

Goliath

By: Ridley C. James & Tidia

University of Louisville Hospital-two days after Ti's story

*"Giants exist as a state of mind. They are not defined as an absolute measurement but as proportionality....So giants can be real, even if grown- ups do not choose to classify them as such." Edward O. Wilson*

"Shouldn't I be the broody, pissed-off guy in this scenario?" Caleb Reaves asked. "I mean, I'm the one stuck in this suck ass bed, in this suck ass room with tubes shoved in places even the kinkiest of one night stands have never touched upon."

Dean Winchester looked up from his perusal of the chessboard and glowered. His queen was in extreme jeopardy. He'd already sacrificed his bishop, but it was worry for his Knight that claimed all his attention. It made the game more nuisance than the distraction Sam had intended it.

"You have the patience of a five year old, Damien," Dean grumbled, making the only fateful move his careless regard for the board had left him. He gave a resigned sigh when it was finished; studying his friend's face with all the intensity he should have given the game. Caleb looked better than he had the night before, but the dark circles beneath his eyes still stood out against a sickly pallor. The yellow glow of the fluorescents wasn't helping, neither was the weak quality to Caleb's voice, the last few days taking a toll the older man was trying hard not to show.

"You've been staring at the board for ten minutes, Deuce." Caleb tugged at the faded blue hospital gown, the monitor beside the bed picking up his movement and frustration for the garment. Despite his attempts at charm, Caleb had not been able to convince the hospital staff his own sleepwear would provide them with the quick access they needed. He took Dean's queen without any of his typical enthusiasm or jeering. "I have livelier games with Sam, who dissects each of his moves with computer-like accuracy and doesn't let me win."

"I can always hand off to The Scholar. He's just down the hall and it's his turn for babysitting duty." Dean stretched, looking at his watch. They both knew he wasn't going anywhere, but Caleb feigned a look of over-eager anticipation.

"At this point I'd settle for the creepy old candy striper with the blue hair and walking stick." Caleb pushed the rolling tray holding the game away from him. Dean scooted his chair to make room for it to pass in lieu of having the dining cart bang against his knee. "She's a bundle of sunshine compared to you these last two days."

Dean leaned back in his chair, silently counting to ten so not to say something he might regret. He was under strict orders not to upset Caleb. So far the steady stream of medication from the I.V. had proved effective in keeping Caleb stable. However, Dean's hard fought restraint earned him an even more petulant glare from the unhappy hunter in the hospital bed who seemed hell bent on getting a rise out of Dean.

"I got to say this new, calm, kid-glove routine you got going on sucks ass, too." Caleb growled. "You're making me feel worse by acting like Pod Person Dean."

"You'd rather I bitch you out for my lack of decent sleep and good coffee these last two days?" Dean had plenty to be pissed at Caleb about, but it was hard to stay angry at him considering what they'd all been through. The memory of their frantic drive to the backwoods clinic in Arkansas when Caleb blacked out after their tangle with the unfriendly witches and the wendigo was enough to steal Dean's composure. The all too easily recalled image of Caleb's body twitching and jerking in the backseat with what they now understood were a series of seizures kept his voice calm. "Or we could talk about how you've been lying to me for months."

"I wasn't lying." Caleb couldn't even meet Dean's gaze, his eyes travelling to his I.V. where he used his other hand to pick at the tape holding it in place over bruised skin. "It was more a need to know kind of..."

"Stop." The command came out harsher than Dean meant, bringing The Knight's glassy eyes to his. He took a deep breath, sighing the exhale. He gestured to the hanging ringers above Caleb's head. "You don't want another round with Nurse Bad-body if that thing comes loose. I thought you were going to cry the last time."

Caleb's fingers stilled, except for his middle one which he lifted in Dean's direction. "You couldn't have insisted on a hospital with hotter nurses?"

"If you'd been conscious to get a look at the staff back at that VA hospital in Middlesboro, you'd be grateful Mac pulled the strings to get you here to good old University of Louisville as quickly as he did." Dean leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He hadn't been happy about the unplanned med-evac ride, but at the time he wasn't willing to let The Knight out of his sight. "Their Chief of Staff was missing his teeth."

"Deuce, about the wendigo mess..."

Dean clenched his fists knowing what was coming next. It would be a repeat of the first conversation they'd had in Arkansas after Caleb woke up and was actually somewhat cognizant. "If you try to apologize one more time about the wendigo bite I will see to it personally that Randolph, the over friendly orderly with the bright pink scrubs, is in charge of your sponge bath."

Caleb snorted. "So much for having my back."

Dean grimaced at the comment, though it was obviously meant to lighten the moment. They had been conditioned to put others welfare first. Dean understood it was Caleb's complete belief in that priority mission that kept him from coming clean about what was happening with him the last few months, or longer.

"You should have told me." Dean should have trusted his gut. He'd known for a while his best friend was off. He'd blamed it on the showdown with Lucifer, the psychic backlash of having countless demons on the loose. Then there was the hunt for The Spear of Destiny-a gig which should have been a glowing beacon that something wasn't right with Caleb, despite The Knight's protests and assurances to the contrary.

"Like I explained before, I wasn't sure what was going on. I didn't think it was a big deal." Caleb held his gaze. "It's not something you should have picked up on, Deuce. Don't go down that road."

"You wanted to protect me." Caleb had confessed he was avoiding adding more to Dean's plate, a plate already full as the newly appointed Guardian before the unwanted surprise of The Trinity and Reagan Walsh. "I can understand not bitching about the extra migraines and the odd visions, that's old hat for you to some degree, but losing time, seeing dead people, *seeing Dad. Those* I would have liked to have known about."

Caleb had come clean with Dean that first night in ICU before Mac had arrived when the doctors in Louisville had managed to stop the seizures. Dean wasn't sure if it was the painkillers, or the uncharacteristic helplessness of the situation, but Caleb had promised he wasn't holding anything else back as he told Dean about the headaches, the problems with his balance, and the odd sightings of Atticus Finch, John Winchester and other people they had lost along the way.

"Speaking of being secretive, has Mac said anything to you?"

"Are you kidding?" Dean ran a hand through his hair, allowing the redirect because being pissed at Caleb could wait until his friend was out of the hospital and on the mend. "And risk violating patient confidentiality?"

Dean's cluelessness was not from lack of asking. Yesterday he had followed the good doctor around the hospital, demanding a rundown on what the battery of tests he'd put Caleb through was telling him.

"Dude, he won't tell me a damn thing and I'm the fucking patient." Caleb glanced to the doors, as if expecting Mackland to appear with his entourage of doctors. "He's dodging us, and it's getting old. I'm not some kid he can keep in the dark while he runs wild with scans and probes of my anatomy."

"At least you're getting pudding cups and the comfy bed." Dean knew Caleb was miserable. His best friend wasn't a good patient in the best of circumstance. Add in a continuous stream of tests

and strangers subjecting him to up close hands on care and he became the patient most likely to be accidentally overdosed by haggard floor nurses. Dean withheld his worst case scenario theory about Mac's silence in lieu of trying to offer lame reassurances. "I think he's trying to put all the pieces together, man. Once a Scholar always a Scholar. I've got Sammy on the case shadowing the good doctor like an annoying stray dog hoping for scraps. He'll let us know as soon as he picks up any bits about what's going on."

"But why the hell call in Griffin Porter? The man's like some kind of mad scientist, not a real doctor." Caleb brought a hand to his head, wincing. "I don't like it."

"I don't know." Dean didn't like it either, any of it. They had already been through these questions when Griffin showed last night. They hadn't seen him in person, but Sam had alerted them to the fact Mac had asked the man to join him in some group consultation. Dean didn't have the same visceral reaction Caleb did to the hunter, but he was pissed Mac would make such a move knowing how his son felt. Dean hoped the doctor had a damn good reason. "Maybe he needed another psychic's opinion. It's not like Mac can talk supernatural shop with his brain trust of peers when it comes to you. Porter's more in your league."

Caleb made another face, this one having nothing to do with physical pain. "He wishes. The man can't hold a light to what I can do."

Dean understood his friend wasn't bragging. Even though Damien was prone to blowing his own horn when it came to his prowess with hunting and women; he did not take pride in waving his super psychic flag, on the contrary, he downplayed his capabilities.

"You and I both know he's missing the right DNA to play in my ballpark. Despite acting like a devil, Porter's human, a damn poor example, but still just flesh and blood."

Dean was not above some redirection of his own. "We both know Mac's doing whatever it takes to make sure you get out of here." That thought kept him from shaking the truth out of the infuriatingly secretive doctor.

"I think I'm good to go now."

"Of course you do." Mac was not the only one Dean felt like shaking.

"My head doesn't hurt that bad now and I haven't had any kind of event since yesterday."

"Seriously?" Dean rolled his eyes at the air quotes Caleb made when he said 'event', as if the hospital staff were conspiring to make-up his seizures or make the convulsions seem much more ominous than they were. From where Dean had been sitting there was no need to make them any scarier than the reality. They sure the hell weren't a figment of anyone's imagination. "You think the pain meds and other drugs they're pumping into you might have something to do with your miraculous recovery, Genius?"

“Only one way to find out. “ Caleb eyed his I.V. Dean was quick to reach out and grip his friend’s wrist.

“We’ll find out when Mac finishes his tests.” There was no way he was helping Caleb go AWOL. Their eyes met and Dean recognized the growing panic that had been building since his friend figured out this wasn’t a ‘few stitches and I send you on your way’ kind of visit. Caleb didn’t scare easily, but when his fears did rear their ugly head they were formidable and hard to beat back into the closet. “I know this sucks, but you’re staying put, and that’s an order.”

“I don’t think hospital stays fall under Guardian Mandate territory.”

“Then consider it a heartfelt request from your best friend.”

Caleb shook his head, a flicker of amusement coloring his eyes, chasing away some of the desperation. “If I knew you were so eager for us to spend some alone time together, Deana, I’d have visited the farm more.”

“Please.” Dean snorted. “You were there every time I turned around. I barely got a free weekend without you and Sammy flying home. What’s the use of finally having a bachelor pad of my own if the kids are always underfoot?”

“I told Sam his college boy homesick routine was going to encroach on your fledgling love life, but the kid has no sympathy when it comes to a guy’s libido.”

“My love life is none of your or Sam’s business.”

Caleb perked up. “So, you’re admitting you have a love life?”

Dean blamed lack of food on the fact he’d walked into Caleb’s trap. It was worse than the chess game, his relationship with Juliet playing the role of the forfeited queen this time. He was spared a costly and embarrassing defeat by Mackland and Porter’s timely entrance.

The two men could suck up air in a room without their typical physician garb; but decked out in twin stark white coats, carrying computer tablets, and sporting matching grim countenances the doctors made it hard for a guy to breathe easy, especially the guy in the hospital bed. Dean felt Caleb tense from where his hand still gripped the older hunter’s wrist and he gave a quick eye roll to dismiss the scene as overkill. Caleb did his best to return the silent communication by mimicking the gesture.

Dean let go of Caleb as he stood, but placed himself between the patient and the men moving towards them. “Don’t tell me the lovely Doctor McCroy has asked you two to join her staff?”

“Elizabeth has been very accommodating.” Mac moved to the computer monitor at Caleb’s left. Dean didn’t miss the half smile he attempted for his son’s benefit.

“Accommodating or not, she’s going to be pissed when she finds out you’ve stolen some poor resident’s coats.” Dean moved his eyes to Griffin. “If Mac didn’t tell you he and the Chief of Staff here have quite the history. I’m pretty sure Dr. McCroy brought her disdain for his enormous ego with her from our little medical clinic in New Haven where she used to work.”

“I’ve met the lovely Chief of Staff in question. She seemed to like *me* just fine.” Griffin moved closer, joining Mac by the monitor. “Perhaps we share similar views on Mackland’s outlandish ego.”

“Or it proves her taste in men hasn’t improved with her promotion.” Caleb grunted. “She thought Johnny was a well-refined gentleman, too.”

“Don’t listen to him.” Dean took a seat on the mattress by Caleb’s hip, keeping his eyes on the two physicians as they made silent exchanges while studying the print out. “Damien’s just pissed Liz vetoed his request for real jammies.”

“I’m more concerned with who she lets practice in her hospital.” Caleb frowned at Griffin. “I always thought the MD after your name stood for Mentally Deranged.”

“Caleb.” Mac looked up from the readings long enough to give his son a disapproving glance. “I asked Griffin to come here as a favor, as I explained to you this morning. Please show some respect.”

“Actually, you were a little lax on the explaining.” Dean bristled at Mac’s tone. He folded his arms over his chest feeling uncharacteristically petulant himself. At this point, a full blown Damien-like temper tantrum wasn’t out of the question. “Maybe Caleb would feel a little more welcoming if you, as his father, remedied that. I know I, as The Guardian, sure as hell would.”

“I brought coffee.” Sam’s timing as he blew into the room was both impeccable and annoying. A part of Dean understood that Mac had slipped on his hat of renowned neurosurgeon Mackland Ames for good reason, but another side fumed at the man for being able to be so clinical when it came to their fucking family. His brother seemed to read his mood, moving quickly to stand beside him with the drink carrier, practically shoving the cups under his nose. The fact the coffee was obviously not from the cafeteria took away some of Dean’s ire.

“Did you happen to bring breakfast?” Dean met Sam’s gaze, taking one of the steaming drinks.

“Best apple and cinnamon muffins in the five state area.” Sam shook the brown paper bag he was holding in his other hand, shooting Caleb a sympathetic glance. “Sorry, man. I promised your nurse nothing from the bakery she sent me to would find its way back to you.”

“Traitor,” Caleb said with a longing look at Dean’s coffee. “I’d almost kill for some caffeine.”

“Maybe Mac will arrange for you to have a ringer of some warm milk and sugar added to your I.V., Damien.” Dean took a drink of the dark brew with only a twinge of guilt. He gave a large

satisfied sigh for Caleb's benefit. "Seeing how that pretty much constitutes what you pass off as coffee."

"I'd be happier if Mac would just give me the all clear to get the hell out of here." Dean took another gulp, watching Mac's face as Caleb gave him an imploring stare. "How about it? Can we move this forced vacation to the farm like we usually do? We'll even lift the wards against insufferable bastards so Griffin can come over to play doctor with you."

Dean set the drink down on the chess board not caring that he knocked over several pieces when Mac's expression revealed what would be the answer to Caleb's question. The fact Sam moved closer to him, his shoulder almost touching Dean's increased the bad feeling Mac's silence stirred, and he wondered what information his brother had picked up and had been holding back from his spy mission.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Son," Mac finally responded.

"Why the hell not?" Caleb's frown morphed to an attempt at a half smile, a tactic that often got him his way. "I mean, come on, *Dad*. I'll promise to keep up the bed rest. Deuce has proved himself an adequate nursemaid."

"You can trust me to make sure he stays put." Dean spoke up, hoping his words might magically change the doctor's mind. "New Haven isn't that far from Louisville if there's an emergency."

"I prefer Caleb stay here." Mac glanced at the monitor again. "His condition warrants that he remains in the hospital at this time."

"Until when?"

"What condition exactly?"

Dean and Caleb's simultaneous questions were different, but both demanded Mac do what he had not done thus far. He pulled up a chair and faced The Triad.

"I don't feel as though I can give you an exact time frame, Caleb." Mac looked from his son to Dean. "It would depend on what course of action we take."

"Course of action?" Caleb shook his head. "Maybe you should go back to Dean's question about my condition."

When Mac hesitated, Griffin responded. "Caleb, you have a massive growth in the temporal region of your brain, spanning the medial and ventral lobes." Griffin didn't give them time to digest what he had said before tapping a few buttons on his tablet, flipping the iPad around so they could see the screen. It revealed a colorful picture of a brain, labeled for their benefit. "Here." Griffin tapped the image, enlarging the lower section. "And here."

“I have a brain tumor?” Caleb laughed. “You’re kidding me, right. Is this some kind of sick joke?”

“Son.” Mac reached out to cover Caleb’s hand, but Caleb was quicker, pulling away, pushing himself up higher in the bed.

“You’re fucking serious?”

“Is it malignant?” Sam’s question had Dean pulling his gaze from the tablet in Griffin’s hand to his brother’s face. Sam was watching Mac, brow furrowed in concentration, eyes bright and focused as if he were waiting some crucial detail of intelligence for a hunt. It struck Dean that Sam did not seem surprised at the revelation.

“Yes,” Mac responded.

“Caleb has cancer?” Dean’s voice didn’t sound like his own as it echoed in his head, the words strange and foreign on his tongue. Cancer was one monster that had never dared cross into their realm of reality, almost as fantastical and elusive as big foot.

“No.” Caleb was the one to answer. “No fucking way, Deuce. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“In the truest essence of the word, that is exactly what you have,” Griffin contradicted, turning the iPad so he could pull up another screen. Mac stood, pacing to the lone window in the room. When Porter showed them the iPad again a video was playing, a laboratory slide came to spectacular life. Dean thought it looked more Disney Pixar creation than molecular biology, the two colorful wisp-like structures splitting becoming four before splitting again thanks to time-lapse magic. It was strangely beautiful and completely terrifying. “The term cancer basically indicates an incidence of rapidly reproducing abnormal cells. That is currently what’s taking place in your brain.”

“How do we stop it?” Dean looked away from the screen to Mac whose back was turned towards them.

“There’s surgery right?” Sam spoke up. “Drugs?”

“Wait, just hold on,” Caleb sputtered. “There’s been some kind of mistake.”

“There isn’t a mistake,” Griffin countered. “Your father has been overly thorough, calling in several specialists including myself and some of his fellows from Johns Hopkins, the Mayo Clinic, even conducting a Skype consult with The Tianjn Cancer institute in China. The Ames name has allowed your condition to baffle some of the greatest medical minds in the world, Caleb.”

“That’s why you’ve taken so long, been so tightlipped?” Dean continued to watch Mac, who was staring at something beyond the window. Dean doubted it was the spectacular view they were



afforded of the parking garage. He wondered if the doctor had even slept in the last forty eight hours. It was unlike the former Scholar to let anyone speak for him, especially someone like Griffin Porter, who in the past had always proven to be more adversary than contemporary.

"I wanted to be disproved." Mac's voice broke slightly, as he ran both hands through his hair, finally turning to face them. "I've never wanted anything more."

"Dad..." Caleb started, but Dean cut him off.

"So now we fix it." Dean glanced at his brother. "Like Sam said, there's surgery, medicine."

"Wait-" Caleb tried again, but Dean plowed on.

"I mean people beat cancer every day."

"Cancer, yes." Mac sighed, looking much older than he had at Christmas when he and Esme had acted more the parts of the twenty-something newlyweds than Carolyn and Joshua. "But this is very different."

Dean turned on Porter. "But Griffin said..."

"I said that in the most elementary sense Caleb has cancer. The abnormal cell growth in his temporal region is remarkable, but he doesn't have the protein markers, the elevated white cell count that one would expect to find in a stage four growth such as his."

"Stage four?" Sam choked. Dean didn't dare look at his brother, this last bit of news was obviously not something he'd managed to pick up and keep to himself until now.

"It's my abilities, isn't it?" Caleb's voice had lost the shocked tone, replaced with a note of resolution that had a lump forming in Dean's throat. "Genetics coming back to bite me in the ass?"

Mac seemed to collect himself, morphing once more into the physician, Scholar and father that was etched into most of Dean's memories. He moved to take the chair by Caleb, putting down the tablet, resting a hand near his son's. "The temporal lobe is the region most notably linked with psychic ability, so that is something we're looking at. Most of my early research in telepathy involved persons of interest who had sustained trauma to that region, or suffered from temporal epilepsy."

"That's the area of your brain that was damaged in the car crash that brought on your abilities," Sam said knowingly and for the first time Dean considered what it might have been like for Mac who was completely normal for most of his life only to awake from a coma not only broken, but with psychic abilities that made him a good candidate for the X-men.

“Damaged, stimulated-maybe both.” Mac nodded. “Most likely it occurred during the surgery to relieve the intracranial swelling, but yes, Samuel as we’ve discussed before, I believe that’s how my abilities began, in contrast to psychics like you and Caleb who were born with gifts.”

“My research in psychics shows that those with extra sensory abilities typically have very active temporal lobes,” Griffin added.

“So do artists, musicians, and incredibly altruistic persons,” Sam replied, proving he had done his own bit of research in the area. “They don’t end up with cancer because of it.”

“That’s true,” Griffin hedged, glancing first at Caleb, then resting his gaze on Dean. “But those people do not usually have the kind of increased cerebral activity that creates a psychic such as Caleb.”

“Because I’m a complete freak of nature.”

“Meaning your gifts go far beyond the range of anyone we typically have the chance to study,” Mac reframed, braving another tactile move. He placed a hand on Caleb’s blanket covered leg, and though Dean suspected Caleb would have been up and half way across the room if he’d had his choice in the matter, his friend endured the contact, but twitched like a tethered horse.

“Meaning you haven’t dissected many demons,” Caleb insisted on being belligerent.

“Actually,” Griffin cleared his throat. “I’ve performed vivisection on several demons.”

Dean looked at Porter, a sudden image of Griffin as the mad scientist Caleb proclaimed him to be earlier, locked in his secret lab beneath his neat mini-mansion in Atlanta filling his mind. “Why doesn’t that surprise me, Dr. Jekyll?”

“I assure The Guardian the experiments were carried out on only those humans fatally wounded during their possession, ones who would not have survived after the demon was done with them.” Griffin glanced at Mackland, and Dean guessed this was not the first time the former Scholar had heard this news. “The knowledge I gained paved the way for the progress I’ve been able to make in psychic research and in the oncology pharmaceuticals field.”

“That’s why you called him?” Caleb demanded. “Because he’s the resident expert on demon lobotomies and chemical psychic castration?”

Mac didn’t even bother with a defense. He leaned closer to Caleb. “I won’t dismiss Griffin’s research because I find his obsession or techniques distasteful, especially if it gives me a better chance of understanding what is taking place with you and even a shred of hope that we might stop it.”

“And does it?” Dean didn’t like the idea of humans being used in Porter’s quest either, especially if he manipulated Brotherhood connections to collect his specimens, but if it helped Caleb, he might be tempted to let the indiscretion slide at least until their purposes were suited.

“Dean,” Caleb started.

“Shut up, Damien.” Dean continued to look at Mac. “Do you know what’s causing this?”

“Caleb is showing signs of the type of cerebral breakdown a host shows after a long period of possession by a high level demon,” Griffin answered. “In theory all humans that die of prolonged possession, much like acute radiation poisoning, actually succumb to cancer of one kind or another, again in its most simplistic definition of rapidly multiplying abnormal cells, but still. Caleb’s mostly human brain can no longer compensate for the steady growth. There is no surgery or known chemotherapy that’s going to remedy what’s taking place.”

“But why now?” Sam asked. “Caleb was born with his abilities, he isn’t possessed.”

“We have a couple of theories.” Mac looked at Caleb.

“Like?” Caleb asked, pinching the bridge of his nose with a wince.

“That perhaps your DNA held recessive and dormant traits that your human side suppressed until an unknown event triggered them.”

“Have you experienced a recent progression in your abilities or talents?” Griffin inquired.

“Besides my ability to tolerate your presence?” Caleb growled. “No.”

“What kind of event, Mac?” Sam asked.

“It’s hard to say,” Mac hedged. “But by the size of the growth, the amount of damage to the surrounding area. . . This has slowly been taking place for some time, the effects just now causing serious damage.”

“Like a year or more?” Dean asked, a knot of dread unfurling in his gut.

“Perhaps.”

“Noah Seaver’s amulet.” Sam sat down in the chair Dean had vacated earlier, head dropping to his hands. “The whole time Caleb was using it, I kept saying it was like he had flipped some kind of switch.”

“Sam!” Dean and Caleb said at the same time.

Mac paled, his hand moving from Caleb’s leg as if he were burned. “What are you talking about, Samuel?”

Sam looked up and Dean saw the instant regret in his brother's eyes. Sam had spoken without thought of their company, guilt for his own part in the idiotic plan overshadowing his common sense. Mac had never discovered the details of the lengths his son had gone to in hopes of sparing Dean a trip to Hell.

"I took Noah Seaver's amulet from the farm and learned to use it. At the time it seemed like a good idea." Caleb shrugged. "It boosted my abilities, gave me access to other demon's talents, too."

"Caleb, how could you..."

"If that's true," Griffin interrupted Mac and for once Dean was grateful for the man's desperate need to be the center of attention. Rehashing the past would not help anyone. "Then it would definitely explain what's taken place. Samuel's reference to a flipping of switch would be quite appropriate."

"But that was so long ago." Caleb shook his head.

Mac sighed. "It's possible there is a connection, but there's also the more recent demon activity, your run in with Lucifer when he erased your memory, then the subsequent time-travelling with Castiel to when Isaac and your mother were killed. It could be any number of things, perhaps a combination..."

"Castiel." Dean latched onto the name like a life ring. He couldn't believe he hadn't immediately thought of the angel who had healed all of them on numerous occasions. Dean scooted off the edge of the bed, standing. "He can fix this."

"I hadn't considered that an option," Mac stated. "Castiel could literally be a saving grace."

"Don't hold your breath, Dad," Caleb reached out and caught the end of Dean's flannel shirt, temporarily halting his move to the door. "You forgetting we haven't seen or heard from your buddy Cas since Tennison, Deuce? We don't know how that whole war with Raphael is fairing, man."

"I've not forgotten anything, but I'm pretty sure since life as we know it has continued to carry on, Cas and company are alive and holding their own."

"Then he owes us for helping their cause by turning over The Holy Lance," Sam pointed out.

"You bet he does and I'm going to the chapel to collect my Guardian marker." Dean glanced to Mac and Griffin. "Hold off on torturing the patient any further until I get back."

Dean moved for the door again, but Caleb still had a hold of his shirt. Dean looked down at the hand wrapped tightly in the flannel fabric, then up at his Knight. "I'm just going down the hall. Sam will be here."

Caleb frowned. "You know Castiel's not my biggest fan. The feeling is mutual."

Dean grit his teeth, trying to conjure some of Pastor Jim's patience, a feat made almost impossible by the fact he'd just been told his best friend was succumbing to some supernatural malady that was masquerading as stage four brain cancer; the same best friend who was being a pain in the ass. "You're really going to let Cas's lack of social tact and your wounded ego get in the way of some angelic healing?"

"I'm just saying it might not be as cut and dry as you think."

Dean leaned his hands on the bed, eyes locked with Caleb's. "You prefer the alternative where we let Mac and his buddies and their scalpels have a go at you, or better yet, Griffin carts you off to his sinister lab to fulfill his dreams of becoming a legitimate doctor by getting published in The New England Journal of Medicine?"

Caleb let Dean's shirt go, paling at the suggestion. "Tell Cas I'll lay off the trench coat and loafer jokes if he'll do it. Hell, I'll even consent to sharing best friend status with him when he's earthbound. I mean, as long as that's not a routine occurrence."

"Don't worry, Damien. He'll do it." Dean reached out and patted Caleb's shoulder with a smirk. "You won't even have to share me."

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"What the hell do you mean you won't do it?" Dean was grateful the small hospital chapel was empty as he quickly bridged the distance between him and Castiel. The angel had surprised him by appearing quickly, stepping from behind the statue of Christ almost before Dean had finished speaking his name. Dean's relief at the speedy appearance rapidly vanished when after explaining the most recent crisis Castiel's face grew grim, and he quietly informed Dean he may not be the answer to their prayers.

"I didn't say I wouldn't," Castiel corrected, face as solemn and devoid of emotion as ever. Dean couldn't help to think the bronze statue looked more sympathetic to his cause. "I said that I couldn't."

Dean growled. "Semantics, Cas."

"No, Dean, not when one response means I have no desire to help, the other that I have no ability to do so."

Dean slid a hand over his mouth, feeling the rough stubble that covered his usually clean shaven face. He was afraid if he caught a glimpse in the mirror the reflection might look a little like John Winchester. "What do you mean you don't have the ability? You're an angel."

"Which is part of the problem."

“Is this about Caleb’s ancestral issues? Because that hasn’t stopped you from healing him in the past.” Sure the angel complained about the up close contact with what Castiel viewed as something completely unholy. Dean could easily argue there were countless humans and even some angels much more evil than Caleb.

“I have healed Caleb of physical ailments that could befall any human. Nothing I took or changed was directly related to his demonic heritage. This is different.”

“Wait,” Dean held up his hand. “I didn’t tell you Caleb’s condition was linked to his demon DNA, only that he was sick.”

“I know the illness he is suffering is resistant to my influence because I already attempted to heal it, first at the farm, and then again in Tenneson.”

Dean stared at the angel, recalling the moments when Castiel had taken care of Caleb’s concussion when he’d come to ask their help in finding The Holy Lance, and then the beating he’d suffered at the hands of Reagan Walsh’s psycho Knight, Owen. “Sonuvabitch, you knew? You knew all this time.”

“I sensed he was suffering from a grave condition, yes.”

“And you didn’t think that was important to mention?” Dean had never trusted easily or counted on those outside his family to come through for him, but Castiel had proven the exception time and again. He believed the angel had his back, the backs of those he loved.

“I did all that I could and didn’t think bringing up my inabilities to affect something you and Caleb were unaware of at the time....”

“Damn it, Cas. Don’t play stupid. You knew he was sick and you didn’t tell me because you wanted me to go after The Lance.”

“I made a carefully weighed decision to serve the greater good. Sometimes the one is sacrificed for the benefit of the many.”

“Don’t you dare preach the greater good to me! You lied to me to get what you wanted.”

“I chose to shield you from the truth.”

“And in Tenneson? When you had your precious Lance? You couldn’t have pulled me aside long enough to tell me to get Caleb to a hospital? That was months ago, Cas. Months we’ve lost in helping him.” Dean couldn’t wrap his mind around the betrayal. He knew there was no love lost between Cas and Caleb, but the ideal the angel could show such disregard for a human life, *Caleb’s* life, seemed completely out of character.

“I’ve seen what you are capable of doing in your quest to help those you care about.”

“So you were afraid of what I might do to save Caleb?” Dean moved closer to Castiel. “This was about protecting me?”

“To some degree, yes.” The angel nodded thoughtfully. “You have showed time and time again that you have no sense of self preservation; that hasn’t changed much with the position you now hold.”

“So you lied to me because you didn’t want to lose The Guardian in your pocket!”

“I didn’t want to lose you-my friend.” Castiel explained without remorse. “I couldn’t risk you sacrificing yourself for a demon.”

“You meant to say a brother, right?” Dean countered with a steely glare. “Because that’s what Caleb is to me.”

“I know that.”

“Of course you do.” Dean shook his head, running his hands through his hair with a shaky laugh. “You just don’t fucking understand it.”

Castiel shook his head. “Isn’t that semantics, Dean?”

Dean met the angel’s gaze. “Not when one reply means you’re family, and the other means I have nothing else to fucking say to you.”

Castiel held Dean’s gaze for a long moment before disappearing without another word. The small chapel grew eerily silent with his absence and the vestiges of hope he took with him. Dean released a heavy sigh, frowning at the statue of Christ.

“So much for the guardian angel thing. You might as well have sent a hungry wolf to watch over your sheep.”

His crude observation garnered no response, not counting the twinge of guilt in his gut which he blamed on years of enduring Pastor Jim’s enforced reverence for the house of God, even if said sanctuary was tucked away in the bottom floor of a bustling hospital so close to the cafeteria that it wreaked of French fries and coffee.

Dean took a seat on one of the red cushioned pews, hoping to be granted some divine grace or inspiration despite his bold disrespect- if only in the form of a spin he could put on Castiel’s inability to help them that wouldn’t make their situation appear bleaker than it truly was. His temptation to go to the altar on his knees was curtailed by the opening of the chapel doors behind him, the hushed voices of a man and woman.

He might have stayed where he was if not for the hair on the back of his neck. It prickled, alerting well-honed hunting instincts that whoever had entered was most likely not there for

prayer. Dean stood slowly, still facing the statue of Christ. He made a devout sign of the cross with one hand, as he discreetly reached for his weapon with the other.

“There is no need for violence in such a holy place.”

“That why you thought it the perfect spot for an ambush?” Dean kept his hand where it was as he turned to face the newcomer. The guy was over six feet, built like a linebacker, with dark skin and shaved head. He was wearing dress pants and a sport coat. The blue shirt beneath his jacket was open enough for Dean to catch a glimpse of the tattoo-like design that crept from the beneath his collar, trailing over one side of his neck. It revealed a half moon, peeking between the intricate outstretched limbs of a large tree, some type of dark bird perched on one of the barren branches.

“We seek your counsel, Guardian,” the woman at his side spoke. “Not a confrontation.”

She was dressed in a t-shirt and jeans. The casual attire as well as her shorter stature, long red hair and pale skin made the two strangers look like very mismatched bookends. The identical half moon and tree mark on her forearm told they had more in common than appearances would suggest.

“Who the hell are you?”

“I’m Lawrence and this is Marta.”

“You’re witches.” Dean wasn’t up on all the different logos, but he recognized a mark of a coven when he saw one. The one on the man and woman was familiar. It wasn’t the same as the one his Advisor bore with the five pointed star and intricate circle, but he’d caught a glimpse of it on Sida’s wrist, when she was treating him only a few days before. “Sida’s coven, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Have you seen her?” Marta’s hand went to a blue crystal pendant resting at the base of her throat. Her breathy question had her counterpart glaring at her. Dean got the distinct impression she had been allowed to attend this meeting by agreeing to stay silent.

“Not since we were asked so nicely to leave your coven’s territory.” He glanced to Lawrence. “I’m guessing you aren’t here to check up on how I’m fairing considering I got the boot as soon as my imminent death was avoided.”

“Sida went missing the day after you and your Triad left.”

“And you think we had something to do with her disappearance?” Dean couldn’t exactly scoff outright. When Caleb had first collapsed he’d worried the witches were behind it, though Joshua assured him that there were no signs of dark magic. Now, Dean almost preferred that was the case. Witches he could tackle, Caleb’s illness was proving to be a much larger challenge.



“It seemed an unlikely coincidence when we found her gone after your departure,” Lawrence explained. “We don’t trust outsiders and...”

“How the hell did you track me down?” Dean asked before the large witch could continue his train of thought on the sanctity of coven life.

“By one of the witches in your trust. Several covens have reason to know what is taking place in The Brotherhood these days, considering your atypical association.”

Dean sighed. Joshua’s coven was the one he was most familiar with, but he realized The Brotherhood’s pact had been made with several interconnecting covens, ones he had no personal relationship with beyond that as The Guardian. It was not something he was thrilled with, the allegiance had been to his and The Brotherhood’s advantage during the pending apocalypse, and was possibly one of the few good things to come from the war.

“Then you’re probably also aware my Triad has had their hands rather busy these last few days, and we haven’t had time to hatch any grand kidnapping schemes.”

Lawrence bowed his head. “We have since ruled out Brotherhood treachery.”

“Then why are you here? Maybe you should check into some travel agencies, or go to the police? There’s a novel idea.” Dean ran a hand through his hair, glancing at the watch on his wrist. He didn’t have time to play private detective with these people.

“Because as the leader of an ultra secretive organization steeped in mystery and fraught with intricacies that are often misunderstood by the average citizen do you opt to utilize your local police force?”

Dean glared at Lawrence. “We actually have members on the police force, and in other stations of power. You should consider initiating some municipalities into your coven.”

“This is not a laughing matter. Our coven is dependent on Sida’s leadership. She would not have left without good reason.”

“Nor would she have left without telling me.” Marta once again voiced her thoughts and Lawrence growled with impatience. “She’s my best friend, and sister. Surely, you understand, Guardian. “

Whether it was the woman’s desperation, tear-filled eyes, or the empathy she was hoping to invoke by mentioning her relationship with Sida, Dean wasn’t sure, but he felt bad for her despite the cold treatment he and his Triad had received from the coven.

“Look, I’ll put out some feelers, assign a few people...” He started, only to have Lawrence interrupt him.

“We don’t want worker bees, Winchester! You made a vow to us, to Sida, and we’re calling in that promise. We want The Triad to find Sida. Immediately!”

Dean had come to call in a marker with Castiel, a plan that had blown up in his face spectacularly. Instead, he was being called on the carpet to repay a debt much sooner than expected for the favor Sida had done them by saving his life. The irony pissed him off.

“As I pointed out earlier my Triad is not in any position to take a job.”

“And my coven is not in the position to wait patiently, nor will we.”

Lawrence was obviously used to getting his way, to having his bidding done without question. Dean had a lifetime of experience dealing with just such men. “Is that a threat?”

“I’m only pointing out that there could be dire consequences to breaking our covenant, both personal ones and professional ones.”

“This is not the time to mess with me or mine, Larry.” Dean poked a finger in the big man’s chest. “Parlor tricks and potions have nothing on the kind of wrath I’m capable of bringing down on you and your people.”

“I think what Lawrence is trying to say is that we hope you ‘ll find a way to get to this matter as soon as possible, before anyone else is hurt.” Marta’s hand rested on Dean’s chest. “We understand your hesitation, but we all know that Sida’s trail grows colder as we speak.”

“Then you’ll be grateful for the men I’ll assign to start the investigation immediately.” Dean growled, gently removing Marta’s hand. “You can expect a call from Ethan Matthews before the afternoon is up, not only is he a veteran detective, he’s like a lieutenant commander in my army, nowhere near a worker bee.”

“And we’ll expect you and your Triad to join in the investigation as soon as this situation permits.” Lawrence folded his arms over his chest. “Because no matter what differences we may have, Sida assured our council that The Guardian of The Brotherhood was a man of his word before we agreed to offer you refuge and the benefit of our magic. She said you could be trusted.”

Dean clenched his fists, feeling the strum of energy coursing through his silver ring, reminding him that his actions no longer reflected solely on him. “I’ll be there when I’m able.”

Lawrence held out a business card. “This has my home number and my cell.”

“Glad to know we won’t need a cauldron and some eye of newt to contact you.” Dean’s comment prompted dual nasty glances as well as a quick exit by the unwanted party. He watched them go, returning to his pew to have the door open again.

“What now?” He growled.

“I hope your sour mood doesn’t mean the meeting with Cas went bad.” Sam’s voice had Dean sitting up straighter in the seat, meeting his brother’s weary gaze. “Griffin’s started talking experimental drugs, bringing up more pictures on his iPad and Caleb’s freaking out. You need to get in there.”

“Damn it.” Dean exhaled heavily, his gaze going once more to the statue of Christ, hoping Jesus might provide some last minute rescue before he had to break the news to Caleb. “Castiel won’t be helping us.”

“What? Why not?” Sam sat down beside him.

Dean looked at his brother. “Because apparently angels can’t help demon kind even if they wanted to.”

Sam took a moment to digest what that meant, licking his lips before speaking. “Did he give any suggestions how we might fix it.”

“I didn’t exactly ask.” Dean clenches his fists, as he recalled the look of guilt in Castiel’s eyes. “I was too pissed at finding out the bastard has known about this since before Tension.”

“When he healed Caleb’s concussion at the farm.” Sam guessed correctly, sitting back in the pew, his hands coming up to run through his hair. “If I’d insisted on the hospital run back then...”

“Don’t do that, Sam.” Dean had already had the same thoughts, but they didn’t have time for self flagellation. “I okayed the non-hospital run. Besides, you know what dad always said about Monday morning quarterbacking.”

“We have to find a way to fix this, Dean.”

“I think I have an idea.”

Dean didn’t miss the confusion or the doubt in his brother’s eyes. It was probably a reflection of the same kind of dread that inspired Castiel to keep the truth from them. He slapped Sam on the knee.

“Don’t worry, Little Brother I promise it doesn’t require you wearing a chicken costume.”

RcJ\*T\*SnsnsnsN\*T\*RcJ

Goliath

By: Tidia & Ridley C. James

A/N: First, Tidia and I would like to thank everyone who took the time to comment and review. It is always fun to hear what people think might be happening. We do want to make one assurance, this is NOT, nor was it ever planned to be a 'cancer fic'. Using cancer as a reference was the one way I could think to show how the effects of Noah Seaver's amulet and Caleb's abilities were manifesting themselves. It was meant to illustrate only. I'm sorry the reader who was very concerned about that being the case didn't understand Griffin's speech about mimicking the signs of the disease. Although, I did find it quite flattering to have one of our stories critiqued for being too realistic, and only hope that perception continues especially in light of where this story leads our boys. Any other concerns, I hope will work themselves out as the story goes along. Enjoy, and for those celebrating have a wonderful new year.

RcJ&Ti\*SnsnsnsnsN\*Ti&RcJ

"This is your brilliant plan?"

Dean ignored Sam in lieu of finishing the devil's trap he was currently drawing on the hospital sub-basement floor. Unbidden images of his father flashed to mind. He wondered if this scene was similar to the night John traded his soul to save his son's life-different hospital, different demon, but same old desperation.

"What exactly are you hoping to accomplish, Dean?" Sam continued, undaunted by Dean's silence.

Dean looked up when the task was done, matching his brother's scowl. "What the hell do you think I'm hoping to accomplish, Sam?"

"I just don't see how summoning Crowley is going to help?"

"The Runt's right, Deuce. No way are any of us making any kind of deal with demon kind. I don't care if my brain fucking implodes; I'm not putting you and Sam at risk."

Dean stood and pointed an accusing finger at Caleb, who was situated in the corner like a kid being sentenced to time out. "I believe 'our' deal was that you'd stay put and keep your mouth shut if Sam and I sneaked you out of your room."

Sometimes desperation worked in a guy's favor. After Dean had broken the news about Castiel's inability to help, Mac and Griffin had started plotting Plan B. Plan B involved a complex medicinal bombardment, a plan Caleb had vetoed at the first mention of side effects, which were gruesome and many. The Knight's vehement refusal of treatment had sent Mac and Griffin back to regroup with their colleagues and no doubt strategize a counterattack, giving Dean time to privately present his alternative. At that moment any prospect would have seemed preferable and

it didn't take much to get his Triad on board. Sam's errand to get the supplies they would need along with the midnight trek into the bowels of the hospital's boiler room had taken away some of their enthusiasm.

"I promised to keep quiet as long as you or Sam weren't in any danger." Caleb made a damn good effort of looking foreboding as he moved off the stool Sam had found for him and made his way over to the center of the room which the brother's had cleared of abandoned files and outdated supplies. Most of the menacing effect was lost due to the fact The Knight was dragging an I.V. pole alongside him and had insisted on accessorizing his hospital gown with his battered leather jacket, combat boots and gun holster complete with his treasured Desert Eagle. "Calling on the current top dog demon is what I consider unnecessary jeopardy on our part; so you either explain exactly what we're doing down here or take me back to my comfy bed and pudding cups."

"When Castiel couldn't help, I started thinking."

Caleb gripped the I.V. stand. "Your hamster wheel turning is not always a good thing, Deuce."

Dean glanced at Sam then met Caleb's gaze. "We're down here because a guy wouldn't take the Lamborghini to a Honda dealership for a fucking tune up. Well, *you* might but I'd kick your ass if you did."

The draining of color from Caleb's face had Dean reconsidering the wisdom of allowing him to be in on the meeting. "So, now after all these years you're willing to admit I'm a demon?"

"No." Dean was beyond frustrated that Caleb was making this harder than it had to be. For once he wished his Knight was a little more like Jim Murphy's. John Winchester didn't wear his emotions on his sleeve. Over the years Dean had come to believe his father's staunch practice of a stone cold façade left him incapable of experiencing, let alone showing, a complete range of human feelings. Caleb, on the other hand, could be an open book, failing miserably in the one area his predecessor had excelled. Dean took a calming breath, calling on all his experience of dealing with a prickly Damien. "Whatever the hell is making you sick *is* demonic in nature. Castiel said it himself. He can't help because he's an angel. It only makes sense that a demon might hold the key."

"Even if that's true, what makes you think Crowley will help us?" Sam asked.

"Because I'm going to make him an offer he can't refuse." Dean was beginning to appreciate his little brother's ability to steer them away from the emotional, onto the path of logic, however needling his attempts. He kept his eyes on Caleb though; hoping one of their favorite Godfather lines might erase the kicked puppy look.

Damien sighed, running a hand down his face, the lack of fight didn't make Dean feel one bit better. "He's not going to do it out of the goodness of his cold black heart, Deuce, or because of some Guardian Godfather marker you might have up your sleeve."

"That's why I agreed to let you come, Dirty Hairy Legs."

Caleb frowned, tapping his head before gesturing to the I.V. "I'm not exactly up to enforcer status."

"You ain't sleeping with the fishes, yet, Brazi." Dean smirked at his best friend, before arching a brow at Sam. "Guardians are at their most powerful when surrounded by their Triad. Crowley will help us because I'm not going to give him a choice in the matter."

Caleb tugged at the hospital gown that barely reached his knees. "So that's why you were on the phone with Josh so long? You've got some Triad mojo planned?"

"Something like that." Dean had hoped Joshua might have some magic up his sleeve that didn't involve a demon. Joshua, who had returned home to Carolyn after they had secured Caleb in Louisville, was at a loss as to how the Brotherhood resources might help with Caleb's diagnosis. However, he had more than enough to say about Sida's coven and the trouble it could bring. He promised to return to Kentucky on the next available flight, after a lengthy and drawn out exposition on why Dean should not do anything until he got there. Apparently, everyone thought Dean was going to do something crazy.

"Please tell me this is some Guardian trick you've actually tested."

"Trick? I'm not a fucking carnival act." Dean snapped at his brother, who raised his hands in surrender. Dean felt a tiny twinge of hypocrisy concerning his frustration at Caleb's sensitivity towards certain issues. The Guardian 'abilities' were one facet of the job Dean wasn't prepared for. It wasn't like Pastor Jim flashed his powers at the drop of a hat. Hell, Dean thought the old man's magic was in his awesome apple pie and sweet tea elixir. It was one thing to talk about the gifts Merlin bequeathed to The Guardian, completely another to utilize them. "I've been brushing up on some things since our run-in with Walsh. I won't be showed up by that dickhead again."

"Things you want to share with us?" Caleb asked.

"How about I just show you." Dean took out his silver flask and handed it to Caleb. "Think you can manage this?"

"I'm not a fucking invalid." Caleb snatched the holy water, offering Dean a roll of his eyes and exaggerated huff. "At least not yet, though if Porter's latest multimedia production is right I'll be deaf, blind and possibly in a vegetative state before long."

Dean worked hard to school his features, to keep the rush of fear buried deep beneath his blocks. He'd wanted to strangle Griffin after the latest round of projections, and had only managed his control because they might need the man if things with Crowley didn't pan out. "Then we should get on with this because you'll be of no use to me as a wing man if you're led around by a guide dog and have the mental capacity of a cumquat."

"Please." Sam snorted; taking Ruby's blade from Dean, his intent to be the one to make the blood sacrifice that was required. "Like Juliet is going to let you continue to hit the bar scene with your best buddy for much longer if she defies the odds and stays around."

Dean refused to be goaded into talking about his relationship with Juliet. "You could definitely use the help, little brother. Maybe I'll let you borrow Damien to troll the college club scene."

"Stop offering my services like a buck-fifty hard-up hooker. I've gotten an up close view of the runt's moves this past year, believe me when I say even my great looks, charisma and healthy roll of flash cash isn't going to help his cause."

"Shut up before I suggest we take some of your blood for the invocation." Sam pointed the knife in mock threat at Caleb.

Caleb grunted. "It actually might work better considering the audience we're pandering."

Dean picked up his journal and began the Latin verse before Caleb could turn the little bit of levity they had managed back to morose subjects. Sam followed suit, sliding the knife over his arm, turning it so the rich red drops plopped onto the threshold of the devil's trap where they had placed the other items needed to summon a specific demon. Dean had barely finished the final line when Crowley appeared, his scowl of irritation quickly morphing to his more typical cat that still had canary feathers hanging from his mouth grin as he took in who had called him.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the newly crowned heroes of the thwarted apocalypse." The demon ran a meticulously manicured finger down the lapel of his suit coat. "What rates my gracing the rare audience of the complete Triad?"

"We have some business to discuss." Dean put the journal away, keeping his gaze leveled on Crowley.

"Business would imply we have a *working* relationship." Crowley looked around at their surroundings, then down to the trap that bound him. "A working relationship requires mutual respect and doesn't usually involve one party being bound against their will. That is more liken to a kidnapping. I should warn you I'm quite immune to Stockholm syndrome."

"Maybe I should rephrase that." Dean cleared his throat. "We need something from you and you're going to give it to us or I'm going to hurt you."

Crowley arched a brow in challenge. “You do realize that this measly little trap will only hold a demon of my experience for a very short time?”

“I do know a thing or two about demons.” Dean reached for the flask Caleb was holding, twisting the lid off before tipping it to let the holy water trickle out. He placed his fingers beneath the small stream, feeling the coolness against his skin along with a surge of power. The water reacted like a line of gun powder struck with a match. It sparked to life, racing around the outline of a trap and the Triad symbol in the middle. When it had covered every surface of the three interlocking circles the entire devil’s trap glowed like silver moonlight reflected on the pond. “Can you say the same about Triads?”

Crowley’s self-assured grin faltered before he could cover. “Nice trick, Guardian.”

“As I was telling someone earlier the Guardian’s not a circus show, Crowley,” Dean said, gravely. “You won’t walk away from this with cotton candy on your chin and balloons tied around your wrist. I can guarantee you won’t be going anywhere now that Triad magic has bound you and I imagine holy water has nothing on what Merlin’s silver will do to you.”

“He was part demon you know,” Caleb spoke up. “My guess is that the old magician understood the nature of the beast better than most.”

“Sort of like you.” Crowley looked from the flask in Dean’s hand to Caleb. “I don’t think we’ve formally met, but I’ve seen you on countless occasions over the years. Azazel loved to show off his pet prodigy.”

“Don’t talk to him.” Dean stepped in front of The Knight.

“It’s alright, Deuce.” Caleb moved closer to the devil’s trap. “I’m the one who needs Crowley’s help, after all.”

“Help would imply he has a choice in the matter,” Sam said, moving closer to Dean, providing a line of solidarity. “Which he does not.”

“Easy now.” Crowley raised a hand. “You haven’t even told me how I might be of service to the Triad, though our setting and The Knight’s current state of undress gives me some idea. Are we in a psychiatric facility?”

“One more quip and I’m going to douse you with this holy water and let the silver have its run.” Dean wasn’t up to playing games with the haughty demon.

“I’m sick,” Caleb admitted. “Dying, actually.”

“Damien.” Dean was beginning to rethink his decision to let his best friend come. Two Triad members would have more than likely sufficed, no matter what Joshua said.



“It’s not like he isn’t going to find out.”

“I understand you humans are extremely fragile and susceptible to all sorts of maladies. It’s one of the reasons the more intelligent of our kind stopped trying to breed with you people long ago. Although, to give our most infamous hold out Azazeal credit, you’ve lasted longer than the rest of his line.” Crowley ran a hand over his chin. “He theorized it had to do with your natural psychic ability inherited from your mother’s side of the family I believe. It’s one of the reasons he chose ‘special’ children for his later project, deciding to go the whole blood sharing route instead of messing with the dicer aspects of DNA and genetics.”

Dean felt his brother shift beside him. Doing this solo would have been the best plan for everyone involved, screw his Advisor's warning. He'd manage to wield the silver on his own several times. “How about we stick to the here and now, Crowley? None of us needs a history lesson in Yellow Eyes sick agenda.”

“Very well.” Crowley sighed, once again eyeing Caleb. “I take it your abilities have advanced past a threshold that your body can’t maintain.”

“Something like that,” Caleb answered.

“That’s simple enough to remedy.”

“It is?” Dean didn’t mean to sound so surprised or hopeful.

“Of course.” Crowley grinned. “Caleb merely needs to embrace this opportunity for what it is, to become what he was meant to be.”

“Come again?”

“He means I should become a full-fledged demon.”

“Don’t sound so repulsed.” Crowley shook his head. “As one of Azazeal's offspring you’re practically royalty, a direct descendant of the king, and you're a trusted member of The Triad, a position I promise no demon before you has held. You would be welcomed by your brothers and sisters, celebrated. In fact, with a little grooming from yours truly, you might even make an excellent second in command.”

Dean slung holy water on Crowley, felt a tug of satisfaction as the demon hissed and writhed in pain. He lifted his hand, touching his hunter's band with a twisted snarl that let Crowley know they all would get a chance to see just what the silver might do to the bound demon. "Try again."

"Like it or not, it's the only solution I can offer." Crowley growled, his dark eyes flashing completely black. "Give him a quick death and let him come with me or watch him suffer, suit yourself."

"Death and a trip to demon boot camp is not a solution I can live with, Crowley." Dean had witnessed firsthand the initial stages of initiation into Hell's bad boy club. There was no way he'd ever allow Caleb to endure a worse fate.

"It's the nature of the beast. Caleb either completes the transformation he started by wielding Noah Seaver's amulet, or slowly succumbs to the limitations his human form has saddled him with, unique bloodline or not."

"You know about the amulet?" Caleb demanded.

"You think you can use one of our prized possessions, pardon the pun, and not be discovered?" Crowley clucked his tongue. "You called countless demons from the pit to help in your cause, including the likes of Malachi Harris. It was quite impressive, much better than your great great-grandfather's attempts to harness our power, but I suppose that was in part due to the fact he was completely human and you were hardwired to use it."

"Is there a way to reset the switch, stop the progression?" Sam asked.

"Perhaps you've heard of Pandora, Scholar?" Crowley sighed, impatiently. "Some things are not so easily returned to their box."

"There has to be something..." Dean started only to have Caleb grip his sleeve.

"Let him go, Deuce."

"What?" Dean turned to his best friend. "He knows more, Damien. Demons always hold out, twisting the truth for their own purposes, you fucking know that."

"What I know for sure is that I'm not interested in anything he has to offer."

Dean held The Knight's gaze, reading the request in Caleb's gold gaze even before the silent plea echoed in his thoughts. 'Please, Deuce.' Dean waved his hand over the trap; the silver glow brightening for an instant before it vanished, leaving the white chalk outline, which Dean broke with a hard scuff of his boot.

"Get the hell out of here, Crowley."

Crowley inclined his head to The Guardian, then turned to Caleb. "If you change your mind..."

"He meant now..." Sam moved forward with Ruby's knife just as Crowley wisely took his leave.

"You should have at least let me work him over a while." Dean said with a sigh as he turned to face Caleb once more. The older hunter seemed to deflate with Crowley's disappearance. It took quick reflexes on both Dean and Sam's part to keep The Knight on his feet.

"I'm sorry, Deuce," Caleb muttered as they got him back to the stool and seated.

Dean kept a firm grip on Caleb's shoulder. "I'm the one who's sorry, man, a sorry sonofabitch. I should have known better than to bring you down here."

"Are you alright?" Sam asked, checking the I.V. in Caleb's hand, looking up to the ringer bag, which was nearly empty.

"I can't do that. I won't become one of them." Caleb was saying- his gaze still locked on Dean. He was shaking his head, breathing quick and shallow. "Throw me on a fucking pyre first, make sure my ashes are scattered on holy ground. Do whatever it takes..."

"Dude, calm down." Dean exchanged worried glances with Sam, waiting for his brother to tighten his grip on Caleb before kneeling in front of the Knight. If Dean had any clue that Crowley was going to offer up Caleb's worse nightmare as their last ditch solution, he'd never called on the demon. "No fucking way I'd ask you to go along with something like that. Never. You understand me?"

Caleb nodded, but still looked as if he might hyperventilate. He leaned forward, bracing his hands on his bare knees. "I'd do anything for you, Deuce, but not that."

"Don't be an idiot." Dean reached out and gripped Caleb's wrist. "I'd finish you myself before I let you go down that road. Got it?"

"Dean," Sam admonished.

Dean had to grin when his brother's appalled exasperation got Caleb to laugh.

"The runt doesn't appreciate the lengths we'll go for each other."

"I don't appreciate Dean once again contemplating killing one of us."

Dean shrugged. "You know how squeamish the little guy gets when it comes to offing family."

"This is not fucking funny, guys."

"Language." The stern reprimand was delivered in stereo with twin glares from Knight and Guardian.

"Seriously!" Sam threw his hands up. Caleb nearly tumbled off the stool. "Shit-sorry, Caleb."

"It's okay," Caleb stubbornly waved him off, trying to make it to his feet.

"Easy, man." Dean stood, taking part of his friend's weight. "Let's get you back upstairs and figure out our next move."

"Deuce..."

“Don’t say it!” Dean snapped. He looked at Sam, who moved quickly to help him. “Sam and I will figure this out, without any freaking angel or demon assistance.”

“I was going to say that maybe I can buy us some time.”

“How?”

Caleb stopped, halting their slow trek towards the stairs. “By letting Griffin take yet another stab at killing me.”

“Seriously?” Dean swallowed, not sure if the surrender should bring relief or another crushing disappointment. It sure as hell felt like a kick in the teeth.

“In light of Crowley’s offer, Porter’s treatment can’t be so bad.” Caleb looked at him, offered a half-decent grin. “As long as I get to keep my hair-one mention of it coming out and all bets are off.”

“Because that’s the side effect that should scare you.” Sam snorted, shaking his head. “Idiot.”

“Deal.” Dean kept his own smile in place though his heart was threatening to pound through his chest as he gave his best friend a sharp nod. “Sammy never did have his priorities straight.”

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“Your first priority is to The Brotherhood, Deuce.”

“My family comes first- always.” Dean leaned forward in the chair by Caleb’s hospital bed. They had been having this same argument for the last two days, since the disaster with Crowley. It had come to a head with Ethan’s phone call that morning. “The powers that be should know that about me by now, just like Jim understood when he chose me as his successor.”

“I get it, you know I do...but what the hell are you going to do here? Hold my hand? Glare at the nurses every time they come in the room like they’re ambassadors of doom?”

Dean rolled his eyes, knowing he hadn’t been exactly pleasant, but Caleb made it sound like he was ready to draw down on the next vampire in scrubs that came in to extract more blood or subject his friend to another scan. “Do they really have to come in the middle of the night to check if you’re sleeping alright?”

Caleb dodged the redirect. “You heard Josh, man. You can’t let things fester with that coven. They may not associate with the covens under our protection, but they’ll be talk. Ethan’s found a lead; you’ve got to follow it up, especially if the Jane Doe he discovered is Sida. She might have been a bitch, but she saved your life, and as The Knight I feel honor bound.”

“Josh is the king of overreacting when it comes to the covens, and you’re not beholden to a bunch of witches that happened to be in the right place at the wrong time so put down your

sword, Lancelot.” Dean frowned at his friend, but kept his voice an even keel. Caleb was putting up a good front. He’d had a hell of a night with the pain getting to a point that the morphine was having a hard time keeping it at bay. “And I sure as hell don’t jump when Ethan calls. He’s a foot soldier, nothing more.”

“Josh has a right to be worried. We’re the reason he pledged with the whole witch fraternity. We owe him too much to leave him hanging out to dry. They look to him as a liaison of sorts to watch after their investment.” Caleb arched a brow. “And E is more than some hunter. He’s our friend, and my second. You need to start thinking about that incase...”

“Josh can take care of himself and Ethan’s position is a moot point as far as I’m concerned. I’m more worried about you at the moment.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” Caleb gestured to all the equipment, the monitors. “I’ve probably never been safer in my life.”

“Except for the fact Griffin gets to start injecting you with his serum tonight.”

“I’d be lying if I said that didn’t freak me out, but Mac is here along with his brain trust.”

“You’re talking about men who dose people with poison all the time, guys who come up with one drug more evil than the next just to outdo one another.”

“I think it’s called trying to find a cure.”

“Maybe, but from this side of the bench, it just seems like insidious torture.” Dean slid a hand over his hair, rubbing at his tired eyes. At Mac and Bobby’s prompting, he’d gone back to the farm the night before, but a surprise visit from Juliet had robbed him of what little hope he’d had of getting any rest, and not in any good way that he could recant to cheer up Caleb.

“All the more reason for you to get the hell out of here.”

“So the truth comes out.” Dean lifted his head, spearing his friend with a look of disbelief. “You really think I don’t know why you’re pushing this trip? Screw duty. You want to protect me and that’s bullshit, Damien.”

“Not to me it isn’t.” Caleb’s didn’t try to deny it. His voice slurred, a result of the amount of pain medicine rushing through his system. Dean knew his friend was fighting the tug of sleep, a reprieve from the reality of his situation, just as strongly as he was fighting Dean’s logic to remain in Louisville. “I have to go through this shit first hand. I sure as hell don’t want to watch you and Sammy suffer through it with me.”

“I’m The Guardian. Sam and I are your Triad,” Dean countered without much heat. There was a part of him that wanted to jump at the prospect of leaving, to hide away from whatever horrors

were lurking in the shadows. Maybe his sudden cowardice was why he was so pissed. He hated to admit to such weakness, especially in face of Caleb's upcoming battle.

"My head knows that, Kiddo." Caleb blinked. "But my heart sometimes slips up and sees only a tight-lipped, green-eyed five year old and his babbling baby brother."

Dean understood. At this moment, he felt ever bit that terrified and traumatized child. "What about the 'all for one and one for all' creed?"

"I never doubt you and Sammy have my back, Deuce." Caleb was having a harder time keeping his eyes open, which could explain the candor, and the fact they were verging into chick flick territory. "It doesn't matter if you're sitting right here beside me sporting the bitch face, or half way across the country kicking some supernatural ass."

Dean sighed. "You're not going to let this go, are you?"

Caleb's mouth twitched. "I haven't even begun to pull out the big guns."

Dean held up a hand. "Please spare me the infamous Reaves pouting. Besides you need to save your strength and your best moves to con Joshua and Bobby into doing your bidding until me and Sam can get back, which will be sooner than you'd probably like."

"Bobby's easy, but you might want to put some Guardian smack down on Josh." Caleb smirked, making a fist and bumping it weakly against Dean's hand. "You know how older brothers can be."

Dean glanced to the door, knew Sam was waiting for him just beyond. He turned his gaze back to Caleb, but The Knight's eyes were closed, face lax with sleep.

"Yeah, I know all about brothers." Dean stood, swallowing the huge lump lodged in his throat. He rested a hand on Caleb's head, his friend not even twitching with the touch. "It's the one area in my fucked up life in which I got crazy lucky."

Dean turned, grabbing the duffel he'd packed at the farm. He brought it to the bed, pulling some of the things he'd taken from their home. A worn leather-bound copy by Dumas, the framed photograph of him, Sam and Caleb from Josh's wedding, both of which he set on the night stand so Caleb would see them when he woke. A familiar dream catcher came next. Dean found a place to hang it on the I.V. The last object he squeezed in the palm of his hand so it left a slight imprint before sitting it in front of the picture. The plastic green dragon Atthewm would stand sentry in Dean's stead.

Dean found Sam just where he'd left him, hovering by the door. Joshua and Bobby were with him.

“We’re going,” Dean told his brother, who had straightened his slouch and stopped biting his thumb when Dean exited the room. “Call Ethan. I want to be on the road in ten.”

Sam nodded. “I want to tell Caleb bye.”

“He’s asleep.”

Sam shrugged, offering his brother a weak smile. “Didn’t you once say some of our best conversations take place when one of us is unconscious?”

