.

They say in South Dakota, Bobby Singer looked up in confusion, thinking for a moment he'd heard his old friend John Winchester call his name.

They say in New Hampshire, visitors to America's Stonehenge reported an earthquake that dislodged the stones over the Oracle chamber.

They say in Chicago, visitors to the art museum asked each other, "Wasn't there a door there a second ago?" as they looked at a medieval tapestry.

They say in Heaven, an angel flew down to Earth like he'd been fired from a gun.

They say in a burning forestry station outside of Lovell, Wyoming, the angel Castiel blasted open the door and walked through the fire to pull Dean Winchester out.

Eleven

And each found their life in the other, and each was the other's love.

--Parzival, Wolfram von Eschenbach

Someone held a cup to Dean's lips and whispered, "Drink."

He sipped -- the liquid was cool, milky and sweet, like coconut milk with lime. He swallowed, coughed, and whispered through his aching, smoky throat, "Where am I?"

"My home," the woman said softly and held the cup to his lips again. "You're safe. Drink."

Dean drank again and swallowed, and lay back on the pillow. It smelled like lavender. He rubbed his eyes and squinted at the woman, and smiled when he recognized her. "Dr. Fisher."

"Call me Celine," she said, smiling back. She picked up a round sponge and began cleaning his face with warm water.

"Maya's mom. Or sister. Or whatever."

"Maya's mom is good enough," she said, gently washing him. "Rest your voice, Dean. You inhaled a lot of smoke."

He nodded and lay back, and then started up again. "Sam --"

"Sam is unharmed," Celine told him gently. "Lie down. You can't do anything about it now. Doctor's orders," she added and resumed cleaning the ash and blood from his skin.

"But Lorcan has him -- and Lilith --"

"They need him alive," Celine said. "He is not dead."

"But they'll kill him," Dean said and pushed her hand away. He tried to sit up and was racked with coughs.

She sighed and said, "Castiel," and the figure in the chair by the window rose so that Dean could see his face. It was Castiel, of course it was Castiel, his own face smudged with ash and his eyes red from smoke.

He clasped Dean's hand. "Rest."

"I have to save Sam."

"You have to rest."

"Cas --"

Castiel held up his first two fingers to Dean's forehead. "Relax or I'm putting you out."

Dean lay back, unhappy and frustrated, and when Castiel's hand cupped his cheek he turned his face into Castiel's palm and sighed. "Where are we?" he muttered into Castiel's warm skin.

"The Fishers' home."

"Which is where?"

"Do you remember the mountain I took you to before, when you dreamed of the burned forest? You can see the mountain from these walls."

Dean closed his eyes. "So I'm dreaming." It figured -- a death hallucination. Typical.

"No. This is real. You are alive, you are safe, and when you are well enough we'll discuss the next step. But you are not well enough and you are filthy." Dean opened his eyes and saw that Castiel was looking at him affectionately.

"You came and got me," Dean whispered. "You got me out of the fire." He could remember it vaguely now -- Castiel wrapping his coat around him, how somehow they'd burst through the flames and into the cold day, how the sound of helicopters had only gotten fainter as Castiel carried him away. He looked up at Castiel with wonder.

"You called my name, so I came." Castiel stroked Dean's cheek. "Sleep now."

Dean looked from Castiel to Celine, then nodded and relaxed against the pillow. Celine gave him one more drink of the sweet milk, and as she finished washing the traces of the fire off him, he slept.

Dean was only vaguely aware of the passage of time. The room got brighter, different people came to feed him or bathe his wounds. Someone held his hand for a while. Someone stroked his face. Someone sang one of his favorite songs to him in a soft, whispery voice as if they didn't want to be heard.

He thought later that he slept too deeply for dreams.

When Dean woke up fully, he blinked a few times to get the room into focus. It was plain grey stone, with an arched doorway and an arched window. A candle burned in a candlestick on the arched windowsill. It was too dark to see what was outside, but he could smell vegetation and soil, and he could hear water running over stone and wind blowing through leafy branches. There were a few tapestries on the walls, depicting picnics and hunts, and a thick rug on the floor woven with flowers. The bed he lay in was made of wood, high off the floor, and there were green velvet curtains pulled out enough to shield him from light coming from the window. The coverlet his hands rested on was green velvet as well, and he ran his hands over it a few times to take pleasure in the softness.

And in a green velvet chair, one leg pulled up and the other stretched out like a counterbalance, his head propped on his fist, slept Castiel.

Dean had no idea how long he'd been asleep, but he knew that he couldn't sleep anymore and that he was hungry, and that was enough to propel him upright. Celine had stripped him of his clothes at some point to clean him, and there were a few folded items of clothing at the foot of the bed -- a green tunic type of thing, loose enough not to pull on healing skin, and green cotton trousers that laced up the fly and made Dean wonder exactly what kind of guest the sisters usually had.

Soft as the noise was of him getting dressed, it was enough to wake Castiel. He blinked a few times and then stood as well and picked up the candlestick.

"How are you feeling?" he said and offered his arm to Dean to lean on.

"Hungry." Dean shook his head and limped slowly through the archway that separated his little room from the long, wide main hall. "Where's the kitchen? Is there a kitchen? Or do they live on dew and spirit juice?"

"There's a kitchen," Castiel said, walking slowly beside him. "Sophie makes very good bread."

"I bet she does," Dean muttered. "Are you ever going to tell me who they really are?"

Castiel inhaled and walked in silence for a while. "They say the first human soul was born from her laugh." Dean looked at him, confused. "She has many names, many faces. You know three. There are others. The Gnostics called her Sophia." He looked at Dean. "Wisdom."

"I don't follow."

"She's the soul of the world, Dean." He was quiet for a moment, and Dean wondered if it was too late to take his arm. "If the Apocalypse comes and Hell reigns on Earth, all life will end and Sophia will mourn her children until the end of time."

"Her children?"

"All mankind."

Dean shook his head and swallowed hard. "This never gets any less scary."

"I know, Dean."

"Do you know what we can do to save Sam?"

Castiel sighed. "I don't."

"Do you know what I need to do at all?"

Castiel took his arm. "Let's feed you first. Then we can talk."

"Right, right," Dean muttered, but food sounded far too good to refuse.

The kitchen was spacious and airy, strangely old-fashioned with an ice box and an open hearth for cooking and a sink you had to pump to get water. Castiel got out a salt-glazed clay pitcher of milk and a plate of butter and put them on the long kitchen table, and got out a loaf of bread from the breadbox. Dean got mugs and plates -- more salt-glazed clay -- from the open cupboards and put them on the table, and then sat, too tired to do much more.

"I didn't think you ate," he remarked, and Castiel gave him a patient look. Dean grinned at him and leaned his head on his arm. "You know, I never had midnight snacks like this when I was a kid. Or homemade bread fresh from the oven. I ate a lot of Spaghetti-Os, though. That has to count for something."

Castiel looked up again from slicing the bread and faintly smiled.

"Lots of Happy Meals, too. We had a good collection of Happy Meal toys for a while. They were cheap little plastic toys that broke the second time you played with them." He smiled with nostalgia. "They were great that first time."

Castiel still didn't say anything though he still had that affectionate faint smile. He got out a bunch of grapes from the icebox and rinsed them off with a quick pump from the sink, and put them in another bowl.

"Hot chicks in lingerie," Dean tried.

"Dean," Castiel said patiently and brought over the food to the table. "I'm not sure what point you're trying to make."

"The world's pretty great. That's all." He poured them both a mug of milk. "Fresh cookies and silly toys and bread cooked on a hearth and hot chicks in lingerie. That's all pretty great." He watched Castiel put slices on the plates and take up a butter knife, and spread butter on his first slice. "You," Dean said quietly. "You're pretty great."

"Eat," Castiel said, pushing the plate closer to him. "You're delirious from hunger."

"Teaching you to joke was a bad idea." He picked up a slice of bread and ate a bite, chewing slowly. It tasted nutty and hearty, and the butter tasted like fresh cream.

"I'm sure it was," Castiel said and had some milk.

Dean looked away, then drank some milk too and shivered at how sweet and cool it tasted. "I think . . . I think I'm okay with dying to save the world," he said quietly. "I died to save my brother once. Why not the whole world? Six billion people are worth it."

Castiel's eyes were downcast as he said, "You will not have to, Dean. It is over. We've lost."

"What?" Dean whispered and put down his slice of bread.

"It is over. Lilith has Sam. She has the Grail. On Friday night she will open the doors to Heaven and walk right in, and that will be the end of everything."

"I can't believe you're saying this!" Dean said and shoved himself up from the table. "After all we've done -- after all the people we've lost -- you're just giving up?"

"I don't know what more there is to do, Dean!" Castiel said. "I have no orders! I have nothing to guide me!" He looked down again, shaking his head. "I brought you here to heal. What happens next, I do not know."

"I have to find Sam, that's what happens next."

Castiel said quietly, "I know where he is. I have no way to reach him until Lilith brings him back to the mortal plain."

"Oh." Dean sat at the table again, feeling defeated. "Where is he?"

The look Castiel gave him was so painful and hopeless that Dean said, "I don't want to know."

"No. You do not."

"So . . . I just stay here until then, right? And then when Lilith is within reach again I'll go fight her, right?"

Castiel did not answer for a moment or two, and then said softly, toying with his mug, "I do not know how you will win that fight."

"Neither do I, but I'm still going to do it." Castiel looked at him and then looked down at his mug. Dean said, "Cas."

"I do not want to send you to your death, Dean."

Dean rubbed his forehead a moment, watching Castiel stare at his mug. "Is it that hopeless?"

"I do not wish to lose you." He looked out the arched window at whatever was out in the darkness.

"If there was a way," Dean whispered, "would you stay with me?"

"I would like to," he said softly. "I would like to stay here for quite some time. Wouldn't that be a lovely life? You and I, away from questions and judgment, just --" He stopped himself and drank more milk.

"Loving each other," Dean said. Castiel didn't look up but Dean could see the muscles in his throat flex as he swallowed. "I should have said this before. I know. I should have said it when you did but I wasn't ready. I'm ready now."

"Ready for what?" Castiel said softly, still not looking up.

"To say I love you." Castiel closed his eyes, but Dean went on anyway. "I know it's hopeless. I know we don't have a future together. I know you don't want to do anything physical 'cause you're in another man's body. I know all that. I don't care. I love you."

"You're just saying this because I saved your life," Castiel said.

Dean got up from his chair and went around the table, took Castiel's face in his hands and kissed him. Castiel gripped his wrists and kissed him back, his lips parting at the touch of Dean's tongue. His hands slid up Dean's arms and down Dean's body to his hips. He pulled Dean onto his lap, and Dean laughed and straddled his thighs and kissed him deeper. He rubbed circles into Castiel's temples with his fingertips and stroked his thumbs over Castiel's cheekbones, played chase with their tongues and breathed in Castiel's breath.

All the while Castiel barely made a sound but his hands clung to Dean's hips as if he couldn't bring himself to let go even to touch Dean more.

Far too soon, Castiel turned his face away and dropped his hands from Dean's hips. Dean made a frustrated sound and held onto Castiel's face, their foreheads leaning together, and inhaled the sweet, reassuring scent of Castiel's skin. He whispered, "It's not just because you saved my life. Not just because of everything you've given me or shown me I could do. Cas, I don't fall for guys, but I've fallen for you and --"

"Stop," Castiel whispered, hands on Dean's arms. "Please stop. I can't bear it."

Dean stroked Castiel's hair, soft between his fingers, and said, "Tell me to get off you if you really want me to stop."

Castiel closed his eyes as if it hurt to look at him. "No. I don't want you to stop." He wrapped an arm around Dean's waist and pulled him closer. "I want you right here." He caught Dean's lips with his, more of a whisper than a kiss, but it was good enough for Dean.

He kissed Castiel slowly, his thumb tracing Castiel's sharp cheekbone, and then twisted around and snagged a grape from the bowl. He held it to Castiel's lips and Castiel ate it, eyes never leaving Dean's; and when Dean kissed him again Castiel's mouth tasted even sweeter.

"You need to eat," Castiel whispered and picked up a slice of bread from his own plate.

"I'm not hungry anymore," Dean said. "I'm too happy."

Castiel chuckled. "Nonetheless, eat. I told the sisters I would feed you when you woke."

"Well, if you promised the sisters . . ." He held Castiel's wrist and ate from his hand, kissing him sometimes between bites. He got a kiss for every grape he ate and every bite of bread and sip of milk, and sometimes was even rewarded with the sight of Castiel's smile.

Castiel had left the raincoat and suit jacket in Dean's room but he was still wearing his tie, so Dean played with it while he kissed him, rolling it up in his fingers or tugging it a little to bring Castiel closer. It was his considered opinion that you could never touch someone you love too much, and so he played with Castiel's thick unruly hair and followed the lines of his face with his

fingertips, rested his thumb in the hollow of Castiel's throat and sometimes just wrapped an arm around his neck and laid his head on Castiel's shoulder.

"We may only have this night," Castiel said, stroking Dean's back. He was touching Dean too, just as simply. He found Dean's ears fascinating, and liked to feel Dean's heart beating under his palm, and even held his feet for a while so they wouldn't get cold.

"So let's have it," Dean said, holding the cup to Castiel's mouth. Castiel drank, his eyes closing, and Dean watched in fascination as the muscles in his throat moved. *How could it be*, he thought, *that one person could become so important that every little thing about him was worth noticing?* "Let's really have it, Cas. Let's make it ours."

