

Season Three

Episode Twenty-One: Heaven and Earth

By irismay42

Mount Diablo State Park, CA

The sun peered shyly over the double peak of Mount Diablo, painting the early morning California sky with fingers of russet and gold. A promise of cobalt blue hung in the air, and a light breeze caressed the treetops. Somewhere a coyote howled, and a falcon wheeled overhead, searching the ground for mice and squirrels, who went about their business always aware that sudden death might come swooping down out of the sky for them at any minute.

The only human figure stirring at the base of the mountain was oblivious to nature blazing all around her, no interest in what was above her, only in what lay below.

She crouched in a trench cut into the earth, two or three feet down, gingerly brushing dirt from the object barely protruding from the ground beneath her.

She exhaled slowly, streaking dirt across her freckled face as she brushed a hand over her cheek and pushed long ginger curls out of her hazel eyes and back under the dirty ball cap from where they had escaped.

She rested on her haunches briefly, wiping her hands on the thighs of her dirty old jeans and realigning the ball cap so her curls tucked through the back vent and spiraled down her back instead of onto her face.

She glanced briefly at an old Jeep parked a few feet away; at twenty years, it was almost as old as she was. Briefly, she considered rifling through the untidy pile of what to the untrained eye might appear to be junk, seeking out a bigger trowel to expedite the unearthing process.

With a shrug of her shoulders, she dismissed the idea. The object in front of her was too delicate for such manhandling, of that she was sure.

Brushing away more of the earth, she slowly revealed an additional couple of centimeters of the find, incongruously white against the brown of the dirt in which it nestled. She frowned to herself as she peered down at the object. Too white for bones. For old bones, anyway. There should be discoloration if it were of any great age.

Gingerly, she ran a fingertip over the object, touch convincing her of what sight could not. Bones. Without a doubt.

She sighed heavily. Probably just some kid's dead dog Dad had decided to bury out here. Certainly not a find that would secure her another semester's funding.

Dammit, she needed to *find* something! She needed to find something *soon*. She'd been so sure of herself, so sure of her research, even when Professor

Atherton had laughed at her theories and told her there was nothing out here for her to find.

It wasn't fair. It *wasn't*.

She jumped to her feet, almost stamping her foot in frustration. She was right, she *knew* it! There had to be artifacts around here. There just *had* to be! Why wouldn't the faculty listen to her?

She stood there, fuming silently to herself, her body rigid and trembling in anger.

Or perhaps it wasn't her body that was trembling.

Because the ground was trembling too.

She looked up sharply from the trench, rocks and stones suddenly dislodged from the ground above slipping and sliding down into the hole all around her.

She let out a frightened squawk as a particularly large rock narrowly missed hitting her temple, hurriedly scrambling up out of the trench as the ground began to shake more violently, the whole area thrumming with angry energy as rocks slid and bounced down the side of the mountain.

Covering her head in fear, she crouched low to the ground, hoping to lower her center of gravity to avoid toppling over completely.

Please stop, she murmured in her head, praying whatever she'd been unearthing hadn't been buried again beneath the suddenly shifting ground. It might be worthless, but she still had to examine it properly to confirm that.

Please stop!

Before she exhaled her next breath, the quake desisted as abruptly as it had begun, the ground beneath her ceasing its shake, rattle and roll, the mountain stilling itself even as rocks continued to slide down from the summit.

Rising hesitantly to her feet, she edged warily back to the trench, almost dreading what she would see there: two days' work lost?

It came as something of a pleasant surprise when instead of seeing her unearthed bones once again buried under mounds of rock and dirt she saw quite the opposite: the tremor had shaken loose *more* bones.

Crouching down at the edge of the trench, she tilted her head sideways, intrigued by the partial skeleton now revealed before her. There was something not quite...*right* about it.

Cautiously climbing back down into the trench, careful not to disturb any of the find, she crouched low over the bones, her long fingers tentatively probing what looked like a human scapula. *Hmm, shoulder blade. Maybe not a dead dog after all...*

So what was she looking at here? A murder victim? Someone who'd gone missing in the past couple of months?

Squinting harder at the shoulder blade, she frowned as her fingers traced something decidedly odd, something, from the anatomy courses she'd taken as an undergrad, she was pretty sure shouldn't be there: A bony ridge branching off from the scapula which looked uncannily like it ought to be connected to...

She sat back on her haunches and sucked in an incredulous gulp of earthy air.

No. Way.

Hopkins Marine Station, Pacific Grove, CA

At first he can only watch the assorted whey-faced onlookers who all stare out at the ocean, shaking their heads in mute despair. They're lined up like witnesses to an execution, a few with hands thrown over their mouths in fear and revulsion, others shaking their heads solemnly.

It's a shocking sight, and it takes every bit of courage he has to turn his gaze back toward the angry, roiling water, steaming and bubbling, the ocean boiling beneath a calm cobalt California sky.

As fish, birds, insects float to the surface of the water, the tall blond man can only shake his head and turn away.

Pricewise Motel, Milton, KS

"I *hate* Kansas," Dean grumbled, tossing a duffel full of dirty laundry into the Impala's cavernous trunk with a huff.

Sam glanced over his shoulder at the seedy, one-story motel that had been "home" for the past week, and had to admit he wouldn't be sad to see the back of the state of their birth.

Of course, admitting that to himself was one thing; admitting it to his brother was something else entirely.

"Can't blame an entire state for its over-friendly fairies, Dean," he said, barely suppressing a snigger.

Dean's eyes shot to his brother, narrowing as he ground his teeth together audibly. "It's your stupid fault we're here at all," he declared. "You know how much I hate this place."

Sam raised an eyebrow as he slung their weapons bag into the trunk next to the laundry and a couple of books on fairy lore he'd "forgotten" to return to the library over in Norwich. "Hey, don't blame me, man, *you're* the one said we could do with an easy hunt after that last run-in with Mia. Go someplace she'd never expect us to go. Get off her radar." He straightened, trying not to remember the look of terror frozen on poor Erin's face as Mia stabbed her through the heart. He sighed, surveying the empty parking lot and deserted, pot-holed road that eventually led to the highway. "And she sure as hell wouldn't expect us to come here to the ass-end of Kansas."

Dean grimaced, jaw tightening in reluctant agreement “Yeah, well,” he conceded. “Still. Friggin’ fairies.”

The corner of Sam’s mouth ticked up, cheek dimpling. “You really *are* a chick magnet, bro,” he said, grinning. “Those fairies sure took a shine to you.”

Dean grunted, yanking open the driver’s door and bending to look inside the Impala. “Fairy dust’s gonna be a friggin’ bitch to get out of the upholstery,” he grumbled, straightening as Sam breezed past him, ruffling his hair.

“Not to mention your hair, dude,” he commented gleefully. “Looks cute on you though. Sparkly.”

Dean grimaced at him, shoving away his brother’s large hand before shaking his head like a wet dog and brushing angrily at his shoulders in an effort to further dislodge the shiny powder. “Friggin’ fairies,” he moaned for the ninetieth time that morning. “Shoulda ripped their friggin’ wings off, see how much they liked me then.”

Coldplay’s *Lost!* suddenly started to warble from the general direction of Sam’s jeans, and Dean rolled his eyes.

“Friggin’ Coldplay...”

Sam frowned at him as he checked the caller ID, his phone not recognizing the number. He shifted slightly when he noted the Palo Alto area code, unconsciously turning his shoulder so he was facing away from Dean.

Heart picking up the pace uneasily, he jabbed at the button to pick up the call and offered a wary, “Hello?”

“Sam?”

The voice sounded familiar, but Sam couldn’t quite place it. “Uh – yeah?” he confirmed dumbly, wincing slightly as he imagined Dean’s response to his giving away his identity so easily.

“Sam!” The voice was warmer, an obvious smile in the inflection. “It’s Zach! Zach Warren! You know, the guy you saved from Death Row...?”

Sam’s face lit up immediately, relieved and genuinely pleased to hear from his old college buddy. “Oh my God, Zach!” he burst out, again wincing, but this time at the girly excitement in his voice.

He glanced furtively over his shoulder at Dean, who had taken a step toward him, a frown minutely crinkling his forehead.

Sam again hunched his shoulder, once more turning away from his brother, almost as if he were embarrassed to be taking the call. “How did you get my number?”

“Becky,” Zach replied, and Sam nodded. He’d kept in sporadic e-mail contact with Rebecca Warren—the girl the shapeshifter with Dean’s face had almost killed—ever since they parted ways in St. Louis back in ’05.

"Well it's—it's great to hear from you, man," Sam stammered awkwardly, suddenly realizing he had no clue what to say next. "How is Becky? She's at Harvard Law, right?"

"Yeah," Zach confirmed. "She got a couple of years ahead of me after—y'know. I had to take some time out."

Sam nodded, understanding probably more than Zach realized. "Yeah, Becky said you'd gotten into Stanford Law. Congrats, man." His eyes flicked up to see Dean standing right in front of him and he gritted his teeth together, determined to show not the slightest emotion. Bitterness? Envy? No way.

"It's hard work," Zach continued. "But it's worth it. Thought my chances of law school were completely shot after Emily." He sighed. "Amazing how one night can change your life forever."

Sam didn't realize he hadn't responded at first, images of Jess bursting into flames above him springing unbidden into his head. "Yeah," he agreed quietly. "Life has a habit of pulling the rug right out from under you when you least expect it."

He chanced another look at Dean then, the older brother's expression morphing from inquisitive to sympathetic and concerned in the space of a heartbeat.

Even only hearing one side of the conversation, Dean must have read the look on Sam's face, the single word displayed in his eyes and the awkward set of his mouth: *Jessica*.

Unable to bear Dean's compassion, Sam turned again, walking away from his brother just a couple of paces, heading back toward the rear of the Impala.

"I'm sorry, man," Zach said finally.

"Yeah," Sam agreed, mentally shaking himself before continuing on a little too brightly. "So what can I do for you, Zach? Not sure I'd make that good of a study buddy these days."

Zach laughed hollowly. "You might be a little rusty, but really, it's just like riding a bike."

"Yeah I guess," Sam agreed, vividly reminded of Dean telling him the exact same thing about hunting the night he came and got him at Stanford. "Not sure law school's in my future any time soon."

He heard Dean's boots scuff the gravel and didn't have to turn to know his brother had walked away.

"Yeah, from what Becky tells me," Zach began a little cautiously, "you kinda switched your specialty there, huh?"

Sam paused for a second. "She told you what – what really happened to Emily, right?"

"Yeah," Zach said. "Which is kinda why I'm calling."

Sam's eyebrow ticked up. "Yeah?"

"I have—something—that might fall into your area of expertise. Something I could kinda use your help with."

Sam risked another glance in Dean's direction, but his brother was leaning against the Impala's hood nonchalantly, face impassive as he did his best to give Sam a little privacy.

At least, that's what Sam hoped he was doing.

"So," Sam continued, a forced levity in his voice that he most certainly didn't feel. "Ghouls in your basement? Vampire bats in your belfry?"

Dean looked up at that, a quizzical expression in his quirked eyebrows.

Zach laughed a little bleakly. "Wish it were that simple," he said. After a beat, he continued, "So there's this girl..."

Sam grimaced. "Aw man, you sure I wanna hear this?"

"Don't be a pervert," Zach admonished him.

Sam shook his head. "Spending too much time with my brother I guess."

It was Dean's turn to grimace, obviously affronted that Sam should be...saying whatever it was he was saying about him.

"Her name's Daisy," Zach continued. "My girl."

"Way to go, dude," Sam said, genuinely pleased for his friend. "I'm happy for you."

And he meant it.

Sam hadn't spoken to Zach a whole lot since St. Louis, but if what his friend had felt for Emily was anything like what Sam had felt for Jess, then he knew how hard it must have been for Zach to take that difficult step toward finding someone else.

"Yeah," Zach continued slowly. "It...wasn't easy."

Sam nodded, even though he knew Zach couldn't see him. "No," he agreed. "I know."

The line was silent for a second, Zach and Sam communing on some level where shared experience was more important than words could ever be.

"She's an archaeology student," Zach continued. "Daisy Duffield."

"Cute," Sam remarked.

"Yeah, she is," Zach agreed. "Thing is, she's been out on a dig at Mount Diablo Park for a couple of months and—well—she's found some—uh—interesting bones that—well—maybe you guys might want to take a look at."

"Bones?" Sam repeated. "Why do you think we'd—?"

"They're just—weird," Zach explained, hesitating for a second before adding, "Maybe *your* kind of weird."

Sam nodded. "Ah," he said. "Okay—"

"But—" Zach continued, "That's not all. There's—there's something else I'm kinda worried about. Daisy, she..." He paused for a second, took a breath. "Sam, I could really use your help..."

Palo Alto, CA

"So...you're really okay with this?" Dean asked, obviously trying to sound casual but with an undercurrent of concern threaded through his voice that set Sam's teeth on edge. "I mean," he continued, glancing surreptitiously at his little brother out of the corner of his eye, "coming back here."

Sam set his jaw tightly, trying to remind himself that Dean was just trying to be a good guy, a good big brother. "Why wouldn't I be?" It came out harsher than he'd intended, snappish even, and Dean recoiled a little, that kicked puppy look on his face he always used to get whenever he'd failed to live up to Dad's ridiculously high expectations.

Sam hated to think he'd put that look on Dean's face.

He opened his mouth to apologize, just as the Impala rumbled past the little coffee shop where he and Jess used to drink lattes on a Sunday morning, and his throat constricted so much he couldn't form a single word.

"So..." Dean tried again. "Zach's gonna meet us at the university?"

Sam merely nodded, unable to trust his voice as tears prickled at his eyes.

There was the deli where they ate breakfast before class; the restaurant where he'd taken her for their first date; the jewelers where the rings he'd been saving up for had probably been sold years ago.

All gone. All of it. Jessica. *Sam* and Jessica. *Them*.

That bright, shining future he'd almost held in his hands, almost but not quite, all of it slipping through his fingers because of who he was. Because he was a Winchester.

"We could stop, man, if you want—"

"I don't need to stop," Sam snapped harshly, immediately regretting it when Dean just nodded, so much patience and understanding on his face Sam almost wanted to hit him. Hard.

If he hadn't come for him that night... If Dean had just left him the hell alone....

God, this was a hundred times worse than their trip to Seattle a couple of months back, and he'd thought *that* felt awful at the time. Then, all he'd had to consider was the road not taken, what might have been. Now...it was like being in mourning all over again. Not just for Jess; but for the life snatched away from them, the life forever denied him.

Because of who he was. Because he was a Winchester.

And as much as he knew it was wrong and unfair and totally undeserved, every time he looked at Dean all he could see was the thing that took it all away: the hunt; the life; the family. The Demon.

Until eventually he just stopped looking at him altogether.

Stanford University Palo Alto, CA

Dean got it. He did. He'd told Sam once that he didn't know what it was like to lose someone the way his brother lost Jessica. But he did. He *did*. He'd lost Sam. For almost four whole years. And this was the place responsible for that. This was the place that took Sammy away from him and made him *Sam*.

So he could sympathize, he really could. Loving someone that much and losing them? It was the worst thing in the world. And for Sam, losing Jessica—losing the life he had all laid out in front of him, the life he had with *her*—that must have been impossibly hard on his baby brother. He'd seen it himself first hand—the nightmares; screaming her name in the middle of the night; the way he'd thrown himself into hunting as if that would somehow make it right again.

And now coming back here—seeing places he used to take her, places they used to hang out with their friends... Well it didn't take a genius to figure out what must be going on in Sam's planet-sized brain. After all, Dean had been there himself, that first time they'd pulled up outside their house in Lawrence—*Jenny's* house. He knew what Sam was feeling; he knew only too well.

Loss.

So he totally got why Sam had been stonily silent since they were about three miles outside of Palo Alto. To be honest, Dean had been pretty stunned Sam had agreed to come here at all. Sure, Zach Warren was an old school buddy and everything, but the Winchesters sure as hell didn't owe him anything. Not after what Dean had sacrificed to get him off the hook with the cops.

Which was the thing Dean *didn't* get: Why Sam seemed to be so pissed off at *him*. What the hell had he done wrong that had upset Sam so much *he* couldn't even look at him?

Unless what Sam had said to him that one time had been a lie: that Sam really *did* blame Dean for Jessica's death.

"I'm sorry, man," he said quietly, eyes still fixed on the road ahead and studiously not on his little brother, not entirely sure whether he was apologizing

for Sam losing Jessica, or for his part in Sam losing Jessica, or for Sam's having to come back here at all; none of which were really Dean's fault when he actually came to think about it.

Sam looked at him then, for the first time since they'd entered Palo Alto, and something in his resolutely stoic expression seemed to shift just a little.

"No," the younger brother said on a sigh, raking his fingers through his hair tiredly. "*I'm* sorry, Dean. I—I'm being a jerk—"

"No you're not," Dean assured him. "Well not much. And I get it. I do. How you might think that—that it's my fault, if I'd not come and got you, not dragged you back into hunting, how she—she'd still be here and you—you'd have a life. Be a real person." He remembered those words of Sam's, like a knife through his heart back in Chicago. So Dean—Dad—they *weren't* "real people?" Not real enough for Sam, anyway....

Sam shook his head sadly. "Dean, I already told you I don't blame you for what happened to Jess," he said, and Dean wanted to believe him, he really did. "But it's just—hard. Harder than I thought it'd be. I thought—four years—it'd be easier now. I'd be over it. But—"

Dean nodded his understanding, even as he turned off Campus Drive and headed for one of the university's parking structures. "Yeah, I know," said, maneuvering the big Chevy carefully into the structure. "Maybe we need to lay down a couple new hunting rules," he added, deliberately lightening his tone. He glanced sideways at his brother, smiling sardonically. "How about from now on we stay outta Kansas and California?"

"And New Jersey?" Sam suggested, a reluctant smile hovering about his lips.

"Oh God yes," Dean agreed wholeheartedly, pulling the Impala into a space on the lowest parking level, grateful for the shade provided by the floors above. Shutting off the engine, he sat back for a second. "So why'd Zach want to meet us here?" he asked at length, shoving open the driver's door and swinging his legs out onto the asphalt. "I mean, not that I'm worried anyone's gonna recognize you as the brother of that dead serial killer from St. Louis or anything."

Sam exited the passenger side of the Chevy a little more slowly, almost reluctantly, peeling off his jacket and tossing it onto the back seat with Dean's. "He's working," he replied finally. "Couldn't meet us until after class." He glanced at his watch. "In about two minutes."

"Wow," Dean whistled. "Are we ever punctual!"

As they headed for the parking structure's exit, he suddenly added, "Whaddya mean Zach's working?"

He blinked in the harsh sunlight as he followed Sam out onto the sidewalk, feeling slightly overawed by the red-tiled buildings rising up all around them, the palm trees shimmering lazily in the heat, the country's best and brightest scurrying between classes, books and laptops clutched to their chests.

He wondered fleetingly what it had been like for Sam here; what *Sam* had been like here. Had he ever even thought about Dean? About the life he'd left behind?

"He's a TA," Sam explained, heading for an imposing-looking building fronted by a line of yellow brick archways. "Helps him pay his way through grad school."

Dean whistled as they entered beneath one of the archways, tugging open a glass door and holding it for his brother before following him into the blissfully air-conditioned interior. "That pad his mom and dad had in St. Louis?" he said. "Sure didn't look like he'd be sweating the school fees."

Sam shook his head. "Dean, not all college students are spoilt brats living off their parents' charity."

Dean nodded thoughtfully as he followed Sam into a large lecture hall, his brother seeming to remember the way without even thinking about where he was going. "No," he said to Sam's retreating back. "I guess not. Or else how the hell would *you* have gotten in here?"

He followed Sam down between rows of benches and tiny tables, again imagining Sam sitting in some crowded, mind-numbingly boring lecture, scribbling down notes in his ridiculously neat handwriting, completely oblivious to the chick behind him ogling his girlie hair and wondering what shampoo he used.

No one ever asked *Dean* what shampoo he used...

He hung back a little as Sam trotted down the sloping stairs toward the young man standing at the front of the hall. He was collecting papers into a pile on the desk and generally tidying up after the recently finished lecture.

Dean had never actually met Zach Warren, but recognized him from the photo stuck to the fridge in his and Emily's apartment, and the security tape of the shifter when he was wearing Zach's face.