“True.” Dean snorted. “At least Damien can’t call you a pansy ass.”

“Thank God you’ve seen the wisdom of my earlier points,” Joshua started once Sam had left them.

“No, you should thank Caleb, considering his stubborn streak is the only reason I’m going.” Dean looked to Bobby. “I don’t want him left alone for a minute. Too many people and too many things know about what’s going on.”

“We’ll take care of Junior.” Bobby nodded. “Silas is here, he’s got people on the inside already.”

Dean rubbed a hand over his face, wishing he’d taken the time to shave at the farm last night. “You get the wards in place?”

“As many as I could without drawing suspicion,” Joshua replied. “I do wish you’d reconsider and take Adam with you, or at least allow him to accompany you when you venture into the coven’s territory.”

“As much as I’m sure Adam is jonesing to tag along on Brotherhood business, I’m going to decline the offer.” Dean knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Adam wanted nothing to do with The Triad business. He had proven himself loyal to Joshua, and therefore Dean considered him an asset to The Brotherhood, but like most witches he found hunters distasteful. A mutual relationship unnatural, which was a damn shame considering Adam would have made one hell of a hunter, like Rambo on steroids, with the added bonus of being a genius at crafting.

“You can’t be your typical self with these people, Dean.” Joshua pinched the bridge of his nose as if he were explaining an impossible concept to a wayward child. “I hoped you would have learned that from our last experience there. Sida is a powerful witch. I explained to you that she possessed a gift for the spoken art of spells. I have no doubt she could call on the elements. There are probably others in her coven with the same ability, and if the worst has happened and the body Ethan found is hers, they will be all too ready to exact retribution.”

“Give him some credit, Slick,” Bobby surprised Dean by speaking up in his defense. “The kid’s not going in there alone. Ethan and Sam won’t let him be too much of an idgit. They’ll keep him on a short leash.”

“Thanks so much for your confidence.” Dean glared at the junkman before turning once more to Josh. “I’ll play nice with the witches, Josh. I want to clear this mess up as soon as possible.”

“As long as a modicum of tact and discretion is applied.”

Dean growled deep in his throat. He fisted his hands to keep them from around Joshua’s neck. “I hope you know I expect the same from you.”

“Meaning?” Joshua folded his arms over his chest, tilting his head in genuine confusion.

“Meaning I expect you go above and beyond in watching over Caleb. Keep your big feet out of your mouth, pretend to have a normal amount of empathy instead of your deficient supply, and make sure you are always with him when Griffin is in the room. Do you understand me?”

Joshua frowned. “So I’m to be my brother’s keeper.”

“No.” Dean held Joshua’s gaze. He and his Advisor had come miles from where they used to be, their relationship evolving over the years so that now Dean would easily call the man before him friend, possibly even family. There was still a distance that would only be crossed by Joshua proving himself over and over again. It might not have been fair to the other man, but Dean’s life had never been governed by equality. Matters weren’t helped by the fact Dean was pretty much pissed at anyone up and walking around with a clean bill of health these days. “You’re to be *my* brother’s keeper and we both know that job is a whole hell of a lot more important than the position of Advisor. You get my drift?”

“Failure is not an option.”

“Exactly. Termination from the position would not be pleasant.” Dean glanced to Bobby, who was pretending to be distracted by the car grease beneath his nails, instead of enjoying the private conversation. “Call me if anything goes wrong, and I mean anything, Bobby.”

“I’ll ring you up if Junior so much as sneezes.”

“See that you do.” Dean was thinking more along the lines of heart failure and respiratory distress, both possibilities Griffin had given them in his lengthy disclaimer the night before, but he would rather Bobby be overly open with the information than anyone attempt to keep him in the dark.

“Take these.” Joshua handed him three mojo bags. “You, Sam and Ethan should wear them whenever in the presence of the witches. It’ll offer a degree of protection.”

Dean took the bags, noting the mark of Joshua’s coven on the material along with their Triad symbol. He felt slightly guilty for coming down so hard on his Advisor. He forced a smile as a white flag. “Thanks, Mama’s Boy.”



“Powdered crow gizzard is extremely hard to come by, not to mention expensive.” Joshua smirked. “You’ll be receiving an invoice for the overtime and materials, I assure you.”

“Of course I will.” Dean snorted, stuffing the bags in his duffel. “Some things never change.”

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Ethan was working on being patient. Sam had contacted him informing him of Caleb’s illness and that his help was required. Ethan couldn’t believe the trouble that the Winchesters attracted, and he was denying that Caleb was sick. He had seen Caleb a month or so ago and everything was well- same pain in the ass Knight. So Ethan decided to ignore that Caleb was in the hospital and pretend like it was any other case, minus the fact that it involved witches, evil witches which were owed a favor by The Guardian.

Ethan still didn’t understand how the fuck that happened. There was no doubt there was one hell of an interesting story behind it all, one Caleb would love recanting in exaggerated detail over beers with Ethan.

He was waiting for Sam and Dean to meet him at the medical examiner’s office in the small town. Ethan had been able to track down the body of a woman, matching the description that Sam had given him. The Jane Doe had been found in a neighboring area to the coven’s territory dragged from a river by some unlucky fisherman. Decomposition had left her a mess. Dean didn’t want any reports going to the coven until they were sure it was the queen witch. Dean and Sam were needed for a positive identification.

Ethan had already gotten something to eat and was reading a magazine in his car with a cup of coffee as his companion. He had already talked to Eli, venting his frustration at the tardiness of the Winchester brothers. As always his brother was levelheaded.

“They’re dealing with a lot,” Eli said.

“I know but Caleb’s going to pull through,” Ethan answered, but was greeted by his brother’s silence. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Griffin is involved. I talked to him briefly. It’s not looking so good. . .”

“Shit.” Ethan thought about Gideon-not a day went by when Lane did not enter his thoughts. Losing one of their team, even as a second string Triad was devastating, he wouldn’t, couldn’t wish it on Dean, Sam and Caleb. “Fuck.”

“Pretty much,” Eli agreed. “If you need me. . .”

Ethan swallowed, trying to remove the lump in his throat. If Caleb died, then he would fill in the Knight position. In the beginning, when Gideon had been alive, it was all he’d wanted-to make his father proud. Things had changed drastically since then. Ethan still honored The

Brotherhood, and would do his duty as he promised Jim Murphy, but the position would not be what he once thought, especially now that he knew Caleb. They were friends. He'd worked with Dean and Sam as a hunter, not a guy standing in line to take one of their Triad's places if the worst should happen. "Thanks, Bro. We'll be in touch."

So when he saw the black Impala pull into the parking lot behind him he was filled with sympathy and understanding up until Dean greeted him as he jogged over to the car.

"You ready to do this?" Dean got out of the car, avoiding Ethan.

"I've been ready." Ethan frowned, then decided to move to Sam. Even in the rocky start of their relationship, Sam had been the first to offer an olive branch. "You two get held up?"

Sam put out his hand in greeting, which Ethan accepted in a firm handshake. Sam explained as he came to the driver's side and leaned against the Impala. "Got a late start. Thanks for this Ethan. How are you?"

"Good." Sam nodded. "Reaves doing okay?"

Dean crossed his arms. "He's in a hospital with a team of bloodsucking doctors headed up by your sociopathic godfather. Does that sound fucking rosy to you?" He pushed away from the car.

"Okay, then." Ethan took a deep breath and tried to conjure some of Eli's patience.

Sam reached out and grabbed his brother's suit jacket. They were acting as FBI agents, while Ethan was being himself- an officer of the law. "Dean--"

Dean shrugged the grip off. "Let's just get this started and finished. I want to get back to Louisville as soon as possible." He gestured to Ethan and then the safety building. "You first, Crockett."

Ethan led the way inside the building with the hope that Dean would keep hostility in check for the time being. They had to check in with badge information recorded. Ethan had made an appointment with Brendan Walden who was there to greet them, walking them the rest of the way into the medical examiner's office.

Brendan was a foot shorter than Ethan; his white boxy coat was bigger than his small frame. They all shook hands.

"Can we see the Jane Doe body?" Ethan asked as he noticed Dean sulking, checking his watch.

The medical examiner was happy to oblige. He slid open the door to the body. The smell greeted them first and Ethan was glad he'd opted not to eat dinner. Years on the force and a lifetime in

The Brotherhood and his stomach still roiled at the scent of human decay. The body was in an advanced state of decomposition with the face disfigured from the water.

Dean stepped forward, towering over the ME. "You got some gloves?"

The ME looked to Ethan, who nodded. "Special Agent Dick is the lead Fed on the case. Our Jane Doe might be a kidnapping victim in a recent case."

Walden looked hesitant, but handed Dean the latex. Dean snapped on one and reached for the woman's arm, which he turned so her wrist was visible.

Ethan recognized the brand-like insignia that was clearly the chosen mark of her coven.

"That's her," Dean confirmed with a glance to Sam. "Our kidnapping just became a murder investigation."

"Are you sure?" The medical examiner looked back and forth from the body to The Guardian.

"Positive." Dean gave a quick nod. "Same body type, hair color is right and that mark- I've seen it up close before."

"Was drowning the cause of death or was it post mortem?" Sam asked as the frustration in Dean's voice was easily heard.

Brendan closed the refrigerator door, then led them away from the bodies to his small enclosed office. He waited until they had all filed in, handing the folder to Ethan. "Broken neck between C4 and C5. She was dead before she hit the water."

"Defensive wounds?" Sam asked, looking over Ethan's shoulder as he opened the file to read the notes.

"Bruising to her upper arms and a couple of contusions to her face that were peri-mortem."

"Lover's spat?" Ethan asked.

Dean jerked the folder out of Ethan's hand, flipping through hurriedly. "Possibly, or injuries inflicted during the abduction."

Ethan cleared his throat in irritation, and Dean reluctantly passed him one page of the autopsy report, which he then passed along to Sam. "Was there alcohol involved, drugs in her system?"

"Not enough for impairment, but toxicology reports show trace amounts of wine. Her stomach contents indicated she'd eaten shortly before time of death." Brenden leaned back in his chair, oblivious to the tension in the enclosed space. "Pizza and nuts."

"Date gone awry?" Ethan looked once again to Sam, avoiding Dean.

Sam cocked his head to the side slightly. “Cressida didn’t exactly strike me as the bar nuts and pizza kind of girl. Think wine and crepes by candlelight.”

However, Dean made sure he was part of the conversation. He was not going to be ignored. “Maybe she was slumming,” Dean snapped the folder shut. “She could have had a thing for bad boys from the wrong side of the tracks.”

“We’re going to need a copy of the report and pictures, please.” Sam waved the few sheets that had come his way.

The medical examiner got up and collected the file from all three of them. “Give me a minute.”

Ethan backed up to lean against the wall and separate himself from the brothers, especially Dean. He studied the large poster of Hawaii in the office. It seemed like a picture of a dream unfulfilled. “Are we going to have to put a leash on you, Corleone?”

Sam stepped between the two. “Can we wait and have this discussion until we go outside? Keep it together.”

Ethan didn’t know if the comment was directed to both of them or just to Dean himself. He didn’t have a chance to ask as the ME returned with the copies.

“I did three- enough for everyone.” He handed out the packets.

“We’ll contact the family in regards to the arrangements,” Ethan stated, putting out his hand in thanks, which the medical examiner accepted. “I’ll be in touch.”

They headed for the cars.

“What do you want to do now?”

“The coven is going to want more,” Dean growled, running both hands through his hair. “You’re the fucking police detective-what would you do?”

Ethan flashed Sam a look, but kept Eli’s words from earlier in his mind. He took a deep calming breath and let it out with a sigh. “We need a picture of Cressida, a current one. We’ll take that to all the local drinking establishments that have food and see if anyone remembers serving her. This is a small town, there’s not that much ground to cover and if she looked out of place like you’re painting her, someone’s going to remember.”

“It’s a start.” Dean made to push past him, but Ethan reached out and snagged the sleeve of his suit coat.

“Hold up, man. I’m all for working this case, but I’m not the whipping boy.”

Dean jerked free. “What the hell does that mean?”

“It means you’re The Guardian and I’m a hunter so I have to follow your orders, but I’m also your friend, *Caleb’s* friend, so you don’t have to be an asshole.” Ethan was not one that was going to be trampled on.

“You want a pat on the back? A thank you for doing your fucking job, Matthews?”

“Dean.” Sam stepped alongside his brother. “Stop it.”

Ethan stood his ground as Dean moved into his personal space, voice lowering as he stabbed a finger at the detective’s chest. “If you think this is some kind of test run for us, you are in for a big disappointment. You’re here as a run of the mill hunter, and if you’re going to pull a prima donna routine on me I can fucking call up any other number of hunters in the area; but keep in mind if you cost me anymore time, I can promise you that you will be pulling shit recon jobs for the foreseeable future, Knight’s understudy or not.”

Ethan didn’t have a chance to respond before Dean turned and stomped towards the parking lot and the Impala.

“Ethan...” Sam started.

“What the holy fuck?” Ethan exploded, his reserve of patience completely gone. “Are you sure that’s Dean? Have you said Christo around him lately? Or tossed some holy water in his face? Maybe we should stab him with a trusty silver blade just to be on the safe side.”

“I’m sorry he’s punishing you for being here.” Sam shook his head. “He hasn’t slept in days; he won’t eat. Basically he’s going on coffee and adrenaline. He’s majorly stressed and ...”

“And he’s fucking delusional if he thinks for one second that I want Reaves’s job.”

“He doesn’t think that,” Sam hesitated; his voice catching slightly as he stared off in the direction his brother went. It took a moment before he seemed to compose himself enough to face Ethan once more. “Dean’s just completely terrified that it might not matter what either of you want.”

“Shit, man.” Ethan rubbed a hand down his face. “It is it that bad?”

Sam forced a half smile. “How long have you known us?”

Ethan grimaced, his chest tightening with past grief and a heaviness that was all new. “So, I’ll start on the east side of town, work my way towards you two. You’ll email me the picture as soon as you get it?”

Sam nodded, his smile more genuine. “When we find the place I promise you a beer and pie.”

“Fuck that.” Ethan snorted. “Reaves is going to owe me a filet and The Guardian is coughing up some of Jim’s stash for being such a prickly bitch.” Ethan hoped that Dean and Caleb could live up to those promises.

((()))

Sam watched his brother work the room at the latest bar on their long line of stops. Surprisingly for such a small town there were plenty of places that served wine and pizza. He couldn’t help but to think back to Tennison and a very different quest. Caleb’s voice had him refocusing on the phone in his hand. “Hey, man. I told Joshua not to wake you.”

*“I told him there would be dire consequences if you guys called and he didn’t. He’s afraid of me.”*

Sam heard Joshua mutter something in the background about The Guardian’s Mandate. He smiled as if it all seemed normal. But it wasn’t normal. “How are you?”

*“I just asked you the same question- twice. You want to tell me what’s going on? Something happen with Ethan?”*

Caleb was avoiding conversations about his health. There would be time to talk about his progress and the side effects of the treatments. Sam didn’t want to linger on those thoughts. Maybe Dean wasn’t the only one a little shaken by working a case with the police detective by their side. “He’s not you.”

*“I’ve got looks, money and sparkling personality. Of course he’s not me. Dean’s giving him a hard time?” Caleb sighed. “I’ll talk to him.”*

Sam rubbed his forehead. This was the last thing that Caleb needed to involve himself in. “No, it’s okay. You concentrate on you, don’t worry about us. I just wanted to let you know we’re still in one piece. I’ll take care of Dean. Got it?”

*“I’m out of the game and you’re getting delusions of grandeur, Kid. Yeah, yeah, it’s all about me. There’s a first time for everything.”*

“You listening to me would definitely be a first.” Sam snorted at the Han Solo routine. “I’ll have Dean call you when we get more info. Take care.”

He waved at his brother after he finished the call. Dean put a finger up, then called him over. Sam went to join his brother who was talking to the burly bartender.

“Bub, this is Sam, my partner. Can you tell him what you were telling me?”

The bartender wiped his hand on a towel, which he then tossed over his shoulder. “Dean showed me that picture and I remembered her.” He pointed to the picture that Dean had on his phone of a

very much alive Cressida. "Kind of hard to miss, you know, definitely not one of our regulars. She was waiting for someone. He took his time to get here. I kept checking on her. . ."

Dean rolled his eyes. "Girl alone at a bar - he's a regular humanitarian."

Sam glared at his brother, then prompted Bub who had fallen silent. "Sorry, can you continue?"

Bub glanced down the bar at the other few patrons, seeing that he was not needed he finished his story. "So this guy shows up, and she looks pissed to see him. Big guy, too. I was expecting a suit, some preppy type. This guy was nothing like that. He sits down, they talk for a while, but she didn't look happy about the conversation. She left in a snit, then I guess he left a while later."

"They didn't leave together?" Sam asked, knowing that this meant there was a possible suspect, and it may indeed have involved a lovers spat.

"No," Bub confirmed. "The guy had a beer, looked to be stewing, you know what I mean."

"When was this exactly?" Sam asked.

"Not sure of the night, but it's been about a week ago."

"Do you remember anything else about the man?" Sam knew the bartender saw a long line of customers but was hoping his interest in Sida might have made her companion more memorable.

"Like I said he was big, long hair, slight beard-definitely the type to be in trouble."

Sam glanced at Dean, who shrugged. "Told you she had a thing for bad boys."

"I almost forgot," Bub broke in. "Dude had this wicked scar. I noticed it when he paid the tab."

"A scar?" Dean asked.

Bub made a slashing motion across his throat. "Like he was lucky to be walking around kind of scar, if you know what I mean."

"Thanks for the time," Dean said as he slipped a twenty along the dark wood of the bar top, sharing an unnerving glance with Sam. Bub took the money, folded it in half before placing it in his pants pocket with a mumbled thanks. Sam leaned his back against the bar and sighed.

"You don't think..."

"I don't know what the hell to think."

"I mean there has to be other guys with scars like Owen's." Sam couldn't begin to imagine why The Knight of the Trinity would be involved with Sida. Dean didn't seem to want to consider the convoluted possibility as he took out his phone and began typing.

“You texting Ethan?”

Dean nodded. “Matthews ran background checks on Walsh and his team. He may have a picture of Owen we can show Bub, get a confirmation.”

“At least we know Sida was definitely here, so the trail might still be warm.” Sam looked around the place, hoping the bad feeling that things were about to get much worse was just hunger pains. “Maybe we can talk to some of the regulars, too.”

“He’s on his way.” Dean flashed Sam his phone screen, then pulled his half-finished beer in front of him and took a drink. “Were you talking to Caleb earlier?”

Sam nodded. He wasn’t hiding anything from his brother. He wasn’t expecting his brother to be upset at the phone call.

“Damn it, Sam.” Dean snarled. “He needs to be getting some rest, not getting field reports.” He picked up his beer and headed to the booth that Sam had originally been sitting at.

“I told him that.” Sam defended himself as he followed after his brother. He had every right to connect with Caleb.

“But you had to call him. . .”

“Just to check in. I promised him.” Sam slid in to the other side of the booth. “It wasn’t to talk about you, though I could have given him an earful about your attitude thus far.”

“What attitude?”

“You were an asshole to Ethan. If he wasn’t wearing a ring, and loyal to The Brotherhood, then he would have walked out. I know I would have.”

“I *am* an asshole, Sam. I thought you knew that.”

“I do, but you’re also a damn good Guardian, a good man and a great brother.” Sam waited for his brother to meet his gaze. “Caleb expects that of you.”

“Well, I expect a lot from Caleb, too. Like for him to stick around, get better . . .”

“Me too,” Sam agreed, knowing his brother was reacting to fear the only way he could, the way their father had modeled for them. He was lashing out, pushing everyone away.

“Too damn bad people don’t always live up to our expectations.” Dean took another drink of his beer.

Sam frowned. “We both know Caleb is not going to disappoint you, Dean.”



“I don’t want to let him down either, damn it.” Dean slammed the beer down on the table.

“That’s why I can’t fucking believe this Sida crap just keeps getting worse.”

“You won’t let him down.” Sam tried redirecting once more.

“Right.” Dean looked down at the silver ring on his finger, twisting it a few times before lifting his gaze to Sam’s once more. “Because I’ve got a great track record when it comes to coming through for him.”

Sam knew Dean was referring to the times when he’d been forced to make the impossible decision of choosing between the people he cared about most. Sam always seemed to come out on top. Now Dean perceived he was being forced to once more choose, this time between his obligation as Guardian and his duty to a brother. “No one understands the decisions you’ve made better than Caleb, big brother.”

Dean leaned back in the booth with a wide yawn he couldn’t hold back. “That your way of saying Damien and I are made from the same mold?”

“Maybe.” Sam snorted. “If John Winchester could shit clay.”

Dean laughed, even though it didn’t hold much humor. Sam was thankful that he caught a glimpse of the brother he’d come to appreciate over the last year.

“That would most definitely be the pot calling the kettle black, little brother.”

“Possibly,” Sam conceded. He was too much his father’s son at times. He was trying to do better in the areas that John failed, like being there for Dean. “Still, Caleb wouldn’t want you moping in your beer about perceived past slights. He’d want you to think about better times, like ones we haven’t had yet.”

“Yeah, yeah, Damien is all about the future these days.” Dean finished off the beer, motioned to a passing waitress for another round for them both.

Sam would make sure to order some food when she made it over so it would be ready when Ethan arrived. “I think he’s got the next Triad planned and ready to take over when we can no longer make it into the field with our walkers.”

“I blame Josh. Damien’s been foaming at the mouth since finding out Carolyn was pregnant.” Dean glanced out the window at darkened window by their booth when headlights reflected on the glass.

“I blame that time-travelling kid, James.” Sam didn’t know what the body snatcher had told Caleb but whatever transpired had definitely lit a match under The Knight.

“You need to let that grudge go.” Dean gave him a half grin. “That kid might be important to you someday.”

“Call me insane, but I’d prefer to think about kids that are actually in our timeline.” Sam rolled his eyes. “Like Joshua’s son.”

“Son?” Dean raised a brow. “You know something I don’t?”

Sam silently cursed his careless remark. Joshua had made him promise not to tell Dean or Caleb, especially Caleb, afraid the Knight’s campaign for godfather would intensify. Dean obviously took his silence for what it was—an omission.

“A boy.” Dean whistled. “That seals it. Josh is going to have to put new locks on their place to keep Number One Uncle out. The Knight will want to start training as soon as the kid’s mobile.”

Sam’s guilt was quickly overshadowed by Dean’s lift in mood. “Like you won’t want in on that action?”

“It might be fun to corrupt Joshua’s kid.” Dean returned his attention to his empty beer, peeling at the label. “It would serve Josh right for all the hell he gave us over the years if his son turned out just like me and Caleb.”

“But why punish Carolyn?” Sam teased, hoping to prolong the relief from reality.

“She married Josh.” Dean looked up, brow arched. “The woman enjoys a good challenge. She’s practically a masochist.”

Sam waited until the waitress had put their beers down and taken their pizza order before replying. “Josh’s kid isn’t the only one Caleb is determined to watch grow up.”

“Someone else expecting?” Dean picked up his fresh beer, not missing a beat. “Don’t tell me little Sammy has a girl in the family way? How is the lovely Georgia by the way?”

“Shut up.” Sam would never understand how Dean did it. He was a grown man, but Sam could feel the flush of heat creeping up his neck at the mention of the grad assistant from NYU, making him feel much more like a self-conscious fifteen-year-old. “I was talking about your kids, idiot. Caleb is counting on Juliet being the one to make you a dad.”

Sam could physically sense the moment Dean’s dark mood descended upon them once more, his brother’s eyes darkening a shade from moss to deep jade, his shoulders tensing. “That’s not going to happen.”

“You never know...” Sam started, lightly hoping to recover ground. Dean shut him down with a cold glare.

“I do know. Juliet and I are finished.”

“Okay.” Sam gave his brother a moment, before pushing on. He hadn’t made the connection until now that Dean’s already foul temper had deteriorated after his trip to the farm the night before they left Louisville. “Did something happen when you went home the other night?”

“The Winchester Curse happened.”

Sam wished he’d never said that their family was doomed. Dean, who had vehemently denied it at the time, had reverted to throwing it back at his brother when Fate seemed to screw them over. Sam blamed it on losing their father, Pastor Jim, and so many others along the way, like some self-fulfilling prophecy. “You saw Juliet at the farm?”

“She was waiting on me when I got there.” Dean ran a hand over his mouth. “I forgot we were supposed to meet, that she was going to fix me dinner. With all that was going on with Damien, I hadn’t thought to call her or check my phone messages.”

Sam gave a small smile. “It’s not exactly like you’re up on relationship protocol.”

Dean looked insulted. “I manage, Sam.”

“I was just pointing out that Juliet seems smart enough to figure out you aren’t really the text and talk, keep a strict schedule kind of guy. Dating Bruce Wayne has its pitfalls.”

“She’s aware of my shortcomings,” Dean growled.

Sam accepted he was going to be saddled with prickly, overly sensitive Dean. It reminded him of the time after their father’s death. He couldn’t help but to wonder what would become of his brother if the worst did happen with Caleb.

“Then what upset her?”

“Who says she was upset?” Dean sighed, when Sam’s silence cued that he was not going to let it drop. “She found Caleb’s scans and test results if you must know-the print outs you got from Griffin.”

“Shit.” Sam palmed his tired eyes, feeling a stake of guilt. The results were spread out on the table where Sam had researched the variables of Caleb’s condition. They would have been impossible to miss. “Dean, I’m sorry.”

“So was Juliet. She was so sorry.” Dean shook his head, his voice softening momentarily. “If you could have seen the look on her face when I walked in...she thought they were mine. She thought *I* was sick and that’s why I hadn’t called her or been in contact. She was upset.”

“That’s understandable.” Sam imagined as a doctor Juliet made quick work of the findings, drawing the same grim conclusions that both Griffin and Mackland had made.

Dean cleared his throat, the hard edge returning to his tone. “I told her I should be so fucking lucky.”

“I take it she didn’t understand your response.” Sam wasn’t sure many could grasp the self-sacrificing verging on self-destructive streak with which his brother was both cursed and blessed. On the surface Dean was all about self-confidence, swagger verging on cocky. Only after seeing past the brash, devil-may-care attitude did one catch glimpses of the insecurities, the doubts Sam now understood led to questions of Dean’s self-worth. Dean would have much rather have been the one in the crosshairs, easily putting those he loved before his own happiness.

“She told me I didn’t mean it, that I was in shock.”

“She has a lot to learn about you.” Sam tried to be empathetic to Juliet’s plight. He wanted to see the woman as something more than competition for his brother’s affection, but it was hard, much harder than he imagined. It might have been irrational, and more than a little bratty, but as much as he wanted Dean to be happy, he couldn’t help the little selfish part of him that wanted that happiness to stem from their family, from hunting, from being Sam’s big brother as it always had.

“It doesn’t matter now.”

“What did you do?” Sam fought the urge to let it drop, to rack up Juliet’s dismissal as an unforeseen blessing on his part.

“I told her to get the hell out of my house and not to look back.”

“Call me crazy, but a woman who cares about you getting upset when she thinks you have a terminal diagnosis seems a bit farfetched as a just cause for breaking up with her.”

“Breaking up?” Dean looked disgusted. “What are we in high school? So, we’ve been hooking up for a few months. It’s not like I’ve given her my class ring or changed my Facebook relationship status.”

“I’m just saying you’re upset, now is not the best time to be making rash decisions.” Sam wouldn’t let the voice that cheered this turn of events gain any ground. He loved Dean too much and knew as much as it pained him, Dean more than deserved a shot at normal.

“You mean while my best friend is dying?” Dean barked. “Because that’s what she said- that Caleb was dying.”

Sam frowned, not reconciling Dean’s proclamation with the woman he had met. “Are you sure that’s what she said?”

“Maybe not in so many words,” Dean admitted. “But I could see it on every inch of her face, in her eyes...her fucking eyes that were full of pity.”

Sam sighed. His brother, much like their father often mistook sympathy and attempts by concerned individuals to reach out as condescension and pity. "I'm sure she was hurting for you."

"I don't need her to hurt for me, Dr. Phil because Caleb's not dying. I told her as much, too. Told her I was going to fix it just like I fixed you."

Sam winced. "You told her about Cold Oak?"

"Damn right I did. Might as well lay all the cards on the table, right?" Dean took another swig of his beer. "She didn't look so understanding when I explained how your spinal cord was severed, how I sat with your corpse for days, and still fucking brought you back with a brief make-out session with that cross-roads demon."

"And what about what that deal cost you?" Sam held Dean's gaze, gauging what his brother was thinking, or what he was not thinking. He would not allow Dean to make such a sacrifice again, even for Caleb. "Did you tell her about that?"

"I told her about the deal, and that I spent forty years in Hell. I told her the only reason I was walking around was because one of God's angel's pulled me from the pit, only to stab me in the back a few times over since then."

Sam slid a hand through his hair, shooting an apologetic smile to the waitress who had showed up for the end of Dean's tirade. "We're running dialogue for a movie script."

"Sounds...interesting." She put two bar pies and two plates down, but seemed anxious to leave them to it. "Need anything else?"

"Just another plate." Sam nodded to his beer, knowing Ethan should be there any moment. "And three more of these."

"Sure thing."

Sam watched her walk away with another glance over her shoulder. He caught a glimpse of her thoughts as she walked away and pinched the bridge of his nose. She thought they were crazy. He could only imagine what Juliet believed.

"I trust she didn't take it so well."

"I didn't stick around to find out." Dean picked up a slice of pizza, just to drop it on his plate with a scowl of irritation. Any other time Sam knew his brother would have already inhaled half the slice. "I grabbed what I needed and hauled ass back to Louisville."

When Sam only continued to stare at him, Dean feigned a tight smile. “Look, I know you are all about this open line of communication thing these days, but can we please just drop the touchy feely talk for now. It’s killing what little appetite I have left.”

Sam wasn’t thrilled with leaving the conversation up in the air, but realized they would have miles of road to revisit the topic when they finally returned to Louisville. It was easier to grant Dean’s request when he picked up on the psychic twinge that let him know Ethan had just arrived.

“Only if you apologize to Ethan.”

Dean groaned, pantomiming a gagging reflex as he glanced towards the door. “God, it’s like being on the road with Oprah and Gayle.”

Sam picked up a piece of the pizza and grinned at his brother’s astute pop culture reference. “I’m sure Ethan has some advice he could give on the relationship front. Eli told me he was actually engaged a couple of times.”

“Fine.” Dean grabbed three more slices of pie and piled them on his plate as Ethan slid into the booth beside Sam. “I’ll do it.”

“What are you doing?” Ethan wasted no time in claiming a piece of the pizza for himself. “And should I be prepared to draw down?”

“I’m sorry I was an ass to you earlier.” Dean muttered, his appetite suddenly springing to life as he took an impossibly big bite of pizza, then another.

“And?” Sam quirked a brow at his brother, who rolled his eyes again, and pointed at his full mouth.

“It won’t happen again.” He mumbled through the wad of food. “Blah ,blah, blah.”

“I think that’s as good as it’s going to get.” Sam glanced at Ethan who was chewing with a grin on his face.

“Works for me.” The police detective shrugged. “But the pie and beer would have been sufficient, Corleone. What’s up with the high school girl drama and shit?”

Dean shook his head, washing down the food with a drink of his beer. He tipped the bottle at Sam. “Have you met my kid sister, Samantha?”

Ethan snorted. “We should hook her up with my sister, Eleanor.”

“You two are so funny.” Sam should have known better than try and play peacemaker with two Neanderthals. Still, the annoying teasing was preferable to his brother brooding and taking his

frustrations out on Ethan. “Maybe when your comedy routine is finished we can get back to business at hand, like the missing witch and The Trinity’s possible involvement.”

“Now you want to talk business.” Dean continued to eat. “I thought you were going to get Ethan to spill about his failed trips down the aisle.”

“Whoa, whoa, back up.” Ethan looked from Dean to Sam. “You said Sida was spotted here, nobody mentioned the crazy SEAL team, and who the hell told you I was ever engaged.”

“Your kid sister blabbed about your runaway groom routine.” Dean picked a pepperoni off his pizza and tossed it in his mouth.

“As for the Trinity,” Sam interrupted, hoping to not highlight his betrayal of Eli’s confidence. “Bub, the bartender mentioned a wicked scar on the suspect’s neck.”

“And you guys automatically thought Owen, the insane Knight?” Ethan snatched another piece of pizza, rapping the dripping strings of cheese around the end. “Caleb mentioned the Columbian neck tie courtesy of Walsh, but that’s kind of out of the blue, don’t you think? I mean what are the chances of them being tangled up with this coven business?”

Sam glanced from his brother to the police detective. “Once again, how long have you known us?”

“Damn.” Ethan put the pizza down, wiping his hands on his jeans before picking up his phone. “Only one way to be sure.”

Sam watched him pull up a file and hand the smartphone to Dean. “You can do the honors.” Ethan slipped out of the booth, letting Dean get out with a huff.

They watched as Dean talked to the bartender who studied the screen and then nodded his head. Ethan groaned as he stood to let Dean back in. “This sucks.”

“You’re the police detective and that’s all you’ve got?” Dean handed the phone back. “Hell, Bub did most of our work. I should make him a hunter.”

“This fucking sucks.” Ethan lifted his beer. “Better?”

“Some.” Dean shrugged.

“She had to drive here right?” The police detective didn’t wait for an answer. “I checked in with the local pd. A 2007 green Toyota Corolla is registered to her and hasn’t been impounded.”

“So it has to be around here or wherever she was staying.” Sam made the conclusion as he folded his piece of pizza.

Dean took his fourth slice, making up for the last few days. “Sorry, this is like a bad TV cop show. Where are the donuts?”

Ethan grabbed another slice of the fast disappearing pie. “This is *good* police work. And its soy lattes now.”

“We have to run around town looking for a green car?” Dean huffed.

“Pretty much- we should look around here first, then at the area motels and hotels. Of which there are only two.” Ethan pointed to himself. “Again-good police work.”

Sam swallowed the last of his dinner, but really didn’t taste it. “I’ll settle up the bill and meet you two outside.”

He watched Ethan take the remaining food on his plate as well as the last piece on the pan when Dean waved it off. “Let’s fight and make up more often, especially if Sam is going to cover the tab.”

Dean glanced at his brother, giving a half grin before following the detective. “So exactly how many diamond rings have you got stashed away, E?”

“Why? You hearing wedding bells, Winchester?”

Sam watched them go, enjoying the banter. Ethan was easy going, competent but not overly serious. He could match wits with Dean, and treated Sam as an equal. It seemed natural for them to partner up, if natural included a dark witch’s coven, an evil Triad and a sick Knight. Sam pulled his wallet from his pocket, feeling traitorous for the moment of introspection. There was no need for him to consider the worst case scenario. He tossed a couple of twenties on the table, knowing the sooner they found Sida’s killer, the sooner they could concentrate on finding a way to help Caleb.

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Dean tried to keep his head in the game and not let his mind stray to Louisville and Caleb. When you were a hunter, it was important to focus, because mistakes could get you killed. Still, he wanted to call the hospital, but knew he had nothing to offer but more bad news. Caleb would not take The Trinity’s involvement well, and Dean sure as hell wasn’t going to make matters worse for his best friend until he had more information.

As he drove the Impala he kept on the lookout for a green Toyota Corolla matching the plate number Ethan had given him. Sam and Ethan were also keeping watch without much luck until they came to the The Village Hotel. There was Sida’s car parked in the lot.



It was an upscale place, stucco three floor building and the name written in a fancy font that made it difficult to read. They parked next to the car; Sam and Ethan carefully looked around, blocked the view as Dean opened the car with a jimmy and quickly disarmed the alarm.

“I’m going to talk to the hotel clerk and get a room number while you two go over the car,” Ethan said once Dean was inside the vehicle. “Don’t forget to wear the gloves.”

Dean rolled his eyes, but slipped on the black latex gloves Ethan had produced from his back pocket. He and Sam had already gotten a lecture on crime scene processing.

“Find anything?” Sam was leaning against the vehicle, trying to make them less conspicuous.

“Nothing in here.” Dean slid out of the back seat, taking off the gloves. “Smells like herbs and shit, but other than a couple of CD’s and a few hair clips it’s clean as a whistle.”

“Jess’s car was always clean, smelled like the beach.”

Dean glanced at his brother. “Juliet’s Honda is a rolling trash heap. Water bottles everywhere, books, hiking boots, barn boots, waders. It smells like wet dog and new car air freshener, not to mention the fur- lots and lots of fur.”

Sam raised a brow. “Guess you don’t have to worry about that anymore.”

Dean picked up the smug tone in his brother’s statement. Sam thought Dean had just revealed something important with his mention of Juliet. “Just pointing out one more reason it would have never worked. No dogs allowed in the Impala.”

“Sure, Dean.”

Dean didn’t a chance to respond as Ethan jogged back to them. “She’s a regular here. They have her credit card on file. Room Number 302.”

“Is this a rendezvous point for her and someone else?” Sam asked as they made their way to the building.

“You mean her and her hook up?” Dean said, not stating that he thought the boyfriend could be Owen. There were two sets of outdoor stairs. They took the ones in the far corner to the top floor.

“What is the coven going to accept as a good answer?” Ethan held up the key card to the room.

Dean rubbed a hand down his face. The answer the coven was looking for was that Sida was alive and well. He would have to break the news to them, and according to Josh, tread carefully. “Nothing we’ve got to say so far. Go ahead, Crockett.”

Ethan checked the door frame before swiping the key card. “No signs of forced entry.” He thumbed the Do Not Disturb that was hanging off the doorknob.

“It was someone she knew-if this is where the murder took place,” Sam added, gesturing that Dean should go in before him. They stepped into the room, which had been updated within the last 5 years with its beige rug with slight pattern running through, neutral wallpaper, king size bed, white sheets and flat screen television.

“Maybe not.” Ethan shut the door, lifting the door chain. “It’s broken.”

Sam headed to bathroom while Dean and Ethan focused on the bedroom. Sam called out from the bathroom. “Shower curtain’s gone.”

Dean exhaled loudly. Owen, had more than likely overpowered Sida, then wrapped the body in the shower curtain. The room was clean. They found Sida’s overnight bag partially unpacked with some clothes in one of the draws. “He cleaned up after himself.”

Ethan did a turn around the room. He shook his head. “Damn, I know I read their files, but I still thought when you guys said they were *professionals* that you were pulling shit out of the air, but what the fuck have you gotten involved with?”

“Us?” Dean looked at his brother with disbelief. He had too much on his plate and didn’t need one of his hunters accusing him of bringing trouble to their door. “The Trinity got thrown at us. It’s not like we met them at a rave and decided to become besties.”

“What should we do next?” Sam interrupted, shooting Dean a look that said there was enough tension in the room.

“She’s dead. I’ll tell the motel clerk to stop charging her card and you may want to start practicing what you’re going to say to the coven.” Ethan looked back. “I’m going to report it as a crime scene, although I’m sure they won’t find anything. At least they’ll collect her things and process them so they can be claimed with the body.”

Dean paused as he watched Ethan leave the room. “Is he saying we’re screwed?”

Sam nodded grimly. “That’s definitely what I heard.”

“Great.” Dean rubbed a hand down his mouth. “The good news just keeps coming.”

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Going to see the coven with an invitation was a much different experience. They went through the front door, albeit one with a long driveway in the middle of nowhere. There was still a welcoming committee, but this was smaller, not one to show a position of strength and the hoods and capes were missing. Lawrence was there to greet them, waving away the witch enforcers

except for one. The rest remained outside the room and Lawrence led the way to a dining area in a well-appointed house. Lawrence shut the pocket doors giving them privacy.

“Do you want us start with the good news or the bad news?” Dean asked, pulling a wooden chair out and unceremoniously dropping into it. When he didn’t receive an answer right away he replied to his own question. “We found her. She’s dead.”

Lawrence remained silent. Dean jutted his chin at Sam and his brother continued. “She’s at a town a few hours away. It wasn’t a natural death.” Sam cleared his throat. “Did she have any enemies?”

This time Lawrence did answer, though visibly shaken. “There are those who were jealous of her abilities, but there are no enemies that would do this and face the repercussions of this covenant.”

“Of course there are always hunters,” said the other witch in the room.

“Screw this.” Dean started to get up. He had better things to do, like being there for Caleb. He’d been forced to tell Caleb about Sida and Owen’s apparent connection on the way over. To say The Knight was concerned about the recent turn of events was a gross understatement.

Ethan, sitting next to him, put a hand on his chest to keep him seated. “Correct me if I’m wrong, but you asked for our help.”

“Your Guardian owed us,” the other witch was still standing, showing a position of power.

“Erich, that is enough.” Lawrence snapped his fingers, motioning for his associate to back off before facing Dean once more. “Do you know anything else?”

“I know you need to keep a muzzle on him,” Dean warned taking a moment of silence to get his point across. He then focused on Lawrence. “There was a man involved. Did Sida have a boyfriend?”

“I wouldn’t know. . .” Lawrence spared a glance to Erich who shook his head.

“Now, you’re quiet,” Ethan grumbled.

Sam leaned forward across the table. “Is there someone that would know?”

“Bring Marta,” Lawrence ordered.

Dean leaned in closer to Ethan and Sam. “That’s the BFF,” he whispered.

Marta gave Dean a nod of greeting, taking a seat at the table with a look of uncertainty and dread. “Did you find her?”

Dean remembered her from the hospital, her impassioned plea about her friend. Dean shook his head. "I'm sorry. She's dead." He tried to soften the blow. He knew what it was like to have a best friend.

"I knew she was gone...I felt her absence." Marta's eyes welled with tears; her voice grew husky with unchecked emotion as she clutched a crystal around her neck. "I didn't want to believe it, even after we tried the scrying spell with my amulet."

"Someone murdered her," Sam spoke. "We're hoping you could tell us if she had a boyfriend?"

Marta wiped at her eyes, nodding. "She's seeing someone."

"Marta if you know who this man was..." Lawrence started.

"He was a hunter," she choked out.

"A hunter?" Erich snarled. "One of them? That's not possible."

"Whoa there. Muzzle it. The Brotherhood has not been around these parts, and I know everything that goes on with *my hunters*." Dean understood exactly what Joshua was trying to warn him about.

"Do you have a name?" Sam prompted, but when she didn't reply he added, "Is it Owen?"

She shook her head, wiping the tears on her face. "No, Regan."

That caught Dean off-guard. "As in Regan Walsh, head of the Trinity?"

She nodded. "For awhile now."

"I thought you said it was Owen. . ." Ethan covered his mouth and leaned into Dean.

"I think you need to see what happened to your friend." Sam interrupted, and Dean frowned wondering what his brother was up to. He reached for the folder on the table, opened it and slid the pictures to her. "Someone did this to your best friend. Was she meeting Regan Walsh?"

Marta covered her mouth and gagged for a moment, pushing the pictures away from her, but they didn't go far. "He was just supposed to talk to her..."

"Marta, who was supposed to talk to Cressida?" Lawrence boomed, while Erich moved in closer to Marta, sensing something was amiss.

Her eyes were wet, and she blushed with either heat or embarrassment. "Romance between hunter and witch is forbidden. It has always been taught. Cressida was letting her passion rule her head with Regan. She was groomed for this position, born to it because of her abilities. I told

her she was a fool for risking everything. Owen came to me- he said that his Guardian was distracted . . .he understood my concerns because he shared the same for his friend.”

“So you hatched a plan to kill her?” Ethan said, obviously disgusted with what he heard.  
“Accessory to first degree murder, and your best friend no less-“

“No!” Marta stood up, but Erich forced her back down. “It wasn’t like that. He was supposed to talk to her. He promised he could convince her to do what was best for both her and Regan. I arranged for her to meet him at the place she usually went to with Regan- I told her he had left a message with me, which sometimes was the case.”

“But there was no message?” Sam led, sounding much like the lawyer Dean knew he’d someday be. “You unknowingly plotted with Owen to get Sida away from the safety of her coven, and out in the open where he could ambush her.”

“No. I only wanted to help her.”

“It didn’t go quite as you expected.” Dean growled, not understanding why or how Marta could have betrayed her best friend. “Why the fuck would you think that Owen was the man to talk to your friend?”

“I thought he was an honorable man, one who wanted what was best for Regan.” She kept her eyes on the table, her hand tightly clutching her necklace. “He understood what it was like for me. I’ve spent my life taking care of Sida, supporting her, helping her. I just wanted her to realize her place, what she was risking by taking up with a hunter.”

Ethan leaned back in his chair. “I hear it all the time—women think they see a different side of the bad boy.”

“He just isn’t bad. He’s evil.” Dean fought off a chill as he thought of their meeting and Owen’s sadistic behavior.

“A hunter did this.” Lawrence rubbed his chin.

“Good hunters,” Dean pointed to himself, Sam and Ethan. “Crazy, fucked up, bad hunter,” he pointed to the pictures. “There is a difference.”

“A hunter is a hunter.” Erich put both his hands on Marta’s shoulders in a gesture that had nothing to do with comfort. “Witches know better than to trust anything anyone of you does or says.”

“I would never hurt her.” Marta was crying outright now, her whole body shaking. “She was so excited, expecting a surprise from Regan for doing as he asked and healing you.”

“Whoah...” Dean stood up and planted his hands on the table, forcing her to snap out of her building hysteria. “What the hell do you mean for healing me?”

“It was Reagan’s idea. He told Sida you would come to her and ask for refuge and that she should agree, do what you asked.”

Sam put a hand on Dean’s shoulder. “Their psychic Jonah must have seen it.”

“What the girl is saying makes sense.” Lawrence frowned at Marta. “We would never have allowed hunters on our land, let alone used our craft for you if Sida had not requested it, ordered it, in fact.”

“Little did she know that favor was going to involve finding her dead body.” Ethan snorted.

“Now you see why I did it, right? She was letting Regan make decisions that affected our coven,” Marta cried, looking from Lawrence to the visiting hunters. “I only wanted to help her, to make her see. You have to believe me.”

“What I believe is you got your best friend murdered.” Dean no longer felt any pity towards the woman or for Sida, who had helped him for far more nefarious reasons than a future favor. The Trinity needed to be stopped. There had been perpetual bad news since they had come on the scene. Dean was channeling all his hate for his inability to help Caleb at the Trinity. He looked to Lawrence. “We’ll take care of Owen and Walsh.”

“What do you want to do about the girl?” Sam asked. “Ethan can take her into custody.”

“Like you, we’ll take care of our own,” Lawrence announced. Erich had a firm grip on Marta’s arm, causing her to wince.

“Boss?” Ethan asked, ignoring Lawrence. The hunter was only going to recognize Dean as the authority.

“Leave her out of it.” Dean gave Ethan a nod. “I’m sure whatever they have planned will be worse than jail.” Dean started for the door, but Marta’s voice stopped him.

“Wait, please, tell me one more thing,” Marta choked. “Did you find her crystal?”

Dean faced the crying woman. “What crystal?”

Marta held up the icy blue stone around her neck. “It’s the sister stone to mine. She would have never willingly taken it off.”

Dean looked to Ethan. “There was no mention of it in the coroner’s report.”

“She could have lost it in the river.” Dean pinned Marta with a hard look. “That’s where he dumped Sida’s body after he snapped her neck.”

“That’s not likely,” Lawrence spoke for Marta who had dropped her gaze to the floor. “A witch’s amulet is enchanted, a very powerful object similar to your hunter’s ring.”

Dean glanced at Ethan. “Sounds like something a sick sadistic fuck might keep for a memento.”

“It could be crucial evidence to convict him.”

Dean hoped the look he gave Ethan made sure the detective realized there would be no need for taxpayer’s money to be spent on a lengthy trial. Dean might not have been able to kill Owen outright, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t lock him away in a prison of his own devising. He nodded to Lawrence. “If we happen to find it, we’ll make sure it’s returned to you.”

“Take Marta’s.” Lawrence didn’t give the woman a chance to resist as he reached for the crystal, snapping the chain from around her neck. Lawrence had just made his first executive decision as Sida’s successor. “They’re connected and one will recognize the other.”

Dean took the broken chain and pendant, feeling a jolt of electricity in his hunter’s ring when his hand brushed over the crystal. He recognized the flash of grief in Marta’s eyes as she watched him put the stone in his pocket. It was another loss, not a sister or a best friend, but that of her coven, and Dean couldn’t help but to think of Caleb. It gave him the resolve to walk away without so much as a glance back.

“So what now?” Sam asked as he and Ethan followed Dean out of the house.

“Now we hunt for Owen before his trail goes completely cold.” Dean wanted nothing more than to say they were going home, back to Louisville to figure out the best way to help Caleb. Marta’s revelation about Regan Walsh made that impossible. The man was after something, something that had little to do with witches. Sida might have been found, but her killer was still out there, more clear and present danger to The Brotherhood than ever before.

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## NEXT PART

Joshua braced himself, taking a moment to gather his wits and recover his game face before entering the hospital room where he had spent the majority of his time over the last few weeks. Despite his mother and grandmother's attempt to make the space feel a bit homier, the area still smelled of sickness and desperation. It called to mind Joshua's own brush with death, the weeks he spent in ICU after Ruby's attack left him near death. The women were behaving similarly to that time as well, which left Joshua both humbled by their untiring spirits and slightly jealous he was not the only man in their lives these days deserving of their benevolent mothering. He was not in the least surprised to find that his wife also seemed to share Jocelyn and Esme's determination to lavish the current patient with care.

"Here you are." He hoped his voice held none of the irritation he felt as both Carolyn and Caleb turned to regard him as he entered and made his way across the room. Carolyn's smile showed he was successful at least on her part, but his stepbrother's smirk hinted that compromised psychic ability or not, Caleb was well aware of the limits to Joshua's willingness to share certain women in his life. Joshua met and held Carolyn's gaze, worried his face would also betray him to Caleb. It was not easy to look at The Knight these days and not feel bad for him, although Caleb looked better than he had yesterday. The first forty eight hours after one of Griffin's treatments proved to be the worst, with the patient rebounding some on the third before the process started all over again. "Mother and the others are waiting for you in the lobby. It seems Cullen will be treating the women to dinner, leaving the rest of us to suffer the hospital's cuisine."

"That was my idea," Caleb said proudly. Joshua wondered at the man's audacity as he kept his hand prominently displayed on Carolyn's protruding belly. It might have been misconstrued as an intimate gesture, if not for the dreary setting and the two's divergent countenances. Caleb had become the embodiment of sickness over a short fourteen days, Carolyn blossomed into the image of radiant health, her glow boasting a promise of a future Caleb could not count on. "Granddad assured me he would take them someplace worthy of their combined beauty since I'm laid up at the moment. I asked Mac and Griffin to give me a free pass, but they both vetoed the idea."

"That's probably for the best. The last I heard Bobby had invited himself along, so your presence would not have been welcome. I fear anything requiring a jacket and tie may also be out of the question." Joshua doubted Caleb could have made it out of the bed even if his doctors had allowed him the night out. Griffin's treatment regime might have been taking its time in showing positive results in slowing the growth, but it had made quick strides in decimating everything else in its wake, mainly Caleb.

"Good thing Louisville has some amazing burger places." Caleb looked at Carolyn and then down at his hand. "Considering the way this kid is kicking, he's primed for a half pound of aged angus."

"He?" Joshua quirked a brow at his wife, whose face pinked at his silent question. They had agreed to share the sex of the baby with a select few. Caleb was most definitely not one of the few considering his ongoing campaign for godfather status.

"Caleb is convinced I'm carrying a boy, quite possibly the next Knight of The Brotherhood." Her tone was at once completely reverent and slightly teasing, but Joshua could tell the news pleased her even though her latest ultrasound had assured them they were indeed having a son. Joshua was quite certain Caleb was grasping at straws, but played along.

He tapped The Knight's foot as he took a seat on the edge of the bed. "Have you had another great psychic revelation like when you announced to the world Carolyn was pregnant?"



Caleb was not thwarted by Joshua's attempts to subtly remind his wife she was furious with The Knight only a few short months before, though he did slide his hand from beneath Carolyn's and away from her person. "My senses tell me this one is strong with the force, which obviously means Knightly abilities skip a generation with the males in your family."

Joshua opened his mouth to reply, Carolyn's quick reflexes and slight squeeze on his hand stopping his typical rebuke. He would revisit the slight when his wife was safely on her way to dinner. He had followed Dean's gag order the first few days, but then found exchanging barbs with The Knight in their typical form seemed to take the patient's mind off his misery better than placating his every whim as The Guardian had requested.

"Funny you should mention Joshua's grandfather, because we're going to name the baby Maxim, I mean *if* it's a boy, which we're not at all sure it will be." Carolyn rushed to add, proving herself the terrible deceiver Joshua knew her to be. "Though I really hope you're right about the sex-a boy would be wonderful."

"Well, sex is something I know all about." Caleb winked at Joshua.

"We'll call her Jocelyn if it's a girl." Joshua kept his forced smile in place. "After my grandmother."

Caleb turned his gaze to Carolyn. "Let's just pray that if you guys ever do have a girl she gets her mother's looks, and only Jocelyn's and Esme's genes."

"I don't know." Carolyn turned to study Joshua, smiling at him before looking to Caleb once more. "I rather hope our children have Joshua's eyes-they're the loveliest shade of cornflower-and of course his smile."

"Joshua smiles?" Caleb feigned shock.

"On occasion." Carolyn nodded seriously.

"On the occasion I'm away from troublesome irritating people intent on instigating and courting my less flattering side."

"I'm not buying that you have any other side, Josh. We'll just keep our fingers crossed that Max has his Uncle Caleb's personality," Caleb added. "Which is entirely possible if Pastor Jim was right about children being more a product of their environment than their DNA."

"Something we will not have to worry about considering the unlikelihood of you being around *Maxim*..."

Joshua was not allowed to continue his thought, which he was convinced would not have sounded half as bad if Carolyn's gasp and scowl of disbelief not interrupted him. "Joshua Perseus Sawyer!"

"What...I didn't mean...."

"Perseus?" Caleb laughed out loud, sparing Joshua the stumbling apology. It was a real laugh, one Joshua had not heard since Dean and Sam left. He would never admit it was almost worth the current embarrassment and future ridicule he was sure to endure over his misfortunate middle name. "You can't be serious? No wonder you stuck with just the 'P' on all your business cards."

"I'll have you know Perseus was the original Greek hero. He slayed Medusa and formed Mycenae." Joshua's declaration only earned more laughter from the patient, Carolyn's traitorous giggles joining in.

"That had to be Harland's idea," Caleb surmised correctly.

"Obviously." Joshua harrumphed and Carolyn tried to control herself.

"Esme barely talked him out of Zeus," she confided, a betrayal Joshua chose to believe was meant to make matters better for him, however unsuccessful. "Perseus was their best compromise."

"Kids made fun of you, didn't they?" Caleb coughed, his eyes watering from the strain. "I know I sure as hell would have."

Joshua went around to the nightstand and poured a glass of water from the pitcher, which he offered to The Knight. Caleb's trembling hand and the wince of pain his effort to swallow elicited had Joshua confessing the rest. "Only because I insisted on being called Percy until age seven until I realized my father's stories of grandeur were only that-stories. I was no more a hero than he was."

"Oh, please stop." Caleb handed him the cup back after managing a small sip. "It hurts too much to laugh."

"As if you hadn't at some point wished your middle name to be **d'Artagnan** or perhaps Galahad."

"Promise me you'll give Max a decent middle name, Carolyn." Caleb turned to Joshua's wife ignoring Joshua's jab. "Caleb for instance."

"Caleb is a great name, from The Bible, just like Joshua," Carolyn said, her hand finding Caleb's once more. Her smile disappeared and Joshua caught the telltale sign she was close to crying as her lower lip trembled. She clamped her teeth over it, biting down to bolster her resolve, ensure her brave face. "They were men of great faith, holding onto hope even when everyone else around them had given up."

It was an admirable attempt on Carolyn's part to erase any harm Joshua's misconstrued comment might have caused to Caleb's attitude. He doubted she realized her breaking voice and tear-filled

eyes were by far more telling of Caleb's likelihood of recovery than Joshua's poor choice of phrasing. To Caleb's credit he covered brilliantly.

He smiled coyly at Carolyn. "So, I'm a shoe in for namesake *and* godfather?"

Pity-invoking patient be damned, Joshua would not let his tenderhearted wife lock them into such a promise. He tapped his watch. "Shouldn't you be going, Carolyn? Bobby will be regaling the ladies with his twisted idea of charm in the limo by now. I'm not comfortable leaving him with my grandmother for very long."

"Especially considering Jocelyn's preference for younger men," Caleb said.

"My grandmother's fawning over you has nothing to do with your charm or perceived irresistible sexuality. She sees you as she would me."

"Like a grandson-I know." Caleb's grin widened, all too pleased that Joshua's attempt to make clear his grandmother's hovering had offered him another opportunity to rub in how the women in Joshua's family had went above and beyond the call of duty to be at his beck and call. At least the familiar cocky attitude momentarily overshadowed the fact Caleb barely resembled himself. "A *favorite* grandson, I'd say. What do you think, Carolyn?"

"I think I should get going." Carolyn wisely took her leave before the two men could be drawn into a battle over who was or was not Jocelyn's favorite grandchild. She eased herself off the bed and turned to take her purse. "Do you need anything before I go?"

"Well..." Caleb started.

"He's fine," Joshua interrupted The Knight. He took his wife's arm and escorted her to the door. "I am quite capable of attending to the patient, and if not, there is an entire bevy of nurses all too willing to assist in my efforts."

Carolyn rose to her tiptoes, giving him a quick kiss. Her lips were warm against his cheek as she breathed a, "be nice to him," before attempting to go on her way.

Joshua tugged her to him once more, leaning down to respond in kind. He brushed his mouth against her ear, inhaling the familiar scent of her hyacinth and jasmine shampoo, an organic blend from his mother's shop. Whispering his reply gave him the chance to keep her close, to feel the presence of their unborn son pressed between them-a treasured reminder of life in the midst of this dreadful place. "I promise to try my best."

She stepped back with a smile, her hand pressing against Joshua's cheek. "Max and I know you can do it." Carolyn waved at Caleb, squeezed Joshua's hand once more and she was gone.

"You can go with her, you know." Caleb was watching him when he turned from the door, all traces of humor vanished. The dark circles beneath his eyes made his drug glazed gaze more

haunting. Stark planes and angles of his face, already sharper from the rapid weight loss, seemed to stand out in relief, straining against drawn, pale skin. Joshua had encountered zombies with more color.

“And spoil Cullen and Bobby’s fun? I would never hear the end of it.” Joshua returned to Caleb’s side, taking the chair by the bed this time. He picked up the morning copy of The New York Times. He assumed Cullen had left the paper along with The Wall Street Journal and The Village Voice, which was obviously for Caleb along with the varied architectural magazines. The eldest Ames had arrived the day Dean and Sam had left, proving his dedication to his grandson by renting out a suite at 21C Museum Hotel nearby. “Besides, she would be disappointed if I didn’t stay and keep you entertained. This is buying me husband brownie points.”

“Of which I’m sure you need many, but I can handle being alone, in fact it would be a nice change.” Caleb frowned as he shifted on the bed. It seemed to Joshua the younger hunter was having a hard time getting comfortable in a body that probably now seemed somewhat foreign to him. He’d watched Carolyn’s frustration as she went through a similar struggle over the last few months. “I’ll tell her you were a faithful companion, just go run an errand or grab some coffee.”

“I’d rather not deceive my wife.” Joshua noted Caleb’s voice had lost the strength he’d no doubt managed for Carolyn’s benefit and he, for lack of a better word, appeared to wilt and withdraw without an audience that demanded a certain performance.

Caleb sighed, his gaze turning pleading as he regarded Joshua. “Honestly, all the hovering and mothering is really starting to freak me out.”

“I believe some women have a specific gene that requires them to make a fuss when someone they care for is sick.” Joshua hadn’t considered that the overwhelming attention might be unpleasant for Caleb, or that the younger hunter wasn’t thoroughly taking advantage of one of the very few perks of his situation. He supposed the Knight, although the consummate ladies’s man wasn’t exactly used to women being a fixture in his life. Joshua’s mother, grandmother, and wife were not the only culprits. Missouri had made an appearance, as well as Dean’s lady friend, Juliet.

“I was talking about Bobby.” Caleb gave him a crooked grin. “The women, I don’t mind. Did you ever notice your mom smells like vanilla and honey?”

“Right.” Joshua folded the paper, finding the entertainment section. He would ignore the comment about his mother, remembering Carolyn’s belief that he could be kind. “Bobby at his surly best is hard to handle in large doses, but this new maternal side is quite unsettling. I can understand why you’re disturbed, but I can assure you I will not be falling over myself to comfort you.”

“Bobby smells like axel grease, gun powder and Old Spice.”

Joshua nodded, skimming an article that read more like a well-plotted character assassination. It was on a potential client he had turned away a few months before. For once he silently gave thanks for having a pregnant wife to consider as well as being at a trouble prone Triad’s beck and call. He finished the article with a shake of his head, tuning back into Caleb’s lament.

“I mean the guy’s dug bullets out of me and put stitches in my head with not much more than a muttered ‘suck it up, Junior’, but now he’s falling over himself to cater my ever need, treating me like I’m made of glass. It’s pissing me off.”

“Perhaps Mackland has allowed him to sit in on one too many consultations about your progress, or more than likely he’s bugged the doctor’s office and learned more than he needed to know.” Joshua chose not to think about the private consultation he’d been privy to earlier in the day. He blamed Dean. Griffin had asked him to leave, but considering his promise to The Guardian, Joshua had excused himself only to the far side of the room, leaving him in ear shot of the grim news.

“I don’t know and I don’t care, but last night was the last straw. He offered to fluff my fucking pillow.”

Joshua glanced up from the paper, trying for some levity. “And did you allow him to play nursemaid? Perhaps feeding you a pudding cup as I have seen you request from some of the younger, more attractive hospital staff, as well as Dean’s new lady friend, would have made him feel better?”

“Hell no. I told him to just fucking smother me with the damn thing instead, end my suffering once and for all.”

Joshua highly doubted Bobby found Caleb’s poor humor so easy to stomach in light of the current situation. Of course he couldn’t be certain that The Knight had been joking. He put the paper down. “I imagine Bobby’s out of sorts at not being able to pull some magical answer for you out of his many books. There’s nothing for him to hunt down and kill. He’s completely out of his element, and as you know helpless is not something men in our profession deal with well.”

“When he’s not hovering over me, his nose is buried in the computer.” Caleb flexed his hand with the I.V., his frown deepening. “Like there’s still something out there we’ve missed. Between Bobby and Mac they have both medical and supernatural fronts covered. I wish they’d just let it go.”

“Surely you don’t mean that.” Joshua refolded the paper, placing it on the wheeled food cart that had become more of a mini library since Caleb had been unable to eat. He ran a hand down the front of the polo he was wearing; missing the tie he usually wore and fiddled with when he had

nothing better to do with his hands. “Of course you understand they’re terrified they’re going to lose you.”

Caleb didn’t look at him; instead he turned to stare at the silver framed photograph sitting on the nightstand by his bed. It was a shot of The Triad sporting tuxes from the day of Joshua and Carolyn’s wedding, though Dean’s bowtie was undone, dangling from his neck. All three looked happy, relaxed-most definitely a rarity. Joshua wondered if there would be any other photo opportunities to capture his Triad in such a state.