Castiel exhaled and leaned his forehead against Dean's. His eyelashes were impossibly long and thick, and Dean had to kiss them for being so perfect, which made Castiel chuckle. "Always a slave to your appetites, Dean," he said, putting a hand on Dean's hip.

"I like to think it's one of my better points. I don't pretend I want anything other than what I want."

"It is one of your better points." He ran his fingers slowly up Dean's spine, and Dean shivered. "Of course," Castiel added, his voice even lower, "I think all of your points are your better points."

"You love me," Dean said, smug.

"Yes." Dean had to kiss him again for that. "You also love me," Castiel whispered, lips against Dean's, and held Dean tighter so he could kiss him harder.

"I do," Dean whispered, "God, I do," and was content to just kiss him for a while. There was no question in his mind that Castiel wanted him -- it was in the ruddy shade to Castiel's cheeks and the darkness in his eyes, in the lingering touches of his hands and the way he trembled when Dean pressed their hips together as they kissed.

"Our night," he said, holding Castiel's cheek in his palm. "You and me. Let me have this, Cas. Let yourself have this. Just one night to be selfish."

"You lust for this body," Castiel whispered.

"I lust for this body because you're in it." He glanced over his shoulder at the table. They had eaten half the bread and most of the grapes, and he felt nourished -- not full, necessarily, this wasn't half the food he normally ate for a meal, but like all his cravings were satisfied. "Come back to bed with me. You did what you told the Fishers you'd do -- come be with me for a while now."

"Dean," Castiel said, taking his hand and holding it palm-to-palm.

"Give me tonight, Cas. Just tonight."

Castiel looked up from their hands to his face. His gaze searched Dean's, and Dean hoped he looked just like how he felt -- eager, passionate, yearning. Whatever he saw must have answered his unspoken questions -- Castiel gave him one of his quiet, barely-there smiles and gently kissed him. "Yes, Dean."

They put the food away quickly and went back down the hall to Dean's room. "There's no door," Dean said, frustrated, as he stood in the open archway. He'd been sure there would at least be a curtain of some kind.

Castiel wrapped his arms around Dean from behind and kissed his neck. "We're alone here."

"Are you sure?" Dean said and turned his head back, hungry for Castiel's mouth.

Castiel kissed him as requested. "I'm sure." He reached under Dean's shirt to unlace his trousers, and Dean stood in his arms, holding Castiel's hair and breathing with him, his eyes closed. "Even if we weren't," Castiel whispered, "I would not want to stop."

"Neither would I," Dean muttered and shivered as Castiel's hand slid along his hip. Castiel touched him curiously, his fingertips gentle, sliding from hip to belly to chest, while Dean's chest hitched and his legs trembled and he said quietly, "Cas, Jesus. Castiel."

"I healed your body," Castiel whispered. "I put you back together, cell by cell. I know every inch of you."

"And left your mark," Dean said and yanked his shirt over his head. He turned to face Castiel, trousers hanging low on his hips, and it made him breathe a little harder to see Castiel's face flush darker and his hands tremble. Castiel put his hand gently on the scar on Dean's shoulder and pulled him close. He held Dean around the waist and kissed the scars, and then Dean's protective tattoo and gave it a small brush with his thumb.

"Only fair," Castiel whispered and kissed Dean's mouth. "You've left your mark on me."

"Yeah?" Dean said, steering Castiel back to the bed. "Where?"

"All through me. From skin to soul." He lay back, bringing Dean with him, and kissed him again. "Every inch of me says your name."

Dean closed his eyes a moment, overwhelmed, and then pushed himself up and unknotted Castiel's tie. Castiel watched him with a steady gaze, playing with Dean's hair or running his fingertips along his arm, as Dean unbuttoned his shirt and pushed it open. Dressed, he looked so slim that as Dean undressed him he was surprised to see the muscles in his arms and the tautness of his belly. "Still hot," he whispered and kissed down Castiel's chest as his thumb circled his hip bone.

Castiel chuckled. "You will have to explain that slang to me someday, why being hot is a good thing."

"I will explain anything and everything you want me to," Dean said and had to kiss Castiel's mouth while he was still smiling. He went easily onto his back when Castiel rolled him over, and tilted back his head as Castiel licked down his neck to his chest.

"You taste good," Castiel mumbled into his skin, and Dean laughed and put his hand back in Castiel's hair.

"So do you. C'mere." Castiel crawled back up his body and kissed him, slow and deep, as he rocked his hips into Dean's. Dean pressed a knee into Castiel's ribs so he could push up his hips, gratified when Castiel shuddered and groaned against his neck.

Castiel pushed himself off Dean's body and slid down to kneel between his thighs. He put his hands on Dean's legs, careful of the still-healing stab wound, and looked up at Dean with

enormous, dark eyes. "I feel more than I know what to do with," he said, sliding his hands restlessly from hip to thigh and back.

"You're just expressing affection," Dean assured him and grinned when Castiel rolled his eyes.

"I'm expressing lust," he corrected and dabbled his tongue over the head of Dean's prick before sliding it carefully into his mouth.

"Oh," Dean gasped, "yeah, okay." He thrust a hand into Castiel's hair, and moved his hand down to Castiel's jaw to show him a better angle. "That's good, that's just right," he breathed, and watched Castiel's mouth with fascination as Castiel sucked him. He had beautiful lips, really, and they looked even better swollen from kisses and wet with saliva and precome.

Finally Dean pushed on Castiel's shoulder and said, "Off, man, pull off," and Castiel raised his head. "Naked," Dean said, so Castiel arched his body and pushed down his trousers and the dark boxers beneath, toed off his shoes and tossed it all, socks, underpants, shoes and shirt, onto the floor. Dean bit his lip to hold back the whimper that rose in his throat.

"Dean," Castiel said, and Dean rolled onto him and kissed him, arms wrapped around his head.

"I just want -- I wanna --" He took his cock in his hand, still wet from Castiel's mouth, and rubbed it slowly against Castiel's until the other man shivered and gasped. He thought he might get another low, amused, "Yes, Dean," the usual answer to whatever ridiculousness he'd proposed to Castiel lately, but instead Castiel pushed him onto his back and knelt over him.

He dipped his head and kissed Dean slowly, and then took hold of Dean's good leg and raised it over his shoulder. "Trust me?" he said softly, eyes searching Dean's face.

"More than anyone," Dean said, and bit hard on his lip as he watched Castiel spit in his hand and use his saliva and fingers to open Dean up. Dean groaned as Castiel pushed into him first with his fingers and then with a cock that made Dean think, *No fucking way it's all going to fit*. He groaned deeper and closed his eyes.

"Shh," Castiel whispered and brushed his lips over Dean's eyelids. "Relax, Dean."

"Don't tell me," Dean gasped, "you've done this before."

"No," Castiel said with a soft laugh. "But I've . . ." He moaned a little as he pushed deeper into Dean. "I've watched."

Dean laughed and put his hand over his eyes. "Oh, Cas . . . you dirty dog."

Castiel removed his hand and kissed him, and Dean pushed his hand into Castiel's hair and pulled his head down further to kiss him deeper. He pressed his thighs to Castiel's hips and kissed his mouth, kissed around his face and breathed heavily against Castiel's cheek.

"Promise me," Dean began, looking up at Castiel, and Castiel looked at him with his deep blue eyes, and Dean shook his head and kissed him again. "Never mind. Don't promise me anything. No promises."

"No promises," Castiel whispered and kissed him back.

"You know what the bitch of this is?" Dean said as he stroked Castiel's back.

"I have an idea." His arm hung over the edge of the bed, fingers trailing over the rug as if through water.

"That we waited so long. We could have been doing it for months." Castiel turned his head to raise an eyebrow at him, then turned his head back to rest it on his arm. "Admit it," Dean said. "You've wanted me for a long time."

"I've wanted you for a long time," Castiel said with a sigh. "But wanting a thing doesn't make it a right thing."

Dean removed his hand from Castiel's back. "So this was wrong?"

"Dean . . ." Castiel turned over and took his hand.

"Or more like the last meal of a condemned man. Right?"

"You are not going to die, Dean." He was completely serious, and for Castiel, that was really saying something. "I won't let you."

"So you do love me."

"That is never in question." He held Dean's hand to his chest and slowly ran his fingertips up and down Dean's inner arm. "Whether I should -- or will be allowed to continue --"

"Castiel, renegade angel," Dean said, and Castiel huffed a laugh. "Look. I'm -- I'm not okay with dying, not really, but it's better than letting the world end, right? So whatever happens, it's what was meant to happen. Right?" He lay back and wound his arm around Castiel, and Castiel tucked himself into Dean's body, sighing like it was all he needed to find the secret to happiness. "And, thank you for this. For you." He kissed Castiel's forehead.

Castiel was quiet for a while, which Dean was used to, and then pushed himself up enough to kiss Dean's forehead in return. "I know you're tired," he said and smoothed out Dean's forehead with his fingertips. "But will you trust me again? If you stop the Apocalypse, it does not mean you have to die. And I would prefer that you lived."

"You're prefer it, huh?" He smiled at Castiel, knowing that it was bitter rather than happy. "You'd rather I didn't die, if you please?"

"Don't mock me. I'm serious. I would prefer that you lived."

"Not mocking you," Dean mumbled and pulled Castiel's head to his shoulder. He ran his fingers through Castiel's damp hair. "Just . . . you're right. I'm tired. I've been tired for a long time. As long as I'm a hunter I'll keep being tired. And damn it, if I'm such a fucking hero I'd like a reward. That's part of all the stories, right? The hero comes home and gets the girl or the kingdom or whatever. I'd prefer that. A little peace."

Castiel breathed slowly in his arms. "I would like to give you that peace, Dean."

"But it's not up to you."

"No. It is not."

"You know," Dean said when he got tired of waiting for Castiel to elaborate, "I get why you didn't want to fuck me now -- not just because you're in someone else's body but because you'd like it too much, you'd want to keep doing it and so would I, and we're going to just have to suck up

and deal with the fact that we want each other and can't be together. Which sucks mightily, Cas. Sucks like a hose bag."

"I have no idea what that means," Castiel said slowly, "but I agree, nonetheless." He gave Dean another kiss. "Sleep. The Fishers will be upset if you're awake all night instead of resting."

"I'm sick of resting, too," Dean said. "Stay with me."

"For a while. I will likely be gone when you wake."

"Okay," Dean said, settling in to sleep -- and then opened his eyes and said, "When will you be back? You'll have to come back -- we have to find Lilith."

"Don't concern yourself with that," Castiel said and kissed him, and then kissed him again, and he must not have been too worried about the Fishers being upset with him because kisses turned to more with hardly a pause.

They say thunder rumbled across the country, but no rain fell.

Twelve

But I believe in Love

And I know that you do too

And I believe in some kind of path

That we can walk down, me and you

--"Into My Arms," Nick Cave & the Bad Seeds

When Dean woke again it was morning -- just after sunrise, from the look of the light and angle of the sun -- and someone had left him fresh clothes as well as water and a washbasin and soap. It was tempting not to wash up, to keep the scent of Castiel on him for a little while longer, but he bathed anyway and put on the clothes. The other outfit was probably intended to be pajamas, he realized -- these were made from a tougher weave and fit a little closer.

He inspected himself for burns as well, but it appeared he'd gotten nothing more than a few stray ashes on the back of his neck. He resolved to thank Castiel for that once he saw him again -- one more thing to thank him for, and he'd say "Thank you for loving me" and that would make Castiel smile . . .

Dean left the little room and followed the main hall in the other direction than they'd gone the night before, and this brought him out to the gardens. It took only a moment of looking around to understand that while the house had its function, the gardens were where all the actual living took place. They were tiered and walled, with gravel paths and hedges, and there was at least one long aqueduct kind of structure or several small ones that carried water from the wells -- Dean could count three just from where he was standing -- to the trees and rose bushes and rows of vegetables.

It was warm here, too, warmer than he could remember being for months. The winter had been unbearably long back at home.

He followed one of the paths, which took him first past a well with a round wood cover and then past an enormous ash tree, and then finally to a strawberry patch where Maya knelt on the grass and put strawberries in a basket. For someone doing something as relaxing as gardening,

she was digging with determination, as if she didn't notice the dirt on her skirt or under her fingernails.

"Hi," he said and sat cross-legged on the grass beside her.

"Good morning," she said and hastily wiped her cheeks with her palms, leaving streaks of moist soil. She gave him a strawberry. "Do you like strawberries?"

"Love 'em," Dean said and bit off the tip. It was still warm from being in the sun, and he chewed slowly, enjoying the sweetness. "Where's Castiel?"

"He had to go. He'll be back in a day or so."

"Do you know where he went?" Dean took another bite of the strawberry.

"Yes. He said he had to interrogate someone." She wiped some dirt off another strawberry and sat back on her heels to eat it.

Dean swallowed with a dry throat, suddenly feeling sick with worry. "Did he say who?"

"He did not," Maya said. "However, there is something you should know about. Before he left, Castiel asked that you be allowed to stay here and we agreed."

"I didn't think you'd kick me out just because Cas was gone," Dean said with a slightly hollow chuckle, still caught on where Castiel might be and what he might be doing to this person he had to interrogate. Was it about Sam? Was it about *him*? What if Castiel got caught, what if he got hurt?