He seemed taller in person, broad shouldered and dark haired, still with a neatly-trimmed goatee and dark sparkling eyes that lit up when they caught sight of Sam.

"Samwise!" Zach burst out, rushing toward his friend as Dean raised an eyebrow at the salutation.

Samwise? And he got on Dean's case for calling him *Sammy?*

Sam made a beeline for Zach, the two young men enveloping each other in a heartfelt hug while Dean continued to loiter toward the back of the hall, letting them have their reunion without interruption.

"Hey, Zach." Sam finally returned the shorter man's greeting, pulling away slightly to meet his friend's gaze. "How ya been?"

Zach shook his head, thumping Sam's shoulder before finally disentangling himself. "I'm good, man. How 'bout you? It's been too long."

Sam averted his eyes uncomfortably. "Yeah," he agreed with an awkward smile. "Too long."

Zach looked Sam over appraisingly. "Well, life on the open road seems to agree with you," he commented. "You look—big. *Real* big!"

A genuine laugh escaped Sam's lips at that, his shoulders relaxing as his face settled into a broad smile. "Chasing monsters is a really effective fitness regime," he said. "Can't afford to get too flabby when there's a werewolf on your tail."

Zach blinked at him, apparently uncertain whether he was joking or not.

Sam laughed again. "And you, look at you! Stanford Law, huh? And Becky at Harvard. Your mom and dad must be real proud."

Zach shrugged. "Helluva step up from Jefferson City Correctional Center, lemme tellya." At that, he glanced over Sam's shoulder to where Dean was still lurking, his expression sobering. "I have you and your brother to thank for that."

Sam turned in the direction of Zach's gaze, as if only just remembering Dean was there. "Uh—yeah—I forgot you two never actually met. Zach—my brother Dean."

Dean took a hesitant step forward, smiling awkwardly as Zach held out a hand toward him. Dean took it a little self-consciously, Zach turning the handshake into a warm two-handed grip.

"I never got to thank you for what you did," he said sincerely. "Taking the blame for Emily's murder when that *thing*..." He trailed off, shaking his head as his eyes filled with unshed tears. He took a breath, composed himself a little, before meeting Dean's gaze once again. "You and Sam," he said, "you saved my life. And I know you pretty much lost your own to do it—police record and a reputation as a dead murderer. That must have been hard—knowing that, as far as the world knew, Dean Winchester was just another dead psycho."

Dean shrugged. "Yeah, well... Didn't have much of a reputation to begin with," he said with a half-grin. "And being legally dead has its advantages." He shrugged. "Don't pay taxes for one thing—"

"Dean, you *never* paid taxes," Sam put in.

Dean glanced over at his brother, looking a little crestfallen for a second, before demanding, "Yeah? So? Your point being?"

Sam snickered at him, and Dean felt something finally relax inside of him.

"Anyway, I guess everything's cool now, huh?" Zach suddenly interjected. "Y'know—now you've finally been exonerated and everything."

Dean stopped dead, expression frozen on his face as his attention shot from Sam back to Zach. He just blinked dumbly at him for a second before finally managing to croak out a strangled, "Huh?"

Sam frowned, taking a step toward his friend. "Zach," he said slowly. "What do you mean 'exonerated?'"

Zach blinked at him in mild surprise. "What—you guys don't—you don't *know*?"

"Know *what*?" both brothers managed to ask at the same time.

Zach shrugged. "Couple of months ago I get this call completely out of the blue from some cop in Baltimore—"

Dean and Sam exchanged a glance. *Guevara?*

"I've never been to Baltimore in my life," Zach continued. "So it kinda confused me when the guy told me the St. Louis police were reopening Emily's murder due to some 'recent developments.' He told me the St. Louis cops still believed they had the right guy—their perp was most definitely six feet under—but they weren't so sure he was Dean Winchester anymore. Apparently they were planning on exhuming the guy's remains and carrying out more thorough testing."

"About freakin' time," Dean muttered, folding his arms across his chest. "This cop—his name wasn't Guevara by any chance? Rafael Guevara?"

Zach nodded. "Yeah, that's the guy. You know him?"

Dean shuddered as he remembered trying to fight off the Service 66 Slayer, who had an unhealthy interest in cutting out his eyes and his heart and tossing him into a Hellgate, while at the same time trying to avoid getting hauled right off the train and into the precinct by the Baltimore cop. "He—uh—kinda owes us a favor," he replied guardedly.

"Pretty big favor," Zach observed. "Baltimore cop messing with a St. Louis murder investigation? He must have pulled some serious strings to get the case reopened."

Dean nodded, glancing again at Sam. "I just have that effect on people," he declared.

"Well he called me again yesterday," Zach continued. "They've done some new hi-tech DNA analysis and they're satisfied they've got their murderer, but they've also confirmed he's not Dean Winchester." He inclined his head in Dean's direction. "Which we—uh—kind of already knew, right?"

Dean just nodded mutely, while Sam blew out a breath. "You're really off the hook?" he said a little uncertainly.

Dean shrugged. "Doesn't sound like our luck does it?" he replied. "A little too good to be true."

"He sounded pretty genuine, guys," Zach said. "I mean, his calling me was the whole reason I decided to risk calling Sam. I figured it was divine intervention or something—his calling just as I could really use your help. 'Cause you know I would never have asked you guys here—risk Sam being recognized—if I thought you'd be in danger of getting yourselves arrested."

"So why *do* you need our help exactly, Zach?" Sam asked. "You were a little sketchy over the phone."

Zach bit his lip before continuing. "I told you about my girlfriend Daisy, right? That she's been out at this dig over at Mount Diablo Park for a couple months? It's pretty much a one-woman show. She's working on her Masters—did all this research on Native beliefs that Mount Diablo was the site of Creation—where God created Man—and was absolutely convinced there would be something of

archaeological interest at the site. But up until a couple of days ago, things weren't looking so good for her. She'd not found a thing and her funding was up for review and her professor's a real hard-ass who didn't think much of her theories..."

"What happened a couple of days ago?" Sam interjected.

"She found this—weird—skeleton," Zach explained.

"What's so weird about an archaeologist finding a bunch of bones?" Dean asked.

"There's something hinky about them," Zach said. "About the shoulder blades. The structure of them...and some other bones lying nearby..." He trailed off. "Look, this is something you really need to see for yourself. I can take you to Daisy and she'll show you."

"Okay," Sam said slowly. "But on the phone you said there was something else...?"

Zach dipped his eyes and shuffled his feet uncomfortably. "Ye-ah," he stammered. "It—it sounds kinda nuts though."

"Story of our lives, man," Dean assured him.

Zach looked up reluctantly. "Earthquakes," he said at length.

"Earthquakes?" Sam echoed. "Zach, we're pretty much sitting on the San Andreas Fault here..."

Zach nodded. "Yeah, I know. It sounds nuts. I told you—"

"What about earthquakes?" Dean interrupted him.

Zach met Dean's interrogative gaze and seemed to shrink into himself a little bit. "They go wherever *she* goes," he said, sounding a little bit desperate, not to mention a little bit sheepish. "Daisy. Earthquakes follow her around."

The Winchesters glanced at each other. "Daisy's an earthquake magnet?" Dean clarified.

Zach nodded. "I know. Nuts. I can't explain it. *She* can't explain it. She thinks I'm being ridiculous—paranoid. Says she's so not being followed around by earthquakes. But she is! I *swear* it! Would I have called you guys if I was making this up?" He glanced from one to the other of them before continuing. "At first I thought—after Emily—after what Rebecca told me actually killed her—I thought maybe something was after *me*. But now... Now I think it might be after Daisy..."

"What kind of 'something?'" Sam asked, his brow furrowing.

Zach looked up at him. "I don't know, man. All I know is wherever she goes, earthquakes are sure to follow. That's how she found the skeleton in the first place—there was a tremor out by Mount Diablo and it kind of unearthed itself."

"Like it wanted to be found...?" Sam asked uncertainly.

Zach shrugged. "Maybe. When you see this thing—you'll understand why I—why I called you. Why I think this might be your kind of thing—y'know? Weird stuff?"

"Who ya gonna call?" Dean muttered, shaking his head.

"Look, let me take you to meet Daisy—show you the dig site and the—the bones. Then maybe you'll understand why I'm freaking the hell out here."

Sam nodded. "Okay, we can—"

"It should only take about an hour and a half to get there," Zach continued, a spark of hope igniting in the depths of his dark eyes. "I can drive you right now if—"

"We'll take my car," Dean interjected.

"He's kind of a control freak," Sam explained.

"While he's just a regular freak," Dean returned.

Sam scowled at him and Dean smiled back brightly. "Jerk," Sam said.

"You're so predictable," Dean returned, before heading off toward the exit. "Listen, you girls finish catching up. I'm gonna go call Rafael the Wonder Cop." He paused, glancing back over his shoulder before adding, "And we'd better not be camping, *Samwise*..."

* * * *

Dean tried his best not to let the bustling quad intimidate him as he pulled out his cellphone. Sure, these kids might be richer, better dressed and smarter than he was, but that didn't make them superior in any way. He sniggered as a kid in designer ripped jeans, a replica Ramones tour t-shirt and a pair of sneakers that probably cost more than the entire contents of the Impala slammed right into a palm tree while trying to text and walk at the same time; maybe Dean ought to re-evaluate that whole "smarter" thing....

He wondered whether Sammy had been such a dork when he'd been here.

Probably, he figured. Sammy had *always* been a dork.

Reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulled out a battered business card and dialed the number efficiently—and without walking into a single thing.

"Detective Guevara," Baltimore's finest's clipped tones answered on the first ring, and Dean unaccountably found himself happy to hear the guy's voice.

"Hey, Supercop, it's your number one fan here."

There was a slight pause, then a chuckle. "Mr. Winchester I presume? I've been expecting your call."

Dean shifted slightly. "Oh you have, huh?"

"Figured Zach Warren might get in touch with Sam. You know, I'd have called you myself but that number you gave me was out of service."

Dean coughed awkwardly. "Oh, *that* number? Yeah—well—I got a new phone a couple days ago..."

"Sure you did," Guevara returned.

"So..." Dean wasn't entirely sure how to broach the subject. "I hear you've been doing some digging on my behalf. Or getting someone else to do some digging...?"

"I figured I owed you after the Service 66," Guevara explained. "So I made some calls. The St. Louis P.D. weren't overly thrilled to have me poking around one of their historic murder cases, particularly one that for all intents and purposes they'd already solved," he added. "But I called in some favors. A *lot* of favors. And I finally managed to convince them that Dean Winchester's demise had been somewhat exaggerated, that I'd spoken to him and he'd protested his innocence of the Emily Channing murder."

"Aw, that's sweet," Dean cooed. "You on a one-man crusade to get me exonerated."

"Stupid is more like it," Guevara replied. "Got my ass *seriously* chewed out by my boss—and *her* boss—for not turning you in back in New Jersey. But I used my natural charm and eventually persuaded St. Louis P.D.'s own version of Gus Grissom to exhume the body and do a little DNA testing. You know, like they should have done at the time? Yeah, they were a lot more helpful after I pointed that out to them."

"I guess the case seemed pretty cut and dried," Dean observed. "Y'know, they figured they had their killer. Dean Winchester. That freak of nature *did* have my face when he died after all. The guy may have been a psychotic, homicidal dick, but he obviously knew handsome when he saw it..."

"Don't flatter yourself, Winchester," Guevara returned. "He didn't look so handsome by the time they dug him up. In fact, he'd pretty much liquefied."

"Eww," Dean managed. "Nasty."

"Yeah," Guevara agreed. "The forensic guys told me the corpse shouldn't have decomposed as fast as it had, and when the techs in the lab got to take a look, they said it was almost as if the body's genetic structure was breaking down completely."

Dean huffed. "Figures. Couldn't hold its form once it died."

"Yeah, well I could hardly tell *them* that," Guevara pointed out. "But the DNA they took from the remains matched what they found at the Emily Channing murder site; not to mention Alex and Lindsay Akita's apartment, the Warren house and in the creep's lair on the trophies it had taken from its victims. So it was pretty conclusive evidence that they had the right guy. But then they went on to compare that DNA to your DNA—"

"How'd they get my DNA?" Dean interrupted.

"Beer bottle taken from the Warren house back in '05. They still had it in storage, as well as another that matched Sam's DNA—apparently that fine upstanding brother of yours participated in an experimental voluntary program while he was at Stanford—a couple hundred students provided DNA samples which were loaded onto the Federal DNA Database."

Dean shook his head. "You're kidding me, right?"

"He did you a favor," Guevara informed him. "By comparing his sample and yours they could prove the sample on the beer bottle belonged to his brother, not just some random guy who'd been chugging back a few at Rebecca Warren's house. They compared that to the cuffs I'd used on you back on the Service 66 and found a match. But when they compared your DNA to the stuff they got from the remains, they conclusively proved that the perpetrator's DNA sample and your DNA sample *didn't* match, although there were some 'weird' similarities, apparently."

"How weird?"

"I dunno, man, you're the shapeshifter expert. You tell me."

Dean shrugged. "Maybe that's how it mimicked people—borrowed some of their DNA somehow..."

"Whatever it did, it was enough to convince St. Louis P.D. that their murderer *wasn't* Dean Winchester, even if they're yet to identify who he *was*. He wasn't on the Federal DNA Database, or any state database, so neither the cops nor the Feds have been able to figure out who the hell he was. They did say his DNA was seriously freaky though..."

"That's how the techs described it?" Dean clarified. "'Seriously freaky?'"

"Well maybe not exactly," Guevara conceded. "Although they did say it was like nothing they'd ever seen before."

Dean took a breath and exhaled slowly. "Listen, man," he said awkwardly. "I can't—I can't thank you enough. For straightening this out for me. Getting me off the hook. I'm a free man now, right?"

"Mostly," Guevara confirmed.

"Mostly?"

"You still have about fifty unpaid parking fines..."

Mount Diablo State Park, CA

Sam took a deep breath as he, Dean and Zach followed the trail from the visitors' lot where Dean had parked the Impala to the area where Zach's girlfriend was busy digging up dead things.

He could hardly believe it. Dean was a free man! He could use his real name again without fear of being summarily cuffed and thrown into a county jail cell

with a six foot ten inch black guy called Brenda and a couple of rolls of toilet paper!

All this, and it was a beautiful day too—the sun was warm on their backs, the scenery was breathtaking, and for the first time that day he could think about Jessica and about Stanford without hurting from his head to his toes.

Maybe things were looking up.

“This feels like camping, Sammy,” Dean grumbled from behind him, lugging a duffel full of supplies up onto his shoulder with a grunt.

Sam refused to let Dean’s negative view of the great outdoors dampen his spirits. “You’d rather we were on horseback?” he asked innocently, shutting Dean up pretty damn quickly.

“Friggin’ horses,” Dean muttered, continuing the rest of the hike in virtual silence.

It took them less than half an hour to make their way to the dig site, where a young woman with spirals of ginger hair sticking out the back of a dirty baseball cap was crouched over a trench cut into the parched ground.

She looked up as they approached, rising to her feet and putting one hand on her hip when she caught sight of Zach.

“So you brought the Ghost Busters along, huh?” she said, looking the Winchesters over a little warily.

Zach shook his head. “Honey, we talked about this,” he said, his voice attempting to be soothing and / or placating. “Sam’s a friend from school.”

Sam held out his hand and Daisy shook it a little reluctantly.

“Nice to meet you,” Sam said, smiling brightly.

Daisy didn’t seem too convinced, merely tipping her head at him in acknowledgement.

“He and his brother are interested in—uh—unusual phenomena,” Zach continued, gesturing at Dean, who stepped forward.

“Dean,” he introduced himself. “Only go by ‘Sam’s brother’ at parties.”

Daisy looked him over for a long moment—probably a little longer than even Dean was used to being looked over by attractive young women, Sam figured. His big brother started to shift uneasily, and Daisy merely tilted her head to one side before asking, “I know you?”

Dean shrugged. “Depends if you’ve ever been to one of those parties,” he replied.

She continued to look at him a little suspiciously. “You remind me of someone...” she said, trailing off as she considered.

“Johnny Depp? Rudolph Valentino?”

"My granddad," Daisy decided eventually. "He's eighty-six."

Dean recoiled a little. "Gee, thanks," he managed.

"It's the freckles," Daisy informed him. "And you should look so good when you're eighty-six."

Dean forced a polite laugh before muttering, "Somehow I don't think I'll make it to eighty-six, lady."

"So you wanna see my bones?" Daisy asked suddenly, changing tack so quickly Sam almost felt seasick.

"Uh, sure," he agreed, following the young woman over to the trench.

Dean trailed along behind him, Zach bringing up the rear.

"Here," Daisy said, pointing down into the excavation. She scratched at her ball cap as Sam and Dean peered down into the hole. "Carbon dating's proved pretty inconclusive. Can't seem to get any kind of reading that'll enable me to date the bones." She shook her head, exasperated. "They could have been here a week or a couple of millennia for all I can tell."

Sam ran his gaze the length of the trench, taking in the almost-complete human skeleton unearthed below him. "So apart from not being able to tell how old they are," he asked, "what's so special about these bones in particular?"

Daisy jumped down into the trench, gently lifting what Sam figured looked vaguely like a shoulder blade. "You see this?" she said, pointing to an odd protuberance branching up from the bone. She made no further comment, and Sam was left to nod dumbly, trying to figure out where he'd seen something like that before.

In an anatomy textbook.

In the section on birds...

He almost laughed out loud. "You have *got* to be kidding me!" he burst out, glancing sideways at Dean, who was frowning at the skeleton, his head skewed slightly to the side.

"Is that what I think it is...?" the older brother murmured.

"Wings?" Sam burst out. "*Seriously?*"

Daisy climbed back up out of the trench, shrugging a little defensively. "It's not that much of a stretch," she informed him. "Mount Diablo's an incredibly important sacred site to the local Native American tribes. According to Miwok and Ohlone creation mythology, this is where the creator Coyote made man and the world..."

"Yeah, Zach mentioned that," Sam intoned, eyes never leaving the skeleton laid out at his feet. "But still..."

"Hold on, wait," Dean said suddenly, raising a hand. "You're saying this is an *angel*?" He glanced first at Sam and then at Zach. "Dude, you brought us here for friggin' *angels*?"

"What?" Zach looked vaguely taken aback. "Wait, no! Angels? Hell, no! I brought you here because I was worried about the earthquakes! I swear!"

"Zach!" Daisy spat. "You told me you were bringing them here to look at the *bones*—!"

Zach's gaze skittered from Daisy to the Winchesters and back again. "I didn't—" He looked back to Daisy. "Honey, I was worried—"

"About *earthquakes*?" Daisy burst out, squaring up to him. "Dammit, Zach, I am *not* being followed around by freakin' *earthquakes*!"

"Honey—"

"You think I'm a freak, is that it? You think I'm causing earthquakes somehow? Tell me how, Zach, huh? *How*?"

"Look, baby, I was just worried about you! I never said you were a—a freak! It's just—well, Sam and Dean deal with this kind of—stuff—all the time and I thought, if something was after you, then they'd be able to help—"

"After *me*?" Daisy echoed. "What the hell could be after me, Zach? Something that causes *earthquakes*? Are you out of your *mind*?"

Suddenly the ground beneath their feet began to tremble and Sam glanced up at Dean who was standing closest to the trench. Rocks began to slide down into the excavation, and Dean backed away from the edge, the trembling increasing to a definite shake as Daisy froze completely, her cheeks flushed and her hands balled into fists at her sides.

"I think maybe we need to get out of here," Dean suggested as the quaking intensified, almost throwing him to his knees as the dull rumble increased to a deafening roar.

"I think maybe you're right," Sam agreed, catching Zach's arm as Dean grabbed hold of Daisy, just as an ear-shattering crack echoed all around them, and the ground started to split apart at their feet.

A crack rapidly zigzagged out from where they were standing, reaching out to the base of the mountain in a matter of seconds, widening instant by instant as the ground shook itself mercilessly and rocks the size of a person's head began to bounce down from the summit of Mount Diablo.

"Sammy—" Dean began.

"Jeep!" Sam ordered, pointing to Daisy's battered old vehicle even as he urged Zach toward it.