When Caleb spoke again, his voice was rough, weary. “I understand we’ve all lost enough people for a few lifetimes.”

Joshua looked at his hands, the silver band on his right hand, and then the gold on his left. He felt guilty for quickly agreeing when he, unlike Caleb, had been so incredibly fortunate not to lose anyone he loved. Even his grandfather’s death had occurred at such a young age that he didn’t remember the ache of his farewell. Gideon had been more acquaintance than friend, and Joshua although respectful and fond of Pastor Jim, understood the former Guardian’s death had not taken even a modicum of the toll on him that it did his Triad.

Unfortunately, it was all too easy for Joshua to envision what such grief would feel like now that he had allowed so many people past his defenses, now that he had a wife and child to consider. His son was not even born, still somewhat of an abstract idea despite the fact Joshua had heard his heartbeat, witnessed his in-utero acrobatics with more than a touch of awe. Yet, Joshua could already imagine the sharp knife of that loss, the severing of connection between father and son. His mother called it the double-edged sword of parenthood, a fear so tangible that it could just as easily be the physical presence of a piercing blade poised over one’s heart always threatening to strike a killing blow. Joshua could not help to wonder if he had not been insane for putting himself at such risk.

He licked his lips, choosing his words carefully. “We humans are extremely determined to hold onto what we love the most, motivated to protect ourselves from harm.”

He was afraid Caleb might call him on the fact he had no right to speak of such things, but the look The Knight gave him was not one of accusation. Instead, it held all too much understanding and empathy.

“Have you heard from Dean?”

Joshua looked at his watch, then to the phone on by the bed. Mackland had instructed the calls be rerouted, going so far as to make that a mandate for Caleb’s cell also. “Not today.”

“Have they missed check in?”

“There’s still time.” Joshua kept his voice casual, though he was beginning to worry himself. Dean had called every morning since he’d been gone, talking to Caleb when possible, badgering whomever was unlucky enough to pick up Caleb’s cell when The Knight was too sick to speak. For the last few days since Mackland’s underhanded move, all calls had been rerouted to Joshua’s cell, which showed no new or missed calls. “I talked with Elijah earlier, who had spoken with Ethan this morning. They’re all fine.”

“Forget the fucking phone tree.” Caleb pushed himself up straighter. “Dean would have called me.”

“I’m sure he would have only that Mackland asked him not to do so.” Joshua pinched the bridge of his nose, hating being messenger boy. He would spare Caleb from Dean’s colorful reply, one that was shouted loudly enough for everyone in the waiting room to hear over the small phone. The Guardian’s refusal to comply prompted Doctor Mackland Ames to take matters into his own hands, making what he saw as the best decision for his patient. Joshua feared the Guardian and former Scholar would not be on good terms when Dean returned.

“Excuse me?” Caleb looked suddenly very capable of getting out of bed so much so that Joshua stood, inching his way towards the patient just in case. “Dad told Dean not to call me? When? Why?”

“Three days ago. He didn’t want you disturbed unless there was an emergency.”

“An emergency? The bizzarro Trinity roaming about murdering witches in their wake to some unknown end isn’t an emergency?”

“Not compared to his son dying, no, I imagine not.” Joshua hadn’t actually meant to say that out loud, but he was thankful the words seemed to have a sobering effect on Caleb, or at least so he thought.

“Wait.” Caleb shook his head. “Three days? I haven’t talked to Deuce in three days?”

Joshua sighed. “Your fever was extremely high after the last treatment. You were in a great deal of pain and very confused...”

“I don’t remember.” Caleb rubbed his eyes. “Just one more fucking thing I can’t remember.”

Joshua looked away. He didn’t think anyone expected The Knight to lose vital chunks of information, or at least misplace them for a period of time-like the fact Dean was now The Guardian, and not some vulnerable teen out on a hunt with his baby brother, or that John Winchester was dead, had been for years, and would not be coming to his protégé’s aide when he asked for him. There was a reason Mackland was being protective, having to be the one time and again to break bad news to his son.

"I assure you I talked with Dean yesterday. He was frustrated that Owen had once again eluded them but he told me to tell you that he was handling things." Joshua's mouth twitched. "And that you owed him, I believe his exact words were, 'a couple of honking big steaks and a trip to fucking Fenway Park for having to put up with Sonny Crockett's shenanigans.'"

Caleb snorted. "Deuce said 'shenanigans'?"

"Something along those lines."

Caleb sighed, either resigned to the fact he would have to rely on secondhand information or just too tired to continue being angry. "What do you think about this thing with Sida and Owen?"

They had covered this ground before, but Joshua was not about to shed light on the fact Caleb had asked the same question a week before. "I think it could be a PR nightmare for The Brotherhood and the covens, and paint Dean in a poor light."

"But Owen isn't involved with The Brotherhood. Dean can't be held responsible for his actions."

"Owen's a hunter. Sida was a witch." Joshua had gone over this many times. Adam was in agreement. The covens in their trust would not be soothed by the fact Owen was from another faction of hunters, or that Sida was not a trusted member of their circle.

"A very bad witch," Caleb pointed out, as he had done every time he and Joshua went around the subject.

"A witch still the same."

"Damn." Caleb held his head, a grimace of pain twisting his face. He gripped a fistful of sheet, inhaling sharply. "This fucking sucks."

Joshua wasn't sure if he was talking about the mess they were facing thanks to Reagan Walsh's Knight or the fact he was obviously hurting.

"Should I call a nurse?" Joshua reached for the call button, but Caleb's fierce gaze stopped him.

"NO!" Caleb shook his head, his eyes watering as the movement must have made matters worse. "I don't want any more pain medicine, at least not until I talk to Dean."

"Do you really think that's wise?" Joshua returned his hand to his side, glancing to one of the many monitors that was recording Caleb's vitals as he tried to remember exactly when the nurse had come with Caleb's last round of painkiller. Several had started beeping, registering the fact the patient's heart rate and blood pressure had picked up.

"Probably not." Caleb continued to take measured breaths, but kept his white-knuckled grip on the sheets. "But I need to talk to him."



“Yet you were the one who insisted he continue to follow Owen’s trail, even after they lost him in Florida. Or is that something you have also forgotten?” Joshua felt his irritation flair, not sure if his ire was for Dean’s continued absence, or the stubborn man before him who had yet to remedy it by merely muttering the three magic words that would bring The Guardian running. If Dean understood Caleb needed him there, no amount of supernatural mayhem would keep him away.

“I fucking know what I said.” Caleb released his hold on the blankets, his jaw relaxing, registering the fact the pain had momentarily abated. “He had a job to do, damn it, like you said, this could reflect badly on his leadership. He has to put The Brotherhood first.”

Joshua rolled his eyes, a bad habit he blamed on the Winchesters and Caleb. “I truly doubt your concerns for PR is what drove you to insist Dean and Sam stay on the road.”

“Whether you believe it or not, I want Sam and Dean here.”

“That fact is quite evident by your calling out for them when Griffin’s drug runs its course, or whilst in the throes of your countless nightmares.” Joshua decided there was no need to start pulling punches now. The Knight’s self sacrifice routine fueled his irritation. He wasn’t quite convinced it was a purely noble gesture.

“Way to use a guy’s subconscious against him, Josh.” Caleb pressed his head against the pillow, closing his eyes for a moment. “I thought Carolyn told you to be nice.”

“I was under the impression that coddling was not what you wanted.”

“Coddling no.” Caleb cracked one eye open to look at him. “But a little less kicking a guy while he’s down would be appreciated.”

“I’m not trying to make things harder on you. On the contrary, I’m trying to help.”

“By convincing me that I should ask Dean to come home.”

“Yes. You can’t keep them away forever.” Joshua pointed to Caleb’s left hand where his finger looked especially bare. He’d insisted Bobby hold onto his hunter’s ring for safekeeping, an act Joshua knew had been hard for both parties involved. “Nor will removing your band spare them your suffering. Merlin’s connection is not based on the silver itself.”

“Maybe not, but I can spare them this a little longer.” Caleb opened both eyes with a wince, using his hand free of the I.V. to gesture to his face. “If you haven’t noticed I’m beginning to look a whole hell of lot like some of the things we hunt?” He looked down at his hand, running his thumb over the tan line where his ring should have been. “Deuce may feel the need to put me out of my misery.”

“You have looked much better.”

Caleb frowned. "Thanks."

Joshua knew Caleb was wired to protect Dean and Sam Winchester. He'd grown up watching Reaves be molded by John Winchester. In the beginning Joshua had seen it as merely an attempt by Caleb to gain power in The Brotherhood, to seal his place as John's successor. It didn't take long for Joshua to realize that Caleb was desperate, but not for a coveted seat in The Triad. The only position he desired was one in a family. He wasn't nefarious or devious; he was a good man-possibly a much better man than Joshua, a fact Joshua was now ashamed to admit that at the time fueled his dislike of the younger hunter. Things were different now. Not only was Caleb a friend, he was also ironically a part of Joshua's family. It demanded he at least try and make him feel better. "On the bright side your hair is still intact. Griffin's word that his treatment would spare you that indignity has at least held true."

"There's that." Caleb snorted, not as impressed by Joshua's attempt at a positive spin as Joshua felt warranted. "Thank God for small miracles, right?"

"Drew tells me that the gaunt, vampire look is quite in this year." Joshua gestured to the issue of GQ and Italian Vogue his well-meaning assistant had sent. "Now you actually look like the starving artist type he finds quite attractive."

"Good to know I'm every gay man's fantasy."

"I wouldn't go that far. Drew is very shallow and you still have a terrible personality."

"So, will you call him for me?"

"Who?" Joshua arched a brow. "Drew?"

"No, damn it." Caleb growled. "Dean."

Joshua folded his arms over his chest, not willing to concede his earlier point no matter how far he'd let himself be drawn off topic. "On the condition you'll ask him to come back."

"I'm not going to do that." Caleb was just as adamant. "Not until they find Owen."

Joshua felt he had no choice but to play his trump card. "Is your insistence Dean and Sam stay on the road truly fueled by The Knight's sworn oath to uphold The Brotherhood, or is it driven by the fact you don't want to tell Dean you're considering stopping Griffin's treatment?"

"You heard that?" Caleb paled, though Joshua thought it impossible considering he blended with the stark white hospital sheets as it was.

"Yes."

"Then you also heard he can't pinpoint any marked success from the three rounds of his devil's brew. Even Griffin's beginning to think he's just killing me off quicker."

Joshua hated to admit the same thought had crossed his mind. “His confidence from before has seemed to wane.”

“The bastard’s pissed at me for not responding appropriately. He wanted this to work, for whatever reason, whether it was his ego or he hoped The Guardian would be in his debt. I thought I’d never say this, but I think he’s almost as upset as Mac is that things aren’t working out.”

“I highly doubt that.” Joshua might not be a father yet, but he had new insight to what losing a child would do to someone.

“You’re right, potential Pulitzer Prize at stake or not, the guy hates me. He’s secretly glad I’m dying.” Caleb blinked again, rubbing his eyes. “Mac, on the other hand, is not throwing in the towel. He’s pushing for me to try at least one more round, a stronger dose this time.”

“What do you think?” Joshua wondered if he was the first to ask Caleb that question since the ordeal had started.

“I think I’m tired, man. I think I don’t want to go out this like this.” Caleb swallowed hard. “I think...I just want to go home.”

Caleb’s candor caught Joshua off guard. He cleared his throat. “Home to New York?”

“No.” Caleb reached over and picked up the toy green dragon on his nightstand, turning the tiny statue over in his hand. “Home to the farm.”

Joshua had expected as much, but hearing out loud what equaled to Caleb’s throwing in the proverbial towel left him uncharacteristically without any words, inappropriate or otherwise.

“It wasn’t supposed to end this way, you know,” Caleb mused. “Belac was supposed to be around a lot longer to fight battles by Athewm’s side. Things were just getting fun.”

Caleb’s quiet declaration released Joshua from his temporary stupor, but he had to swallow the large lump at the back of his throat before he could speak. “I’m sure most people have those same thoughts when their time is unexpectedly cut short.”

Joshua wasn’t trying to be callous, though from Caleb’s face he could tell that remaining silent might have been the better choice.

“Yeah, but you see I thought I had a guarantee.”

“You mean your psychic ability?” Joshua forced himself to take a seat on the bed, his knees suddenly weak as if he’d just finished an adrenaline packed climb. He gestured to the toy Dean had left. “Or the fact that dragons are invincible?”

“No, every dragon meets his St. George. I meant James.” Caleb dropped the figurine, pressing his palms to his eyes. Joshua wasn’t sure if the pain had returned or their conversation was just as unpleasant for the patient as it was for him. “I was counting on James.”

“You mean the kid who accused me of sending him back here from the future?” However unexpected the change in topic offered Joshua a handhold, something to stop his decent into the emotional abyss that he could feel tugging at him.

Caleb lowered his hands, his gold gaze meeting Joshua’s. “I mean Dean’s kid.”

“I beg your pardon.” Joshua wondered if all the drugs hadn’t scrambled Caleb’s mind more than he first thought.

“James was Dean’s son, is Dean’s son-shit, *will be* his son.” Caleb gripped the sheets again, gritting his teeth. “However the hell the time continuum thing works.”

Joshua was certain Caleb didn’t have a fever, had seemed rational and lucid up until this very moment. “I can see how you might come to that conclusion considering he was quite obnoxious in a very familiar way but...”

“He told me who he was the night of the Barnwell Mansion fire when Dean was hurt. The kid panicked, let the cat out of the bag. I know what I’m talking about.”

“Still, you can’t be sure.” Joshua tried again, glancing to the monitors which had picked up Caleb’s elevated heart rate once more.

“I’m sure.” Caleb brought his hands to his head, squeezing his eyes shut as he slowly massaged his temples. “I could sense it after I knew what thread to look for. Families are connected, like how I can feel the link between you and Esme, Mac and Cullen, and Dean and Sam. The blood always tells.”

“And did you tell Dean about this?”

“No.” Caleb gave a small shake of his head, inhaling sharply with the movement. “I couldn’t risk it.”

Joshua could imagine the restraint it took for Caleb to withhold such a secret from his best friend. “So, I take it something James said made you believe that this isn’t the way your future worked out.”

“He said I was his godfather.” When Caleb opened his eyes they were brighter, brimming with a pain Joshua couldn’t quite discern as physical or emotional, quite possibly a barely tolerable combination of both. “That I trained him and the others. He said Dean, Sammy and I were the longest running Triad, just like I always knew we’d be. We just had to have faith.”

Joshua was not going to ask about the others of which Caleb spoke, or mention that it was probably unwise for Caleb to have ever put stock in what a time travelling hunter from a possible future might have told him. “I think maybe you should just try and relax, I’ll call Dean and then...”

“I wanted to meet those kids so damn bad.” Caleb closed his eyes again, his breath hitching. “Your son, too.”

“That’s still a possibility.” Joshua was regretting having started this particular conversation, assured he had somehow made Caleb’s condition worse. He should have just called Dean, as Caleb had asked, doctors orders be damned. Their discussion had taken a grossly different trajectory than what he had intended. He would later blame his misplaced guilt for the declaration he was about to make. “I’m sure you would be an extremely dedicated godfather. In fact, I didn’t want to mention this prematurely, but I have almost convinced Carolyn to forgive you for outing her condition in a public venue, so perhaps you would consider doing us the honor...”

Caleb opened his eyes, pinning Joshua with a look so full of grief that it immediately derailed Joshua’s train of thought, effectively keeping him from asking a question they might both regret for very different reasons.

“You know you might be right about those pain meds, man.” Caleb didn’t wait for Josh to respond before bringing an arm up to cover his eyes, sinking further into the mattress. “Could you call someone?”

“Of course.” Joshua stood, sending another glance to The Knight before edging to the door. He would get Caleb’s nurse, then he would do his job by calling the person Caleb really needed. Joshua would advise The Guardian to come home immediately.

RcJ&Ti\*SnsnsnsN\*RcJ&Ti

“Hey,” Ethan spoke into his Bluetooth as he drove. They had been on the road a couple of weeks since leaving the coven with news of Sida, each of them more weary and frustrated for the experience. He tried concentrating on the unfamiliar roads and his GPS’s comments. “You have any good news for me?”

*“I wish I did,” Eli replied. “Weather’s been good. Does that count?”*

“No, not really.” Ethan wanted something more, something life affirming. His brother had been put in charge of doing more research on The Trinity.

*Eli sighed. “Caleb’s not doing well. I’ve heard from Griffin and Joshua. It doesn’t look like it is going to get better, Ethan. I’m sorry.”*

“Shit.” That word covered so much. Shit for him for the job he was about to inherit, and shit for The Brotherhood, and shit because they were losing one of their own. “I figured that was the case when Joshua called. Dean’s barely keeping it together as it is, man.” Ethan had witnessed The Guardian’s moods- they were getting worse as he was unable to connect with The Knight and was forced to follow Owen on the wild goose chase.

*“I take it no Owen?”*

“Lost the trail-*again* in a little border town this time. It’s like he fell off the face of the Earth. I have a feeling Dean has reached his limits, but he wants me to keep working it.” The decision was made for Dean and Sam to head back to Louisville, and Ethan would continue to search from Texas.

*“I don’t like you being out there alone. These guys are slippery.”*

“Dean is going to send Silas and some others, but I don’t know if there’s really a point. I don’t think The Brotherhood has faced anything quite like this. This all could end very badly.”

*“We’ve said that before. . .” Eli started.*

They had lost Gideon, the current Triad had faced an apocalypse, but no one mentioned a demon disease or evil hunters all at the same time. “Yeah, but this time I don’t see any silver lining in sight.”

RcJ&Ti\*SnsnsnsN\*RcJ&Ti

Joshua was finishing the last chapter of The Three Musketeers when he heard the door to Caleb’s hospital room open. His captive audience had long since drifted off, having come off the latest round of Griffin’s less than miraculous cure all enough to find some solace in a drugged bliss. It had to be close to midnight, so he was expecting one of the nursing staff rotating for shift change or perhaps Bobby, who was due to relieve him of his duty any time now. Joshua was not prepared for the voice that echoed in the dim room.

“Josh?”

“You’re here.” Joshua turned to find The Guardian behind him. He slowly made it to his feet as his body responded sluggishly after having been sedentary for so long. He hadn’t expected Dean and Sam until sometime the following day. The Guardian and Scholar would have had to drive without stopping to have made it from the Mexican border town they were in to Louisville in the two days since Joshua had made the decision to call him. From Dean’s harried look and bleary countenance that was exactly what they had done.

“How’s he doing?”

“He’s had better days.” Joshua kept his voice quiet; placing the novel back on the cart with Caleb’s other things. He resisted saying the same could be said for Dean, especially when the younger man moved closer, the small light over Caleb’s bed revealing the devastation registering on The Guardian’s face as he took in the changes sixteen short days had brought to Caleb’s condition. Joshua attempted to soften the blow. “I assure you it hasn’t kept him from flirting with every female in the vicinity, including your veterinarian friend who dropped by a couple of times and my extremely pregnant wife.”

Dean’s mouth twitched, though his eyes stayed glued to the patient. “I guess that proves Bobby’s theory that Damien would hit on a beautiful woman from his death bed.”

“It at least proves how ridiculous the fairer sex can be.” Joshua tugged at the sleeves he’d rolled up earlier bringing the cuffs back to his wrists to fasten them. He felt vulnerable in a state of dishevel. “His libido has seemed the one thing left unscathed by the events of recent days.”

“Mackland should have fucking called me.” Dean finally pulled his gaze from Caleb to pin Joshua with a hard stare. It was difficult not to look away, or at the least not to squirm. The anger in Dean’s eyes was matched only by the depth of pain in his green gaze, both pulsing and palpable in the small quarters. Despite being completely out of character, Joshua found himself wanting to tread softly, and forgo his typical frankness.

“I assure you he’s been completely absorbed with Caleb’s case-like a man possessed. In fact, I have barely spoken to him myself, and I’ve been here the entire time.” Joshua did not recognize the Mackland Ames of the last few weeks, and took Cullen’s word for it when the businessman explained in a haunted tone that it was like getting a glimpse of the son he knew before Mackland’s accident. “My mother and Bobby seem to be the only ones able to reach him.”

“Then *you* should have called me.”

“I did call you.” Joshua snapped in turn, softening his tone only when Caleb stirred. He was not in any mood to be dressed down by The Guardian. “Did you forget our conversation from two nights ago?”

“Sooner, damn it!” Dean growled.

“I believe we spoke almost every day.” Joshua kept his tone measured, barely holding on to his thinly worn composure.

“You didn’t tell me it was this bad.”

“You didn’t ask.” It was a low blow, but one Joshua considered provoked and justified. Dean might have been keeping check-ins, but he didn’t go above and beyond for specifics. There was a reason for that, and even though Joshua understood it to be an attempt at self-protection on a merely human level, he somehow found himself expecting more from Dean. “I even recall you

cutting Bobby short the one time he did try to explain that Caleb's condition was swiftly deteriorating."

"I talked to Damien later. He told me he was fine, that it wasn't a day in the park, but he was hanging in there."

"Caleb told you what you wanted to hear."

"He wasn't the only one." Dean jabbed a finger at Joshua, his face reddening. Joshua couldn't help but to think of the few times he'd been cornered by John Winchester and the man's charging bull temper. It had been quite some time since he'd found himself on the receiving end of Dean's similar bad humor. "You kept up the reassurances when Mackland stopped letting my calls go through."

"Because he asked me to." Joshua gestured to Caleb. "Because The Knight insisted it was more important that The Guardian do his job than worry about him."

"And maybe you were so quick to fucking agree because you were worried about your precious covens and what a stink Sida's murder would raise in the crafting circles, how it all might reflect badly on you and your witch kin!"

Joshua felt his face burn, disbelief that his motives were being called into question by Dean who inadvertently had forced him to join the coven in the first place. He opened his mouth to tell The Guardian just where he could shove his insinuation when Caleb interrupted.

"Deuce?"

The croaked voice was the equivalent of a cold bucket of water. He and Dean reacted like two bickering parents caught mid shouting match by their sleepy-eyed five year old. They instantly reigned in their tempers, forced fake plastered on smiles and faced Caleb with tempered tones filled with insincere cheer.

"Hey, Dude, bought time you woke up."

"Why were you yelling?"

"Yelling?" Dean moved around to the side of the bed where the rail had been lowered, taking a seat on the edge of the mattress. "Who yells in a hospital in the middle of the night?"

"Winchesters yell in any setting, any time of day."

"True." Joshua watched Dean's forced grin morph into a sentiment more genuine. "Part of our unusual charm."

"I guess." Caleb shifted, managing to lift himself marginally higher in the bed. "If by unusual, you mean completely void of anything resembling charm."



“Like you’re one to talk.” Dean reached out and pushed the button that would raise the top of the bed.

“I’m full of charm, Deuce.” Caleb lifted a brow in challenge. “Just ask anyone.”

“Mama’s boy?” Dean turned to Josh, his smile still in place, but definitely icier now that he was addressing his Advisor. “You want to chime in?”

Joshua played along. “I for one have not witnessed one ounce of charm from the patient.”

Dean turned back to Caleb, who managed an eye roll. “I meant anyone with an X chromosome. My brand of charm is especially designed for the ladies.”

“Like Juliet?” Dean asked. “I hear you’ve been hitting on my woman, Damien?”

“She brought me pie.” Caleb’s dimples flashed. “She offered to feed me.”

“Peach or apple?”

“Both.”

“Sonofabitch.” Dean shook his head. “Shows how much women can be trusted.”

“Don’t hold it against her, man. I was pretty damn irresistible before the whole sick card.”

“I guess. If by irresistible you mean butt ugly, then yeah,” Dean agreed, managing to get a laugh out of The Knight, a feat no one had accomplished in the last few days.

“Said the guy who lost his razor,” Caleb lifted his hand, gestured to Dean’s face. “You look like shit, kiddo.”

“Right back at you.” Dean surprised Joshua by reaching out and gripping Caleb’s hand before the man could return it to the mattress. The unexpected action and The Guardian’s somber tone of voice completely changed the mood of the room. Joshua went from feeling as if he was a spectator watching a well-practiced verbal sparring match to witnessing a scene much too intimate for an audience. “Seriously, Damien, you trying to scare the hell out of me?”

“I’m okay, Deuce. Things look worse than they are.”

“That’s good to hear because from where I’m sitting, things are pretty damn bad.”

“I’ll be better tomorrow.” Caleb blinked. “When Porter’s drug has worked its way through my system. First couple of days are always the worst.”

“Griffin’s drug sucks ass.”

“You’re not telling me anything I don’t know, Dude.”

“Why didn’t you have Josh call me sooner?”

“Josh called you?” Caleb moved his gaze past Dean’s shoulder, and Joshua once again felt the uncomfortable need to excuse himself from the room.

“I believe you asked me to on several occasions.” Joshua ran a hand over the front of his shirt, doing little to remove the numerous wrinkles.

“Note my earlier comment about using a guy’s subconscious against him.”

“Someone should have called me sooner.” Joshua didn’t miss the hostile look shot in his direction, though Dean kept his tone tempered.

“Did you at least find Owen?” Joshua was not surprised Caleb was trying for a redirection.

“No.”

“Damn it.”

“What can I say, man? The guy’s like a ghost. I’m pretty damn convinced no one’s going to find him until he wants to be found.”

“Our government dollar hard at work,” Joshua interjected, having spoken to Elijah at length about The Trinity. “Their training is not typical of the beings we encounter, nor any hunters.”

“Ethan’s still out there,” Dean continued. “I’m sending Silas and a team to join him.”

“What about Boone, he’s one of our best trackers and he was in black ops back in the day.”

“You mean Buzz.” Dean shot an anxious glance in Joshua’s direction and Joshua gave a quick shake of his head. “Boone’s been dead for a while now, Damien.”

“Right, I know that. I meant Buzz.” Caleb brought a hand to his head. “I’m still a little out of it.”

“Maybe you should take it easy, let me worry about Owen, alright.” Dean gestured to the clock. “We can talk about it in the morning, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Where’s Sammy?” Caleb yawned, blinking to keep his eyes open.

“Why? You want to tell him Georgia or one of his other cute co-ed study buddies dropped by with some cupcakes from Magnolias?”

“Something like that.” A ghost of a smile crossed Caleb’s face, accompanied by a grimace of pain. “The Runt won’t buy it.”

Dean moved his palm to rest against Caleb’s forehead. “Get some sleep, Hospital Heartbreaker and I’ll be sure Josh backs you up on your story in the morning.”

Joshua expected The Knight not to give up so easily, but Caleb seemed unable to hold out any longer against the pull of a narcotic sleep. He closed his eyes, another half-smile lifting the corner of his mouth. “I’m glad you’re back, Deuce.”

“Me too, Damien.”

Joshua watched Dean run his hand over Caleb’s hair, much like he’d seen his mother do the countless times she’d sat with her stepson. It always surprised him when Dean or Caleb proved capable of such compassion, considering their typical testosterone throttled approach to everything from hunting to sports to women, and of course there was the man who had influenced so much of their lives. Joshua had never known John Winchester to be the touchy feely type, more likely to rip someone’s head off than offer comfort even in time of great peril. He supposed there was another side to the man, one he hadn’t been privy to considering the way John felt about him, but a nature he’d passed along just the same.

“He’s in bad shape.” Dean kept his voice quiet, finally releasing the hold he had on Caleb’s hand when the other man’s fingers went completely lax with deep sleep.

Joshua nodded robotically. “He wants to go home.”

Dean sighed, running both hands through his hair with a sigh as he stood to face Joshua. “I hear that. We all could use some real rest.”

“You misunderstand me.” Joshua stepped forward, realizing he was encroaching in the Guardian’s space, weeks of frustration and lack of sleep making him reckless. “He’s finished with this. He wants to go home and I think you need to think about what’s best for him for a change.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the lengths he’ll go to protect you. He feels honor bound to keep some ridiculously absurd promise he made twenty-five years ago to get a broken child to open up to the world again, and you, despite now being an adult, are perfectly willing to hold him to such an absurd vow.”

Joshua felt only a twinge of guilt as Dean’s face blanched. Caleb had told Joshua about the promise to Dean during a bout of delirium after the latest round of Griffin’s treatment, the one where he vowed to stay alive, to not abandon Dean as his mother had. Joshua was quite certain it was Caleb’s one reasoning for continuing to subject himself to whatever the doctors proposed.

“I believe it’s time that both you and Caleb realize that an oath given by a child to another at a time when both of them were desperate for any form of reassurance, especially an oath such as one to stay alive at all costs, was inherently doomed from the beginning.”

If the scowl on Dean’s face was any indication he had no interest in the truth of the matter.

“You shut your fucking mouth.”

Dean had him by the shirt and pinned against the wall before Joshua could fully realize the folly in his forthrightness. He had already crossed an invisible line, knowing that halting now would accomplish nothing but pissing off The Guardian. “He’ll never ask you, Dean, but you need to let him go, to tell him it’s alright to stop this treatment.”

Dean brought up his forearm, pressing it against Joshua’s throat to effectively cut off the air flow and make sure Joshua could not utter another word. “What I need to do is remind you of your place, something you’ve obviously forgotten in my absence.”

Dean punctuated his statement by jerking Joshua forward and slamming him into the wall once again. Joshua was quite certain he might have succumbed to the lack of oxygen if Bobby hadn’t appeared, latching onto Dean and physically dragging him away

“What the hell are you two idgits doing?” Bobby kept a hold on Dean as he backed towards Caleb bed. The patient stirred, but didn’t wake. Singer pointed an accusing finger at Joshua. “You fucking know better.”

“Me!” Joshua croaked, reaching up to rub his throat. He pulled in one sweet breath of air after another. “Did you miss the part where I was the one being choked?”

“You ever heard the saying don’t trifle with dragons when you are small, crunchy and taste good with ketchup.”

Joshua continued to glare at Bobby, ignoring Dean who was huffing and puffing as if he were the one deprived of air. “You couldn’t rely on normal beatitudes such as don’t poke a tiger with a stick?”

“See,” Bobby jabbed at him again. “You did know better.”

Joshua rolled his eyes skyward. “Why do I even bother?”

“Take this shit outside.” Bobby shoved Dean towards the door. “And I don’t want to see either of you back here until you’ve slept, showered and eaten something. Daddy Warbucks has a suite up town. Josh will take you.”

“I’m not leaving again.” Dean growled.

“Then grab a cot in one of the resident’s quarters.” Bobby glanced to Caleb and then back to Dean. “He sure as hell doesn’t need to see you like this.”

“I’ll be back.”

Joshua wasn’t sure if Dean was speaking to Caleb or Bobby as The Guardian. Dean turned and stomped out of the room.

“Well, what are you waiting for, Slick?” Bobby shooed Joshua as if he were a giant fly. “Go after him. Make sure he doesn’t hurt himself.”

“Again, did you miss the part where *he* was assaulting *me*?”

“I caught it, and that’s exactly why he shouldn’t be roaming the halls alone. It’s no telling who might cross his path.”

“What do you expect me to do? Feed him dinner? Tuck him in? Shoot him with an elephant tranquilizer.”

“If you think it’s going to be that easy you really aren’t as bright as I thought you were, Slick.” Bobby took a seat on the edge of Caleb’s bed, his eyes fixing on Caleb, voice lowering. “The Guardian’s out for blood and someone’s going to give it up.”

Joshua glanced to the door, his stomach churning with dread. “Mackland.”

He heard Bobby mutter an indistinguishable curse as he made for the door, exiting in time to catch a glimpse of Dean’s brown leather jacket turning the corner up ahead. It was well after visiting hours, the oncology ward running on a skeleton staff, vacant of emergencies and well-wishers. These were the hours of the battle worn, when a trip for coffee meant running into mostly shell-shocked family members who were spectators in a war where prayer was their only resource to offer, hoping for a miraculous reprieve, a turning of the tide, or at least reinforcements with morning light. Joshua was only asking that Dean made it to the elevators without incident, surely Mackland had indeed done as he said he was going to earlier and retire for the night. The crash and subsequent clanging of items striking the hospital floor along with a few startled swears told Joshua that was not to be the case.

When he turned the corner he was greeted with the sight of Mackland Ames sitting on the floor among an overturned cart and various monitoring instruments including a laptop and medical charts. The doctor was holding his jaw, looking up at Dean who was standing over him, fists balled, ready for round two.

“Dean! What the Hell are you doing?” Sam nearly tackled his brother knocking him away from Mackland.

“This is your fault!” Dean roared, fighting Sam’s restraint, struggling to reach the downed doctor. “He’s dying and it’s all your fucking fault.”

“Dean, stop it!” Sam ordered, using his height advantage to keep Dean at bay, though Joshua feared the tactic would not hold Dean for long.

Joshua quickly made his way to Mackland’s side, taking his stepfather’s arm. “Are you alright?”

"I'm okay. Everything's fine." Mackland pulled away once he was standing, steadier on his feet than Joshua would have imagined. The doctor wiped blood from his lip. "Samuel, let him go."

"Where the fuck were you?" Dean yelled, and Joshua feared his shouts might wake the near dead, or at least alert security. "How could you let this happen!"

Sam had yet to release his grip on Dean, having resorted to wrapping his arms around his brother's waist and planting his feet like an experienced bar room bouncer. Mackland moved closer to the struggling duo, a move Joshua feared foolish as he'd never seen Dean this out of control.

"Let your brother go," Mac said again, and from the tilt of his head, Joshua wondered if there wasn't another silent command given, one only a fellow psychic would understand.

Sam relented, releasing Dean and stepping back out of the way. Dean dove for Mackland, wrapping his hands in the doctor's coat, driving them both against the opposite wall of the corridor where Mackland's back struck with a dull thud.

"I trusted you! Caleb trusted you," Dean yelled.

"I know, Dean," Mackland bowed his head, his tone remorseful and full of grief, not at all what Joshua expected considering the man on a mission he'd witnessed over the last few weeks. "I know you did."

"What good are all your fancy degrees, all your articles and public acclaim when you can't even save your own fucking son?" Dean gave Mackland a vicious shake. "What the hell kind of father are you?"

Joshua spared a look to Sam as Dean's voice broke, his words choked with an emotion that seemed to immobilize Mackland as the doctor made no move to evade The Guardian's wrath. In fact, he looked hopeful that Dean might strike him again. The younger Winchester met Joshua's eyes only briefly, but long enough for Joshua to see that Dean and Mackland weren't the only ones on a verge of some kind of breakdown. Joshua wasn't at all certain he could count on The Scholar for help if matters were to get worse. He wished Bobby had ordered him to stay with Caleb and took it upon himself to be the one to go after Dean, as obviously, Advisor or not, Joshua had no clue what to do. He knew of no Triad magic to alter this course.

"You're supposed to protect him, to save him." Dean was no longer yelling, but he hadn't let go of Mackland. "That's every dad's job."

"The one all fathers fear failing at the most." Mackland nodded, his eyes filling with tears.

"My dad would have never let this happen. He would have done whatever it took."

"I've let you down, Son. All of you."

The sincere confession worked a wondrous spell Joshua could not have predicted and instead of the fight escalating, Dean let the doctor go, his hands falling away, hanging limp at his side. The two stared at each other, a pause far more pregnant than Carolyn seeming to suspend time indefinitely, and then Mackland did the unthinkable. He reached for Dean as if he were a child, pulling The Guardian hard against him in a crushing hug. Joshua was both stupefied and humbled when Dean not only didn't resist, but willingly went, accepting momentary refuge the doctor was offering. Mac's repetitive whispers of 'I'm sorry' and Dean's choked reply of 'Please, don't let him die' were deafening in the silence of the empty hospital corridor and Joshua was eternally grateful when Sam's hand fell on his shoulder.

"Let's go."

Joshua didn't question the quiet command, nor did he speak when they passed Silas standing sentry at the end of the hallway, dressed in a security uniform prepared to stop anyone from interrupting Guardian and former Scholar. Even when he and Sam were alone in the elevator, the right words escaped him. He wanted to ask if Sam was okay, if Dean and Mac would be alright, and how the hell did Silas appear in all the right places at the perfect time, but Joshua feared his tendency to say the wrong thing at the worst possible moment would somehow make matters worse.

"So, you're buying right?"

"Buying?" Joshua looked at Sam as the elevator dinged and the doors opened on the ground floor.

"The shit load of beer we're about to drink." The younger Winchester gave him a hint of a hopeful grin. "There's a bar just a few blocks from here."

Joshua started to shake his head, to beg off because of the night he'd just had and the inevitable morning to come, because the Winchester's lives were messy at best, and despite being tied to them he valued the fact that his lone man status allowed him the ability to walk away without remorse. He thought about the warm bed in a suite across town with his pregnant wife waiting to wrap her arms around him, then he did something quite novel and thought of Sam. Joshua forced a smile, the one Carolyn so often admired. "How about, I spring for the first round."

## Next Part

The bear was at least 600 pounds. Dean imagined if it stood on its hind legs it would tower over him by a foot. He could see it perfectly, the light of the full moon acting as a spotlight. The creature was wet, dripping from the pond where it had emerged. Its fur glistened like silver and

droplets of water and dirt splattered Dean when it shook itself, pawing the soft sandy earth between them with a heavy snort.

Dean was paralyzed, frozen in place by fear, only able to watch as the hulking animal moved ever closer, swinging its massive head back and forth in challenge. The pond offered refuge a possible escape but the bear was blocking his way, a giant in his path to safety. He tried to reason that the beast couldn't be real. Killer grizzlies didn't roam the Kentucky countryside, there was no mistaking this animal as one of the mostly harmless black bears that used to raid Pastor Jim's favorite black berry patch, coming to low ground to steal things from human territory when late frosts or droughts limited their food supply. This was no gatherer, but a hunter- a man eater. Dean was the only man in its sights.

He risked a quick look down, finding himself weaponless, wearing only a worn Zeplin tee and sweats, barefooted. Dean wondered what had brought him to the pond in such a state in the middle of the night. A loud roar had him refocusing on the enemy. He was staring into the vast abyss of the animal's massive mouth, razor sharp teeth jutting from the inkiness like deadly icebergs in a black sea. The forceful blast of hot, foul breath made him wonder if the skin of his face wasn't comically blown back like Bugs Bunny standing down a menacing roar from one cartoon beast or another. A hysterical giggle nearly bubbled forth as Dean considered pulling a glove from his non-existent pocket and slapping the bear, imagining it instantly ceasing its attack, sitting back on its haunches to pout as if Dean had done it some great harm. Dean knew the reality would most likely involve him withdrawing a bloody stub where his arm used to be.

The bear roared again, spittle striking Dean's face. Terror gripped his heart even as it pounded against his chest, threatening to burst from his body. Adrenaline demanded he run, live to fight another day. Only his body refused to respond to the command. Dean Winchester was helpless, at the mercy of his most feared enemy, and there was nothing to do but wait- wait for the razor sharp claws to tear into him, wait for the crushing jaws to rip out his throat, wait for the blinding pain that would no doubt plunge him into instant inextinguishable agony. For a second a part of him, a small desperate part, welcomed the end.

Only the pain wasn't the horror he imagined, instead, the needle-like sensation on his toes of all places was irritating at best. The sheer unexpectedness had him bolting upright, swearing as the physical sensation was enough to pull him from the nightmare. He found himself armed with the blade from beneath his pillow, standing not at the pond, but still in his bed at the farm, tangled in sweat-soaked sheets. Dean welcomed the four walls of Pastor Jim's old room, the faded blue wallpaper, the earth-colored curtains pulled closed to block out the eastern sky that flooded the room each morning. Sunlight still escaped the barrier. He could tell from the stretch of yellow splashed across the roughhewn pine floors that it was late morning and he'd slept much longer than he'd planned. Another chomp on his toes had him glaring at the only beast in the area.

He lowered his knife, running a hand over his damp hair. "Damn it, Dill."



The black and white pup was sitting at the bottom of the bed, head tilted as if she were waiting for Dean to say something further, maybe offer a thank you for the wake up. Dill was no doubt to blame for the stinky breath and spittle that had seemed so real in the dream. It wouldn't be the first time he'd had a tongue bath in the middle of the night thanks to Boo's prodigy. She was wily and as attuned to Dean's moods as her old man with an intelligent streak a mile wide that Juliet informed him was common in herding breeds. It made her a formidable opponent when it came to keeping her out of his bedroom, as did the forlorn gaze she was flashing him now, made more potent by the odd sky blue eyes she'd inherited from her sheep wrangling ancestors.

Dill whined, lifting one speckled paw and Dean sighed, falling back on his pillows helpless against her wiles. She took it as a sign to come closer, nuzzling her nose beneath his arm to rest her head on his heaving chest, sliding her lanky pup body against his side with a sigh of her own. Juliet explained Dill's favored sleeping spots with her head tucked beneath Dean's chin or resting over his heart was due to her desire to feel his pulse, to hear the whoosh of his heart as she had once her mother's before they were separated. Dean couldn't find it in him to deny Dill such assurance when he understood all too well what it was like to have all sense of safety and security snatched away in a blink of an eye.

"Thanks for the wake-up, girl." Dean rubbed a hand over her head, thankful his heart rate was slowing, terror fading as his body shook off the effects of the dream.

Dill's tail swished against the sheets as she inched even closer, seeming to pick up on the fear still lingering in the room intent on protecting her master. Dean laid there for a moment longer, allowing both of them a small reprieve before pushing himself up and swinging his legs over the side of the bed vacant of dog. Thoughts of the bear and the omen it might represent forced him to his feet. He needed to check on Caleb.

It had taken him a week back at the farm before he'd stopped sleeping on Miss Emma's antique chaise in the downstairs bedroom where Caleb had been stationed in the guest room by Mac to avoid carrying equipment and helping Caleb up the side stairs to the second level where their boyhood rooms lay. He was kept vigilant by the prospect of an unseen reaper, but it didn't take Caleb long to recover enough strength and stubbornness to insist Dean stop being an idiot and sleep in his own damn room. Dean might have reluctantly agreed to appease his best friend, but his own obstinacy kept him awake watching television until the patient was completely asleep each night, and sometimes even then Dean would sit in the high back chair by his bed and watch him breathe until the first hints of dawn, haunted by the prognosis that Caleb's time was both uncertain and extremely limited.

Desperation and remaining tendrils of the nightmare had him forgoing his shoes, taking two stairs at a time as he made his way to the room. Dill's claws clicked on the wooden steps as she gave pursuit, determined not to be left behind. Dean's heart skipped a beat when he found the room empty, bed made, books neatly stacked on the bedside table. Dill padded inside,

performing a wide sweep of the room before turning to face Dean with a wagging tail and whimper.

“Find Damien, Dill,” he said and wasn’t surprised when the pup took off at a run towards the kitchen. Dean didn’t hear any voices, but that didn’t mean anything these days. Caleb might have regained some stamina, put back on some of his weight in the two weeks they had been home, but he still seemed only a shadow of the man Dean had known most of his life.

The pup was waiting for Dean at the back door when he reached the room. Dean ignored her scratching at the floor, focusing instead on the lone occupant at the table.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Good morning to you, too, big brother.” Sam put down the book he was reading, frowning at Dean. “What’s wrong?”

“Where’s Damien?”

“He took a walk?”

“By himself?” Dean planted his hands on his hips, his scowl deepening.

“Boo Radley went with him.”

“Boo’s a dog.”

Dill yipped and pawed at the door again. Harper Lee sauntered out from beneath the table, joining the pup with a wide yawn and a bowing stretch.

“I’m aware.” Sam stood, picking up his coffee mug. “Caleb seemed to want some alone time.”

Dean threw his arms up, growling in frustration at his brother’s carelessness. “Where are Mac and Bobby?”

“They went into town for some groceries and supplies.” Sam filled his cup, taking another from the cabinet above him. “I think Bobby thought Mac could use some time away, too.”

“Why the hell didn’t you wake me?”

“Because you didn’t go to bed until after three, Dean. You’re exhausted.” Sam lifted the pot of coffee. “You want some?”

“No, what I want is to find Caleb.” Dean started for the door, state of undress and lack of shoes be damned. He refused to be lulled into a false sense of normalcy like everyone else in their family. Caleb had played his part well, acting as if he were merely recovering from a run of the mill injury, convincing Missouri and Cullen to return to their homes after he left the hospital

with promises of phone calls and Skype check ins. Carolyn and Esme had gone back to New York and Charlotte, Joshua lingering until a few days ago when the tension between he and Dean finally drove Mackland to ask The Advisor to join Ethan on the search for Owen, which was almost comical now considering they had hit one dead end after another.

“Dean, he’s at the pond. The farm is safe.” Sam brought his mug back to the table, along with another for his brother. “I can sense him, and if you concentrate, push your panic away, you can too. He’s fine.”

“He shouldn’t be alone.” Dean rubbed a finger over his hunter’s ring, aware that the connection he felt with his Knight was strong, not compromised. He also knew their home was well protected, but he couldn’t help to think of the bear’s location in the dream, breathing life into his irrational fear once more.

“You can’t keep shadowing him.” Sam sighed, drawing Dean’s gaze.

“I’m not shadowing him.” The denial seemed weak even to Dean’s ears. Fact was Dean was doing just that. He’d taken to following Caleb around like a pup, like he’d done when Caleb was a restless teen and Dean just a little boy bent on keeping his new friend in line of sight at all times.

“Mac okay’d the walk. Caleb’s doing a lot better. He needed to stretch his legs, without a chaperone. He’s not going to disappear.”

“Isn’t that exactly what he’s going to do, Sam?” Dean snapped. Death was its own vanishing act. Dean knew all too well what it meant when he and Mac had come to an agreement that night in the hospital hallway. They had to let Caleb call the next shots, and Damien decided the farm was the best medicine for him.

“We haven’t given up hope, Dean.” Sam gestured to the numerous books on the table, his and Bobby’s computers. “We’re still looking for a way.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Dean pinched the bridge of his nose, knowing he was taking his frustration out on his brother, lashing out at the one person who understood and was trying to help in the only way he knew how. He also knew he was making Damien a little crazy-making everyone a little crazy. He gave Dill the command to stand down as she was still pawing at the door. Harper Lee settled with a huff, content to wait.

“Drink this and I’ll make you some eggs.”

Sam brought over the cup of coffee, offering a sympathetic smile and a quick squeeze to his shoulder. Dean tried not to bristle at his brother’s compassion. He was well aware that the others had taken to treating him with the same kid gloves Caleb had complained about, as if he were the

one with a death sentence hanging over his head. He gave Damien credit for not shooting somebody.

“I’ll take the caffeine, but I’m not eating until Caleb is back.”

Sam nodded. “Then I’ll make some French toast with extra butter and bacon, lots and lots of bacon.”

Dean smirked at his brother who had taken over Missouri’s zealous attempts to create a menu to fatten Caleb up. Mac had cringed at the call for saturated fats and carbs, demanding that some of the caloric intake be nutrient infused.

“You better throw in some blueberries and one of Joshua’s magic herbal protein shakes in case Mac makes it back from town in time for the feast.”

Dill’s bark alerted them that someone had indeed arrived and both brothers turned their gaze to the door. Sam cleared his throat, standing once again. “That’s not Mac.”

“What?” Dean stared at his brother. “Who the hell is it?”

Sam offered him another sympathy infused smile. Dean was threatened to draw down. “Sam?”

His glower must have warned Sam that a pat on the back would have been the last straw because The Scholar wisely gave Dean a wide berth as he took his coffee and made for the living room. “It’s for you. I’ll start breakfast after I’ve grabbed a shower.”

“What?” Dean had no patience for Guardian duty today. He’d put Carolyn in charge of rerouting all Brotherhood business to Elijah, and hunting matters to Silas.

Dean cursed the fact he didn’t have his brother’s psychic ability when a soft but insistent knock on the door had Dill whining and Harper letting out a lonesome howl that rang in the quiet house.

“Great.” Dean was left with no choice but to open the damn door, determined to get rid of whoever it was as quickly as possible. He scooted the dogs away with his foot as he did, and was caught completely off guard by Juliet’s presence.

“Hi.” She took a step back as Dill scrambled between Dean’s legs to offer the exuberant greeting Dean could not. Harper Lee joined them, his short stumpy body wagging as he snuffled at the woman’s boots.

“Hey.” Dean commanded the dogs to sit, watching as Juliet waited for them to obey before kneeling to give both a thorough ear rubbing. She didn’t seem to mind Dill’s tongue bath, or the fact Harper Lee’s fascination with her boots now extended to her jean clad legs and jacket. The beagle, having lived his entire life on the farm, was enthralled by the exotic and wild scents the

veterinarian brought with her, especially when she came straight from the wolf research facility, which was likely the case now.

“May I come in?”

Dean hesitated, unsure after their last encounter. Despite knowing she had come to the hospital to visit Caleb, he hadn’t talked with her since spewing the gory details of his deal with the crossroads demon after which he effectively kicked her out of his house. He doubted Pastor Jim would be pleased with his manners thus far, so he moved aside making way for her to enter, although he wasn’t in the right frame of mind for a round two.

“I brought these by for Caleb.” Juliet waited for him to close the door leaving the dogs on the porch before offering Dean a stack of books. “Carolyn called me and told me he was released and was staying with you.”

“Eliot and Keats.” Dean took the books, rolling his eyes at the collections of poetry. Carolyn had told him several times how much she had enjoyed meeting Juliet, how great she was, and in Carolyn’s not so subtle way, how she thought Dean was being a complete jerk. He wrote it off as pregnancy insanity, a phrase Josh tossed around often when not in earshot of his wife.

“Caleb mentioned they were some of his favorites.” Juliet made no move to take off her jacket or slip out of her shoes, which seemed odd to Dean as over the last few months he’d memorized her ritual; one which included her leaving a trail of clothes as she grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator or a glass of wine from the stash she left and regaled him with whatever lupine story had played out during her week. Now, she stood stiffly by the table with hands stuffed in her coat pockets. “I added some Mary Oliver and John Ashbury because I thought he might like something more contemporary.”

“I see Damien played the moony-eyed poet card with you.” Dean moved closer to her, putting the books on the table. She smelled like the outside, the crisp spring morning. “I hope you know that’s classic seduction maneuvers.”

“I’m aware.” A hint of a smile lifted one corner of Juliet’s mouth. “Your best friend is quite charming.”

Dean snorted, glancing towards the window, remembering his need to be at the pond, not entertaining. “So he tells me, often.”

“I like him.” Juliet nodded to the books. “False poet or not.”

“Most women do.”

Juliet met his gaze, some of the tension seeming to leave her body so that her stance softened. Dean felt a pang of regret. “I like all of your family.”

He ran a hand through his hair. "It wasn't exactly the way I planned on you meeting them."

Juliet laughed. "Meaning you never planned on me meeting them."

Dean didn't want to lie. He hadn't considered the next step in their relationship, though the more time he spent with her the more he realized an invite to a family gathering at the farm had not been completely out of the realm of possibility. However, his caution was warranted. Juliet had met Sam and Caleb in an unexpected encounter, and Dean was still dealing with that fallout through Caleb's merciless meddling and Sam's trepidation. Dean forced a grin. "You can't tell me after meeting Bobby Singer you don't understand my hesitation."

His attempt at humor fell short and the understanding look she gave him had his gut twisting. "They were lovely, all of them. It's easy to see they love you very much."

Dean nodded, swallowing hard. "I'm glad you got to meet them, even if it wasn't under the best circumstances."

She smiled. "After growing up with my parents, I prefer genuine grit over false pleasantry any day."

Dean snorted. "False pleasantry isn't really something we do."

They stared at each other for a long moment.

"I'm leaving," Juliet blurted, just as Dean asked her if she would like a cup of coffee.

"Sammy's coffee isn't the best in the world, but it's no reason to rush off."

"No," Juliet shook her head. "I mean I'm going to Wyoming. I leave this afternoon."

"You're taking the job." Dean recalled her mentioning the offer to head up a summer expedition, but thought she had decided to turn it down, going through with her plans of opening up her own practice after her contract with the research facility in Tennessee was finished. It was another reminder of how much could change in one short month.

"It's really an amazing opportunity," she said brightly. Dean recognized forced cheerfulness when he saw it-the fake pleasantry she claimed to hate. "The wolves need me."

"And you have nothing keeping you here." Dean watched her eyes brighten, felt the tendrils of dread tighten.

She reached for his hand. Taking it in hers, she took a slip of paper from her pocket and placed it in his palm, closing his fingers over it. Her touch was cool, but it sent a jolt of warmth through Dean, and he forced himself not to pull away. "These are the co-ordinates of where our base camp will be located."

He lifted his gaze from their hands to meet her eyes. Juliet was the one to let him go, stepping back to put space between them. She didn't give him a chance to reply before she turned and moved towards the door where she abruptly stopped with her back to him, hand resting on the knob. Dean watched her shoulders rise and fall with a deep breath before she turned to him once more.

"Tell Caleb I'll see him around." Her face set in determined lines, lips pursing like they did when she was intent on getting a point across. "Because I have complete faith that the guardian of an ultra-secret society sworn to protect the innocent against the entire world's evil is just the man to save him."

Dean chose to focus on the conviction in her parting statement instead of the fact that her recounting the words from their first meeting brought a lump to the back of his throat. She left without him mustering a witty come back. He grabbed Jim's mud boots from beside the door, and started for the pond before he could second guess himself for not even trying to stop her from going.

The morning air had a sharp bite to it, his short sleeves and sweats offering little protection from the chill. He longed for spring to finally make up its mind and warm weather to settle in. Pastor Jim would have pointed out the bushes blooming along the trail to the pond as the culprit, Blackberry Winter they called it in the south when the berry bushes bloomed and winter seemed to take the land in her cold hand once more. Dean was thankful for the sun and cloudless blue sky as he made it through the dense patch of woods into the clearing that stretched before the water like a blanket of white. The sight that awaited him had his body going frigid once more. Caleb was lying on the long wooden dock they'd built last summer, not moving, all three dogs positioned like sentries around his sprawled form. Dean tried to move, but he was frozen in place, as if the grizzly from his dreams had returned and was now an invisible force between where he stood and the dock that jetted out into the water.

"I'm alive," Caleb called.

His best friend's voice broke the spell. An image of Sam's lifeless face sprung unbidden to Dean's mind, the memory of his brother's limp body morphing to cool marble in his arms at Cold Oak making him dizzy with sudden grief.

"Deuce?" Caleb lifted his head in Dean's direction, the dogs turning to regard him as well.

"I wasn't worried." Dean forced himself to walk casually to the pond, though his pounding heart urged him to hurry, unused adrenaline causing his limbs to twitch.

"I guess that's why I felt your fear like a sledgehammer, huh?" Caleb returned to his resting position when Dean stepped onto the dock, his eyes hidden from Dean by the dark sunglasses he

was wearing. Dill cocked her head to the side, giving Dean a doggy grin as if to say, ‘Look, I found him’.

“Seeing as how your abilities are screwed to hell these days, I wouldn’t trust anything that bounces around your head, Damien.” Dean sidestepped his friend, taking one of the two Amish made Adirondack chairs that had been a Christmas gift from Mac and Esme this past year. Boo quickly beat Harper to the coveted position at Dean’s feet, his body still damp from a recent dip in the pond. Dean leaned over his knees, rubbing the golden retriever’s wet head as he watched Caleb.

“Never fear, despite the rapid loss of brain cells, the link to you and Sam remains perfectly intact, in fact it’s stronger than ever.”

Dean wasn’t sure by Caleb’s tone if that was a good thing or an unfortunate curse. He made an effort to reign in his runaway emotions. “What the hell are you doing out here?”

“Sunbathing.”

“What?” The pond was Caleb’s least favorite place on the farm, despite Dean’s efforts to sway him to its many positives and erase the haunting memories it held by insisting it be the only place they could consume the dwindling supply of Pastor Jim’s brew. He’d even let the architect get creative with the dock, making it much more elaborate than Dean had originally planned, hanging lights and adding a second landing for boarding the boat.

“Dogs seem to get something out of it.” Caleb pushed himself up to a seated position, leaning against the other chair as Harper Lee and Dill rallied to his side, both attempting to clamor onto his lap. He ran a hand over Harper Lee’s belly when the beagle gave up competing with the younger dog and just rolled over on his back as close to the psychic as he could get. Caleb looked up at Dean and grinned. “It’s not like I have to worry about skin cancer.”

Dean turned his gaze to the water, focusing on the sound of lapping on the shore from the small waves the steady breeze was stirring, the soothing thump of his boat as it bobbed against the dock where it was tethered. “You really expect me to believe you came out here for some vitamin D exposure?”

“I considered a swim with old Boo, but thought better about it after I realized the damn blackberries were blooming. Tell me again why we have like five kinds of winters in the South?”

“It gives the farmers something to talk about.” Dean wasn’t buying it. He brought his gaze back to Caleb, trying not to explode. Caleb’s refusal to have a serious conversation was surprisingly one of the many things that pissed him off about the current situation. It wasn’t like Dean courted any kind of deep emotional shit, but he wasn’t used to Caleb shutting him down when and if he did try. His friend was pushing him away, keeping him at arm’s length. They had rules about the chick-flick scenes, exceptions. As far as Dean was concerned a ‘get your affairs in order’



directive from not only one doctor, but a team of highly notable brain surgeons and one mad scientist, was a damn exception. “Come to think of it you have been acting like a grumpy old man these days.”

Caleb slid the sunglasses up to rest on his head, rubbing his eyes with a weary sigh. “What do you want from me, Deuce?”

“How about a straight answer?” It was a good place to start.

“If you must know, I had a nightmare.”

Dean picked beggar lice from Boo’s fur, tossing them into the pond. “They must be contagious.”

Caleb pulled his knees into his chest, rapping his arms around them. “Smokey the Bear visiting you again?”

Dean lifted a brow, unwilling to let the focus of the conversation shift. “We’re not talking about me.”

“I forgot that I finally got that wish about becoming the center of the universe.”

“That’s not working out for you?” Dean played along, knowing the best way around The Knight’s defenses.

Caleb smirked. “I have a new understanding for those people who win the lottery, and then can’t stop bitching about how it ruined their lives.”

“Would it help if The Guardian ordered everyone to ignore you?”

“Depends on whether that mandate applies to The Guardian himself?”

“We both know The Guardian is a stubborn asshole.” Dean ruffled Boo’s fur. “So you were saying you had a nightmare?”

Caleb nodded. “My mom was in it.”

“That sucks.” Dean knew from experience that any dream with a murdered parent was rarely a good thing.

“Actually, she was the only good part.” Caleb met his gaze. “I was in the ocean during a storm—literally drowning at sea, and she came to save me. Isaac was with her.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad.” Dean tried to sound positive, even though the idea of Caleb’s parents appearing from the other side to offer their son a reprieve from his current torment set off warning bells.

“Then Johnny showed up.”

“Dad always did have lousy timing.” Dean didn’t think his friend caught the silent thoughts of gratitude to his father. Caleb seemed too far away, perhaps reliving the scene from the nightmare even as his gaze stayed locked on Dean.

“Only he wasn’t really, Johnny, he was the black dragon.”

“O’nathan Jay,” Dean felt a fresh wash of sadness. Pastor Jim had regaled them with the story of a mythical kingdom throughout their childhood, painting John Winchester’s dark moods in the best light possible. Ebony dragons were prone to moments of great wrath and carelessness, especially when they were seeking vengeance, but it was all done in the pursuit of justice and an honor bound duty to their charges. As a child Dean had clung to that explanation, choosing it over the reality that his father was so blinded by grief that he didn’t see the damage he was inflicting on those around him.

Caleb’s voice thickened. “He kept beating the water with his wings, making the waves higher, keeping me from reaching them.”

The image brought to mind one of Caleb’s many paintings, the sea often depicted as a dark evil cauldron spawning monstrous beasts from its depths. “He didn’t want you to go with them.”

“No.” Caleb shook his head, breaking the spell he was under, his gold eyes seeing only Dean now. “He wanted me to stay in the storm and fight.”

“He’s not the only one.” Dean didn’t need psychic abilities or Merlin’s silver ring to feel the mix of pain, fear and disappointment that his whispered words brought. Caleb looked away, out over the water, but not before Dean registered the truth in his eyes, the wet glisten of heartbreak on his lashes. No amount of wanting on anyone’s part was going to prolong the inevitable much longer.

“So I came out here to see if I could find any trace of the old bastard, or maybe Pastor Jim. Ask them why the hell this is happening; what the fuck they expect me to do.”

Dean cleared his throat. “You came out here to talk to Dad and Jim’s ghosts?” He hadn’t meant to sound patronizing, but judging from the angry glare his Knight shot him, he must have.

“I’m not crazy or losing it, Dean. I know they both had a hunter’s funeral, but you’ve seen Jim here, even gone fucking fishing a few times if I’m not mistaken.” Caleb swiped a hand over his eyes, erasing any trace of weakness. “Ghost? Spirit? Whatever the hell he is now, we all saw him, right here on this bank after Joshua’s wedding.”

“Dude, chill.” Dean raised his hands in surrender. “I get it. You want some fucking answers.”

“Only no one’s talking, at least not to me.” Caleb nudged Dill off his lap, making it to his feet with a major effort that Dean tried to ignore. “Maybe Heaven’s especially busy, or maybe they just don’t give a fuck anymore.”

“That’s not true.” Dean stood, stepping towards his friend when Caleb swayed.

“It doesn’t matter.” Caleb took a step back, waving off Dean’s help. “I’m done with the lot of them.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Dean folded his arms over his chest, to keep himself from reaching out to steady The Knight as Caleb got his balance.

“It means I’m tired of counting on some fairytale. As far as I’m concerned the dragons, Merlin and his roundtable can go fuck themselves.” Caleb started off the dock, but Dean grabbed his arm.

“Wait.”

“For what?” Caleb didn’t pull away, probably lacked the strength, but Dean felt his muscles twitch with the desire to do so, and forced himself to let his friend go. “You going to petition the Lady of the Lake for an audience?”

“It doesn’t work that way.” Dean felt his own frustration seeping to the surface. He’d waited for her to appear to him as she had when he was desperate and directionless in the past, but whether it was Walsh’s taint of the story, or her fickleness, Dean had not been visited by her presence no matter the amount of times he’d tried to conjure her. “I’m sorry.”

“This isn’t your fault, damn it.” Caleb sighed, roughly running his hands through his hair. “None of this is your fault. I’m the one being a fucking jerk and I know it. It’s just...” He bowed his head for a moment, pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes. Dean hoped he was going to get the conversation he’d been courting, but when Caleb met his gaze once more, guarded amber eyes told him that wouldn’t be the case. “God, it’s just I have this headache I can’t seem to shake.”

Dean reached out and squeezed his friend’s shoulder, officially letting him off the hook. Pushing wasn’t going to bring about the end he wanted. Caleb wasn’t ready to talk and until he was, Dean wasn’t accomplishing anything but making them both more miserable. “Let that be a lesson to you, Damien. No amount of vitamin D is going to work as well as Mac’s magic pills. You should still eat something before climbing on that white horse, dude.”

“Please.” Caleb faked a groan, a hand going to his flat stomach. “No more protein smoothies.”