"I mean forever, Dean. He wants you to stay here forever."

Dean's faint smile faded completely. "Why?"

"Because you'll be safe here. Castiel thinks the battle is lost and if you go back and face Lilith you'll be killed, so he wants you to stay here."

"But," Dean said and shook his head. "But all this time he's been telling me I'm the only one who can stop the Apocalypse. The righteous man who began it is also the one who can end it. That's what he said."

"He doesn't plan on stopping it," Maya said. "Have another strawberry." She held out one to him.

"No, thanks." He waved it away. "I don't understand this, Maya."

She shrugged and ate the strawberry herself. "Castiel knows there are a few ways all of this can end, and none of them are good. So Castiel is going to do what we should have done from the start -- he is going to steal the Grail back from Lilith and bring it here, where it will be safe."

"But we're supposed to leave the Grail on Earth."

"I know," she said sympathetically. "Even when the Grail was just on the Other Side the Earth suffered. Bringing it here will be . . . well, you have to admit very few people will really notice. God hasn't spoken for so long."

"But," Dean said again, "all the work we've done, all the people we've lost. We just take the Grail away, all of that sacrifice will be meaningless."

She tilted her head, curious. "Why do you think any of this has meaning?"

"Because it has to," Dean whispered. "If there's no meaning, what's the point?"

"Sometimes the meaning is in the doing, not the result."

"I don't believe for a second you believe that."

She shrugged and resumed picking strawberries. "I think I'd like to make berry compote. Whipped cream and strawberries and blueberries, does that sound good to you?"

For once, Dean was not distracted by food. "What if Castiel can't steal the Grail?"

"Then," she said slowly, "it's likely Castiel's vessel will be destroyed and Castiel will be sent back to Heaven, and Lilith will succeed in opening the gates of Heaven and raising Lucifer, and

the Apocalypse will begin. In which case all hope is lost and we will be cut off permanently from the earthly realm."

"And you're okay with this," Dean said, and Maya continued picking strawberries. "I can't believe how cold you're being. Just last week -- thank you, by the way, for losing three days we really could have used --"

"Time is a mortal invention, Dean."

"Whatever. Point is, you just last week told me not to give up, not to give into hopelessness, not to become complacent. But that's exactly what you're telling me to do now."

Maya said, not looking up from the perfect strawberry in her hand, "Dean, why haven't you asked me about Sam yet?"

Dean swallowed. "Because -- he's untouchable right now. Isn't he? Since Lilith needs him?"

"Or you just don't want to know. I'd hardly blame you for that. But I have to tell you, we can see his story ending a few different ways. One, Lilith cuts off his head and uses his blood and body to desecrate the Grail and open the doors to Heaven and Hell. Or two, Lilith uses a little of his blood to desecrate the Grail and open the doors to Heaven and Hell, and then offers Sam as a vessel to Lucifer once he's risen. I can see the second one happening far more easily than the first. Lilith would momentarily enjoy killing Sam, but how much pleasure would it give her to see her worst enemy housing her lord? Or even . . . he might offer himself. You know what he's been thinking about his purpose, Dean."

Dean wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. "Yeah. I know."

"So if Castiel fails in stealing the Grail, the other option is to kill Sam." She put the strawberry in the basket.

"No," Dean whispered. "He can't. He can't kill Sam, that's --"

"If it's what must be done, Castiel will do it. Which is why, if he doesn't bring the Grail here, he doesn't plan to return."

Dean pushed himself to his feet and walked a few yards away, his mind so full he couldn't make any sense of any thought. "And if he fails to do either of them?"

"We'll know." She pointed to the enormous ash down the path. "That will split from roots to branches."

Dean stared at the tree, his hands on his hips, and then turned back to Maya. "I refuse."

She raised her eyebrows at him. "What are you refusing?"

"This bullshit. Castiel's not the one who's supposed to stop it. I am. If Castiel goes he'll be killed, but if I go -- no matter how dangerous, no matter what I --" His voice faltered. He cleared his throat and went on ruthlessly, "No matter what I have to do, then I at least have some chance of succeeding."

Maya started to smile. "Some chance," she said softly. "A small one."

"But I'm not going to kill Sam. I don't care what the prophecies say. There has to be a way to save him. He's not just meant to be a vessel for Lucifer or a fucking sacrifice. He's more than that. He's my brother."

"How?" Maya said in a practical tone. "How can you save him, Dean, if he's already made up his mind that this is what he needs to be?"

"If he's made up his mind, I'll change it. If he's just a hostage, I'll rescue him. I won't let Lilith kill him. I'll get the Grail from her. I'll -- I have no idea how," he confessed and let his shoulders slump. "I just know I will."

She watched him for a moment, and then got to her feet, shook out her skirts, and came to him. She put her hands on his shoulders. "I can show you a way to find out."

Dean looked up, hopelessness fleeing. "Yes. Yes. Show me."

"It won't be easy," she warned him. "It may be the hardest thing you've ever done."

"I'm not afraid," he said, and she smiled and led him to the ash tree.

"This," she said and laid a hand on its trunk, "is the world tree. It contains every secret, every mystery whispered into an acolyte's ear, every bit of wisdom and knowledge given to man or kept from man or shared in the red tent between women. Its roots grow deep in the Earth and its branches reach far into the sky."

"Yeah," Dean whispered, looking up. "It's big, all right." He looked back at Maya. "What do I have to do? Climb it?" His leg ached at the notion. "Meditate under it?"

"Hang from it," Maya said.

Dean blinked at her. "What? What?!?"

"Sacrifice for wisdom," she reminded him, and he looked back at the tree, understanding. Fate had been trying to warn him all along that he'd end up here.

"Okay," he said and took a deep breath. "I'm not afraid."

Maya patted his back, and went back to her basket. She gave it a little twitch and it unwound, scattering strawberries everywhere, into a length of rope. She came back to the tree and swung the rope over a branch. "Lie down, it'll be easier."

"Shouldn't I have a horse or a stool instead?" Dean said and gave a hollow laugh.

"I'm not going to hang you by the neck, Dean," Maya said patiently. "I don't want you dead. Just wise."

"Right, right," Dean said and lay on the grass. He watched skeptically as she tied the rope around his left ankle, and then with a great yank she pulled him off the ground and into the air.

Dean shouted with pain as the whole weight of his body was held by his injured leg, and he thought there'd been some purpose to this, too, that the injury that had caused them so much trouble through this quest had brought him something like clarity.

He could already feel himself begin to sweat as he swayed, every creak of the rope sending new pain shooting through his leg. The rope chafed, blood was rushing to his head, his heart was pounding -- "Maya," he said, and his voice was already hoarse, "Maya, I don't know --"

"Faith, Dean," she said from the grass as she tied the end of the rope around the tree trunk. "Remember the hanging man." She went back to the strawberry patch and began to gather her berries.

Remember the hanging man, Dean thought, and tried to picture the card. He let his arms hang loose and that eased the pain in his back a little; and if he bent his leg just so that controlled the swinging so he didn't feel so dizzy.

However, it did not stop his heart from racing and his mind from thinking, *Oh, God, I'm completely helpless, I'm stuck here and she's going to leave me --*

Calm down, he thought, trying to make this inner voice sound as much like Castiel as possible. *Be calm. They're not trying to kill you. Just be open to wisdom.*

He inhaled and exhaled slowly, even though just breathing hurt from the pressure on his ribs. The minutes ticked past, and he was sure it was getting into hours. He started to hear tiny little sounds -- insects buzzing among the flowers, water splashing from the wells, even the wings of robins as they flew from branch to branch. Sweat began to drip down his face.

Wisdom, he thought. *I'm ready for wisdom.*

"So, Winchester," said Jo Harvelle, standing before him with her arms crossed and her hip cocked.

"So," Dean whispered. "Harvelle."

"You're in quite a mess, aren't you?" She walked closer -- tiny, blonde, dangerous, the little sister he'd never had. "Come down from there. Come back on the road with me, Dean. Come hunt with me. This is what you want -- a free life with no obligations, and a friend who'll never betray you."

He could see it -- traveling with Jo, crisscrossing the country, posing as husband and wife, as brother and sister, evading the law, saving people.

But the Apocalypse would still come. The world will still end. Jo would suffer if he failed, like all of his friends -- like Ellen, like Bobby.

"This is for you," Dean whispered. "This is for your mom. This is for everybody I had to leave behind. I can't, Jo. I'm sorry. I can't."

She patted his cheek and said, "I'm sorry too, Winchester," and disappeared.

The sun was high overhead and his back was aching. His injured leg hurt so much that if he so much as curled his toes it shot new pain from foot to thigh. The little garden sounds were growing louder, and he thought he could hear music -- a woman's voice sweetly singing, "Stars shining bright above you, night breezes seem to whisper I love you . . ."

"Dean," a woman said softly, and he jerked around so he could see her. It was Lisa, his Gumby girl, Ben's mother. Her dark hair was flowing and her eyes were as kind and her smile as friendly as ever. "What are you doing here, Dean? This is crazy."

"I know," he said, "I know." He closed his eyes as he felt her cool hands on his face, her soft lips gently brushing his.

"Come down from there," she said. "Come down and be a dad to Ben. That's what you've always wanted, even if you wouldn't admit it to anybody, not even Sam. You want a quiet life of little joys. Come home."

He could see it -- he could see it perfectly. Coming home from the garage every day to her lovely house, washing the car with Ben on Saturdays, laughing in bed with Lisa every night . . . it would be a beautiful life. Simple, perfect.

It could never be. If he failed -- God, he could see this too, Ben on a rack, Lisa under torture --

"I can't," Dean whispered and felt his eyes well. "I'm doing this for him, so he can have a happy life. That's all I want for him -- for him to be normal. Not a hunter. Not like me."

Lisa nodded sadly, then leaned forward and kissed him between his eyebrows. When he opened his eyes again she was gone. *That's not fair*, Dean thought, and then shouted, "That's not fair!"

The branches of the enormous ash tree creaked, and he supposed that was all the sympathy he was likely to get.

His body slowly turned. The branches creaked, the insects buzzed, the water splashed. The sun crossed the sky and started to sink beyond the garden walls.

"Dean," a woman said and Dean nearly sobbed because it was his mother.

"Mom," he said, and his eyes and throat stung. "Mom, you're not supposed to be here."

"Neither are you, sweetheart," Mary Winchester said and stroked his hair. "Come down. You don't need to do this. It's too much."

"Oh, Mom," Dean whispered.

"Come down," she said again. "Come be with your father and me. Come rest. This is what you want, Dean. To be a family again, to be with us. To be at peace."

He could see it. His reward for all the pain, a blessing for every scar, reunited with his parents, finally laying down his gun and giving up the fight. His father, proud of him; his mother, looking after him.

But if he failed, Sam would not be with them. They would suffer, if Heaven fell. Everyone would suffer, even the dead.

"Mom," Dean said and felt tears track down his face. "I have to. No one else can. I have to do this. Please, Mom, don't make it any harder."

"I love you," she said and kissed his forehead, and in a moment was gone.

"Mom," Dean said one more time, the word tearing his heart, and as the garden grew darker he wept from a different sort of pain.

When he opened his eyes he was in the burned forest, and a man sat beneath the tree, his own injured leg stretched out on the burned earth. A crutch was propped against the tree. The man was scaling a fish, to cook on the little campfire he had built beside him.

"Hey," Dean said. It came out hoarse -- his throat was so dry it hurt. He cleared his throat and said, "Hey!" again, but the man didn't look up.

He saw Maya, regal as a queen, beautiful amid the smoke and ruins -- but he could also see what he'd missed earlier in the garden, that her eyes were wet and her cheeks were streaked with tears. "Dean," she said softly.

"Maya," he said, reaching out a hand to her, and she took it. "What happened here?"

"The king was wounded, and while the Grail is keeping him alive he suffers every day. Then came war, famine, fire . . . The sun can't break through the clouds, and the rain never falls. The king suffers, the land suffers, and thus his people suffer."

"Why?" Dean said. "Why does it work that way?"

"Because the king is the land, and the land is the king."

"Am I here to help him?"

She smiled at him. "Yes."

"Then get me down -- I can't do anything from here."

"Just answer a question. Whom does the Grail serve, Dean?"

Dean closed his eyes, remembering the conversation with Sam about this very question. "I don't know," he said honestly. "I'm not even sure what it does. When I hold it -- it's like being hugged by someone who really, really cares about you. But I don't know what that means."

"Whom does the Grail serve, Dean?" she said again, her tone patient.

"I don't know!" Dean said. "God? I don't know. Castiel said it was a door and a conduit . . . it connects Earth to Heaven . . . it connects . . ." He opened his eyes and looked at Maya. "I think I understand."

She smiled even more. "Whom does the Grail serve, Dean?"

"Everyone," Dean said with wonder. "Everyone who asks. It wants to help us all."

Maya held his face and softly kissed him, and he felt his body jerk. His eyes flew open -- he was back in the garden, the sun was rising, and Castiel, his face grim, was lowering him by the rope. He looked like he'd been on the wrong end of an ass-whipping -- there was blood smeared on his forehead and streaked at the side of his mouth, and his knuckles were scraped raw.

"Don't worry, Dean," he said when he saw Dean's eyes were open. "I've got you."

"I understand now," Dean said and lay on the grass a moment, panting, as Castiel cut the knot to free him. "I think I do, anyway. The Grail -- I know what I have to do."