Dean followed suit, virtually dragging Daisy in his wake. She seemed to be in shock, staring up at the trembling mountain above her as if there wasn't a huge crack forming in the ground right beneath her feet.

As the crack widened still further, more incongruously white bones were thrown up toward the surface as the earth underneath churned and juddered, and Daisy seemed unable to tear her gaze away.

"Come *on!*" Dean yelled at her, pulling hard. "Or do *you* wanna end up some archaeology chick's big find in a couple hundred years time?"

Daisy finally looked at him, shaking her head as her face paled, letting him pull her over to the relative shelter of the Jeep, which Sam and Zach were already crawling beneath.

Dean shoved her under in front of him before throwing himself to the ground as a sound like an explosion ripped through the air above their heads and rock began to rain down all around them.

"Dean!"

Sam scrambled out from beneath the Jeep, crawling over to Dean and grabbing hold of his arm. "C'mon!" He half-dragged his brother back under the Jeep with him, the ground continuing to shudder and rock like a carnival cakewalk on a Saturday night.

"Sam, I don't know how you did it but you found something *worse* than camping," Dean bellowed in his ear. "If this keeps up they're gonna be digging *us* out with the angels!"

"No, I can't lose those bones!" Daisy suddenly piped up. "It can't all be buried—I've been working on this for *months* and I can't lose it all now!"

As she spoke, the violent quaking all around them seemed to lessen, the continuous rattle of rocks sliding down the side of Mount Diablo beginning to subside and the ominous rumble emanating from the ground beneath them fading to a dull throb.

Sam took a breath, his fingers cramping from the hold they still had on Dean's shirt.

"Is it over?" Dean asked, peering out from underneath the Jeep as the dust began to settle all around them.

As if in response the ground gave one last heave before everything stopped, an eerie silence falling over the mountain and the park beneath.

Sam crawled out from under the Jeep, Dean close on his heels as Zach and Daisy hesitated before finally following suit.

Dragging themselves to their feet, they surveyed the scene around them.

Dust and dislodged earth choked the air, a haze obscuring Mount Diablo's twin peaks, and the crack that had opened from the base of the mountain to Daisy's dig site was now a yawning chasm, maybe fifteen feet wide and who knew how deep. Bones protruded from the walls of the opening, hundreds of them, and Sam couldn't help wondering how many—People? Angels?—had died here.

Daisy moved cautiously over to the edge of the crack, peering down at the newly-unearthed bones, shaking her head as if she didn't quite believe it. "What the hell...?"

"Sam."

Sam turned toward Dean at the summons, but his brother wasn't looking at him—he was looking up at the mountain. Sam followed the direction of his gaze, to a large pile of rocks at the base of the mountain and a huge jagged hole in the side of Mount Diablo itself—a hole that hadn't been there before the quake.

Zach and Daisy had also turned to see what the brothers were looking at, Zach mumbling hopefully, "Wind caves, right? Like at Rock City?"

Daisy shook her head. "Too big," she said. "It looks more like...the entrance to something bigger..."

She took off at a trot, Sam and Dean exchanging a glance before setting off after her.

"Wait!" Sam called. "Maybe we ought to come up with a plan before we charge right on in there..."

Daisy glanced back at him, but didn't slow her forward motion. "What? Why?" she demanded, if anything quickening her pace. "This could be what I've been looking for since I got here!"

"And it could also be dangerous!" Dean cautioned her. "We don't know what's in there!"

Daisy didn't even spare him a backward glance. "What, you think there's gonna be a *monster* in there or something?" she said sarcastically. "I thought you guys did this for a living? What are you afraid of?"

Dean paused to produce a sawed off shotgun from the duffel he'd lugged from the Impala, breaking it open and inserting a couple of shells before answering with a grim smile, "Nothing now, sweetheart."

Daisy frowned at him, obviously disapproving of his use of firearms, before she began to climb up the pile of blasted rock which led to the hole in the side of the mountain. "Boys with toys," she muttered, scrambling to the top and pausing when she reached what was obviously the entrance to a cavern of some sort. She shook her head as she glanced behind her, Dean then Sam and finally Zach climbing up next to her. "This shouldn't be here," she told them, pointing at the rough-hewn hole which seemed to have been blasted outwards from the mountain.

That certainly explained the pile of rock they'd just climbed up, Sam observed, squinting into the cavernous black opening, able to see little but the couple of feet illuminated by the dust-hazy sunlight.

"There are a few small caves in the area," Daisy continued, taking a step toward the opening. "Over in Rock City, a couple of miles from here. Wind caves, where the rock's eroded," she added. "But nothing like this." She took another step, crossing the threshold into the cavern, seemingly oblivious to her companions.

"Can't see a damn thing in here," she muttered, startling when Dean suddenly put a hand on her arm.

"Hold on," he instructed her, grinning as he produced a couple of flashlights from the duffel. He tossed one to Sam before taking a cautious step into the dark opening in the rock. "Okay, now we can at least see the monsters before they eat us," he quipped.

"That's not funny," Daisy told him, before motioning to the duffel with a flick of her head. "You know, it's painfully obvious to me now that you guys aren't really Ghost Busters at all." Dean raised a brow at her, and she flashed a grin at him bright enough to rival his own. "You're Boy Scouts."

Dean's own grin widened in response. "Be prepared, sweetheart," he said. "Always been my motto. Right, Sammy?"

Sam huffed. "Not really the one that springs to mind, Dean," he observed. "'Shoot first, don't bother with questions at all,' maybe. Or 'Hi there, I'm Dean, I'm an Aquarius.' Oh and let's not forget the immortal 'Are those real?'"

Dean pulled a face at him. "Dude, you're pissy when you get PMS."

"Shut up."

"You shut up."

"Er, kids?" Daisy interrupted. "Find of the century, deep dark previously undiscovered cavern in the side of a mountain could be full of monsters kinda deal going on over here."

Dean tore his attention away from Sam for a second. "I know," he protested. "I was getting to it."

With that, he took point, inching his way cautiously into the cavern, Sam on his heels trying but failing to keep Daisy behind him.

"Wow." Dean whistled as he came to a dead stop a few feet into the side of the mountain. "This ain't no wind cave."

Sam couldn't help whistling himself as he drew level with his brother, casting an awestruck gaze about him.

The cavern was huge, so big in fact that the boys' flashlights made virtually no impact on the inky darkness; and yet light seemed to be coming from somewhere, because if Sam squinted hard enough he could see that the rocky floor sloped down gently in front of them, while the ceiling swept up for at least a couple of hundred feet above their heads.

"This can't be here naturally," Daisy breathed, gazing around the cavernous expanse before her.

"Why not?" Sam asked, trying to keep pace with her as she started forward once more, Dean flanking her warily on her opposite side.

Daisy gestured up toward the ceiling. "This! All of this! It's too—it's just—something this massive just shouldn't be here! I'm no geologist, but I'm guessing only an underground water source could erode a mountain from the inside this way, and although, granted, millions of years ago Mount Diablo was surrounded by sea, right now there's no water down here that could have done this—"

"No water like that, you mean?" Dean swung his flashlight further into the cavern, the beam glinting off something that at first glance appeared to be a huge sheet of black glass stretching from one side of the cavern floor to the other.

Daisy took another couple of steps down into the cave, blinking in disbelief. "That can't be here..."

Sam shone his own flashlight further down into the cavern, finally managing to overtake Daisy as she stopped dead to stare in the direction of the beam.

"It's a lake," he breathed, the sheer size of the body of water stretching out in front of him truly breathtaking in its almost unnaturally glassy stillness.

Dean moved up to his shoulder. "Thanks for pointing that out, Joe College," he muttered. "But what the hell is a *lake* doing *here*?"

"Is that—steam?" Zach suddenly drew up behind them, squinting as the flashlight beams illuminated white vapor rising from the lake's obsidian surface.

Daisy continued to shake her head. "That's not possible," she asserted once again. "There's no volcanic activity in this area. What could be heating it? Hell, there shouldn't even be any *water* here, much less *steaming* water!"

Sam played his flashlight along the edges of the lake, the beam reflected back by shards of unnatural whiteness scattered around the earth in stark contrast to the blackness of the water. "More bones," he observed, as Dean took a few steps closer, his own flashlight picking out more of the remains.

"They're everywhere," Dean said slowly, sounding a little unnerved. "Look. They're all around the lake."

And they were: unnaturally white bones scattered around the entire circumference of the water, almost as if....

"It's a pattern," Sam said suddenly, catching the skeptical look Dean shot his way. "Almost as if they'd been arranged by...someone..."

"Some cultures—the ancient Romans, for example—sometimes used to leave the remains of the fallen on the battlefield after the fighting was over," Daisy told them. "As a warning."

Sam glanced back at her. "You think that's what this is?" he asked. "A battlefield?"

Daisy shrugged. "Or a warning."

"A warning against what?" Dean asked. "What the hell happened here? Seriously—winged skeletons, mountains with holes where there shouldn't be,

lakes that shouldn't exist...?" He trailed off as the ground beneath their feet began to tremble. "And earthquakes."

"Not again," Zach moaned.

But this vibration wasn't anything like the tremors they had felt earlier.

This was rhythmic; ordered. *Unnatural*.

With each thud, ripples broke from the center of the lake, gentle at first until the rhythmic pounding began to increase in intensity and the water began to lap more and more violently against the rocky cavern floor.

"Uh," Dean began. "Maybe we oughtta..."

A thud more violent than any preceding it shook the cavern floor, throwing them all to their knees as rocks were shaken loose from the ceiling and began to rain down all around them. As the vibrations increased in intensity and violence, the whole cavern seemed about to collapse on top of them, and as Sam dragged himself to his feet he caught sight of the lake.

"Sam!" Dean yelled, struggling to his feet next to him. "We gotta go...!" He was tugging at Sam's shirt, but Sam wasn't moving, staring transfixed at the lake, not at his brother.

"Dean," Sam said slowly. "The lake. It's—it's boiling..."

Mount Diablo, CA

"That's not possible!" Daisy insisted for possibly the tenth time in as many minutes. "It's just not possible!"

Dean tried to tear his eyes away from the angrily bubbling lake boiling away in the center of the cavern, but found he couldn't help but stare at the way the inky mass of water churned and undulated like something alive; alive and very pissed.

"Yeah, I think you might have mentioned that before," he told Daisy, as the ground lurched violently beneath their feet and more rocks fell from the ceiling. He yanked the girl to his side, covering her head with his arms as chunks of the cavern rained down all around them.

"We need to get out of here," Sam said. "Right now. This place is gonna shake itself apart and if we don't end up crushed to death we could end up trapped. Or boiled alive. Or steamed. Or..."

"Barbecued?" Dean offered, just as jets of fire started to shoot up from the surface of the water, reaching up for the cavern ceiling like hellish fountains of flame.

Daisy's eyes widened as she shook herself loose from Dean's protective hold and backed up a step. "That's just not..."

"Possible? Yeah, we got that." Dean agreed, grabbing the archaeologist's arm once again and pulling. "C'mon Indiana. Time's up."

For once, Daisy didn't even protest, allowing Dean to pull her away from the lake as if she had no independent will of her own.

More jets of flame shot up from the surface of the water as they turned to haul ass out of the cavern, dodging falling rock while picking their way blindly toward the exit, the ground doing its best to lurch right out from under them.

The temperature was rising exponentially, steam rapidly filling the distance between their current position and the faint sliver of daylight which seemed to be moving further away the faster they ran toward it, the clamorous hiss of water boiling to vapor behind them echoing off the cavern walls as the flames rose higher and higher with each thud and judder of the rocky ground.

Dean glanced behind him once to ensure Sam and Zach were still following, shoving Daisy in front of him as they finally breached the entrance to the cave. He sucked in a welcome lungful of fresh if dusty air, his hand still firmly wrapped around Daisy's arm as she doubled over, breathing heavily, his grip seemingly all that was keeping her from faceplanting on the cracked ground at her feet.

Under cover of allowing Daisy to recover her breath, Dean held his position at the entrance to the cave until Sam and Zach emerged behind him, himself breathing a little easier when he saw his brother was safe and in one piece.

"You okay?" he asked throatily, Sam only managing a weak thumbs up in return as he coughed dust out of abused lungs.

Satisfied, Dean pushed Daisy in front of him, making his way as quickly as he was able back down the haphazard pile of displaced rock toward Daisy's dig site, doing his level best not to slide down on his ass.

Although Daisy seemed as sure-footed as the proverbial mountain goat, Dean stumbled a couple of times, the rocks juddering beneath his feet as the ground continued to rumble, steam billowing out of the cave entrance behind them as they slip-slid their way back down onto terra firma.

Well, as *firma* as it was likely to get with Earthquake Girl trying to shake them to pieces without even knowing she was doing it.

"Well that was fun," he remarked, trying to catch his breath as his lungs protested the heat and dust with which they'd been assaulted in the last hour. "Remind me to add that to my list of Things Never To Do Again."

Extricating herself from Dean's iron grip, Daisy pulled her cellphone from her jeans pocket, holding it up and examining it with a frown, even as the quaking beneath their feet once again began to lessen.

"What are you doing?" Dean enquired as calmly as he was able, glancing over his shoulder as Sam and Zach finally drew level with their position.

Daisy didn't even look at him. "Getting my legs waxed," she snapped irritably. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

Dean blinked, stepping back unconsciously before throwing a look in Zach's direction. "She always this friendly or is it just me?"

"Don't take it personally," Zach said, shaking his head as he tried to get his breath back. "She gets testy when she's scared."

Daisy shot a glance at him. "I am *not* scared!" she insisted, clenching her jaw. "And I'm not *testy* either! I just think maybe we need some help." She cast a withering look in Dean's direction. "*Professional* help."

Dean nodded. "Oh yeah, you definitely need professional help, sweetheart," he agreed.

"Dean—" Sam put in.

"She started it!"

"I can't get a signal," Daisy announced, pointedly choosing to ignore Dean completely. "And I think it's time I called a couple of my colleagues from Stanford." She shrugged, heading off toward the Jeep. "I have a satellite phone in the car..."

Sam made to follow her, but Dean caught his arm, lowering his voice in an effort to avoid Zach overhearing what he was going to say next. "She gets scared, the ground starts shakin'?" he observed. "And now she's not in danger—at least for now—the quaking stops? All by itself?"

Sam glanced over at Zach, who was following Daisy back in the direction of the Jeep and the dig site. "Pretty big coincidence, huh?"

"Friggin' *huge* coincidence!" Dean gestured toward the crack stretching from the dig site to the mountain, and to the bones erupting from the earth along its entire length. "Just like her finding these weird-ass bones just as her funding's about to be cut."

Sam sighed. "I guess she was pretty desperate to find something to validate her research," he conceded reluctantly. "And this is a damn significant find in anyone's book."

"Just in the nick of time," Dean agreed. "I dunno man, maybe this is all a set up—the bones, the cavern, the quakes..."

Sam tilted his head to one side uncertainly. "This is a pretty elaborate hoax, Dean," he observed. "Especially for someone working alone. I mean that lake? Blowing a hole in the side of a mountain? Seems pretty extreme to me..." He scratched the back of his neck thoughtfully.

Dean sighed, nodding grudgingly. "Little Miss Sunshine over there doesn't exactly strike me as the con artist type either."

Sam shifted slightly, his sneakers scuffing the dusty earth beneath his feet. "There's another possibility," he hazarded, eyes downcast as he worried his bottom lip with his teeth.

"Another psychic kid, right?" Dean guessed, nodding. "One that survived that flunky Eli's little Psychic Kid Apocalypse?"

Sam nodded slowly, eyes gradually rising to meet Dean's. "Like Kyle, or Nathan Cole, maybe? They both somehow escaped Lucifer's notice when he put an end to Haris' little science project back in Wyoming."

"Never heard of a Big Bad called Duffield before," Dean observed.

"Never heard of a Big Bad called Cole, either," Sam pointed out. "We still have no idea who Nathan Cole was descended from."

"Paula?" Dean suggested. "She oughtta get a one way ticket to Hell for that *Dawson's Creek* song alone—"

"Dean."

Dean sighed. "You're no fun sometimes, Sammy, you know that?" he said. When Sam just frowned at him, he shifted his feet uncomfortably. "Yeah, okay," he conceded. "So how come Lucifer—or Haris, for that matter—*wasn't* interested in Kyle or Nathan?" He grinned brightly. "I mean, seriously, that whole tornado thing Nathan had going on? Was *awesome!*"

Sam shrugged. "Maybe—" he began slowly. "Maybe they're from some diluted branch of a cursed family," he suggested. "You know how we're pretty much descended right down the male line from *those* Winchesters—"

"Like the rifle."

"Uh-huh," Sam confirmed. "And it was the same story with Alyssa Medina, Matthew Teller, Matthew Ismay, David Mitchum, right?" he added. "Well maybe Daisy's cursed ancestor lived hundreds, maybe thousands of years ago; maybe her ancestral line has become so diluted that she just escaped Haris' notice—"

"Like Kyle and Nathan."

"But she's powerful enough to cause earthquakes."

"Dude, if that's true," Dean said, "there could be *hundreds* of psychic kids still out there we don't know anything about."

"Yeah," Sam agreed, the two of them just standing looking at each other as they considered this worrying possibility.

The silence was finally broken by Zach ambling back toward them, his hands stuck firmly in the pockets of his jeans and a worried look darkening his features.

"Hey man." Sam clapped him on the shoulder reassuringly. "Everything okay?"

Zach raised an eyebrow at the question. "Well, as far as Daisy getting to her satellite phone? Yeah, she's talking to a couple of guys she knows from Stanford right now—a geologist and a marine biologist. Should be here within the hour."

"Well that's good—right?" Sam hazarded.

Zach smiled tightly. "Sure," he agreed. "But the whole 'burning lake, girlfriend causing earthquakes' scenario? Not so much."

"Look, man, it might not even be by Daisy—" Dean began.

"Oh no?" Zach interrupted him testily. "Like when she got mad at me for bringing you guys here and a damn *chasm* opened up at her feet?"

Sam took a breath. "Sometimes," he said slowly, "these things run in families." He glanced quickly at Dean before continuing. "You—uh—know anything about Daisy's background? Her family? Where she's from?"

Zach frowned minutely. "She's from Louisiana originally," he told them. "Her dad's a dentist. Does that help?"

"Not really," Dean mumbled.

"What about her mom?" Sam asked, frowning pointedly at his brother.

"Realtor."

"No wonder Haris never bothered with her."

Sam shot his brother a "that's *not* funny" look, just as Daisy herself approached from the direction of the Jeep, excitedly waving her satellite phone.

"Got a signal!" she proclaimed, grinning a little maniacally, and Dean couldn't tell if she was jittery because she was scared or because she was excited. Enthusiasm sparkled in her eyes as she bounced eagerly on her toes. "We got ourselves a little expedition out here, gentlemen!" she burst out. "My colleagues are real excited!" Her attention slid to the side of the mountain, where the steam billowing from the cavern entrance seemed to have lessened. "This is *such* an amazing find!" she mused. "It could really make my career." Her voice sounded faraway as her brain skipped ahead twenty years. Suddenly her focus snapped back to the present and to her companions, a huge grin splitting her face in two. "Let's see Professor Atherton try to cut my funding now!"

Dean exchanged a loaded glance with Sam, who merely shrugged and turned his attention to his feet.

Dean huffed. "Sweetheart, we just watched a hole get ripped in a *mountain* in case you hadn't noticed!"

Daisy's grin widened. "I know! How *awesome* is that?"

Dean shook his head hopelessly before persevering on regardless. "Kinda convenient, though," he said. "All of this. Couldn't have happened at a better time for you, right?"

Daisy narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously. "Meaning?"

Dean shrugged nonchalantly. "Well you gotta admit, it's pretty lucky—you making the archaeological find of your career just as your project's about to get mothballed."

Daisy's eyes flashed and she strode right up to him, hands on her hips and chin sticking out as she stood on her tiptoes and did her level best to get in his face.

While the archaeologist was about as intimidating as a Chihuahua, Dean had to give her bonus points for attitude.

"What are you trying to say, *Dr. Venkman?*" the girl demanded, her mouth drawn into a tight white line.

Dean inclined his head in Sam's direction. "He's Venkman," he informed her. "I'm Stantz."

"You know, you keep casting aspersions and I am *so* gonna wipe that smug smile off your face, pretty boy!"