“You’re safe for now. Mac’s in town with Bobby and Sammy’s making breakfast.” Dean jerked his chin toward the path to the farmhouse. “French toast and bacon await you.”

At the word 'bacon,' Harper and Dill stood at attention, tails furiously wagging. Dill gave a small woof.

"At least someone is excited at the prospect of Sam's cooking." Caleb tried to fake a similar look of eager anticipation, but his Pavlovian response was definitely lacking. "You coming to join us or are you going to subject me to The Scholar's culinary skills and his scrutiny without backup?"

"I'll be in soon." Dean gestured to the dock. "Might get in a few rays first."

"Just no swimming with Boo." Caleb stripped out of his Under Armor jacket and tossed it to Dean. "It's fucking freezing out here."

Dean caught the jacket, swallowing past the lump in his throat to muster his typical tone. "Thanks, Nanny Reava."

Caleb played along, rolling his eyes. "Shut up, smart ass."

Dean slid into the coat, though he doubted anything could ward off the chill that had him in its grip. He watched Caleb disappear into the tree line before turning to gaze over the water. Boo bumped up against his leg with a soft whine. The other dogs had followed after Caleb. Boo the lone holdout despite the mention of bacon. Dean hated to disappoint him, but he wasn't in the mood to toss sticks into the water today. He'd stayed behind to have a one-sided conversation, determined to have his say.

"I'm not doing this without him." Dean knew by now the mysteries of being The Guardian were many. He'd been selected by Jim to be the man's successor, but the pastor had not had the final say in the matter. Dean wasn't sure if The Lady of the Lake was real or smoke and mirrors much like the great Oz, but he'd had encounters with *something*, the mysterious inscription on his hunter's ring, the dreams in which he'd been instructed and led were proof there was indeed a supernatural connection. Then there were the times from when he was a little boy, times he'd never spoken about to anyone, when he'd been drawn to the water, to the refuge of Jim's boat. She'd whispered soothing words and even sung her siren song to him then, though in his childlike naiveté he'd foolishly believed it was his dead mother, hoped upon hope that it was Mary Winchester reaching out from wherever she had been taken. "I'll walk away if you don't fix this."

Boo's tale thumped and he gave another whine. Dean squatted beside him, his eyes still on the pond. "I'm not talking to you, Boy. I'm talking to the lady who lives out there." Dean reached down, his fingers skimming the surface of the water. It might have been a trick of sunlight, but the pool appeared to shift from deep blue to bright silver with his touch. Boo lowered his head over the dock, sniffing suspiciously. Dean felt a surge of anger swell inside him. "Did you hear me?" he yelled. "I'm not fucking doing it!"

Boo skittered away from the pond as the surface solidified, silver spreading from bank to bank until the entire body of water looked like a giant glittering ice rink, the bright sunlight magnifying the effect.

"I believe that's taking Blackberry Winter a litter far, Winchester."

Dean spun around at the unexpected voice. "You."

"I know I'm not exactly who you were expecting." Gideon Lane stepped onto the dock. Boo whined softly, staying tucked against Dean's leg. Dean didn't bother to hide his disappointment, but Gideon smiled just the same, extending an arm in greeting. "It's good to see you again, Dean."

"Any other time, Boy Scout, I would say the same." Dean clasped Gideon's hand, only slightly surprised to find solid flesh, as warm and lifelike as his own despite the fact Gideon had been dead a few years, murdered by Ian Hasting when he took a bullet meant for Dean. Boo accepted the man's physical contact as a release and moved to circle the newcomer, tail wagging.

"I'm sorry Pastor Jim couldn't make it."

"I had another guest in mind." Dean gestured to the pond that had once more reverted to simple water. "But he would have definitely been my second choice."

"Does it help that he sent me?"

Dean folded his arms over his chest, remembering Caleb's earlier words about Heaven being busy. "Let me guess, he's having dinner with Miss Emma and couldn't tear himself away?"

"You know better." Gideon's smile faded. "There are limits to how much he can interfere in this situation, especially considering the circumstances and who may be involved. The fact I was never officially a Guardian gives me some leeway."

"And The Lady?" Dean waggled his ring finger. "Does she know you're here?"

"She can't show favoritism."

"Because of Mordred, Morgana Fey and the whole balance between good and evil that no one ever mentioned to us."

"I wish I could tell you more, but I don't want to jeopardize all you've sacrificed." Gideon held his gaze. "All that myself and others sacrificed."

"I hate to break it to you man, but it's going to be a moot point if someone doesn't give me some answers soon. Caleb's sick, like on the verge of joining you on the other side sick."

"I know." Gideon's face softened. "It's why I'm here."

“Just so me, you, Jim and The Lady are straight when it comes to him I’m not willing to settle for dream world chess games and ghostly meals I can barely remember once I wake up.” Dean appreciated the times he’d spent with Gideon, Pastor Jim and the others that had crossed over, especially when they had been the only respite during his time in Hell, but he wasn’t going to be limited to such random graces with one of his brothers. He drew the invisible line at accepting Sam and Caleb as another loss.

“I’m not here to ask you to settle. I’m here to help as much as I can.” Gideon bent down and rubbed Boo’s big head. The dog not only allowed the attention, but leaned into the former hunter’s legs with a contented sigh. “In case you’ve forgotten, I had brothers, too.”

“I haven’t forgotten.” Dean thought about Ethan, and what he and Elijah would probably have given to be here talking to Gideon, what it would mean to Gideon if they were.

Gideon looked up at him, a knowing look crossing his face. “I appreciate the sentiment, but just like you, I don’t think Ethan or Eli could settle for a stolen moment. It would just make things harder.”

Dean frowned remembering in the past his thoughts proved to be impossible to hide during his meetings with Jim and Gideon. It made him wonder how much of what he was hearing and seeing was taking place all in his head. “Maybe, but I wouldn’t blame you for wanting to see them just the same, if only to let them know you’re okay.”

“Maybe someday.” Gideon straightened. “But today, I’m here for your Triad.”

“You have a way we can help Caleb.”

“I do, but you’re probably not going to like it.”

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

“It involves Reagan Walsh.”

“Of course it does.” Dean couldn’t help sending a glare out over the pond, hoping The Lady of the Lake could read his thoughts as well as Gideon seemed to. “I got to tell you finding out there was a bizarro Guardian was much worse than when I found out about you and the wonder twins vying for Triad status.”

“I know secrets suck, but I don’t have time to commiserate. Reagan wants David’s Sword.”

“David?” Dean arched a brow.

“As in David and Goliath.” Gideon gave an impatient sigh when Dean didn’t respond right away. “David who slew the giant Goliath with a sling shot.”

“I know who David is, Lane,” Dean growled. Pastor Jim was a keen judge of what stories in The Bible would hold his boys attention. “He used Goliath’s own sword to decapitate the giant, then dedicated the weapon to God. I don’t remember it ever being mentioned again, but I’m not really up on my Biblical studies.”

“Many people believe he gave it to his son Solomon for the Temple he would build for God. When Solomon was near death he took the sword from the temple and sent it out to sea on a ship he built. To be recovered later by one of David’s descendants.”

Dean pinched the bridge of his nose, knowing what was coming. “Did this descendent happen to be a hunter?”

“A knight, actually.”

“Lancelot?” Dean was half joking.

“Close. Lancelot’s illegitimate son Galahad.”

“Seriously, Lane?” Dean shook his head. “Is this one of Pastor Jim’s stories? Because I know the old man loved to put a Biblical spin on shit.”

“This is not a spin. Galahad’s mother, Elaine of Corbenic was purportedly from King David’s lineage.” Gideon held Dean’s gaze. “It makes sense if you think about it. Galahad wielded a shield, donned a cross drawn in blood by Josheph of Arimathea. He was one of only three knights allowed to retrieve the Holy Grail, supposedly the last to ever hold the grail here on earth.”

“Shit.” Dean took a seat in the chair, glancing up at Gideon. He knew Pastor Jim, wherever he may be, was sure to be getting a kick out of this. In Jim’s mind The Brotherhood was an extension of the hand of God, knights and dragons emissaries of his good will. “Are you seriously talking Excalibur with me?”

Gideon claimed the other chair. “Jim believes the swords are one in the same.”

“Of course he does.” Dean rubbed his eyes. “Why else would Reagan Walsh want a sword if it didn’t come straight from Arthurian legend?”

“That sword makes the Spear of Destiny look like a magician’s prop. It’s priceless and its power unknown.”

Dean twisted the silver ring on his finger. “Reagan could sell it to the highest bidder, like he had planned for The Holy Lance.”

Gideon leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “I’m not sure it has anything to do with money.”

“You haven’t met Walsh. Trust me; it has something to do with money.”

“No matter his motivation, if he gets that sword, Dean, it would shift the balance. Darkness would gain the upper hand to untold repercussions. No one on our side wants that to happen, and you and I both know that the welfare of one is easily sacrificed when those in power feel that the fate of many is at stake.”

“Wait.” Dean held up a hand, Gideon’s choice of phrasing striking a chord. They had once argued this very philosophy, but it was the more recent disagreement with Castiel that flooded Dean’s thoughts. “Are you saying Reagan going after the sword has something to do with Caleb getting sick?”

“I don’t think its coincidence that Reagan Walsh began his quest for the sword a little over a year ago.”

“About the same time Mac thinks Caleb started getting sick.” Dean thought again of Castiel, the angel’s choice to keep Caleb’s condition from him. “You think the powers that be meant to take Caleb out of the game?”

“Which powers that be is the big question.”

“But why? That doesn’t make sense. What the hell does Caleb have to do with this?”

Gideon licked his lips, glanced at the water before leaning closer to Dean. “Only a descendent of David can claim Goliath’s sword.”

“Okay, so I’m guessing Reagan isn’t related.”

“No, but Amelia Laurent *is* a descendent of Elaine of Corbenic, which puts her on David’s family tree.”

“Caleb’s *mother* Amelia Laurent?” Dean had learned Caleb’s mother’s maiden name from the extensive search he’d done for her lost painting, the one he’d tracked down and given to his friend several Christmases before. “You’re telling me Damien is a descendent of David?”

“The very last of the line.”

Dean swallowed thickly, the implications dizzying. “Caleb can claim the sword.”

“There are many who believe that he can, including Reagan Walsh.”

“I guess it at least explains why Walsh was willing to break centuries of protocol and seek us out. It was never about The Holy Lance.”

“No.” Gideon shook his head. “Maybe The Spear of Destiny was merely an opportunity to meet you, to study the enemy up close. He wanted to know your weaknesses.”



“He figured that out pretty quick. Why not just take Caleb when he had the chance?”

“He doesn’t just need Caleb; he needs you and Sam, your complete Triad.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re not going to find David’s sword tucked away in an attic in a backwoods town like Tennison, Georgia.”

“Let me guess, its whereabouts are somewhere between Avalon and Camelot?” When Gideon didn’t respond, Dean stood, pacing away from the other hunter. “You have got to be fucking kidding me!”

“I don’t know the exact location, Dean, but Reagan does. I do know he needs two keys to get there.” Gideon remained sitting, giving Dean some space. “Your Triad and his. Dark and light working together.”

“For what end?” Dean whirled on Gideon. “Will David’s sword heal Caleb?”

“No, but there is a possibility that something else there will, and Reagan knows your desperate enough to go if there is even a remote chance. More than likely the sword will be his payment for revealing passage there. It’s the one hope Caleb has left. Walsh is counting on it.”

“Is he right?” Dean turned and walked back to the end of the pier, Boo on his heels. “About Damien being healed?”

“Jim thinks so.” Gideon looked up at Dean. “He said Caleb only need claim his rightful seat.”

“Skin Horse.” Dean glanced heavenward, rolling his eyes at the Pastor’s relentless belief in the impossible. He returned his gaze to Gideon. “You realize he’s talking about Siege Perilous.”

“I guessed as much.”

“I need to find Walsh.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Says the guy who hasn’t been busting his ass for the last month trying to find the sonofabitch. The bastard is a fucking ghost, worse than a ghost, because I can actually hunt down and catch one of those.”

“Newsflash.” Gideon stood. “The bastard is here.”

“Here?” Dean looked down at his hand, realizing the silver ring on his finger was tingling, had been for a while. It was a sensation he vividly remembered from Tennison each time he’d been in a close proximity of Walsh. He turned his gaze to the path for the farm. “Sam and Caleb.”

“Wait.” Gideon caught him just as he turned to run for the house. “Don’t let him get you near the water. He’s stronger than you there, with a lot more practice.”

“I know I’m lacking in the guardian skills.” Dean nodded, needing to get to his Triad.

“You *do* have an ace up your sleeve.” Gideon tightened his grip on Dean’s arm, keeping him in place. “Hold onto it until it will work for your advantage.”

Dean didn’t have time to ask what card Gideon was eluding too. A jolt of a different kind came through the ring, a telltale sign of trouble. “Thanks, cryptic, but I have to go.”

Gideon released him with a small smile. “Good luck.”

Dean didn’t used to believe in luck, at least that’s what he told himself growing up. He was of the school that a man made his own fortune, doggedly held onto the belief that if he worked hard enough, was diligent beyond reproof; he could control the shit that took place around him. Dean Winchester would not be at the mercy of fate. It probably explained why he felt responsible for everything bad thing that happened , but as he ran through the woods he cursed the dark cloud of doom that seemed to be hanging over his head these last few months. Just when he was beginning to believe in a light at the end of the tunnel, to see the fruit of all their labor, it seemed as if some force was working to thwart him, to eclipse his Triad’s moment in the sun. Dean might not be able to take out his fury on an invisible, intangible concept he didn’t hold stock in. There was a very real enemy he could confront, a man who had the nerve to trespass on Dean’s home turf. Apparently Reagan Walsh for all his military training knew nothing about the danger of entering a dragon’s lair. Dean would gladly give him his first lesson.

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“Did you and Dean have a fight?” Sam made the inquiry as if he was asking about the day’s weather, hoping Caleb might explain why Dean hadn’t returned to the house. He and Caleb often had breakfast together in New York, though it usually entailed Sam dividing his attention between his bagel, whatever assignment he had pulled up on his laptop, and Caleb’s choice of conversation. Topics ranged from a current hunt to a recent conquest, which may or may not have still been sleeping in Caleb’s bed. Sam often tuned out, but his roommate was unusually quiet, which had been the norm over the past few weeks.

“No.” The answer was too quick, and Caleb didn’t look up from his breakfast. As far as Sam could tell the older hunter hadn’t eaten anything, just pushed the food around the plate in a way to suggest it was disappearing. He suspected Dill and Harper Lee, who were both positioned beneath the table, were benefitting from Caleb’s attempt to look as if he were enjoying the meal.

“Why don’t I believe you?”

“Because you’re suspicious, cynical and think you know everything.” Caleb put his fork down, meeting Sam’s gaze with a straight face. “Typical pain in the ass Scholar.”

Sam frowned over the rim of his coffee cup. “I’m also psychic.”

“Cut the constipated face, Runt. We both know you wouldn’t risk reading me in my delicate condition.” Caleb made a show of picking up his napkin, wiping his mouth. “Did I mention you’re a pansy?”

Sam ignored the insult. “I guess it’s a good thing I don’t have to use my abilities to know Dean’s been driving you a little crazy.”

“Kind of like you are now?” Caleb lifted a brow.

Sam was used to redirection. Dean was a master at it, and he’d learned everything he knew from Caleb. “He thinks he’s going to lose you and he’s running scared.”

Caleb picked up his glass of orange juice, taking a drink before glancing at Sam again. “Something else it doesn’t take a psychic to realize.”

“Then you can’t use your screwed abilities for an excuse as to why you’re completely ignoring the fact he’s a mess.” Sam was well aware he sounded a little like his father, all he lacked was the ‘suck it up soldier.’ The all too recent sense of anguish he’d picked up from his brother that morning, and the nightmare he’d caught glimpses of when Dean appeared in the kitchen looking nearly unhinged kept him from feeling too guilty.

“Sorry, Sam, I guess I’ve been a little preoccupied by the whole dying thing.”

“So you were out at the pond wallowing in self-pity?” Sam put his coffee down, disregarding the flash of anger in Caleb’s amber glare. “Because that’s much better than fighting with Dean.”

“Not that it’s any of your fucking business, but I went to the pond to talk to Jim.”

“Pastor Jim?” The mention of the preacher stole some of Sam’s righteous indignation.

“Yes, and before you make any more asinine assumptions about where my head is, I know he’s dead. I’m not confused about that, trust me.”

Sam didn’t understand turning to the dead when two corporeal people were practically begging for you to talk to them. “Were you expecting some kind of spiritual guidance or one of the pastor’s pep talks?”

“I didn’t go out there for one of the old man’s favorite parables.” Caleb rubbed a hand over his eyes. “Can we just drop it, please?”

Sam felt a twinge of guilt. Caleb was an easy target for his frustration, but the last person he should be using as a whipping boy. “I’m sure Jim would turn all this into some kind of Sermon on the Mount moment.”

A weary smile lifted the corner of Caleb’s mouth. “Caleb, my boy, courage is merely fear that’s said its prayers. Take heart, son, all is not lost as long as you still have hope.”

Grief washed through Sam. Caleb’s imitation and the familiar words enchanting the room like fairy dust tossed in the air. He swore he could smell the aroma of warm cinnamon, the kitchen seeming somehow brighter as if Sam turned he might find the smiling pastor retrieving a pitcher of tea and plate of cookies. He met Caleb’s gaze. “Love works miracles every day; the impossible quakes in its presence.”

“Jim definitely knew how to turn a phrase.” Caleb’s smile faded, his eyes returning to his barely touched plate. “But I’m not sure there’s a miracle in our cards this time.”

“Is that what you told Dean?” Sam suspected his brother already feared as much.

Caleb shook his head. “That’s not something Dean wants or needs to hear right now.”

“So this whole silent routine is your way of protecting him?”

“Not like I have a lot of options.” Caleb picked up a piece of bacon, taking a bite.

“I hate to break it to you, but it’s not working.”

“What the hell do you expect from me?” Caleb dropped the rest of the bacon to the floor, both Harper and Dill’s heads popping from beneath the table, jaws snapping to retrieve it. It reminded Sam of playing Hungry, Hungry Hippos with his brother and Caleb as a kid. They both pretended to hate the game, but pushed their respective hippos viciously to consume the most marbles. The memory had him feeling five again, something that was happening a lot these days as his research skills and books failed him in his quest to find answers for Caleb.

“I expect you to do what Caleb’s do.”

Caleb snorted at the antiquated reference to their childhood. “What are you, six?”

“No, but some things never change.” Sam might have been an adult, but he still held onto that boyhood faith that when it came to Dean, Caleb could make it all better. It was ridiculous that Sam found himself angry at The Knight.

“You don’t think I want to fix this-to spare him?” Caleb slammed his fist on the table, rattling plates and silverware. “You don’t think I want for one fucking time for things to work out for him, for *us*? I want it almost as much as I wanted to keep him from going to Hell, but we both know how that turned out.”

A flash of he and Caleb burying Dean behind the farm seared Sam's thoughts, the feel of his brother's blood warm and thick on his hands had his chest clenching in response. It was the worst moment of his life, worse than watching Jessica burn on the ceiling, worse than finding their father collapsed and not breathing on the hospital floor. "I didn't think I'd live through it, that either of us would live through it."

"But you did-we did." Caleb gripped his wrist, pulling Sam from the holds of the past. Sam met his gaze, watching as The Knight's anger disappeared under a stricken look that told Sam that Caleb's abilities to read him weren't completely compromised. "Just like you and Deuce will get through this."

Sam wanted to protest, to point out like he had to Dean earlier that they weren't giving up, that there were still avenues to explore, there was the faith healer in Minnesota and...

"You were just building a case for me to open up, counselor," Caleb's soft admonition kept him from speaking. "Don't get soft on me now. We can be honest with each other, or I can keep my mouth shut and play make-believe with you, too."

Sam realized it was one of those rare times when Caleb was seeking something from him that Dean could not offer, or maybe that Caleb wasn't willing to ask him to give. It was a facet to their relationship Sam had come to appreciate, especially since they had accepted their position as The Triad-a unique aspect perhaps to Scholar and Knight. He hurt at the idea of losing something he'd only recently learned to treasure. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to die, Sam." Caleb let him go with a grin that didn't reach his eyes. "I'm going to fucking die."

If the draining of color from Caleb's face was any indication, Sam was pretty sure it was the first time the older hunter had spoken the words out loud, or maybe the little bit of food he'd consumed wasn't sitting well. Either way, Sam wanted desperately to say the right thing. "What do you want me to do?"

"What Sammy's do, of course."

"That would be?" The elephant on Sam's chest lightened some with the hint of teasing that had returned to Caleb's voice.

"Keep your big brother on the straight and narrow. Give him something to hold onto when he's ready to call it quits." Caleb held up a hand before Sam could voice a protest that nothing he could do was going to help Dean get past losing yet another person he loved. "And before you get your briefs in a twist, I'm not talking about you abandoning your own life and moving back to the farm. On the contrary, I expect you to stay in school, finish your law degree, have the life you've always dreamed of. In fact, I'm making it one of my last requests."

Sam frowned. "That's not fair."

"So sue me." Caleb smirked. "I can guarantee I won't be around when the litigation clears."

"Explain to me how me finishing school helps Dean exactly?" Contrary to what Caleb assumed, Sam had already considered all the reasons for moving back to the farm if the worst happened, to take up hunting on a more full-time basis, bury himself in the mind-numbing work like he had when Dean went to Hell.

"Because you're Deuce's focus, kind of like the north star when sailors are in trouble at sea," Caleb explained. "You're the one thing he took away from the fire, the thing he still had after Johnny made his deal, the home he came back to after surviving forty years in the pit."

"So you want me to be happy so it will make Dean feel better."

"No, smart ass, I want you to be happy because you deserve to be happy, but I also know Dean will hold it together to make sure you have what you need, even if it hurts like hell in the beginning. Once he sees that you're going to be okay, he'll follow suit and I'll be a faint ache, like an old football injury."

Sam shook his head, wondering if Caleb realized that for all his talk of honesty he was painting a fairytale for himself. "What about The Triad?"

"Ethan will make a great knight; the three of you will make a go of it."

"You weren't on the road with him and Dean."

"I didn't say it would be easy but Jim, Mac and Johnny weren't exactly a traditional Triad. They came together late in the game, but made it work."

"So you truly believe Dean will be content with playing big brother to me, and resolute to his right hand man being Pastor Jim's second string pick."

"Ethan is more than that and you know it."

"Yes, Ethan is a good man. He's become a good friend, but he is not nor will he ever be *you*, and if you think Dean is going to walk away from your death a little bruised and battered but basically intact, then you're an idiot."

"Way to make a guy feel better."

"Hey, you're the one who called no bull-shitting."

"I know Deuce is going to be wrecked. I've buried a brother, I remember it all too well, but I'm not merely counting on you and the Brotherhood to keep him together." Caleb attempted a look of confidence. "Family is the most important thing to Dean."

“Considering the majority of Dean’s family is sitting at this table, you’re not helping your case.”

“I’m talking about a new family, a family he’ll make with Juliet.”

“I wouldn’t count on that scenario.” Caleb’s quest to set Dean up for a life of bliss with the doctor had obviously blossomed into an intricate part of the plan he’d hatched over the last few weeks. Sam thought the odds of Dean staying in a committed relationship was a long shot from the beginning, but understood better than anyone that Caleb’s death would doom Dean and Juliet even if Juliet’s visit earlier that morning hadn’t ended things.

“Why not?” Caleb’s brow furrowed. “Just because you’ve given up on ‘happily ever after’ doesn’t mean it’s not out there. I have it on good authority that Dean finds it with someone, why not Juliet?”

Sam didn’t even have to ask what authority. Joshua had already confided in Sam about Caleb’s belief about the time travelling kid, James and his relationship to their family. “Dean and Juliet broke up.”

“Broke up? What are they in high school?”

Sam rolled his eyes at the familiar scoffing. “Juliet came by this morning.”

“The doc was here?” Caleb’s eyes narrowed, his frown deepening. “When?”

“When you were out at the pond.” Sam pointed to the stack of books on the table. “She brought those by for you.”

Caleb glanced at the collection of poetry. “I take it there was another reason for her visit.”

“She and Dean talked.”

“And?”

“And what? You think I was sitting on the secret step you and Dean utilized to listen to the former Triad’s business?” The knowing look Caleb shot him had Sam sighing, confessing his indiscretion. “She’s taking a new job.”

“Okay,” Caleb hedged.

“A new job in Wyoming.”

“Well, hell.” Caleb ran his hands through his hair. “That throws a fucking wrench into the mix.”

“I hate to break it to you, but betting on Juliet isn’t your only mistake.” Sam waited for The Knight to look at him before continuing. “Dean might have saved me from the fire that destroyed our lives, but it was your understanding of what it was like to lose a parent that gave him some

common ground, a connection to rebuild on. Yeah, he spent most of his life taking care of me, protecting me, but that was because someone was watching out for him. Dean learned how to be a big brother by your example. When I left for Stanford it was you that kept him together. If I'm his compass, then you're his anchor. So no matter what you think he's going to be adrift and lost without you."

Caleb stared at him for a long moment, a vast array of emotions flashing through his gaze before one Sam recognized as reluctant acceptance settled amidst the gold and amber. "Damn, Runt, you been into the books meant for me? That was practically poetic?"

Sam snorted at the humor that was as much for his benefit as Caleb's. "I could have called you the wind beneath his wings."

Caleb shoved his plate away. "I think I just threw up a little."

A sharp rap on the door interrupted Sam's response. He and Caleb shared a confused look as the dogs barked, fleeing their posts under the table for the prospects of company.

"I'm not picking up anything." Caleb tilted his head. "You?"

"No." Sam stood slowly. "There's no energy being emitted."

"Which means someone wanted to be a surprise." Caleb joined the Scholar, reaching for the shotgun Dean kept behind the china cabinet.

"Yet, they knocked?" Sam shook his head, moving to the pantry door where there was always a rifle at the ready, stored on the top shelf within easy reach for the tall men. They crossed the room quickly, avoiding the windows as much as possible. Caleb stood in front of the closed door, and looked through the peephole. Sam remained at the ready- when they opened the door he would be the first line of attack.

"It's Walsh," Caleb whispered. "What the fuck is he doing here?"

Before Sam had a chance to reply or even make a plan with Caleb, the ailing Knight opened the door. Sam reacted by bringing the rifle up, pointing it in the Trinity's Guardian's face even though the thin screen door remained between them. Dill picked up on the tension, growling low in her throat, Harper's hair stood on end along the ridge of his back as he barked a warning.

"You're not welcome here. I can't kill you, but I can make you bleed."

Walsh smiled and put his hands up. "Even though I come in peace? Even though I am an answer to your prayers?" Walsh looked around at the white clapboard home. "Pastor Jim would have let me in."

"Shut the fuck up." Caleb came forward, pushing against Sam's shoulder. Sam stood his ground,



not allowing the Knight to get closer.

"Not looking so good, Reaves." Walsh put his hands down, stuffing them in his pockets in a relaxed manner.

"What do you want?" Sam asked, priming the rifle. Walsh's cockiness on their home turf pissed him off.

"He's here to talk to me," Dean said. Sam caught sight of his brother on the steps from his viewpoint at the door. He must have circled around the house, leading Sam to believe Dean had expected their unwanted visitor. "Ain't that right, Walsh? He's come begging for our help."

"Begging? I don't think so."

Dean moved onto the porch, standing behind Reagan. "Shut the door, Sam. We'll be having this conversation in private."

"Stay where the hell you are, Sam," Caleb ordered. "There's no way we're leaving you alone with him. The other stooges are probably lurking about."

"I came by myself." Walsh glanced down at Boo, who'd come alongside Dean to sit at attention by his feet. "Looks like he's got one watchdog, Reaves. You should probably stand down before you fall down."

Caleb reached for the handle of the screen door, but Sam was quicker. He stepped completely in front of The Knight, locking gazes with Dean. "You sure?"

Dean nodded and much to Caleb's and the dogs' disgruntlement, Sam opened the screen, handed his brother the rifle and closed the door.

"What the fuck, Sam?"

"You heard Dean."

"Dean isn't exactly himself."

"He's still The Guardian."

"Really? You're playing The Guardian card. Weren't you just reaming me a new one for not doing my job where he's concerned? The Knight does not stand by while The Guardian has a clandestine meeting with a highly trained sociopathic assassin. Check the Hunter's Handbook. It's in there."

"I didn't mean to insinuate you were slighting Dean."

"Don't use that tactic on the guy who invented it, damn it." Caleb put the shotgun down, moving to the window in the living room. "I can't see them."

"They probably went to the barn."

"You should have at least made Walsh lose the witch's purse." Caleb pressed a hand against the glass. "We could have had a connection to him."

"It's not like you're up to reading someone with his blocks, and I wouldn't have made much progress without proximity and a visual in my favor." Sam understood he was going to have to relent and step up his practice where his abilities were concerned, especially if they lost Caleb.

"Dean's pissed," Caleb muttered. Sam wasn't sure his friend was even listening to him, too focused on what was taking place beyond his reach. He held back on his warning for Caleb not to tax himself, knowing his words would fall on deaf ears. He was at the ready when The Knight swayed.

"I'm fine." Caleb swore as he lifted a hand to his nose, fingers coming away smeared bright red.

Sam tugged him toward the couch, pushing him down on the cushions before grabbing the box of Kleenex on the coffee table. "I could have told you Dean was not happy to see Walsh and spared you the nosebleed."

Caleb glared, taking the tissue and bending forward so his head hung between his knees. "Smartass."

Sam took a seat beside The Knight. "What could possibly possess him to show up here?"

"Maybe the bastard knows what's coming, like a vulture and prospective carrion."

Sam glanced towards the window. "He said something about being an answer to our prayers."

Caleb turned his head, cutting his eyes towards Sam. "Just like Castiel and Crowley were the answers to our prayers."

"We've been searching for them for a month, and now he just shows up here. He has to have something Dean wants or he'd never risk a confrontation." Sam had spent his winter break reading every bit of information Riley and Bradley had compiled on Walsh and his team. Reagan was a brilliant strategist. Soldiers of his caliber didn't make rash decisions or foolish moves.

"Dean's too smart to let Walsh parade a fucking Trojan horse into our midst." Caleb straightened, and Sam felt the surge of frustration mixed with pain.

Sam frowned. "Which means Walsh obviously knows exactly how desperate we are."

"Not that desperate."

Sam met Caleb's gaze. "Are you sure?"

"We're not considering any plan involving the fucked up Trinity."

"Of course not." Sam shrugged off the idea even as his mind tried to fathom what possible scenario Reagan Walsh could offer them that they hadn't discovered on their own.

"Sam." Caleb gripped his wrist. "Promise me you will stick with me on this point. Swear it."

Sam studied The Knight, the smear of blood above his lip, the dark circles beneath his eyes, eyes that now glowed with fear different from what he'd witnessed during their earlier conversation. This was something more primal, more ingrained than Caleb's self-preservation. The rare display of vulnerability, the sheer anomalous act of him asking for help had Sam desperate to give Caleb the answer he was hoping for, but he couldn't quite bring himself to make a vow he might not be able to keep. "I promise I will do what's best for our Triad."

Caleb let him go. "Screw the Scholar crap, that's not what I asked you and you know it."

Sam cast another glance towards the window, catching an echo of emotion from his brother, a jarring mix of outrage and anxiety. It was the faint swirl of hope that laced through the tangle of heightened feelings that had him returning his gaze to Caleb, more certain than before of his response and resolved that The Knight was not going to be pleased with whatever was taking place in the barn.

"I'm sorry."

Caleb's outward response to his apology was merely to relax into the couch, tilting his head back on the cushions as he brought the tissue to his face once more. His inner reaction was not so subtle. Sam felt the disconnection of their psychic link as sure as the other hunter had slammed an invisible steel vault door between them. Sam only hoped the sharp slice of sudden separation was merely payback for the perceived betrayal and not foreshadowing for a more permanent loss looming like dark storm clouds in the distance.

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"So this is where the great Triad of The Brotherhood had its beginnings."

Dean didn't answer; cradling the rifle his brother had passed him as he watched Walsh survey the two-story farmhouse and the rolling land surrounding it. The fields were lush and green from spring, dogwoods and weeping cherry in bloom. The wrap around front porch would have kept him close to his Triad and given Walsh a glimpse of Miss Emma's garden, which was bursting with the first colors of the season. A protective surge had Dean opting for the barn.

He pointed the barrel of the rifle towards the bulking gray structure in the distance. "We can talk in there."

"Humble beginnings for such greatness." Walsh stuffed his hands in his coat pockets, started walking. "Not that different from how Owen and I grew up actually, just trade the horse shit and sod for sand and fish guts and we practically led a parallel childhood, Winchester."

"I fucking doubt that," Dean growled. When they reached the barn he let Reagan enter first, following along with Boo, who startled one of the two barn cats. The black feline darted in front of them, the retriever giving chase. Dean nearly laughed at the prospect of further bad luck crossing his path. "Martha's Vineyard is a long way from Kansas or Kentucky."

"It was the Cape, actually." Reagan didn't seem surprised that Dean had done his research, or at least read through the files Riley had composed on Walsh and crew since their first encounter. "When my pops wasn't hunting he ran a pub in Bourne, The Trawler, best crab legs and Irish coffee on Buzzard Bay."

"Owen's father was a partner in the business." Dean said, showing Walsh he wasn't revealing anything Dean didn't already know. He really wasn't in the mood for idle chitchat, but would let Reagan take the lead for now.

"In name only." Reagan walked the perimeter of the barn, taking in every detail. He stopped in front of the stall holding Sam's horse. The big bay gave a friendly nicker, hanging his head over the gate, no doubt hoping for an apple slice or sugar cube. "Owen's old man did two things well, run traps out of his fifth generation lobster boat and run up a tab at the bar."

"He's been known to take fingers." Dean lied, not liking the idea of Reagan touching something his brother loved. He placed the rifle by his side, propping it against the Impala, which he'd pulled into the barn last week to give himself something to do over the endless days when he felt useless in every other aspect of his life. He'd already changed the oil, and replaced spark plugs, brake pads and rotors that had miles of life left in them.

Walsh ignored his warning, running a hand over Festivis's white blaze. "I guess you know Jonah's blueblood Boston family had a big beach house on the island, and stayed there every year during the on-season?"

Dean managed a bored look. "It was the only connection between the three of you before your military service."

Reagan made his way over to the Impala, resting his hands on the Chevy's hood. "What your computer geeks probably didn't tell you was that Jonah's mom, like so many of her rich bored peers, liked to slum during her vacations away from their fancy boarding schools. My old man was quite the Casanova back in the day, stole more than his fair share of summer girls' hearts, not to mention their virtues."

"Jonah's your brother." Dean hadn't seen that one coming, but supposed in a twisted way it made sense.

Reagan shrugged. "Not exactly something Jonah's mother and her socialite family liked to advertise, hence why Jonah kept the family name and his ties to my father on the down low, but me and my dad still made sure to have some influence."

"Like hunting and the navy."

"You know how it is, Dean. Boys want to please their fathers and emulate their big brothers. The fact Jonah started showing strong psychic abilities at an early age drew the attention of The Guardian at the time, who took it as a sign and made sure to keep Jonah close, making sure Owen, myself and Jonah stayed close."

Dean felt his anger stir at the undeniable fact there were similarities in their background. "Why the hell are you sharing your fucked up family tree with me, Walsh?"

"To point out that we really do have some things in common, to prove to you I'm a family man, too."

"You came all this way to share your softer side. What next, manis and pedis, an invite for lunch? "

Reagan laughed. "I figured you'd be glad to see me seeing as how Owen tells me you've made quite the effort to track us down this last month."

"I've been looking for you."

"Jonah and I have been out of the states, doing a favor for God and country. Just wrapped the mission and made it back yesterday."

"Owen didn't want to join in the fun?" Dean's mind raced; putting together the possibility that Reagan's crazy Knight might have had a secret mission of his very own to carry out. If Walsh was telling the truth, this piece of information could be the ace that Gideon had alluded to.

"The government no longer appreciates Owen's particular talents."

"That explains the dishonorable discharge."

Reagan didn't take the bait, but the almost imperceptible shift in his stance told Dean what he needed to know. The flash of anger in his blue eyes wasn't so easy to hide. Owen was most definitely a weakness. "So I take it you must know about my quest for The Sword of David."

"Aren't you a little old to keep up this Indiana Jones fantasy of yours."

"Your resources are better than I expected. I was hoping to keep you in the dark a little longer, wait until you were really desperate."

"Like you hoped to keep me in the dark about your coven friends?"

"You know about Sida?"

"The question is, do *you* know about Sida?"

"I know she's loyal to The Trinity and The Order, an Advisor of sorts, like your witch."

Dean snorted. "Only I sure as hell ain't fucking Sawyer."

"You really want to discuss my love life when Caleb's looking worse than some of the casualties I saw on my recent trip to Al Tifar."

"I want you to say what you came here to say so you can get the fuck off my property."

"You know I want the sword, but it's a complicated process in getting to where it's located."

"It takes both dark and light to open the door."

Reagan nodded. "Not only the Trinity and Triad, but an ancient spell and two very powerful witches to cast it."

"So you weren't just stringing Sida along to get closer to my Triad."

"Sida and I have history of sorts. She was the first piece of the puzzle in attaining the sword of David. Jonah saw her with a grimoire that held the spell. When he also foresaw an opportunity for her to assist you, I took it. It's not like you would be much use to my plan if you weren't breathing."

"Funny you should say that."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we may have a problem. You're down a witch. Sida is dead."

"What?"

"You think Caleb looks bad, you should have seen your girlfriend laid out on that morgue slab. The shower curtain she was wrapped in didn't do much to keep her from feeding the fish and other scavengers in the lake where her body was dumped." Dean knew he was being a cold bastard, but it was worth it to watch Walsh's face flush, sweat dot along his upper lip as he struggled to work out if Dean was lying.

Walsh clenched his hands into fists. "What kind of game are you playing, Winchester?"

"No game." Dean shook his head, taking note that Owen was not Walsh's only weakness. Reagan looked gutted, and it told Dean that he had not had a part in killing Sida. "Your girl's gone, pull up some recent newspapers from that little town you two liked to use as a secret hook

up in Arkansas and take a gander. While you're at it I suggest you find another *Advisor* pretty damn quick if you want my Triad's help in getting to the sword."

"If you hurt her..."

"You'll what?" Dean slammed his hand on the Impala. "Kill me? We both know that's not an option, and if you even think about going after someone I care about, there's no way in hell I'll work with you, possible cure be damned and we both know you're not getting your hands on the sword without Caleb."

"You've made a fucking mess of things, Winchester."

"Me?" Dean laughed, shook his head. "I think you might want to take a long look in the mirror, Walsh. You're the one that brought her coven into this."

"I had no reason to hurt Sida."

"Then that's just another thing you and I have in common. I didn't touch the bitch, but that didn't stop her coven from running to me when she disappeared, thanks in part to your brilliant scheming."

"If not you, then who?"

"Damned if I know." Dean shrugged. Gideon was right about the information. He didn't know how the truth of Owen's guilt would serve him, but having something to hold over Walsh was the only possible advantage they might have in this whole convoluted mess. He'd be in contact with Sida's coven as soon as he was rid of Walsh, insuring they kept their mouths shut about Owen if they wanted the Brotherhood's help in exacting justice. "Maybe it was someone who had something to gain from her death? It's often someone close to the victim, a boyfriend or lover. After I questioned her BFF Marta, I thought it might be you, of course that was before you started to tear up."

"That's why you were looking for me?"

Dean gave a sharp nod. "The information about the sword only just came today with my morning news."

"I'll have to secure another witch, ones comparable to Sida's power." Reagan began a small tight pace with perfect cadence. Dean gave him credit for reining his emotions in so quickly, obviously another skill he'd gained in service of God and country. Death did little to shake a seasoned warrior, but betrayal was another story all together. "You could be right about someone with something to gain. Sida's murder could mean there is another player in the game. Someone who wants to see us fail in our objective."

"You mean the angels?"

“Or demons.” Reagan took one more sharp turn before regarding Dean. “There are those on both sides who have their reasons for wanting us to fail.”

“Yet none of that is reason enough for you not to go after Goliath’s Sword? You must have one hell of a deal worked out for that blade.”

“My motivations are none of your concern. Caleb swears to turn the sword over to me and we take you to the place where we all get what we want.”

“And where is that exactly?”

Walsh seemed to regain some of his swagger, having compartmentalized his lover’s demise. “The Fisher King’s Castle, of course.”

“Corbenic? The Grail Castle?” Dean recalled Jim’s stories of how the legendary tower often appeared and disappeared at will in Arthurian verse. It was the birthplace of Galahad, the end of many a knight’s great quest. “That makes perfect sense.”

If Walsh picked up on Dean’s incredulity and sarcasm he ignored it in lieu of acting as if they were going on a regular mission. “I have Sida’s grimoire and the location of one of the secret doors that allows passage there. You’ll need to bring your Triad, your witch, and most importantly our leverage.”

“What leverage?”

“The Holy Lance.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Why do you think I needed you to find the damn thing in the first place? Raphael was getting too close. I knew you’d do the honorable thing and the lance would be in safe hands with your buddy Castiel until we needed. You’ll need to call for it back, by the way.”

“So finding The Spear of Destiny wasn’t some big ruse to get closer to me?” Dean didn’t bother mentioning he and his angel buddy were not exactly on speaking terms.

“No.” Reagan looked insulted. “I needed The Lance.”

“What the hell for?”

“To negotiate terms with The Fisher King.” Walsh moved around the car to stand in front of Dean. “He’s not just going to kindly invite us into his castle.”

“I have to still be dreaming.” Dean shook his head. “This is all part of my nightmare.”



“Here are the coordinates where we’ll meet.” Walsh held out the slip of paper to him and Dean’s thoughts turned to Juliet. It was the second time that day he’d been offered directions that could drastically alter the course of his life. One path he doubted he’d ever have the luxury of exploring, the other he was being left no option but to accept.

He took Reagan’s note, gripping it in his fist. “When?”

“Two days from now. I’ll need a little time to secure Sida’s replacement.”

As much as Dean hated to admit it, time was not something they had in excess. Still, Caleb had only just started to regain his strength. “Caleb needs to recover.”

“Recover?” Walsh shook his head. “We both know that’s not going to happen. If anything, the sooner you get him on the road the better. Giving him a mission might work miracles for your knight because he sure as hell isn’t going to let you and your brother go off on your own. If he croaks, at least he does it on the battlefield with his boots on. It’s been my experience that sheer determination can go a long way in fending off a reaper.”

Mac had just approved a walk for Caleb. He’d be unlikely to sign off on a trip to fucking Camelot, but Dean would concede Walsh had a point. The idea of Dean and Sam working with Walsh would light a fire under Damien. Dean had reluctantly agreed to his best friend’s request to leave the hospital, he never said he would let him go peacefully into the night. “This better not be some kind of trick, Walsh.”

“And if it is?” Reagan grinned, though it looked more grimace. “You’re going to what? Kill me?”

“You’ll only wish I had that option.”

Walsh had the nerve to slap him on the back, like they were two old buddies making plans for their next meet up. “If it makes you feel better bring your security blanket...I mean *detail*. You can be damn sure after what happened to Sida I’ll have a couple of my best hunters to watch my Trinity’s sixes.”

Dean really wanted to tell Walsh that stationing a couple of hunters to stay behind really wasn’t going to do him much good when he was taking Sida’s murderer along for the ride. Instead he kept quiet, except for the muttered ‘bastard.’ He watched Reagan slip out of the barn before turning to Boo, who’d abandoned his halfhearted pursuit of the felines to rest on his boots.

“Any ideas on how to break this to Sammy and Damien?”

Boo tilted his head thoughtfully, letting out a fretful whine. “That’s what I thought.” Dean ran a hand over his hair, making his way towards the barn door. “I’m screwed.”

In the end he made his Triad wait until the others arrived at the farm to tell the whole convoluted story. Ethan and Joshua made it by late afternoon, Eli and Riley flying in on separate flights that got them to the house by eleven. Mac and Bobby rounded up the group of solemn faces surrounding the round table in The Tomb. It was nearing the witching hour.

“Don’t hold us in suspense much longer, kid. Your buddy’s about to fall asleep in his warm milk.” Bobby lifted his mug towards Caleb who was sitting, rather slouching at Dean’s left side.

Caleb instantly straightened, picking up his own weakened coffee and glaring at Bobby over the rim. “I’m fine.”

It was a rote statement, one they’d all taken to ignoring. Sam rolled his eyes, sharing a look with Joshua, which told Dean his Advisor might have some insight as to why his Knight and Scholar seemed to not be speaking to one another. He’d pump Josh for information later.

“No one’s going to feel like catching a few z’s after the story I’m about to tell you.”

“That’s for sure.” Riley was practically bouncing out of his seat at the far end of the table. Dean had been forced to fill the kid in on some of the details when he asked him to bring all the research he had on The Fisher King, David and Goliath and Galahad. “It’s got all the makings of a George Lucas saga with a Charlton Heston epic spin. Think The Ten Commandments meets the The Knights of The Round Table.”

“Indy, I think I asked you not to talk unless I asked you a question.” Dean held up a finger when Riley opened his mouth. He could not be expected to get through the whole sorted tale with Riley interrupting at every whim. He was starting to regret having okayed Bradley’s two week trip to study some bizarre culture in the Amazon with a graduate class he was taking. “We also agreed that when asked a question you would only respond with facts, and not your typical enthusiastic commentary.”

“I’ll keep a leash on the kid, Corleone,” Ethan spoke up, putting a big hand on Riley’s neck and giving the college student a little shake. “Seeing as his usual handler isn’t here to rein him in.”

“Bradley’s not my keeper.” Riley knocked Ethan’s hand away, wagging his finger with the silver band. “I’m a full-fledged hunter.”

“Boys, please let Dean tell us what he needs to tell us so we can all get some rest and a fresh start in the morning.” Mac motioned for Dean to continue, glancing to his son before cutting his eyes back to Dean. “This has been a long day for everyone and the anticipation is not making it any easier.”

“You mean dread, don’t ya, Dad?” Caleb looked up at Dean. “Anything involving The Trinity has got to be bad news. The fact The Guardian made everyone, including his Triad, wait to hear it only means it’s beyond typical bad.”

“It’s not all bad.” Dean met Caleb’s gaze. “In fact, some of it is just up your alley, Damien.”

“There’s going to be naked chicks with kinky fetishes?”

“There is chainmail and swords.”

“Dean,” Sam chimed in and Dean shot his brother a weak grin.

“Just setting the mood, Bro.”

“Now that you have the children’s attention, could you please continue?” Joshua tugged at his tie. “Some of us have planes to catch.”

Dean hated to break it to Josh that his plans to head back to Virginia where Carolyn was waiting out the last couple of weeks of her pregnancy with her parents were going to have to be put on hold yet again. Instead, he took a deep breath and tried to conjure some of Pastor Jim’s essence. After all, he’d listened to the former Guardian regale them with similar stories in this very room

The Tomb, though changed through the years, still gave off a foreboding vibe of history. The smell of the old journals from hundreds of hunters long since passed that lined the walls of bookshelves, portraits of the more famous of their peers and the scarred wood table that Jim liked to pass off as his own version of The Round Table told the story of those that came before them, whispered possibilities of those that would long follow in their footsteps.

Dean let all that fall away, concentrating on the painting on the far wall that Caleb had done for the pastor the Christmas before he left for Auburn. In it fierce colorful dragons circle above a great white capped lake, the thick fog swirling off the water barely allowing the view of a giant castle in the distance, the tip of its gray tower glistening in the few rays of sun piercing the mist. Dean vaguely wondered if his friend hadn’t had the Grail Castle in mind, though he imagined it was more the castle where Prince Samuel lived. No matter, it gave Dean the fortitude to tell them the story Gideon shared, to lay out the plan that would hopefully ensure his Triad had a chance to make their own mark on The Brotherhood.

“A descendent of Galahad?” Caleb was the one to break the silence that had fallen over the group when Dean finished a very condensed explanation of what Gideon and Reagan shared. “Surely you realize Walsh knows you’re desperate, Deuce. The sonuvabitch is yanking your fucking chain.”

“He didn’t tell me the part about Galahad and David,” Dean said, wearily. “Gideon did.”

“Gideon?” Caleb and Ethan asked at the same time, their tones vastly different. Caleb’s still held doubt, but the police detective’s tone was full of awe.

“You saw Gideon?” Ethan continued before Dean could say another word. Dean could imagine the confusion and hope his statement might have stirred in Lane’s best friend. “When? Where?”

“It’s a Guardian thing,” Dean knew the explanation was lame. He felt Eli’s disappointed gaze on him so he turned to the professor. “I know I’m being a hypocrite and probably an ass, too, but I really don’t have time to get into that now.”

“This happened at the pond after I left?” Caleb asked.

Dean nodded. “I know it sounds out there, but…”

“It’s true.” Bobby’s confident declaration had all eyes going to him. “I’m sorry, Junior, but Daniel Elkins traced your ancestors extensively after your parents were killed. Hell, I helped the crazy bastard before I realized what he was planning. We focused on Seaver, but he had your mother’s family tree tossed in there for good measure. It was one of the things the pastor used against him when Daniel tried to convince The Brotherhood you should be… well, you know. Jim made a compelling argument that you should be given a chance because of your lineage, not in spite of it.”

“Dad?” Caleb turned on Mac and Dean hoped that the doctor could plead ignorance.

“I truly believed the last thing you needed was to have more expectations placed upon you, Son.”

Dean didn’t know where to pity the former Scholar or be pissed at him. Caleb had obviously quickly settled on the latter.

“So you were okay with me knowing I was descended from demon kind, but not that I had ties to The Knights of The Round Table?”

“I would have preferred you never known any of it, Caleb. None of it has anything to do with who you are.”

“Yet, it has everything to do with what’s happening to me now.” Caleb turned back to Dean.

“Isn’t that right, Deuce? I mean, Johnny taught us there are no coincidences and the fact Walsh is after a sword only I can get him has to have something to do with the fact that I find myself in a position where I might just be desperate enough to give it up.”

Dean nodded. “My money’s on that theory.”

“That’s because you’re no fool.” Caleb stood slowly, scooting his chair back. “Neither am I. Daniel Elkins’s crazy theories screwed with me most of my life. I sure as hell ain’t going to let them fuck up what time I’ve got left.”

Dean didn’t try to stop his Knight from leaving, but dissuaded Mac from following Caleb with a piercing look when the doctor started to get up from the table.

“I’m not finished here.”

The former Scholar did not hide his displeasure, but stayed seated just the same. Mac might have had all the authority in the hospital, but there was no mistaking who was in charge here.

“We need to make a plan for when we meet up with Walsh and his Trinity.” Dean turned to his brother, offering Sam the slip of paper Regan had given him. “These are the coordinates. I want you to get a feel for the area. There has to be something unique about it.”

“Okay.” Sam took the note. His brow furrowed but he held back on pointing out that Caleb had just refused to go along with Walsh’s plan. Dean appreciated his restraint. “What about The Spear of Destiny? You said Walsh said we had to bring it.”

Dean glanced to Joshua. “You got any ideas in that area?”

“I might. The Spear is technically yours to govern. We may be able to use a Triad spell to call for it if Castiel doesn’t want to cooperate.”

“Why wouldn’t Cas cooperate?” Riley asked. “He’s like your own personal guardian angel.”

“Let’s just say Castiel may have bigger obligations to consider.” Dean didn’t give Riley a chance to question him further. “Now is a good time for you to fire up your power point presentation, Indy. We all need to be on the same page.”

“Wait,” Joshua interrupted before Dean could make for the door to The Tomb. “You said Walsh mentioned a spell book? I could call my grandmother and Missouri. If such a grimoire exists, they may know of it.”

“That’s a good idea.” Dean nodded. “I want you to get in touch with Adam. I’d feel better if he was there to cover your coven assets as they were.”

“I’ll have you know I’m quite capable of covering my own assets, but this level of spell work might pique his interest. So much so that he would be willing to overlook the company.”

“I’m sure Glenda the good witch can tolerate her wicked crafting cousins for a short time.”

“I was speaking of you and Caleb.”

Dean snorted, having walked right into that one. Joshua loved reminding them that Adam was not impressed with them in the least. “Just tell him we’ll be heading out tomorrow night.” Dean turned to Ethan. “Crockett, you and Bobby are coming along for security detail.”

“I’d like to come.” Eli lifted his hand as if he were in a classroom asking a teacher for permission. Dean guessed it was a hard habit to break.

“Sorry, Professor. You have to sit this one out.”

“Why?” Elijah lowered his hand, his glance going to Sam and then back to Dean.

“For the same reason The President and The Vice President always take separate planes.” Dean had a responsibility to The Brotherhood. With Gideon dead, Elijah was the only person Dean trusted to take his place. “I wanted you here in case the current Guardian crashes and burns.”

“What about Owen and Sida’s murder?” Ethan asked, effectively changing the subject. “How can you be sure that Sida’s coven won’t try to handle things on their own, or at least let the cat out of the bag on your theory?”

“I already talked to Lawrence. I explained to him how stupid any such move would be on their part. They’re all about keeping secrets so staying quiet that we think Owen was responsible for Sida’s death shouldn’t be a problem.” It had not been difficult to persuade the witch once Dean mentioned that Walsh claimed to have access to an ancient grimoire, one that had belonged to Sida. It seemed that Lawrence had no idea that one of their sacred texts was missing. “They understand what’s at stake and are willing to do what it takes to cut all ties to the hunting world. They’ll play along and keep their mouths shut.”

“You realize this spell will undoubtedly demand the dark arts?” Joshua glanced from Sam to Dean. “There are things I have sworn not to do, rituals I will not perform if it means tainting my family, or worse, cursing future generations.”

“There’s a reason they need both light and dark, Josh.” Dean was certain any nefarious works would most likely be left to the Trinity’s crafter. “You won’t get your hands dirty.”

“What about me?” Mackland folded his hands on the table, leaning forward to make sure Dean understood he was not going to concede this point so easily. “Past regime or not, you can’t dismiss me as if I don’t hold a grand stake in this plan.”

“Just like you didn’t dismiss me and Sam when you carried out Caleb’s treatment plan at the hospital?”

“That’s not fair,” Mac stated quietly, his dark eyes holding Dean’s. “I did what I had to do in hopes of saving Caleb’s life.”

“Then you should understand that’s exactly what I’m trying to do now.” Dean knew exactly what he was putting on the line. His, Caleb’s and Sam’s lives were only the tip of the iceberg. It gave him a new understanding and appreciation for Pastor Jim. “Just like with Elijah, I need you here in case we don’t make it back. I can’t risk either of you. You’re the only ones who can pull The Brotherhood through if the worst happens.”

Dean recognized Mac’s impending protest and rushed to cut the former Scholar off before he could launch into one of his epic speeches. “You know I’m right, Mac. Losing one member of a Triad is enough to put the sharks in a frenzy; something eradicates all three it’s going to take someone they respect, someone who’s used to holding the shit together to prevent a fucking blood bath.”

“Kid’s making sense, Doc,” Bobby broke in. Dean watched him rub a hand over his grizzled beard. “It sucks ass, old stinky ass, but you and I have been around this bend before. You know I’m going to watch out for the boys, just like always.”

Dean watched the two old friends share a long look. He could imagine the exchange of memories taking place, had been witness to most of them. Not for the first time he wondered at their ability to carry on when so much had been taken from them. He longed to promise them both something to look forward to, a time when they would somehow reap the rewards of all their service and steadfast loyalty, not just to The Brotherhood but to Dean and his brother, but then Caleb had always been the one to put stock in such a future.

“Okay, Dean,” Mac finally conceded, looking up at him. “We’ll do it your way.”

Dean managed a half smile as a white flag. “Now if I can just get your pigheaded son to agree, we’ll be a go.”

He found Caleb in Jim’s old room, Dean’s room now. He was in the small sitting area at the pastor’s desk in front of the bay window.

“Still courting ghosts, Damien?” Dean crossed the room, hitched a hip on the corner of the desk. He gestured to Jim’s Bible clasped in Caleb’s hand. “Probably more of the Pastor left in there than out at the pond.”

“I stayed in here after you went to Hell.” Caleb told him, his eyes staying focused on the scenery out the window. You could make out part of Miss Emma’s garden, a red bird perched on one of the wild bird feeders hanging from the lower branch of a massive oak, which was one of many that stood sentry around the old house. “Partly because I couldn’t stand the sight of the door to your room from my own bed; mostly because I hoped something of the old man might rub off on me, give me a reason to keep going.”

“I think I catch glimpses of him sometimes.” Dean fingered the silver letter opener on the desk, traced over the reading glasses no one had the heart to toss away. “Usually in the morning when I’m not quite awake. White head bent over his sermon notes, crazy hair sticking up all over the place.”

“I used to hear Beethoven and Bach.” Caleb glanced over to the ancient record player the pastor used every morning to fill the room with classical music, sometimes jazz depending on his mood. “Thought Sam was messing with me a time or two, but then neither of us was really in the mood for practical jokes.”

Dean took his hand from Jim’s things, refocused on Caleb who was staring at him now. “Look, man, I’m sure the pastor would have told you the whole thing about David and Galahad eventually. Just like he would have explained the Guardian stuff to me and The Scholar gig to Sammy. Meg and demon kind robbed him of his opportunity.”

“I’m not pissed at Jim, Deuce.” Caleb put the Bible back onto the desk, crossing his arms over his chest. “The pastor is the first person I remember from when I woke up at the psych hospital, the first person who didn’t seem interested in me as a potential psychotic murder suspect. He promised he was going to help me that he would get me out of there no matter what it took.”

“It took getting Doctor Mackland Ames on the case.” Dean probably owed Mac an apology for many reasons. The former Scholar had been instrumental in saving Caleb’s life the first time around, all of their lives on subsequent occasions.

Caleb’s mouth twitched. “Dr. Ames knew how to work a hospital even back then, where his clout didn’t take him, the Ames fortune did well to grant him access and favor. For a long time I thought he was some kind of rich do-gooder, wanting to prove to the pastor he was worthy of his divine cause.”

“They did the best they could by us.” Dean was thinking of his father as well.

“They did.” Caleb leaned back in the chair, stared at Dean. “If they had dumped that Galahad spiel on me when I was older, it wouldn’t have been some grand reassurance, a way to fight off my insecurities. Hell, I would have thought they were just helping me because of what I might potentially do for The Brotherhood. It sounds fucked up saying it out loud, but knowing about the demon shit actually made me more confident in the fact that someone wanted. If I was part of everything they stood against, tainted by the enemy they fought to destroy, and they still wanted me around, then I had to have some kind worth.”

“You mean besides your excellent nanny skills?” Dean knew Damien well enough to know what his friend was saying was true. Jim in all his wisdom probably understood the same.

“Screw you.”

Dean laughed. “Or they could have been afraid your already big head might explode and that your cockiness would have reached epic levels when you realized that you were the great to the tenth power grandson of Lancelot.”

Caleb’s mouth twitched. “Johnny would have had his hands full.”

“As if he Dad didn’t already.”

“For all your old man’s faults, all the times he gave me hell, he never let me doubt that I was the right choice for The Knight. He used to say I was the real thing.”

“That didn’t have anything to do with your connections to Galahad, dude. Dad didn’t give a shit about who might fall out if he shook your family tree. He knew you, the man you are, Noah Seaver and King David be damned.”



Caleb held his gaze for a long moment, finally giving a quick nod of ascension. “You really think Walsh is going to get us to the Grail Castle?”

Dean smirked. “Don’t tell me the prospect doesn’t get your blood flowing?”

“If by blood flowing you mean make me nauseous, then yeah.”

“Come on. I know you better than anyone. You get stiff just thinking about seeing Excalibur.”

“That might be true, but in case you haven’t forgotten I’m not exactly up for a trip to Avalon. Hell, I was going to be happy if you and I made it to The Red Caboose once more before my time was up.”

“I never thought I’d say this, but The Red Caboose has nothing on this trip. We’re talking Camelot, The Castle Corbenic. Fuck, Damien we might even see a dragon. This is like your life long fantasy coming true.”

“I’ll have you know my life-long fantasy involves canvases of raw silk, half a dozen Victoria’s Secret models and lots and lots of edible paint.”

“Bullshit,” Dean countered. Caleb might play at the perpetual Casanova, but Dean knew what made the real Damien tick. “The only way this could be deader on for Caleb Reaves is if Riley promised you The Fisher King’s Royal Guard was the fucking Musketeers.”

After a long moment, Caleb lifted a brow. “You really think we might see a dragon?”

“At this point, I’m not willing to discount running into old Merlin himself, but you’ll never know if you don’t come along.”

“And if it’s a case of willing spirit but failing body?” Caleb gestured to his head. “As much as it kills me to admit this to you, Kiddo, I was lying down at the pond this morning because once I walked out there, I didn’t have the energy to make it back. I was seriously considering calling you to come get me when you showed up.”

Dean didn’t even blink. “Sam and I will carry you if we have to.”

“Okay.” Caleb swallowed hard, his mouth twitching with what Dean recognized as a steel determination to keep emotions at bay.

“Okay,” Dean echoed, not trusting his own voice.

“But no sissy cradle shit.” Caleb pointed a finger at him. “Piggy back or fireman carry and only then if I’m completely unconscious.”

“Deal.” Dean reached out his hand and Caleb clasped his forearm.

“The fucking Knight of The Brotherhood has a reputation to protect.”

Dean grinned, feeling steadier. “Damn straight.”

((O)))

Eli’s little psychic trick of distancing the pain The Knight was feeling had performed a small miracle, or Caleb was working really hard to save face. Dean could almost lull himself into believing Caleb was back to his old self as he and Sam had seemed to call a cease fire on whatever argument the two had going on. The ritualistic rock paper scissor showdown for shotgun before leaving the farm led Joshua doomed to the backseat. Dean couldn’t blame his Advisor for begging to ride with Ethan and Bobby in Ethan’s much roomier SUV, but he needed Harry Potter so they could discuss their game plan.

“It shouldn’t come as a surprise that this lake is the location of a doorway. Legend has it that a ‘lady of the lake’ takes a sacrifice from Lake Ronkonkoma each year,” Sam explained from the backseat. Dean suspected his brother had thrown the match with Caleb, though he did a good job of acting pissed about the loss, pretending to brood as he used his notebook to pull up the research he’d put into their location over the last couple of days. “The most widely accepted myth is that the spirit is that of an Indian Princess, but when I dug deeper I found that men disappeared there long before the 1800’s, that the Indians believed it is possessed by one of their water gods. Either way, the facts don’t lie. There have been over thirty deaths just since 1960, all of them male. Doorway or not, it’s up our alley.”

“I’m glad you approve the setting, Runt, but I’m not planning on being the next sacrifice,” Caleb answered.

“No worries there. You are extremely over her age range. She only likes young men,” Joshua assured from the back seat. Dean caught his smirk in the rearview mirror. “Contrary to your Peter Pan syndrome, you no longer fall in that category.”

“Still younger than you,” Caleb retorted, shifting in his seat. “You okay over there, Deuce?”