Castiel glanced at him. "You don't have to do anything, Dean."

"If I don't, everyone will suffer. I have to, no matter how much it scares me. Cas. You can't do it, you know you can't, and I'm not going to let you charge off into something that's only going to get you killed."

"Neither am I," Castiel said and sat on the grass beside him, drawing up his knees.

"Do you think I'm going to die or do you know I'm going to die?" Dean said and carefully sat up. His head spun and he gagged so hard he thought he would vomit. Castiel wrapped an arm around him and he gasped against Castiel's shoulder until he felt steady again.

"I'm afraid," Castiel whispered. "I'm just afraid. I don't want you to die. I don't want you to have to kill your brother. I'm afraid one or the other will happen."

"There's always another option," Dean said, clutching Castiel's coat. "I can save Sam, I know it. I don't know how right now but I'll do it, Cas. I'll do it. I won't let him die."

Castiel touched Dean's cheek, looking at him with his calm, deep eyes, and Dean kissed him. Castiel quietly gasped against his mouth and slid his fingers into Dean's hair, and when they parted they leaned their foreheads together and quietly breathed.

"You won't be alone, Dean. I am with you until the end."

Dean smiled, his eyes still closed. "I know." He kissed Castiel again, gently, and said, "It looks like you could have used me earlier, too."

Castiel looked at his bloody knuckles. "It took some persuading to get the information I needed."

"Yeah? What information was that?"

"Where Liliith intends to use the Grail." He got to his feet and held his hand out to Dean.

"No shit, really?" Dean said as he grasped Castiel's hand. He let Castiel pull him upright. A spasm pinched down his back and he hissed, but limped on determinedly to the path. "It's the next Grail castle, right?"

"Yes," Castiel said, walking slowly and calmly at Dean's side.

"If you've known this all along I'm so going to kill you."

Castiel smiled to himself and put an arm around Dean's waist to support him as they walked. "I have suspected that the two were the same since Liliith send a demon to fetch the Grail. I have not always known where the exact location was. I have been searching since Joseph Temple died."

"I wondered what you were up to," Dean said and paused to kiss Castiel. "Of course you were looking out for us. Is it far? Do you know where my baby is? If we have to drive --"

"Your car is safe. I will take you back to it. We will have to drive all night to get there in time, Dean."

"I can do that," Dean said confidently. "Done it before, can do it again. Where are we headed?"

"San Francisco," Castiel said, guiding him into the Fishers' stone house. "There's a church with an outdoor labyrinth called Grace Cathedral. That is where Lilith will be."

"Okay," Dean said with a nod. "Okay."

Castiel took him to his little room and he washed up from the wash basin as Dean put on his own clothes, jeans and t-shirt and his leather jacket, which was only a little scarred from the fire. When Dean was dressed there were footsteps in the main hall, and the three Fisher women stood outside his room.

"I, um." Dean looked at Castiel and Castiel gazed back at him, calm -- and he thought it was fair to say affectionate, too. "Thank you," he said and said it again, his eyes wet. "Thank you."

Sophie Fisher came to him and kissed his forehead. "Be strong," she said softly. Dean nodded, solemn.

Celine Fisher came to Dean and kissed him on the forehead. "Be brave," she told him, and Dean nodded again.

Maya Fisher came to him and held him by the shoulders, and lightly kissed Dean's mouth. "Be full of love," she whispered, and smiled at his surprised expression. "What? How often am I going to get to kiss you, Dean? Especially since --" She glanced at Castiel, who was trying very hard not to frown. "Since your heart belongs to someone else."

Dean smiled reassuringly at Castiel, and then hugged Maya. "One last question. Why were you crying, Maya?"

"Because hope felt small," she said, "but it has grown large again. Now go, boys, and go quickly. There isn't much time."

Dean held out his hand to Castiel, who took it, kissed him -- a little possessively, it must be said -- and brought him back to Wyoming, back to the everyday world.

The Impala had been impounded, according to the motel clerk, who gave them an address while looking at them disapprovingly. Dean supposed arriving with one man and leaving with another could only mean that he was hustling to her, but he had no desire to set her straight. Castiel was his lover, after all. Whatever else people assumed about them, that much was true.

They passed the day drifting between various coffee shops and diners, and at one Dean picked up someone's abandoned newspaper from the day before and looked at the headlines. He pointed out one article to Castiel, who read it, frowning.

"The two rangers died," he said softly. Two bodies had been found by the burned-out station, and the fire marshal was quoted as saying it was probably arson that had caused the fire. The article particularly expressed relief that the arsonist left the medicine wheel unharmed.

"They probably were killed by the demons who possessed them," Dean said. "They just left their bodies behind when they moved on."

Castiel nodded, still frowning. "They are getting careless. They don't expect to need the bodies for long."

When it was dark and the town was quiet, Dean and Castiel went to the impound lot. Dean was ready to climb the fence and get his baby -- and he was looking forward to driving through the gate -- when Castiel waved his hand and the padlock fell open.

"You're handy," Dean said, grinning at him, and Castiel shrugged and smiled.

"I have a few tricks."

There were few cars in the lot so they found the Impala quickly. Castiel unlocked the boot on her front tire with another wave of his hand. "Hello, sweetheart," Dean said, as he pulled the boot off. "You're a good, patient girl, you know that?" He shoved the boot aside and unlocked the passenger door, using his key, to let Castiel in. He got into the driver side and then leaned over to kiss Castiel one more time. "Still scared? I hope you are, 'cause I'm scared shitless."

Castiel smiled a little. "I am not as much as I was." He laid his hand on the dash. "We have to fly. We've lost a few days."

"My baby can fly," Dean said and started up the engine, grinning as the Impala roared to life. They took off into the night, out of town, heading west.

They say, on the highways of Nevada, there's a ghost car -- big and black as if the devil himself could be behind the wheel, and going so fast you can only see it out of the corner of your eye.

There isn't. But despite Castiel making the Impala go much faster than mere gasoline ever could, a few people driving the highways saw them as they tore across the desert to California, and stories will always spread. That's what stories do.

Thirteen

Now, once more, I must ride with my knights to defend what was, and the dream of what could be.

--*Excalibur*, John Boorman/Rospo Pallenberg

They arrived in San Francisco in the late morning on Friday. Dean parked the Impala down the street from the cathedral, and he and Castiel walked to the church and had a look around the grounds. The outdoor labyrinth was easy to find -- it was set apart by hedges, and a few people were slowly walking the path despite the misty weather. The cathedral was busy as well, which Dean supposed was normal for Good Friday.

"Tonight," Castiel said. "It must be tonight." He lowered his head and Dean put his hand on Castiel's back. After a moment Castiel raised his head and said, "I don't know what's going to happen. There may be earthquakes, storms, locusts . . . there may be only a girl with a cup."

"And my brother," Dean said.

"Yes."

"I feel like we're getting ready to drop off a ransom or something."

"In a way, we are." He shoved his hands deep in his raincoat pockets. "Dean, if we can't save Sam --"

"I know," Dean said and swallowed. "I know. If I have to choose between Sam and the world, I have to choose the world." He blinked hard and looked away, and Castiel stepped closer to him and leaned his head against Dean's. "But I'm not going to give up on him," he whispered and Castiel made a comforting sound. "I can't give up until there's no hope left."

Castiel nodded slowly. "I don't have a plan."

"Neither do I." He nodded to the church. "Do you want to have a peek?"

"Very much," said Castiel, so they climbed the steps and looked first at the schedule of Holy Week events, including services throughout Friday.

"Is that bad news?" Dean said, frowning. "She could take hostages if she wanted."

"I can protect the church."

"Yeah," Dean said, smiling at him. "I bet you can. No shotguns tonight. There'll be too many people around. We can have salt in bags but no rock salt pellets."

"And no traps," Castiel murmured. "People will see them." He pushed open the door to the church and they went inside. There was another labyrinth on the floor and stained glass windows in the walls, and they could hear the subdued sound of prayers as people waited to make confession.

Dean sighed, disappointed that there was no sign of Sam. Of course, that would be far too easy. Lilith would likely keep Sam hidden wherever she'd put him until she needed him. She probably wouldn't let him out of her sight.

"If we cannot disturb the services tonight," Castiel said softly, "I would prefer that."

"Me too. Unless there's earthquakes and everything you said."

"I hope there are not earthquakes." He sat in the very last pew, and after a moment Dean sat beside him. It was strange to him -- he used religious relics and language all the time, but he spent little time in churches unless someone had died there.

Castiel took his hand. Dean gave him a look, but figured they were in San Francisco and people were used to it, and wove their fingers together. Castiel closed his eyes and Dean let him be, knowing that Castiel had his own ways of gathering strength.

Castiel said, after they sat in silence for several minutes, "If it comes to choosing between the world and you, I must also choose the world."

"I know," Dean said and squeezed Castiel's hand. "It's funny -- I'm not worried about what's going to happen to me. I'm worried about what's going to happen to you and to Sam, but not to me."

Castiel rubbed his thumb slowly over the back of Dean's hand. "You are not allowed to sacrifice yourself, Dean."

"Cas --"

"No." He looked at Dean, serious. "I will not watch you die again."

"Again?" Dean said softly. "You were there?"

"I witnessed it. I have told you, Dean -- I have seen nearly every moment of your life."

"And you still like me?" Dean started to smile.

"Very much."

"Me too." He looked out at the church again. He'd felt confident ever since they left the Fishers' place, but it felt different in this peaceful setting, as the faithful prayed or contemplated around them. "Even though you are a puzzle to me, Cas."

"I expect I shall remain so." At Dean's look he said, "If we fail, I expect I will be taken. If we succeed, I will need to go home."

"Right away?" Dean said. "You can't stay for a while and celebrate?"

"If the Apocalypse is stopped, my job is done."

Dean waited for him to go on, and when he didn't said, "That's it? Your job's done and you just go?"

"It is not my choice, Dean."

"Right," Dean said and his eyes stung a moment. He whispered, "I was hoping we could have more time."

Castiel clasped Dean's hand more tightly. "I am not supposed to be here."

"I'm supposed to do this on my own?" Dean whispered harshly, and a few people in the pews turned around to look at him. Castiel just gazed at him, and Dean shook his head. "Your bosses . . ."

"Only you can stop it, Dean."

"I know. I know. God, I know."

"But I will not leave."

Dean closed his eyes. "Cas. You're risking death for me, aren't you? The price for disobedience is death, right?"

"Yes," Castiel said.

"So you're going to risk your existence to help me, and just go back to be executed when we're done." He looked at Castiel, who didn't answer, his eyes downcast. "This isn't fair."

"I suppose not. Nonetheless, it's what I must do. I cannot run and hide."

Dean shook his head again. "But I love you," he whispered and felt his throat grow tight. "I don't want you to go."

"We are but two people, Dean."

"I know," Dean said and pulled his hand away. He got up from the pew and left the church, and stood on the steps with his hands shoved in his back pockets and his head down. If he failed, the whole world would descend into Hell -- if he succeeded, he'd lose the one person who felt like home.

He walked out to the labyrinth and found the beginning of the path. People paced it slowly, some with open scriptures to read as they walked, some just with their heads bowed in thought. The people he was fighting for -- good people, or people who were trying to be good.

How am I going to do this? he thought. *I have to rescue Sam, get the Grail, send Lilith back to Hell -- all without weapons and only one angel on my side.*

He sensed Castiel behind him and turned back his head to acknowledge him. He leaned into Castiel as Castiel's arm slid around his waist. "I don't know what to do, Cas."

"Do you have faith?"

"I'm not even sure I have that."

"I have faith." Castiel held him a little tighter. "We'll know what to do when the time comes."

"I hope so," Dean said, glad for his comforting warmth.

By mid-afternoon the mist had become a storm and the outdoor labyrinth was deserted. Worshippers hurried through the rain to the afternoon liturgy, huddled under umbrellas.

At Castiel's insistence Dean ate some lunch at a nearby cafe, and then they got salt and some small weapons from the Impala and went back to the park across the street from the cathedral grounds to wait and watch.

The trouble was, as it always was with demons, that Lilith could be anyone -- she could be the tourist snapping pictures of the cathedral, she could be the businesswoman hurrying along the sidewalk, she could be the little girl hopping up the steps to the labyrinth, holding hands with her daddy.

Dean rose from the bench they'd been waiting on. The little girl's daddy had familiar shaggy hair and mile-long legs, and Dean would know that jacket and those boots anywhere. He started towards them, and then felt Castiel's hand clasp his.

"Patience," Castiel said softly.

"It's them!" Dean hissed. "It's going to start any moment now, Cas."

"Patience," Castiel repeated and raised his hand towards the cathedral. There was a faint shimmer, just a moment, but enough for Dean to see castle walls and towers like the Fisher King's castle in his dreams. "There it is," Castiel said softly and finally rose from the bench. "We must be careful -- it's likely Lilith has many minions around."

"Right," Dean said. They crossed the street and followed up the steps to the labyrinth, and hid themselves behind the hedges. As they watched, Lilith tried to enter the labyrinth, but stopped as if a wall had sprung up in her way. "Is that you?" Dean whispered to Castiel, and Castiel shook his head.

"It's the castle. No one unworthy can enter it." He paused. "Well, there are ways . . ."