"Give it your best shot, *Indiana,*" Dean returned, pulling himself up to his full height and proceeding to loom over her threateningly. "I'm kinda partial to aspersions as it happens. What are you gonna do, make the earth move for me?"

Daisy virtually growled at him, baring her teeth as she stubbornly stood her ground and prepared to launch another verbal assault in his direction, just as Sam stepped smoothly between them, one hand on Dean's chest, the other on Daisy's shoulder.

"Whoa, hey, time out!" he insisted, pushing them apart hastily. "This isn't helping!"

"He started it!" Daisy whined.

"Did not," Dean retorted.

"Did too!"

"Hey! Kids! Enough!" Sam echoed Daisy's earlier intercession in his best teacher voice, shoving Dean back a step before turning back to the archaeologist. "Look, don't you think it'd be better if we pooled our resources here rather than getting into a pissing competition with each other?"

"Yeah, I'd kick her ass at that too!" Dean insisted. "You just don't have the plumbing, baby!"

Daisy made another lunge toward him, Sam catching her arm and holding her back. "Hey!"

Daisy looked up at him, her cheeks flushing as she breathed hard. "Did you hear what he was accusing me of?"

"He wasn't *accusing* you of anything," Sam assured her, soothingly. "Believe me, Daisy, we're not making any judgments or any accusations," he continued, throwing a look in his brother's direction. "Are we, Dean?"

Dean shrugged. "Nothing wrong with a few *aspersions...*" he grumbled under his breath.

Sam shook his head at him. "Look, we need to work together here. You two think you can do that?"

Daisy hesitated before nodding grudgingly. "I suppose."

"Dean?"

"I'm not in kindergarten, Sam."

"Dean?"

"Whatever."

"Now kiss and make up."

Daisy grimaced. "I'd just as soon kiss a wookiee," she informed him, causing Dean to snort loudly.

"I can arrange that," he told her, glancing meaningfully in Sam's direction before turning his appraising gaze back toward the diminutive archaeologist. "*Star Wars* fan huh? Maybe you're not so bad after all, *Princess*."

"You're no Han Solo, buddy," she informed him haughtily, tossing her ponytail dramatically over her shoulder before her expression softened a little bit and her lips twitched into a reluctant smile. "Although Zach tells me you pretty much drive Chevy's version of the Millennium Falcon..."

"You better believe it, sweetheart!" Dean informed her, matching her grudging smile with a grin that was probably the closest he was going to get to a peace offering. "And much as I love hanging out with you here in—uh—Tatooine, you think maybe we should head back to the Jeep? I guess that's where your geeky friends will be meeting us?"

Daisy nodded. "I guess." She paused for a second before turning and beginning the trudge back in the direction she'd just come, leading the way as Sam and Zach followed, Dean bringing up the rear. "But only *one* of them is a geek," she added, eyes twitching in Zach's direction.

The young man sighed. "Everyone loves the tall, handsome marine biologist," he muttered under his breath. "It's the hair, right? I guess blonds really *do* have more fun."

"Admit it, even *you* have a crush on him," Daisy returned.

Zach frowned at her while Sam took advantage of the girl's improved mood, quickening his pace until he was matching her stride.

"So," Sam began casually. "Where you from, Daisy?"

The archaeologist cocked a suspicious eye in his direction. "Lafayette," she replied cautiously. "Louisiana. Why?"

It was Sam's turn to shrug. "Just passing the time of day," he returned innocently, and from the look on Daisy's face Dean wasn't at all sure the girl was buying it. "So how about your family? They still there?"

Daisy's eyes narrowed as her suspicions became even more heightened.

Back off, Sammy...

"What's that got to do with anything?"

Dean had to admit, the expression of innocent enquiry that crossed his little brother's features just then was pretty damn masterful.

"I was just wondering, that's all," Sam explained with a guilelessly dimpled smile. "Y'know, Duffield. Where have I heard name that before? You have any famous or—" he chuckled, "—*infamous* ancestors I read about in a history book or something?"

Daisy stopped dead, looking up at him as if he was completely off his meds. "Why the hell would you want to know *that*?" she demanded.

Sam seemed momentarily taken aback, but recovered quickly. "History buff," he explained with another innocent smile.

"History *freak* is more like it," Dean added smoothly, and Sam nodded, grateful for the assist.

"Well you two sure got the 'freak' part down," Daisy muttered, spinning on her heel and resuming her path toward the Jeep.

Sam caught up to her again, seemingly undaunted by the girl's distrust, and Dean had to admire the kid's perseverance. "You know, we traced our ancestors all the way back to *the* Winchester family—"

"Like the rifle," Dean butted in.

Daisy cast a glance at him over her shoulder. "You must be so proud," she commented, raising an eyebrow at him before turning her attention back to Sam, who threw her another innocently encouraging smile. She sighed resignedly. "No," she said at length. "No famous forebears in my family. Or infamous ones." A lopsided smirk crept across her face as she added darkly, "Well not that I know of."

Sam nodded, and Dean was kind of relieved his little brother seemed to be letting the subject drop. The last thing they needed was Daisy getting pissed off at them and going all Earthquake Diva again. *That* kind of "rock 'n roll" Dean could certainly do without.

They trudged on in silence for a few minutes, finally arriving back at the Jeep just as Dean risked asking, "So these friends of yours—"

"Should be here within the hour," Daisy supplied.

"You think they'll be able to figure out what the hell just happened in there?"

Daisy hoisted herself up into the Jeep's driver's seat, sitting sideways with her legs dangling out the open door. Her eyes shifted to the chasm yawning open from the dig site to the base of the mountain and she shrugged one shoulder noncommittally. "I'm not sure there *is* an explanation."

Dean leaned against the side of the car, following the direction of her gaze. "At least there's no more steam coming outta there."

"That was too weird, man." Sam shook his head. "I've never seen anything like that—"

Dean caught his eye and raised an eyebrow. "Not since Leicester anyway."

"What happened in Leicester?" Zach asked a little nervously.

"You really don't wanna know," Dean told him.

"I don't?" Zach didn't sound entirely convinced.

"You don't," both brothers told him simultaneously.

"You know," Daisy put in suddenly, for a second seeming to be talking to herself before her distant gaze snapped back to her companions and she laughed sardonically. "Maybe this really *was* the site of Creation," she said. "Maybe God—or Coyote—or whoever—is angry at us for disturbing such a sacred place."

"Could explain why it's surrounded by the bones of angels." Sam sounded way more serious than Daisy had. He shrugged. "Y'know—to scare the masses away from holy ground."

Dean huffed. "Not sure there was anything 'holy' about what we just saw in there," he observed. "C'mon, lake of fire? That's Old Testament, man—"

"As in Hellfire?" Daisy snorted derisively. "You think that was a Hellmouth we just saw? Guys, hate to disappoint you, but Buffy really *was* just a TV show y'know. And this certainly isn't Sunnydale."

"Mmm, Buffy..." Dean seemed to drift off for a second, before suddenly exchanging a nervous glance with his brother. "You don't think...?" he began, letting the rest of his sentence tail off into a tense silence, Sam worrying his bottom lip with his teeth for a second before replying.

"Like Leicester?"

Dean nodded, the brothers holding each others' gaze as if Daisy and Zach weren't even there.

"The earthquakes," Dean said. "When we were in the mountain. Almost sounded like—" He paused, took a slow breath before continuing. "Almost sounded like somethin' was trying to bust through..."

"Aw man," Sam whined. "That was so not fun the last time—"

"Wait." Daisy held up a hand to silence them. "You guys—" She looked from one to the other, the disbelief growing in her eyes. "I mean, you don't actually think it's called 'Mount Diablo' because the *Devil* lives here, right?"

Again, the Winchesters exchanged an uneasy glance, Sam laughing nervously. "Of course not," he assured her, not sounding quite as convincing as he had clearly hoped to sound.

"What do you think, we're idiots?" Dean asked, before suddenly adding, "Don't answer that, okay?"

Daisy raised an eyebrow and seemed about to toss a rejoinder in Dean's direction, but was cut off by Sam's cunning distraction technique.

"So why is it called Mount Diablo?" he asked, the sincere innocence once again flooding his carefully guileless face; although from the amount of research Dean had seen the kid do in the last few days, he was pretty sure his little brother already knew the answer.

"You really want a history lesson *now*?" Daisy asked a little incredulously.

Sam spread his hands in front of him. "We got an hour till your friends get here," he said with a shrug.

"And, y'know, know your enemy," Dean added shortly.

"Enemy?"

"It's better to have all the relevant information before you go rushing into something," Sam amended, casting Dean a pointed look.

"s what I said," Dean protested.

Daisy shrugged. "Well," she began. "If you really want to know... The mountain got the name 'Mount Diablo' in 1805 when some Chupcan Native Americans escaped from the Spanish into a nearby willow thicket, seeming to disappear into nowhere. The Spanish dubbed the place 'Monte del Diablo' or 'Thicket of the Devil.'" She grinned mischievously. "'Devil's Woods.'"

Again Dean glanced at Sam, whose eyes had already flickered in his brother's direction.

"Somewhere along the line," Daisy continued, "the Anglos misinterpreted the name as a reference to the mountain itself, rather than the woods nearby, and the name just stuck. Certainly, by 1850 General Mariano Vallejo had romanticized the engagement with the Spanish just a little bit. In a report to the California State Legislature, he had the incident taking place on the mountain itself, where he claimed the soldiers saw an 'unknown personage decorated with the most extraordinary plumage,' which caused the Spanish soldiers to turn tail and run, believing the Natives had allied themselves with the Devil."

Daisy laughed at the ridiculousness of the whole story, and Sam and Dean smiled awkwardly whilst exchanging a dark, almost impenetrable look.

"The Devil, huh?" Dean said lightly, still looking pointedly at Sam. "Lucifer right here on this little ol' mountain?"

"Who'd have thought?" Sam returned, fake smile slipping ever-so-slightly.

Dean barely suppressed a shudder, all traces of humor suddenly gone from his lowered voice. "Man, if this is one of Lucifer's old stomping grounds," he said, just loud enough for Sam to hear. "We could be in serious trouble."

"It's only a story," Daisy assured them breezily, glancing distractedly at her watch. "There's no such thing as the Devil."

The brothers smiled at her, even as their gazes slid warily to the mountain.

"Right," Dean said slowly. "No such thing..."

* * * *

True to their word, it was about an hour later that another Jeep bounced along the uneven ground toward their position, kicking up plumes of dust in its wake.

They'd spent the time keeping one eye on the mountain and another on the park, simultaneously looking out for park rangers and civilians alike, neither of whom, thankfully, seemed interested in inspecting the damage caused by the earthquakes. Which was odd in itself, Dean mused, almost as if the trembling had somehow been confined to the area around the mountain itself and no one further afield had felt a thing.

Even Dean knew that wasn't possible.

A quake the magnitude of the one that had ripped a hole in the side of the mountain? That would have been felt for miles.

Daisy had told them other little snippets of Mount Diablo's history as they hung out by the Jeep and waited for reinforcements. But when Sam had again tried to wheedle a little more personal information out of her, she had been skillfully evasive to the point of making an excuse to go check out what was left of her dig site, Zach hard on her heels like an over-protective puppy.

Dean didn't get the impression Daisy was being so evasive deliberately; more like she'd rather be discussing her work than her personal life, and he really couldn't blame her for that. Not everyone had Winchester-sized skeletons in their closets, but for a lot of people the past, family, these were places they weren't overly-anxious to visit, especially with strangers they'd met barely a couple of hours earlier.

Dean knew from personal experience that there were chunks of time in his own life he didn't discuss with anyone, not even Sam: November 1983 for one, and the couple of years that followed. From what he remembered, that had not been the most fun period of his life, much like the time Sam had been away at Stanford.

Of course, there were always reminders everywhere he looked of the parts of his past he'd really rather forget. Like the giant Stanford University logo adorning the hood of the Jeep which squeaked to a halt a couple of feet away from Daisy's somewhat older vehicle, two figures inside barely visible through the sudden sandstorm churned up all around it.

The Jeep's passenger alighted and approached them first, a small hamster of a man in his late fifties, with a thick thatch of auburn hair set atop a wide head and

little round glasses that magnified his dark eyes to unnatural proportions balanced lopsidedly on the end of his pudgy nose.

He stuck out his hand as he approached them, and Dean couldn't help commenting, "You called Scooter from *The Muppet Show* for help?" even as Daisy cast him an irritated glance.

"Be nice. He's one of Stanford's top geologists—an expert in his field."

"Professor Anthony Maynard," the little man introduced himself, shaking Sam's hand a little too enthusiastically before moving on to Dean's and finally Zach's, who he suddenly squinted up at before wheezing out a rasping laugh. "Oh, but I already know you, don't I my boy?"

Zach smiled broadly. "Yes sir," he confirmed. "Zach Warren. I'm Daisy's—"

"Squeeze, yes, yes, I remember now," the Professor agreed distractedly, already turning his attention back to Sam and shaking his hand all over again. "And you are?"

"Uh—" Sam began, and Dean wasn't sure whether his kid brother was nonplussed by the little guy's odd behavior or merely tongue-tied at finding himself once again in the presence of an honest to goodness Stanford University professor. "Winchester. Sam Win—"

"Ah, Winchester! Good strong family name!" the professor commended him, finally letting go of him, although his body continued to shake even after he'd stopped eagerly pumping Sam's hand. "So exciting! So exciting!" he twittered, bouncing over to Daisy. "What a day, my dear! What a day! And what a find! A hole in the side of Mount Diablo you say? Giant underground lake? My my, I've not seen this much excitement since Mrs. Maynard decided to wear a negligee on the night of our thirtieth wedding anniversary!"

Sam and Zach glanced at each other a little uncomfortably while Dean positively beamed at the little man.

"Damn, Scooter, you're gonna have to tell me that story sometime!"

Maynard stared at him for a second before bursting into raucous guffaws of laughter, slapping Dean enthusiastically on the back before leaning into him conspiratorially. "My boy, maybe you and I should get together and compare notes..."

Dean raised a wicked eyebrow. "I expect I could learn a thing or two, huh?"

The professor opened his mouth to make a suitable boast, but his eyes suddenly skittered to the figure approaching from the Jeep, and he was scuttling off toward him in an instant, Dean apparently already forgotten.

"Jon, my boy, come, come, there are boiling lakes afoot!"

The newcomer strode toward them out of the settling swirls of dust, a powerfully built blond man almost equal to Sam in height, broad shouldered and slim with startlingly blue eyes.

He grinned warmly as he approached them, eyes twinkling. "Winchesters!" he greeted them heartily. "Nice to see you boys again in a warmer climate!"

Dean blinked once, twice, for a second imagining the man's handsome face shrouded by the hood of a parka, snowflakes on his eyelashes and settling into the stubble on his chin. "Holy crap!" he burst out, which was followed almost immediately by Sam's amazed,

"Jon? Jon Volsung?"

The marine biologist nodded in confirmation, pulling Sam into a rough bear hug before slapping his back so hard Dean half expected his little brother's teeth to shoot out of his head.

"You're a long way from Canada, my friend!" Jon observed, shaking Sam's hand as he pulled away slightly.

"And you're a long way from Norway!" Sam returned. "What are you doing here?"

"Yeah," Dean interjected. "What the hell's a Norwegian marine biologist doing in California of all places?"

Jon turned to face him suddenly, eating up the distance between them in two long strides.

"Dean Winchester, it's been too long!"

Dean braced himself and barely disguised a flinch as Jon pulled him into a powerful embrace before literally yanking him off his feet a couple of inches.

"Du-ude!" he managed to splutter out as the air was knocked from his lungs. "We mere mortals need oxygen, remember?"

Jon dropped him with a massive grin, his teeth startlingly white against his newly-acquired California tan as he turned back toward Sam. "Your brother's shrunk in the sunlight, Sam," he said. "Look how tiny he is without six layers of clothing!"

Dean glanced down at his t-shirt and jeans, an affronted grimace puckering his forehead. "Hey...!"

"If his legs weren't so bowed he'd be as tall as us normal-sized guys," Sam commented, positively beaming at his brother, who shot a venomous scowl in his direction.

"That '*Hey!*' applies to you too, Gigantor—"

"Wait!" Daisy held up a hand suddenly, stepping between the big Norwegian and the even bigger Winchester. "You guys *know* each other?"

Dean snorted dryly. "Yeah, what are the odds?"

"Pretty damn phenomenal I'd say," Zach put in.

"Yeah," Sam agreed, still examining Jon thoughtfully. "Me too."

Dean huffed. What was going on in Sam's giant thinky brain now? "C'mon, man, you don't think—"

"Last time we met was out in the middle of nowhere on the Canadian tundra," Sam pointed out. "Now we randomly bump into each other in the middle of nowhere California-style, right where 'weird stuff' is going down?"

"Coincidence." It sounded lame, even to Dean's ears.

"Divine intervention?" Jon offered.

Dean looked at him. "Don't tell me you got religion since the last time we met?"

"After what I saw in Canada," Jon informed him wistfully, "I believe anything is possible." He smiled playfully. "And when Winchesters are involved? Anything can happen and frequently does."

Daisy cocked an eyebrow. "What happened in Canada?"

She was met by an awkward silence, Jon finally replying, "I'm still not sure I know."

Daisy nodded, glancing from Sam to Dean. "More 'weird stuff'?"

"It's what we do," Dean replied with a half-smile before deftly changing the subject. "So what *are* you doing here, Frodo?" he asked, glancing sideways at Sam. "Not that me 'n *Samwise* here aren't happy to see you..."

Sam frowned at him. "You realize that makes you Gollum, right?" he suggested archly.

"Hey, let's not be nasty!" Dean said defensively. "I'm not the one called you 'Samwise' in the first place!"

"Makes a helluva lot more sense than 'Frodo!'"

"I was being ironic! He's *tall*, dude!"

"Unlike yourself?"

"You call me short one more time and I'll kick your ass all the way back to *Canada*, Sasquatch—"

"You and whose army, *Shorty?*"

"Ahem." Jon cleared his throat pointedly, and the brothers instantly ceased their bickering, eyes downcast like a couple of naughty schoolboys.

"Jeez, you two are just like an old married couple," Daisy observed.

"A *senile* old married couple," Zach agreed.

The Winchesters glanced at each other sheepishly before Dean coughed awkwardly and repeated his earlier question. "So Volsung. What's a nice marine biologist like you doing in a place like this?"

Jon's amused smile faltered a little. "I've been working at Stanford's Hopkins Marine Center out at Pacific Grove," he explained. "I was brought in as a consultant a couple of months ago when the researchers there noticed the ocean's temperature had risen a couple of degrees above what is usual for this time of year. They didn't think much of it at first, but the temperature kept on rising over the next few days, the water for a hundred square miles gradually becoming hotter and hotter, until a day ago, when it finally became superheated." He took a breath and swallowed. "Yesterday I stood and watched as the Pacific Ocean *boiled*. All the marine life in the area is dead or dying. It's catastrophic, and whatever's doing it, it seems to be affecting a hundred mile stretch of coast from the San Francisco Bay area down towards Monterey Bay."

Sam scrunched his brow. "What the hell could cause something like that?" he asked.

Maynard coughed politely and the group's attention shifted to the diminutive professor. "That was why *I* was consulted," he put in, puffing out his chest a little. "I believe there might be some kind of geological explanation for this marine catastrophe."

"Tectonic plate shift, right?" Dean hazarded, causing the group's attention to swing back in his direction, Sam's mouth hanging open a little. Dean shrugged dismissively. "What? That motel we stayed in when you had chicken pox got the Discovery Channel."

"You're quite right my boy," Maynard confirmed. "It's possible the North American Plate shifting against the Pacific Plate has caused volcanic activity beneath the ocean's surface, causing the water to become superheated."

"What about the lake we found?" Daisy put in. "The one underneath Mount Diablo?"

Maynard's face collapsed in on itself, and it took a second for Dean to register that he was laughing.

"Oh my dear, that's just not possible," the professor insisted. "Mount Diablo is situated between two converging earthquake faults and is the result of subduction—the Pacific Plate sliding beneath the North American Plate, which causes the earth to buckle and push rock upwards. The earth becomes compressed, and the mountain is formed by this displaced rock being pushed outwards and up. Big caverns like the one you described on the phone would only be carved out by water erosion, and as far as I'm aware there's no flowing water beneath this part of the Diablo range, hasn't been for thousands of years..."