Dean didn’t know if he was okay. He was tense and wary of dealing with The Trinity as they grew closer to their meeting place. Even with the back up and Adam, he hated feeling as if they were somehow at a constant disadvantage. His best friend needed a cure, but Dean wondered at the price. He knew it wasn’t just the Sword of David. He had prayed to Castiel in the hopes the angel would not only return The Spear of Destiny, but also answer some questions. Cas never materialized, but Dean found the Holy Lance by his bed the morning they were to leave. There was also a small leather pouch containing a pile of thirty gold pieces. Dean wasn’t sure if it was some strange apology from Cas or if it held another meaning, either way Dean didn’t miss the irony that Judas had sold Jesus out for a similar pay off. He felt Caleb’s expectant gaze and glanced in the rearview mirror again.

“Josh, you got any more ideas about what exactly this spell is going to do?” Shifting the conversation was better than lying.

“Mother said such spells, ones that boast time walking and plane shifting are extremely rare, taboo even. Most crafters discount them as either impossible or too costly in the grand scheme. My grandmother was more forthcoming. She said she’d seen one performed once as a girl. Without going into great specifics she warned us to tread carefully or face grim repercussions.”

“We know time travel is possible,” Caleb spoke up. “James is proof of that—proof you can cast such a spell.”

“I will once again remind you that *James* is not a reliable reference point seeing as we had no proof of his claims that I sent him back in time. Secondly, if I did cast that spell in an unknown future, it was from Malachi Harris’s spell book, proving my Grandmother’s caution valid, and your point moot considering Sam destroyed the manual. Third, and most importantly, that was not a time walking spell, but more along the lines of soul swapping. I obviously would have used a sort of locating spell, one that would have called a familiar, displacing people more so than opening an entire doorway.”

“So you admit it?” Caleb turned completely so he could lean on the seat and stare at Josh. Dean didn’t have to look at The Knight to know he was grinning, enjoying goading their Advisor.

“I admit to nothing.” Joshua growled. “I also continue to find it insulting that you take a stranger of questionable character word over your own brother.”

“Hey, that kid of questionable character could wind up dating your daughter someday, Josh,” Dean couldn’t resist getting in his own jab. Although the brother reference, said tongue and cheek, had his teasing sounding a bit more serious than he intended. “Hold off on the character assassination until you actually meet him.”

“I don’t intend on meeting him, besides as if you didn’t already know considering some in our company find it impossible to keep a secret, Carolyn and I will be welcoming a *son*, not a daughter. So no worries.”

“Sorry, Josh, it just sort of slipped out,” Sam broke in.

“You told him?” Josh sounded genuinely shocked. “I was referring to the loose lipped psychic.”

“Guess your unfair assumptions about people aren’t always dead on, Josh.” Caleb drummed a hand on the seat before turning around to face the front once more with a satisfied smirk. “You owe your brother and James an apology.”

“Can we just return to the important matter at hand?” Sam sighed. “Lengthy drive or not we’ll be in Long Island before we like.”

“Sammy’s right.” Dean cut his eyes to Caleb. “Didn’t you tell Mac you’d nap on the way?”

“Nap?” Caleb rolled his eyes. “Seriously, dude? What am I, five?”

From the rearview mirror Dean could see Joshua give a quick glance to Sam. “The theories I was able to form with Adam are anywhere from a creating a bond with someone or something in the place the Trinity intends for us to go to opening some sort of portal. It’s possible, since Caleb is connected to Galahad, that they’ll use his blood as a trigger.”

“So we’re back to me being some kind of sacrifice? Excalibur or not, I knew this was going to go badly for me.”

“No one’s taking your blood or anything else, Damien.” Dean hadn’t brought his best friend on this goose chase for him to wind up in worse shape than he had begun. He took his eyes from the road long enough to find Joshua’s gaze in the mirror once more. “What you’re telling us is you really have no idea what we’re going to walk into.”

“Basically, yes.”

“Did Lawrence or Marta have any ideas?” Sam leaned forward so that his head appeared in the middle of the bench seat.

Dean pushed the gas a little harder in aggravation. Lawrence was acting as a neutral. “Lawrence said he had instructed Marta to do as Regan asked of her because it is what Cressida would have done, and would arouse the least suspicion. He wants us to follow through with our plan, but Marta will be acting as Regan’s witch and no help to us.”

“So he has no idea either.” Sam sat back.

“It seems as though Cressida’s grimoire holds the secret.” Joshua cleared his throat. “Until we see the actual spell there is no real value in hypothesizing, but I want you to understand that this may not work as predicted.”

“Now you become humble?” Dean snorted. “I get it. Sida was innately powerful, while you’re more into books and science, a nerdy witch.”

“I am only stating my limitations when it comes to working with the craft, a truthful disclaimer if you must.”

“Because truthful disclaimers are such a huge part of the PR world. That’s big of you, Josh, considering fucking outright lying is so much closer to your true nature.”

“Deuce,” Caleb interrupted. “Cut him some slack.”

“Fine.” Dean growled. “If we all die or are doomed to live out our days in Camelot you’re not at fault. Okay, Josh? Don’t lose any sleep over it.”

“If you should not return I’ll be sure to keep your heartfelt request in mind, Dean.”

Caleb leaned back in his seat, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Can we just talk about something else for a while?”

“You okay?” Dean tried to stop himself from asking, but any wincing or acts of illness had him hyper vigilant. Elijah had hoped his psychic Novocain might hold off Caleb’s pain for a couple of days, helping The Knight cut back on the drugs he was using to keep it at bay.

Caleb kept his eyes closed, waving his hand in dismissal. “Anybody want to wager on whether we’ll see a real dragon or not? Sammy?”

“Odds are against that happening.” Sam played along. “There’s never been any archeological discovery to suggest anything like a dragon actually ever existed.”

“So there’s no skeleton of a firedrake in the Museum of Natural History.” Dean shot Caleb a glance. “No one’s ever written up a journal article about elves, fairies, vampires or werewolves, but we all know those bastards exist. My money’s with Damien on at least catching a glimpse of one.”

“In that case perhaps we should research the best ways to kill a dragon?” Joshua claimed Sam’s iPad. “I believe their underbellies are a weak area...”

“Kill it?” Caleb sat up straighter, outrage at Joshua’s suggestion bringing some much needed color to his cheeks. “Why the hell would we want to do that?”

“I suppose you would rather make a pet out of it, bring it back to the farm with the menagerie of other beasts you three have managed to collect? I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but contrary to Pastor Jim’s tale, dragons are painted to be disagreeable creatures with violent temperaments that wreak havoc on kingdoms, terrorize villagers, burning entire settlements to the ground, and devour knights. That last one should at least have you refraining from identifying yourself to the beasts.”

“Just like you, Josh, I have my limits to what I’ll do on this gig.” Caleb folded his arms over his chest, looking much like the five year old he disavowed only moments earlier. He cut his eyes to Dean. “I’m not slaying a dragon, Deuce.”

“Okay.” Dean nodded. “No dragons dying on our watch.”

“Damn straight.”

Dean bit his lip to keep a straight face, even when he heard his brother snigger. He felt hope stir with the preposterous conversation. For the first time in a long time he believed they could come out of this better, stronger. His optimism continued to build through the long road trip right up until the point Sam alerted him they were close to their destination.

“Should be coming up,” Sam said, holding up his phone. He’d used his GPS to get them there almost an hour earlier than Walsh had instructed. It was nearly ten at night and Dean expected to be the first to arrive, was counting on it, but there were already three cars parked on the side of the road. The van Dean knew belonged to The Trinity, the dark SUV- probably their backup. He was betting the other, a silver Accord, more than likely belonged to Marta. Ethan’s headlights flashed behind them. They’d picked up Adam a few towns back, and by that time Dean was glad Joshua insisted he keep the other crafter company.

“Show time,” he said as he killed the engine. Even with the light of the moon above and clear star filled sky, he couldn’t quite make out if the vehicles were empty, though he thought he caught shadowy movement from the woods beside them.

“Duce, wait.” Caleb’s hand locked on his arm, kept him from opening the door.

“Damien?” Dean stilled, knowing Ethan and Bobby would not get out until Dean gave the signal for them to do so.

“I can’t sense anything.”

“We expected them to block us.” Sam leaned against the front seats, his voice quiet as if they might be overheard. “I’m not picking up any psychic energy either. The witch’s purses Joshua made us make sure they’re experiencing the same thing.”

“I know that.” Caleb hesitated, his grip tightening on Dean. “I can’t sense either of you.”

“Side effect of Eli’s block?” Dean guessed.

Caleb shrugged. “Maybe, maybe it’s the disease progressing, but it’s freaking me out. I need to know you both are safe.”

Dean glanced to his brother, able to read the concern on his face even in the darkened car.

“We’ll stay in sight. Right, Sam?”

“No matter what.” Sam gave a sharp nod. “No splitting up.”

Slowly, Caleb released his hold on Dean. “You have to understand I’m already at a disadvantage here, going in completely blind is not something I was counting on.”

“I’d like to say we could turn around and leave, come back when we’re on better ground, but we all know that’s not an option.” Dean could imagine what it was like for Caleb. He was vulnerable, sick, going into a situation against an enemy that had proven themselves formidable and deadly. They had inadequate intel, and now Caleb had been robbed of the abilities he’d always relied on to give him an upper hand. It went against everything John Winchester had drilled into his head. The Knight’s priority mission had always been to protect, and Caleb had never been more ill-suited to carry out that duty.

“Just so we’re on the same page.” Caleb looked at both the Winchesters.

“Yeah, and what page would that be, Damien?” Dean asked, casting a quick glance in the rearview when Ethan flashed his lights. “The one in The Hunter’s Handbook that says Knights and devoted nannies go out before their charges?”

“Make fun of me if you want, but one foot through death’s door or not, I’m still responsible for you both. I’d rather die a thousand deaths than fail my mission. Understood?”

Dean shared a look with his brother, a silent exchange in which they both agreed humoring Caleb was better than arguing that they felt the same way about saving him. Dean turned to Caleb. “If we promise not to die can we get out of the fucking car?”

“Yes.” Caleb folded his arms over his chest.

“We promise.” Dean and Sam spoke at the same time. Caleb snorted.

“Why do I have the same feeling I did that time you promised not to throw rocks at the bee hive when you were eight?” Caleb glanced first at Dean and then to Sam. “And when you swore you wouldn’t take one step out onto the frozen pond if I went out after Scout?”

“Probably because you’re overly suspicious, go straight to the worst case scenario, and have real trust issues even with the people you love most.” Sam deadpanned. “Typical pain in the ass Knight.”

“Fuck you, Runt.”

On that note Dean wisely opened the door figuring they weren’t going to get any closer to their typical momentum. Ethan, Bobby, Josh and Adam approached from behind.

“This place reminds me of Camp Crystal Lake from the Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> movies,” Ethan said as he came alongside Dean. “Maybe it’s Jason taking sacrifices instead of some lady looking for love.”

“Trust me when I say the scariest thing you’re going to see around here is The Trinity’s fucked up Knight.” Dean lowered his voice. “Make sure you stay between him and Caleb at all times, got it?”

“Sure thing, Boss.”

“What are two whispering about?” Caleb made his way to Ethan’s side. Dean noticed he’d grabbed The Spear of Destiny from the Impala’s trunk, as well as a broad sword that John Winchester favored. Dean had no doubt his friend had various other weapons strapped beneath his leather jacket and stashed inside his boot. Damien was overcompensating.

“Corleone and I bonded while you were lazing around the hospital last month.” Ethan smirked at Caleb. “Jealous much?”

“Of you?” Caleb handed off The Spear to Dean, cutting his eyes to the police detective. “Have you forgotten the fact that besides being like four income brackets above you, I’ve been blessed with rugged good looks no woman can resist, charm, charisma, and the brooding artist card? Me being envious of you is like Bruce Wayne wishing he were his scrawny virgin sidekick Dick Grayson.”

“Let’s not forget how humble and gracious you are, Junior.” Bobby grunted, bumping Caleb as he joined the group along with Adam and Joshua. “You’re practically a fucking saint.”

“Stop, I’m going to blush.” Caleb winked at Bobby. “And you don’t want to crush what little self esteem E has left.”

“Shouldn’t we be discussing a game plan instead of this inane pregame bantering you blithering Neanderthals insist upon?” Joshua pulled his coat tighter around him, gesturing to the trail that led to the water’s edge.

Dean didn’t miss the annoyed look his Advisor sent Adam, obviously intended to convey to his fellow crafter just how put upon he was on a daily basis. Dean would let his Advisor flex his muscles just this once. “You got any grand ideas on what kind of entrance we should make, Mama’s Boy?”

“Do you have a cloak of invisibility?” Ethan asked. “Maybe a secret map that will show us their exact location?”

“How about we just walk on down and meet them out in the open like Regan suggested?” Sam spoke up.

“The direct approach that’s something we don’t do too often,” Dean remarked, wishing he knew how this all ended. He sensed they were being watched by Reagan’s backup. He wondered if they were as loyal as the hunters of The Brotherhood.

There was a glow behind Dean and when he turned it was Adam holding what looked like to be an overly bright candle flame. To say the hulking crafter with his grim countenance looked menacing was an understatement. “I thought we weren’t making a splashy entrance.”

Instead of Adam replying the light grew brighter, casting shadows on the trees around them. Dean rolled his eyes, not sure if Adam’s stillness was one out of deference to his leadership, due to the fact Adam was a man of few words, or possibly a silent ‘fuck you, hunter’. Dean decided it was probably the latter.

“We do need to see where we are going,” Sam commented, making an excuse for Adam’s behavior, playing peacemaker. “It’s not like they aren’t expecting us.”

“Fine, we do it Doc Holliday and Wyatt Earp at the O.K. Corral style.” The trail of men made their way to the lakeshore. “Coming in,” Dean announced.



Reagan Walsh was standing at a small campfire by the water's edge, Owen and Jonah on either side. Two armed men stood farther away, Marta and Lawrence hovering several feet from the fire. Dean lifted The Holy Lance. "I'd say we come in peace, but everyone knows that a lie."

The Trinity's Guardian looked from Dean to the other men flanking him. "I would say introductions are in order, General, but then I've always found enlisted men really insignificant in the grand scheme of things."

"You're not hurting anyone's feelings, besides I'd rather not expose my people to the plague." Dean glanced over his shoulder, halting Bobby and Adam, Ethan moved to stand just on Caleb's right

"By the looks of your Knight I'd say we should be the ones afraid of what you're bringing into our camp." Owen grinned at Dean, his white teeth flashing in the firelight. "Then again a detail consisting of an old man, and a piss poor cop who couldn't find his own dick in the dark, lowers the threat assessment drastically."

Reagan lifted a hand to silence his Knight. "During the spell your escort will stay back as will mine. Walsh motioned to Sam and Caleb. "We just need the three plus the witch." He turned to Lawrence and Marta. "Marta, you'll join us now."

"First of all, this isn't your show." Dean pointed the tip of The Holy Lance at Walsh as the red haired witch stepped closer to the fire. He then moved it to cover Owen. "Keep a muzzle on your pet psycho and drop the orders or we're going to have a real problem before the show even gets underway."

"Maybe we should just talk about what we're all about to do." Sam had taken a stand between Dean and Caleb. "Focusing on the plan may help ease tensions on both sides."

"Spoken like a true Scholar." Reagan glanced to Jonah. "Do you want to bring them up to speed?"

Dean watched as Jonah withdrew a leather book from the satchel at his side. "Basically we're going to use the power of The Triad and The Trinity to cast a very powerful spell, one that was penned centuries ago, one that if done correctly will open a doorway so to speak, a portal to the past that will take us to The Fisher King's Castle and to the treasure, for lack of a better word, that we each seek."

"Could we see the grimoire?" Sam pointed to the book in Jonah's hand.

Dean lowered The Lance as Jonah flipped the book open and offered it to Sam. "We'll have our witch tell us exactly what's going to be required if you don't mind."

Joshua waited until Sam had possession of the book to step forward. Dean shared a look with Caleb who'd traded his broad sword for his trusty 9mm. The Knight nodded, staying focused on Walsh as Dean turned slightly to regard his brother and their Advisor. "Well?"

Joshua seemed to take an eternity to read the short passage, turning the pages forward and back. Instead of addressing Dean, he lifted his gaze to Marta, who stood quietly across from them. "And you are prepared to do this?"

"I am," she whispered. Dean couldn't prevent the twinge of sympathy that ran through him as the woman lifted her arms out to her sides in a gesture of helpless surrender. Dressed in a flowing white cloak, her pale skin seemed almost translucent. With the firelight catching the red in her long hair, reflecting the large pools of her doe-like eyes, Dean thought she looked more angel than witch, but he quickly reminded himself of her true nature by calling to mind Sida's face, bloated and disfigured from the time in her watery grave. A grave Marta helped Owen make for her best friend. "A piece of my soul is already lost, what is a little more."

"Josh, what do you need to do?" Sam's question had Dean refocusing on his Advisor and not on the fact he understood all too well what it was like to have pieces of your self torn away.

"Nothing near as drastic as what I assume she has committed already." Joshua shook his head in a way that told Dean whatever Marta had done, his Advisor pitied her. "Three drops of my blood, three breaths of my life. Not so much when compared to a third of one's soul."

"What does that mean exactly?" Dean demanded.

"Unlike Marta's part, mine is more of a metaphoric sacrifice, a bit of myself I won't be able to reclaim, but nothing that will render epic consequences I assure you." Joshua glanced from Sam to Dean. "You all have your own penance to give as well."

"That doesn't sound fun." Dean glanced to Caleb, unable to keep from thinking the worst.

Joshua seemed to read his thoughts. "There's no indication any of you will be harmed physically. It seems to have more to do with you as a Triad, a collective." He returned his gaze to the book. "It doesn't explain exactly what you'll be asked to give but this spell requires a great deal of power. There is a reason others have not used it before. No witch could cast this on their own, no matter how blessed in the art, no matter how far on the dark side they were willing to tread. I daresay even a Triad and Trinity should only cast it once."

"Which is why we must get it right the first time," Marta spoke with more confidence now. "I have brought all the natural ingredients we need as well as my talents and my sacrifice. I hope you are as competent a crafter as The Guardian claims, Joshua Sawyer."

"I assure you I'm quite capable, and shouldn't I be the concerned party seeing as how you have joined us by default."

Dean was for once thankful for Joshua's inflated estimation of himself and biting tongue. The look on Marta's face was priceless, as was the shadow of doubt that colored Reagan's tone. "We can hold our side of the bargain, Winchester. Can you?"

"We're willing to do our part." Dean glanced to Sam and then Caleb. "Whatever that might be."

"What about the linking object that is mentioned, the one that connects directly to the person in the past, or in the other plane?" Joshua asked, pointing to one of the symbols Dean did not recognize. Some of the text looked ancient Latin, but the glyphs and drawings meant nothing to Dean. "It's essential when time walking or traveling such as this, Caleb's blood alone won't be enough to create the bridge."

"Did you say my blood?" Caleb spoke up for the first time. "I thought we agreed I'd be giving no blood."

"Josh?" Dean quirked a brow. "Something you want to tell us?"

"You're not going to like it."

"How many times have I heard that lately?" Dean growled.

"What? A little glimpse of your mortality got you going soft, *Seaver*?" Owen taunted.

"You want an up close introduction to your own?" Caleb pointed his gun at the former SEAL's head. It sparked a chain reaction. Reagan's hunters primed their weapons. Dean heard the sounds of Bobby and Ethan returning in kind. Maybe he hadn't been off when he referenced the bloody showdown in Tombstone.

Dean glared at Walsh but didn't make a move for his own gun. "What did I say about the muzzle?"

"Caleb," Sam stepped closer to The Knight. "If one of us is injured, it will probably make travelling a lot more difficult."

"Winchester's right." Reagan motioned for his men to stand down. "We've already got Reaves's condition to contend with. A bleeding wound is only going to hamper us further, and we have no idea what kind of terrain or unfriendlies we might encounter in the area once we've crossed over, or how long it will take us to travel to Corbenic. We need all capable hands on board."

Owen snorted. "Especially when two of us will probably end up carrying his dead weight."

"I can carry my own fucking weight, and if the spell demands it, I'll fucking bleed for the cause," Caleb told Walsh. "But I'll be damned if I'm going to put up with any more bullshit from this sonofabitch."

“Shut your mouth, Owen.” Reagan beat Owen to any retort. “Not one more word, do you hear me? This mission requires all of us and we can’t waste time squabbling.”

“We have the object Sawyer’s talking about,” Jonah broke the short silence that followed Walsh’s directive to his knight. “It was the first thing I saw when Reagan began his quest for the sword.”

“What’s he talking about, Josh?” Dean ran a hand down his mouth, turning to his Advisor. “Laymen’s terms.”

“The spell calls for an item to link with, think scrying. When I use an object belonging to the person we are searching for. In this case, it would be something from that time and place, from a person we know to have been there at the point we want to return.” Joshua lowered his voice. “For instance, if I cast that spell sending James to the past, I would have used something connected to Sam, something he felt strongly about.”

“Like his Woobee bear?” Dean couldn’t resist, flashing his brother a half grin.

“Shut up.” Sam snapped. Caleb snorted.

“I might have used his journal, or a favored weapon,” Joshua continued with an apologetic glance to The Scholar. “Combined with his blood, that would have created a very tangible connection to dial into, sort of like co-ordinates on a map.”

“What?” Dean turned to Jonah. “You three get your hands on Merlin’s wand?”

“Close.” Jonah motioned to one of the hunters standing behind him who stepped forward offering a wrapped parcel. “I have Sir Galahad’s shield.”

“The one given to him by Joseph of Arimathea?” When surprised glances turned his way, Dean made an effort to look offended. “I know my Arthurian legends.” There was no need to admit Gideon had made reference to the shield in their recent conversation.

“Actually the shield was a gift from King Evelake, but Joseph of Arimathea was purported to have placed a cross drawn with blood on the front as a divine blessing.” Jonah removed the cloth revealing an unusual white shield with a cross which though touched by the years still shown ruby-like in the firelight. Dean heard Ethan let out a low whistle, muttering something under his breath.

“Should we even ask what grave you robbed or holy ground you defiled to get your slimy hands on that?” Caleb demanded.

“Like you haven’t pilfered consecrated land and disturbed the dead, Reaves?” Reagan took the shield from Jonah. “It’s the way of our kind.”

“To save lives, yes, not for profit,” Sam defended.

“If it makes you feel better, see my team securing this beauty from its resting place in Syria as an effort to save Reaves’s life.” Walsh offered the shield to Caleb. “You’ll need to have this for the spell. We won’t even charge you a finder’s fee for returning the family heirloom to your possession.”

“I’d say the Sword of David is to be payment enough.” Dean nodded for Caleb to take the shield, which his friend did after only a moment’s hesitation. Dean didn’t miss the look of reverence that crossed his Knight’s face when he took hold of the ancient relic. It might as well have belonged to Caleb’s boyhood hero d’Artagnan. “We all know you’re in this for the bottom line.”

“This again.” Reagan grinned, shaking his head. “As my daddy was fond of saying, Winchester, sin is sin, intentions be damned.”

“Our father was a plain spoken man, but I think my brother’s point is a valid one.” Jonah tossed the cloth onto the fire. “Your hands are just as dirty as ours, so the self righteous act is doing nothing but giving you a false sense of piety and wasting precious time.”

“The optimum hour to cast the spell would be midnight,” Marta supplied. “There’s still much for us to prepare.”

Dean glanced to Joshua who still held the grimoire. His Advisor lifted the book, addressing the other witch. “I’d like for another of my coven, Adam to look over the spell.”

Marta inclined her head. “Lawrence will join as well.”

“Stay where we can see you,” Dean caught Joshua’s sleeve as he turned to go get Adam. His Advisor nodded and Dean let him go, turning his gaze back to Reagan. He forced a smile. “So what now, boys? Smores? Ghost stories? Or my favorite, a panty raid on the girl’s camp across the lake?”

Dean’s suggestion garnered him glares from not only Walsh and team, but his own Triad.

“I suggest waiting in neutral corners until we’re needed,” Reagan replied.

“And you call yourselves men of adventure,” Dean called out, watching Walsh and company retreat to their waiting comrades.

“I suppose that could have gone worse,” Sam said quietly as they moved towards Bobby.

“I guess Jonah’s big reveal could have been Goliath’s severed head,” Dean offered with a glance towards his Knight, who had been unusually quiet. “Damien?”

“This all feels wrong.” Caleb lifted his eyes from the shield to meet Dean’s concerned frown.

“Like we’re betraying them.”

“That’s just the whole sacrifice thing talking.” Dean hoped that’s all it was because his gut was tied in knots too. He stopped walking. Sam drew up short beside him as Ethan continued on with only a quick glance to The Guardian. “Right, Sammy?”

“Right,” Sam replied, though Dean easily picked up on the lack of confidence in his brother’s voice. “This is all just a little too familiar, like times when we’ve not always made the best choices in the past.”

Dean frowned at his brother. “But that doesn’t mean we’re making the wrong decision here.”

“Doesn’t it?” Caleb pointed to the shield. “Is this really a noble crusade, man? Or are we in it for our own profit, just like Walsh.”

“We’re here to save your life, a *brother’s* life.” Dean gripped his friend’s wrist. He wasn’t going to lose his family because of a moment of doubt, a self-imposed guilt trip. “That’s as righteous a cause as I know.”

Caleb nodded and Dean let him go. “Now how about those S’mores?”

In the end they settled for cold sandwiches, stale chips and warm beers. As a possible last meal it wasn’t much, but the company was good and Dean found himself hesitate as Joshua informed them they were ready to begin.

“You sure about this, Kid?” Bobby gripped Dean’s neck, gave him a little shake.

“We’ll be okay.” Dean forced a lopsided grin. “That is as long as you don’t invoke your recently awoken maternal side and try for a goodbye kiss.”

“Smart ass.” Bobby let him go, sending a meaningful look to Caleb. “That goes double for you, Junior.” He turned to Sam, pulling the Scholar in for a hard hug. “Keep your head about you out there because we all know these two only listen to two organs, their hearts and their...”

“I get it, Bobby.” Sam pulled away with a blush that had Dean chuckling. “I’ll be smart enough for the three of us.”

“Watch your asses in Camelot.” Ethan bumped fists with Caleb, nodding to Dean and Sam.

“We’ll take care of everything here, Corleone.”

“I’m holding you to that, Crockett.” Dean waved a hand to Caleb and Sam. “Mount up, boys.”

RcJ&Ti\*SnsnsnsN\*Ti&RcJ

RcJ&Ti\*SnsnsnsN\*Ti&RcJ

“All six of you need to stand in the water.” Sam glanced at his brother when Marta, waved them towards the lake. He could sense Dean’s rush of irritation at being ordered around.

“As if the wardrobe change and exchange of weapons wasn’t bad enough?” Dean stayed standing on the bank of the lake by Caleb. He picked at the layer of chain mail overlaying his tunic and tugged at his dark green fur-lined cape. “We look like we just stepped off the set of Robin Hood or *Braveheart*.”

“I can assure you much thought went into choosing the right clothing and weapons for your travels.” Marta placed a hand on her hip, frowning at The Guardian. Sam wasn’t sure what his brother was complaining about when he knew for a fact both he and Caleb had both been secretly thrilled to don the costumes. It was Sam who felt ridiculous and uncomfortable. The wool was itchy and had a strange smell, the leather shoes ill-fitting. “Some are authentic relics.”

“More grave robbery by the Trinity no doubt,” Caleb grumbled, lifting the sword at his side, touching the silver clasp of his red cloak. “I feel like Legolas from The Lord of the Rings.”

“Despite the source, Marta’s right,” Joshua spoke up. “We can’t have you roaming through the medieval ages with torn jeans, band t-shirts and leather jackets. You’d be burned as heretics, or witches. The clothing Marta chose is appropriate for noblemen and knights of the time. The dyed linen and wool, shorter pants and hose actually mark you men of good standing, rather than peasants.”

“And here I thought it just marked us as extremely gay.” Dean glared at Joshua. “I’m taking it out on you if any of those pictures I know Ethan took with his cell phone make the rounds through our ranks.”

“Yes, your lordship.” Sam was almost certain Joshua laughed, though he was quick to cover it up with a well-placed cough. “Now if you’ll join the Trinity in the water, please.”

Joshua’s patience was stretching thin. Sam moved forward knowing his brother and Caleb would not allow him to go alone.

“In any order?” Dean asked, pointing at Walsh. “Because I don’t want to stand next to him.”

Sam heard Marta mutter something that sounded like ‘children’ under her breath. “The Trinity on one side, The Triad on the other. We’ll need Sir Galahad’s shield.”

Dean shoved the shield towards Joshua who had also joined them in the water.

Marta merely nodded to Joshua who placed the shield in the water between them and The Trinity. It bobbed on the gentle waves, but stayed in place as if anchored by an unseen force.

Marta spoke a string of words, some of which Sam understood, others foreign and phonetically strange to the ear, almost physically painful. The bowl she was holding flamed to life, lit with a

strange green aura. She went first, dipping her hand in the bowl, then blowing on her fingers so that green embers took to the air, swirling around them before dripping in the water. She repeated this three times. With a wan smile, and exhaustion, Marta passed the bowl to Joshua.

Sam noticed Joshua's finger was bleeding, a little track of red trailing down his hand. He repeated a verse similar to Marta's, though lacking the strange string of syllables. Sam made out the Latin for earth, fire, and water before the flames shifted to a bright blue. Josh started to reach into the bowl, but Dean interrupted.

"What's in that?"

The look Joshua shot The Guardian said he truly did not want to know and Dean kept his mouth shut as Joshua continued. He dipped his hand into the flame and repeated what Marta had done—three times exhaling a breath.

The shield was standing at alert now, vertical where it had been just floating in the middle of the circle, suspended in air.

"You of the Triad clasp your hands together just above the shield, while you of the Trinity do the same," Marta announced.

"Your hands are clammy," Dean said to Sam, garnering them both a reprimanding glare from Joshua who moved to The Trinity with the bowl.

Joshua placed his hand inside the bowl again, bringing out what seemed to be sapphire colored molten lava and placed it on the Trinity's grasp. Their hands glowed blue. "Stay as you are."

He passed the bowl to Marta. She came to The Triad, and with the same action dripped the lava which was now green on their interlocked hands. Surprisingly, it was a cool sensation and Sam shot a look to his brother and Caleb.

"Is something supposed to happen soon?" Dean was typically the first to lose patience when it came to the use of magic.

Then Sam felt it. His hunter's ring was pulsing, transforming. It felt loose and fluid on his finger as if it might slide off. He wanted to pull away, felt the surge of dread from his brother and Caleb as well, but knew that any such action on their part would defeat the spell. Then he watched in slow motion as three drops of silver dripped from their intertwined hands. The same thing happened with The Trinity, the liquid ore much darker from their bands.

Dropping into the lake with a splash that belied the size of the small six drops, it started the water swirling. The surface of the lake took on the appearance of a forceful current, but yielded against Sam's boot in the same manner as when they first entered the knee deep pool, gentle and lapping.



From the illusion of the cyclical churning there was a shape developing. Sam felt the ground subtly shift below him. The water began to recede from around them, the rest of the lake held back by an invisible damn. The area within the circle they formed was now soggy earth. It began to cave inward and Sam felt the need to step back, afraid they would be dragged under with the silt as it gave way, but found he couldn't move. The sucking mud quickly cleared to reveal a staircase of descending stones the first few glowing in the moonlight; what little water that remained at their feet cascaded gently down its steps, disappearing from sight in the dark depths. The shield, still suspended, acted more as an arrow that said, 'go here.'

"Tell me that's not Alice's rabbit hole." Dean groaned, releasing his grip on Sam and Caleb's hands. Sam found himself able to move once more and did so, taking a step away from the opening.

"I'll be damned." Reagan breathed. "It worked."

"At the cost of our rings," Dean said, flexing his hand.

Sam looked down at his own band. It felt different, thinner, and even a little lighter. Sam had resisted wearing it for years, fearful of the weight of responsibility he'd be forced to bear, but now felt a pang of loss he couldn't quite explain. "That's why we can't keep doing this. If we did, then we wouldn't have a ring left." He left his suspicions of what repercussions that might hold for The Brotherhood unsaid.

"I'm sorry," Caleb said softly, his voice betraying his own grief. Sam remembered the day Caleb received his ring for saving Dean from the devil dog. He understood exactly what the band represented to his friend. He doubted the Trinity, who were busy congratulating themselves, heard, but Dean did.

"This isn't your fault, Damien, besides we haven't lost anything important." Dean met Sam's gaze and despite the look of assurance in his green eyes Sam felt a stab of doubt. "It's just metal."

"I assure you the only thing depleted was your reserves to manipulate such strong magic. Each Triad is assuredly only given a limited source of power and you have merely tapped in and drained some of your account." Joshua spoke softly. Sam realized it was their advisor's attempt to offer comfort, but as usual his ability to soothe wasn't his best skill. "It will not adversely affect your everyday effectiveness, or alter your essential beings in any noticeable manner."

"That's Josh's way of saying, much to his disappointment we're still the same pain in the ass Triad we've always been." Dean grinned at Caleb, though the tightness in his voice belayed the gesture. "Right, Sammy?"

“Right.” Sam stuck with a simple agreement this time, reaching out to give Caleb’s shoulder a quick shove. He hoped it was his imagination that he felt unnatural warmth through the layers of clothing. “What’s a little silver in the grand scheme of things?”

“We’ll consider ourselves damn lucky if it’s all we’re called to give on this mission.” Reagan flexed his hand and then pointed to the staircase. “You three ready?”

Dean took a step forward. “That the same speech you give when heading into battle, Walsh?”

“I usually throw in the whole spiel about the only easy day was yesterday and not bothering to run because you’ll only die tired, but basically yeah, that’s it. What? You were expecting Churchill?”

“I prefer Sun Tzu or John McClane from Die Hard.”

“Seeing as how this was your idea, we should let you lead the way.” Sam suggested before his brother could give a demonstration of his favorite quotes from either source.

“And trust you to follow us like good little soldiers?” Owen scoffed. “I don’t think so, pretty boy.”

“He’s right, we go in staggered.” Reagan pointed to Owen and Caleb. “Knights take point. We’ll come next with The Scholars bringing up our rear.”

Sam understood Walsh’s plan, The Guardians should not be risked. In theory Sam agreed, but knew his brother would never go for it.

“The hell you say.” Dean shook his head. “I’ll go first with your psycho Knight. Jonah and Caleb next. You and Sam can bring up the rear.”

“We don’t know what’s going to be waiting on us.” Caleb shook his head. “The Guardian can’t be risked.”

“As crazy as it sounds, I agree with Reaves.” Owen tapped his chest. “I’ll take point and cover your ass Winchester, but I want Sam with Reagan. On a good day, your knight’s reputation would be sufficient to let him watch my Guardian’s back, but we both know his best days are long gone. Jonah can cover his scrawny six.”

“He’s right, Dean.”

“The hell he is, Caleb. You’re the only one who can claim the sword. Without you they don’t have a fucking mission.”

Joshua sighed, the first to lose his patience when it came to Dean’s stubbornness and Sam caught the Advisor’s eye. “It makes sense a psychic would go first, seeing as how I can alert the rest of you to any prominent danger.” When Dean opened his mouth for another counter Sam rushed on.

“Caleb stays with Dean, leaving Jonah with Reagan. If we all remove our witch’s purses, Jonah and I can communicate telepathically, almost as good as satellite phones. It keeps us all safe and ensures neither team is going to be able to get away with a double cross.”

“That works for me.” Reagan looked to Dean. “Winchester?”

“Fine, but we still stick close.” He glanced to Sam, then to Owen. “One scratch on my little brother, and I won’t give a fuck about the tenuous balance between good and evil.”

“Gotcha, Chief.” Owen gave a mock salute.

“If you are finished with all your posturing, I suggest you enter the doorway before it closes. We are not guaranteed a time limit on how long the portal will remain. I daresay none of us wants to repeat the spell.”

Sam started into the stairwell, but Dean caught his sleeve.

“One more important question, how exactly do we get back?”

Joshua looked to Marta, then to Dean. “That’s unclear, though in theory the spell should remain active until all are returned to their rightful place.”

“Wonderful.”

“But I’ve given Caleb an object of power from this time, as the spell calls for you to take the shield with you, something of great value to me. It should act as a tether, a lifeline if you will.”

“You did?” Sam thought Caleb looked like he might be sick. He met Dean’s gaze. “I don’t remember.”

“As you shouldn’t.” Joshua smirked. “I placed it in the lining of your cloak. It will be there when you need it.”

“You got something for us, Red?” Owen asked with a lascivious grin to Marta. “Something you value?”

The witch pulled a small dagger from a sheath at her hip, brandishing it toward Owen. Sam held his breath, hoping the woman didn’t forget the promise she made to Dean and seek her own revenge. Much to his relief, she flipped it over, offering it hilt first to Reagan. “Sida gave me this when I joined the coven.”

Sam watched Walsh hesitate. He wasn’t sure if it was due to the fact that the blade had at one time belonged to his dead girlfriend, or that there were countless superstitions about accepting a blade from someone. According to whom you asked it could be a good omen representing the depth of a bond, or a loss for all that would be cut away.

“Thanks.” Reagan finally took the athame, adding it to his other assortment of weapons. “We should move.”

Dean didn’t try to stop Sam this time as he moved out onto the first rock. The next step was surreal. The path seemed to lead not so much under the lake, but through it. Even though the stairwell appeared to spiral down like a corkscrew into the center of the earth, walls of water shimmered from each side, bluegill and carp scurrying past. It brought to mind one of the few eventful field trips he’d taken in school as a child. His fourth grade class had gone to a well-known aquarium where Sam had been mesmerized by the tunnel of glass beneath the shark’s tank. Walking through it, awe and terror warred within him. He was torn by the childish wonder of seeing marine life up close and a very adult oriented mind that wouldn’t stop running the logistics of what would happen if there was a crack in the glass. The memory fed his need to hurry his progress, faith in the spell that kept the lake from swallowing him up wavering as he went deeper.

Sam felt lightheaded as he progressed; oddly he heard no steps behind him and when he chanced a look over his shoulder it was only darkness that greeted him though an eerie green glow lit his progress forward. He kept moving. It wasn’t long before he could see that the stairs ended. Stepping onto the last stone, Sam encountered another fun-house like illusion. The world tilted, casting a mirror reflection of the scene he’d just left. He was once more standing knee deep in a pristine lake of aquamarine, stairwell nowhere in sight.

He whirled around, expecting to see Joshua and Marta, but he was alone. It was still night, the moon and stars even brighter and more prominent than they had been in New York. The temperature was colder; the water freezing as it lapped against his legs seeping into his stockings and leather shoes.

A slight whistle had him turning to find Owen now standing only a few feet away in the water. “I’m guessing we’re not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy.”

Sam pressed his lips together, ignoring the SEAL in lieu of studying their surroundings more closely. Owen was right; the lake was similar, but much larger. The territory had changed vastly. A meadow picked up from the one shoreline he could make it out, the water too vast in the other directions to spot land. Where the field ended, dense woods picked up, a mighty forest that looked untouched by mankind. Gone was the parking lot, street lights in the distance and the campfire. The stillness and majesty of the giant trees reminded him of the Redwood Forrest in California.

“Sam?” Dean’s voice had him focusing once more. His brother was standing across from him looking less impressed than Owen, more concerned. Caleb was close by, appearing rather worse for wear from the trip. “You okay?”

Sam took stock. Besides feeling slightly unsteady on his feet, his head was heavy, stomach queasy-like a hangover crossed with a bout of carsickness. "I feel a little strange. How about you two?"

"Magic spells suck." Caleb lifted one foot out of the lake, glaring at his dripping shoe. "Especially when they involve water."

"Spoken like a man after my own heart, one who appreciates fire." Owen lifted his gaze skyward. "With the full moon, there's not much for a knight to get excited about."

"Good for the Guardians, though." Reagan and Jonah also appeared simultaneously, as if they had just been beamed in from a Star Trek device. "We're truly in our element."

Sam doubted his brother felt that way if Dean's uncharacteristic silence was any indication.

"Give me the fucking desert any old day," Owen said, wading towards the bank now that they were all present and accounted for. "There, I'm a god."

"Especially with an assault rifle and easy prey," Caleb muttered, following after Dean and Sam.

"I think he's referring to the fact Knights, ruled by fire, generate energy from the sun. Great bodies of water can actually drain you." Jonah offered as he came alongside Caleb, handing him Galahad's shield. Sam surmised as last in the portal, he'd been instructed to bring the item of power with him.

Caleb took the shield as he stepped onto the shore. "Why do I get the feeling you three have done something like this before?"

Sam had wondered the same thing. The Trinity seemed nonplussed by their experience, nowhere near as shaken as Sam felt, as his brother and Caleb looked.

"We've never been afraid to explore our abilities," Jonah explained. "You can't imagine the untapped potential you three have, especially with two psychics in your Triad."

"He's never forgiven me for not being a freak," Owen commented, tossing his bag on the ground and searching the tree line. "No demons in my family closet I'm afraid."

"Just a bunch of run of the mill drunk fishermen and the bar whores who screwed them." Dean replied in the same friendly tone Owen had used. Sam could even make out his brother's smile in the moonlight, one that might have been mistaken as teasing if he hadn't spent a life time knowing Dean. "Yet, you still turned out to be a fucking devil."

"Shut your mouth about my family." Owen made a move towards Dean only to be intercepted by Reagan. It was the first time Sam had seen the Trinity's Knight lose his cool, and he felt a pang

of empathy for Sida. He wasn't surprised to see the very familiar smirk on Dean's face. The Guardian was doing more than defending his best friend; he was on a fishing expedition.

"Shake it off," Reagan kept his hands on Owen even as he turned to Jonah. "Take him. Get us something fresh for dinner. We'll start setting up camp."

"What about all that talk of wasting time?" Dean questioned.

"You really think setting off to find the sword in the dark is a good idea?" Reagan gestured to the forest. "I'm guessing those woods aren't filled with things from backwoods Kentucky, and if we're anywhere in close proximity to The Grail Castle, there is bound to be a patrol."

Dean leaned towards Caleb and Sam caught the whispered query. "You think they had bears in Camelot?"

Sam found it completely like his brother not to be concerned with the fact they might face a band of well-armed guards. He hoped Caleb would at least see Reagan's sensibility in waiting until first light to continue their quest.

"With our luck, three-headed bears that breathe fire," Caleb replied.

"Okay then," Dean clapped his hands together. "Morning it is."

"You want to come?" Jonah looked to Sam. "Between the two of us we should be able to scare up some game?"

"I'm not much of a hunter." It was only after Sam responded out loud that he realized Jonah's invitation had been a silent exchange. The others were staring at him.

"That goes without saying," Owen snorted, stepping out of Reagan's grasp. He seemed to have reclaimed his menacing humor. "Nice of you to come clean from the onset, Winchester."

"Sam?" Dean lifted a brow.

"I was talking about hunting animals," Sam explained, with a gesture to his head, one he assumed would explain his psychic flub. He faced Jonah, who was smiling. "It's not my thing."

In fact, Sam had only killed one animal, not including werewolves. It was a rabbit he and his brother had snared, and that death was on his hands only because his father had bullied him into doing the deed during one of his weekend survival camps. John Winchester insisted a man be capable of feeding himself and his family off the land because there wasn't always going to be an endless supply of jerky and Mountain Dew. Sam merely made sure to pack extra provisions.

"The little guy's squeamish," Owen nudged Jonah. "You can work your Scholar magic without him."

Sam was convinced Jonah did not hold his own reverence for life or have Sam's qualms about killing harmless animals when he returned less than an hour later with three rabbits, and something that resembled a quail draped over his shoulder.

"We'll be eating well tonight." Jonah grinned, dropping the load in front of Walsh.

"We caught them, you clean then," Owen added, plopping down beside Reagan on the other side of the small fire Dean had built with the firewood Sam and Walsh had gathered.

"Considering by catching them you mean you let Jonah charm them right into your lap, I think you can do the honors."

"Winchester?" Owen pointed a finger at Sam. "Your PETA card keeping you from dressing the kill also?"

"I'm much better with a knife." Dean pulled the haul towards him before Sam could respond. He shot Owen another one of his unfriendly grins. "You'd be amazed at what I've picked up about the art of flaying in the places I've been."

Sam felt guilty for letting his brother rescue him, and more than a little like a hypocrite when his stomach growled, and his mouth watered as he watched the meat sizzle over the fire. It smelled wonderful. His vow to eat only the dried beef he'd shoved into his pack before leaving the Impala wavered as Jonah turned the spit to allow the food to cook evenly.

"I promise you they didn't feel anything," Jonah said as he tore a piece of cooked flesh and tossed it in his mouth. Sam glanced to his right to see if anyone else had heard, but Dean was talking to Caleb, their heads close together. Caleb wasn't looking good. Sam had noticed him holding his head a few times, and it wasn't much of a reach as to what he and Dean were discussing. Reagan and Owen were playing a hand of cards by the firelight. Sam decided it didn't matter if Jonah had spoken out loud or not. He wasn't going to play into the other Scholar's hand.

"What did Walsh mean when he said you charmed the animals?"

Jonah sat back on his heels. "It's one of the gifts of The Scholar, one I imagine was much more beneficial in this time and place." Jonah sat back on his heels, gesturing to their surroundings. "I doubt Scholars of our time need to commune with animals and call on their services, but I'm surprised your predecessor didn't at least mention it."

Sam couldn't help to smile as he thought about Mac and all the times Jim had forced him to reluctantly play veterinarian to the animals on the farm. "My predecessor isn't exactly the commune with animal type."

"And you?"

“I like dogs and horses,” Sam admitted. He remembered the other animals he’d found and brought home to Jim’s farm as a kid, a baby raccoon, an injured hawk, even an orphaned fawn. The pastor had once told him he had a special gift, but Sam had assumed it was just a nice spin on his soft heartedness as a child. “But I can’t say I’ve ever tried to communicate with them.”

“Perhaps this journey will offer the opportunity.”

“You and your team are all about opportunity, aren’t you?” Sam couldn’t quite get his mind around Jonah. He was obviously extremely intelligent and on the surface much more polished and refined than Walsh and Owen.

“I’m not above using the resources I was given to better my situation.”

“No matter who or what gets hurt in the process.” Sam glanced to their soon to be dinner. “As long as you get your belly full, your actions are justified.”

“Are we talking about me killing a few rabbits, or my willingness to upset the fine balance of things to obtain what you deem spoils of war, mere treasure?”

“Is the chow about fucking ready? I’m starving here.”

Owen’s crass inquiry about dinner cut off any reply Sam might have managed, but the smile that quickly returned to Jonah’s face as he called ‘soup’s on’ solidified Sam’s decision to stick with beef jerky.

They ate in stilted silence with Sam using eye contact to communicate silently between Dean, Caleb and himself. Dean seemed to have no problem in partaking in a meal with the enemy. Sam was convinced if Caleb had been in his usual form, he would have joined The Guardian. As it was, Caleb had taken a few bites, giving the rest of his share to Dean.

“Who’s going to have first watch?” Dean asked, tossing the remnants of his feast onto the fire.

“First one to bring it up takes the watch in my command.” Reagan stretched his long legs, punching the pack behind him before leaning against it, arms crossed behind his head. The SEAL looked satiated and comfortable. If he was one bit concerned or on edge, it didn’t show.

“We’re not under your command,” Dean pointed out.

“No, you aren’t since I would have had you reprimanded by now.” Reagan looked at Dean and then glanced to Owen. “Our people learn fast not to step out of line.”

“I’ll take first watch,” Sam volunteered, before anything Dean might say or do would encourage Walsh to explain his training methods. “I’m thinking it might give me time to commune with the local wildlife.”

“In the spirit of your brother’s generosity, I’ll take the second watch-“



“Walsh,” Owen interrupted, but backed down with a quick look from his leader.

“Maybe we should take shifts in pairs?” Dean offered and Sam recognized the big brother mode. He tried not to be offended, after all they were in foreign territory, but Sam knew two of their Triad could not go and leave Caleb alone with The Trinity. Their Knight was putting up a valiant fight, but was nearly out on his feet, besides they’d promised not to be completely out of sight. That left Sam teaming up with Jonah or Owen, and Sam felt safer going it alone.

“Take the crossbow.” Caleb leaned forward, offering the weapon to Sam. He tapped a finger to his head. “First sign of any trouble sound the alarm.”

Sam smirked, recalling their argument at the farm and the subsequent psychic snub. “Does that mean you’re taking my calls again?”

“Temporarily.” A decent imitation of Caleb’s crooked grin crossed The Knight’s face. “You can send me flowers and chocolates later, Samantha.”

“I’d keep patrol to the tree line, not more than 100 yards within our perimeter.”

Reagan’s suggestion earned him twin Winchester glares. “I know how to do a security sweep,” Sam said before his brother could comment. He took the weapon from Caleb and stood.

“As long as a hoard of bunnies and squirrels doesn’t try an insurgency, then we should be fine with Bambi watching our sixes,” Owen offered.

Sam decided one of his brother’s favored hand signals was an appropriate response so he gave Owen the one fingered salute, and made his way a short distance from the fire. Sam couldn’t help but feel a bit of awe as he stood before the majestic trees stretching toward the star-filled blackness with all the grandness of the sky scrapers in Manhattan, or maybe it was the lack of sustenance in the beef jerky he’d consumed that had his stomach feeling as if it were turned inside out.

He tried to focus on the forest, which merely left him with a strange longing to be back in the city. Unlike his brother and Caleb, Sam had always liked the forced campouts his father took them on as kids; he loved sleeping on the ground, under the stars and it was only when he realized his father’s motives behind the adventures did the novelty wear off. Of course this wasn’t a simple camping trip. They were with The Trinity, Caleb was dying, and although the trees might have looked like red woods, they were a long, long way from California. Despite experiencing it for himself, Sam could not quite believe that they were in a place and time he’d only known in Pastor Jim’s fairy tales, books, and movies.

Glancing back to the fire from his slightly higher vantage point, to the silhouetted forms cast in the shadow of the dancing flames below, he felt a bit like his childhood alter ego, Prince Samuel. As a boy, he’d loved being the protagonist of the story, the central plot where others did his

bidding and served him at great cost, but as he got older it wasn't lost on him that he had from the beginning been set apart from the others, in a tower, to be protected. Sam knew Pastor Jim would never consciously cause him to doubt his place in the grand scheme of things, he was trying to illustrate Samuel's importance, to make a little boy feel special and secure, but Sam had locked onto a very important piece of the story through the turbulent teen years. Samuel Winchester was not a dragon.

A cold wind had him tugging his cloak tighter about him, gripping the cross bow. He shook off the creeping self doubt, blaming his unease on the strangeness of the situation. These days give Sam the certainty of Time Square, the controlled wildness of Central Park. Even though he had struggled his first semester at school, doubted his decision to return to his first love of law, Manhattan had charmed Sam just as Caleb had warned. There was something comforting about being alone in a city of hundreds of thousands, a comfort that was sorely missing in this place that seemed void of any human life, let alone a crowd. Sam felt entirely too conspicuous.

Any further philosophic musings on his part were instantly ceased by a prickling sensation spreading through his thoughts. At first, Sam blamed his imagination, hoping his longing for the immense populace of New York had conjured the feeling he was currently experiencing. Unlike the busy streets of the city, another human presence was easily felt here, impossible not to notice, even by Sam who wasn't as practiced at using his abilities for tracking. Like the stars that shown brighter and appeared so much closer here without the distraction of the cityscape, people stood out vividly in respect to the landscape. As a psychic, he suddenly understood why Caleb liked Manhattan. In a sea of a million thoughts and feelings, an individual presence was easy to ignore, discount. It was telepathic background noise, allowing for peace and rest in utter chaos. Camelot, or wherever they were currently, provided no such buffer. Sam easily picked up on the men approaching. Four, no five and they were moving quickly on horseback.

"We got company," Sam hissed as he entered their camp in a crouched run in case the approaching group was closer than he thought. He couldn't pinpoint specifics, not like Caleb.

"Jonah?" Reagan asked as he quickly made it to his feet, he and Dean both kicking sand on the fire to smother it's light.

"He's right. I got five hostiles in the area."

"What else?" Owen demanded.

Sam guessed Jonah's talents were as limited as his own when The Trinity's Scholar shook his head. History proved Scholars generally possessed one talent in which they excelled.

"They're not recon. They know we're here." Caleb said, making it to his feet, withdrawing the sword at his side. Sam watched as he pressed a hand to his forehead, knew it was costing Caleb

to force his abilities to perform a task that used to be as natural as breathing. “They’re approaching from the south; definitely not a welcoming committee.”

“How close?” Reagan faced Caleb.

“Too close,” Caleb muttered just as Sam heard the telltale sounds of brush and ground giving way beneath a steady cadence.

“There.” Dean pointed off to their left where a flicker of light could now be seen between the dark green branches. “Lanterns.”

“We have no cover here.” Owen growled, picking up his pack, slinging it over his shoulder. “We’re like fish in a barrel if they make a stand in the trees.”

“That’s not their way,” Dean spoke up. “This isn’t guerilla warfare. These are more than likely the king’s royal guards, not jungle-educated snipers.”

“Dean’s right, they prefer battle face to face,” Caleb added. “Tactical strategy and shadowy maneuvers weren’t really a strong point of the Musketeers; Knights in general tend to be more up front and showy.”

“Thanks for that morsel of military history, Reaves, but I prefer not to be run through with a lance,” Owen readied his crossbow.

Reagan pointed to the trees. “Honorable or not, they’ve still got the advantage on horseback.”

“Jonah, can you do anything about that?” Owen asked as they all took off in a run for the trees. “Maybe slow them up.”

“When I can see them, possibly,” Jonah replied.

“If you can see them, they can see us.” Reagan kept pace with Dean, Sam and Caleb. “Reaves?”

Sam reached out and gripped Caleb’s arm as he stumbled. “I’m trying, damn it.”

Sam heard the high pitch whinny of a horse, then multiple horses responding in kind. The ruckus implied Caleb had made contact. He thought of Fidiest, and the times Caleb joked about the things the horse told him concerning the long, solitary rides he and Sam liked to take at the farm. Sam always feigned annoyance at the breach of privacy though he knew in actuality there was no threat of such communication between man and beast. Caleb had once divulged in a lesson that the most he’d ever deciphered from a telepathic contact with an animal was an exchange of images, feelings. Once with a black dog that was attacking Dean and once with Atticus Finch, each occurrence had very different outcomes. Sam’s thoughts were focused on the possible content of what Caleb was attempting to project on the guard’s horses when he felt another psychic tug ahead of them. The sudden weight of dread had him tightening his grip on Caleb

who appeared to have a hard time pulling himself out of his telepathic task, and back to the present danger.

“Damn it,” Jonah voiced Sam’s alarm. “There’s a separate group approaching from the north.”

“Six or more,” Sam added, the adrenaline surging through his body making it too hard to focus on the exact count.

“I can’t handle both groups.” Caleb admitted, angrily. “I’m not having much effect on the first.”

“They’re hemming us in, Reagan.” Owen stopped, turning to his Guardian with a twisted scowl. “Bastards are going to drive us back to the water.”

“We could make them regret that,” Dean looked to Reagan.

“You think you’re up to it, Winchester?”

“Oh, I’ve been practicing.”

Sam looked to Caleb who shook his head in a way that assured he had no idea what the two Guardians had in mind.

“We’ll make our stand there.” Reagan motioned his men back the way they came.

“Maybe we can reason with them.” Sam followed his brother to the edge of the lake, Caleb just behind him as the first few horses broke into the clearing. All six men turned to face the oncoming troops. Even without the firelight to see by Sam could make out the lead horse, white, massive, its huffing breath cloud-like visible in the cold night air.

“They don’t really look like they’re in the reasoning mood.” Dean wielded the sword he was holding in front of him, looking to his Knight. “Damien, can you tell if they’re of the mind to shoot first and ask questions later?”

“Like their horses, they’re spooked. They are not used to visitors, trespassers in this case.”

“Owen, cover the leader.” Reagan pointed to the first horse in procession. “If anyone so much as looks like he’s going to think about taking a shot at us I’ll give you the sign and I want you to put an arrow through his skull.”

“Mark made, kill shot on your command, Sir.”

“This is so surreal.” Sam muttered as the horses quickly covered the grassy area to surround them on the sandy bank. There were eleven men in total, all dressed in matching Middle Ages apparel, deep blue capes gathered around their necks, identical ornate silver clasps in the shape of some sort of animal holding the garments in place. They looked as if they had just made an appearance at a reenactment, or were perhaps extras for the television show, *Merlin*. Their

horses, girthed in armor and adorned with the same color blue blankets trimmed in silver, pawed at the sand, snorting as they tossed their heads in excitement. Two men nudged their animals closer as the rest stayed back. The one in the lead wore chain mail, beneath a loose coat that bore a family crest that also adorned the shield he was holding.

“Who dares violate the order passed down by our King Pelles? This land is protected by Corbenic, crossing it unlawfully brings great penalty.” The man on the white horse spoke, his dialect so thick and odd that Sam had to concentrate on his lips as if by watching the words formed he could understand the strange accent. The Old English was deep and rich, strangely foreign considering it was the foundation to their native tongue. He pointed his sword at Owen. “Abandon your arms now.”

“We’re travelers, seeking counsel with your Lordship,” Jonah replied in a confident manner that spoke to his experience with being the invader in a foreign land. He was most likely the member of Walsh’s SEAL team to make first contact. “We come in peace,” he added, waving a hand for Owen to lower the cross bow. The Trinity’s Knight remained as he was.

Jonah might have been fluent in several languages, including Farsi, Russian and German if Sam remembered correctly from the man’s file, but his attempt at an Old English accent didn’t pass muster if the guard’s frown was any indication.

“Your speech is like none I know. Your clothing is strange as well. From where do you men come?”

“Excuse our ill-refinement, we bode from a small province far from here,” Jonah gestured over the water.

“We’ve journeyed a great distance to stand before your king, to present him with a gift as well,” Reagan added, emboldened enough to take a step closer to the man’s horse. “He’ll be quite pleased with the men who bring us to his throne, I assure you.”

“And how did you arrive?” The guard who sat to the right of the one on the white horse demanded, not impressed with Walsh’s promises. “I see no ship. No horses.”

“Magic.” Dean surprised Sam by speaking. Reagan’s glare indicated Sam was not the only one taken aback. “Lots and lots of magic.”

The man on the white horse laughed. “You have us to believe you six are magicians.”

“I’m a Knight, actually,” Caleb cut in, and Sam tightened his grip on his sword, wishing his Triad would heed Joshua’s warnings that this job could not be handled like a typical hunt. Hand to hand combat with these men would not end well. “The guy with a crossbow currently zeroed in on your forehead will tell you he’s one too, but where I’m from we say he’s suffering from debilitating delusions of grandeur.”

“You both appear more peasants than soldiers of any king I know.”

“What can I say? I’ve had a rough couple of weeks.” Caleb shot Dean a smirk. “I told you this cape did nothing for my physique, Deuce.”

“You’re not helping,” Jonah hissed, and Sam silently cheered the other Scholar’s reprimand.

“I tire of this nonsense.” The two guards slid from their horses. One moved closer, hand on the hilt of his sword as he faced off with Dean. “Lower your arms and bow before me, Boran, Knight of Corbenic.”

“Walsh.” Dean shared a glance with Reagan whose hand signal had Owen reluctantly complying with the man’s wishes. Sam could only bite the inside of his jaw as Dean took another step forward, very aware of the other armed guards watching their every move. “If it’s all the same to you, *Boring*, we’ll do our kneeling before your king.”

“It is doubtful you will live to see my king, peasant.” The guard was about Dean’s height, but the helmet he was wearing, along with the chain mail, cut an imposing figure. Sam kept up a silent mantra for his brother to proceed with caution, though his actual telepathic message was not as nice.

Dean of course paid no mind to Sam’s warning. “I know the guy sounds funny, but did you not understand the part about us bringing your king a gift?”

The guard’s incredulity was easy to read in the bright moonlight. “What could the likes of you possibly bring that the Lord of Corbenic would find pleasing?”

To Dean’s credit, he seemed to let the seething condescension slide. “Let’s just say it’s something to cure all that ails him. I even have something I’m pretty sure will get your jollies going as well.”

Dean reached for the belt at his side withdrawing the leather pouch, which he opened, taking out a gold coin. Sam had not remembered Joshua providing them with any monetary props, and hoped his brother realized if the men discovered they were fake their situation would be much worse.

“You think to charm me with trinkets, to ensnare me in to an act of disloyalty to my King?”

“Since when is fine gold a trinket?” Dean tilted the coin, flashing it in the silver light. “Considering the source of this bounty, it’s likely to have come from Solomon’s temple.”

“In other words, big man, it’s called one hell of a bribe where we come from,” Reagan had dropped his attempt at an accent. He stepped closer to Dean. “In my experience it’s the universal language that binds all men.”

Dean held the gold coin up for closer inspection, rattling the pouch that contained the others. “There are twenty nine more of these bad boys for an escort to Corbenic.”

The guard moved with the reflexes of an old West gunslinger. He brought his gloved, metal studded fist up, effectively catching Dean across the face with a jarring backhand that sent him staggering into Reagan, both of them hitting the water close behind them with a splash. Caleb moved almost as fast as the guard, bringing up his sword. “That’s going to cost you more than thirty pieces of gold, you sonofabitch.”

“Caleb,” Sam swore as the other guard’s tightened their circle around them, horses snorting and kicking up sand. He imagined their imminent doom as he glanced back at Dean, catching his brother’s own telepathic mantra to stay with Caleb. Dean’s face was bleeding, but what concerned Sam more was the fact his brother was moving slowly, allowing Reagan to help him up out of the water. Sam heard Walsh order Owen to stand down as the guard who had struck Dean drew his sword and leveled it at Caleb. “Death is upon you now.”

“So I’ve heard about a hundred times already.” Caleb growled, raising his shield. “Go ahead and take your best shot.”

Instead of the clang of meeting swords that Sam expected there was a collective gasp among the closest guards, then whispering gathered and rose like a harsh wind among the others in the distance.

“In what manner did you come by that?” The guard that had struck Dean was staring at Caleb, but making no move on the swift killing blow he promised.

“What?”

“The shield you brandish, heretic.”

“It’s a family heirloom.”

“It bares the blessing from Joshua of Arimathea, and only one Knight was bestowed such an honor,”

“Yeah, Galahad, we know, he and I go way back.”

“Sir Galahad would never abandon his shield to such an unworthy opponent, not unless treachery befell him.”

“Really? This is the Royal Guards of Corbenic’s idea of bringing swift death to your enemy- talking them into submission.” Caleb shook his head. “Thus far, I am so fucking disappointed in this place.”

“Maybe *that* will change your mind,” Sam muttered, gripping Caleb’s sleeve as he pointed to the line of forest closest to the lake. The smashing of limbs and breaking of treetops garnered everyone’s attention, heralding the emergence of a massive winged beast. Sam found it almost impossible to trust his eyes. As incredible as traveling to the Grail Castle had been, The Scholar in him had allowed the possibility that such a place had once existed. The actual presence of dragons however was not something he’d considered beyond indulging Caleb.

“This is not to be believed,” the guard in front of Caleb stuttered, voicing Sam’s thoughts. The awe spread through his men, their amazement not contained to a whisper this time. The horses reared and stomped frantically with fear.