"Shh," Dean whispered and ducked down. Lorcan Murphy, with the briefcase and his two thugs, was climbing the steps to join Lilith. First the big thug and then the little one tried to enter the labyrinth, and then Lorcan Murphy himself. All three were thwarted, and Lilith stamped her foot impatiently. Sam stood still, and Dean wanted to reach out for Sam, to signal to him that he was safe now.

Lorcan knelt on the pavement and one of the thugs held an umbrella over him as Lorcan set down the briefcase and spun the combination. "Now," Castiel said and Dean stepped out of the hedge and shouted, "Lilith!"

She turned and her face lit up, so delighted to see him that Dean shivered. "Dean!" she cried. "I knew you were here. I knew you'd want to see your brother fulfill his destiny."

"Nobody's fulfilling anything," Dean said. "I'm here for Sam. We're taking the Grail."

"No," she said, shaking her blonde curls. "I need it, Dean. And I need Sam. And I promised you to Lorcan though I don't know what he wants to do with you. I know what I want to do with you," she added confidentially. "I'd eat through your breastbone to your heart and then tear it out of your chest while it was still beating and then show it to you."

"Lovely," Dean said faintly. He couldn't see Castiel but he could sense him -- smell him, mostly, the familiar scent of warmth and sweetness that made him think of cookies. He took a deep

breath, reminding himself to distract them. "And you're going to bleed Sam dry, right? You're going to use his blood to desecrate the Grail?"

"Oh, no," Lilith chirped. "I need him alive."

Dean looked at Sam, wishing Sam would face him so Dean could see his eyes. He had a terrible feeling Sam's eyes would be yellow instead of their familiar green. "You want to offer him as a vessel," he said in a low voice. "You know he's protected, right?"

"Sam," Lilith said, "show him."

Sam turned to him at last, and Dean was relieved to see that while his eyes had a distant, blank look of someone under a controlling spell, they were still their usual color. Sam pulled back his button-down shirt to reveal that the tattoo on his shoulder looked as if someone had laid a hot poker across it. It was destroyed, useless, and Dean shuddered as he imagined how much that must have hurt. From the red, puckered skin on Sam's chest, it probably hurt like hell now.

"Oh, Sammy," he whispered.

"I thought of everything!" Lilith said proudly. "I even know how to get rid of that angel who's flitting around. I can see you, Castiel!"

Castiel appeared at Dean's side -- his calm Castiel, ordinary and rumpled as ever, now with a sword in his hand. Flames flickered down the length of the blade. "Lilith."

"Put your pretty knife away, Castiel," Lilith said gently. "It's no use here. My pet will eat you up in a bite and I've got much bigger toys." She said to Lorcan, "Give the sword to Sam, Lorcan."

"Yes, mistress," Lorcan said and took the sword out of the briefcase. It looked ordinary, as it had in Wyoming, an old battered sword with a plain handle, but still Lorcan handled it reverently as he gave it to Sam. Sam took it and wrapped his hand around the handle tight as Lorcan carefully affixed the spear point to the blade of the sword.

"Sam," Lilith said, and without another word Sam raised the sword with both hands and cut off Lorcan's head. Lorcan didn't even have enough time to scream. His thugs looked away, the big one stifling a horrified sound.

"Sam!" Dean shouted, sickened, as blood spilled from Lorcan's neck and his head, expression still surprised, rolled to a stop on the stones. Even Castiel gasped. "You didn't need to do that, Lilith!"

"I told him he'd live forever," Lilith said and picked up the head. "I just didn't tell him it would be this way." She raised the head by the hair and told Sam, "I need the dish."

Sam stooped to the briefcase and got out the dish, and Dean whispered to Castiel, "What do I do? I don't know what to do at all."

"Nor do I," Castiel said, shaking his head, and his eyes were bright and damp. He flicked a finger towards Sam and gave Dean a meaningful look.

Dean acknowledged him with a nod, and eased to where Lilith was setting up her strange, gory alter on Lorcan's body. The big thug was crying openly by now as Sam prodded him into place, and he sobbed, "I don't want to die, I don't want to die, I don't want to die --"

"Shut up," Lilith said mildly and the big guy pressed his hands to his mouth.

"Miss," the little thug tried, "we're just employees. We don't know nothing about magic."

"Shut up," Lilith said again as she arranged Lorcan's head on his chest. "Sam, help me. He's too heavy."

Sam went to her and knelt, and put down the sword.

That's my boy, Dean thought and lunged for the sword. He could have sworn it scooted a little closer to him, making it easy to scoop it up and wrap his arms around it, and he rolled away from Lilith and to his feet. He jumped up, groaning as his leg protested, and held tight to the handle as he poised for a fight.

Lilith's china doll face was dark and angry as the thunderclouds overhead. "Oh, you didn't want to do that," she said softly, and under Dean's feet the ground shook. "And I didn't want to do this, Dean, but you are forcing my hand."

Dean glanced at Castiel, who had joined him, the flaming sword in his hand. "Go guard the church," Dean whispered to him. Castiel gave him a confused look and Dean said, "I can do this. Go protect the church."

Castiel cupped Dean's cheek in his hand a moment as the ground continued its slowly steady shaking, and then climbed the rest of the steps and stood in front of the cathedral doors, the flames on his sword flickering and rippling in the rain.

Dean held his own sword, which felt warm in his hands, and waited for the beast to come into view. The sword didn't give him the same feeling of love and comfort that the cup did, but he did feel like, if nothing else, he'd give the critter one hell of a fight.

He heard enormous hooves climbing the cathedral steps, and the ground trembled hard enough for the trees in the park to sway. A great beast hove into view, and Dean's mouth fell open at the sight of it. It was a bull, but not a bull -- it climbed the steps on all fours, but once it was on the level of the courtyard it stood upright on its back legs. It had the head of a bull, and it was covered with fine, dark, bristly hair from head to about midway down its chest, but its chest and torso were clearly human. Its arms were human but it had no hands, only hooves, and its legs were thick and bowed like a bull's. Its tail twitched and it snorted. There was a heavy rope around its neck, and from the rope there hung a large amulet with the carving of a bare-breasted woman holding a snake in each hand.

Lilith clapped her hands with delight. "Hello," she cooed, "hello, my precious. You followed the boys so well, my lovely, and now you get to eat him! Aren't you glad?"

The creature lowered its head and snorted again.

"What is that thing?" Dean breathed.

"That's the Minotaur. He's ever so old and ever so stubborn, but I made him mine and he obeys me now. He's a little smarter than a hell hound." She beamed at Dean. "I bet you're delicious. I bet you crunch just right."

"Bitch," Dean said and the Minotaur charged at him.

Two swings in, Dean realized he didn't know a damn thing about sword-fighting even though he'd seen a zillion movies about it over his life. He realized, too, that his arm was being guided - - that the sword knew what to do and was telling his arms how to block and when to slice. The rest he figured out on his own, following the arcs and swings of the sword.

The Minotaur swung his horns at Dean again and again, charged at him and tried to gore him, snorted great breaths of air, glared at him with exhausted, red eyes. Dean swung the sword, bearing down on the Minotaur, beating it down to its knees.

Dean grabbed a horn and drew back the sword, ready to plunge it into the Minotaur's throat, when something happened -- he was never able to exactly figure out what. But quite simply and clearly, he could see the Minotaur's life -- despised and hidden for centuries in a labyrinth, wandering the earth from one dark cave to the next, never finding another of its kind.

It was ancient, Dean realized. It was lonely. And like the Green Knight had said in the Hanging Man, it had been kidnapped, made a prisoner, and forced to obey a creature it despised.

I could kill it, Dean thought, and that would be one less monster in the world.

Or he could let it go. Let it get back to its life -- which was, for all its torments, still a life.

Dean sliced through the rope and the amulet fell from the Minotaur's neck. Lilith screamed, "No! No! You can't let it go, I want it!"

For a moment the Minotaur hunched low to the ground, then shook its head as if just waking up. It raised its head and took in the dark, wet courtyard in a slow, piercing stare. Dean panted for breath, and said, "You're free," hoping this wouldn't come back to bite him in the ass.

"That's mine!" Lilith was screaming. "You can't have him!"

The Minotaur looked at Dean. Dean tightened his hand around the handle but let the sword hang at his side. The Minotaur got slowly to its feet and clumped across the courtyard to Lilith, and the little girl held out her arms to him as if expecting to be picked up.

The Minotaur bent and snatched Lilith up in his jaws. Lilith screamed, and kept on screaming as the Minotaur loped down the steps to the street and out of sight.

They say there were at least a dozen calls that night to the San Francisco police, reporting an escaped bull from the zoo carrying a little girl. However, the zoo did not report an escaped bull, and no one reported a missing child. These calls were written off as pranks.

They say in certain parts of the world, in twisty, deep, dark caves, sometimes spelunkers hear the sound of great hooves and a little girl screaming. Investigations reveal nothing, and most people believe them to be simply a form of tommyknockers.

They say Jerome and Grady, two brothers who'd always lived a life of crime, turned a new leaf after the Murphy job. Grady changed his name and joined the Peace Corps, Jerome a monastery. Neither of them will say why.

"Sammy," Dean said and dropped the sword unceremoniously onto the ground. He went to Sam, stumbling a little from exhaustion, and wrapped his arms around his brother. Sam stood stiffly, not only as if he didn't know Dean but as if he weren't being touched at all. Dean whispered, "Oh, Sammy." and felt along Sam's chest -- as he'd suspected, there was an amulet hanging from a leather cord. He lifted it from Sam's neck and tossed it away. "Sammy?" He held Sam's face and looked into his eyes. "Sam, it's me. Wake up, kid. C'mon." Sam blinked a few times, and then leaned his head against Dean's shoulder. "That's it," Dean whispered and stroked his back. "Big brother's got you."

He barely glanced up as he heard the two thugs scramble away. He couldn't blame them -- if you'd spent your whole life committing various crimes, seeing real evil in action would be too much for even the most jaded of people, he supposed. He did look up when he sensed Castiel joining him, the flaming sword still in his hand. Castiel grasped his shoulder, so Dean reached back a hand to lay over it and turned his head to lightly kiss Castiel's wrist.

"Dean," Castiel said, "step away from Sam."

"What?" Dean said and then looked into Sam's face, into his eyes. They were completely yellow.

"Thanks for getting rid of the bitch," Sam said and swung a punch at Dean, connecting hard with his jaw. Dean staggered, and when Castiel tried to catch him Sam raised his hand. There was a blast of wind that knocked Castiel off his feet so that he skittered across the courtyard like a dead leaf.

"Cas!" Dean screamed. He shoved himself to his feet, his body aching, and shouted at Sam, "So help me, if you've hurt him --"

"Shut up, Dean," Sam said and knocked Dean off his feet with a mere gesture. Dean sprawled on the ground, gasping for breath. "I'm done listening to you. You're not strong enough for this -- I've been telling you all along." He knelt on the ground by Lorcan's body and picked up the dish that bore his head. "I am."

Dean crawled across the wet pavement to Castiel, who was lying much, much too still, his head and one leg at a horrible, twisted angle. "Cas," Dean whispered and pulled on his wet coat. "Cas, wake up. I need you. Castiel."

"Dean," Castiel whispered and opened his eyes. His pupils were dilated and there was blood on his teeth when he spoke. "Save Sam."

"Cas, you're hurt, heal yourself, I know you can --"

"Save Sam," Castiel repeated, so Dean leaned their foreheads together a moment and then forced himself to his feet.

"Sam!" he roared and stumbled back across the courtyard to the labyrinth. Sam was holding up the dish with the severed head on it, and his eyes were closed as he rocked on his knees, muttering in Latin. "You don't want to do this, Sam!"

Sam lowered the dish and opened his eyes. "You don't know what I want, Dean. You never have. You forced me back into this life. You led the yellow-eyed demon to me so he could kill Jess. You've always pushed me on, never let me settle down, never let me find my own place, never let me make my own decisions."

"I died for you, Sam!"

"And came back broken," Sam said.

Dean squeezed his eyes shut, wiped the rain from his face, and said roughly, "I came back damaged, Sammy, but not broken." He picked up the sword. "I'm strong enough to stop you."

Sam turned to him and with a gesture, yanked the sword from Dean's hand. "I need that." He rose from his knees and held up the sword, his face more grim than Dean had ever seen it. "I'm opening the door, Dean. Don't try to stop me. I'll kill you."

"Don't do this, Sam," Dean pleaded. "This isn't you. You don't know what Hell is like -- I do. You can't make the Earth into Hell's image. Think of all the people who'll suffer."

"You don't get it, do you, Dean?" Sam said wearily. "This isn't about Hell. This isn't even about Heaven. This is about a New Earth. My Earth. No more demons, no more ghosts, no more suffering. A perfect world where everybody does exactly what they're told. I can make this happen, Dean." He held up the cup. "I can make it happen with this. It wants to help everybody get into Heaven, right? This is how."

"That's not helping," Dean said. "It's taking away everything that makes humanity wonderful."

"People are dicks, Dean. You know it as well as I do."

"Yeah, they are," Dean said, "but they're human. Take away choice and you take away potential, you take away beauty, you take away imagination -- Utopia doesn't come from everybody being alike. It comes from everybody being happy."

"Same difference," said Sam.

"Big difference! Nobody was ever forced into a happy life!"

Sam snorted, and as Dean watched, horrified, Sam worked open the mouth on Lorcan's severed head and murmured another incantation. The head groaned and its eyes opened, and the invisible walls of the Grail castle flickered into view as lightning flashed. Sam continued

chanting and the head picked it up so that their two voices chanted in unison. The walls flickered and wavered like any of the ghosts they'd dealt with over the years.