Dean held out a hand in the direction of the mountain. "Take a look if you don't believe us, Scooter," he said. "Unless all four of us were experiencing some kind of group hallucination, that lake's there alright."

"And it was boiling," Sam added. "Just like the ocean."

* * * *

Sam was relieved to note the lack of steam billowing from the cavern's entrance as he and their little recon party approached.

"You think the quake caused the water to boil?" Dean asked, glancing back in Sam's direction as he stepped into the humid darkness. "That's why it stopped? Because the quake stopped?"

Sam shrugged. "Either that or—"

"There's no water left to boil."

Dean was staring down into the cavern as Sam drew level with him, and the younger brother let out an involuntary gasp at the sight which met his eyes.

"It boiled away," he said quietly. "The whole lake boiled away!"

"How is that even possible?" Dean asked, eyes still fixed to the damp cavern floor which continued to steam forlornly.

"It's about as possible as the lake being here in the first place," Sam commented, as Daisy pushed past him, deftly elbowing both brothers out of her way.

"What the hell...?" she said, making to rush down to the floor of the cavern just as Dean caught her arm and held her fast.

"Quite possibly," he commented, raising his eyebrows at Sam as he inclined his head toward the center of the cavern. Previously submerged beneath the lake and still partially obscured by hazy white steam, they could just about make out the rocky floor of the cave appearing to slope downwards into what looked like a giant funnel culminating in a bottomless black pit perhaps twenty feet in diameter. "You know if I didn't know any better," Dean said slowly, "I'd say that looked like—"

"A sinkhole," Sam agreed uncomfortably. "Just like back in Leicester."

Daisy glanced from one to the other of them. "What the hell happened in Leicester?" she demanded, a little more forcefully than Zach had earlier.

"Hell happened," Dean told her shortly.

She blinked at him.

"Maybe the Spanish really *did* see the Devil here all those years ago," Sam observed. "Dean, if this is another Hellgate—"

"Hellgate?" Daisy echoed, choking off an almost hysterical laugh. "You guys are kidding, right? Please tell me you don't believe this is an actual Hellgate?" When both brothers continued to gaze at her levelly, not the slightest trace of humor on their faces, she blinked blankly at them. "Oookay," she said, backing away from them slowly, hands raised in mock surrender. "Well when you boys decide you need a ride back to that mental ward you escaped from, you just give me a holler." She shook her head in disbelief before rolling her eyes and turning away from them, striding purposefully over the still-steaming ground toward the center of what had previously been the lake.

Dean seemed to fight the urge to pull her back, biting off a snarky retort and instead glancing over at Sam, who was once again chewing his bottom lip thoughtfully.

"So *do* we?" the older brother asked, his voice lowered as Sam met his gaze with a frown. "*Do* we believe this is a Hellgate?"

Sam was about to offer an answer, but hesitated as Jon, Zach and Professor Maynard emerged into the cave behind them.

"My goodness!" they heard Maynard burst out. "This really is quite extraordinary!"

"You guys better come see this." Daisy's voice floated back through the cloud of steam into which she'd disappeared, and the Winchesters approached her position cautiously, the steam beginning to thin despite the heat still radiating up through their feet.

The sinkhole was clearly visible, the rock funneling down into the bottomless blackness still shiny with moisture, and if he hadn't seen the water boiling for himself, Sam might have believed someone had pulled a giant stopper out of the hole and the lake had merely drained away.

"You were right about them being arranged in a pattern," Daisy told him. "It's a ring—look."

The boys followed the direction of Daisy's pointing finger to where the receding waters of the lake had revealed more unnaturally white bones scattered around the circumference of the basin.

"Scattered" perhaps wasn't the right word, Sam realized, noting that even though the water had been so violently removed from the lake, the circle of bones remained unbroken, the remains spread evenly and regularly and with quite obvious purpose.

"Something happened here," he pronounced slowly, eyes never straying from the circle of bones. "Something cataclysmic."

"What makes you say that?" Daisy asked. "These bones? You think they were left like this to keep the locals out?"

"Or to keep something in," Sam agreed darkly.

"Like a devil's trap," Dean said, seeming to catch on to his brother's line of thinking. "You think that's what this is?"

"What's a devil's trap?" Daisy interjected, the brothers continuing their conversation as if she'd not even spoken.

Sam shrugged. "I dunno, Dean," he said slowly. "But why else would someone arrange these bones like this?" He let the question hang, and Dean took a breath.

"So why was there nothing like this at Leicester?" the older brother asked uncertainly, his brow crinkling in contemplation. "If—if someone—some *thing*—left this here—"

"Then why not do the same in Leicester?" Sam finished for him. "If this works the way I think it's supposed to, then that would certainly have stopped the souls of the dead from escaping as soon as—" he coughed, eyes flicking to Daisy, whose gaze was bouncing between the two of them like a spectator's at a tennis match. "—Ferinacci's little construction crew had finished forcing their way up to the surface."

Dean nodded thoughtfully. "And that begs another question," he pointed out. "Who the hell put this here?"

"And *why*?" Sam agreed. "Why *here* and not Leicester? There have always been rumors that Leicester was the site of the Eighth Gateway to Hell, but here? Beyond the Creation lore Daisy mentioned, there's nothing to indicate this as the location of a Hellgate."

"It's almost as if someone *expected* the bad guys to try and bust out this way."

Sam turned his gaze onto Daisy, who was still staring right back at him, her expression a little nonplussed, as if she couldn't work out whether the brothers really were nuts or—perhaps more worryingly—really were serious.

He felt oddly relieved when Zach appeared behind her, gently placing one hand on her shoulder and deftly turning her away from the Winchesters, refocusing her attention on the nearest skeleton and lowering himself down next to her as she carefully began to examine the exposed bone. He said something to her, too low for Sam to hear, his hand moving gently between her shoulder blades, and she smiled shyly, ducking her head a little.

Something clenched in Sam's chest, his jaw tightening.

"Sam," Dean said, breaking in on his thoughts. "If something happens here—like Leicester—with civilians here..."

"I know," Sam agreed, not for the first time marveling at his brother's uncanny ability to know exactly what he was thinking. Sometimes he wondered who the psychic was supposed to be here. "We need to get them away from this place."

That was not going to be an easy task, considering professor Maynard had already scuttled excitedly to the brink of the sinkhole while Jon was busy collecting samples from the shallow puddles of water still lurking between the cracks and crevices of the uneven floor.

"This is quite incredible," Maynard proclaimed, peering into the darkness before squatting down and beginning to scratch at the rock with a pocket knife he seemed to have produced from thin air. He held the knife up to his nose, beckoning the boys toward him as he gingerly sniffed at the blade. "Sulfur," he announced, eliciting an uncomfortable look to pass between the two of them. "Look, it's everywhere." He gestured around him with the knife, indicating the floor and the walls of the cave which, now that their eyes had adjusted to the murky light, they could clearly see appeared to be coated with a distinctive yellow substance.

Maynard shook his head a little, running a finger along the rock at his feet where the coating of sulfur seemed most concentrated. "I really wouldn't expect to see sulfur in a non-volcanic region such as this," he said. "Not at these levels of

concentration anyway." He stood back up, stretching slightly as he nodded at the cave walls. "Potassium nitrate," he said. "Saltpeter. Now *that's* something I'd expect to find crystallizing on the walls of a cave such as this one. But sulfur? That's—" he paused, searching for the right word, "—unusual."

"Not in our line of work," Dean muttered, Sam suddenly catching him by the arm and pulling him sharply out of the professor's earshot.

The older Winchester seemed about to protest Sam's manhandling, but was abruptly silenced by Sam's urgently whispered, "Sulfur, Dean! What if this *is* another Hellgate?"

Dean just looked at him, shifting from foot to foot uncomfortably as the lines deepened between his eyebrows. "Sam—"

"I mean, what if Lucifer's trying to *build* another Hellgate? To replace the one we destroyed in Leicester?"

Dean blinked dumbly at him for a second. "Is that even possible?" he asked at length. "I mean, can he just build another exit outta the Pit whenever he feels like it?"

"I don't know, man. But that earthquake—it didn't exactly feel *natural*, did it?"

"So that makes it *supematural*?"

"C'mon, you gotta admit, that thumping noise sounded way too much like construction work to just be the manifestation of Daisy's bad temper."

"And I guess if Lucifer's got his minions trying to blast a hole through the earth's crust, that could maybe account for the ocean—and the lake—boiling away," Dean agreed reluctantly. "Whatever they're using to force their way out of Hell, it's gonna be generating a helluva lot of heat." He rubbed his hand over his chin as he surveyed the cave around them thoughtfully. "So maybe our little archeologist isn't quite the earthquake magnet with think she is."

Sam's focus drifted to Daisy, who was still intent on the remains scattered around her. "Maybe..." he said slowly. "But I wouldn't rule it out just yet."

A wicked grin inched its way across Dean's face. "One way to find out," he said brightly. "Next time there's a tremor, see if you can make the earth move for *her!*"

Sam just looked at him, attempting to dismiss his brother's less-than-subtle innuendo with a well-placed eye roll. "Dean, that's *so* not funny," he snapped, even as his cheeks colored. "You know it doesn't just—I can't just—turn it on like that—"

"Sam, I refuse to believe any brother of mine can't just turn a girl on at the drop of a hat."

Dean continued to grin at him infuriatingly, and Sam merely huffed. "Dean, we could be looking at a demonic invasion here," he snapped. "Focus for a second!"

"I am focused!" Dean protested innocently. "You're the one with your mind in the gutter! I just meant, y'know, use a little of the Force, Luke! Give her a taste of her own medicine!"

"Dean. Hellgate. Demons. *Lucifer*."

Dean shrugged dismissively. "Look, there's nothing coming *out* of this hole, right?" he pointed out. "Except for, y'know, a little fire and brimstone. There's no recently-departed spooks hijacking unsuspecting passersby. And no demons. And there's sure as *hell* no Lucifer—"

"But if the bones are acting as a devil's trap—"

"We'd still be able to see the demons trying to get out of the Gate. They just wouldn't be able to get past the circle."

"Always supposing the bones *are* supposed to work like a devil's trap." Sam sighed, raking his fingers through his hair. "Hell, they might not even be angel bones."

Dean shook his head, casting his gaze around the grizzly circle of remains. "But if they *are*?" he said, pausing before asking his next question. "Sam, what the hell could kill an angel?"

"Another angel," Sam replied shortly. "Or at least, maybe a fallen one."

"Demons?"

Sam shrugged. "Maybe this is some kind of battle site. Maybe these are the earthly remains of the angels who died. Daisy did say some cultures used to leave the remains of the fallen on show as a warning..."

"A warning against what?"

"Rebellion. Disobedience. Dean, if this was the site of a battle between angels—between *rebellious* angels—and—and those loyal to—"

"God?" Dean shook his head. "Sam, come on. I'm not even sure I buy into the whole 'angel' deal, but *God? Seriously?*"

"Look, just think about it," Sam insisted. "The bones, the cave... This could be *it*, man! The place where they *fell!*"

"Sam—"

"Lucifer and his followers. This could be the place where they were cast out—where they were thrown into the Pit after they rose up against Heaven—"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait a second there, Sparky!" Dean held up his hands. "You're talking about the Fall? Lucifer's *actual* Fall from Heaven? Like in the Bible stories?"

"Dean, we've *met* Lucifer! We know it's not just a story!"

"So—what? You think *God* left these bones here to discourage another uprising?"

Sam shrugged. "Maybe. According to the legends, many of Heaven's army were lost during that battle. And it would also account for why *this* site is so closely guarded. Why there's a devil's trap of angelic remains surrounding it. Why we've not heard about it before."

"Sam, I'm still not sure—"

"Look," Sam continued excitedly. "Dean, think about it! Maybe this isn't a Hellgate at all! Maybe *this* gateway was only ever intended to be used *once*. And then only for a one way trip..."

Dean raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Fallen angels check in, demons don't check out?" He paused for a second to consider that. "And you think maybe they're trying to turn a dead end into a revolving door?"

Sam merely shrugged. "We've heard of crazier things."

Dean thought about that for a second. "But still—*angels*? C'mon, man. There's no such thing."

"Dean, *Lucifer* was an angel! You're telling me you don't believe in *him* now?"

Dean opened and closed his mouth a couple of times before finally shaking his head in disbelief. "Sam, you can't be serious about this!" he managed at length. "The Fall? It's just a story—a myth—"

"Like wendigo?" Sam suggested. "Or werewolves. How about chupacabra? Kikituk? Spring Heeled Jacks? Radiant boys? *Ghosts? Demons?*"

"Okay, okay!" Dean held up his hands. "I get the picture!" He shook his head before muttering, "Geekboy know-it-all," under his breath. "But come on, Sam. Angels?"

"*Someone* left these bones here like this, Dean."

"Doesn't mean it was friggin' angels!"

"Doesn't mean it *wasn't*. If there's demons—and we *know* there's demons—then it stands to reason there have to be angels too." Sam scratched at his nose thoughtfully, eyes straying back to the circle of unearthly remains before lighting up suddenly. "You know what? Maybe demons are repulsed by the remains themselves," he hazarded. "Maybe it's not the pattern they're laid out in that matters so much. Maybe it's just their presence here that keeps the demons—" He paused for a second. "Down There. Maybe this was a way for those who fell in battle to continue protecting their brethren. To continue protecting Heaven." He glanced around himself. "And Earth."

A tiny line of concentration crinkled between Dean's eyebrows. "Decomposing angel corpses would pretty much make this whole place a no-go area for those of a demonic persuasion," he added thoughtfully. "If the remains work the way you think they do. Maybe there's more to this than just the bones."

Sam considered that. "Organic material seeping into the ground and making the whole area toxic to demons?" He cocked an eyebrow at his brother, impressed by Dean's line of thinking. "That'd be pretty ingenious. And could explain why these earthquakes—and their side effects—are a hell of a lot more severe than what was going on in Leicester."

Dean nodded. "Maybe they have to bring the whole damn mountain down in order to destroy the circle of protection."

Sam continued to nod thoughtfully. "Could be the fault line," he offered. "Maybe that's why they're blasting away at it—in the hopes of destabilizing enough of the area to completely eradicate any trace of the remains. Neutralize the protection they offer. Create a new Gateway to Earth..."

Dean looked like a light bulb suddenly went off behind his eyes. "The lake! Sam, the lake—if these remains really *did* once belong to angels and the remains seeped into the earth and into the lake, then the water could have been—"

"Holy water," Sam finished for him.

"No wonder they needed to boil it away."

"And the ocean boiling—that was just a byproduct of their destabilizing the fault line—they only needed to get rid of the water *here*, but the heat they're generating superheated a couple hundred miles of fault line into the bargain."

"Talk about demonic overkill," Dean commented, shaking his head. "Okay, so if that's what's going on here..." He trailed off, pausing briefly before continuing, "Then how the hell do we stop it?"

Sam took a breath, folding his arms over his chest before chewing nervously on a thumbnail. "I don't know if we *can*..."

"Yeah, demonic uprising? Kind of a bit above our pay grade," Dean agreed. "But it's not like we haven't plugged up a Hellgate before." His attention wandered to Daisy, who had just passed between the two of them, intent on a skull sticking up out of the ground a couple of feet behind him. She was humming softly to herself, even as she brushed gingerly at the ancient remains. "Well at least someone's happy in their work," Dean commented. "Y'know, considering we could be on the brink of a Demonic Apocalypse and everything."

Daisy laughed, not even looking up at him. "Yeah, Demonic Apocalypse, sure," she said, nodding sagely. "Whatever you say, guys."

"We're not kidding," Sam insisted, taking a step towards her.

"And we're not nuts," Dean added preemptively.

Daisy did look up at that. "But you really *do* fight demons and monsters, right?"

Dean glanced awkwardly at Sam, as if not entirely sure how to answer that question, and Daisy merely inclined her head in Zach's direction.

"He tells me there's a little bit more to you two than just the poor man's Ghost Busters."

"Not so much of the 'poor man,' Indy," Dean admonished her, turning back toward where Jon was collecting water samples from the couple of puddles that were all that was left of what would appear to have been an entire lake full of holy water.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Daisy responded completely insincerely. "Didn't mean to wound your pride there, Ray."

Dean made a face at her. "Hey, if I wanted to be insulted I could go talk to Frodo," he informed her. "In fact, I might just do that!"

"Knock yourself out, *sweetheart*," Daisy returned. "Boring conversation anyway."

"You're no Han Solo either, baby!" Dean returned, and Sam was fairly sure he could hear his brother's teeth grinding together as he stomped off in Jon's direction, stopping so suddenly he almost skidded on the damp rock as Daisy resumed her humming.

Whirling back around, he was looming over the young archaeologist before she'd even finished the first line of whatever it was she was singing.

"What is that?" Dean demanded, glaring down at her.

She looked up at him, frowning. "It's a skull," she told him, indicating the remains she was busy uncovering. "Alas, poor Yorick, y'know?" When Dean didn't respond to that, she added, "What does it look like, pumpkin pie?"

Dean rolled his eyes. "If only," he breathed, obviously struggling to maintain his patience with the girl. "The song. The song you were singing."

It was Daisy's turn to shrug. "Helps calm me down," she informed him dismissively. "You know, when *people* are doing their best to irritate the *crap* out of me?"

"It's a nursery rhyme," Dean informed her.

She blinked up at him a couple of times. "Yeah? So sue me! I happen to like it. It has sentimental value. My mom used to sing me to sleep with it."

Dean swallowed, his eyes meeting Sam's meaningfully. "Yeah, mine too."

For a second, Sam was at a complete loss as to why Daisy humming a nursery rhyme to herself should be completely freaking his big brother out. It wasn't like it was any weirder than Dean singing Metallica to himself when he got stressed, right?

"Sam," Dean prompted. "Alyssa. When she wiped my memory back in Phoenix. Dude, it's the *same song!*"

Sam blinked a couple of times. "The nursery rhyme?" He cast his mind back, shuddering slightly as he remembered that blank, scared look in his brother's eyes after Alyssa Medina had whammied Dean's memory right out of him.

Daisy got to her feet abruptly. "Hold on there, hotstuff!" she interrupted. "My mom told me that nursery rhyme's an old family tune—been passed down from generation to generation for, like, *ever*. So I'm sorry, but there's no way your mommy used to sing it to you when *you* were a rugrat."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "Wanna bet?"

Daisy squared her shoulders. "Actually, yes," she informed him. "Seeing as it's a song about some cowboy who was, like, my great-great-great-great-something-or-other-grandpa."

Dean's mouth fell open slightly, but all that seemed to come out of it was air.

"Emmanuel Claviger?" Sam jumped in, barely able to believe what he was hearing. "Daisy, you're related to *Emmanuel Claviger*?"

"Holy crap," Dean muttered, swaying on his feet a little, as if this was maybe just one coincidence too many for one day. And Sam couldn't say he blamed him.

"Claviger..." Daisy rolled the name around on her tongue, clearly oblivious to Dean's horror or Sam's disbelief. "Claviger.... Yeah, that sounds familiar," she said finally. "Not sure about Emmanuel, though. Think I'd have remembered being related to someone called Emmanuel. I think the name my mom mentioned was James..."

"Claviger?" Sam clarified. "James Claviger was your great-great-great—"

"Whatever."

"—grandfather?"

Daisy nodded. "Yeah, that sounds about right. My mom's family."

Sam glanced up at Dean, who had paled considerably. "Emmanuel Claviger's younger son," he explained, his mind's eye trying to conjure up the details of the complicated family tree he remembered drawing up on a napkin in some diner back in Phoenix. "The doctor. Shadrack Mann's grandfather."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "Little Miss Earthquake's related to the old kook that gave me this?" He fingered the amulet about his neck a little disconcertedly.

Daisy was back to glancing from one to the other of them in turn. "Wait, wait, wait!" she insisted. "How do you know all this stuff about my family? I mean—I never met the guy, but I know there was some swamp-dweller nutjob called Shadrack who my family never talked about—" She paused for a second, glancing at Dean's amulet with the detached curiosity of an archaeologist. "You knew him?"

Dean inclined his head slightly. "Kinda."

"We're—uh—" Sam stammered. "Sorta related to him too. Your great-great-great-great-grandfather James Claviger? He was the younger brother of *our* great-great-great-great-grandfather, John Claviger. The cowboy in the nursery rhyme—Emmanuel—he was their father."