“Astorim.” Caleb lowered his sword as the creature soared above them, blocking out the moon as it passed.

Sam could understand Caleb’s comparison. The creature looked just as Sam imagined the tiny toy silver dragon that led the sentinels guarding Prince Samuel’s castle might if as six year old Sam had so many times hoped. Astorim had come to spectacular life. The dragon’s wings were at least ten feet across, jagged and sharp as if they were sheathed in layered of ice. His body glistened like polished chrome, scales the color of a frosty sea. Its horned head was set with a cave-like mouth, teeth that flashed like crystal stalagmites and stalactites jutting from the top and bottom, enormous eyes glowed like chunks of blue diamonds. When it roared, the sound was as loud and powerful as the surf crashing against a rocky coast in the gales of a hurricane.

“What magic is this?” The guard hissed. “No dragons remain in this land.”

“We brought this one with us.” Dean called from where he still stood in the water alongside Walsh. “He’s not particularly happy with the hospitality you’ve shown so far.”

The pieces clicked in place for Sam as he looked from the dragon to his brother. The creature was the embodiment of the sea for a reason. The two Guardian’s had used the water and their abilities to give it life, but the form their creation took, it’s resemblance to the dragon that bore Pastor Jim’s moniker had Dean written all over it. His brother *had been* practicing.

“You will have me believe that you control this beast?” The guard was tracking the animal’s graceful arching movements in the sky, his sword and shield at the ready.

As if in reply the creature swooped over the lake, skimming the surface with its talons. It seemed to pick up momentum, power, before diving towards the circle of guards that had hung back from the three front men. It opened its mouth unleashing not a rush of fire but a powerful jet stream of water that knocked Corbenic’s royal guardsmen from their horses, sending their animals fleeing towards the forest, out of harm’s way. The dragon breathed another torrent onto the scrambling men, sending them tumbling across the ground like a rioting crowd blasted with a



water cannon. None of them got a chance to rise as the puddles around them transformed to thick silver cords, binding their hands and feet to the earth.

“Any more doubts as to whose side the dragon is on?” Dean pointed to the lead guard. “Order your wing man to drop his weapon as well, or I’ll gladly give another demonstration.”

“As you wish.” Boran didn’t have to address the man as he quickly tossed his shield and swords at Caleb and Sam’s feet. “Call off the beast, Sorcerer.”

“I’m no sorcerer. I’m a Guardian,” Dean said, stepping from the lake to come between Caleb and Sam. He glanced up, and Sam felt a cool wind as the dragon once more beat it’s wings above them before turning and flying off over the top of the trees where it had come. A loud splash from the lake echoed in the distance and Sam knew Astorim had returned to his resting place.

“Told you we’d see a dragon, Damien.” Dean elbowed his Knight flashing a smug grin in Sam’s direction. “Don’t exist my ass.”

“What evil have you brought to our land?” Boran stammered.

“As we tried to tell you before, we bring gifts.” Jonah stepped forward along with Owen, who had once again lifted his crossbow and was pointing it at the unarmed men. “We wished only to see your king.”

“The King of Corbenic no longer welcomes guests; he will not be pleased at what has taken place here. It could be considered an act of war.”

“Only we all know that Corbenic is in no position for war, and that your king doesn’t welcome guests because he is wounded,” Reagan began. “What we have to offer could remedy both those things.”

“You are not the first to seek counsel with our king offering promises of salvation. Braver knights than you have attempted to breach Corbenic’s walls hoping to plunder her riches.”

“But did they have their own fucking dragon?” Caleb asked. He held up his shield. “Did they come in Galahad’s name?”

“This could be the men our King has been awaiting,” The guard beside Boran hissed. “The prophecy tells Galahad will heal our King, perhaps this is a sign.”

“Silence.” Boran held up his hand, keeping his eyes on Dean. “What is it you wish to gain from this meeting?”

“We’ll tell our business to your king if you don’t mind.” Reagan gestured to the restrained guards. “Once you and your friend have taken us to him, we’ll release the rest of your men without harm.”

Boran turned to glance at his charges whose struggles to free themselves from the silver had proved fruitless. He then shared a look with the man at his right before addressing Dean. “And you’ll pay the tax, Guardian?”

“Tax?” Dean folded his arms over his chest, glaring at the knight. Sam wasn’t sure if he should be impressed with the guard’s cunning or disappointed in his calculations.

“The one for trespassing in our kingdom.”

Dean glanced at Walsh, then back to Boran. “Let me guess, it just happens to be thirty pieces of gold.”

Boran nodded, and Owen laughed. “So much for fucking chivalry.”

Dean tossed the pouch to Boran. “Lead the way.”

“You think we can trust him?” Sam asked as they entered the forest. The Trinity seemed to have no problem following the two men. Sam imagined them trusting more nefarious men in missions for their country and quests for their own profit.

“I think we have no choice. The sun’s coming up and we’re running out of time.” Dean turned to Caleb. “Damien, you okay?”

“I should ask you that.” Caleb pointed to Dean’s face. “You’re bleeding, Deuce.”

“I know how to take a punch, man.” Dean smirked, running a finger over his busted lip. “You taught me when I was like twelve.” Dean gestured to Caleb’s head. “Speaking of steel-enforced structures, how’s your head?”

Sam knew that Caleb was exhausted, sensing it in the dimming connection between them. Dean was right, they needed to get moving.

“I don’t think you and Sammy have to carry me just yet.” The weak attempt at a smile was not reassuring, Caleb’s stumbling gait as they tried to keep up with The Trinity and Corbenic’s guards much more telling. “The Runt’s bitch face is enough to keep me on my feet for a few more miles. I’m afraid he might start crying.”

Sam frowned. “I don’t have a bitch face.”

Dean snorted. “Just like Camelot doesn’t have dragons.”

“You made that dragon,” Sam pointed out.

“And it was completely kick ass, Deuce.” Caleb picked up his pace, bumping shoulders with his best friend. “I kept expecting Athewm and Belac to show.”

Sam rolled his eyes, resisting the urge to pantomime gagging. “Let’s just hope the Fisher King is as impressed.” If he was, then this they would be home soon with a healthy Caleb and one amazing story to tell.

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Dean would not say he was a connoisseur of castles and architecture like Caleb, but he understood rundown, having stayed at so many less than stellar motels, hotels, boarding houses and apartments.

The castle was huge, but the creeping ivy that once covered it was dried up and withered and uninviting. The structure, gray from the clay that was used, was showing cracks that someone had attempted to cover, but seemingly had given up once there were too many.

Boran hollered out to the castle in a greeting that allowed the drawbridge to start its decent, the clanking chain holding up the welcoming door working slowly as if trying to muster its energy. “There’s a moat,” Dean commented as he looked down, half expecting to see floating body parts, but less than thrilled to see it was some sort of sewage system.

“It’s not what I expected,” Caleb replied his breath coming quickly from the exertion of the walk to the castle, a hike that would not usually have left The Knight winded.

“I was thinking dancing maidens.” Dean attempted to lighten the mood.

“This isn’t the twelve days of Christmas,” Sam said, squinting in the sun that had finally risen earlier than expected after they lost a night of sleep.

“It has good bones. With a little. . .”

Dean smiled as Caleb was lost in the possibilities of building and construction. He hadn’t seen that side of his friend in a long time. Dean missed Tri Corp. “Let’s go storm the castle.”

“That’s exactly what The Trinity wants to do, plus looting,” Sam whispered so the others could not hear. Dean did not miss his brother’s doom and gloom, over dramatic preaching. “We won’t let that happen. Besides, the Sword of David technically belongs with Caleb.”

The look Sam shot him as they started across the drawbridge spoke volumes about what The Scholar thought of that leap in logic on Dean’s part.

“Maybe you should let us handle the talking once we’re inside.” Reagan had slithered his way alongside Dean, displacing Caleb.

“Because you did such a good job of negotiating while we were at the lake?” Dean kept his eyes on Boran’s back as they approached a great wooden door emblazoned with the same crest that

marked the knight's shield. He hadn't noticed it before due to the size, but one corner held a detailed illustration of a bear, mouth open in a mighty roar. Dean couldn't stop the shiver than ran through him.

"I'll give you credit for the dragon, but you couldn't have done what you did without me," Reagan continued, keeping his voice low. "Don't go getting cocky, Winchester. This is still my show."

Dean recognized the clipped tone. Walsh didn't like having to share command. Of course Dean didn't give a shit about what Walsh liked. He sure as hell wasn't going to compromise the mission to piss off the bastard. "We both take point, play it by ear."

"Fine, but remember our main objective is David's Sword. Don't even think about double crossing me."

Dean glared at Walsh. It was a testament to his desperation that he hadn't considered hatching a plan to thwart The Trinity. In his defense there had been little time to prepare for the possibility they were going to time travel or shift universes, whatever the hell they did to get to fucking Camelot, let alone think through the consequences of his actions. "You'll get the sword as soon as Caleb's cured."

If first impressions of The Grail Castle had been a letdown, the area inside the outer walls was little consolation. Even though Sam had bored them on the road trip to New Jersey with details of Middle Age castles, Dean had still envisioned a grand estate. As it was the Keep where the lord, his family and his knights lived, ate and slept was in an even greater state of disrepair than the Bailey. Dean could practically feel Sam's 'I told you so' smirk as they entered the area where the king carried out his business to find dirt floors and windows that were dulled with time and lack of attention.

"Maybe The Great Hall will be better," Caleb muttered. If Dean was disappointed at the lack of grandeur, he knew his best friend was doubly so. Thanks to its lofty architect Prince Samuel's play castle, although converted from a Barbie Dream House, had more frill than the Fisher King's home.

"I told you both that King Pelles's infirmity was reflected on his kingdom. In many of the legends the land around the castle even dried up representing his impotence, refusing to yield even meager crops. The people were forced to flee, taking their businesses and their tax money with them," Sam whispered. "He probably has only a skeleton staff for upkeep."

Dean frowned at his brother. "Must you rub salt in our wounds?"

Sam rolled his eyes. "Believe it or not, this is a good thing. It means Walsh is probably right about the King's willingness to hear us out."

Dean easily found the irony in their commonality with the Fisher King. Pelles was forced to watch the empire he loved fall to ruin, just as Sam and Dean were watching Caleb's steady drastic decline. Reagan Walsh and his Trinity were using both their weaknesses against them. Dean hated to admit he was reassured by the fact, like him, the Fisher King was probably willing to do just about anything to restore what he'd once had, and once again ensure that his kingdom would not die out.

"I feel bad for the guy, too."

Dean pulled himself from his musings to realize they had entered another small room that was not as cold, damp and drafty as the other and at least had a stone floor and walls adorned with large tapestries. Caleb was staring at him, his gold eyes mirroring Dean's guilt.

"We'll make sure that he knows the consequences of using The Lance." Caleb pointed to the weapon Dean carried at his side. "Great success comes at a price."

Dean hadn't even considered the curse that came with The Spear of Destiny. It might grant one wealth and sovereignty over one's enemies, but it also promised at the least bad luck, at the most a swift death, if it was lost or forfeited in battle. He knew Caleb, like Dean was considering what a victory on their part might cost them.

"Wait here."

Boran's order kept Dean from having to respond. He watched the knight exchange a few words with the other guard before disappearing through a door into another chamber.

"What's going on?" Walsh demanded.

"Boran will inform the king you are here. Preparations will be made for our Lordship to grant you an audience in The Great Hall."

"Meaning they're going to pull him out of bed, and try to pass him off as a shadow of their former ruler." Owen snorted. "Reminds me of those schleps in South Asia who tried to convince us a goat was the reincarnation of their chief."

"Show some respect." Caleb growled. "Injured or not, you're about to come before The Fisher King."

"Right. The guy who set his daughter up for an adulterous romp with Lancelot." Owen grinned. "Reaves, your ancestry gives a whole new meaning to that old saying, don't shake a whore tree expecting an angel to fall out."

Caleb started forward, but Dean caught his arm. "Don't sweat it, Damien. Owen's just pissed his genealogy report stinks of rotting fish and cheap booze. Don't even get me started on the men in his family."

“Maybe we could refrain from fighting amongst ourselves.” Jonah stepped in front of The Trinity’s Knight, facing Dean. “A united front would probably serve us better than beating one another senseless prior to our meeting with the king.”

“He’s right, Dean.”

Dean didn’t bother reminding his brother that Owen started it. Instead he pointed to one of the tapestries on the wall adjacent to them. “Look, Damien, dancing maidens.”

“The trip’s not a complete loss,” Caleb jumped in. “But I’m guessing those are nuns, Deuce, maybe angels. Byzantine art doesn’t really lend itself to fluidity of any sorts, let alone any expression of joyful movement.”

“I guess it’s all about perspective.” Dean forced a grin. He maintained his good humor as they investigated the other artwork giving his particular spin on the pieces to pass the time and to goad a smile out of Caleb and even an occasional half-grin from Sam, who kept glancing at his wrist though Joshua had taken their watches from them.

“Your Lordship will see you now.” Boran had returned, gesturing for them to follow him.

Dean allowed Reagan to go first, but matched his pace as they continued through another hallway. They entered The Great Hall of Corbenic shoulder to shoulder. Time had seemed kinder to this part of the castle, the ravages of poverty not as telling. Long polished tables filled the central area, surrounded by marbled statues and ivory reliefs depicting various religious scenes. Several knights in full armor lined the path that led to the king’s throne. Dean might have mistaken them for empty suits if they hadn’t shifted in perfect cadence as the six approached, lifting their swords to form a tunnel to pass through.

King Pelles sat upon a grand chair encrusted with jewels and detailed in gold. The old man had not been granted the same reprieve as his reception hall. He looked as dilapidated and badly maintained as his decaying kingdom. Pelles’s drawn form was dwarfed by the chair, his lower body cloaked in a blue blanket matching the capes his knights wore. With his bent form and long white beard, Dean couldn’t help but think of Moses. Two of his royal guard stood at the ready on either side of him, and Dean wondered if their steadfastness was not more out of fear the old guy might slide off his throne, instead of fear of an attack.

“My men said one of you claimed to be a Guardian. Which of you might it be?”

Despite his appearance, King Pelles voice was strong and rumbling. His cloudy blue gaze was just as fierce when both Dean and Reagan took a step forward.

“You have me believe there are two of you?” Dean decided he might like King Pelles when the old man rolled his eyes skyward, lifted his hand in a sign of exasperation when neither he nor Reagan backed down. “Both emissaries of Merlin?”

“That would be me.” Dean took another step closer, feeling Reagan’s glare burning into him. “I’m The Guardian of The Brotherhood.”

“Ah, yes, The Brotherhood.” Pelles sighed, giving a slight nod of his head. “Merlin’s band of bewitched merry men, though your reputation lends little evidence towards a kind and forgiving countenance.”

“Some of us are merrier than others.” Dean grinned. “I, for one, can bring the party.”

“It was you then who conjured the dragon that attacked my men?”

“I did.” Dean didn’t think the king was requesting exact details, so he chose not to explain that it was only with Walsh’s extra boost of energy that Dean was able to give flight to Astorim, though the grim scowl on Pelles’s face made him consider the wisdom of not dragging Reagan under the bus with him.

“As soon as I heard there was a dragon about, I knew Merlin must be involved. He identified his brotherhood with the beasts. The old fool went so far as to keep a young one as a pet, you know.” The King’s mouth twitched beneath his beard, betraying his effort to seem disgruntled by the infamous magician. “The foul beast nearly burned my kitchen to the ground during a wild romp through the courtyard on one of the wizard’s visits. No dragon has been allowed in Corbenic since.”

“Then I beg your pardon for loosening one.” Dean glanced to Boran, who was standing off to their right. “Your Knight forced us to defend ourselves.”

“I had hoped Merlin, my old friend, might have returned especially when there was mention of Galahad. The time since their last visit has seemed an eternity.”

“You were expecting them?” Dean recalled the guard’s earlier mention of a prophecy.

“As you can see I have capability to do much else but wait and hope, Guardian.” Pelles threw back the blue blanket, revealing one normal leg, the other bandaged and bloodied as if the wound had only just occurred. Dean resisted the urge to cover his nose as the septic smell of the rancid appendage reached him. “Merlin promised one of his visions saw me healed and whole, my kingdom restored, but that seems ages ago.”

“Perhaps we’re the men you’ve been waiting for.” Reagan now took his place by Dean. “What would you say if I told you that we come prepared to offer you the means to see your kingdom returned to its rightful glory, including boasting a king that is healed and healthy?”

“I would say that you think I’m a fool. That you hope to trick your Lordship.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Dean said, glancing to Caleb and Sam before returning his gaze to King Pelles. “There is no trick, but there is a great risk involved.”

“As with any venture of great gain,” Reagan was quick to add.

“Considering the risk you six have taken to come here before me, then I am to believe you are hoping for a similar favor?”

“We want the Sword of King David, the blade he used to take the giant Goliath’s head.”

Pelles exchanged a surprised look with Boran as if the Knight had perhaps betrayed a great confidence instead of accepting a simple bribe. “And what led you to believe Corbenic would hold such treasure?”

“We know Merlin camouflaged his own Great Hall within the boundaries of your kingdom.” Reagan glanced to Dean. “All Guardians hide their repository of weapons in well-protected places. It doesn’t get much better than a magically cloaked, frequently disappearing castle.”

Dean had never considered they were going to plunder Merlin’s version of The Hunter’s Tomb. He tried to imagine strangers coming to the farm; courting a visit into the secret catacomb, only the most trusted of hunters was granted entrance, with the sole intention of taking one of the protected relics it housed.

“You might not even be aware it’s here, but considering you called Merlin friend, I imagine you not only know of its existence, but have access to it.” Reagan continued, breaking through Dean’s morose line of thinking. He swallowed the bile that threatened to steal his breath, knowing they had been left no other recourse.

“We’re not asking you to betray Merlin. The sword rightfully belongs to our Knight.” Dean tried to put strength of conviction into his words, but they rang through the hall painfully hollow.

“I would say the sword rightfully belongs to Goliath, or perhaps to the giants who forged it.” King Pelles stroked his beard, his blue eyes holding Dean. The disappointment reflected in the unwavering gaze twisted The Guardian’s gut in a way that only a well-meaning glance from Pastor Jim could in the past. “But considering his fate, the law says it belongs to David and his heirs.”

“The Guardian’s Knight is a son of David.”

“You claim to be from Galahad’s line?” Pelles pointed a gnarled finger towards Caleb.

“He has Galahad’s shield, My Lord,” Boran inserted before Caleb had a chance to respond.

“His mother is descended from Elaine of Corbenic.” Reagan also took liberty. Dean was not blind to what the other Guardian was attempting.

The King laughed, though his eyes now searched Caleb’s face more earnestly. “So not only are you a son of David, you are son of mine. You don’t show much promise for my lineage.”



Dean changed his mind about liking Pelles as he watched him size up Caleb, waving his hand in dismissal. "He's had a rough couple of months."

Caleb stepped forward, surprising Dean by taking one knee, bowing his head in reverence. "I'm willing to prove my claim, my Lord, by taking my rightful seat at The Round Table."

"And what seat might that be, Knight of Merlin?"

"Siege Perilous."

"You realize your fate if you are found unworthy?"

"I do, but if I am judged true, I will claim the Sword of David."

It seemed to Dean as if everyone in the Great Hall held a collective breath as Pelles reconsidered the man kneeled in front of him. Dean had a fleeting moment of panic, a desire to grab Caleb's arm, collect Sam and beat hell out of there. But the King's decree brought an abrupt halt to his fear-spurned plan.

"I will allow it," King Pelles interceded. "In exchange for the item you promise will restore Corbenic."

Dean moved forward, extending the lance. "Once I hand this over to you, it's in your best interest you never lose track of it, returning it only to me, although that's probably an unrealistic option."

Pelles lifted a silver brow. "Because you yield from a strange far away province, Guardian?"

"You bet." Dean shared a look with Caleb who had risen to his feet, but was looking unsteady. "So, keep it safe," Dean said as he brought forward the lance. "This can only be passed from one leader to another." He bowed as he reached the lower step of the dais, waiting for the king to allow his further approach.

King Pelles gave a nod. "Proceed."

The lance felt heavy in Dean's hands, uncommonly so. Dean had a feeling it was because the lance would change the course of events here. Was this planned or foreseen by Merlin? Dean was dizzy with the thought as he made his way slowly up the stairs, trying not to seem threatening to the wizening king.

He kneeled as he had seen Caleb do and lifted the lance above his head so that the weakened lord would just have to reach for it. Dean felt the moment of contact as Pelles took the lance, and his hands shined briefly as the power shifted to the Fisher King.

“It’s not instant, but in time your kingdom will flourish again.” Dean was uncomfortable still kneeling on the hard surface. He risked a glance back and Caleb shrugged at him. “So now you owe us, right?”

King Pelles did not answer. He stared off in the distance and no one spoke. The lance rested in his hands and he sat up straighter. It was in the silence that a small white bird flew in, landing on the lance, staying for a moment before flying out again.

Dean took the opportunity to stand, restating his request. “You promised to allow us entry into Merlin’s room.”

“I did,” King Pelles replied. “Show them, Boran. Show them.”

“Yes, Sire.” Boran gestured to the first four knights. They walked forward with two knights on each side, standing before an elaborately etched wall in the King’s Great Hall. Boran waited until Dean came down from the dais and joined the others. Sam put a hand on his shoulder.

“That’s a wall,” Owen said before being quieted by Jonah.

“Is it? Merlin was a man of great faith,” the king replied shifting the lance. “I grow tired. Decide what you will do.”

Dean stared at the etching before them. It showed a detailed garden complete with a fountain overflowing with water. If one looked close enough, the ripples of water formed a shape in the pool -three interlocking circles. Dean tapped Reagan on the chest. “I got this.”

Reagan grabbed Dean’s wrist, giving it a squeeze. “Watch yourself,” he murmured.

Dean smiled, winking at Caleb who seemed ready to attack Reagan even though he was slightly listing against Sam.

Dean took confidence in the presence of The Triad symbol. With a breath he walked forward and slipped seamlessly through the wall like a spirit. The others would follow in just a moment as they saw that the wall was a clever apparition. Merlin wasn’t remembered as the greatest magician for nothing. Dean knew the illusion not only served as protection, but also required an act of faith for whoever ventured past it. Inside there was the true door, radiant warmth emanated not just in its gold color. There was no doorknob on the door, but instinctually Dean placed his hands flat against one of the panels. He felt a vibration through his silver band and with a soft click the doors opened, parting for him.

The color of the door matched the color of the walls in the room, a deep cavern with natural sunlight coming through the windows covered by stained glass the color of the sea that dimmed the brilliance of the walls enough that one could look and not squint. This room, unlike the Keep, was kept polished and in repair. Green spider plants cascaded from the walls, providing an extra boost of oxygen that Dean could sense and relish in as he felt more refreshed.

There was gold, jewels in every color, haphazard in its display, seemingly like pirate's booty because there was no organization to it. But, that was not what held Dean's attention.

The large fountain, gurgling from some unknown water source took center stage. It was grander than the one portrayed in the relief. The water was an unnatural blue, glowing almost silver because the light reflecting on the three levels gave the illusion of flowing crystals. It pooled in a mist at the bottom, but the mist was enough to nourish the delicate white flowering plants that made a ring around the base.

"Dean!"

Sam's worried voice snapped Dean from his trance. He was shaken when he realized he crossed the room, and was now standing directly in front of the fountain. The cool spray caressing his face and hands left a dew-like layer on his hair and eyelashes. Dean wondered if he might shimmer if the light caught him right. He thirsted for more, reaching out in a hope to cup just a taste of the sweet water for himself.

"Deuce!" Caleb's grip on his arm had Dean shaking his head, fighting free of the fog that shrouded his thoughts. "Are you alright?"

"I'm okay." His voice was rough. Sam's concerned frown had him attempting an imitation of his grin. "Just checking to see if we could install one of these oversized bird baths in The Tomb."

"I called your name three times." Sam glowered at the fountain as if it were spouting poisonous fumes instead of the most intoxicating aroma Dean had ever encountered.

"Move away from the water, Deuce." Caleb tugged him backward. "My headache notched up a few decibels as soon as I looked in its direction, and mine and Sam's rings are tingling like we just grabbed hold of one of the electric fences at the farm."

"It's beautiful," Reagan said. Dean felt an irrational sense of jealousy strike him as The Trinity's Guardian moved to touch one of the trembling white blossoms.

"Don't." Jonah interceded before Dean had to. "Reaves is right, something's off. It has a peculiar energy."

"I'll be damned." Owen whistled, nudging Reagan back a few more steps as he peered into the water. "I think this is the Enchanted Fountain of Nereid."

“Water nymphs?” Caleb growled, shouldering Dean behind him. “No wonder they’re drawn to it.”

“It’s rumored the water, once caught in your hands, turns to diamonds and sapphires.” Owen glanced at Reagan who was looking less dazed, then took a step closer.

“I would approach that with great caution if I were you.” King Pelles entered on a chariot-like structure shouldered between two of his men. “Merlin placed that here after one of his Guardians nearly drowned while attempting to quench his horrible thirst. Some say Thetis; the Greek sea goddess breathes life to it.”

Dean swallowed hard, the dryness in his throat fading as he allowed Caleb to block his view of the fountain. “So maybe we’ll just go with that water cooler Sammy’s wanted to install in The Tomb.”

“You’ll find that many of the so called treasures Merlin hid away here are not what they seem on the surface. All that glitters is not gold.”

Dean cleared his throat, remembering his vow to Sam that he would not allow The Trinity to plunder Merlin’s stockpile. “The only item we’re interested in is The Sword of David.”

“But that doesn’t mean we can’t look around with caution,” Owen interjected with a sweeping bow toward the king. “And your permission of course, Lord.”

“It is not I who granted you entrance into this place.” Pelles was staring at Dean. The king might have known Merlin’s secret location, but he could not have gained entrance. That required a silver ring, and a secret oath of allegiance that only a Guardian of The Brotherhood had sworn.

“Don’t touch anything.” Dean bared his teeth at the Trinity’s Knight.

“Why don’t you just lift your leg and piss on the walls, Winchester?” Owen rolled his eyes, falling into line with Reagan with a huff.

“Shall we begin?” King Pelles interrupted, gesturing to the grand table on the other side of the fountain. Dean had not noticed it after encountering the fountain; even now it was calling to him, caressing him with a soothing voice that tugged on long buried memories. He refocused with great effort toward the infamous table.

It was bigger than Dean expected, but still exactly what he imagined. Imposing. Stately. Magical. Sam had included more history than they ever wanted to know about The Round Table in his mini lecture series on the way to Long Island, but Dean had found himself reflecting on Pastor Jim’s stories. The ones in which he told how Merlin designed the table with magic, modeling it after the table Jesus and his Disciples had used for the Messiah’s last meal. Even the empty seat left for Judah, mirrored the one left for The Grail Knight, though the latter was a seat of honor,

and not one shamed and colored by betrayal. However, the idea of having Caleb claim the perilous position made it seem just as daunting and damning to Dean as the one left for Judas.

“We’re waiting, Winchester,” Reagan gave an unnecessary reminder.

Dean glanced at Sam and then Caleb, who was staring at the table in the same manner The Guardian imagined he must have been looking at the fountain because sudden fear for his best friend’s safety gripped him, and he wanted to ask Sam if he too felt the hum of warning in his hunter’s band.

“Give us a minute will you?” Dean snapped at Reagan, not caring if they were causing their ungracious host precious napping time. King Pelles had The Lance, and a guaranteed glowing future unlike Dean’s Triad, which might be sharing their last minutes together. .

Walsh’s face shifted to an uncharacteristic look of understanding. He nodded, moving away, taking his men with him. Dean wasn’t surprised that Owen began a large sweep of the goods, stopping first at an open chest that would have been the envy of Davy Jones.

Dean returned his gaze to his best friend. “Damien? You having second thoughts?”

“You could say that.” Caleb looked towards the table and back to Dean.

“It’s normal to have a bit of nerves.” Sam declared logically. Both Knight and Guardian glared at him.

“Yeah, like when I went to Auburn and turned around twice to head back to the farm before finally getting a grip.”

“You turned around?” Dean remembered that day, the party at Jim’s, the exact moment when Caleb piled in his old Jeep, and tore out of the driveway leaving ten year old Dean watching from his bedroom window because he’d refused to come down and tell his best friend goodbye.

“Not really the time, Deuce.” Caleb ran a hand over his mouth. “I was just pointing out that I don’t really have much of choice but to go through with this.”

“There was a choice then,” Sam said, his dark eyes reflecting his understanding of what it meant for Caleb to leave that day. Dean wondered if his little brother had ever thought of turning back from Stanford. “There’s a choice now.”

“Meaning, I’m dead either way, so what the hell?”

“No.” Dean gripped his friend’s arm. “Meaning, this is going to work. You’re going to be fine.”

“You remember the tales as well as I do. Even a regular seat at the Round Table demanded the Knight who claimed it be braver and badder than the previous occupant. I’m not sure I measure up to the likes of Bors, Gawain, Bedivere, let alone Galahad.”

“You’re the bravest, most badass I know.” Dean promised. “The likes of Lamorak and Morholt have nothing on you.”

Caleb shook his head. “You do realize that Galahad was raised by nuns? Old man Pelles said it back there; I was pretty much raised by wolves.” Caleb twisted the silver ring around his finger in nervous habit. “Bobby, Johnny, hell, even Mac are far cries from the Sisters in Waiting and Jim, God rest his soul, was no Mother Superior. Pelles agreed to this because he doesn’t believe I’ll pass muster. He doesn’t think I’m worthy.”

“Then he’s going to have a whole hell of a lot of crow to chow down on when he hands over that sword to you.”

“Or he’ll be sitting pretty with The Holy Lance when I’m a pile of ashes and you five are locked up in his dungeon.”

“You’re worried because of the demon connection?”

Dean glared at his brother. “Sam.”

“What? We’re all thinking it.”

“Yeah, but only one of us has been bonding with Joshua Sawyer way too much.”

“Actually, Runt, I was thinking about the fact Galahad was a fucking virgin, but now that you mention it, yeah, my unusual bloodline could present a problem when taking a place where only three Knights have sat before me, all of them holy enough to seek The Grail.”

“A fucking virgin?” Dean forced a grin, trying to derail this train before it could make it all the way to Gloomsville. “I think that’s the best oxymoron I’ve heard come out of your mouth, Damien.”

“Let’s not forget, Merlin was part demon.” Sam was doing his part to put a positive spin on things.

“Shit.” Caleb shook his head, exhaling a heavy breath. “You two really know how to make a guy feel better.”

“You’d rather we go on about how much we love you? How no matter what happens we’ll always be brothers? And how this can’t be the end because our Triad has a destiny to fulfill?”

“Not unless you want your last memory of me to be the one where I kick your ass.”

“That’s what I thought.” Dean grinned, winking at Sam. “Now, time to plop *your* ass down like a real man, or should I say, knight.”

Pelles was waiting for them at the head of the table. Caleb glanced to where Reagan and his Trinity, now cloistered in their own little circle, were watching them with an air of impatience before facing Sam and Dean once more.

“If the worst happens, find a way to get the hell out of here without them.” Caleb pulled an item from his pocket, which he handed to Sam. “Your ticket home.”

Sam turned the picture around so Dean could see it was Carolyn’s latest sonogram. “Joshua’s son is the power totem.”

Dean snorted. “I give the Mama Boy’s credit. That’s a whole hell of lot better than an athame.”

“He wanted to make sure you make it back, and so do I.” Caleb gripped Dean’s wrist. “He was reminding us that there is a future generation to consider. Understand me, Deuce?” Instead of letting him go, Caleb pulled him forward, crushing Dean in a hard hug. “No matter what happens, we’ll always be brothers.”

Dean returned the embrace, understanding the parroting of his words for what they really meant. “Always.”

Caleb let him go, gripping the side of Sam’s neck, flashing a quick watery smile. “Take care of him, Runt.”

“Once you take the seat, it will hold you in its grip,” The Fisher King warned and gestured for his men to back him away from the table. “The choice is yours Son of Galahad.”

“They all look the same.”

“As Merlin intended, yes?”

“How will I know I’ve chosen the right one?”

“Only Siege Perilous will deliver your death, or what you seek.”

“So if I sit down and nothing happens...”

“You and your friends will be free to leave Corbenic *without* The Sword of David.”

“Use the Force, Luke,” Dean encouraged, not completely sure he wanted Caleb to choose Siege Perilous.

He watched as Caleb rolled his shoulders back and circled the table once, before claiming a seat. He watched a beat, gave an encouraging smile as nothing happened until the chair seemed to

undulate. Then a light shined down, too much for Dean to see through, but he could make out that Caleb's head was facing upwards.

Even though he inherited the Guardian position from Pastor Jim, the former Guardian's religious beliefs did not get passed onto Dean. However, in this moment Dean believed that Caleb was blessed. Their Triad, too as they had been given opportunity, faced adversity with grace and determination to come out finally on the other side. It was humbling, and horrifying all in the same instant, as Dean felt the weight of what they were doing. He'd experienced small moments of conviction all along, the visit from Gideon in Jim's stead, the silence from the Lady of the Lake, the undeniable parallel between Merlin's Great Hall and The Tomb at the farm. Then there was the fountain, an instrument of evil that Merlin had taken great measures to keep away from his brethren as a means of protecting them. Was Dean saving one brother only to loosen ruin on countless others under his watch?

"This is wrong, Sam," Dean said in a low voice as he looked around the room. He saw the Trinity, Owen especially pillaging the treasures. "This is wrong," he called out in a louder voice even as Caleb was seated in Siege Perilous, covered in light, being healed. "We went too far this time." Everything Pastor Jim had told them was true about The Brotherhood. When Dean had gone to Hell after his actions to save Sam, it was he who had suffered most, then those closest to him. This action was different. Dean was The Guardian now, and what he did affected not only the hundreds of hunters under his current command, but those who had come before him, and those that would come after, like Joshua's son. This place belonged to all of them. It was sacred and deserved to be protected. "We brought them here; we brought evil into our house. This place is everything to The Brotherhood- it is loyalty, honor, duty and good."

Sam was torn, focused on Caleb, before letting what Dean was saying sink in. Once the light around Caleb began to fade, Sam turned to his brother. "Dean?"

"This was why Pastor Jim didn't come to me at the farm, wouldn't, because he knew the path I'd take." Dean glanced from Sam's concerned face to where Owen still pilfered through Merlin's things. He strode toward The Trinity's knight when he saw Owen lift an ebony handled blade from a sheath on the wall. It could have been the twin to the blade they'd found in Wyoming, the Dragon's Talon that Dean's own knight now carried. "I'm The Guardian of this. Put that down you piece of shit."

"The Guardian of the Brotherhood gave you an order." Sam at full height was menacing as any warrior.

Owen admired the knife, waving it in front of Dean, ignoring Sam's threat. "You're a little testy for someone who is getting everything you wanted. It's only fair we get what we want, too." Owen slid the blade into the belt at his side as Reagan and Jonah moved closer.



Dean took a step toward Owen, but Pelles's proclamation had him and the others looking once more towards The Round Table.

"It seems your Knight has made a wide choice."

Dean's heart leapt, Owen's pillaging temporarily forgotten. Caleb was standing in front of the chair he'd chosen and it was as if the last two months had never taken place. The desiccation the supernatural malady had left in its wake with the help of Griffin's treatment was erased. Caleb was restored to the image of strength he had always projected first as five year old Dean's vigilant, steadfast protector, and as The Knight of The Brotherhood. The miracle before Dean warred with the morbid realization of their actions.

"Deuce?" Caleb tilted his head, easily reading the mix of trepidation and elation battling for dominance within Dean. His hand hovered over the glistening sword that had appeared on The Round Table before him.

"Wait, don't touch it." Dean lifted a hand towards his best friend. He could sense Reagan at his side, practically panting at the prospect of coming so close to his prize. He shook his head at Caleb, his gut alerting him to just what might signal the end of the spell they had performed. If Damien took the sword, their time here might be over and Dean now understood beyond a shadow of doubt he could not let Walsh return to their realm with David's Sword. "Stay where you are, Damien."

"What are you playing at Winchester?" Walsh snarled. "We had a deal."

"A deal?" Dean saw his chance to use the truth for their advantage, to play the card to which Gideon had eluded. It was time for The Trinity to be stopped. He turned and jabbed a finger at Walsh's chest. "Just like the deal you had with Sida? The one in which you promised her your allegiance, your protection, as long as she went along with your great plan?"

"What?" Reagan took a step back, gave a shake of his head. "What does Sida have to do with this?"

"Maybe you should ask Owen that?" Dean turned to the Trinity's knight. He pointed to the blade Owen planned to steal. "I guess that's just another trophy for your collection?"

"A magical weapon lifted from the great Merlin's private collection." Owen narrowed his eyes, licking his lips in rapture as he patted the knife at his side. "Don't worry Winchester, I'll keep this where I keep all my extra special mementos, close to me."

"Just like Cressida's necklace?" Dean figured as much. It's why he had brought Marta's pendant with him. Dean pulled the crystal from his cloak, watching with satisfaction as it started to glow brightly. The blue shard strained against the silver chain it was dangling from to point at Owen like a living, breathing accuser. Dean chanced a glance to Walsh. "You may not recognize this as

the mate to the crystal your girlfriend wore, but funny how it sure as hell recognizes your best friend.”

“What the fuck are you talking about, Winchester?” Reagan looked from Dean and the amulet to Owen and back again.

Dean offered Marta’s necklace to Reagan. “When they found Sida her crystal was missing. This is its sister.”

“I know what it is.” Walsh took the pendant, shaking his head. “Sida would have never removed hers. It was enchanted, as sacred as a hunter’s ring.”

“We believe her killer took it as a *memento*.” Sam spoke up, using Owen’s own words against him.

Dean arched a brow at Reagan, knowing the man could not be so dense to not understand what was going down. “We’ll give you three guesses as to who that was, and the first two psychotic sociopaths don’t count.”

“Owen?” Reagan lifted the necklace to his best friend, watching wide-eyed as Sida’s crystal answered the call of its sister by glowing brightly enough to be seen beneath the layers of Owen’s shirt. He’d been brazen enough to wear it against his heart since the night he’d wrenched it from the witch’s neck.

“No, Owen,” Jonah murmured. “Not like before.”

“He’s setting me up, Reagan.” Owen lied smoothly. “This is part of their plan to keep you from getting The Sword of David—a tactical attempt to divide and conquer.”

“Marta tells a different story.” Dean stepped between Owen and Walsh, blocking Reagan’s view of his knight. “She said Owen was determined to make sure you got everything you deserved and more, even if it meant taking Sida out of the picture. The only break up he was interested in was yours and Sida’s.”

“You sonofabitch!” Walsh roared. He would have lunged for Owen if Jonah hadn’t intercepted his brother with a tackle that took both of them to the floor. It was the only distraction Owen needed. Dean felt the bite of the blade pierce his back in the same instant he heard Sam scream his name.

The pain was a brief fiery explosion that set off a chain reaction of charges along every nerve in Dean’s body. Then as if someone had set a charge of nitro to wipe out a raging inferno, the blazing agony ended in an eerie quiet that left Dean feeling absolutely nothing. A part of Dean momentarily grasped that his spinal cord had been severed by a military maneuver almost identical to the one that Jake had used on Sam at Cold Oak, though the comprehension and

almost unbearable irony slipped from his consciousness just as the pain had even before Owen twisted the blade and drove it completely through his chest.

Far too gone, Dean Winchester was unaware his brother's arms came around him. He was deaf to Sam's cries as The Scholar failed at keeping Dean on his feet and went to the stone floor with him, Dean's blood bathing them both.

The Guardian of The Brotherhood didn't see his outraged knight leap into action with Goliath's sword, taking Owen's head with a fateful swing much like David had claimed the giant's centuries before they were born. Dean only had eyes for the warm bright light beckoning to him.

It called to Dean with promises of sunshine, daisies, and peanut butter cookies burnt just around the edges. The smell of apple pie and fried chicken teased his nose, the sound of gently lapping waves and dogs barking prompting him to hurry up and join them. Dean didn't feel his heart stutter, start to fade, but Caleb felt everything.

The Knight let the pain that flowed across his newly revived connection with Dean fueling his fury. It was as if Dean had unwittingly conjured two dragons that day. Astorim might have been the only one visible to all, but Belac was just as tangible to Caleb as the beast roared inside his chest, demanding vengeance, a reckoning against those that had dared hurt Athewm. He was not satiated by Owen's head, so Caleb used David's sword to give him Reagan's torn and shredded heart, and when that did nothing to appease, the newest knight of The Round Table used his revamped psychic abilities to offer up Jonah's last gasping breath. Still, Belac raged. Caleb whirled around to fell the next enemy but found he was the last man standing. King Pelles and his guards were gone, which in Caleb's state was lucky for them. The sight of Dean's crumpled body; blood pooled on the stone floor did what the death of The Trinity had not. Belac's fires extinguished under the icy reality that Dean wasn't moving. Green eyes open, but vacant and unseeing, vanquished the dragon completely.

"Oh, God." Caleb dropped to his knees beside Dean, across from Sam who was curled over his brother, ear pressed to The Guardian's chest, hands fisted in Dean's tunic.

The smell of Dean's blood had Caleb's nausea returning with a vengeance, dizziness so overcoming that he had to brace his hand on the floor to keep from face planting on top of the brothers. It had taken an incident with a seven year old Dean and a broken jar for Caleb to understand that every super hero, including fifteen year old wannabe hunters, had their fucking kryptonite. More than twenty years had passed and Dean's blood still had the same effect.

"Sammy?" Even on his worst days after Griffin's treatment, Caleb was pretty sure his voice had not sounded as broken or afraid. In that moment, he might as well have been Superman surrounded by a ton of glowing green rocks.

"He's not breathing." Sam's tear-filled eyes met Caleb's. "He's gone."

“No!” Caleb reached out, gently slapping Dean’s face. “Come on, Deuce. Wake up, damn it!”

“Caleb...” Sam choked. “It’s too late.”

“It’s not too late!” Caleb snarled, placing his hands on Dean’s chest, ready to administer CPR. “It can’t be too late, damn it. Help me!”

Sam stayed where he was, eyes now locked on Dean’s stone-still face. “Do you feel him?”

“What?” Caleb demanded, glaring at The Scholar. “Start resuscitation breathing. Now, Sam!”

“Do. You. Feel. Him.” Sam snapped each word.

“No,” Caleb choked. He hadn’t felt his best friend’s presence since the wave of pain when Owen stabbed Dean. He looked down at his overlapped hands on Dean’s chest, remembering another time when he’d felt the great black chasm where his link to Dean should have been. He hoped his hunter’s ring would give him some indication, some sensation that his abilities were just off line, still not back to full force after the healing. “My ring?”

“They’re gone,” Sam’s voice was hollow. “Everything’s gone...”

Caleb looked from Sam’s bare finger to his flat gaze, understanding Dean wasn’t the only thing they’d just lost. The Brotherhood was destroyed along with The Order, had been the instant Owen had delivered his fatal blow, and Caleb returned it in kind. This was why Triads and Trinities were warned to never cross paths.

“No, no, no.” Caleb shook his head, his hands moving back to Dean’s face. Screw The Brotherhood. He didn’t care if they were hunters, only that they got Dean back. “This is all my fault. This can’t be happening.” A pounding ache picked up somewhere in his skull, and Caleb could feel the hot tears overflow his eyes, mingling with the enemy’s blood already smeared on his face. “You can’t do this, Deuce. You have to come back, please, please come back.”

End of part

“Caleb,” Sam tried, his hand latching onto Caleb’s shoulder. “Caleb!”

Caleb tried to shake off the grip, holding tighter to Dean, unable to understand what the hell was wrong with Sam. Dean was dead! “No. Get off me!”

“Caleb, come on, man.”

Caleb blinked the tears and blood blurring his vision so that Dean faded in and out before his eyes. Still, Sam’s voice called to him, demanding his attention.

“Caleb, damn it! Wake up!”

“What?” Caleb blinked again, reaching up a hand to wipe at his eyes. When he focused, Dean’s unseeing green eyes were replaced by Sam’s dark gaze full of concern.

“Caleb? Can you hear me?”

“Deuce?” Caleb muttered, not understanding how Sam was now above him, how he was the one on the floor.

“No, it’s me. Sam.”

“Deuce!” Caleb bolted up straight, searching the area for Dean. Merlin’s Great Hall was gone, taking their Guardian and the remains of The Trinity with it.

“Hey, hey, take it easy.” Sam gripped his shoulders. “You’re bleeding.”

“Where are we? Where’s Dean?”

“We’re in New York, at the apartment,” Sam said calmly, using one hand to reach up and touch Caleb’s head, which was pounding in rhythm with the AC/DC song Caleb could hear trilling in the background.

“We were all at The Grail Castle. . .”

“No,” Sam said slowly. “We’re in Manhattan. Dean’s in Kentucky.”

“No, he was hurt. He was...” Caleb couldn’t bring himself to say it. He tried to push Sam’s hand away.

“I swear to you, Dean’s fine.” Sam juttied his head to the bed beside them. “That’s him blowing up your phone as we speak. I just talked to him. You’re the one that’s hurt.”

“What?” Caleb reached a hand up to the spot Sam had been prodding, his fingers coming away red with blood. But what caught Caleb’s eye was the silver band on his finger, the hum of energy he could feel strumming through the cool metal. He closed his eyes, reaching for his link to The Guardian, his frantic heart rate slowing some when he found it intact and sparking with life.

“Fuck.” He opened his eyes and looked at Sam. “What the hell just happened?”

“That’s just what I was going to ask you.” Sam sat back on his heels, a frown marring his face. That’s when Caleb noticed the NYU tee and sweats Sam was wearing, the ones so worn and bleached that he used them for pajamas. “I found you lying in the floor by your bed. It looks like you hit your head on the desk. Did you have a vision?”

“That was no vision.” Caleb squeezed his eyes shut, trying to make sense of all he’d just gone through. “At least not one I’ve ever had before.”

“Maybe we should get you to the hospital.”

“No...” Caleb started, then reconsidered after another explosion of pain had him seeing stars. He vaguely remembered this conversation with Sam, one from the vision, dream, whatever the hell it was. “Maybe.”

“You’re agreeing to go the hospital?” Sam’s look of relief warred with confusion. “What happened to the tried and true- ‘you can do the stitches, Runt?’ Are you sure you’re alright?”

“I’ll let you off the hook this time, Dr. Winchester, even agree to some scans as long as we don’t miss our flight to Kentucky in the morning.” Caleb needed to know if what he’d gone through was the most elaborate bad dream in the history of nightmares, or something more. “But first I need to talk to Riley.”

“Riley?” Sam’s frown deepened. “Why?”

Caleb raised his gaze to Sam’s. “I need him to do some research.”

The Scholar groaned. “Not the Big Foot hunt again. We are not spending our first weekend back at the farm since Thanksgiving hunting Big Foot. I have finals coming up.”

“No, not Big Foot.” Caleb clenched his fist, relishing in the feel of his silver band, the link it provided to a very much alive Guardian. He met Sam’s gaze, wondering if the kid could at least feel, if not see, the desperation on his face. “We have to find a man named Reagan Walsh before he finds us.”

“It’s about time.” Dean opened the back door of the farmhouse just as Caleb and Sam started up the steps. “I heard you pull in ten minutes ago. What took you two idjits so long?”

The sense of déjà vu was staggering. Caleb easily recalled the pre-Christmas trip to the farm from his nightmare. Every moment was so clear; Caleb could nearly recite dialogue by rote, like Star Wars, which he and Dean had probably watched close to a hundred times. Still, the ending to his dream was what stuck out in vivid relief as he closed the gap between him and his best friend.

“Well aren’t you a homely sight, fugly.” Dean stepped onto the porch, Dill and Boo wiggling out the screen door behind him. Dill pounced on Caleb’s shoes, and The Knight practically tripped over her as he grabbed Dean in a hard hug.

“Damn it’s good to see you, Deuce.” Dean was solid, warm in his grip. This had not happened in the vision of course, and Caleb made a vow this would only be the first change he would ensure took place.

“I guess this means you really, really missed me.” Dean endured the embrace for a moment before pulling back to shoot Sam a frown that had ‘what the hell’ written all over it. “Or did you hit your head harder than your roommate let on over the phone.”

Caleb forced himself to take a step back out of Dean’s personal space, more at ease now that he had seen his best friend for himself. He touched his bandaged head and shared a meaningful glance with Sam. “No damage done that wasn’t already there.” The trip to the hospital had confirmed Caleb’s fears.

“Considering your head is a fucked up place, that doesn’t say a lot, Damien.” Dean looked from Caleb to Sam, his teasing grin fading some when Sam didn’t say anything. “What? You miss your big brother too, Sammy? Need a hug?”

Sam shoved the boxes of pizza they’d picked up into his brother’s hands as he moved around him to get to the door. “I’m good.”

Dean grabbed the pies, narrowing his eyes at Caleb. “What’s up with him?”

Caleb shrugged, not wanting to explain why Sam had argued for him to stay at the hospital until Mac could be called in. The Scholar had proposed cancelling the trip altogether, bringing Dean to them instead. “Sam was primping. We had to take a later flight.” Caleb evaded, gesturing to the door. “I bet you’re starving, right?”

“Yeah,” Dean looked from Caleb to where Sam had gone, wariness easily read in his green eyes.

“We brought dessert; Sam got pie from Sweet Melissa’s.”

“Now I know something’s not right.” Dean’s frown deepened.

“What? Sam can’t be a little homesick, want to make up for lost time with his big brother?”

“Is that why you called Joshua and told him to haul ass to the farm because we had an important hunt? You miss your big brother, too?” Dean quirked a brow. “He called me on the way to the airport to confirm our plans.”

Caleb shrugged. He had no choice but to call the Advisor. They had to be ahead of the game if they were going to successfully get the jump on Walsh. “Carolyn’s sick, I knew Josh would jump at the chance for some time away from home.”

“And the special something you have Riley working on?”

“Damn, third degree. Does The Knight have to clear every order through The Guardian?” Caleb slid his hands through his hair. “If you must know, Riley’s research has to do with the hunt.”

“We’ve been researching Big Foot for years, man. Why would you need to have Riley work on that?”

Caleb opened the door with a put upon sigh, waiving the Guardian ahead of him. "Can we continue this interrogation inside?"

Dean narrowed his gaze suspiciously but entered the kitchen, where he started in on Sam again. "So, little brother, Caleb says you're sick of New York and your current roommate."

"I didn't say that. Living with me is awesome." Caleb tried for a half grin, which Sam did not return. In fact, the look Sam gave Caleb as he sat the six pack of beer he pulled from the fridge on the table told Caleb he wasn't going to get that one last normal meal he'd pleaded for in the car. Sam believed the sooner Dean knew about their findings at the hospital, the sooner their Triad could start working on fixing the problem. Caleb hadn't been able to bring himself to tell Sam that there was no solution, or recant the long and sorted details of the strange premonition that caused him to agree to the tests in the first place.

"Okay." Dean put the pizza down. "What the hell is going on with you two? Why did you really miss your flight?"

"Things took longer at the hospital than we expected." Sam folded his arms over his chest, daring Caleb to contradict him. "There were some complications."

"Complications?" Dean's gaze went from his brother to Caleb. "You said everything was fine, just a mild concussion."

"I think I said the little trip I took didn't contribute any more damage." This was harder than Caleb thought. It was bad enough that Sam had been with him when the attending physician in Manhattan had explained the first of the troubling scans they had done, but now Dean was staring at him. All Caleb could see was the image of a five year old permanently branded in his brain, the boy he'd promised not to abandon.

"Why is that not as reassuring as before?"

"Probably because there's a lot more to the story."

"Okay?" Dean prompted.

"You're going to want to sit down." Caleb took a seat hoping his Triad would follow suit. He glanced at Sam. "You too, Runt. There's a bunch of shit I didn't want to get into until we were all together. You might as well crack open the pizza and beer. It's going to take a while to get through."

It didn't take as long as Caleb thought it might to condense the events spanning the equivalent of six months into an explanation that his Triad could grasp. He was used to describing visions to other hunters in his close circle, to dissecting the sometimes random events he would catch glimpses of, but this was something new. It was like giving a overly thorough oral book report on a book he'd actually bothered to read. Caleb skimmed over certain parts, leaving out the



gruesome ending entirely. He gave the boys credit; they let him get through most of it without interruption. When he finished they were both staring at him, slightly slack jawed and shell-shocked.

“You’re dying?”

“There’s another Triad?”

Their questions were vastly different, but spoke to their distinct personalities. Sam had also already been privy to the grim faced doctor’s initial prognosis at the hospital so the revelation about his health wasn’t entirely out of the blue. Caleb grinned at them. “Did you miss the part where we saw a fucking dragon and I sat at *the* Round Table?”

“How long have you known, Damien?” Dean demanded.

“That I was, as I have long suspected, a direct descendent of Galahad?” Caleb knew he was pushing his luck but couldn’t help but to fall on old hat. “I had the vision tonight.”

“No, Sir Asshole, I’m talking about being sick. Don’t tell me you didn’t know, that there wasn’t some sign before this big revelation.”

Caleb stared at his hands, keeping his eyes on his silver band. He was hoping to skip this confession, realizing that the seizures during the wendigo hunt he’d witnessed in his dream might have been a blessing in disguise. Dean was too freaked to be pissed. “I’ve been having some trouble for a while now.”

“What kind of trouble?” Sam wanted to know.

“Really bad headaches, worse than usual, blurred vision, some issues with my balance, which could account for the most recent fall.” Caleb met Dean’s gaze. The dream had shown him how things would have progressed, how he would have knowingly covered up the worst of his symptoms, willingly hid them from his best friend. At least at this point he was guiltless of overtly lying. “I swear Deuce, I thought it was residual from the all the demon activity.”

“Then maybe this was all just some weird dream, it sure as hell sounds like a fucked up nightmare, not a vision,” Dean said and Caleb knew he had the younger hunter’s predominant emotion of fear to thank for The Guardian letting him slide on the obvious obfuscation

“I don’t know what it was, but the hospital confirmed that I have the growth, exactly like I saw.”

“Then Mac can fix it.”

“No.” Caleb made sure Dean could read the truth in his gaze. He had spared them some of the more gruesome aspects of his time in the hospital, but he refused to breed false hope. “He tried,

believe me he tried; even called in a massive brain trust. Hell, I let Griffin Porter take a shot at me. It only sped up things. We even went to Crowley and to Castiel.”

“Castiel wouldn’t help?” Dean looked gutted.

“Wouldn’t, couldn’t, who the hell knows.” Caleb pinched the bridge of his nose as the pounding behind his eyes picked up a notch. His stomach gave another lurch and he felt the sweat bead on his forehead. “You can ask him though, because if the vision was right, he should be showing up pretty damn soon.”

“For our help in getting The Spear of Destiny?” Sam questioned gently.

“Yes.” Caleb snapped, not liking the hint of ‘kid gloves’ handling he could already detect on The Scholar’s part. It would only get worse. He placed a hand on his stomach, willing the food to stay where it was. “He needs Dean to get it, but I’m not sure if it wasn’t some cover story to start with.”

“And it’s on the hunt for The Holy Lance, which I still can’t believe really exists, that we first cross paths with this bastard you’ve got Riley investigating, Reagan Walsh?”

“Right, but we can’t let him get the drop on us. We have to find him first.” Caleb could not stress that point enough.

“Because he knows how to get to The Grail Castle, and that’s how we get you healed.”

“No, no way.” Caleb slammed his hand on the table. “That is **not** how my visions work. I have visions to stop the bad thing from happening! In this case that would be us going to The Grail Castle with Walsh and his fucked up Trinity.”

“But we still don’t know this is a vision.” Sam, ever ready to play devil’s advocate with his Scholar’s logic, countered, “This could be some kind of new Triad power.”

“Damn it, Sam.” Caleb stood, determined to thwart the Winchesters. The sudden movement had him gripping the table, his head spinning, stomach demanding he make it to the bathroom quickly.

“Damien?” Dean slid his chair back from the table, but didn’t stand. “You alright?”

Caleb gave a quick shake of his head, making it out of the kitchen before either of the brothers could ask him anything else. He could hear their worried filled conversation continue as he made it to the bathroom. Caleb could block out the voices with the running water, but even his retching didn’t dampen the fear that was hammering at him loud and clear through the connection he had to both Scholar and Guardian. When he was able to return to the living room, spent and desperate to retreat to his bedroom upstairs, he was not surprised to find Castiel. As in his dream, he arrived just in time to hear the angel’s explanation about The Holy Lance.

“We know why you’re here, Cas,” Dean was saying, his eyes tracking Caleb’s progress as The Knight made it to The Guardian’s side. “We know all about The Spear of Destiny.”

“I’m willing to bet Castiel already knows that we know. Right, Wings?” The idea had come to Caleb between bouts of sickness, struck by the divine notion as he paid homage to the porcelain god. He’d been thinking about the magical healing that would be available to him soon, how with Castiel’s touch he’d at least be relieved of the symptoms from the concussion enough to get Dean and Sam on board with his goal to interrupt Reagan’s mission. In the vision, he’d resisted the angel intervention on the premises that the last time he and Castiel had physical contact Caleb had been transported into the past to relive his parents’ deaths. Every detail of that time was still so easily recalled, vivid, unforgettable. “It suddenly struck me that this dream I experienced last night is a whole hell of a lot like the time you took me back a couple of decades to see what happened the night Isaac and my mother were murdered. It was like I was there, watching everything unfold, but a hundred times more realistic than anything my abilities had ever shown me.”

“You think Castiel took you into the future?” Sam asked, his gaze going from the angel to Caleb.

“I think he showed me some important events.” Caleb noted that Castiel was watching him, as impassive as ever. If it were true and the angel had manipulated time, Caleb could probably get past the part where he’d been made to suffer through his own illness and decline. He would not be so forgiving in being made to watch his family’s suffering because of it, nor being made to endure Dean’s death and watch Sam do the same. “He knew letting me experience them would get the point across.”

“And what the hell kind of point were you trying to get across, Cas?” Dean demanded. “After all we’ve been through, you couldn’t just come to us and tell us that Caleb’s life was in danger? We’re family.”

“It’s not my life he’s worried about.” Caleb stepped toe to toe with the angel, torn between feeling a kinship with the celestial being for wanting to protect Dean at all costs, and feeling the need to put his fist in the bastard’s face. “Isn’t that right, Cas?”

“I have done all that I can, more than I was supposed to.” Castiel looked from Caleb to Sam and Dean. “The rest is up to you.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means he’s in on it,” Sam said. “Just like Caleb said, the angels want The Sword of David too.”

“Is that true?” Dean asked. “Are you using us? Using Caleb’s condition to get something you want to tip the balance in this war you got going on with your brothers?”

Castiel took the grilling well, not getting upset, not showing any emotion really. “I am helping as much as I can, Dean. The Sword, the Lance is in everyone’s best interest, especially yours.”

“Can you heal him?” By the Guardian’s tone it was not a question.

“Of the wound yes, of the disease, no.” Castiel placed his hand on Caleb’s forehead, riveting him to his place. “The malady is part of his nature- to remove it would remove his being and that is beyond me.”

Caleb felt the headache wane and the nausea subside. He sighed in relief as he was allowed to move once more. “Thanks,” Caleb added. The thank you should have covered the vision too, but the course was not changed yet so Castiel would not get his appreciation unless Dean came out unscathed, The Brotherhood intact.

“Can you at least tell us where to find this Reagan Walsh?” Dean rubbed a hand against his five o’clock shadow, something he did out of nervousness.

The angel shook his head. “Like you, they are blocked from the consciousness of angels.”

“Is there anything you can say that will help to save Caleb?” Sam asked with a frown.

“You will need the Lance *and* the Sword of David along with the Trinity. The course is not for heaven to decide.” Castiel crooked his neck. “The strategy lies with you.” Castiel then disappeared.

“We need to get the jump on the Trinity and get the Lance. You called Josh, so I’m guessing you think we should start with this witch Sida and her coven first?”

“This isn’t about saving me.” Caleb was adamant.

“No? You expect us to do nothing? No Lance, no Sword, no Caleb? Where does that sound like us after all these years?” Dean moved toward the kitchen table. “Now let’s finish our pizza and beer so I can have some fucking pie.”

Caleb looked to Sam after Dean left them alone in the living room. The Scholar shook his head. “I’m with The Guardian on this one.”

“Do I really need to explain to you why we can’t do this, why the risk is too high?” Caleb could show Sam. He could use their psychic link to project and playback the images of Dean’s death, the destruction of The Brotherhood, but he didn’t want to subject Sam to that unless it was absolutely necessary.

“If your reaction when you came to at our place was any indication, I imagine something very bad happens to Dean.”

“We could lose him.” Caleb expected to rouse some sympathy from The Scholar.

“Do you really expect me to choose one death over another?” Sam folded his arms across his chest, a scowl far too reminiscent of John Winchester’s gracing his face. “That’s illogical, not to mention insulting and completely unfair.”

Caleb had not expected the sentiment, was unable to school his surprise if Sam’s darkening gaze was any indication. “The Guardian can’t be risked.”

It was a weak reply. One they both knew had little to do with why Caleb would not put himself before Dean. Duty was one thing, but protecting family, the instincts of an older brother, was the stronger master.

“The Knight won’t be sacrificed,” Sam said in challenge.

“Damn if you’re not stubborn.” They were at a stalemate, one Caleb would not, could not concede. “Fine, we’ll take a vote when Joshua gets here.”

“Even if he votes your way, which I doubt he’ll do, it’s still a tie, and I’m guessing The Advisor doesn’t have as much pull as The Scholar, and especially The Guardian .”

“We’re not a fucking corporation, Sam. It’s not like Josh’s a shareholder, and he doesn’t have as much stock as we do in the situation.”

“I don’t know about that.” Sam shook his head. “I’d say Dean and I have a lot more invested in you.”

“Moot point, Damien. I am The Guardian of The Brotherhood.” Dean reappeared in the room, holding the Sweet Melissa’s box. “Maybe I don’t act enough like the leader, but you gave Jim respect so I expect the same. I’m not a kid anymore that you need to protect. I make the decision that we are going to cure you, and you have to damn well like it.” He pointed with his fork to the unopened package smelling of fresh apples and brown sugar, then jabbed it in Caleb and Sam’s direction. “Now will you two girls please stop bitching and get your asses in here so I can eat my damn pie!”

Sam’s mouth twitched as Dean’s bellow and second swift departure hijacked any response Caleb might have made. “You just had to be the one to tell him about Sweet Melissa’s didn’t you?”

“I paid to check your bag,” Caleb grumbled. “That makes it a gift from both of us.”

Sam let a hand gesture suffice as his response and Caleb couldn’t help but to latch onto the sentiment. One misstep on their parts and their Triad and The Brotherhood would be royally screwed.

“Explain to me again why we are risking a likely disastrous encounter with this coven based solely on what may or may have not been a vision like no other from the psychic with a confirmed brain tumor?”