"Sam," Dean said desperately, "when Cas took me out of the fire he brought me to this mountain where the Fishers live, and I had a vision, Sam, I had a vision under the world tree of all the possibilities of my life -- but no matter how perfect the vision were it wasn't right because it didn't have the people I love most in them."

Sam stopped chanting, though the head continued, and glared at Dean. "Castiel," he scoffed. "Your star."

"Castiel," Dean admitted and swallowed hard. "And you."

Sam stared at him, blinking in the rain, and then shrugged a shoulder and said, "I'm done arguing about this with you, Dean. Azazel gave me these powers for a reason, and I know the reason now. It's to remake everything. Heaven, Hell, Earth -- I can do it. God doesn't care -- He's been lost to us for who knows how long. I can leave Lucifer in his cage and take his place. All I need is this." He held the cup to his chest. "This and a little of my blood, and everything will be so much better. I'll *make* it better."

"Whoever told you this was lying, Sam," Dean said.

"Why should I believe you?"

"Because I saw it, Sam. I saw you. You do this and the whole world will suffer until the end of time." He took a deep breath. "Stop this, Sam. Stop it or I'll kill you."

"You can't," Sam sneered. "You're too weak, Dean. You love me too much. Love has always been your weakness."

"No," Dean said softly. "Love has always been my strength." He threw himself at Sam, feet slipping on the wet stones of the courtyard, and knocked him to the ground. Sam grunted and the cup rolled from his fingers, making Sam growl with anger. He wrestled Dean off him and tried to crawl to the cup, as Dean pulled him back and crawled over him. Dean shoved Sam back with a foot and scooped up the cup, and cradled it against his chest as Sam yanked on his left leg hard enough to make Dean see stars.

"You can't stop me, Dean!" Sam shouted.

"Maybe not," Dean said and got to his feet, panting, with the cup still in his hand. "But I can try." He stepped into the labyrinth.

They say, during the Good Friday services in Grace Cathedral that year, people prayed with a fervor they'd never felt at Easters past. They say the officiant said a prayer she'd never said before and never said since, a prayer for strength and safety. They say people wept, more moved by the Spirit than they could recall being.

Some blamed the strange events in the world in the last week. Some blamed the storm outside, that sounded like Mother Nature herself was lashing against the stone walls.

When Dean looked back over his shoulder, he could see the cathedral, the park across the street, even Castiel's body still lying on the wet pavement. When he looked ahead, however, he could see only walls of gray stone leading onward, no doors, no corridors.

He tucked the Grail into his elbow and began to run. It was a labyrinth, not a maze -- he knew there were no dead ends, no false passages to lead him astray -- but still it seemed the faster he ran the longer the initial passage became, until finally he stopped to get his breath and rest his aching body a moment.

"Dean!" he heard Sam shout from somewhere far behind him. "You can't hide in here!"

"Watch me," Dean muttered and started doggedly running again.

A few more minutes of this, with Sam shouting behind him -- sometimes sounding closer, sometimes sounding far, far away -- Dean stopped again and tried to think. Running was getting him nowhere -- when he looked behind the view of the cathedral was exactly the same -- so maybe the answer was to do something else.

Dean closed his eyes and slowly breathed. He held the cup loosely in his fingers, and then began to walk, his other hand on the wall to guide him. He put one foot in front of the other deliberately, stopping every few steps to just listen and breathe.

He felt the wall curve under his fingertips, just slightly, enough to tell him he'd come through the first part of the labyrinth and was into an exterior part of the path. He opened his eyes and looked behind him, and smiled when he saw the cathedral was no longer in his view.

"Don't fail me now," he whispered and closed his eyes again. He took the next curve and the next at the same slow, steady pace, forcing himself to keep going whenever he heard Sam's angry shouts.

Walk with trust, he thought. You won't get lost.

In the back of his mind he knew Castiel was injured -- that the vessel could be dying this very moment -- but he forced himself not to think about it. First the world. Then his lover.

The wall abruptly stopped and Dean opened his eyes. The path opened to a small chamber shaped like a rosette, with eight small niches circling around. It was quiet here, as if the storm outside was far distant, and bright enough to feel like day.

He held out the Grail. "Okay," he said, "you've brought me this far. Now what do I do?"

There was a shimmer, and he was not at all surprised to see the Fishers, dressed like queens and looking quietly pleased. "Dean," Maya said.

"You knew all along," Dean said.

"We didn't know. We know very little. We hoped."

"How do I save him, Maya?" She didn't answer, and he said, "Celine? Sophie? Tell me how to save Sam."

"You know the answer," said Sophie.

"You know the question," said Celine.

"You've always known," said Maya.

"Thanks a lot," said Dean, and turned when he heard Sam's footsteps pounding on the paving stones. Dean stood in front of the Fishers, knowing he had no weapons to defend them if it came to that.

Sam burst into the chamber, his eyes eerily gold, and held up the dish with Lorcan Murphy's chanting head. "This castle is mine now. I claim it and all its magic."

"You have no claim here," said Sophie.

"You have no power here," said Celine.

"You have nothing here," said Maya.

"You have me," Dean said and swallowed. "Put that thing down. It's an obscenity."

"Out of my way, Dean," Sam said and drew the sword. "I don't want to kill you but I will if you force me to."

"I can't force you to do anything," Dean said. "I can only hope you do what I ask. Sammy. Please. Think of what you'll do to every living thing if you go through with this."

"The misery," said Sophie.

"The suffering," said Celine.

"The despair," said Maya.

"Stop it," Sam whispered. "You don't know anything. I've seen it. I've seen the truth. I've seen the future I'll bring. It'll be -- it'll be --" He faltered.

"Sammy," Dean said, "I love you. I love you more than anyone. You're my only brother. My flesh and blood. When we're not together I feel like half a person, like I'm missing half my soul. You kill me, you're killing yourself."

"Shut up."

"I love you, Sammy," Dean said again. "I love fighting at your side. I love knowing you're safe. I love that you know me better than anyone."

"Shut up!"

"Put down the sword, Sammy," Dean said. "Put down the sword. Come and drink." He held out the cup again, and it was different in his hand -- not the plain clay cup he knew so well, but the cup as it truly was, heavy and shining and rich, made of gold, studded with jewels. "You know who the Grail serves, Sam?" he said softly. "It serves everyone. It serves life. It serves every man, woman and child who's ever walked this Earth and will ever walk it. It loves us all completely."

Sam stared at him, and the dish and sword fell from his hands. Lorcan's head rolled off the dish and came to a stop.

"Drink," said Sophie. "Be comforted."

"Drink," said Celine. "Be healed."

"Drink," said Maya. "Be true."

Sam slowly blinked and fell to his knees. "Sam!" Dean shouted and crossed the chamber to him, catching him before he could pitch forward onto his face. "God, Sammy," he said and held the cup to Sam's lips. The cup filled itself with water that Dean knew was cool and sweet, and when it touched Sam's lips it hissed and sizzled a moment before he opened his mouth and swallowed.

Dean cradled Sam on his arm and didn't take the cup away until he had drained it. When Sam finally pulled back, his eyes closed, Dean kissed his forehead. "Love you," he said. "Stupid ox."

"Shut up, jerk," Sam whispered and opened his eyes.

They were green.

They say the rain stopped abruptly. They say the clouds parted over San Francisco Bay and a beam of sunlight shone through, pretty as a postcard, and people who took pictures of it noticed later that the beam seemed to fall into the center of the city.

Celine knelt beside the brothers and held Sam's face a moment. "Speak," she said gently.

"I -- I'm confused," Sam whispered. "I was -- so full of anger." He looked at Dean. "I hated you."

"Well, I hate you too," Dean said. "But that doesn't stop me from loving you, either."

"Not what I mean," Sam said and looked at Celine. "I don't know what happened."

"You nearly lost yourself, Sam," she said gently. "You were so close that if you hadn't drunk when you did we would have lost you forever." She pushed the cup to Dean. "Drink as well."

"I'm fine, Celine, really."

"Drink," she repeated. "Drink and be healed."

Dean drank. As he'd suspected, the water the cup bore was delicious as a mountain spring, and he drank eagerly. Heat burned in his wounded leg and Celine steadied him when he wavered, and smiled at him. "The wound is gone," she said and kissed his forehead. "Sam." He looked at her, his eyes damp. "You are purified of the demon blood within you. You are forgiven."

"Thank you," Sam whispered.

"You know who you really are," said Sophie. "Do not forget again."

"Never," said Sam, and when Sophie looked at him Dean said, "Never," too.

"You've learned something it takes others decades to understand," said Maya. "All life is connected. All life is precious. All life depends on each other."

"I understand," said Dean, and Sam nodded and whispered, "I understand."

"Castiel," Dean said, getting to his feet. "He was hurt --"

"Go and tend to him," Celine said, "but remember, the cup can only heal. It can't give back what was taken away." She reached for Lorcan Murphy's head and gently closed its eyes, and its mouth stopped chanting and went slack at last. She picked up the head and cradled it in her arms, and in a puff of ash it disappeared. She gave the dish to Sam. "Take the treasures and put them in the cathedral. They will be safe there until they're needed again. Now go, quickly."

"Thank you," Dean said again, and in a blink the castle was gone, as were the Fishers. There was nothing in the courtyard but the briefcase, a small pile of ash where Lorcan Murphy's body had been, and Castiel.

Dean ran across the labyrinth, no walls in his way now, and knelt at his side. "Cas," he said and held the cup to Castiel's lips. "Castiel. Wake up. Drink this, Cas." He poured a little water into Castiel's mouth, and it dribbled down his chin. "Cas, please," Dean begged and felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up, expecting Sam -- but it was Zachariah instead, looking down at him with something like compassion. "You," Dean said, narrowing his eyes at him.

"Me," Zachariah said mildly. "We knew you could do it, Dean."

"Bring him back," Dean said, pointing to Castiel. "I want him back. You owe me."

"Some things are beyond even our power," Zachariah said gently. "I'm sorry."

"No," Dean said, and Sam joined them, the briefcase in his arms and troubled expression on his face. "He wants to be with me. I know he does."

"I have to take him back with me," Zachariah said. "You forget, Dean. He disobeyed. The rules are pretty clear on what happens now." He stooped and touched Castiel's forehead, and with that touch Castiel disappeared, leaving only a dark imprint on the wet pavement.

"Fuck you," Dean said, his eyes filling. "Fuck you and your rules. He loves me. He wants a life and I want him to have a life, I want a life with him --" Sam put an arm around him and Dean pressed his face to Sam's shoulder a moment, overwhelmed with grief.

"I'll bear that in mind," Zachariah said and was gone.

Sam rubbed Dean's back slowly while Dean wept. Behind them, the cathedral bells began to ring, a deep, solemn sound. Sam said, "Looks like the service is over."

Dean looked up -- the congregation was coming out of the church, blinking at the late afternoon sunshine that peeped through the clouds. "Yeah," he muttered and wiped his face with his sleeve. "Better go put this stuff in their new home."

"Yeah." Sam paused. "Hey. Dean." Dean looked at him, and Sam said awkwardly, "I . . . I didn't mean it."

"You meant it," Dean said wearily. "You meant every word. But you know what? I meant it too. I love you, Sammy."

Sam's face crumpled and he hugged Dean close for a moment, and then got to his feet and held out a hand to help Dean up.

They walked up the steps to the cathedral, where the clergywoman was bidding goodbye to the parishioners as they left. Everyone was silent as they came through the door and went down the steps, and a few of the parishioners gave Sam and Dean a puzzled look as they went past. Dean supposed they were a strange sight, crumpled and rain-soaked.

When the last of the congregation was gone Dean went to the clergywoman and said, "Um," realizing how crazy what they had to say would sound.

"How can I help you? I'm afraid you've missed the liturgy."

"Can we talk to you for a few minutes?" Sam said.

"Certainly. Come with me." She led them into the cathedral and down the main aisle. The nave was quiet, nearly deserted, with only a few volunteers putting away hymnals and picking up discarded programs. The clergywoman took them to her office and gestured to them to sit.

"Now," she said, folding her hands on her desk. "What can I do for you?"

"We're --" Sam began, and then held out the briefcase. "I think we're supposed to give this to you."

She looked at them, puzzled, and then took the briefcase and popped open the locks. She didn't look any less confused when she saw what was inside. "Are you sure these are for me?"

"They belong to the cathedral now," Dean said. "Or the cathedral belongs to them. It's one of those things where it's hard to tell."

"I had a dream last night," she said softly. "I dreamed about a wounded man in a burned forest, and there was a man in a raincoat . . ." She looked up from the briefcase. "He told me to expect you."

Dean looked away, his eyes stinging. *Cas.*

Sam said, "We're not entirely sure what happens now, but we do know these will be safe here. You'll be safe," he added gently, and the clergywoman smiled a tiny bit.

"I'll take good care of them. You tell -- if you see them again -- you tell the others I'll take care of them."

Dean nodded and stood, and Sam did as well. They started to leave the office when the minister called, "Son, boys," and they stopped and looked at her. "Thank you," she said, seriously, and all Dean and Sam could do was nod in acknowledgment and continue on their way.

In many ways, the story ends there. The grail was safe, the world was still neither Heaven nor Hell, and the two sons of John Winchester were back on the road.