"*Charm 'round his neck...*" Daisy murmured, still examining Dean's amulet. Gingerly, she reached out to run her finger over the charm, pulling back in surprise as something that was probably just static crackled at her touch.

Yeah, totally just static, Sam completely failed to convince himself.

Dean squinted down at the girl appraisingly. "You know what this means, right?" he said, a grin slowly teasing its way across his face.

Daisy looked up at him, her frown pretty damn threatening. "You ever call me 'Cousin Daisy' you'll be wearing your kneecaps as a hat, Bo," she informed him archly, tugging at the amulet meaningfully and yelping as another crackle of electricity bit at her fingers. "*Dammit, what is that thing?*"

"Your mom ever tell you much else about Shadrack Mann?" Dean asked.

Daisy shook her head. "I told you—he was the family whack job."

"Well, you got that part right..."

"He gave you this?"

"Family heirloom."

"The charm from the nursery rhyme?"

"You catch on quick."

"What does it do?"

Dean glanced over at Sam. "It's kind of a protection thing."

Daisy raised an eyebrow. "Can I have it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"'Cause you're a girl."

When Daisy looked like she might punch Dean's lights out, Sam stepped smoothly between them. "It's complicated," he informed her. "Long story—"

"I take it off I die," Dean added helpfully.

Daisy did a double take. "Hey, if you don't want me to have it, just say. I'm not *stupid y'know—*"

"It's the truth," Sam interceded on Dean's behalf. "He really will die if he takes it off."

Daisy squinted at him. "Seriously?" At Sam's nod, she blew out a breath. "What the hell was crazy Cousin Shadrack into?"

"That's complicated too," Dean informed her.

"Too complicated for a *girl* to understand?" Daisy was grinning sardonically, but Sam could tell from the confused look on Dean's face that his brother wasn't at all sure whether she was being serious or not.

"I never said—"

Dean never got to finish his sentence, a distant rumble turning into a judder beneath their feet.

"Aw, c'mon, Indy! Gimme a break! I was only kidding!"

Daisy scowled at him. "I told you, these earthquakes *aren't my fault!*"

As the rumbling increased in volume, the ground began to shake a little harder.

"Uh—Sam?"

Sam glanced at his brother. "This feel different to you?" he asked over the growing cacophony.

"Not so much a quake as a—vibration," Dean agreed, nodding.

He caught hold of Daisy's arm as the ground lurched beneath their feet, and for once she didn't protest as he began to draw her away from the hole in the center of the cave.

"Jon! Professor!" Sam called over to the two scientists still examining the rim of the sinkhole. "I think you'd better get away from there—"

The words had barely left his lips when a column of flame shot up out of the hole, Professor Maynard stumbling backwards as Jon caught him and attempted to drag him away to safety.

"What the hell...?"

Sam followed Zach's gaze upwards, where the pillar of fire was rapidly blackening the cave roof, orange fingers scabbling across the rock like vaults in a cathedral.

Or flames on a nursery ceiling.

Dean didn't say anything, but he didn't move either.

"Dean?" Sam yelled over the deafening rumble. "Dean!"

Daisy had taken it upon herself to start tugging at Dean's amulet again, the resulting buzz of electricity finally succeeding in tearing his attention away from the dancing flames above his head and returning him to the present.

"I think we need to get out of here," he said a little groggily, his voice oddly strained.

Sam nodded his agreement, gagging as the noxious stench of sulfur began to assault his nostrils. "Like, yesterday," he agreed. "Jon! We need to *go*...!"

The unmistakable sound of screaming began to emanate from the sinkhole, tendrils of anguished sound reaching up from the depths of the earth to mingle with the flame and the rumble of quivering rock, and Sam was vividly reminded of Leicester, of the souls of the dead seeking release from their eternal torment.

"Jon! Now!"

Volsung grabbed hold of the flustered professor, dragging him back toward the Winchesters, both of them stumbling as the ground seemed to lurch violently, a loud crack rending the air above them as the rock began to crumble and disintegrate below.

Zach ran to their aid, catching hold of the professor as Jon regained his footing, the ground tilting back toward the sinkhole as rock and debris tore itself free and bounced back down the slope, disappearing into the entrance to the bottomless pit.

"Sam—!"

Sam nodded as Dean made to pull Daisy toward the cave's entrance. "Go! I'll help them!" he assured his brother, but instead fell to his knees as a crack formed right under him.

"Sam!"

Still keeping a tight hold on Daisy, Dean reached out for his brother as a strong wind shot up out of the sinkhole, hot and violent as it began to whip and whirl around them, the screams of the damned borne up out of the Pit to reverberate off the cavern walls, even as the whole mountain seemed to be shaking itself to pieces.

Sam covered his ears with both hands, squeezing his eyes shut as Dean and Daisy were thrown to the ground beside him. But it wasn't enough to block out the overpowering noise or the heat or the smell, and he almost felt as if he was being dragged down to Hell itself as the terrible screams reverberated all around him and the noisome whirlwind ripped at his clothes and his hair.

"Sam!"

Sam risked opening his eyes at the insistent tug on his sleeve, Dean pointing toward the opening to the sinkhole as dark shadows began to emerge from within the blackness, resolving into vaguely humanoid shapes guttering within the jets of flame still reaching up to the ceiling.

"We *really* need to get out of here..." Dean stated the obvious, attempting to pull both Sam and Daisy to their feet but failing spectacularly, the young archaeologist seemingly rooted to the spot as her eyes widened in terror.

"What...?" Unable to form a coherent sentence, she pointed instead to the edge of the bone circle, where the darkness itself seemed to be moving, silhouettes and the shadowy suggestion of *something* crawling up out of the sinkhole and slithering toward the remains.

"Sam, I really hope you're right about this..." Dean muttered, both Winchesters holding their breaths as the dark shapes approached the bones...but ventured no further.

It was as if an invisible wall had been thrown up around the sinkhole, rocks still bouncing and juddering back down into the opening, but the emerging shadows unable to pass any further than the ring of remains.

"Devil's trap," Sam breathed in relief. "Told you!"

"All right, Mr. Smartypants," Dean said. "You figured that out, can you figure out a way to stop the ground shaking long enough to let us out of here?"

"I don't—"

The rest of Sam's sentence was abruptly cut off as an eerie white light suddenly began to cast even more shadows onto the walls all around them.

At first unable to pinpoint the source of the light, Sam blinked hard in the direction of the sinkhole, where the very *absence* of light seemed to be collapsing in on itself as a blinding whiteness filled every inch of the cave.

Growing brighter and brighter as the darkness seemed to swirl back down into the sinkhole, Sam screwed up his eyes against the light which seemed to be emanating from the bones themselves, pulsing and vibrating in concert with the ground upon which they had lain undisturbed for thousands of years.

"Sam!"

Sam felt Dean's hand on the back of his neck, pushing him and Daisy both down against the ground as a terrible scream like a million souls giving voice to their unending torment shredded the air above their heads and the light became so blinding all Sam could see was white, even with his eyes screwed tightly shut.

Then there was a sound like the *absence* of sound, the opposite of sound, the light growing even brighter until a deathly silence seemed to suck the air right out of the cave and a bright white flash dissolved the world around them....

Mount Diablo, CA

It was almost like an explosion.

In reverse.

Sound—the screams of the damned shrieking around their heads, bouncing off the walls, lodging in their ears—and then no sound at all.

Nothing.

Sam couldn't even hear himself breathing.

And then there was a light so brilliant and so beautiful Sam could hardly bear to look at it.

Screwing up his eyes, he worked his jaw, trying to get his ears to pop even as he attempted to shake Dean's hand off the back of his neck and raise his head enough to take a look around him.

Dean released his grip a little but didn't let go, and for that Sam was oddly grateful, the warmth of his brother's fingers grounding him, reassuring him that he wasn't dead and this wasn't some incredibly intense dream. Or vision. Or worse.

The light was like nothing he'd ever seen before, so pure, so perfect it was almost physically painful to look at it.

He blinked hard and it was nearly too much, but slowly, very slowly, the blinding light began to dissipate, retreating back up to the roof of the cave even as the dark shadows struggling to escape the sinkhole were sucked back down beneath the earth where they belonged, the angry tendrils of flame receding with them with a whoosh of oddly muted sound.

Sam blinked again as his attention was drawn up to the ceiling, not entirely sure what he was looking at and unable to tear away his gaze, even to check on the wellbeing of his brother or his friends.

Dean's grip slackened and gradually fell away from his neck, fingers coming to rest loosely on Sam's upper arm. And again Sam was grateful. He didn't need to look at Dean—*couldn't* look at Dean—but at least he knew he was okay, that once again they'd survived something they really shouldn't have survived.

Thanks to this—this *light*.

This light that was slowly descending toward them.

It had gathered itself into a ball of pure brilliance, too bright to look at, but no longer painful to the eye and Sam couldn't understand how he hadn't been blinded by the intensity of the illumination: he was barely even having to squint at it anymore.

He drew in a breath, swallowing hard and suddenly able to hear every sound around him, from the stuttering of his own breathing to the rustle of Dean's clothing as he pulled himself to his knees by his side.

He wanted to check that Daisy was okay, but somehow he couldn't; all he could do was watch the light as it gracefully made its descent toward the cave floor, hovering a few feet from the rocky surface before gently touching down.

As it did so, the light receded still further, gradually coalescing into a distinct shape: the shape of a woman.

As her foot gently touched the ground she became silhouetted for an instant, the light seeming to draw itself into her, enfolding itself within her as she stepped delicately toward them.

Sam drew in another breath, unable to completely process what he was seeing.

Slender and graceful, flowing golden locks, smooth pale skin and cobalt eyes....

He *knew* her.

"*Gudrun...*"

Even as he said the name, he knew it couldn't be so.

The Valkyrie shield maiden had died, torn to pieces in a dark, dank cave far beneath the Canadian tundra. Sam knew because Dean had *seen* it. With his own two eyes. He'd seen the gory destruction wrought by the kikituk upon the young woman's apparently all-too-human body. His description had been vivid and detailed, guilt that he had survived while she had not causing him to be quiet and withdrawn for some time after her death. That was enough for Sam to know his brother had told him the truth; that the girl had fallen in another dank cave miles and miles away from this one.

And yet here she was, in the flesh, whole and uninjured, alive and smiling at him.

But as she walked there was a stiffness in her bearing, as if it was with difficulty she held herself upright, her features pale, her lips almost the color of her marble skin.

She was whole. But she did not seem *complete...*

As the sound seemed to rush back into the cavern and the light returned to its former murky dullness, Sam heard the girl's words, soft and gentle, pleased to see them.

"Sam. Dean. I think perhaps I missed you..."

Sam opened and closed his mouth a few times in dumbstruck shock, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Dean do the same, his brother's eyes never leaving Gudrun even as he instinctively reached behind him to help Daisy haul herself to her feet.

"Who...?" Sam heard the young archeologist whisper, and something in him wanted to answer her, but somehow he didn't seem to have the words to make any sense out of what he was seeing.

Gudrun continued to smile serenely at them as she approached, finally coming to a halt right in front of him, reaching up and pressing a tiny hand gently against his cheek.

She was so cold...

"You—you were—"

"Dead?" the girl supplied helpfully, and Sam nodded mutely, causing her smile to brighten and her startlingly blue eyes to twinkle mischievously. "Now now, Sam, you know better than that."

"It ripped you apart," Sam heard Dean insist. "The kikituk. I saw—"

Gudrun patted Sam's cheek again fondly before turning her attention to Dean.

She approached him soundlessly, merely reaching up to wrap her arms around his neck and pull him into a heartfelt embrace.

And Dean let her.

"It wasn't your fault, Dean," she whispered into his ear, and Sam saw his brother shift uncomfortably. "You did the best you could."

Dean didn't reply at first, but his arm tightened around her waist a little.

"I think I missed you too," he managed at last, causing Gudrun's tinkling laugh to further banish the shadows to the far corners of the cave. "But you tell anyone I said that," Dean added, pulling away slightly, "and I'll kill you all over again."

If Sam hadn't known better, he would have sworn his big brother's eyes looked a little shinier than usual.

"So—so how are you—how did you...?" Sam wasn't entirely sure of the correct etiquette for asking someone why they weren't dead. "How did you get here?"

Gudrun shrugged dismissively, glancing over Dean's shoulder to where Jon stood watching, a puzzled expression on his face.

"You were in trouble," the girl said simply, her eyes never straying from Jon's face, and Sam got the distinct impression the Valkyrie wasn't talking about either of the Winchesters.

"But the kikituk—"

"Killed my earthly body, yes," Gudrun agreed, coming back to herself suddenly. She pulled away from Dean a little, her fingers lingering on his arms. "When I'm—" she glanced around herself, "—here, my body is capable of healing itself more rapidly than a human's. But I'm not indestructible."

"So—" Sam hazarded, "—the kikituk damaged your body beyond its ability to heal itself?"

Gudrun nodded. "Yes. Physically, I died."

"But—"

"But my *soul*, Sam!" Gudrun turned her attention back to the younger Winchester. "My soul is immortal, remember? Sacrifice is the mark of the hero, and when I sacrificed my earthly shell so that you might escape the kikituk, my immortal soul was transported back to Valhalla. There I was able to recuperate, prepare myself for the battle ahead, recover my strength so that I might once again take on the mantle of a human and return to Earth."

"You don't look so recuperated," Dean commented with a pointed frown, and Sam could see he wasn't the only one concerned by Gudrun's disturbingly fragile appearance.

The girl's gaze once again drifted to Jon. "When those we love are in danger," she said solemnly, "we find reserves of strength and power we never knew we had."

Her eyes slid to Sam, who fidgeted awkwardly, suddenly aware of Dean's attention flickering in his direction.

"I never knew you cared, sweetheart," the older brother said, his focus shifting back to Gudrun as he typically attempted to snark his way out of an impending chick-flick moment of epic proportions.

But Dean knew exactly what Gudrun was getting at, Sam was certain of that. Just as Sam's powers seemed to manifest themselves when those he loved—up to this point, namely Dean—were in danger, so Gudrun had returned to Earth because she sensed *Jon* was in peril. And from her unhealthy pallor, it appeared she may have returned before she was truly ready.

Of course, Sam reflected, there were far more people in danger here than just Jon Volsung. If Sam was right about what Lucifer and his minions were up to, then the whole world could be in trouble. Trouble with a capital "T" and a side order of demonic apocalypse.

"What is this place?" he asked tentatively, jerking his head in the direction of the murky pit, still steaming and smoking ominously. "I mean, it's not an accident that you happened to show up here, right? Is it a Hellgate? Is Lucifer trying to build another Hellgate?"

Gudrun didn't answer, momentarily distracted as Jon began to move toward her, Zach and Maynard in tow.

The little professor was blinking furiously, an unending litany of, "That didn't happen. It's not logical. I'm dreaming," falling from his distraught lips.

Zach appeared no less nervous, pale and more than a little shell-shocked, immediately planting himself at Daisy's side and quickly reassuring himself that she was unhurt.

Jon, however, seemed mesmerized by the Valkyrie, his eyes never straying from her as he approached.

Gudrun took a shuddering breath before breaking the hesitant eye contact she had established with the big Norwegian and returning her attention to Sam.

"This isn't a Hellgate," she pronounced finally, seeming to mentally shake herself out of her reverie.

"Tell that to those demons trying to bust up outta there," Dean interjected. "If this place didn't have some kind of devil's trap mojo goin' on, we'd be knee deep in Hell's Least Wanted by now."

Gudrun nodded. "You're right," she said, and Dean blinked at her as if he must have heard her wrong.

"I am?"

"Yes," Gudrun confirmed. "But it's not a Hellgate."

"Then what is it?" Sam asked quizzically, his forehead crinkling in confusion.

"A conduit," the Valkyrie replied. "*The Conduit*, actually," she added.

"Conduit?" Sam echoed. "Between Hell and Earth?"

Dean blinked. "Just like, oh I don't know, a Hellgate maybe?"

Gudrun shook her head at his sarcasm. "Not exactly," she explained. "The Conduit has its mid-point here—creating a connection between Hell and Earth, yes. But it also serves as a gateway between Earth and Valhalla."

Dean blinked again. "*Heaven?*" he burst out. "You're telling me this thing—" he looked upward, eyes scanning the ceiling of the cave, "—this thing goes all the way...Up? To—to the Penthouse?"

Gudrun nodded. "Yes. That's how I came to be here."

"Wait." Dean held up a disbelieving hand. "This is—what? A way for you guys to get in and out of the Pearly Gates without Saint Pete giving you a hall pass?"

Gudrun chuckled. "Something like that."

"But if Earth is the mid-point," Sam put in suddenly, the full implications of what Gudrun was telling them suddenly starting to burn a hole in his brain. "Then—then this is also a gateway between Hell and—and *Heaven?*"

Gudrun nodded solemnly. "Yes," she confirmed. "A gateway that has existed for millennia. But something is wrong. Those demons you saw? They shouldn't have been able to get this far—*nothing* is supposed to be able to escape from Hell this way. If I hadn't opened the Conduit from Above, casting them back down into the Pit, then ..." She trailed off, shaking her head. "It *can't* happen. It's not *possible...*"

"Demons?" Daisy suddenly interrupted. "Those—those things...they were demons?"

Gudrun looked at her quizzically, but didn't respond.

"You believe in angels, right?" Dean asked the archeologist abruptly.

Daisy glanced around herself, at the bones scattered throughout the cave. "I—guess..."

"Well according to the Bible—" Dean continued, "and that old dead English dude—"

"John Milton," Sam translated. "*Paradise Lost?*"

Daisy blinked at him blankly.

"Then demons are supposed to be fallen angels," Dean concluded, his voice oozing skepticism. "If you believe in that sort of thing."

"No 'supposed to be' about it," Gudrun interposed. "This Conduit has been sealed for millennia. To keep them out. Ever since the Fall."

Sam's gaze snapped to the Valkyrie. "Then...I was *right*?" He sounded as shocked as Dean had earlier. "This is the actual site of the *Fall*?"

Gudrun nodded. "It was the greatest battle ever waged in Heaven," she confirmed. "Here, God's army held fast against Lucifer and his rebellious hoards, battling them for many days before finally casting them down into the Pit—"

"Through the Conduit?"

Gudrun nodded again. "At that time there was no mountain here, only small islands surrounded by sea, water stretching out from horizon to horizon. As the battle raged Above, those who lost their lives—God's faithful and the Fallen alike—fell to Earth here. The remains of those who gave their lives to protect their Father's house sanctified the earth and the water, creating—"

"A sea of holy water," Sam put in. "Between Heaven and Hell."

"Yes," Gudrun confirmed. "But it was more than that. When Lucifer and his army Fell here, the water became as fire, burning away their angelic aspect in preparation for their descent into Hell."

"The Lake of Fire?" Sam asked. "Like in Revelation?"

"Exactly," Gudrun agreed. "This is the place where Lucifer and his followers took the form they bear today."

"Demons."

"Yes. Once their angelic countenances had been destroyed forever, God finally cast them down into Hell to burn for all eternity. The Conduit was sealed to ensure Lucifer and his minions might never again threaten Heaven or Earth, the remains of those who fell in battle sanctifying the water and the earth for many miles around, creating an invisible barrier that no demon could ever breach."

"That's why they couldn't get out earlier?" Sam asked.

"It's the last line of defense," Gudrun confirmed. "Should they ever manage to escape the Pit. The mountain was raised to obscure the entrance to the Conduit from curious men, the bones left scattered around the entrance not only as a further ring of protection from anything that might find a way to escape Hell, but also to deter those humans living nearby from venturing in further. Superstition can be a powerful ally. Any man coming across the remains would think twice before attempting to gain entry to the mountain."

"And this seal," Sam asked. "It's held since then?"

"It has," Gudrun confirmed. "The hosts of Hell have never breached its threshold." She glanced behind her to the still-smoldering sinkhole. "But Lucifer is mobilizing his troops. He has other Hellgates—that's how he came to be walking the Earth once more—but he has nothing like this. The loss of the Gate in Leicester dealt him a bitter blow, and the other Gates for the most part have resisted his attempts to open them, except at certain times of the year or when certain complex rituals are performed. If he is to raise his entire army from Hell, then he must find an alternative, more convenient escape route, one that he may access at any time and in greater numbers."