“Your concern for my health and confidence in my abilities is touching, brother,” Caleb grumbled as he dodged another tree limb. They had gotten an early start so they could make the hike, talk to the coven and then head back. Time was of the essence, not because of his health, since he knew what he was dealing with, but to retain the element of surprise. He was surprised too; there had been no sightings of wendigos, no missing hikers or injuries. It puzzled Caleb, kept him alert. He didn’t want Dean hurt this time around because of his actions. “Perhaps you could focus on where you’re taking us instead of using your energy to yammer on about the circumstances.”

Joshua was walking by his side, the Winchester brothers were up ahead. “I’m following the directions I was given. This group is closed to other covens. . .”

“We know, Josh- a lot of Bothans gave their lives to bring you the information,” Dean quipped from his lead position. He had been glancing back to check on Caleb, and Caleb noticed that The Guardian was not keeping his usual punishing pace.

“What Bothans? My coven used its contacts. I have repeatedly told you-“

“That this coven’s reputation is that they are involved in dark magic,” Sam interrupted Joshua. .  
“We appreciate your efforts, Joshua.”

Caleb tried to smother his snort of laughter as even Sam’s patience was being tested by Joshua. However, if Caleb was going to have an opportunity to be godfather to Joshua’s son, the one he’d seen in Castiel’s little time trek, then he had to play nice with his stepbrother. “You don’t think they will believe me?”

“No, I’m not even sure *I* believe you so I am trying to think of a way to ensure our safety when they accuse us of treachery.”

Caleb stopped walking, determined to make a point. “Carolyn’s pregnant.”

“Whoa, what?” Dean halted as well, Sam too.

“How did you know that?” Joshua demanded, whirling to face Caleb.

Caleb tapped his head, relishing in taking the older hunter by complete surprise. “She hasn’t told you yet; but you found the pregnancy test and you’re freaked about being a father and considering the role model you had I can’t say that I blame you. That’s why you jumped at the chance to come on this hunt even though you kept up your typical belligerence to save face. You’re going to make me godfather by the way, and give him *Caleb* as a middle name instead of the god-awful one Harland cursed you with. Believe me now, Percy?”

“Percy?” Dean laughed. “Joshua’s middle name is Percy?”

“Perseus, to be exact,” Caleb gloated.

“After the Greek god,” Sam offered. “The King of Mycenae.”

“Exactly.” Joshua ran a hand through his hair. “At least someone understands its significance.”

“Oh, we all get that Harland is an egomaniac with a god complex, Josh, and now we know why you stick with the P. on all your fancy business cards.” Dean grinned, reaching out a hand to slap his Advisor on the back. “Congratulations, Perseus. I can’t wait until little Hercules gets here.”

“It’s Max, actually,” Caleb added. “Maxim, after his grandfather, The Knight.”

“I will never forgive you for this.” Joshua growled at Caleb.

“Trust me when I say your anger is nothing compared to how Carolyn felt when I let the happy news slip at Griffin Porter’s in front of everyone.” Caleb faked a shudder. “Your wife can be scary.” “

“So some time away from her is probably a good thing.” Dean snorted. “The honeymoon is officially over.”

“Although when I was wasting away in the hospital, she didn’t leave my side.” Caleb grinned. “Carolyn, Esme, Jocelyn, even Juliet were all completely doting.”

“Juliet?” Dean’s gloating grin faded, morphing into an instant frown. “My Juliet?”

Caleb smirked. “*Your* Juliet?”

“Jim’s Juliet,” Dean quickly corrected.

Joshua held up his hand with a hissed, “Quiet, we’re here.”

“Along with the welcoming committee,” Sam said as there was a break in the tree line. Ten feet away there was an open section of land free from trees and brush. In Caleb’s eyes it looked magical and unexpected- a secret place. It wasn’t peaceful though with at least ten people waiting for them spread out to cover more of a distance.

Joshua whistled, catching The Triad’s attention. Two men were behind them. They had sensed they were being followed from the beginning. Joshua had called it an escort, putting a PR spin on it.

“Let’s go meet the nice coven.” Dean put down his weapon and led the way to the clearing and the witches.

When they reached the ten witches Joshua placed his hands up. “We come in peace. I am Joshua Sawyer, one of your kindred.”

“Not one of ours, Joshua Sawyer. You bear a different mark.” Cressida stepped forward. “Why are you here? You should understand your kind is not welcome.”

Caleb nudged Dean. “That’s Sida,” he whispered, but then waved to get everyone’s attention. “Hi, Sida, right? I think you might want to hear what we have to say in private.”

Sida crossed her arms. “I know who you are too, Caleb Reaves, Knight of The Brotherhood. I hide nothing from my kindred, can you say the same?”

“Yeah, he can,” Dean answered. “This is about your boyfriend, and I don’t think your cult knows you’re dating-“

Sida stepped forward. “We will speak in private.” She flicked her eyes to another witch with red hair. “Marta, join us.” Sida led the way to a few cabins built beyond the clearing in an encampment that was well hidden, blending into the environment. She opened the door to one of the cabins and the three of them entered. When Josh went to cross the threshold she held up her hands. “You go no further. Marta will watch over you.”

“It’s okay, Josh,” Dean interrupted. “I’d rather you watch our backs. I don’t trust her.” He juted his head towards Marta.

The door shut soundly without Sida touching it. Caleb was impressed by the show of power, but he didn’t show it. He pulled one of the chairs, straddled it. Sam lounged near the window, keeping a look out for anyone trying to get in past Josh.

“Has Reagan come to you about his master plan yet?” Dean asked, taking another chair, leaving Sida standing, still with her arms crossed. She remained silent.

“You know Regan Walsh, head of The Trinity, the bad guys?” Caleb picked up, sensing the woman’s surprise though her face was like stone. Her psychic shields were strong but not impenetrable to him. Caleb’s vision was so clear when it came to The Trinity. “And let’s not forget his sick fuck of a friend masquerading as a knight, Owen.”

“This is unexpected.” Sida narrowed her eyes. “You are well informed.”

“And here a whole hell of a lot earlier than you were expecting.” Dean scratched the top of his head, the little spikes standing on end for a moment before falling down into place. “I’m also a lot healthier than you were led to believe I would be. Right, sweetheart?” “I think you have to tell her how we were well informed,” Sam commented, shifting from the window location to come stand by Dean.



“I had a vision. You and your boyfriend were going to set us up,” Caleb began. “You entice a wendigo into these parts, make sure word of it gets back to The Brotherhood. We come here. Dean’s hurt, you’re the only one in the area with the means to help him.”

“It’s a good plan. Do you come up with it or does it come from Walsh’s psychic wonder, Jonah?” Dean asked, not expecting an answer.

Caleb continued. “Maybe it would have worked, but what you two didn’t understand is that Owen doesn’t like anyone infringing on his territory. You did Reagan his little favor, but the only thing you ended up with for your gracious cooperation was a broken neck. Should I describe what your bloated body looked like when it was fished from the lake a week or so after Owen dumped it in the water?”

“You look pleased with yourself.” Sida licked her lips, trying hard to hide the fact she was shaken. “That is your proof, a story of an elaborate premonition, a possible assassination?”

“You know Walsh’s endgame and now so do we. He needs you for the spell to get The Sword of David, but Owen has another agenda. He thinks he has Walsh’s best interest at heart, and trust me as a Knight, there isn’t much we won’t do to protect The Guardian. He’s tried before to get someone that Reagan’s cared for out of the way. . .” Caleb mimicked cutting his throat.

“Hunters and witches aren’t supposed to be together. That’s the rule-right?” Sam asked, driving home the point. “Prejudices are strong on both sides.”

“Some feel that way.” Sida walked a few steps to the door.

Caleb had to make sure she listened. He stood up. “*Owen* feels that way.” She paused at the door. “You help Reagan get to us and then you are no longer useful. You will die.”

She put her hand on the doorknob and turned it, opening the door a crack. “Marta, come in.”

Marta came in, gripping the end of her hair and pulling it so that it tumbled in the front of her shoulder. “Sida?”

“Did you tell them about Reagan? Tell anyone?” Sida held her friend’s wrist.

Marta shook her head. “Never. I promised you.” She placed her hand on a crystal pendant that hung around her neck, the chain obscured by her hair, but Caleb understood the importance of the necklace. He knew when Sida turned around she would be wearing its mate.

Sida remained holding her friend’s wrist, but turned to face Dean. “If I were to help you, then what would that entail?”

“You’d be helping us right a wrong and you’d stay alive,” Dean replied, getting up from his chair. “Seems like a win/win to me.”

“Will there be bloodshed?”

“You know we can’t kill your boyfriend.” Caleb wished that wasn’t the case, but he’d witnessed up close and personal the domino effect such an act would start. “We’re just heading trouble off at the pass.”

“Where’s Walsh now?” Dean demanded.

Sida blinked slowly as if she was centering herself. In an exhale she stated, “Outside of Atlanta, a town called Tennison.”

“That makes sense,” Caleb said, thinking about his vision. “He’s probably expecting us to come there for the lance.”

“Thank you.” Dean gave her a nod. “I’m going to trust this stays between us.”

“And I trust that such silence will earn me something in return.”

“Lady, you got some nerve,” Caleb started forward, but Dean caught his arm.

“We just gave you the chance to change your fate, probably saved your life despite the fact you have been plotting in secret against The Triad of The Brotherhood.” Dean tilted his head. “I’d say it is you who owes us, and I’ll consider your cooperation on this matter as partial payment for me not destroying you and your little coven, too.”

“Sida?” Marta stepped closer to her friend.

“Fine.” Sida finally conceded. “We have a deal.”

Marta squeezed closer to her friend when Caleb and Dean moved past them. Caleb stopped in front of Sida.

“You should watch out for her.” He raked his gaze over Marta and then bent down so that his lips almost brushed Sida’s ear. “Reagan isn’t the only one with a best friend who has questionable loyalties.”

When the Triad came out, Joshua was waiting for them, the coven greeting party on either side of The Advisor obviously on standby to escort them out of their territory.

“We may need you to help bring an end to all this.” Dean turned around to tell Sida, who had stayed in the doorway watching them leave. “We’ll be in touch.”

“I’d steer clear of The Trinity if I were you. Just to be safe.” Caleb winked at her while Sam shook his head. “No more secret rendezvous in out of the way motels. A woman like you deserves something a little classier, a Hilton suite at the least.”

Sam groaned when Sida's only response was to lift a very defined brow. Caleb elbowed The Scholar as they made to follow Dean. "She thinks I'm hot."

"Or she sees her next powerful mark."

Caleb shrugged, finding he didn't mind Sida so much this time around after The Guardian had nicely put her in her place and Dean's life wasn't on the line. "She's going to kick Reagan to the curb and I for one have no problem with hunters hooking up with witches when they look like her."

"Do you remember what happened the last time you ended up in a hotel with a witch?" Sam fell back, slightly to come alongside Joshua.

"If he does not, I will be glad to refresh his hormone addled memory." Sawyer shot him a look. "I was forced to barter with my future to procure a cure for him. I was left with a life sentence of servitude in return."

"Agatha was an old crone." Caleb frowned, not liking the double team. "And don't make it sound like we sold you off to a band of traveling gypsies when I actually did you a favor. You *like* being in the coven and let's not forget your badass BFF, Adam. I'm responsible for bringing you two together."

"My point, which you so obviously have chosen to ignore, is that Agatha was a witch willing to manipulate any forces necessary to get what she wanted."

"And," Sam cut in. "Agatha was also incredibly beautiful after she stole your life force with dark magic to make herself young again."

"Alright, I get it." Caleb held up his hand to ward off the warnings, sending a smug smile Joshua's direction. "The only good witch is a dead witch."

Joshua ignored him, turning purposively to ask Sam if perhaps they should call Griffin Porter in on the situation seeing as how he lived in Atlanta. Caleb picked up his pace wanting to distance himself from talk of the scientist, the ill-effects of Porter's drug still too fresh in his mind.

"You come up here to tell me Sam and Josh are picking on you?" Dean made room for Caleb on the narrow path that would take them back to the car. The coven members had stopped at the edge of their territory, allowing the hunters to continue on their own without another word. "Because I left my Damien fan club shirt at home."

"I came up here to make sure you and I are all good." Caleb cut his eyes to his best friend. "I guess that's too much to hope for?"

"You mean since you've been lying to me for months?" Dean shot back. "Now you want to clear the air?"

“I wasn’t lying, exactly, and I wasn’t really talking about that. I was talking about what you said at the farm, about me not respecting you, not respecting your position as The Guardian.”

“The two issues are one in the same, Caleb.” Dean picked up his pace, edging in front of Caleb.

It had bothered Caleb to believe that Dean thought that he was not respected. If Caleb really examined his actions, then he could see where The Guardian got that idea, even though nothing he had done to cause the younger man to feel that way was intentional. “Dean, I respect you, more than my many years in the John Winchester ‘real mean shoot men who wear pink’ boot camp will ever let me say out loud.”

Dean turned his head, but still kept the distance. “So you weren’t keeping me in the dark about what was going on with you to protect me?”

Caleb swallowed, wanting to lie. “You have a lot on your plate and…”

“And that’s my fucking point, Damien.” Dean stopped abruptly. Caleb was forced to do the same or run into the younger hunter. “Fuck!” Dean growled, surprising Caleb when he turned and lashed out, shoving Caleb hard with both hands. “You just don’t fucking get it.”

Caleb stumbled back a few feet, but managed to stay on his feet. He was aware that Sam and Joshua had also stopped, but were keeping their distance from Knight and Guardian. “I’m sorry, Deuce. I just can’t switch off twenty years of ingrained instincts because you’re suddenly my fucking superior.” Caleb was just as angry now, taking a step into Dean’s personal space. “Accepting orders has never been my strong point.”

“This isn’t just about The Brotherhood, or me giving you orders, and you know it.” Dean punched a finger in his face and Caleb forced down his retaliation. “This is about you thinking it’s your job to protect me at all costs as if my life is somehow more valuable than yours.”

“Well the pot just fucked over the kettle.” Caleb laughed, the irony almost painful. He turned his head just enough to gesture at Sam before returning his burning gaze back to Dean. “I’m not doing anything you haven’t done; only I didn’t go out of my way to lock lips with a crossroads demon to get the deed done.”

“No, you just crawled into bed with dear old great, great granddad and the consequences are catching up with you just as sure as my deal came due.”

“Fuck you, Deuce.”

“No, fuck you, Damien.”

They stood there at an impasse, fists clenched, teeth bared, both panting as if they’d actually taken a couple of swings at each other. Caleb might have felt better if they’d gone a few rounds

instead of just flinging hurtful past deeds and wrongs at each other like a couple of middle-school girls. John Winchester would have rolled over in his grave if he'd had one.

"Do you two need a moment?"

Sam's question had them both glaring at their Scholar. "No!" They shouted in unison.

"Then perhaps we should continue on to the car before it gets dark, or before someone sheds blood and entices an actual wendigo to appear," Joshua offered. "Atlanta is a rather far drive and I'd prefer to reach Griffin's before morning, preferably in one piece."

"Fuck Griffin Porter, too." Caleb growled before turning on his heel and stomping up the trail. Dean followed a few steps behind, but didn't try to keep up with Caleb's self-inflicted grueling pace. They were nearly back to the Impala when Caleb felt the first twinges of how foolish he had been. Not for arguing with his best friend, because he'd been beating himself up for that all the way back, but for the fact in his anger at what an idiot he was he'd pushed himself beyond what his body was capable of performing. The black Chevy swam in and out of focus as he cleared the tree line. Caleb took a deep breath to ward off the dizziness. His last thoughts before the ground rushed up to meet him was that if he had failed in changing this part of the vision, how the hell was he supposed to keep Dean from dying.

"Caleb?" Sam's voice invaded The Knight's senses like a hum from a buzzing bee. He swatted at the younger hunter in hopes of stopping the annoying sound of his name being repeated over and over again. "Caleb!"

"What..." Caleb forced his eyes open when Sam's voice was suddenly accompanied by a rough shake.

"Are you with us?"

He blinked, Sam's and Joshua's faces coming into focus from where they hovered over him on either side. "Where else would I be?"

"I'd say you should probably be in the hospital."

Joshua's declaration had Caleb attempting to sit up as memories of the vision forced their way through the fog in his head. "Shit, did I have a seizure?"

"You didn't have a seizure," Sam said calmly, planting his hand firmly in the middle of Caleb's chest to keep him still. "At least I don't think it was a seizure."

"Seizure?" Dean's voice was suddenly close by. "He's having a seizure?"

"No," Caleb shook his head. "The seizures didn't happen until the wendigo hunt, which was after we got the Holy Lance."

“What the hell is he talking about?” A cool hand pressed against Caleb’s forehead, and only when Caleb sought out his best friend did he realize his eyes were squeezed shut. He made an effort to open them though the late afternoon sun was more painful than Mac’s miniature solar flare of a pen light. “Damien? Are you alright?”

“The time line’s not right.” Caleb insisted, knowing he wasn’t making much sense to the three men around him who didn’t understand that in Caleb’s vision the seizures that warranted trip to the hospital did not take place until months later after they’d found The Holy Lance, after Christmas at the farm. “I’m okay. I just...”

“Fainted?” Dean smirked at him when Caleb managed to keep his eyes open. “Like the hormonal menstruating girl you are.”

“I hate you.” Caleb brought a hand up to touch his head. “Almost as much as I hate this bitch of a tumor that’s turning me into a complete pansy ass.”

“Don’t blame the tumor for that.” Dean reached down and with Sam’s help managed to get Caleb to sitting, letting The Knight rest against his chest until he got his bearings. Dean offered him a bottle of water he must have gotten from the car. “You’ve pretty much been a pansy ass from the get go.”

Caleb took the offered drink, taking a couple of small sips before offering the bottle to Sam who was kneeled in front of him, worry easily read in his dark eyes. “I can tell he’s worried when he tries to flatter me. You going to heap some love on the pile, Runt?”

“If you think that’s flattery perhaps we should get you to the nearest hospital, after all,” Joshua offered.

“No hospital,” Caleb attempted to get his feet under him, levity fleeing with the thoughts of his condition. “Help me up.”

He knew the Winchesters were sharing a look of concern as well as a silent communication that had nothing to do with psychic ability, but after a second Sam stood and offered Caleb a hand up as Dean gave a shove from behind. “Damn you need to lay off the cheeseburgers, Dude.”

“Must I introduce pot to kettle again?” Caleb grumbled, not resisting when Dean’s arm came around his waist to steady him.

“There’s a huge difference, Damien. My much younger metabolism allows me to indulge.”

“Trust me when I say I’ve recently seen myself sporting the gaunt, waif-like vampire look that Josh’s assistant Drew and all his other gay GQ loving friends go crazy for and it totally doesn’t work for me.”

Dean nodded his head toward the Impala. "You think you can make it the rest of the way or should Sam and I carry you."

The offer, although said in jest, reminded Caleb of Dean's vow in the vision, the one to get Caleb to The Grail Castle no matter what it took. "I'm not that far gone yet, Deuce."

Caleb felt The Guardian's hold on him tighten. "Let's get you in the car."

"About earlier, Deuce..."

"Forget earlier." Dean moved them toward the Impala, Sam and Joshua hanging back under the ruse of gathering their things.

"You were right. I lied to you, and I did it because I wanted to protect you from the truth, but maybe I also wanted to protect myself from the truth."

"What truth exactly?"

"That I knew something was really wrong, something that probably couldn't be fixed. We just made it to being the Triad, things were falling into place, and I didn't want anything to mess that up. I wanted the happy ending for once."

They made it to the Impala and Dean waited until Caleb was balanced against the car before letting him go. The Guardian turned to face The Knight. "I want that happy ending, too, man and that means that Sammy, me and you all make it through this in one piece. There isn't any other satisfactory alternative."

Caleb started to open his mouth but Dean held up a hand, shaking his head. "I'm not finished. I won't risk The Brotherhood, and I won't put myself in any unnecessary jeopardy, but we're going to use the information Castiel gave you in the vision, or whatever it was, to get the Sword of David. It's my job as your best friend to save your ass, but it's my duty as The Guardian to ensure our Triad is safe. You don't have to like it, or agree with it, but as The Knight, you damn well are going to go along with it."

Caleb nodded, forcing a half grin he didn't exactly feel. "Yes, sir."

Dean snorted. "I bet that tasted really, really bad on your tongue."

"I think I threw up a little." Caleb shrugged. "But, hey, it could have been from the earlier concussion."

"Cass healed you of that, smartass." Dean opened the passenger door, hovering until Caleb moved forward and safely slid inside. "Let's face it, Damien humility has never been your strong point."

“True,” Caleb looked up at him. “But this is you, and we both damn well know I’ll do anything for you, Deuce.”

Dean closed the door. “Ditto, Damien.”

“Yeah, Ditto.” Caleb rested his pounding head against the window as he watched Dean walk around the front of the Impala. Their Triad’s willingness to lay down their lives for each other was both blessing and curse. A part of him blamed Pastor Jim for nurturing their less than picture perfect childhoods with stories of self-sacrificing knights, valiant dragons and humble saviors. He heard Sam and Joshua climb in the back as Dean made it into the driver’s side and started the engine.

“You doing okay?” Sam leaned in the center between the seats, eyeing the older hunter. “Maybe we should do a run by the ER. I’m not sure I trust the sequence of events in the vision. Time is relative and easily skewed when angels are involved, besides we’re bound to have changed things already, just by our presence here ahead of schedule.”

“If I start foaming at the mouth, and twitching like I’ve just been hit by a Taser, feel free to do that, Runt.” Caleb turned his head, meeting Sam’s gaze. “But for now, how about instead of fretting like a newly calved heifer, you do something useful like find me a couple of aspirin and a cold compress for my neck?”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Dick head.”

“The affection you three show for one another is truly remarkable,” Joshua muttered as his thumbs brushed over the keyboard of his iPhone with practiced fluidity. “I’m alerting Carolyn of our location and our intentions to pay Griffin a visit. She’ll alert him of our impending arrival in the morning.”

“Tell him to skip the steak and egg breakfast,” Caleb replied, his stomach turning at the idea of having to endure yet another visit to Porters. At least he’d have the Queen Anne to appreciate. “We won’t be staying that long.”

“Hold your horses,” Dean cut in, “Are we talking ‘Cullen Ames’ quality beef here because Griffin strikes me as the type who’d hold a stash of aged angus and some good scotch just for such an occasion to preen.”

“Really?” Caleb glared at Dean. “You’d make your best friend endure a meal with Griffin Porter after the last two days I’ve had.”

“It’s you I’m thinking of Damien. You need to keep up your strength.” Dean’s face was serious, but Caleb easily read the smirk in his tone. The bastard was holding a grudge.

“You just told me I needed to lose weight.”



“So, I’m fickle.” Dean pulled the car onto the lonely dirt road they’d travelled from the highway to reach the coven’s territory.

“You’re something alright.”

“I could go for some steak,” Sam chimed in as he handed Caleb a couple of white pills and a fresh bottle of water. “Maybe a poached egg, French toast.”

“Et tu brute?” Caleb took the pain killers and drink, flashing the younger Winchester a disappointed scowl.

Sam activated the cold pack and tossed it in Caleb’s lap. “Broke college students have to take advantage of free meals when we can.”

“In your case that’s every day.” Caleb swallowed the pills, hoping they were the good stuff that might knock him out for the long drive. “You forget who feeds you on a daily basis and puts a roof over your head?”

“Carolyn has just confirmed. Griffin looks forward to entertaining the Triad for breakfast.” Joshua held up the phone for Caleb to see, his gloating unmistakable. “He’s quite humbled and honored, in fact.”

“Humble and honor,” Caleb groused. “Now there are two words that should not ever be used in conjunction with Griffin Porter.”

“Suck it up, Damien.” Dean cut his gaze to the Knight as he made the turn that would take them back to civilization and eventually to the Interstate.

“Didn’t you say in your vision Porter tried to save your life?” Sam asked.

“Not out of the kindness of his black heart.” Caleb placed the cold pack along the back of his neck, trying not to think about Griffin’s extensive efforts. “I’m pretty sure he got some perverse pleasure out of torturing me with his experimental drug. Did I mention he practices vivisections on possessed demons?”

Dean glanced at him again, this time his serious expression genuine. “All the more reason for The Guardian to pay him a visit.”

Caleb’s head hurt too much to argue further so he ended the banter with yet another yes, sir. This one said under his breath, and actually a bit hard to swallow. He looked away from Dean, resting his head against the window once more in an attempt to feign sleep.

In all the years since he’d known Dean would be The Guardian, hoped and prayed for that moment to be realized, maybe he’d never truly considered the ramifications or the readjustments to their friendship. As much as Caleb hated to admit it, some of John Winchester’s warnings and

admonishments about his reluctance in taking orders and his over protectiveness where Dean was concerned now made a painful sort of sense. The musings left him longing for some advice from his long dead mentor, and for the first time doubting his ability to be The Knight that The Brotherhood deserved, descendant of Galahad be damned.

Caleb's foul mood wasn't improved by the nap he managed during the road trip, nor did the two hours they had spent with Griffin help. He picked at his steak and politely tolerated the condensed version of Porter's spiel on The Holy Lance, which in his mind was redundant since Caleb knew where to find the damn thing. Griffin's biggest help was the town car he let them borrow and the directions he provided to the college, which proved to be an easy break and enter considering it was a weekend day and the campus was dead. He was sure the team's Centurion mascot, along with the winning coach, would be disappointed when game time rolled around that night and the lucky spear was missing from its glass case. Dean was almost as upset that Sam didn't get to don the chicken suit Caleb had told them about from the dream.

"Do we really believe this was the wisest avenue to take in apprehending The Trinity?" Joshua asked from his position behind one of the large trees surrounding the house they were staking out. "How do we know they're even here?"

"That's their ride." Caleb pointed to the black van parked across the street. "And this is the house they brought me to when they kidnapped me. I can also sense them, three norms, one psychic."

"If Caleb's timeline holds true, we're still a day ahead of them even with the trip to the coven. They won't be expecting us this soon." Sam met his gaze, lifting the mojo bag he wore around his neck. Joshua had made them all one to keep them flying under the radar. "It would explain why there are no witch's purses on this property blocking psychics like you said there was in the vision. If they knew we were in town already they'd have guards in place."

Joshua was determined to play devil's advocate. "How exactly did they know when we arrived the first time around?"

"They had people paid off in the local motels," Caleb explained. "Others around town watching for the Impala, I'm sure. Walsh kept going on about how he we were legends in the field of hunting."

"The bastards are thorough. I'll give them that much." Dean lifted his binoculars, watching the front door. It was broad daylight, the neighborhood quiet for a weekend.

"You saw their service records Ethan sent over." Caleb met Dean's gaze. "I'm telling you we'll only get one shot at this, Deuce."

"I understand, Damien. I'm ready." Dean held up his hand, flashing his silver ring. "I've been practicing during all my alone time at the farm."

“Then let’s go introduce ourselves.” Caleb nudged Joshua. “After you, brother.”

“And why is it again I must be the front man in this ridiculous venture?” Joshua demanded.

“They don’t know who you are.” Caleb wasn’t completely sure the Trinity had no visual for Joshua, but in the vision Reagan had only seemed to only know their advisor by his name.

“How is that possible?” Joshua looked insulted.

“Because they don’t have an Advisor, Walsh thinks them unnecessary, an insult to his command,” Caleb replied.

“Is that supposed to convince me of my dedication to my post?”

“It shows their overconfidence,” Sam pointed out. “They think they’re untouchable and all powerful.”

“It makes you like our secret weapon, Josh.” Dean grinned. “You keep us humble.”

“Don’t think for a moment I entertain your same warped interpretation of flattery, Dean.” Joshua eyed the house again.

“I can always make it an order.” The Guardian folded his arms over his chest.

“He’s getting really good at those,” Caleb added, catching a glare from his best friend for the trouble. He elbowed Joshua. “Go. I’ll have your six…”

“And would you like for me to be blunt or more roundabout?”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Just buy us a way in, give us some insurance, and a distraction so Sammy and I can come in the back door.”

“Fine, but if anything happens to me, you’ll be left to explain to my child why he’s been forced to grow up without a father.”

“Don’t worry, Mama’s Boy, I promise Max’s godfather will step up to the plate,” Dean winked at Caleb. “His honorary uncles will help make sure the kid doesn’t even miss his old man.”

“All the more reason for me to be cautious.” Joshua slid his aviator sunglasses over his eyes, straightening his jacket to make sure the gun tucked in the waistband was covered. He held Sam’s gaze. “I trust you to spare my child their insidious influences.”

“You bet,” Sam nodded. “Good luck.”

They watched as Joshua made his way towards the ranch style house before fanning out. Caleb stopped at the corner of the house, while Sam and Dean used the tree cover to make it around to

the back. Caleb waited for Joshua to knock before edging his way closer, ducking behind one of the large hedges framing the few steps up to the door.

Joshua knocked several more times before the sound of a lock being turned and a door opening preceded a voice Caleb needed no visual to recognize. Owen.

“What the hell do you want?”

“Are you the man of the house?” Caleb rolled his eyes at Joshua’s cheesy intro.

“Who wants to know? I’m not buying any damn thing.”

“That’s good; because I’m not selling anything.”

“Got no use for religion either, so go tell your Jehovah Witness buddies…”

“I assure you, sir, I’m no spiritual zealot.” Caleb could tell Joshua didn’t have to work hard to act insulted at Owen’s insinuation. “This is a hand tailored, Loro Piana jacket I’m wearing, not some hand me down suit from the neighborhood thrift store. “

“So, you’re a politician angling for my vote?” Owen snorted. “Sorry, I’m just passing through this po-dunk town.”

“As was I, before the unthinkable happened and my car stalled.” Joshua pointed to the shiny black Mercedes Benz belonging to Griffin. Owen stepped out onto the porch to get a better look at the vehicle, obviously finding no threat in the situation.

“You’re sporting a five hundred dollar jacket, driving a seventy five thousand dollar car and you don’t have a cell phone?”

“Oh, I have a phone. It’s top of the line, too.” Joshua reached inside his jacket, pulling out not his cell, but his 9mm. “But I find this toy gets people’s attention much more quickly. Now put your hands up, and take a step back before I demonstrate why that’s the case.”

“Jack, you picked the wrong door.” Owen lifted his hands slightly.

“His name is Josh, actually.” Caleb came up behind the Navy SEAL, jabbing his gun into the man’s spine with more force than was necessary. “And we’re most definitely in the right place.”

“We got company, boys.” Owen announced as Caleb shoved him into the house after disarming him of the gun tucked under his tee shirt, handing the weapon off to Joshua who closed the door behind them.

“They’re already aware. Your team isn’t the only one good at top secret infiltrations of impossible places to get the drop on the enemy,” Caleb told the Trinity’s Knight as he shoved

him through the living room into the open kitchen where Dean and Sam now held weapons on Reagan and Jonah who were seated around the dining table, hands flat on the surface.

“By the looks of it, I think we got here just in time for dinner, Damien.” Dean gestured to the food and drinks on the table as Sam collected weapons all around. “You hungry?”

“Damn that’s ironic.” Caleb gave Owen a hard shove towards one of the empty chairs. “Take out from the Silver Chariot? All that’s missing is the drug in my drink and the kidnapping plot.”

“Look, I don’t know who you are, or what you’re talking about but we are undercover vice. . .”

“Are you kidding me?” Caleb pointed his gun at Reagan’s head, prompting the man to shut up. “Don’t even waste your breath, Walsh.”

“We know who you are.” Once Sam nodded an all clear, Dean took one of the empty chairs, spinning it around so he could straddle it, facing Walsh. He rested his gun atop his other hand, keeping it level with the SEAL commander’s chest. “Mordred’s wannabe Triad. The Trinity isn’t it?”

“This is a surprise, Winchester.” Walsh’s attempt to look innocent faded under the cocky smile Caleb remembered from his time walk with Castiel. “My sources told me you were ignorant about our existence. I guess you’re smarter than your reputations lends.”

“You mean sources as in your psychic bastard brother?” Dean grinned, cutting his gaze to Jonah. “I guess he’s not as talented a psychic as you thought.”

“If you know who we are, then you are well aware you can’t kill us.” Jonah gritted through clenched teeth.

“Just because we can’t put a bullet in your head doesn’t mean we can’t aim for other places.” Dean illustrated his resolve by aiming his gun at Walsh’s nether regions. “If you know my reputation, then you know I’m not bluffing.”

“You shouldn’t even be here!” Jonah seethed, Caleb easily picking up on his incredulity at what was taking place. It was such a contrast to the cool, detached manner he’d displayed when he’d kept Owen from taking his beating of Caleb in this very room a little too far, when he’d told Caleb about how Owen had received the scar circling his throat. “Trinity and Triad are not supposed to cross paths.”

“As a Scholar maybe you should have considered that before you set this ball in motion.” Sam took clips from the guns he’d collected, pocketing them before placing the guns on the furthest counter. “Sounds like your intelligence, just like your abilities, isn’t up to par.”

“Or perhaps they should have seen fit to have recruited a proper Advisor,” Joshua chimed in. “I can assure you he or she would have protested this grievous, ill-devised, plot of yours to garner the upper hand from the very beginning.”

“Advisors do come in handy.” Dean grinned at Reagan. “Especially if they’re blessed with crafting abilities. Joshua, for instance, created these nifty little mojo bags for us, kept you from knowing we were, well, right at your back door. But then I’m guessing you know all about the benefits of climbing into bed with a witch, though much more literal on your part.”

“It sounds like your pet bitch led them here, Rea,” Owen said casually to Walsh. “You should have let me handle her.”

“Don’t blame the very lovely Cressida.” Caleb tapped his gun against Owen’s head. “I’m just a much better psychic than your buddy Jonah.”

“What do you want, Winchester?” Reagan’s smile was gone now, his face dark and dangerous as he regarded Dean.

“I want a way to The Grail Castle.” Dean was just as fierce. “We both know it takes all six of us to make that happen.”

“So you must also know your Knight’s going to die in what promises to be a slow, ugly death.” Reagan flicked his gaze to Caleb then back to Dean. “A shame all your usual resourcefulness will fail in rendering aide. You must understand we’re your last resort.”

“Just like you were counting on.” Dean looked around the kitchen. “Although, Caleb tells me you were expecting our first meeting to go a little differently I think.”

“Visions can easily be misconstrued, very subjective and sometimes hard to interpret the subtext, like text messages and email.”

Dean laughed. “So, you weren’t laying in wait here in good old Tennison to ambush me and my Triad, foaming at the mouth to reveal who you really were after a ploy to pawn yourself off as fellow hunters? You didn’t plan on kidnapping my knight, torturing him so that I’d be *motivated* to find The Holy Lance, which we need to bargain with The Fisher King? I already have that by the way, picked it up on the way here.”

Caleb had recanted every detail of their time in Tennison to his Triad and Joshua after leaving Griffin’s. He wasn’t leaving anything to chance.

“So perhaps your Knight’s vision was dead on.” Reagan didn’t attempt to appear apologetic. “Of course as a veteran soldier, you understand it was nothing personal.”

Dean held Walsh’s stare. “What I understand, is that war is always personal.”

Reagan rolled his eyes. “And here I was hoping we would be more alike than my predecessor would have me believe.”

“We are nothing alike,” Dean hissed. “The Brotherhood hunts to protect the innocent, to save lives.”

“We hunt, we save lives.” Reagan looked at his brother.

“That may be true, but our end games are very different.” Dean leaned in, “I’m guessing when you do hunt, there’s always a material gain in it for you.”

Reagan lifted his hands to contradict Dean but Caleb grabbed a fistful of Owen’s hair and slammed the other knight’s head down on the table. He pointed his gun at Walsh. “Keep your fucking hands where I can see them.”

Walsh returned his hands to the table and Caleb let the struggling knight go. Owen laughed when he brought his hand to his nose and his fingers came away smeared in blood. “I am so going to enjoy putting my hands on you, Reaves...”

“So what now, Winchester?” Walsh interrupted Owen’s threat.

“Now we do things on my terms,” Dean stood, returning his gun to its holder.

“We’ll require payment for our assistance of course.” Reagan gave a short nod.

Dean snorted. “Mercenaries always do.”

“The Sword of David.”

“I know exactly what you want. We’ll meet in two days; I think you know the coordinates.”

“I’m aware.” Reagan nodded, glanced at his hands, then up at Dean. “Should we shake on it?”

“Only if you want my Knight to continue and work on Owen’s ugly face.” Dean picked up one of the unopened beers on the table, uncapping the lid. “How about I just drink on it.”

“By all means, help yourself.”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

Caleb shared a glance with Sam as Dean took a long pull from the beer. He sighed, turning the bottle upside down letting the rest of the amber liquid spill onto the small table. Dean slid the fingers of his other hand under the stream and the cascade flashed an ocean blue before transforming into molten silver. It became a living writhing thing then, that raced over the table climbing up the other half full bottles of beer, crushing their outer shells to free the liquid inside, which instantly became caught up in the ore tide.

“What thehell...” Owen tried to move away from the table, but the silver was quicker, whipping like ropes, it wrapped around all three occupants wrists, lashing their hands in place before solidifying into a bright shiny silver, which bound The Trinity securely to one another and fastened them to the table.

“Nice trick,” Reagan observed, testing the bonds of the silver. Finding no give he glared at Dean. “You’re aware you can’t leave us like this?”

Dean leaned on the table, his face inches from Walsh’s. “I’m aware you claim to be a Guardian. If that’s true, then you should be able to figure this out.” He glanced at Sam, then Caleb before patting Reagan roughly on the back. “Eventually.”

“Hopefully, before Raphael and his angel squad show up,” Caleb added. “As I recall they were not happy with the way things turned out the first time around.”

“I’m sure their Scholar can talk them out of the situation,” Sam shared a look with the other psychic. The younger Winchester had not been happy when Caleb told him what he knew about Jonah, and he’d then had a chance to read over the man’s file himself. Caleb wasn’t sure if it was the advantage Jonah had obviously enjoyed, one of which was an education the likes of which Sam had only dreamed about, or his bragging about his advanced psychic ability. “All those degrees should count for something.”

“I suggest we take our leave, gentlemen,” Joshua started backing towards the door. “I would prefer we not have an encounter with any of heaven kind this go around.”

“See,” Dean pointed at Joshua, shooting Reagan a wicked grin as he made it around the table to follow his brother and Joshua out. “Advisors have their moments.”

Caleb brought up the rear, backing out after Dean, closing the door behind him. His best friend was waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs.

“So, did I get the inflection right?” Dean raised a brow then wriggled his fingers. “Tell me I was more impressive and bad ass than Walsh.”

“You did awesome, kiddo. Using the beer was a nice touch, so much better than plain water. The look on Walsh’s face was priceless.” Caleb ducked his head, as he came along side the younger hunter. He hadn’t been completely joking when he told Dean he might not ever be able to verbally express the depth of his admiration. It wasn’t their way. Yet, he also had a new understanding for the precariousness of time. Even though he’d been reminded many times to the contrary, he still let himself be lulled into thinking he was invincible, the Winchesters more so. Caleb didn’t want to leave the world without Dean understanding certain things, things John and even Pastor Jim were remiss in spelling out. “You surprise me sometimes, and I want you to know I really am proud of you, proud of The Guardian you’ve become. I’m honored to be your knight.”



Dean held his gaze for a moment, before breaking out into his typical shit-eating smirk. “You’re not going to hug me again, are you? Because even with the whole dying thing, these voyages into chick-flick territory are getting a little much.”

Caleb rolled his eyes. “And then you’re right back to the smartass I’ve always known.”

“And loved, let’s not forget loved.”

“How could I forget that when I’m reminded of all the many reasons daily?”

“Exactly.” Dean slung an arm over his shoulder. “Just hold onto those precious moments these next couple of days as I expect you to grin and bear it like a good little Caleb as we put together our trip to Camelot. That will include a complete physical courtesy of Doctor Ames.”

Caleb held back on the yes sir this time, instead reverting to old hat by giving his beloved Guardian a double middle finger salute.

“Now there’s the Damien I know and kind of like- an insufferable, insubordinate ass wipe.”

“I see you two are still fawning over each other,” Joshua grumbled when they reached the Mercedes. “I was being serious about our need to avoid the angels, seeing as we are not prepared to defend ourselves against them.”

“I hope what I said to Walsh in there didn’t go to your head, Mama’s Boy.” Dean took the keys from Joshua. “I’m quite capable of calling the shots.”

“Speaking of your strategic genius, Sam is on the phone. Per your request Riley, Bradley, Ethan, Eli, and Bobby will meet us at the farm. Mackland as well.” Joshua glanced at his watch.

“Another reason we should be on the road, considering flying with certain people is out of the question.”

“You’re welcome to fly back, Josh.” Caleb opened the passenger door, finding Sam already taking his spot at shotgun. “I’m sure Griffin could spare a broom.”

“Nice one, Damien,” Dean complimented, but quickly took a vow of Switzerland when The Scholar refused to give up the coveted spot.

“Where the hell are the Guardian Mandates when you need one?” Caleb muttered. He made sure to kick the back of Sam’s seat with zeal as he reluctantly got in back with Joshua. The younger hunter glared at him, but continued to prattle into the cell phone, his ‘geek’ speak giving away that it was probably Eli Matthews on the other end. “What happened to being nice to me because I’m dying?”

“I thought you preferred we all maintain our game faces during this job, treat it like any other hunt. If I recall that was the theme of the speech you gave as we were leaving Kentucky?”

Joshua cut his gaze to Caleb. "I should have known the silent suffering martyr would not last for long."

"I can suffer in silence with the best of them," Caleb challenged. "In fact, I was a model patient in my vision. It was everyone else who was falling apart at the seams, you included."

"Would you like to place a wager?" Joshua shifted in the seat, sliding his sunglasses down his nose to meet Caleb's eyes. "One hundred dollars says you can't make it back to Atlanta, let alone Kentucky without lamenting your woes."

"You have a deal, brother."

"Nice one, Josh." Dean glanced first at his Advisor then caught Caleb's gaze in the rearview mirror. "Playing on Damien's ego and tight wallet to keep him quiet. I should have thought of that years ago."

Caleb stayed silent. He would let them think they were getting one over on him. In actuality he would use the road trip to go over every detail of his vision once more, especially the part where they reached The Fisher King's castle. As The Knight he might be duty bound to follow Dean's orders, and he would learn to live with that, but what Dean seemed to forget was The Knight's priority mission. It just happened to align with the same mission given to Caleb Reaves by John Winchester at the tender age of only fourteen. Whatever it takes, keep Dean safe.

The December night air was bitter cold. Caleb could detect a hint of sleet, maybe some snow mixed in the drizzle as he made his way out of the old farmhouse and into the barn. He didn't blame Dill and Boo for staying curled by the fire, even when he picked up Jim's old barn coat to head out. The house was typically a warm refuge for everyone, but tonight the company was a bit stifling for The Knight.

Caleb didn't usually mind when the farm was brimming with people, especially those he considered a part of his inner circle. The Mathews twins, Riley, Bradley, even Silas had become staples at the homestead since Dean officially became The Guardian, but then they weren't the cause for Caleb's need for an escape. Tonight it was a much closer source- his father. Caleb took his frustration out on the stubborn latch of the barn door, resorting to kicking the bottom bar to gain entrance. It was warmer inside but not by much. Fideist greeted him with a raised head and soft nicker.

"No carrots tonight, Boy." Caleb pulled the door closed behind him, not latching it, hoping the wind wouldn't pull it back open. "Just some unexpected company."

Caleb understood that Mac was upset by the revelation of his illness, but like in Caleb's vision, the doctor in him took over in lieu of facing a father's helplessness, demanding every detail, unable to accept the diagnosis he himself had made, albeit in Castiel's glimpse into the future. Things had gotten worse when Caleb had to explain about Noah Seaver's amulet. Caleb had been unable to manipulate or avoid that painful confession. It left him wondering how effective he was going to be in changing what mattered most.

"I'm betting you won't expect much conversation." Caleb rubbed the horse's head. He was tired of talking. He'd related details from his vision to the group Dean had assembled in The Tomb, and then had been forced to recant in private every instance to his father and Bobby, twice. He understood the older men's desire to understand, their instinct to protect him, but it was overwhelming. As much as Caleb liked attention, he did not like being the focus of their scrutiny or concern when there were other more pressing matters at hand, like The Trinity and the threat they posed. He patted Fideist. "As long as you don't ask how I'm feeling, or want to take my temperature, we should be just fine."

"You shouldn't be so hard on your old man, Kid. He's just trying to take care of you."

The unexpected voice had Caleb whirling towards one of the darkened corners of the barn, his heart pounding when John Winchester stepped from the shadows, looking just as he had the last time Caleb had seen him, sans the hospital garb and injuries from the car wreck. Caleb took a staggering step back, bumping his shoulder against Fideist's head. Just like so many other things, he was hoping he might be spared the strange hallucinations, though in none of those had John spoken.

"Johnny?"

"Junior."

"You didn't talk before."

John laughed. "Do you really think *I'd* make a trip through the veil and not have something to say to you?"

"I've never known you to pass up an opportunity to chew my ass over something." Despite sensing an energy that he did not recall from the sightings in the vision, he wondered if this was some new aspect from his condition.

"It's all about perspective, Private." John seemed to read his thoughts. He smiled, moving further out of the shadows into the light. Fideist's ears pricked forward and he let loose with a soft snort. "I preferred to look at it as imparting my vast wisdom."

"You don't temper steel with lukewarm water, Junior." Caleb tossed out one of John's tried and true euphemisms, taking a tentative step closer.

“Damn straight.” John reached out and cupped a hand around the back of Caleb’s neck, his fingers unexpectedly solid and warm. “Coddling is for nursing babies and their binkies. Knights have to keep their blades sharp.”

“God, it’s good to see you, Johnny.” Caleb stepped into the older man’s embrace, the rare back-pounding hug bringing a sting to his eyes, a huge lump to his throat that he had to swallow down before speaking again. “I think my sword’s gotten a little dull in your absence.”

“I doubt that.” John pulled back, but kept a hand on Caleb’s shoulder. “I hear you’re practically Sir Galahad.”

Caleb rolled his eyes, snorting. “You could have told me about that you know.”

“And listen to you throw it back in my face every time I tried to impart some of that vast wisdom, I don’t think so.” John gave him a soft whack to the back of the head. “Typical badass teenager swagger was enough to deal with at the time.”

“Yeah, I guess I thought I knew it all back then.”

“Back then?” John lifted a brow. “It’s more a terminal condition with you, Kid.”

Caleb winced at the terminology. “I’m suffering from more than my huge ego these days, but I guess that’s why you’re here.”

“One of the reasons.” John leaned against the empty stall by Fideist. “That why you’re out here hiding from your daddy?”

“Mac’s driving me crazy.” Caleb reached out and ran his hand up and down the blade on Fideist’s face. “Bobby keeps staring at me like I might vanish.”

“They both know how easy that can happen,” John waited for Caleb to meet his gaze again. “People vanishing, that is.”

“I know.” Caleb licked his lips, giving a sharp nod. “Believe me, I know.”

“I know you do.” John turned so that he was facing the same way as Caleb, his shoulder almost touching the younger man’s. “That kind of fear can drive a man, or it can just as easily drive him a little crazy.”

Caleb cut his gaze to the former Knight. “You speaking from experience?”

“You know I am.”

“Crazy or not, I’m beginning to think you were right about some things, maybe a lot of things.”

“Damn, I bet that burned like hell going down?”

Caleb laughed at the similarity between John's teasing and Dean's from a few days before. "I think I threw up a little."

John grinned, his dimples flashing. "Didn't I ever tell you humble pie sucks ass, Kid?"

Caleb turned his attention back to the horse, letting the silence settle around them like a favorite blanket, the familiarity of it achingly bittersweet. When he lifted his gaze again, his mentor was watching him.

"So, turns out, I hate taking orders from Dean."

"No surprise there." John laughed, resting his elbows on the other stall. "You hate taking orders period."

"But this is *Dean* we're talking about."

"And? What in the hell made you think directives from your best buddy would be any easier to swallow than the ones from me, Bobby or Mac?"

Caleb lifted his hands in the air in frustration. "I don't know, maybe I didn't really think about that part of it."

John shook his head. "Where were you all those years Jim Murphy put me in my place?"

Caleb frowned at John. He'd never witnessed anyone make John Winchester do anything he didn't want to do. "Seriously?"

"You think I worked with that prick Harland Sawyer because he wore a silver ring? Then there was the fact I didn't kill Griffin Porter when he kidnapped my sons and their pain in the ass nanny."

Caleb's mouth twitched. "That would have been some insubordination I would have gotten behind. Still could if I didn't think Dean would take my ring."

"I let Ian and Fisher walk away after they beat you to a pulp, and cowed to countless other things The Guardian mandated."

"Those mandates suck ass," Caleb inserted.

John nodded. "Tell me about it."

Caleb pinched the bridge of his nose, wincing at what promised to be the beginnings of one hell of a headache. "Try taking them from a guy who used to sneak in your room wearing footie chipmunk pajamas dragging his drooling baby brother with him when he'd had a nightmare so you could protect them both from the monsters beneath the bed."

“I hate to break it to you, Kiddo, but Dean’s not that little boy anymore-hasn’t been for a very long time.”

“So he keeps telling me.” Caleb ducked his head, squeezing his eyes shut against the pain that had suddenly intensified.

“Maybe it’s about time you listen to him, before it’s too late.”

“Seriously what is up with you Winchesters and not understanding the whole ‘pot and kettle’ concept? Is it a hypocrite gene or...” Caleb forced his eyes open with a hiss, intent on reminding John of just how many times he’d ignored Dean’s pleas for one thing or another only to find his mentor gone. He slid both hands through his hair with a huff. “Damn it, Johnny.”

“They say talking to yourself is the first sign you’re fucking losing it, Reaves.” The new voice from behind Caleb heralded a vicious blow to the back of the head that had Caleb bouncing off the empty stall next to Fideist’s to land on his ass in the dirt, stunned and barely conscious. Lights exploded behind his eyes in meteor shower fashion, darkness threatening to enfold him like a collapsing star. Rough hands wrapped in his hair, jerking his head back, keeping him upright. “Or maybe in your case it’s the fucking brain tumor kicking in.”

“Owen...” The name was like a shot of adrenaline, the realization that The Trinity’s Knight had somehow sneaked onto the farm, and gotten the drop on Caleb powerful enough motivation to momentarily keep unconsciousness at bay. Caleb tried to get up, struggling to reach the gun in the holster at his side, but Owen was quicker. He let go of Caleb’s hair, stepping back so he could swing the shovel he was holding like a ball bat. He caught Caleb across the side of the face, sending him sprawling.

“Did you really think I was going to miss out on beating your pompous, goody two shoe ass? Not on your miserable life.” Owen brought the shovel down again, catching Caleb with a glancing blow to his ribs before the downed hunter managed to roll over finger’s finally latching onto his gun. Caleb had barely gotten it free from the holster when Owen lashed out with the shovel catching Caleb’s hand. Caleb felt his wrist snap and the gun went flying. He curled into himself for a pittance of protection. The move did nothing but seem to infuriate Owen, who tossed the shovel, but lashed out with his feet instead, resorting to stomping and kicking Caleb. “I mean I don’t have the comforts of home here with the nice chair, the ropes and my assortment of toys, but this is somehow poetic, don’t you think?”

Caleb knew he had to get up, had to gain some footing or he was going to die. Dean and Sam would find him in a bloodied mess. His good hand brushed against the ground grasping a fistful of dirt. Before he could roll over and throw it at Owen’s face, The Trinity’s Knight stepped on his curled fingers, crushing them beneath his boot. Caleb cried out as bone gave way.

“Not so tough now, are you?” Caleb must have blacked out for a moment because when he opened his eyes again, Owen’s face was next to his. The SEAL’s breath was hot against his skin, sour smelling like day old beer, and Caleb resisted the urge to throw up. The cold blade resting against his throat kept him still. “I’m going to enjoy watching you bleed out.”

Caleb’s mind raced. Dean and Sam would have to know he was in trouble by now, the rings alerted them when Caleb had taken a tumble out of bed, how could they not know a deranged Navy SEAL was beating their Knight to death in the barn?

Owen’s face twisted into a grin as if he knew exactly what Caleb was thinking. “Wondering where the cavalry is? Why little Sammy and his big brother Dean haven’t ridden to your rescue this time?”

Caleb bucked under the other man’s weight, his attempt embarrassingly weak and completely ineffective. “Please just go for the jugular and get it over with.” Caleb gritted his teeth, swallowed blood. “Your stench is too much torture to take.”

“Not before I tell how much I liked your little farmhouse. The Tomb was a bit of a letdown. I was expecting something a little more like Merlin’s Great Hall.” Owen pressed the blade harder against Caleb’s throat, the steel biting into vulnerable skin. Caleb didn’t feel the pain of the new injury, the demanding call of all the other hurts in his body forgotten and fading beneath the sound of his pounding heart. The roar of his rushing blood filled his ears, causing him to resort to watching Owen’s mouth as intently as a lover’s so not to miss his next words. The Navy SEAL’s dry chapped lips twisted into a vicious grin before brushing against Caleb’s ear. “No one’s coming to help you, because I made sure there is no one left.”

“No!” Caleb bolted awake, his body jackknifing in the passenger seat of the Impala. His first instinct was to fight the restraint of the taught belt across him, but Dean’s hand on his chest, the concerned utterance of ‘Damien’, had him collapsing back against the seat, with a muttered, “Holy shit.”

“You alright?”

Caleb looked over at Dean, struggling to get his bearings. Clarity came rushing back as worried green eyes met his. They had been traveling all day from Kentucky on their way to meet up with The Trinity as planned. Caleb hadn’t meant to fall asleep on the last leg of their journey, but the past couple of days at the farm had taken a toll. They were stopped, by the looks of it, at the lake where they would open the portal. It was dark, deserted, which was to be expected in the middle of December, nearing midnight, no less. Sam had already exited the car. Caleb sensed him behind them with Ethan, Joshua, Bobby and Adam, who had followed in Ethan’s vehicle.

“Nightmare?” Dean removed his hand when Caleb nodded.

“Damn puppies and kittens.” Caleb squeezed his eyes shut, pinching the bridge of his nose. A dull ache strummed through his body, like an echo of the beating he’d taken from Owen in his dream, but the pain in his head was all too vibrant, tangible. Apparently the killer headache wasn’t just part of the nightmare. He willed his runaway heartbeat to slow down, reminding himself that at least Owen murdering his family right under his nose had been all dream. “You know how it is.”

“At least it wasn’t unicorns and rainbows,” Dean replied gently. “Those bitches are the worst.”

“Counting my blessings.” Caleb felt the younger man lean across him, heard the latch on the dash.

“Here, Damien.”

Caleb opened his eyes when he felt Dean press something against his hand. It was a bunch of napkins.

“Your nose is bleeding,” Dean explained when Caleb shot him a confused look.

“Don’t look so scared, Deuce.” Caleb took the tissue, bringing them to his nose. He forced a grin that he hoped belayed the fact his hand was shaking. “I promise not to hemorrhage on your baby’s interior.”

“You look like hell.” Dean’s frown deepened. “You said Dad’s name.”

“Johnny?” Caleb’s voice cracked. He laughed, though it held none of the humor he hoped to instill. It sounded much more like a sob and Caleb winced when his heart gave another lurch at the thought of his mentor. “You know how your old man loves the cuddly ones.”

“You want to talk about it?”

This time Caleb’s laugh was real. “Don’t you think we’re way over our chick flick quota, Deana?”

“Dude, not counting the girl fight back in the woods, you haven’t talked to me about one damn thing that’s going on in your head.”

“And that’s different than the way we typically handle emotionally charged issues how?”

“It’s not every day that one of us gets a death sentence.”

“Isn’t it?” Caleb didn’t mean for it to come out so harsh, but the truth had that annoying habit of biting. “Because sometimes it sure as hell seems that way.”

Dean did what he did best, redirected. “It’s not like I haven’t listened to your creepy nightmares before.”



“The nightmare had nothing to do with my current condition.” That wasn’t exactly true, but Caleb understood his subconscious well enough to know what deepest fears had inspired it. “It did, however, have to do with Owen and his sadistic Trinity, which is what we should be focusing on, seeing as how they are lying in wait for us just beyond the tree line. I can feel the bastards.”

When Dean continued to stare at him with a determined scowl, Caleb sighed. Satisfied his nose had stopped bleeding, he crumbled the napkins in his hand. “I know you weren’t privy to all the drama in stunning Castiel cinema-vision, but trust me when I say we’ve been down this road before. Once was enough for me.”

“You left the heart to hearts out of the cliff notes version.”

“Purposively to spare you and your manhood.” Caleb managed another weak grin. “We’re talking hand holding bedside vigils, shedding of tears. Hallmark movie of the week shit. We could have won an Oscar for best bromance.”

“I don’t think the Oscars have that category, Dude.”

“Then a People’s Choice for sure.” Caleb shifted in the seat, sensing he was at least making some headway with their typical banter even if it felt a bit strained. “I seriously think I depleted my testosterone just watching you fall to pieces.”

Dean’s frown morphed into something closer to his typical smirk, which had been Caleb’s intention all along. “You realize it’s more believable that you were just dreaming about pretty ponies frolicking in a field of wildflowers. Right?”

“It hurts me that you question my truthfulness, Deuce.” Caleb held up a hand. “Even if I have given you good reason these last couple of months, but I hope you have a better understanding of my desire to just get all this over with in a hope to spare us both acting like a bunch of pansy asses.”

“Fine,” Dean conceded, gesturing to the row of trees and the patch of darkened water they could see in the distance thanks to the bright moonlight. “Sammy’s gathering the troops. How did we do this the first time?”

“Direct approach, all civil like,” Caleb replied. “No conflict.”

“That’s different *and* boring.” Dean started to reach for the door handle, but Caleb caught his sleeve.

“Deuce, you have to promise me one thing.”

“Okay.” Dean looked down at Caleb’s hand, which still gripped his jacket and then met his gaze. “Anything.”

“Don’t die.”

Dean nodded. “Okay.”

“And don’t give me that look, damn it.” Caleb growled, letting him go to release the latch on his seatbelt so he could exit.

“What look?” Dean opened his door.

“The exact same one you gave me before throwing that baseball at the hornet’s nest when you were eight.” Caleb grumbled, climbing out of the car. Sam was waiting for him. He pointed at the younger man. “Don’t think I haven’t forgotten about you and the trip onto the icy pond, either.”

“What?” Sam looked at his brother over the Impala’s roof probably wondering how he’d managed to raise Caleb’s ire when he wasn’t even in the car. “What’s he talking about?”

“Just give him your solemn oath not to die, Sammy.”

Sam looked unsure, but tentatively held up three fingers in a Boy Scout salute. “I swear.”

“Never mind.” Caleb smacked The Scholar’s hand down, making his way to the trunk to get his extra weapons. Neither of the Winchester boys had ever been a scout, not counting Dean’s disastrous one day in the Wolf Cubs. “I’ll just take it upon myself to make sure you both come out of this alive.”

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Unlike Caleb’s vision, this time when they went in it was not placid, but with guns blazing, taking out two of the guards that Reagan had put in place, dragging them to the clearing, bleeding, but breathing.

Dean pushed one of the guards to the ground. "Still haven't learned your lesson, have you? We're not pushovers."

"Guess not," Reagan replied, dismissing his men with a quick hand signal so they limped back to their posts. "You can't blame a guy for trying."

Cressida and Marta were present, and it was obvious that there was tension between Cressida and Reagan. Caleb sensed the discord, the way she held herself apart from Walsh’s group. She would get over a broken heart, but she would not get over being dead. She stepped forward. "I would like to speak to your Advisor to prepare for our part of the ritual."

Caleb tapped Joshua on the back. "No worries, it doesn't hurt."

Joshua gave him a wan smile. "I think I need to be the judge of that."

The Trinity and The Triad kept their distance, but Caleb stepped forward. "I think you have something that belongs to me. Where's Galahad's shield?"

"You know about that, too?" Jonah shared a look with Walsh, who gave a nod. The Trinity's Scholar moved to a bag, removing the white shield before handing the duffel to Owen. "That must have been one hell of a vision."

"I'd say you got the Hell part right." Owen grinned at Caleb. "Demon spawn got game."

"You're lucky I didn't shoot you in Tennison," Dean pointed his gun at Owen. "I'm willing to bet a Navy SEAL of your caliber has no problem completing a mission with a couple of bullets in him. Don't push me."

"You're lucky we're willing to share." Owen tossed the bag in the center of the standoff. "Put those on. We brought clothes so that we could fit in."

"You didn't mention this, Damien." Dean lowered his weapon as The Trinity backed off, watching Sam dig through the garments.

"That's because he always wanted to dress up like a knight." Sam lifted a set of chain mail. "This stuff is straight off the set of Merlin."

Caleb did not respond as he accepted the outfit that Sam handed to him, the same one he wore in his vision. "We have to go in with only primitive weapons, too."

Dean glanced at him. "That explains why you were up all night polishing Dad's favorite swords."

Caleb offered his best friend a smile he didn't feel. "I have to look my best for my appointment with destiny. I have a reputation to uphold."

Dean bent down and snagged the empty sack at Sam's feet, which he tossed at Caleb. "Then I suggest you wear this over your fugly face, Sir Dick Head."

Caleb's laugh wasn't so forced. "Don't worry, Deuce, I'm sure some of the dancing maidens at The Grail Castle will still look at you."

"Dancing maidens?" Dean's voice brightened. "Do tell me more."

By the time Caleb finished his elaborate and totally outlandish story about The Grail Castle, they had finished getting dressed. The witches were prepared for the spell as the hour was quickly nearing midnight.

Dean had given his orders to Ethan and Bobby to remain there until they returned. He glanced at Sam, then Caleb. "Let's do this."

"All six of you need to stand in the water," Cressida ordered. "The Trinity on one side and The Triad on the other. Quickly."

"We'll need Sir Galahad's shield," Joshua said, accepting the shield from Caleb, before placing it in the water where it remained fixed.

Cressida spoke a string of words over the bowl she was holding. It flamed to life, and without hesitation she dipped her hand in it and blew on it. Her grey eyes fixed on Reagan, and Caleb felt a wash of grief from her. "This is my punishment. For witch and hunter should not be allowed a union. A part of my soul for you, Reagan Walsh so that you may get your pieces of silver, the only thing you treasure." When she blew on her fingers the green embers danced in front of Reagan where he flinched from them before they swirled around, then showered into the water. She passed the bowl to Joshua.

"Tell me Josh is not giving up a piece of his soul for this?" Dean asked Caleb.

"No just three breaths of life. He gets off easy."

"Silence," Joshua said before he started his incantation. Joshua's flame burned bright blue and fell into the water.

The shield was standing at alert now, vertical where it had been just floating in the middle of the circle, suspended in air.

"Clasp your hands, Trinity and Triad."

Caleb cut his gaze to Dean. "You're not going to like this."

"What?" Dean flashed a smile, but Caleb could read the trepidation in his best friend's gaze. "Holding hands with The Trinity doesn't seem like something I would thoroughly enjoy?"

"That's not even the bad part." Caleb tried for levity, but his own dread was a damper.

Cressida came over and placed the lava on their hands, Caleb felt his ring melt, a drop that seemed to take an eternity to meet the surface of the lake. Once it hit the water it started to pulsate into a mini cyclone with the shield at attention.