Some say the Winchesters went right on hunting, because even if the Apocalypse had been prevented the gates of Hell were still leaky, and there would always be demons and monsters and restless dead.

Some say the Winchesters gave up hunting -- that they had earned a rest and fully intended to take it. Some say if you find them they'll tell you stories and give you advice, but they will not join you in any hunt. Some say they are reclusive and don't take kindly to strangers.

Some say the Winchesters are just a story, told to give people hope that an ordinary man can save the world. Some say the story is told just to earn the teller a few free beers.

There is one more part to the tale. It's not part of the story the hunters tell.

Epilogue

It begins with the king as a boy, having to spend the night alone in the forest to prove his courage so he can become king. Now while he is spending the night alone he's visited by a sacred vision. Out of the fire appears the holy grail, symbol of God's divine grace. And a voice said to the boy, "You shall be keeper of the grail so that it may heal the hearts of men."

But the boy was blinded by greater visions of a life filled with power and glory and beauty. And in this state of radical amazement he felt for a brief moment not like a boy, but invincible, like God, so he reached into the fire to take the grail, and the grail vanished, leaving him with his hand in the fire to be terribly wounded.

Now as this boy grew older, his wound grew deeper. Until one day, life for him lost its reason. He had no faith in any man, not even himself. He couldn't love or feel loved. He was sick with experience. He began to die.

One day a fool wandered into the castle and found the king alone. And being a fool, he was simple minded, he didn't see a king. He only saw a man alone and in pain. And he asked the king, "What ails you, friend?" The king replied, "I'm thirsty. I need some water to cool my throat."

So the fool took a cup from beside his bed, filled it with water and handed it to the king. As the king began to drink, he realized his wound was healed. He looked in his hands and there was the holy grail, that which he sought all of his life. And he turned to the fool and said with amazement, "How can you find that which my brightest and bravest could not?"

And the fool replied, "I don't know. I only knew that you were thirsty."

-- The Fisher King, Terry Gilliam/Richard LaGravenese

"Dean," Sam said quietly when they were in the Impala, "take me to Dolores Street."

"What's there?" Dean started up the engine.

Sam was silent a moment or two. "A mission," he said finally. "I think I need to do something . . . good. For a while."

"And hunting's not good?" Dean said, anger flaring, but he tamped it down when Sam turned agonized eyes to him. "Okay, Sammy," he said gently and pulled out into the street.

"You'll be okay," Sam said as they drove. "You're a survivor. And it'll just be for a couple weeks, probably. I'll call you or come find you when I'm ready to come back."

"You'd better," Dean said, and tried to look brave and supportive as Sam packed up a backpack of belongings and went into the mission.

Dean found himself a motel, not ready to leave the city just yet, and spent Saturday sleeping. His dreams were peaceful, as they'd been for the last few weeks, even when he took off the malachite amulet and put it with his other relics.

On Sunday he put on his best suit and went back to Grace Cathedral for the Easter services. The clergywoman noticed him and smiled hello, and Dean tried to return the smile. He didn't linger to talk afterwards, but went out to the courtyard instead. The day was beautiful -- the air was so clean and fresh it seemed to dance, and the park across the street was turning a deep, lush green in the clear sunshine. A few people were walking the labyrinth, their steps slow and steady, and he wondered if they'd feel any different about the place if they knew what existed there just beyond their vision.

He had no desire to walk the labyrinth himself but he didn't want to leave the church just yet. There was a small sculpture garden beyond the labyrinth, so Dean went there. He sat on one of the benches, his elbows on his thighs and his head down.

He missed Sam. He missed Castiel. He had no idea what he was going to do tomorrow.

"You look like you could use a friend, son," said a man as he joined Dean on the bench, and Dean grimaced.

"Not really."

"Are you sure about that? I'm told I'm a pretty good listener." Dean looked at him -- he was just a guy in a suit, probably one of the parishioners from the cathedral, about John's age when he died. He looked something like John, too, dark hair and eyes and a sturdy build. "I'm good at keeping secrets, too," the man added.

Dean looked at the sculpture in the hedge opposite and said, "I've just accomplished something I've been afraid I couldn't do, and I lost two people I love in the process. I know it was worth it, but . . . I still feel empty. I don't know what to do next."

"As I see it, you have two choices," the man said. "You can go on doing what you usually do, or you can try something new."

"Very helpful," Dean said dryly and covered his face with his hands.

The man patted his back. "There, there, son," he said gently. "It's okay. You're still alive, aren't you? Where there's life there's hope."

"I don't have much hope," Dean said into his hands. He took a deep breath and looked up again. "I hoped . . . maybe, when all this was over, I'd have some kind of reward, you know? Something to say, Good job. You've earned this. Instead . . ."

"And the work itself wasn't a reward?" the man said gently.

"I guess." He frowned. "No. I mean, yeah, of course, because it was a good thing, but . . . I'd just like my friends back."

The man chuckled, and then gestured to the courtyard, the cathedral, the city. "Look at all of this," he said. "Bustling with life and activity, full of people who love each other, observing a day they hardly think about the rest of the year. But they're extra grateful this year, even if they don't know why." He looked at Dean with wise, dark eyes. "But you know why."

Dean narrowed his eyes at him. "Who are you?"

The man smiled, stood and kissed Dean on the forehead. "You did good, son," he said gently, and walked down the garden path to the street.

Dean jumped up to follow him, but by the time he was at the street the man was out of sight.

Monday morning, Dean left San Francisco. He didn't know where else to go so he went back to Bobby's, arriving there late Tuesday. He told the story, ate the pancakes Bobby put in front of him, and slept like the dead on Bobby's couch.

He stayed for a few weeks, going with Bobby to jobs or helping with the junkyard, and finally struck out on a job of his own when he felt he was straining Bobby's patience. He knew he was always welcome, just not for quite so long.

The job was simple enough, just a salt and burn, and Dean thought maybe he could handle hunting solo for a while no matter how much he missed Sam. A few times at night he thought he heard the rustling of wings in his hotel room, but of course there was no evidence of a celestial visitor to be found in the morning.

He tried to pray a few times but he didn't know what to say.

April ended, May passed, and one day in June Dean looked out the window of the Impala and realized it was a gorgeous summer. The fields he was driving past shouted with grain, the gardens of the houses he visited rioted with flowers, the sky was so deeply blue it burned his eyes. The world was aggressive with joy.

Dean felt like he'd been uninvited to a party. He felt homesick for something he couldn't explain -- he'd never really had a home to be sick over -- but there was a longing deep inside that he couldn't kill with food or booze or music or the pretty blond waitress from Moe's Diner.

He went back to Bobby's, not knowing what else to do with himself. "I miss Sam," he told Bobby frankly over the Impala's engine as Bobby hunted for the rattle Dean had left so he'd have an excuse to see him. "I miss Castiel. I feel like I've been cut off from the world by saving it, you know?"

Bobby worked his wrench, frowning. "Kind of what happens in stories," he said. "You need to read your Joseph Campbell again."

"This isn't a story. It's my life and it sucks."

"Well, what do you want, boy? A parade?" He put down his wrench and leaned on the car. "You did a great thing, and people will know about it over time. You know that. But it's not the kind of

thing they throw ticker tape parades over and not something you should expect to be rewarded for."

"Why not?" Dean said, stung.

"Because nobody ever did the right thing for the sake of a reward and meant it. You do the right thing because it's the right thing. Period. If you get rewarded for it, great, but that's just consequences. But expecting a reward for it --" Bobby shook his head. "Look around you. Look at this weather. Look at the news. That's your reward. A little goddamn peace before it all starts up again."

Dean lowered his head, wishing he could explain better, and gave Bobby back his wrench so he could close the hood.

Bobby's project this month was building more bookcases, so they were covered in sawdust and sweat and Dean has a bruise on his thumb when there was a knock on Bobby's door. "Got it," Dean said to Bobby, glad to put down the hammer. He went to the door and opened it, and was enveloped at once in Sam's long arms.

"Dean," Sam said happily.

"Sammy," Dean said, just as happily, and stepped aside so Bobby could hug him, too.

"How are you, son?" Bobby said, looking at him closely, and Sam ducked his head.

"I'm pretty okay, I think. I'm better."

"Good. I could use another pair of hands to help out." He slapped Sam's back and Sam looked at Dean, who just grinned.

"Your turn. I can tune an engine but can't build a bookcase." He slapped his hammer into Sam's hand.

"Welcome home, Sam," Sam said, and took off his backpack.

He told them about how he'd spent the last few months over dinner -- he'd spent every day at the mission, teaching literacy for adults and helping with a lot of the physical labor. The staff had hated to see him go but understood about wanting to be near his family. "And I'm kind of thinking, if I can figure out how, I'd like to go back to school. I think I'd be a better teacher than I would a lawyer."

"The money will be hard to come by," Dean said.

"Yeah. Plus, you know, the felonies. I haven't worked out all the details yet. Maybe more volunteering for a while. I like it. Makes me feel . . ." He shrugged and helped himself to more mashed potatoes. "Like I'm doing something."

"There's always hunting," Dean said. "That's doing something."

"Maybe. Yeah."

"There's not much of that lately," Bobby said. "Hell's giving us a breather, it feels like."

After supper Dean went for a walk to stretch his legs, and Sam caught up with him. They walked in silence for a while, and Sam said, "No sign of Castiel?"

"None. I guess the angels are gone from the Earth again." He sighed, hands in his back pockets. "Look, Sam, I know it's kind of weird --"

"Hey," Sam said, "it's okay. You love who you love, you know?"

"Yeah," Dean said. "But it still sucks."

Sam chuckled dryly. "I know."

Dean read the papers and the internet every day for weird deaths but found nothing that sounded like a job. Sam started volunteering in Sioux Falls and came back to Bobby's every night tired but satisfied. Dean wondered if he should do something like that too, though he couldn't think of a usable skill they'd let him teach at the local shelter or YMCA.

The morning of Midsummer's Day, Dean was in the shower when Sam knocked on the door and said, "Dean, somebody's here for you."

"I'll be out in a minute."

"I'd hurry," Sam said and shut the door.

What the hell? Dean thought and hastily pulled on his clothes, and padded downstairs barefoot.

There was a young man standing in Bobby's living room, looking out the window. He was tall and slender and dark-haired, and there was something familiar about the way he held himself, about the calm atmosphere around him. Dean said, "Do I know you?" and the man looked away from the window and faintly smiled.

"Dean," he said, in a soft voice that was both warm and scared.

"I'm sorry," Dean said, "I don't -- how do I know you?"

The man said, "It's me." Dean shook his head, still confused. "It's Castiel."

"What?" Dean whispered.

"It's Castiel," the man said again, and looked at Sam and Bobby, both on their guard in the archway between the library and kitchen.

Dean narrowed his eyes and walked closer to him, close enough to look into the other man's eyes. He peered into them, and the man gazed steadily back. "The Fishers' garden," Dean said. "The tree. What happened?"

The man said, "You were hanging by your ankle. I cut you down and I held you while you got your equilibrium back."

"Cas," Dean whispered and wrapped his arms around him. He was so happy he was shaking.

"Hi," he whispered. "Hi, there."

"Hi," Castiel answered, holding him just as tight, and he buried his face in Dean's shoulder.

Behind them Sam coughed and said to Bobby, "Coffee?"

"Coffee," Bobby said, and Dean opened his eyes long enough to see them retreat into the kitchen.

"Let's go outside," Dean said to Castiel, and called, "We'll be outside," unsurprised when neither of them did more than wave a hand to acknowledge them. Holding tight to Castiel's hand, Dean brought him out the front door and behind the house, away the wrecked cars.

They walked in silence for a few minutes, holding hands, while Dean tried to choose from the hundreds of questions running through his mind. Castiel seemed content to just walk along with him.

"How did you get away?" Dean said finally.

"There was no getting away," Castiel said. "I was sent. Delivered, you might say." He looked at Dean, biting his lip. "I am here for good, Dean."

"For good -- like, forever?"

Castiel nodded slowly. He looked so much like the Castiel Dean knew, but just different enough that there was no thinking they were the same man. His features were softer, his eyes a little less weary, his voice was lighter and clearer. "I'm . . . on probation, you might say."

"Typical," Dean said. "They use you and then punish you for doing what they wanted."

"Dean," Castiel gently reproved him. He stopped walking and held tighter to Dean's hand.

"Dean, I saw my Father."

"Oh, Cas," Dean whispered back and held his cheek.

Castiel pressed his face into Dean's palm. "He said there must be changes. He said faith was enough, had always been enough, and faith by the sword was not faith at all. So . . . there are changes. I may have disobeyed, but I have a chance to prove myself."

"What chance is that? One big gesture and then you go back?" Dean tried to say it lightly but couldn't hide his disappointment.

Castiel shook his head. "I don't go back until I'm finished. Dean." He took Dean's hand and pressed it to his chest. Castiel's skin felt warm as ever, and his heart beat steadily. "I'm mortal, Dean. I'm here to prove myself, just like everybody else. I will go home if I live a good life."

"Oh," Dean said, confused, and then understood and felt his breath leave him for a moment.

"Cas. This means --"

"Yes," Castiel said, smiling. "I am in your care, Dean. You're to show me how."

"How to -- be good? Cas, I don't know much about that."

"You know more than most," Castiel said in a mild tone. "You will have to show me. It may take a long time. Years and years. Decades."