"And this is it?" Dean put in, gesturing to the rocky chasm behind them. "This Conduit?"

Gudrun nodded. "Yes," she confirmed. "The Conduit is far superior to any Hellgate he might succeed in opening."

Dean frowned. "Why? It's still just another doorway between Hell and Earth, right?"

"No," Gudrun insisted. "It's so much more than that. Certainly, if Lucifer can open the Conduit he can create another way out of the Pit and bring forth more of his underlings to subjugate Mankind—"

"That's not bad enough for you?" Dean asked.

Gudrun sighed. "Dean," she said. "If Lucifer opens this Conduit, not only will he have created a demonic escape route from Hell to Earth—"

Sam blanched. "But he'll also have created a route from Hell to *Heaven*." He blinked wide eyes at Gudrun, his face paling considerably as the ramifications of his words slowly sank in.

Dean's mouth fell open, but for once no words tumbled out. "No, wait a second," he managed at last, gaze bobbing between the Valkyrie and his brother. "You mean—you think that—you can't mean...?"

Sam swallowed hard. "Lucifer's planning an assault on *Heaven*?" He finished Dean's thought for him, looking to Gudrun for confirmation that he was wrong, that this couldn't be Lucifer's ultimate gameplan.

But no such confirmation was forthcoming.

The Valkyrie merely shrugged. "I don't know whether Lucifer has the temerity to attempt a full-frontal assault on Heaven," she said. "But he is proud and willful, and his stated aim and that of the Fallen has always been that they will one day return to their Heavenly home and reclaim their angelic heritage. If Lucifer can find a way back then there is a chance he might find allies there—allies who could turn the tide of battle in his favor." She glanced first at Sam and then at Dean, holding each of their gazes in turn. "We can't let that happen," she insisted. "It could be the end. It could be the end of everything. Lucifer could control *everything*."

This was *big*. This was *too* big. Heaven, Hell, demons and angels? What chance did any of them stand if they got themselves in the middle of something this cosmic?

Dean took a step forward, chin raised defiantly. "What can we do?" he asked calmly. "How do we stop this Satanic asswipe?"

Gudrun sighed heavily, running a tired hand across her pale forehead. "I'm not sure," she admitted at length. "All I know is that the Conduit *must* remain sealed. Everything depends on it. *Everything*."

"How do we do that?" Sam asked tentatively. "There has to be a way, right? If the seal has held this long? There have been earthquakes here before—"

"Not on this scale." Maynard was suddenly standing at Sam's elbow, his face almost as pale as Gudrun's, but a faint spark of acceptance lurking in his bright eyes. "If these—these *demons* are intent on destabilizing the fault line in order to break this—this seal of yours, then I would say they are going the right way about it."

Jon took a step toward them, nodding his agreement. "They've already managed to raise the water temperature for a hundred miles around," he said. "The lake of holy water has been boiled away. It's only a matter of time until the tremors dislodge the bones and the sanctified earth. Then what would happen to the seal?"

"It will break," Gudrun admitted. "The Conduit will be open and Lucifer and his hoards will have free rein on Earth and—and direct access to Heaven."

"The end of the world," Jon muttered. "The Apocalypse."

Gudrun began to nod, a frown suddenly creasing her brow as her eyes rolled back in her head and she stumbled as if she was about to pass out.

Sam, Dean and Jon all lurched forward, Jon reaching the Valkyrie first, catching hold of her and keeping her on her feet, pulling her to his side and holding her there.

Gudrun laughed weakly, eyes turning up to gaze into Jon's. "Opening the Conduit," she said softly, "requires a great deal of energy. Perhaps I just need to rest. Coming here—driving back the demons—perhaps it was a little ambitious for my first day back in human form."

Jon continued to hold the girl upright, his mouth a tight line as he considered her. "You do not look well," he told her. "Perhaps you should return to the place from where you came—"

Gudrun shook her head vehemently. "No," she said. "My place is here, by your side." She stopped suddenly, biting her lip before adding, "By all of your sides."

Dean and Sam exchanged a glance before Dean suddenly said, "Hey Frodo, you got the little lady?"

Jon nodded at him, and Sam quirked an eyebrow. "What's up?"

"I got an idea," Dean informed him. "Jon, stay and look after Miss Indestructible here will ya? Me 'n Sammy gotta go check something out."

"We do?" Sam asked skeptically.

Dean elbowed him meaningfully in the ribs. "*Sure* we do, Sasquatch. "C'mon. We got a world to save and an Apocalypse to avert. Again."

* * * *

Jon Volsung was not a shy man.

He had no trouble attracting women, was never timid in their company, and never struggled to string a coherent sentence together whilst in their presence, particularly when one of them was swooning in his arms.

Which was why, as he watched the Winchester boys head off to explore the cavern, he was somewhat at a loss as to why he had absolutely no idea what to say to the young woman he was currently holding upright, the one with the cobalt blue eyes who was gazing up at him as if he were the only man on the planet.

He glanced once again in the direction Dean and Sam were heading, almost tempted to ask if they needed any help, before Gudrun suddenly whispered, "I think maybe I need to sit down."

Jon's attention skidded back to the young woman, suddenly aware of the unnatural size of his tongue in his mouth and the way his palms were sweating even as he encircled the Valkyrie in his muscular arms.

"Uh...yes. Of course. You should. Sit down. You should definitely sit down."

He guided the girl to a large flat rock jutting up from the uneven floor, easing her down gently before hesitantly perching next to her. To his surprise, she leaned into him, continuing to gaze up into his eyes while he fumbled with his hands, wondering whether to release his hold on her now that she was sitting and didn't look as if she was in imminent danger of faceplanting on the cavern floor.

He moved his arm slightly, as if to withdraw the limb from its current position wrapped around her shoulders, but she caught his fingers, keeping him exactly where he was as she tentatively rested her head against his shoulder.

He coughed awkwardly, eyes once again searching out the Winchesters, who had disappeared from sight, while Maynard, Zach and Daisy were caught up in examining one of the disinterred skeletons near the rim of the sinkhole.

"You feel better?" he managed to ask, his knee beginning to bounce nervously until Gudrun placed her hand on it, stilling his involuntary movement with a soft smile.

"Yes," she told him, snuggling further into him until he could feel her heart beating against his chest. "I feel much better now," she added, averting her eyes for a second, but not removing her hand from its resting place on Jon's knee.

Jon held completely still, the warmth of the girl's fingers at once comforting and terrifying. "I—I am very pleased to see you again," he said lamely, immediately rolling his eyes at himself and shaking his head.

"I'm pleased to be seen," Gudrun replied with a chuckle.

"And I'm glad you're not—"

"Dead?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm very glad you're not dead."

Jon turned away slightly, but could still feel her warm breath on his cheek and his neck, his heartbeat quickening in time with hers.

"Then we're agreed," Gudrun said, a teasing lilt to her voice. "We're both happy I'm not dead."

Jon laughed at that, his gaze returning to her pale face, which slowly seemed to be regaining a little color. "I—I don't—" he began, sighing before scratching at his chin with his free hand and trying again. "I still don't really know what happened in Canada," he managed. "The Winchesters...they told me little, and I'm not sure even *they* knew exactly what was going on, why Lucifer held me prisoner or why—why you gave your life to save me."

"Sacrifice," Gudrun reiterated. "It's sometimes necessary when those we love are in danger."

Jon averted his gaze again, nodding slightly. "I understand that," he said quietly. "Now. At the time, when Dean described to us what had happened to you, what that monster had done... Back then, I didn't even know who you were. And—and I did not understand how you seemed to know *me*..."

Gudrun placed a soft hand against his cheek, turning his face in her direction once more.

"And now?" she asked carefully. "What do you understand now? Do you..." She paused for a heartbeat before continuing. "What do you remember now?"

Jon glanced down at his left hand, the one resting on his knee next to Gudrun's. The one where he still felt the ghostly echo of a wedding ring that he had never worn. "You called me 'Helgi,'" he pointed out tentatively.

"Yes," Gudrun said, blinking a little too quickly as her eyes began to glisten. "He—he was someone very important to me."

Jon nodded thoughtfully. "The trap. In Canada. The place where Lucifer imprisoned me." He took a breath. "It wasn't set for me, was it? I was just the bait. For you. He knew you would come for me."

Gudrun looked away. "Yes," she admitted quietly. "I believe so. Lucifer and I—had crossed paths. In New Jersey. I... I 'removed' a handful of his troops from the battlefield. He was most displeased."

"I can imagine," Jon agreed. "He wished to kill you? Or—or remove you from this mortal world?"

Gudrun looked up at him, a hint of surprise ghosting across her features. "What do you know about me?" she asked.

"Only what the Winchesters have told me," Jon informed her. "That you are what they call a 'Reaper.' That you convey the souls of the dead to Valhalla. That you have great healing powers and healed Sam's hand after he was tortured by one who had escaped from the Underworld." He took another breath. "That you had lived for many hundreds of years. And that they had believed you immortal."

"Until I 'died,'" Gudrun interjected. "Yes. All of that is true." She paused. "Does that disturb you?"

Jon shrugged. "Much that I have learned since meeting the Winchesters has disturbed me," he told her. "I have adapted my world view accordingly."

Gudrun laughed softly, tracing her fingers down his cheekbone and along his jaw. "That happens to many who cross paths with the Winchesters," she told him. "They are never the same again."

Jon withdrew his arm from about Gudrun's shoulders, taking both her hands in his own and placing them against his rapidly-beating heart. "As I have not been since meeting you," he told her solemnly, swallowing hard.

Gudrun blinked again, exhaling a shuddering breath.

"In the cave, back in Canada," Jon continued, determinedly holding the young woman's shimmering gaze. "I heard you... as that monster killed you. You cried out in my own tongue. '*Helgi. Jeg vil elske deg til evig tid, og når tiden ikke er mer, vil jeg fortsatt elske deg, til universets slutt og videre. Jeg er din for alltid.*'" He lowered his gaze again, translating the words but unable to look at her as he did so. "I will love you forever, and when time is no more, I will still love you, to the universe's end and beyond. I am yours forever." He shifted awkwardly, staring determinedly at his naked ring finger. "Why would you say that to me?" he asked. "Why would you say such a thing to a stranger? Unless...unless we—"

"Unless we had met before?" Gudrun once more turned his face toward her, running her thumb soothingly along his cheekbone. "*Helgi...*" she whispered softly, gazing up into his eyes.

Jon lowered his face toward her, his forehead resting gently against hers.

"*Helgi,*" she whispered again. "It's been so long..."

"You knew me before," he breathed slowly. "Before I became Jon Volsung. 'In another life,' that's what you said to me. *En annen liv.* That's when you knew me. In another life. When I was—when I was—"

"*Helgi,*" Gudrun confirmed. "My husband."

Jon took a breath, nodding slowly. "I had thought I was going mad," he told her slowly. "Remembering things that had not happened to me." He pulled away slightly, looking deep into her eyes. "Remembering you."

Gudrun nodded. "I couldn't tell you. I had to let you remember in your own time. It—it would have been too much."

Jon ran hesitant fingers through her hair and she closed her eyes, her cheeks taking on a rosy hue even as his fingertips grazed her skin. "I don't remember everything," he said softly. "It started with a wedding ring... A cabin in the woods. Snow on your eyelashes..." He trailed off, and before he could utter another word Gudrun had turned her face up towards his, her lips gently brushing his own.

"*Helgi...*" she sighed. "I missed you so much."

He held her for a second, returning her caress uncertainly before pulling away ever-so-slightly, still only a hair's breadth between them. "Who was I?" he asked her. "How did I come to be here?"

Gudrun took a deep breath, briefly closing her eyes as if composing herself for the story she knew must be told.

Jon took a breath too, unsure he wanted to hear it.

"When you died..." the Valkyrie began carefully. "When you were human...and...and my husband..." She swallowed, eyes downcast as her fingers laced with his, her thumb gently stroking his empty ring finger. "If I could have died with you, I would have done." She blinked up at him, eyes sparkling with gathering moisture. "I could not let you go, *would* not let you go, and eventually my tears woke you from your grave, raising you up so that you might accompany me to Valhalla as *Einherjar*, one of Odin's army of the dead."

Jon inclined his head slightly, a puzzled expression etched into his forehead. "I remember nothing of that," he admitted, his brow scrunching further. "Only—only what happened before. When I was human."

"That's understandable," Gudrun assured him. "You're human now—it's only logical that your human memories should resurface first."

Jon's frown deepened. "Then—when I died—I became no longer human?"

"You became—" Gudrun paused, obviously considering how to phrase her response, "*—more* than human. The *Einherjar* were chosen by Odin himself, warriors who fell in battle, trained in the Afterlife to stand with him at Ragnarok and defeat the enemies of the gods and the forces of Hell."

"The Apocalypse?"

Gudrun nodded slightly. "When the armies of the Underworld began to rise once more and Lucifer again walked the Earth, a number of the *Einherjar* were reborn as men to continue the battle here, as an advance guard of sorts: a last line of defense before Lucifer laid this world to waste and took the battle to Valhalla. You, Helgi—you were chosen for this honor. To protect the humans inhabiting this world, to fight the armies of Darkness."

"That place," Jon said. "Those markings on the catacombs in Canada. The Winchesters said demons could not escape—"

Gudrun squeezed his hand. "You're not a demon, Helgi. The devil's trap imprisons many other supernatural beings, not all of whom are evil."

"It works on you?"

"Yes," Gudrun admitted. "That is why neither of us would have been able to escape from that place had the Winchesters not destroyed the markings. *Einherjar* are just as susceptible to the magic of a devil's trap as a demon—or a Valkyrie."

She squeezed his hand again, looking up at him with sparkling eyes.

"I have something that belongs to you," she told him. "Something you will need in the coming battle."

She stood stiffly, Jon rising to his feet with her, supporting her gently swaying frame as she tried to regain her balance on weakened legs.

"You need more rest—" he began to protest, but Gudrun waved off his ministrations with a dismissive smile.

"The End of Days waits for no one, Helgi," she told him. "I will rest when you and the rest of this world are safe from Lucifer and his hoards."

Carefully, she drew back the long animal skin coat she wore, revealing a flash of silver at her belt.

"This was yours when you lived, my love," she told him, reaching into her coat and producing a gleaming silver sword, the hilt plain but decorated with runes and other markings while the blade itself was a lethal sweep of finely polished metal. She held it out towards him reverently, one hand supporting the hilt, the other the blade. "It was yours when you were Einherjar." She bowed her head slightly, like a servant presenting a weapon to her king, and Jon hesitated, his fingers reaching toward the sword with an inexplicable familiarity.

Gudrun raised her eyes to his once more, nodding slightly as she continued to hold the blade out to him. "You will need this in the coming battle against Lucifer and his army. Take it, my lord." Her gaze faltered. "My love."

Once again she bowed her head, and this time Jon's fingers closed around the hilt and the blade, lifting the sword out of her hands and hefting it experimentally.

The hilt felt strong and solid in his hand, fitting the shape of his fist as if it had always belonged there. As if it had been forged just for him. His fingers tingled in the same way he thought he had imagined they had the first time he touched Gudrun, when he caught her before she could collapse to the cavern floor.

He remembered this.

He remembered *her*.

"I thought—" he began, eyes tracking the glittering blade as it swooped through the air in front of him. "I thought I was having visions, hallucinations." He lowered the sword, again meeting Gudrun's gaze. "Ever since your 'death' in Canada I—I kept experiencing flashes of—of something—memories—that I knew could not be mine. A different time, a different place. Battles I never fought. Homes I never lived in. A wife I—a wife I never had and a life I never led. I thought I was going mad. I thought Lucifer or one of his minions had done something to me while I was their prisoner, put thoughts into my head to distract me. Living a life with you, fighting by your side." He paused, looking away again. "Loving you. I—I even recalled my own death. On a frozen battlefield somewhere I couldn't identify, lying there, waiting for—something. Someone. Waiting for you. You led me away to Valhalla. I saw your face as clearly as I see it now. You were the one who transported my soul to the Afterlife."

Gudrun was nodding, a single crystalline tear tracking down her cheek.

Jon reached out to her, wiping away the moisture with his thumb, his large hand gently cupping her face. "I heard you crying," he told her. "I felt your tears raining down upon me."

Gudrun drew in a shaky breath. "I couldn't see you in the ground, my love," she told him. "I couldn't carry on without you by my side. I never stopped loving you, never. Even death could not separate us. When Odin chose you as Einherjar, it was the happiest I had been since I lost you. But even that was temporary. I begged and pleaded even though I knew it was a great honor that had been bestowed upon you when you were chosen for this dangerous mission—to be once again reborn as a mortal. To protect the human race from the armies of Hell. Still—" her eyes drifted away to the middle distance. "You had been taken from me a second time and I descended into a dark, dark place, a place where all I desired was revenge upon the evil that walked this Earth, the evil that had necessitated your being ripped once again from my side."

Jon brushed another tear from her cheek, bending slightly so their foreheads touched once more.

"I was forbidden to follow you here," Gudrun continued, seeming to take comfort in his proximity, the warmth of his skin and his breath on her cheek. "But just being here—inhabiting the same plane of existence as you—brought me some measure of comfort in my loneliness." She blinked hard. "As did reaping the souls of evil men, removing them from this world and dispatching them to Hell."

"That is why the Winchesters refer to you as a Reaper?"

"Yes," Gudrun confirmed. "I became an instrument of vengeance, eaten up by loneliness, anger and despair. Until I met them. Until they showed me that this was not my purpose, that I could use my powers for good in the fight against the seemingly unstoppable forces of evil spreading like a cancer throughout this world." She paused, pulling away a little and looking up at him, nothing less than blind adoration in her eyes. "Helgi, this is why I am here. I am sure of it. Now that you know the truth—you know who you were, who you are, who you *should* be—then I too can be who I was supposed to be. *Yours*, my love. I am no longer forbidden to be with you." She placed her hand once again against the side of his face. "We can resume our fight side by side," she told him. "As we were meant to be."

Jon took a long breath, eyes averted to the rocky ground on which they stood. He moved back slightly, Gudrun's hand slipping from his cheek. "This is—to—to—" He shook his head, running his fingers through his hair as with his other hand he raised the glittering silver sword and examined it thoughtfully.

"Helgi—Jon." Gudrun rested her fingers against his arm, stilling his jerky movements. "It's understandable that you should be—troubled. Destiny is not something that can easily be outrun or ignored." She laughed hollowly. "Just ask Sam and Dean Winchester. This is a heavy weight that has been placed upon your shoulders."

"Up until a few months ago I was just a marine biologist," Jon pointed out with a shrug. "Now you tell me I am a reincarnated Norse warrior who may be the key to saving mankind from evil? 'Troubled' does not really begin to cover it."

"I know this is a heavy burden," Gudrun sympathized. She caught his chin with her fingers, once again raising his gaze to hers. "But we will carry it together. You are not alone. I came back for you—to protect you. To help you. I—I love you, Helgi! Time, death, nothing will ever change that! Heaven, Hell, I won't let anything come between us again, not ever. You're my everything! I love you

more than life! What good is immortality if I can't be with the one person I love more than anything else? The one person I love beyond time and death?"

Jon squared his shoulders and raised his chin a little, reaffirming his grip on the sword. "Who am I to argue with Destiny?" he asked, a tiny smile flickering at the corners of his mouth. "If this is what the world requires of me—if this is what you require of me—then we will face what Destiny has planned for us. Together. If you will help me protect this world from the armies of Lucifer, then somehow I will help you find a way to seal the Conduit and protect Valhalla from the Underworld."

Gudrun's face brightened, the fingers of one hand entwining in the hair at the nape of his neck. "It sounds simple when you say it like that," she told him, gently leaning her head against his shoulder.

Jon nodded, wrapping his arm around her and pulling her closer. "It is simple," he told her, kissing her gently, that strange tingle spreading from his lips to the tips of his fingers and the ends of his hair. "Now that we have each other."

* * * *

"Look at it, Sammy!"

Dean sighed pointedly as Sam stared at the cave wall with a blank expression on his face.

Finally the younger brother shrugged his shoulders in defeat. "It's a *wall*, Dean," he replied. "Just like the last three walls you showed to me!"