Dean flexed his hand, and Caleb wondered if he should have tried to explain about the silver. He hadn't because he knew it was a loss that seemed to defy words, a pain that had to be endured firsthand to understand its magnitude.

"I'm sorry." He found it hard to look at the Winchesters as the waters receded around them, the spiral staircase appearing as it had the first time around.

"It's a little silver," Dean replied with forced nonchalance. Sam seemed too stupefied by the lake's transformation to comment. "No big deal, Damien."

“It should not diminish your abilities to function as The Triad,” Joshua assured. Although Caleb appreciated the atypical attempt at reassurance on their Advisor’s part, he couldn’t help but to feel they had somehow tarnished their regime.

“We’ll count ourselves lucky if that is the only thing we lose on this mission.” Reagan’s words were hauntingly familiar as was Dean’s quick reply.

“That the same pep talk you give the troops, Captain? Because I have to say it sucks.”

Reagan rattled off some SEAL motto shit and Owen laughed. “You think that’s bad? You should hear his debriefing speeches.”

Caleb was thankful when Joshua gestured to the staircase, a familiar scowl on his face. “You should all be going. We have no idea how long the spell will last.”

“Or how we’ll get back,” Caleb added under his breath.

“What?” Dean frowned at Joshua as if he had forgotten to mention a crucial detail. “You don’t know how we’re getting back?”

“It isn’t like I have cast this particular spell before.” Joshua glanced to Sida, keeping his voice low. “Cressida believes you will be returned once your goal is obtained.”

“And now you trust the queen bee of the evil dark coven?”

“No, but I don’t believe we have any other recourse at the moment.”

Dean turned to Caleb. “Does that go along with what Cas showed you?”

“In Cas’s version our goal wasn’t actually achieved.” Caleb clenched his jaw. “Hence my reluctance to repeat this fucking venture in the first place.”

“Good thing I’m a believer in practice makes perfect.” Dean returned his gaze to Joshua. “You, Bobby and Ethan stand guard until we get back.”

“I wouldn’t dream of returning without The Triad.” Joshua looked to Caleb. “Are you aware I sent something with you to ensure you have a tether to find your way back?”

Caleb patted the lining of his cloak, feeling a slight bulk and wondering what item Joshua had given them. Their much earlier departure meant it was not Max’s first ultra sound picture. “I hope it’s not a lock of your hair.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“What’s he talking about?” Reagan demanded. Sida turned her long lidded cat eyes on her former lover.

“He’s speaking of a totem that binds you to this time, much like Galahad’s shield links you to the past.”

“You weren’t going to offer us up anything?” Owen asked with a lascivious grin. “Or did you already give Reagan a little something earlier?”

“I’ve given Reagan all that I’m going to impart.” Sida looked to Marta. “Give Owen your Athame.”

“But…” The other witch started. Sida’s steely glare stopped her rebuke, and Caleb wondered if his warning had prompted Sida to have a heart to heart with her BFF. The other woman stepped forward contritely to offer her blade to Owen.

“This was a gift from Sida to me when I was first inducted into the coven as a symbol of our friendship that would never be cut asunder.”

“Meaning what?” Owen took the blade, admiring the workmanship.

Sida cast her eyes to Reagan once more, responding for Marta. “Meaning the love between sisters, like that of brothers, is a fierce bond.”

“As long as it gets us home.” Owen slid the blade into the sheath at his side, winking at Marta, oblivious to her cold stare. Caleb could feel the dark power behind it, and wondered if Owen hadn’t harbored ill will against the witch as much out of self-preservation as out of protectiveness for his Guardian. “I’ll make sure to give it back to you.”

“Now that the matter of a return is settled, I for one would feel better if we get this underway.” Joshua inclined his head to Dean. “I’d say good luck but we both know that’s a rather moot point with you three.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” Dean muttered, starting to step forward towards the stairway. “If I didn’t know better I’d think you were anxious to get rid of us.”

Caleb grabbed his arm. “I’m going first.”

“I don’t think so.” Dean shook off the grip.

“He’s right, Dean,” Sam stepped forward. “The Guardian can’t be risked. I’ll go first.”

“I’m next.” Owen came forward before Dean could protest further. “The Guardians after me.”

“Fine. Jonah and I’ll bring up the rear.” Caleb nodded to Dean. It was different than his vision, but that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. He was healthier this time around and felt better, more in control. He at least felt he could offer some semblance of protection to his Triad for what laid ahead. That false sense of security lasted up until the moment he found himself lying on the cold ground, Sam’s concerned face hovering above his.

“Not again...” Caleb groaned, wondering if he was caught in his own version of that warped movie Ground Hog’s Day. “Please tell me we’re in New York.”

“Dean, he’s awake.” Sam didn’t confirm or deny Caleb’s plea, but leaned in closer to check his pupil reaction.

“Back off.” Caleb tried to sit up, but Sam’s hand on his chest kept him in place. “What the hell happened?”

“That was going to be my question.” Dean knelt by his side, and the scowl on his face had Caleb deciding for himself they were not in New York. He took stock of the situation, noting he felt different, weaker. He wondered if the time travel, dimension shift or whatever the hell it was hadn’t worked on them this time, but Sam and Dean looked fine. “Screw the magic portal; you look more like you just crossed through the veil.”

Caleb looked down at his arms, thinned with weight loss. The tunic was much looser than it had been when Joshua and Sida started the spell. The lightheaded nausea he was feeling was far too familiar. “Well, fuck.”

“I’m guessing you didn’t lose forty pounds of muscle and your healthy pallor the last time around?” Dean met his gaze and Caleb squeezed his eyes shut, focusing on taking deep breaths to keep his panic at bay. “Damien?”

“No, because thanks to Griffin’s treatment I was already this way when I started.” Caleb forced his eyes open, took a closer look at their surroundings. They weren’t by the beautiful lake as before, but on the bank of Castle Corbenic’s moat, marred in sludge and waste. It was somehow fitting.

“Time righted itself, stealing whatever advantage we had once we crossed over. It’s obvious we were meant to go into this situation at a loss-desperate,” Sam said, sharing a look with his brother. “Proving once again that fate and destiny aren’t easily manipulated by human will.”

“Really, Runt?” Caleb pushed himself up to sitting with Dean’s help. “An I told you so?”

“No,” Sam defended. “I’m just pointing out that I cautioned you both about relying on angel interpretation of time, especially when it’s expressed in a vision.”

Dean offered a hand up, and between the Winchesters they got Caleb on his feet. “So in other words a big old Scholarly I told you so.”

“I’m sorry.” Caleb swallowed the bile that rose to his throat. It was hard to look at either Winchester. “This wasn’t how it was in my vision.”

“You mean we didn’t end up in a stinking stream of shit?” Owen growled, from behind Dean. “This is fucking worse than Cambodia.”

Dean ignored Owen, keeping his focus on Caleb. “You alright?”

“Like the castle, I look worse on the outside,” Caleb lied, taking more of his own weight as proof. “Nothing a few months of Missouri’s cooking won’t fix.”

“Or a quick sit down at The Round Table in Siege Perilous.” Reagan moved closer to them. “That is why we’re here after all.”

“That and the Sword of David,” Owen added.

“You three back off.” Dean growled, shooting Walsh a glare that promised something much nastier than sloshing around in sewage. “Give us a minute.”

“Time is of the essence,” Jonah reminded. “We should move while we still have daylight.”

“It’s not like we have far to go.” Caleb studied the bulking gray behemoth beyond them. “We’re here.”

“Seriously?” Owen snorted. “This is really The Grail Castle, The Fisher King’s magical abode?”

“Yes, as far as I can tell.” Caleb studied the crumbling building in its state of disrepair. “It’s in worse shape than it was in the vision, but basically the same.”

“Visions are not always literal; they can be skewed by human perception.”

“Only Reaves ain’t exactly human.”

“Shut your mouth.” Caleb took a step towards Owen only to be held back by Dean.

“He’s just trying to throw you off your game, Damien.”

Caleb nodded. The change in his condition and Corbenic had already accomplished that.

“In the legends The Grail Castle is a reflection of its king,” Sam started. “Maybe the lord of the manner is worse off than he was the first time around.”

“Sort of like your Knight.” Owen snorted. Sam reached out and grabbed Dean’s arm to keep him where he was.

“What do you think happened to the encounter with the royal guard?” Sam asked to shift the focus back where it needed to be.

Caleb shook his head. “Who the hell knows, Runt? The first time around we were in a lake, we’re talking Avalon. It was at least a couple of hours from the castle. That’s where the guards found us, and Dean and Walsh had to improvise to save our asses.”

“Then something about *this* time around is better.” Dean gestured to the crumbling castle.



"I don't know." Caleb forced a grin. "I'm kind of bummed there's no dragon this time around."

"Well, I'm disappointed about the digs, Ass Hat," Dean returned in his gruffest voice. "I'm guessing no dancing maiden worth her salt is going to be shimmying around this place."

"I may have embellished some, Deuce, but the inside is better, I promise." Caleb hoped that much was still the same.

"Falling down or not, these walls are keeping me from getting a reading." The Trinity's Scholar looked to Walsh. "I can't tell what might be waiting for us on the inside."

"I'd wager Castle Corbenic is psychically shielded," Sam said. "That's probably where the legend about it disappearing and reappearing came into play. Merlin helped hide it from other magicians and sorcerers."

"Like Mordred and Morgan Le Fey," Dean muttered.

"Yet here we all are." Reagan rubbed his hands together. "I say we head on in and make ourselves known."

Caleb didn't protest when Dean took point with the Trinity's Guardian, falling into step with Sam right behind them. "What if he's not here?"

"I think it holds if he were dead, the castle would be gone too." Sam kept his voice low. "Besides in the legends, the Fisher King is immortal."

Caleb didn't get a chance to reply as they approached the first door leading to the courtyard and an aging Knight greeted them with drawn sword. Though the man's dark hair had faded to silver and his face had taken on the appearance of sunbaked leather, Sir Boran was still recognizable in his chainmail with the silver crest of Corbenic emblazoned on his shield.

"Who goes there?"

"You have got to be kidding me." Owen laughed, not bothering to raise the cross bow at his side. "This is the royal guard of Corbenic? He looks like he crawled out of one of the tombs."

"Greetings, sir ..." Jonah started his spiel; one Caleb did not plan on listening to once again. He stepped forward, practically knocking Jonah out of the way.

"Sir Boran, isn't it?"

The Knight's gaze brightened, then dulled as he looked to Caleb, who had positioned himself slightly ahead of Dean. His eyes traveled from The Knight's face, to the white shield in Caleb's hand. "Sir Galahad? Is that you?"

“Not exactly.” Caleb glanced at Dean, returning his gaze to Boran. “I’m Caleb Reaves, Knight of The Brotherhood.”

“The Brotherhood?” Boran’s brow furrowed, his hand leaving the hilt of the sword at his side. “One of Merlin’s men?”

“Yes.” Caleb swept a hand toward Dean. “Our Guardian wishes to be granted audience with your King.”

“Today is not a good day.” Boran shook his head. “Perhaps another time...”

“We have something that King Pelles will definitely want to see,” Reagan tried. “An item that will prove invaluable for the king and his castle.”

“No harm will come to your king,” Dean vowed. “You have my word.”

Boran still looked hesitant, so Caleb played a trump. “We’re the ones the prophecy spoke about.”

“I see.” Boran’s gaze went from Galahad’s shield back to Dean. “Follow me then.”

They trailed Boran through the first door, across the winding courtyard strewn with debris and abandoned civilization.

“You must wait here until I speak to the king.”

“This isn’t much better, Damien,” Dean announced, taking in the less the spectacular chamber where they had been left. The paintings were faded, worn with time and lack of care.

“It still has good bones.” Caleb traced his hand over one of the walls, touching a crack in the mortar. “The architect probably never dreamed it would end up in this kind of state.”

“The architect is probably pushing up mounds of daisies.” Dean bobbed his eyebrows at one of the women on canvas, her face disfigured by a tear, but her ample bosom still intact. “Along with the lovely subject of this painting.”

“Still, both architect and artist left a piece of themselves behind.” Caleb knew it was one of the things that drove men to create things of beauty, to build something that would survive centuries, attest that they had once been a part of the world. He leveled his gaze on Dean. “You know some architects used to leave pieces of themselves hidden inside the foundations of their buildings.”

“Yeah? Like those unlucky bastards that lose an arm or leg on the job?”

“You’re never going to forget that summer you worked for me, are you?” Caleb laughed.

“Hunting proved less dangerous if you remember.” Dean leaned against the wall, his hawk-like eyes following Sam who was studying some of the faded portraits. “If I recall, a building fell on me.”

Caleb snorted. “Not the whole building.”

“Semantics.” Dean smirked. Satisfied Sam was safe from The Trinity, The Guardian refocused on Caleb. “So what exactly did these architects leave in their buildings?”

“Some left pieces of their clothing, a favorite tool, a treasured sonnet, even a lock of their hair.”

“Maybe that’s where mobsters got the idea of dry walling their victims.”

“Could be, Corleone.” Caleb looked to the door where Boran had disappeared, hoping the knight would return soon with good word. He really hated the idea of storming Pelles’s great hall.

“How about you?” Dean nudged him with an elbow. “What does the great architect Caleb Reaves tuck away in the struts of all his buildings?”

“Who says I do?”

“Your best friend, who knows just what a sucker you are for all that shit.”

“Dragons.” Caleb pressed his palm against the cool wall again, thinking of the few buildings and bridges he’d been lucky enough to design, watch come to fruition. They’d stand sentry long after the Knight of The Brotherhood was gone. He missed the process of starting a new project more than he imagined. “I sketch a different one for each structure; leave them in the foundation to watch over the place.”

Dean held his gaze for a long moment before his mouth twisted into a half grin. “I knew you’d never sacrifice your hair.”

Caleb didn’t have a chance at a comeback as Boran returned announcing his lordship had agreed to grant them an audience.

“Showtime.” Dean pushed off from the wall, making it through the doorway before Walsh. Caleb made an effort to catch up, but was the last one through the door. The sight that greeted him caused his breath to catch, his chest to tighten.

The Great Hall was as decimated as the rest of the castle, possibly worse. All grandeur was gone, including Pelles’s throne. It was replaced by a dirty cot carried by four aging knights that looked worse off than Boran. At Pelles’s feet a lanky graying Irish Wolfhound stood guard, lifting its head in interest at the activity. The old man made a great effort of appearing regal as the six strangers approached.

“Which of you is Merlin’s Guardian?” His voice still commanded authority. Caleb was not surprised when Dean stepped forward, giving a slight bow.

“That would be me, Dean Winchester.”

“You don’t look like one of Merlin’s tricksters.” Pelles raised a brow, sharing a look with Boran. “I trust I’ll find no dragon-pup stampeding through my royal gardens?”

“What gardens?” Owen muttered and Caleb glared at the other knight.

“I promise no dragons are afoot, unless you count my men.”

Pelles grunted. “Merlin loved to compare himself with the dreadful beasts. Said they were far better pets than flea-ridden hounds.”

The dog let out a loud whine as if he understood he was being insulted. Pelles reached down to pat his head. “I take it the old fool isn’t with you this day?”

“No, we come of our own accord,” Dean replied.

“With a proposal we think you’ll be quite interested in,” Reagan added, stepping forward to come alongside Dean.

“I don’t find my interest piqued by much these days.” Pelles gestured to his covered leg. “Unless you come with a cure for my condition.”

“That is exactly what we have.”

“You don’t say?”

“I told you they spoke of the prophecy, My Lord.” Boran was unable to contain his excitement. “This could be what we have been waiting on, the rescue Merlin promised.”

“Are you our salvation, Guardian?” The King’s blue gaze stayed locked on Dean. “Or is your mission more nefarious?”

“We want the Sword of David,” Dean replied. “But we are willing to give you something in return that may well bring the relief Merlin promised. It could restore your kingdom, but there are risks.”

“You realize the sword of which you speak is not mine to give.”

“We have brought Galahad’s heir,” Reagan once again interjected though it was obvious Pelles was not interested in hearing from him.

“Boran said one possessed the shield of Galahad.” Pelles moved his eyes to Caleb. “I am to believe you are a son of Corbenic?”

“He’s prepared to prove himself by taking the seat of Siege Perilous.”

This time Dean glared at Walsh. “Keep your mouth shut.”

Caleb took that as a cue to move forward where he knelt in front of the ailing king. “I am Caleb Reaves, Knight of the Brotherhood, a descendant of King David, and Sir Galahad.”

Saying the words out loud were just as surreal the second time around. He waited breathlessly, steeling himself against the rebuke, a possible strike of lightning.

“Then perhaps it is I that should kneel before you.”

When Caleb lifted his gaze from the stone floor, Pelles had an amused gleam in his eye, no hint of condemnation. He found himself feeling a bit like d’Artagnan. “I am not a king, only a servant.”

“And you’re prepared to wager your life to claim what you say is rightfully yours.”

Caleb glanced at Dean, then returned his gaze to the floor. “For The Brotherhood, yes.”

“Give me what you brought, Guardian.” Pelles looked to Dean, pointing to the one lone wall in the Great Hall that seemed spared the ravages of time. “Then prove your resolve to take what you have travelled such great lengths to claim.”

Dean knelt by Caleb, sharing another meaningful glance before lifting the Holy Lance above his head for Pelles to take. The dog whined fretfully, resting its massive head on its paws once more with a heaving sigh.

“Now rise and be done with our business so this old man can seek some rest.”

"The sword and the Siege Perilous?" Dean asked after the King had accepted the lance.

"You need to find what you seek, beyond there."

"There is a brick wall."

"It's a leap of faith, Deuce."

There was no honor guard to escort Dean thru the hidden door, but like before he disappeared, calling them a few nerve wracking minutes later. "Come on in."

Sam stayed by Caleb's side as they entered the chamber. Gone were the lush green plants and the burst of oxygen, instead there was withering plants, yellowing with neglect, but there, still vibrant, was the gurgling fountain. Caleb hadn't recalled the musical sound it made, or studied how beautiful it was with sparkling limestone that was either filled with mica or silver that gave off a twinkling light. He was still overwhelmed with the psychic energy it was emitting, still

emitting as Dean was mesmerized before it, even though Caleb had warned him about its power.

"Back away, Deuce." However, Dean did not reply. Caleb pushed Sam towards his brother.

Sam shook Dean to break the reverie. "Dean, you need to back away. That thing is alive."

Owen was pulling away Reagan who had become drawn to the water too.

"Hey, you with us?" Caleb asked once Dean was back with them.

Dean swallowed. "So I guess touching the water is a bad thing?"

"It drains energy like a Siren, so yeah."

"Is that The Enchanted Fountain of Nereid?" Jonah asked, his eyes glazing over.

"The one with the sapphires and diamonds?" Owen kept his grip on Reagan, but gave the fountain another appreciative gaze.

"Forget the fountain, Owen." Reagan growled. "We need to get on with this. Take a seat, Reaves."

"Don't rush us and don't touch anything," Dean ordered Owen, who was toeing a chest of gold with his boot. "This isn't your party, Walsh."

"He's right, Dean. I just want to get this over with." Caleb's head was pounding, his heart racing with more than just adrenaline. King Pelles had not entered with them as he had done before, leaving them to sort out the puzzle of the chair.

"You sure about this?" Dean looked to the table, battered and covered in dust. "Do you know what to do?"

"I'm ready and I know what I have to do. This waif look sucks." Caleb rubbed a hand down his face. "Keep an eye on them, especially Owen. You got that." Caleb made eye contact with Sam. "Last time it went all south when I was in the hot seat."

Sam nodded. "This time we're ready. I promise."

Dean reached out and grasped Caleb's forearm. Caleb grinned. "I know."

Caleb took the seat he knew was Siege Perilous, and waited for an anxious minute before he felt the light of judgment fall over him. He felt a prickling sensation start before being immersed in light, the feeling of pins and needles overcoming him, immobilizing him to the chair. From there he was a witness, fixed to Dean, Sam, Owen, Reagan and Jonah.

He could see The Trinity looting the Brotherhood's sacred property, watch as Dean transformed to the menacing Guardian, a protector of the Brotherhood.

As the light abated, dimming on him, instead shining on the table like a spotlight. From there the sword appeared, dangling in the light, waiting for him to reach out. He stretched his fingers, wanting to claim the sword as soon as possible in case the worst happened. He felt the chair release him.

"Damien, do not take the sword!"

Caleb heard Dean calling to him. He turned to see his best friend, brother-in-arms, The Guardian, being held by Owen. Caleb wasn't sure what had happened, what trick the Trinity had used, but the athame Marta had given Owen was at Dean's neck with a pinprick of blood welling up at its point. It was all so clear to Caleb. Clear on what he had to do to save Dean. He had to take the sword and kill The Trinity before Dean was murdered before his eyes. Again.

"Do not take the sword! That's an order!" Dean called out again. "Stand down!"

Caleb stood up. He felt the vigor of vitality course over him as he was fully released from the chair. Every impulse urged him on, demanded he move. With one leap he could have the sword in his hands, but John Winchester flashed before his eyes in warning. Lowering his arms, taking a step away from the sword went against every instinct Caleb had, but he obeyed The Guardian's command with a wave of regret. The stream of light from above disappeared, taking David's Sword with it.

"That was stupid, Winchester."

"Don't do this," Sam begged, held back by Reagan and Jonah. "It all ends here. We can't go back from this."

"You got what you wanted, and we got shit." Owen lifted the blade to strike. "If I can't have that, then I want blood."

Caleb had no weapon, having left his before approaching the table, but tried to get to Dean in time, keeping eye contact with the younger man. Dean did not flinch as the blade came arcing down towards his chest. Just before contact, the blade disappeared, transforming into a writhing serpent. The snake coiled around Owen's arm, startling the Trinity's knight who released Dean and stumbled back from the attack. Caleb would have kissed Sida if she were there, thankful that a knowledgeable, albeit slightly sinister witch, gave a new meaning to a woman scorned.

Owen clawed at the snake, which grew larger and sunk its teeth into his wrist. He let out a cry, stepping back from his comrades as he tried to shake free of the creature's grip. Reagan released Sam into Jonah's care and went to help his friend, but stopped; mesmerized as the Nereid's Fountain that Owen had bumped in his struggle became agitated.

The water had been trickling down from the top level to the bottom, but now it had morphed, and the water from the pool was rising up, taking shape. First one foot, then another emerged. The

water crystallized, but still dripped, taking on the shape of a woman that pulled Owen into her embrace.

"No!" Owen tried to fight the grip as he started to crystalize, frozen into a block. Reagan took a step back; Jonah released Sam with a push toward Dean. "We need to leave. Now!"

Caleb went to intercept, but Dean shook his head. The crystal woman disappeared, turning into water once more that flowed towards Reagan in a quick wave, then Jonah, riveting them to where they stood, entombing them like Owen, before disappearing with an elaborate splash.

"I knew I was her favorite." Dean breathed, staring at the immobilized Guardian. "So much for neutrality."

"Was that The Lady of the Lake?" Sam asked, shaken.

Caleb didn't give Dean a chance to answer his brother as he gripped The Guardian's shoulders. He didn't care who or what, only that Dean had been spared. "Deuce, are you okay?"

"Me? I'm fine." Dean grinned. "What about you, Galahad? It looks like being the antithesis of a virgin didn't knock you out of the running for top knight."

Caleb glanced down at himself, relieved to see his body restored to normal; though that wasn't the true blessing he'd received. "I'm good."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm healed. Better than new." Caleb was glad to give a completely honest report. He let his friend go, but held his gaze. "I promise."

Dean shot Sam an amused look, then smirked at Caleb. "I didn't know if you had it in you to follow orders."

"Did you know what was going to happen?" Sam asked, nudging Marta's athame with his boot. The knife had solidified again, and lay glistening by the sculpture that was now Owen.

"No. But, I knew they could not have that sword. They couldn't have any of this. This is ours." Dean looked around the room. "This is the house of The Brotherhood, Merlin's Great Hall. What Pastor Jim told us about all our lives."

"What will happen to them?" Sam gestured to the Trinity.

"Who knows," Dean said.

"Who fucking cares?" Caleb added.



"We should," Sam intoned seriously. "If we want The Brotherhood to remain intact, we need to get them home to restore balance."

"They will be returned to their appropriate time I assure you, Scholar. All will be as it should."

The Triad turned as one as King Pelles entered. Gone was the frail shriveled man they had spoken with. The Fisher King stood before them, vibrant, whole, his long beard flowing down his chest, snowy white against a sapphire robe. Bright blue eyes flashed with merriment as the Irish Wolfhound joined him, body wagging as it gave a happy bark of greeting.

"King Pelles?" Dean's voice displayed the uncertainty and doubt that Caleb felt, the same sensation he could feel echoed over his connection with Sam. Their dismay only grew as the vines climbing the walls of the hall revived, growing lush and green, the gold detailing gleaming as it had in Caleb's original vision.

"I don't think so," Caleb muttered.

"Merlin," Dean breathed the name.

"That's impossible," Sam muttered, but kept his eyes riveted on the man before them.

"Guardian." The man inclined his head towards Dean. "It is good to see you again."

"Okay." Dean nodded. "It's good to be seen in one piece and minus any stab wounds."

The man laughed. "It seems fate and destiny are not always such enemies to The Triad."

"Who are you?" Caleb demanded.

The man stroked his beard keeping his gaze locked with Dean. "Knights are always bullish, yes? Grumpy like a dragon woken from an afternoon doze."

"Yes," Dean replied, and Caleb growled low in his throat.

"I asked you a question." Caleb reached out psychically. The taste of salt tingled on his tongue, the smell of brine and sea air overwhelming his sense of smell. He could practically hear the crash of surf pounding a rocky coast. When the man met his gaze the familiar look of patience and love was unmistakable.

"You chose well, my boy. I'm proud of you, all of you."

"Pastor Jim?" Caleb used the same reverence in which Dean had spoken Merlin's. His head was dizzy with unspeakable possibility as he squinted at the person before him, then to the dog at the man's side. The hound woofed and for a moment Caleb's vision swam, a smiling Golden Retriever with chocolate brown eyes wavering in the spot where the hound was moments before. "Atticus?"

“I believe this belongs to you.” From the folds of the old man’s robe the wizard withdrew David’s Sword, stepping forward before Caleb could gather his wits about him. He inclined his head, but not before Caleb caught the quick wink. “Sir Reaves, Knight of The Brotherhood.”

**Comment [01]:** Well, a thought it that they do not get the sword.

“But...” Caleb hesitated, chest tightening, throat threatening to close up completely from the lump that had suddenly lodged there.

“Take it, Damien.” Dean commanded, softly, bumping his arm. “That’s an order.”

Caleb looked from his Guardian to Sam, who gave him an encouraging smile and a nod. His hand had only grazed the hilt when a burst of white light encompassed the entire hall and their Triad. The brightness was blinding, disorientating. Caleb felt himself sway, tightening his grip on the sword. When he was able to open his eyes again, a star-blanketed sky replaced the solar flare, the full moon dulled by comparison.

“What just happened?” Dean’s voice had him blinking, trying to assimilate to the darkness and the information his eyes were relaying. Gone were the walls of Merlin’s Great Hall. Bare branched oaks, and majestic green pines surrounded them now. A dog barked, but it wasn’t the Irish Wolfhound. Boo Radley and Dill stood side by side on the long wooden dock he, Sam and Dean had built the past summer.

“We’re at the farm,” Sam reported needlessly.

“We’re *in* the pond,” Caleb growled, looking down at his feet, which were hidden by the murky green water lapping at his knees. “And it’s freezing.”

Dean snorted, making his way towards the bank. “That’s why you’re pissed? I just left my ride in New Jersey with Josh, Ethan and Bobby as only choices to bring her home.”

“Do you think it’s still the same day?” Sam sloshed after his brother. Boo and Dill clamored around the three as Caleb joined his Triad on land.

“I don’t know what to think of any of this.” Dean knelt down and petted the dogs, Dill scrambling onto his lap. He glanced up at Caleb. “If Damien wasn’t holding proof, I’d swear we’d just dreamed it all.”

Caleb lifted the sword, the fired steel reflecting the luminescent winter moon. He felt a hum of energy strum through the hilt, igniting an echoing call from the hunter’s ring on his right hand. “So, was it Merlin back there?”

“Or Pastor Jim?” Dean cocked a brow.

“Maybe they’ve always been one in the same.” Caleb wouldn’t completely rule it out.

“That’s ridiculous,” Sam declared, but Caleb noted his voice lacked its usual confidence.

“The old Skin Horse did love to keep us guessing.” Dean shifted his gaze to the sky. “Wherever he is, he’s getting a big laugh out of this right now.”

“It couldn’t be...right?” Caleb turned the sword over, marveling at not only the workmanship, but the miracle it represented.

“Either way, this is *not* going down for posterity.” Sam propped his hands on his hips, frowning. He looked from Guardian to Knight. “Our Triad has enough issues without future generations of hunters thinking we’re completely irrational and delusional.”

Dean looked at Caleb. “Did The Scholar just issue a gag order?”

“For once, I’m with the Runt. No journal entries on this gig.”

Dean stood, hefting Dill into his arms. The pup licked his face as they started for the house. “So be it. This stays between us-privileged Triad information.”

“There’s Joshua,” Sam fretted.

“Please,” Dean scoffed. “Mama’s Boy has got enough on his plate. He’s still trying to swallow the fact he’s about to be a daddy.”

“Dad’s going to want every detail,” Caleb said as he and Sam moved to catch up.

“We’ll throw Dr. Ames a bone, let him examine you and run tests to his heart’s content.”

“How’s that fair? I already took one for the team.” Caleb had no doubt his father would insist on medical proof he was healed. It did not bode well for his oath never to willingly enter another hospital. If he was lucky, he could hold him off until after the holidays.

“You just got knighted at the fucking Round Table,” Dean countered. “How is that taking one from the team?”

“It’s like Caleb Reaves wildest fantasy come true,” Sam added in collusion with his brother. “All that was missing was the Musketeers.”

“I’ll have you know my fantasy involves canvases of raw silk, Victoria Secret’s models and...”

“Give it up, Damien.” Dean shook his head. “You just got your World Series Ring, lucky bastard.”

“The only thing that could have made it any more fitting for him was if a dragon had emerged from the fountain and gobbled Owen.”

Caleb didn't even bother with a counter. He knew when he was outnumbered, and it was hard to argue with the truth. He took his position on the other side of Dean, grinning. "There's always Christmas, Deuce."

"We'll see, Damien." Dean laughed. "We'll see."

RcJ&Ti\*SnsnsN\*Ti&RcJ

"Ow!" Caleb jerked his hand away from the platter of turkey, rubbing the reddened spot across his knuckles. "Damn it, Missouri, that hurt."

Missouri Mosley waved her wooden spoon at the Knight of the Brotherhood showing no hint of fear or remorse. She jabbed the utensil toward Caleb's dark haired accomplice beside him. "I told you and Ethan Mathews both to stay out of my kitchen until I called you to dinner."

"You let them stay in here." Ethan gestured over his shoulder to the table where Sam and Eli sat stringing popcorn. Caleb glared at The Scholar who smiled innocently before tossing what looked suspiciously like a chunk of turkey breast into his mouth. "And don't pretend they haven't had a test taste of everything that's come out the stove. My evil twin has blackberry smeared on his face."

"Those two babies are helping." Missouri plopped one fist on her ample hip and shook her head, spoon still raised in striking position. "Like the well-mannered good boys they are. Unlike you two, who have been underfoot all day with nothing but mischief on your minds."

"I hiked two miles into the woods to help Dean chop down the perfect Christmas Tree," Caleb insisted. "Besides, I know for a fact you can't read my mind."

Missouri gave a loud harrumph and went back to her cooking.

"I fought the Christmas Eve traffic to get those last few items on your shopping list," Ethan pointed out, even though the former Advisor paid him no mind. "Do you know the rates for automobile accidents increase on the holidays? I risked life and limb for buttermilk and paprika."

"And you'll be getting a tasty dinner for your trouble." Missouri continued to stir her dumplings. "Unless you keep getting on my bad side, Boy, in which case, you and The Knight may be getting kibble out in the barn with the four-legged flea circus under the table."

Boo let out a loud whine, drawing Missouri's eye and her ire. "Don't you go getting too comfortable over there Boo Radley. I know you think I didn't see you slink in with these two, but I got eyes in the back of my head."

"And a couple of horns sprouting from her forehead," Caleb muttered to Ethan, earning him another glower and a swipe with the spoon that missed him this time. Mostly, he knew Missouri was playing, but there were times when he was certain the witch had it out for him despite the

fact she had been instrumental in bringing him into the folds of The Brotherhood and teaching him how to harness his abilities.

A crash from the living room heralded Bobby's hasty entrance into the kitchen. The guilt-stricken mechanic spared Caleb further harm, and gave Ethan a chance to make it to the table as Missouri zeroed her attention in on Bobby. "Robert Singer, stop messing up all of Esme's hard work. She's got her hands full in there with Mackland and his business mogul daddy trying to give her direction on all the intricacies of tree decorating. She surely doesn't need you adding your two cents, and lending a bumbling hand to make a bad situation worse. Try making yourself useful instead by mixing up a batch of Pastor Jim's eggnog."

"Woman, don't go bossing me around like I'm one of these wet behind the ear pups you've got cowed."

Caleb gave Bobby credit for the attempt at bluster, but one of Missouri's infamous narrow eyed 'looks indeed might kill or at least curse you with a terminal case of erectile dysfunction,' had the older hunter taking off his ball cap, stuffing it in his back pocket before the witch could tell him to, and contritely following her request.

"Who the hell invited the old hag anyway?" Bobby asked under his breath as Caleb passed him the punch bowl and eggs.

"That would be Deuce, who decided we needed to have the whole family here to the farm this year, just like the time before Sammy went to Stanford." Bobby gave Caleb a knowing look. Despite how generous and extremely 'Jim-like' the sentiment might appear on the surface he understood all too well The Guardian's true motivation.

"I hope her freakin' pie is worth it."

Caleb snorted, rubbing his smarting hand. "I don't even like peaches."

"Speak of the man who'd sell his soul for homemade pastry." Bobby nodded towards the door where Dean had just entered with an armload of firewood, Dill prancing at his feet with what looked like a pinecone, but could have just as easily been a misfortunate field mouse gripped in her small teeth. Boo scrambled from beneath the table obviously deciding the risk of Missouri's wrath was worth it to relieve the pup of her prize. It ensued in a growling tug of war match that prompted Harper Lee from his perch by the fireplace. A few sharp barks had Boo and Dill abandoning the treasure at the old, but still alpha dog's paws where Caleb noted with relief that the three had indeed been battling over a pinecone.

"Dean Winchester," Missouri started on a rant, which Caleb was sure would rival any of Pastor Jim's fire and brimstone sermons. Undoubtedly outlining all the evil examples as to why wild beasts should not be housed inside with civilized humans when a voice from the doorway

immediately transformed her countenance, sparing Dean the tongue lashing Caleb felt he deserved for insisting they extend an olive branch to Missouri.

“Look who Santa left in the driveway.” Dean moved further inside, dropping his load of firewood onto the already stacked pile next to the freezer. “Mr. and Mrs. Sawyer decided Kentucky was preferable to Christmas in Virginia, after all.”

“The unexpected snowstorm helped make the decision easier,” Joshua informed, as Missouri rushed forward to envelope him in a crushing hug that had Dean smirking and Carolyn hiding a smile behind the brightly wrapped packages she was holding.

“Who cares what the reasons are, we’re just glad you’re here, Baby.”

Caleb made a gagging motion at Bobby who grinned knowingly. The only plus Caleb could see in his stepbrother’s appearance was that Sam was shoved to second place in Missouri’s affection when her protégé was around. Of course, Carolyn showing was actually a nice addition to the surprise Caleb had planned for later. The thought had him moving forward, taking the stack of packages from the brunette so she could remove her coat.

“Merry Christmas, Beautiful.” He planted a kiss on her cheek; Carolyn’s face quickly pinking in response.

“Please do not flirt with my wife.” Joshua extricated himself from Missouri’s grasp, straightening his red silk tie. The Advisor lowered his voice. “I told her what you did in your little time trek with Castiel, which is the other reason we decided a holiday spent here might be in our best interest.”

“You really thought I’d let the cat out of the bag?” Caleb donned a hurt look, garnering the reaction he was expecting.

“Of course not,” Carolyn touched his arm. “Joshua is exaggerating.”

“She was terrified you would run your mouth, rightfully so.”

“Run his mouth about what?” Ethan asked around a mouth full of the popcorn he’d swiped from his brother’s bowl.

“Yeah, Josh, do tell.” Caleb took Carolyn’s coat, smirking at her husband.

“Here? Now?” Joshua became flustered. “This is not really the time...”

“Joshua, Carolyn,” Esme brushed into the room, Mac and Cullen trailing in her wake. She stopped to kiss on her son’s cheek, before embracing her daughter-in-law. “What a wonderful surprise. What happened to spending the day in Washington with your family, Carolyn?”

“Joshua’s here to do damage control.” Dean folded his arms over his chest, resting against the freezer by Caleb’s side. “He was afraid Damien would run his big mouth.”

“What exactly have you done now, Son?” Mackland ran a finger over his brow, eliciting a frown from Caleb.

“I haven’t done anything, Dad. Josh is just being stupid Josh.”

“I am not being stupid, I am being proactive. Something I’ve learned. Like with my more uninhibited loose lipped clients it is an imperative when it comes to you and The Triad.”

“Hey, I’m trustworthy,” Sam called from the table, earning him a one-fingered salute from his older brother.

“Carolyn?” Esme’s gaze went from her son’s face to the brunette, who despite the typical ruckus was smiling from ear to ear. Caleb finally understood the whole ‘glowing’ thing.

“I’m pregnant!” She spilled the beans with an excited squeal and a tiny dance, which was returned in frequency by Esme, then echoed in an even louder pitch by Missouri. The three of them hugged each other bouncing up and down while gyrating in a tiny circle in a move which Caleb wasn’t entirely sure could be good for the mother-to-be, a thought that must have been shared by the other men in the room who seemed as uncomfortable as he did. Caleb’s attention was quickly diverted to much more important matters as he watched his father step forward to engulf Joshua in a manlier back-pounding hug, but still emotion-filled embrace.

“Congratulations, Son, that’s wonderful news.” The doctor’s slip of the word son had never bothered Caleb as Mac often used the term with Dean and Sam. But something about the exchange with Joshua had him gulping.

“A grandchild!” Cullen joined in on the congratulations, further rattling Caleb’s cage. He shook Joshua’s hand when Mac let his stepson go. “The best present a man can ever hope for, I assure you.”

Bobby slid past Caleb and Dean, and in an uncharacteristic move offered his hand to Joshua, an affectionate tap to the back of his head. “Nice job, Slick. First to get a jump on the next generation.”

“It’s a boy.” Caleb wasn’t sure why he said what he did. It might have been the painful revelation that he’d never be responsible for the joyful look now on his dad’s face, but the sharp jab in his side from Dean’s elbow told him it probably wasn’t one of his best moments. Sam, who had stood up from the table along with Eli and Ethan, sent a silent psychic verbal acknowledgement that Caleb was correct in his self-assessment. His motives might not have been the purest but he tried to correct it by adding, “Maxim Sawyer, a shoe in for Knighthood, right?”

All eyes were on Caleb but quickly went to Carolyn, who had moved out of her circle of estrogen to take a step closer to Caleb. The Knight braced himself for a hard slap, maybe even a good belt to the gut, which although totally out of character for the demure Carolyn, would be completely understandable in the situation.

“A boy?” Instead of lashing out, her hand went to her flat stomach. “We’re having a boy?”

Caleb nodded, unable to look away from her eyes that were quickly filling with water. Tears were far worse than violence. “You can hit me if you want.”

“Hit you?” Carolyn laughed, her hand moving to her mouth when a few tears escaped her lashes to slide down her cheeks. She surprised him with a big wet kiss to his face. “I love you!”

She let Caleb go as quickly as she had grabbed him, turning instead to Joshua. “I knew it was a boy. I just knew it.” Joshua’s glare shot to Caleb over his overwhelmed wife’s shoulder let Caleb know he held no such sentiment towards The Knight.

“We’re hoping Dean will do us the honor of being Godfather.” It was said through clenched teeth, but met with a few whoops from the other hunters as well as a hell yeah, from Dean.

“Who else would it be but Corleone?” Ethan slapped Dean on the back. “He’s by far the most qualified.”

“How about me?” Caleb muttered as he watched another round of congratulations and hugging from the women. He could have sworn Joshua smirked at him as Mac slapped his back again.

“Don’t pout, Damien.” Dean bumped his shoulder. “You and your big mouth just dodged one hell of a bullet.”

Sam cleared his throat. “I have a feeling his luck’s not going to hold.”

“Shut up, Sam,” Caleb warned, having already felt the new presence on the farm even though the crunch of tires didn’t elicit the dog’s usual warning barks as they were too distracted by all the excitement.

Dean glanced from Knight to Scholar. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean Caleb isn’t satisfied meddling in just one brother’s life.”

“Damien?” Dean frowned, and Caleb offered him a half smile before there was a knock at the door.

“Merry Christmas, Deuce.”

“What the hell did you do?”



The knock was louder this time, shushing the congratulations to the parents-to-be and spurning the dogs into a late but notable frenzy. Boo pawed at the floor, Dill started yipping and Harper let out a lone mournful howl. Missouri threatened them all with banishment to the barn.

“Who the hell is that?” Bobby glanced around the room as if accounting for anyone that should have been present but was missing. “Please tell me no one invited Griffin Porter, because I draw the line at sitting down with that ass hat, Christmas or not. No disrespect boys.” He inclined his head to Ethan and Eli, “But your all’s godfather is a prick.”

“Robert Singer.” Missouri slapped him with the spoon she was still wielding. “There are women present and a baby.”

“Holy hell, Missouri that hurt.”

“It’s not Griffin.” Ethan laughed. “We’re supposed to swing by Atlanta for New Year’s.”

Esme turned, inclined to do the sensible thing and see for herself, but Dean leaped over the dogs, practically throwing himself against the door. “Wait!”

“Deuce, you have to let her in.” Caleb crossed his arms over his chest. “She drove all the way from Tennessee.”

“Let who in?” Mackland inquired. “Who drove from Tennessee?”

“A friend,” Dean hedged.

“Oh my God.” Carolyn’s hand flew to her mouth. “The doctor? You invited the doctor to Christmas dinner?”

“No,” Dean hissed, lowering his voice, “I mean, yes, but I didn’t invite her.”

“You’re dating a doctor?” Mackland piped up and once again Caleb noted the gleam of pride in his father’s gray eyes.

“A veterinarian, actually,” Carolyn explained to Esme and Missouri. “Her name is Juliet. She’s Jim’s great niece.”

“Juliet?” Ethan coughed. “You have got to be kidding me.”

“Jim had a niece?” Eli asked. “I thought all his family was gone.”

“Juliet is actually Miss Emma’s great niece.” Carolyn was whispering now, her gaze locked with Eli’s, as if they were discussing some great Brotherhood secret. “She came here to visit Jim’s farm this fall, sort of searching for the real story of Jim and Emma’s great and epic love, and who did she find but Dean. They’ve been dating ever since. Isn’t that ironic and so romantic?”

“What part of privileged information do you not understand, Girl Friday?” Dean demanded. Carolyn did her best to look contrite though she kept smiling. “I knew I should have never agreed to that shared calendar idea.”

“Dean Winchester, move away from the door and let the girl in before she thinks we’re all a bunch of heathens for leaving her in the cold to freeze.” Missouri gestured with her spoon. Dean dropped his head to his chest in defeat. He took a step back and opened the door.

“Hey,” Caleb could make out the slight trepidation in Juliet’s voice. “Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas,” Dean replied just as hesitant. “This is a surprise.”

“Surprise?” Juliet now sounded perplexed. “Your email said six, but there wasn’t much traffic so...”

“That’s what I mean,” Dean quickly covered. “You’re a little early.”

“Nonsense, she’s just on time!” Esme took Dean’s stumbling awkwardness as a cue. She stepped forward to sweep Juliet into the house with a gushing welcome. “You must be Juliet; we were so excited to hear you’d be joining us for the holiday.”

Juliet’s arms were loaded with a bag of wrapped gifts and a crock pot. She glanced at Dean who still looked a little skittish; in the way a wild animal does when cornered. Caleb didn’t doubt his best friend might have seen chewing his leg off to escape a better option than staying put at that moment. Juliet seemed to recognize the animalistic fear and tilted her head with a slight frown. “It was a little last minute and unexpected, but a nice surprise.”

“Oh Dear, let me help you.” Esme gestured to the group of hunters still staring at the newcomer with wonder as if she were the much sought after Yeti they didn’t quite believe existed. “Ethan, place these packages under the tree. Eli, take that heavy crock pot. Joshua, please remember your manners and help Juliet out of her coat.”

“Yes, mother.” Joshua moved quickly after Ethan and Eli had lightened Juliet’s load, each giving the woman a quick hello and matching grins. Joshua nodded to Carolyn as he took the doctor’s jacket. “Juliet, this is my wife, Carolyn Sawyer, the lovely woman with the apron is Missouri Mosley, and you’ve just been dragged into this frightening fold by my breathtaking mother, Esme Madrigal Ames.”

“Esme, of course. Carolyn and Missouri.” Juliet smiled, and Caleb noted with some disappointment that the doctor seemed much more charmed by Joshua than she had he or Sam on their first meeting. Of course Joshua wasn’t bleeding to death as Caleb had been or spouting crazy hunting theories like Sam. “Dean’s talked about all of you. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you all.”

Esme reached out and took Juliet's hand between both of hers. "The girls and I were so excited to hear you'd be joining our outnumbered group. As you are probably aware these gatherings at the farm are often fueled by testosterone and manly grunting, much like prehistoric hunting parties."

The charm and ease was pure Madrigal magic, and Caleb was once again struck at his father's good fortune in marrying Esme. Juliet transformed from terrified deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car to smiling, relaxed guest under the older woman's refined graces.

"So, I've learned." Juliet turned to lock eyes with Dean who had stepped alongside Esme. Dean now seemed a modicum more at ease at having the woman he was dating, and had strategically tried to keep compartmentalized, come face to face with the most private part of his life. He offered Juliet a more genuine smile this time, and Caleb caught the silently mouthed, 'Sorry'. Juliet returned his grin, bending down to scoop up Dill who had been attacking her shoes, cuddling the pup close to her chest. "In fact, when Dean finally asked me to a family dinner, I imagined that would entail cold pizza and beer with Sam and Caleb, my girl Dill here as my only female backup, considering Boo and Harper's loyalties."

"Funny, that's kind of how I imagined it, too," Dean growled at Caleb who shrugged. Sometimes Caleb knew what was best for Dean, and was willing to give the kid a little push. After all, Caleb couldn't expect to be a godfather anytime soon if Dean kept Juliet at arm's length, there was James and the brothers he'd mentioned to consider.

"Hence the crockpot." Mackland stepped forward, taking Juliet's hand and kissing it. "Smart, prepared, and even prettier than I imagined. I'm Mackland Ames and I assure you Dean's hesitancy to bring you home had nothing to do with you, and everything to do with the ragtag group of grunting men my wife mentioned earlier. We've been compared to a pack of wolves, I'm afraid. Any shortcomings you find in my nephew is most definitely to blame on those of us who helped raise him."

"That's okay." Juliet laughed. "Wolves are kind of my specialty."

Bobby moved closer, lifting the lid off the crock pot Eli was holding. "Be still my beating heart, is that venison stew?"

Juliet nodded. "My Grandmother Hannah's recipe."

"I just might fall in love with you." Bobby extended his hand. Juliet shifted Dill to accommodate the mechanic. "Robert Singer, but you can call me Bobby. I'm one of the big bad wolves to blame for the kid's not your typical Brady Brunch upbringing."

"Then I guess I owe you a thank you."

“It’s us that owes you, Baby.” Missouri practically pushed Bobby out of the way, slipping out of her apron, handing it off to Mackland. She passed her spoon to Cullen, who stared at the utensil as if it were a coiled snake. Juliet shot Dean a slightly desperate look as she was caught up in the wave of women heading for the living room. “I never thought any of these boys would get as lucky as Joshua. Come in and sit down with us women folk, tell us all about yourself and your family while we let the men finish up in the kitchen. Robert will fetch us some tea and petit fours.”

“What the hell is a petit four?” Bobby muttered as the men were abandoned in the kitchen. He jabbed a finger at Dean, lowering his voice. “If our dinner is ruined thanks to your daddy’s and Cullen’s cooking, I’m taking it out of your hide.”

“Don’t blame me,” Dean returned, snatching Missouri’s spoon from Cullen and whacking Caleb with it. “Blame Damien’s matchmaking service.”

“Ow!” Caleb rubbed the red whelp rising up on the top of his hand. “Damn it, Deuce that hurt.”

“Good.” Dean handed the spoon back to Cullen.

“We always have venison stew,” Eli pointed out, unhelpfully.

“Bobby!” Missouri’s voice snapped from the living room, setting Boo to scratching at the door again. Harper whined, nudging closer to Sam’s long legs. “We’re waiting.”

“I’ll check the turkey,” Mackland offered, shaking his head at Caleb in a manner that said Caleb could expect a long father son discussion after dinner was served.

“Perhaps I should oversee your ministrations,” Cullen said, handing the spoon off to Bobby. “It’s not like I haven’t directed kitchen staff in the past.”

“So tell me great matchmaker, is this how Christmas played out in your ‘Touched by an Angel’ vision?”

Dean was looking at him. Sam and Eli had gone back to their popcorn, Ethan following after Mac and Cullen, more than likely hoping to get a taste of something more substantial than popcorn, while Bobby gathered Miss Emma’s tea set.

“Not exactly.” Caleb tried to gauge if his best friend was truly upset with him or just playing at annoyance.

“So Juliet didn’t end up in the living room with Missouri, who is no doubt as we speak telling her about how I was one hell of a funny looking kid.”

“Oh Juliet got inducted into our crazy.” Caleb held Dean’s gaze, trying to make light of the memory. “She brought me pie in the hospital. Everyone was there because it wasn’t looking like

I'd make it out, so it was a more subdued setting, but I still think Bobby might have hit on her. On a positive note, she and Carolyn really hit it off."

Dean rolled his eyes, but Caleb caught the shadow of fear in The Guardian's deep green gaze. Caleb wasn't intentionally using his recent condition as a ploy for pardon, but it seemed to work that way just the same. "You could have at least given me a heads up, man. I didn't even buy her a gift. I'm going to look like a dick."

"If I'd given you the heads up, you'd have shot me down with another Guardian mandate no doubt." Caleb grinned. "Besides, I took the liberty of buying a gift for you. It's already under the tree."

A look of panic reappeared on Dean's face. "If it comes in a little black box and sparkles in the least I will take your new favorite toy from our adventures in Camelot and run you through."

Caleb snorted. "Dude, I went for a first edition T.S. Eliot and a collection by Mary Oliver. I have it on good authority the doctor likes poetry."

"Poetry?" Dean groaned. "Because I'm so 'give a girl poetry' kind of guy."

"I added a handwritten IOU to your body shop. All the oil changes and tire alignments her foreign job might need just to showcase your practical side."

Dean sighed. "You really did think of everything."

"What can I say, I'm a giver."

"I guess you have come a long way from that first Christmas we spent together." Dean's mouth twitched. "You were all about what might be in it for you."

"If I recall I handed out some great pearls of wisdom that year *and* gave you some of my Ames loot-a video game, maybe."

"A video game you already had," Dean countered.

"Still better than a bag of M&M's."

"I was five and at least I knew how to share." Dean nodded to the door. "In fact, I'm betting I'm still better in the gift giving department than you. I have something for you outside."

"You got me a present?" Caleb raised a brow in surprise.

"It's kind of dual gift, for you and Sammy."

"But is it comparable to me ensuring the future of our unborn children?"

Dean's gaze narrowed. "You can always stay here and serve tea to the women with Bobby."

“Yo, Runt,” Caleb grabbed their coats from the rack behind the door, never one to pass up the prospect of a present, and not exactly in the mood to deal with anymore estrogen-fueled antics. “Deuce got us an early Christmas gift. Let’s go.”

Sam exchanged a doubtful look with Eli and then narrowed his gaze at his brother. “If it’s condoms and another subscription to Busty Asians like last year, I’ll pass. Eli and I still have to put on the cranberries.”

“Do you have any idea how gay that just sounded?” Caleb shoved Sam’s coat at him. “What man in his right mind disses free rubbers and entertaining bathroom literature?”

Ethan nudged his brother. “I sure as hell wish my brother would get a clue and come off with more of those kinds of presents.”

“You’re seriously criticizing my gift giving?” Eli shared another knowing look with The Scholar. “Last year I got a bag of Beef Jerky, *opened* mind you, and a six pack of Coke.”

“You love Coke,” Ethan pointed out. “And I hadn’t had breakfast.”

“I promise your present isn’t prophylactics or porn, Sammy.” Dean took his coat and started for the door. “Wonder Twins, stop your yammering and mount up. I have something for you, too.”

Ethan whooped. “I so hope mine is porn and prophylactics.”

RcJ&Ti\*SnsnsN\*Ti&RcJ

RcJ&Ti\*SnsnsN\*Ti&RcJ

"This is so much better than a glossy spread of exceptional breasts," Caleb muttered breathlessly as he watched the giant silver dragon The Guardian had conjured soar gracefully over the water. They had all gathered on the dock to watch the animal emerge and take flight.

Dean laughed from his position in Pastor Jim's old boat, which he'd cast off and let drift just a few feet from them. He had one hand hanging over the side, submerged in the cold green depths. "Glad to hear it, Damien."

"He's beautiful," Sam agreed. Boo Radley had another opinion, barking and growling as the dragon swooped closer. Caleb took his eyes from the beast circling above them to glance at Sam. The Scholar had a childlike grin on his face, looking so much like the five year old who used to marvel at the pictures Caleb would draw of Jim's legendary dragons.

"Astorum come to life, huh Sammy." It was as amazing as the one Dean had created with Reagan in his vision only better because of the setting and the missing Trinity. Still, Caleb recognized it for the step it was for his best friend. Admitting he was the Guardian was one thing, stepping up to fulfill his duty natural for a man so driven by responsibility, but demonstrating his power,

acknowledging the fact he was indeed special and gifted in his own right, was not an easy feat for Dean, especially in front of hunters outside their Triad.

"I wouldn't have believed it, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes." Eli watched the dragon dip low over the water, the last tendrils of sunlight glinting off its glistening wings as it skimmed the surface with a talon, sending a spray of water in their direction, which had Boo digging and pawing threatening an attack. Caleb had no doubt the Retriever would have dove in the pond if Sam hadn't had a hold of his collar.

"You haven't seen anything yet, Professor," Dean called out.

Caleb wondered what other surprises his best friend had up his sleeve. He'd obviously been practicing his skills with the silver over the last couple of weeks Caleb and Sam had been in New York.

"That's some magical touch you got going on there, Corleone." Ethan shook his head and laughed. "I didn't know you had it in you."

"I personally think it's a bit of overkill if you ask me, Winchester."

The unexpected voice that called out to Dean from behind them had Caleb's heart pounding. He turned with the others, the silver creation Dean had conjured temporarily forgotten in lieu of the even more unbelievable specter. It seemed it truly was the season for miracles.

"Oh my God." Ethan took a hesitant step forward. "Gideon?"

"Don't tell me you're reeled in by this sleight of hand, E." Gideon Lane moved down the dock, coming closer to them. Caleb felt the punch of his presence, like a sudden blip on the radar. Lane wasn't an illusion, but as corporeal as the other hunters surrounding him. "I promise you it's mostly smoke and mirrors-old Merlin's way of showing off."

"Don't listen to him, Crockett." Dean had rowed back to the dock, and now climbed up with a hand from Caleb who'd shaken his shock off long to return his gaze to the water when Astorim had disappeared into the pond with a loud splash. "He's just jealous that as a Guardian he didn't get a chance to wield the silver."

Ethan didn't need to hear anymore, he closed the distance between him and Gideon, engulfing the resurrected hunter in a crushing hug. "Damn, I've missed you, man."

"How?" Eli stayed in his position by Sam, transfixed by watching his twin and their long lost best friend embrace.

Dean looked from Caleb to Sam, offering Eli a slight shrug. "It's a Guardian thing."

"I don't understand." Eli blinked, his lashes glistening as wetly as the silver dragon's scales.

"It's okay, Eli, you don't have to understand a gift to accept it." Dean squeezed the professor's shoulder and gave him a little nudge forward to join the happy reunion. "Merry Christmas."

Dean nodded his head towards the tree line. Caleb and Sam followed his lead, leaving the Mathews and Gideon alone on the dock.

"That was one hell of a present, Deuce."

"The dragon or Gideon?" Sam ran a hand through his hair. "I'm still reeling. I can only imagine how Eli and Ethan feel."

"The dragon was from me, but the other was all Pastor Jim, or maybe Merlin."

"But you knew he'd come?"

"I figured it was a good possibility from what Damien told me about his vision." Dean looked at The Knight. "I knew you were secretly bummed when the real trip to see The Grail Castle was missing a dragon so I've been practicing."

"I can see that." Caleb was more touched than he could say without breaking every chick flick code they'd concocted over the years. "Best. Present. Ever."

"Even better than Excalibur?"

"We don't know that sword is Excalibur," Sam pointed out.

"Excalibur, Sword of David, Damien still loves it."

"Actually I've been thinking about that."

Caleb watched the Scholar and Guardian exchange a look before Dean frowned at him. "And?"

"And, I think there's one more gift I need to give." He lifted a brow. "You boys up for a little prayer meeting in the barn?"

Castiel looked almost as shocked as Dean and Sam had when Caleb had explained his plans to them. It was somewhat satisfying to see the angel almost rattled, even a little humbled.

"I don't understand," Castiel sounded as unsure as Elijah when he'd voiced the exact same words when presented with the miracle of Gideon being returned to them for the day.

"A very smart man once said that a guy doesn't always have to understand a gift, to accept it." Caleb flashed Dean a grin, stepping forward to hand David's Sword to the angel. "Merry Christmas, Castiel."



"I'm not sure what I'm supposed to say." Castiel took a step back as Boo sniffed his loafers, and circled him suspiciously.

"Thank you is probably the appropriate response, Cas," Dean informed, calling the dog over to his side.

"Thank you."

"Not to *me*, to Damien."

"It's not necessary." Caleb held up a hand to cut off the rote proclamation he could see coming. "Let's just say we're even. You saved our asses with that vision. You saved The Brotherhood, and our Guardian."

"I'll always be on your backs." Castiel nodded.

Dean groaned. "*Have* our backs, man. You'll always have our backs."

"That too," Castiel assured. "As well as your progeny. I'll do whatever it takes to watch over them."

"Did you hear that, Deuce?" Caleb laughed, punching his best friend. "Even Cas knows you're destined to be a dad."

"He didn't say me specifically." Dean pointed to his brother. "He might have been talking about Sammy or The Brotherhood in general."

"Don't drag me into his fantasy!" Sam proclaimed from his spot by Fideist's stall. He continued to stroke the big bay's mane, but shook his head vehemently. "I'm not having any children just so *Uncle* Caleb gets to play godfather."

"Sammy's out and we all know my hat's never going to be tossed in that ring because of Noah Seaver." Caleb folded his arms over his chest and looked to Dean. "It's up to you to seed the next generation."

"Tell him, Cas..." Dean turned to the angel only to find the three of them alone once more with the barn animals. Boo whined, moving to sniff the ground where the angel had been standing. "I freaking hate it when he does that."

"Juliet probably feels the same way about you vanishing on her," Sam pointed out to which Dean frowned at Caleb once more.

"She may never speak to me again, Damien."

Caleb smiled. "All the more reason you really should go rescue her, man. We don't want Missouri running off the mother of our children."

"Will you please give the next generation thing a rest, Dude? I'm just glad the three of us are in one piece at this point." He met Caleb's gaze. "Really glad."

"Okay." Caleb clasped Dean on the shoulder and gave a quick squeeze. The Guardian was right. They had a lot to be thankful for, they had each other. It was enough, more than enough. The three of them could have easily ended up in Eli and Ethan's position. "Let's enjoy the present, allow the future to take care of itself."

Dean smirked. "In the meantime we can entertain ourselves watching Joshua make a fool out of himself preparing to be Ward Cleaver."

"And when Max gets here..." Caleb rubbed his hands together. "The real fun begins." He might not be the kid's godfather but he was still his uncle, even if it was by marriage. The way Caleb saw it, he deserved something from having to put up with Joshua.

"Speaking of Josh and the news of *his* son," Sam stopped at the trap door to the pit, giving Caleb a look that let him know The Scholar had been snooping in his thoughts. "I think a new addition to the family calls for some of Pastor Jim's special brew."

"Look, Damien, Little Sammy is finally growing up on us." Dean reached out tried to ruffle his brother's hair. "He wants to spike Missouri's punch."

Sam danced out of his grasp. "I was thinking about Pastor Jim's special eggnog recipe."

"Now you're talking, Tiny Tim," Caleb bent down and lifted the hatch. "Man that mentions it gets to do the honors."

"Who says?" Sam grunted, eyeing the darkened passageway warily. Caleb figured turn about was fair play and made an effort to glimpse what the their Scholar was thinking. He shook his head at the fact Sam could still be such a kid.

"The Hunter's Handbook, of course," Dean folded his arms over his chest. "Chapter 6, second paragraph from the bottom."

"There is no handbook, and we all know it."

"This from the guy who said there were no dragons." Caleb snatched a flashlight from the shelf and handed it to Sam, enjoying the way the younger Winchester's eyes widened. "Shows what you know, Einstein. "

"Yet he believed in Santa until he was like twelve." Dean sighed. "I wouldn't be surprised if he waits up tonight for the sound of tiny hoofs on the roof."

"I hate you." Sam took the light from Caleb and shined it on the stairs.

"Just so you aren't caught off guard, Runt, I think Pastor Jim stashed that set of clown cookie jars that used to give you nightmares down there."

"In that case I hate *both* of you." Sam clarified before carefully descending into the cellar and disappearing, demented clowns be damned.

"You know he loves us," Caleb countered loud enough so that their Scholar could hear. "Why else brave Bozo, the spiders and the rats."

"If you say so." Dean snorted at his brother's muttered colorful response, as Boo pawed at the hay around the opening and tilted his head to peer down at the dark wooden stairway. "Love does make a man do bat-shit crazy things."

"Are you sure that's not family, Deuce?" Caleb glanced to The Guardian, thinking about the lengths each of them had gone to for one another in the past, the lines they no doubt would willingly cross in the future. He loved Dean and Sam, but that wasn't all that drove him to protect them.

"Maybe you're right." Dean scratched his chin, pretended to ponder the suggestion. "Love does have its limits."

"But not family," Caleb nodded.

"No," Dean agreed, holding his gaze. "When it comes to family nothing's off the table."

"Not even dragons and giants." Caleb grinned at his best friend, knowing that where their Triad was concerned absolutely anything was possible.

"Damn straight." Dean returned the cocky smile, adding a hard punch to Caleb's shoulder. "Goliath's got nothing on us."

The End