"Castiel," Dean breathed and pulled Castiel to him. There was no hesitation on Castiel's part -- he held Dean by his hips and kissed him. His lips were a little less full than the mouth Castiel had before, but his kiss felt the same -- hungry, yearning, full of love. "It's definitely you," Dean whispered and Castiel hushed him with another kiss.

It was a Sunday brunch of sorts around the table later, nothing fancy -- toaster waffles and jam and lots of coffee. Castiel ate like he'd never eaten before, causing amused smiles from the Winchesters and Bobby as he wolfed down waffles. "What?" he said self-consciously, wiping his mouth with his hand. "I'm hungry. I don't remember the last time I ate."

"It's fine," Dean said, patting his back. "You eat all you want." Castiel smiled at him and Dean beamed back, happier than he could remember being for weeks.

"So," Sam said, helping himself to more waffles, and Bobby got up with a sigh to put more in the toaster, "what exactly are you planning to do, Cas?"

"Exactly?" He chewed and swallowed his mouthful. "I don't know, exactly. What do you think I should do, Dean?"

"Well," Dean said, and the look Sam and Bobby exchanged didn't escape him, "I don't know, either. We'll need to find you a job, I guess. We know people who can make fake IDs, so that's not a problem. I guess we just figure out what you can do."

"I don't know how to do anything aside from be an angel." Castiel frowned.

"We'll figure something out. Maybe you could help out Bobby with the wrecking yard until you get on your feet." Dean looked at Bobby, his eyebrows raised, and Bobby nodded. "And then when you're ready, strike out on your own."

"Oh," Castiel said and put down his knife and fork.

"Oh . . . what?"

"I'd hoped to be with you," he said, looking at Dean seriously.

"Oh," Dean said, "well, yeah, I come by here all the time. And when I do, we could -- um --" He looked at Sam, at a loss. What did he have to offer a new human being, after all? He didn't know the first thing about teaching someone how to live. "We could see each other pretty often, really. You know. Between jobs."

"Yes," Castiel said and pushed away his plate.

Dean had planned to hit the road again that day, but with Castiel here he didn't want to leave just yet. They spent the day helping Bobby with his bookcases, and Dean kept sneaking glances at Castiel. This person was not his Castiel and yet he was, with his graceful hands that handled the books so reverently, his slim tempting hips and dark unruly hair. Even his eyes were almost but not quite the same -- wide and calm and intensely blue, but missing something. Angelic innocence, maybe.

After supper -- which Sam cooked, because Bobby's repertoire was exhausted and no one wanted Dean's offer of Spaghetti-Os and cheese toast -- Dean found Castiel out on the front porch, drinking a glass of water and watching the sunset. He bumped his knee against Castiel's, hoping for a smile, but Castiel didn't look at him.

"Hey," Dean said and bumped his knee again.

Castiel said softly, "You don't want me here."

Dean gaped a moment. "What? No, Cas, of course I do. But you just show up and tell me I'm supposed to show you how to live and --and how come you weren't sent back as a baby, like Anna?"

Castiel sipped his water. "Would you have preferred that I had?"

Dean looked out at the wrecking yard, feeling weary. "No. I'm just confused, I guess. I mean, where'd you get this body? You told me you didn't have one of your own."

"It is a gift from Sophia."

"A gift . . . so . . ." He hardly dared to say it out loud. "So it's just yours?"

"Just mine. No one else's." Castiel started to smile back at him.

"So," Dean said slowly, "we can . . . do stuff and you won't feel guilty about it."

"Yes," Castiel said, definitely smiling now.

"Oh, thank God," Dean exhaled, "we can fuck now." At Castiel's amused look he added hastily, "I mean, when you're ready, when you want to, when we both want to --"

"Dean."

Dean shut his mouth. This was definitely his Castiel -- he said his name in that same calm, affectionate way.

Castiel was quiet a moment, arms crossed over his knee. The Fisher sisters -- or Sophia, whatever form she was taking now -- had not put him in a suit, which Dean found a little strange, but just jeans and a t-shirt and work boots much like his own. Castiel's arms looked thin and pale, like he'd never spent any time outdoors.

Of course, Dean thought, he hasn't.

Castiel said, "But how could I leave you, Dean? How could I leave you . . . wondering?"

"Thank you for that," Dean said quietly, "but, Cas, hunting . . . it's no life for an amateur. Stay with Bobby and Sam and I'll be back every few weeks to check in. You'll be safe here. I want you safe."

Castiel nodded and lowered his head. "Very well, Dean."

Dean nodded too and looked out at the junkyard, feeling like he'd closed a door.

Bobby had bought guest beds when it appeared Sam and Dean were around for the long haul, so that night Dean told Castiel to take his and put himself on the couch. He lay awake for an hour or more, his arm behind his head, when he heard a creak on the stair.

He looked up and then sat up when he saw it was Castiel. "Hey," he said quietly and Castiel smiled at him and picked his way through the stacks of books to sit at his side.

"Sam snores," Castiel said and pulled up his legs to wrap his arms around them.

"I know. Like a bulldozer."

"Bulldozers do not snore." He leaned back his head and blinked slowly like a contented cat. "I can't sleep."

"Me too." He shifted so he could lean against Castiel's side. Castiel wrapped an arm around him and kissed the top of his head. "One more proof it's you. No one else is as literal."

"I will study metaphors," Castiel murmured. "I want to be alone with you, Dean."

Dean chuckled and tilted back his head to kiss Castiel's jaw. "I want to be alone with you too, but I have no idea how we're going to manage it."

"Like this," Castiel said and pulled Dean's head back again to kiss his mouth. Dean parted his lips and flicked out his tongue, moaning quietly -- and then not so quietly when Castiel slid a hand down his chest. "But you are noisy," Castiel murmured, amused.

"I know," Dean said and knocked his head back against Castiel's shoulder in frustration. Bobby's house really didn't lend itself to privacy.

Castiel was quiet a moment. "Does Bobby still have the panic room?"

"He does." Dean pushed himself up off the couch. "You're a genius." He held out his hand to Castiel, who smiled as he took it and was still smiling as they walked downstairs to the basement.

Castiel kissed him as soon as the basement door was shut, carefully, holding his shoulders so they wouldn't tumble down the stairs. Dean pulled him along step by step, kissing him back and pulling on his oversized t-shirt.

He pulled Dean along by his hands into the panic room and to the narrow, single bed. Dean lay down with him and kissed him, tasting his mouth. Castiel didn't smell like cookies anymore -- he smelled like something earthier, like potting soil and raw wood. Dean buried his face in Castiel's neck and rocked against him, and Castiel stroked his back and kissed his hair. "Do you approve, Dean?" he whispered. "Do I please you?"

"Oh, I approve," Dean whispered and kissed him harder. His mouth was as sweet as ever, and Dean thought he could keep kissing him like this for days. "I'll always approve of you." He slid his mouth down Castiel's neck.

"I approve of you more when you're naked," Castiel said and tugged Dean's shirt over his head. Dean laughed and let Castiel undress him, shirt and boots and jeans, and then rolled Castiel under him and kissed him. Castiel's hands stroked down his body and his legs wrapped loosely around Dean's waist.

Dean explored him slowly, acquainting himself with Castiel's new body. He was thin and so pale, not even a callus on his fingers, not a patch of rough skin on either elegant foot. Not a bruise, not a scratch, just warm skin, fine hair, and those wide eyes watching him with tenderness and anticipation. Dean said, "It's like you're new, you're brand-new," and Castiel laughed.

"I am new, Dean." He stretched out his arms and arched his body. "I feel . . . I *feel*. I feel my heart, I feel my breath. I think I feel my blood."

Dean stroked his thumb over Castiel's collar bone. "Do you feel infinite?" he said softly. Castiel smiled and grasped him by the shoulders, pulled him down and kissed him fiercely.

"I feel like I contain *worlds*."

They looked at each other, lying on their sides and not touching. Castiel's face rested on his hand and he blinked slowly, his face contented. Dean thought he should be touching Castiel, holding him, but they were so close on the narrow bed it would only take a shift from one part of his hip to the other to be pressed together again.

"Am I different?" Castiel said softly.

"A little," Dean said. "You're newer." Castiel chuckled, still with that contented look, and Dean said, "You feel breakable."

"I suppose I am." He paused. "Dean. Don't leave me behind. Please. I don't know how I could bear it."

Deans wallowed hard. "I don't know how to do what you want me to do," he said, and Castiel's brows furrowed a little. "I don't know a thing about showing someone how to live. It's like raising a kid and I've never done that."

"Sam," Castiel pointed out.

"Yeah, and we know how that turned out."

"He refused to destroy the world." Castiel's foot moved to stroke up Dean's leg. "For love."

"Yeah, well," Dean muttered and felt his eyes sting.

"So I am asking you, for love, let me stay with you." He sat up a little, supporting himself on his elbow. "I came back to be with you," he said earnestly. "I could have been born. I could have

started over fresh, with no memories of what I was. But in the end, I could not make that choice. I would rather be with you than be . . . anywhere."

Dean looked away a moment, overwhelmed by this. He cleared his throat. "Seriously, do you want to be a hunter? Because this life sucks. It's exhausting. We get hurt every job, we break bones, I've had tons of stitches, I've been *shot*, for God's sake."

"I want to be with you," Castiel said patiently. "And if that means being a hunter, then I'll be a hunter."

"You have no training, no skills, no strength -- I feel like I could bench-press you."

Castiel looked at him, still patient. "Would you like to arm wrestle?"

Dean narrowed his eyes. "I should never have taught you to joke."

"Yet you did." He looked away, still faintly smiling. That smile was Castiel's smile, just like the dry, quiet tone and the way he said Dean's name. It was weird to look at that face and not see the Castiel he knew, but his Castiel was inside that body, somehow. "I remember things I knew. I have knowledge and certain skills -- perhaps not the strength that I had before, but enough."

"But, Cas," Dean began.

"Don't leave me behind," Castiel said. "Bobby and Sam are good men, but I want to be with you."

"I want to be with you, too," Dean muttered and wound his arms around Castiel's neck to pull him close. Castiel gave a quiet laugh and leaned into him, his head resting against Dean's neck and his arms going around Dean's waist. "The two of us in the Impala, driving from one corner of the country to the other . . . is that what you want, Cas?"

"So long as I am with you, I don't care where we are or what we do." He raised his head to look at Dean. "Be with me, Dean. Let me stay with you."

"Yes," Dean whispered, "God, yes," and he kissed Castiel.

In the morning they didn't need to say anything -- it was in their faces, in the way they hands brushed each other as they ate. Sam had said before that he could deal with the two of them together, and now that it was right in front of him he kept smiling at them like he couldn't quite believe it. Dean smiled back and shrugged, hoping he wouldn't have to explain it out loud. It was just -- it. Castiel was It. He was home, he was always, he was just It.

"Castiel is coming with me," he told Bobby, who was making an effort not to make any comments on the new development.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" Bobby asked Castiel.

Castiel nodded, wide-eyed. "I am. I know Dean will teach me well." He smiled at Dean, and Dean couldn't help but beam back.

When they went out to the Impala and Dean tossed their duffel bag into the trunk, Sam looked from one to the other. "Promise me you'll take care of him," he said to Castiel.

"With my life," Castiel said.

Dean grinned at that and opened the driver side door. "Get in." Castiel started to go around the car but Dean stopped him. "Get in this side."

"Why?"

"It's time for your first lesson," Dean said, beaming at Castiel's delighted smile as he understood what Dean meant. He put his keys in Castiel's hand. "I'm teaching you how to drive."

End.

Thanks

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Author's Note

A long time ago when I was a wee college student, I got obsessed with Grail lore. This was not unusual: I've always been interested in the unusual and strange. (For instance, in jr. high I was interested in werewolves and wrote a report on lycanthropy for a biology class. Got an A on it, too.) I love not just stories of ghosts and monsters but also of the beliefs behind the stories--how the superstitions and misunderstandings of the past play a part even in modern life.

The Holy Grail is one of those things, fascinating and inexplicable. Where the story came from and what it really means is still a subject of debate, and it's still a potent symbol even in modern, cynical times.

Apocalyptic Love Songs is an attempt at a classic Grail quest in a modern setting. In the old poems, knights would wander the countryside, guided by visions, dreams and prophecies, but with no real idea of where they were going or even if they would find what they were looking for.

And as Sam says in the story, most of the poems are unfinished so no one knows what endings their authors originally intended.

I've been wanting to write about the Grail in a fandom setting for over a decade. I had this idea I called The Sorcerer's Briefcase in the back of my head for years, but it wasn't until I signed up for that I decided to do it. The Grail seems to fit best into Supernatural's America because it's a place where magic exists and can be as dangerous as it is full of wonder; and two men who have spent all their lives questing wouldn't object to undertaking one more quest.

It also gave me an excuse to write more about Dean and Castiel, who are a much newer obsession. I love their relationship in the show, but I love even more delving into how that could become deeper and richer in fic. Dean's capacity for love is what makes him heroic to me, and I loved the notion of him being made strong by love, strong enough to save the world.

Apocalyptic Love Songs is about love. It's about the love between family, between friends, between lovers, even between man and God. It's about grace, heroism and faith, but it's mostly about love.

For more of my thought process and research and how many versions the soundtrack went through, please see my Big Bang Wiki:

<http://misslucyjane.com/wiki/index.php?n=SPNBigBang.SPNBigBang>.

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