Dean shook his head. "Y'know, for someone with a brain the size of a planet, you can be really dumb sometimes, little bro!" he told his brother irritably.

When Sam continued to gaze at him as if he still didn't have the first clue what the hell he was talking about, Dean grabbed him by the shoulders, spun him so that he was facing the wall, seized his hand and slapped it flat against the rocky surface.

"Feel that."

Sam grimaced at him. "Okay, so it's a *wall* made of *rock*," he snapped, snatching back his hand and jerking away from his brother. "Kinda what you'd expect to find in a *cave*..."

Dean rolled his eyes, rapidly losing his patience. "Sulfur, Sam," he said, enunciating his words carefully as if he was talking to a four-year-old; pretty much the way four-year-old Sammy used to talk to eight-year-old Dean now he came to think about it. Sammy was *so* gonna be payback's bitch.

"We're standing next to a Conduit to *Hell*, Dean. There's pretty much gonna be *sulfur* all over the place..."

Dean bit off the urge to retort, "I'm not an idiot!", instead pointing once more to the cave wall. "Sulfur and *salt* *pet*er, Sam!"

Sam blinked at him.

"See this is what happens when you spend your entire childhood in the library instead of blowin' stuff up with your big brother."

Sam raised an eyebrow.

Dean huffed. "Remember that summer we spent with Caleb, Einstein?" he prodded. "Y'know, when he showed us how to make *gunpowder*...?"

Sam blinked at him. Looked at the wall. Looked back at Dean. Blinked again. "You wanna make *gunpowder*?" he burst out at length. "Here? Now? *Seriously*?"

"Unless you got some C4 in that duffel I don't know about."

"But... but..." Sam opened and closed his mouth a few times like a demented goldfish before managing to splutter, "But *why*?"

Dean rolled his eyes again. "Isn't it obvious?"

"Dean, I doubt the little bit of gunpowder you *might* be able to MacGyver outta whatever you can scrounge up in this place would be enough to close the Conduit—"

"No," Dean agreed. "But it might be enough to hold off anything dark and nasty trying to crawl on out of Hell while we figure out a more permanent solution! I'm just lookin' to buy us some time here!"

"Until what?" Sam said. "Until Gudrun recharges her batteries? Even *she* doesn't know how to close the Conduit!"

"I know that, Sam," Dean huffed. "But while we're waiting for you and Gudrun and all your big-brained Stanford buddies to think of a way to save the world, this is the best my meager intellect can come up with, okay?"

Dean drew a breath and so did Sam, both suddenly unable to make eye contact with the other.

Sam scratched the back of his neck absently. "You know you're one of the smartest people I know, right?" he said quietly.

Dean looked at him, for a second unable to see the olive branch for the trees. "Yeah, me 'n Paris Hilton," he shot back tightly.

"Dean."

"What?"

Sam took a slow breath. "Look, just because you didn't go to Stanford doesn't mean I think you're stupid, okay?" When Dean didn't reply, Sam added, "Okay?" a little more forcefully.

"Okay," Dean conceded grudgingly.

"It's just—"

"Here it comes."

"Dean, I'm just not sure the whole gunpowder thing is gonna work, that's all."

"Why not?" Dean demanded. "'Cause one of your Stanford buddies didn't think of it?"

"'Cause contrary to what you might think I *did* actually pay attention when Caleb was teaching us how to make the stuff." Sam sighed, raking a weary hand through his hair. "You see any trees around here? Huh? Charcoal? Where are you planning on getting your organic component?"

Dean thought about that, shifting awkwardly from one foot to the other. "I'll think of something," he insisted, casting his gaze around the cave thoughtfully. "There's got to be *something* we can use..."

"Winchesters!"

Dean and Sam both spun at the hail, Jon and Gudrun approaching them at an unusually slow pace, the shield maiden leaning heavily on the biologist's arm, his free hand clutching an impressive-looking silver sword.

Dean raised an eyebrow in approval. "Like the silverware, Frodo!" he burst out, stepping toward the Norwegian in the hope of getting a closer look.

Jon drew the blade away slightly, merely shrugging at the almost affronted look that subsequently appeared on Dean's face. "It was a gift," he told the brothers. "From my wife."

Dean glanced over at Sam uncertainly before turning his attention back to Volsung. "You—uh—get hitched while we were off over here trying to stop the world ending?" he asked casually.

Gudrun was gazing up at the Norwegian like he was Brad Pitt, George Clooney and that dead guy out of *Grey's Anatomy* all rolled into one. Gently, he cupped her face in one large hand before grazing her lips with a chaste kiss.

Dean blinked.

"Okay, back up," he insisted, taking a step toward the couple. "I think I missed a chick flick moment somewhere."

Gudrun finally turned her gaze away from Jon, her cheeks coloring as she smiled a little abashedly. "It's a long story," she told the brothers shortly. "And as you pointed out, the world may be about to end."

"You knew each other didn't you?" Sam put in suddenly. "Before? Helgi Sigmundarson... or—or Volsung...? That's why you called him by that name back in Canada?"

Gudrun nodded slightly in confirmation. "He was my husband."

"A mortal man who died in battle and was transported to Valhalla to become *Eiherjar*, right?"

Gudrun seemed somewhat taken aback. "You know this?"

"Honey, have you even met my brother?" Dean asked sardonically. "Research Geekboy of the Year 2009!"

Sam grimaced and elbowed Dean in the ribs, causing the older brother to grunt in surprise.

"Well your research is correct," Gudrun said. "Helgi was chosen to be reborn as a mortal in order to help fight the forces of Lucifer," she explained. "That's why he's here. And that's partly why Lucifer captured him. But also to get to me. I told you I came back to help those I loved—" she turned her gaze back to Volsung, "—those I *have* loved... Well that was the truth. Even death couldn't keep us apart."

Dean made a retching sound and this time Sam elbowed him a little harder.

Gudrun's smile widened. "Pretend all you want, Dean Winchester, I know you're just an old romantic at heart."

Dean grimaced at her. "Less of the 'old' there, Mrs. Methuselah," he snapped, trying but failing to keep the affronted glare on his face for very long. "So that's what kept Jon in the devil's trap?" he asked suddenly. "'Cause he's one o' these Ein—Ein—er—stein things?"

"Einherjar," Sam and Gudrun corrected him simultaneously.

"What I said."

"Yes," Gudrun concluded. "Helgi—Jon—is human, but he retains some of the essence of the Einherjar. The devil's trap does not differentiate between a demon and certain other supernatural beings."

Sam nodded. "And you came back from Valhalla because you sensed he was in danger?"

Gudrun looked slightly embarrassed. "And because of the Conduit—"

"But you came back for him first?" Dean put in. "Just like in Canada. That's why you sacrificed yourself? To save him?"

Gudrun smiled lopsidedly. "Aww, I'm sorry, sweetie. Did I hurt your feelings?" she cooed, her smile widening mischievously. When Dean scowled at her, she continued, "I didn't particularly want to see you and Sam being skewered by a Kikituk either, Dean."

Dean straightened, grinning broadly. "I knew you loved me really, princess," he told her.

"Uh-huh," Gudrun agreed less than enthusiastically. "I never could resist a man with dirty hands."

Dean glanced down at his fingers, which were covered in a mixture of sulfur and saltpeter, which he'd been scraping off the walls experimentally. "Oh, this?" he said, shrugging. "Sorry, I left my manicurist in my other jacket."

"What are you doing exactly?"

"Trying to save our asses," Dean replied, as if that should be obvious.

"Oohkay," Gudrun said. "Uh—how exactly?"

"He wants to make gunpowder," Sam explained for his brother, his skepticism clear in the tone of his voice. "But there's nothing organic here for us to add to the mix, and there's no way we could make enough to collapse the Conduit—"

"No," Gudrun agreed somewhat distractedly, suddenly catching hold of Dean's hands and examining them thoughtfully. "No, you couldn't..."

Dean raised an eyebrow at her. "I know you missed me, honey, but that doesn't mean I'm gonna let you hold my hand..."

"Shut up for a second," Gudrun snapped at him. "I'm thinking."

"This could take a while then."

"I said shut up!" Gudrun repeated exasperatedly, only half listening to Dean as she scanned the floor of the cave thoughtfully. Suddenly she looked up at him, an excited glint in her eye as she squeezed his hands. "Use the earth from around the angel remains," she instructed him.

Dean raised an eyebrow. "The—uh—why?"

"When the remains of those who fell decomposed—"

Sam nodded suddenly. "Organic component."

"Exactly."

Dean frowned. "Wait. You're saying we should use decomposed angels to make gunpowder?"

"What's left of them in the earth, yes," Gudrun agreed.

"That'll work?" Dean queried, squirming a little uncomfortably. "It seems a little bit—I dunno—disrespectful maybe?"

Gudrun patted his hand. "Trust me, Dean, those who gave their lives to protect Heaven and Earth will not mind."

Dean nodded uncertainly. "Yeah, I guess..." he began, his eyes suddenly tracking over Gudrun's shoulder to where Jon had turned away slightly and seemed to be stumbling toward the Conduit.

"Hey Frodo!" Dean called to him, causing Gudrun to turn back in the direction of her former husband.

"Jon, what's wrong?" Gudrun asked, pulling away from Dean and heading uncertainly after Jon. She swayed a little on her feet without anyone to anchor her, and Dean quickly caught her arm, steadying her as Sam made to follow Jon.

"Jon, are you okay?" Sam asked, coming up on the big Norwegian's shoulder.

Volsung frowned, his hand raised before him, the sword seeming to tremble in his grasp. "It's..." he trailed off, seeming as if he wanted to explain, but unable to find the words. "The sword," he tried again. "It feels like... It feels like it wants me to go *this way*..."

Sam glanced over his shoulder at Dean, who was still hanging on to Gudrun. "The *sword* wants you to go that way?" Sam clarified, following in the biologist's footsteps.

Jon nodded. "Yes," he confirmed. "It's almost like—like it's *pulling* me...somewhere. Like—like a magnet or...something." He stretched out his arm, the tip of the blade vibrating visibly.

Sam followed him, Dean and Gudrun close behind, as he made his way toward the edge of the pit.

Daisy, Zach and Maynard looked up as he approached, Zach rising to his feet and taking a hesitant step toward him. "Hey, you okay man?" he asked. "Jon?"

Volsung didn't appear to have heard him, still apparently following the pull of the sword closer and closer to the edge of the Conduit.

"Wait, Jon, not so close!" Gudrun called after him

"This happen often?" Dean asked the Valkyrie. "I mean, his sword kinda trying to get him to throw himself through a doorway to Hell?"

Gudrun glanced at him dismissively before trying to pull away from him to get to Jon.

"Hold on there, sister—"

Suddenly Gudrun shoved Dean away with a strength he would not have thought she possessed in her current weakened state, dashing past Sam and Zach until she neared Jon's position.

"Helgi, stop!" she insisted. "Jon!"

Jon continued forward apparently oblivious to her cries, the tip of the sword seeming to drag him right toward the precipice of the pit.

"Jon!" Gudrun cried again. "Jon, stop!"

And this time he did, so suddenly he teetered right on the brink of the abyss, the sword raised high above his head and a somewhat befuddled expression on his handsome face.

"Here," he announced at length, the tip of the sword abruptly plunging into the earth at his feet, as if of its own volition.

Sam, Gudrun, Dean and Zach all converged on his position, Sam catching hold of his arm and pulling him away from the edge of the Conduit while Dean squinted at the soft earth around the blade.

"What is that?" he asked a little uncertainly.

The muted light revealed little but damp ground, still slightly warm from the several hundred gallons of holy water that had recently been boiled away from on top of it.

Jon followed Dean's gaze downward, frowning as his eyes lit on the object Dean was pointing at, something half-buried in the dirt just to the left of where the sword had embedded itself in the ground. It appeared to be of a dull gray color, a stick, or a stalk or... something.

He knelt to examine the area, an inquisitive frown etched into his forehead as he pushed at the warm earth with his fingertips, gently digging away the dirt from around the object.

"What is it?" Gudrun echoed Dean's question as Jon continued his excavation of the object.

"It's—" Jon began, brushing away the last of the earth and holding the object up in front of his face, his eyebrows raised a little in mild surprise. "It's a feather."

Somehow Dean managed to whistle sarcastically. "Gee, a feather huh?" he said, shaking his head. "I can barely contain my excitement. That sword of yours is a real find, Frodo."

"Maybe it's not just a feather..." Gudrun muttered, gingerly approaching Jon's position and gazing at the object in his hand.

As far as Dean could tell, it looked like any other feather, maybe ten inches in length, the vanes a weird shade of gray that was almost a non-color. The barbs were slightly darker toward the shaft and almost white at the tips, while the shaft itself was the same mundane gray color, becoming darker toward the calamus.

Jon ran his finger over the hollow tip, his skin coming away stained with a dark flakey substance that Dean almost thought looked like dried blood.

Jon rose to his feet as Gudrun continued to gaze at the feather, and as she drew closer, one finger extended toward the fragile object, Dean swore the thing started to glow.

Gudrun withdrew her finger abruptly, obviously having thought she'd seen the same thing Dean had.

"What the hell...?" Dean murmured, coming up on Gudrun's shoulder and squinting at the feather.

"I think—" Jon turned to face Dean, the feather now laid out across his palm. "I think perhaps this was meant for you and your brother."

Jon held the feather out towards Dean, his head bowed almost reverently, and Dean took an involuntary step back, shaking his head slightly.

"I don't think—why would...?" Dean stammered as he backed away. "I don't understand..."

Gudrun caught hold of his hand, turning it palm upwards and stretching it out toward Jon. Dean didn't resist, but he wasn't particularly happy about the manhandling either.

"I told Sam some time ago," Gudrun began, "that everyone has a purpose. I think maybe this might have been one of Jon's. To bring this feather to you and your brother."

Dean blinked at her. "That's a pretty crappy purpose, honey," he pointed out, shaking his head in mild disbelief. "It's just a *feather*..."

"Dean!" Gudrun nudged him with her shoulder. "Remember where we're standing! Remember what lies all around us. You really think this is *just* a feather?"

Dean wasn't sure he knew the answer to that one. He was having a hard enough time wrapping his brain around angel bones, but angel feathers too?

"Here."

Jon had caught hold of his wrist and was pressing the feather into the palm of his hand before he knew what was happening, and Dean's skin began to tingle where the wispy object touched his flesh.

"Take good care of this, Dean Winchester," Volsung instructed him. "I think perhaps it might come in useful someday."

Dean wanted to reiterate the fact that this was a *feather* and what the hell was he supposed to do with a *feather* other than maybe stuff a non-existent cushion on his non-existent couch in his non-existent house with it?

But instead he decided to keep his mouth shut for once, taking a closer look at the thing as he raised it up to eye level. Gently, he ran the tip of his finger over the hollow point, but no remnants of any suspicious substances stained his skin as they had Jon's, and the feather certainly didn't glow as he thought it had when it had almost come into contact with Gudrun. Maybe he'd just imagined the whole thing.

He didn't get to ponder any further on the matter, however, as a distant rumbling suddenly started to emanate from the general direction of the Conduit.

"Not again!" Daisy burst out. "This is getting *really* annoying!"

As the ground beneath their feet began to vibrate, Dean stowed the feather inside his jacket, catching hold of Gudrun while Sam endeavored to pull Jon away from the opening to the abyss.

"I think we need to go," Sam informed them calmly, the distant rumbling becoming a little more insistent—and a little more rhythmic, as if someone was hammering against the underside of the opening from Hell with a battering ram.

"I think maybe that's the understatement of the century," Dean returned, beginning to tug insistently on Gudrun's arm.

"Wait—Jon!"

"He's right behind us," Dean assured her, pushing the Valkyrie in front of him, back towards the entrance to the cave, Zach, Daisy and Maynard all scrambling in the same direction.

Despite his reassurances, Dean glanced over his shoulder all the same, intent on ensuring Sam and Jon were actually following them, just in time to see a jet of flame shoot up out of the pit, backlighting his brother and the Norwegian in such a way as to make them appear as if they were momentarily on fire.

"Sam!" he yelled out, caught between getting Gudrun and the civilians to safety and heading back for his brother.

"We're okay," Sam cried back, Dean figuring he probably regretted that reassurance when the ground shuddered right out from beneath his feet and he and Volsung were flung to their knees.

"Sammy!"

Another jet of flame shot up out of the pit. Then another. And another. Huge fountains of fire interlacing with each other as they licked hungrily at the ceiling of the cave.

Sam looked up at his brother, waving him away. "Dean, get Gudrun out of here!" he insisted. "We're right behind you!"

With that, an explosion shook the entire cavern, rock blasting upwards from an area barely ten feet from where Sam was kneeling, stone and earth raining back down on him and Jon as a pillar of fire shot up from the new hole in the rocky cave floor.

"Holy *crap!*" Dean cried out. "What the hell...?"

"Probably," Gudrun agreed. "They're coming through!"

Dean turned to her as the ground juddered once more beneath their feet and another jet of fire burst through the cave floor shooting rock, earth and angelic remains up into the air before raining them back down onto the humans currently attempting to scramble to safety.

"But the Conduit—" Dean tried to protest, somehow managing to keep himself and the Valkyrie on their feet despite the ground trying very hard to slide right out from under them.

"Whatever they're using to blast through isn't just confining itself to the Conduit!" Gudrun yelled at him, the noise of each successive blast of exploding rock almost drowning her out completely. "They're going to take out this whole mountain if they have to!"

"Well that's just *super!*" Dean spat, once again glancing behind him to ensure Sam had managed to get to his feet and was following. "You couldn't have warned us earlier?"

"I'm not *psychic*, Dean!" Gudrun returned testily. "You want me to get you next week's winning Lotto numbers while I'm at it?"

Dean scowled at her. "As a matter of fact I would!" he replied. "You may as well make yourself useful. I mean, what good's a friggin' *Reaper* if you can't warn us when we're about to get *reaped?*"

"You're not getting reaped, Dean!" Gudrun assured him. "Not on my watch."

Suddenly reversing their positions, the shield maiden made a grab for Dean's arm, beginning to drag him toward the cave opening despite his protests.

"We have to go!" Gudrun reminded him. "Look at this place!"

"The remains," Sam pointed out breathlessly, as he and Jon were flung in Dean and Gudrun's general direction by another fountain of flame breaking ground behind them, covering them with a mixture of earth, rock and soot. "The pattern's being obliterated!"

The circle of angel bones was being decimated by the eruptions shooting up out of the earth, the remains tossed up into the air by each successive jet of fire, pieces raining back down onto the ground all around them.

Before Sam could say anything more, a loud crack resounded around the cave, a chasm suddenly yawning open from one side of the ring to the other, bisecting the Conduit and breaking the circle completely.

"They're destroying the devil's trap!" Gudrun yelled. "First the lake of holy water, now the bone circle; soon there'll be nothing to keep the demons trapped in Hell!"

"Except us!" Jon insisted, attempting to rise to his feet, the shining sword held aloft above his head. "We're the last line of defense!"

"Jeez, give him a sword and he thinks he's Zorro," Dean muttered, as the ground lurched beneath him, throwing them once again to their knees as more rocks rained down onto their heads.

The chasm across the center of the cave widened with another ear-shattering crack, and an ominous crimson light emanated from deep within its depths, bathing the walls in scarlet and black until the whole cave seemed to be filled with blood and fire.

As rocks exploded from within the Conduit and tendrils of flame reached up to claw at the ceiling, the sound of screaming once again filled the cave, whipping around them and bouncing off the walls, the sound of a million souls venting their anguish borne on the hot winds escaping Hell and spiraling up out of the abyss.

The entire mountain appeared to be shaking itself apart above them, great slabs of rock breaking free of the burning ceiling and crashing to the ground all around them.

"I suggest a tactical retreat!" Maynard suddenly bellowed from up ahead.
"Quickly, while we still can!"

Dean followed the direction of the Professor's stumbling run, his eyes lighting on the tiny sliver of light still visible at the cave's entrance.

Rock was falling all around them, one large, jagged chunk breaking loose from the ceiling and landing with a crash only a few feet away from the opening, smashing into a hundred pieces and partially blocking their exit.

"We can't stop a demonic invasion if we're dead!" Dean pointed out, managing to pull himself and Gudrun to their feet. "We've got to get out of here while there's still an out to get to!"

Gudrun frowned at him for a second. "That—almost made sense," she replied, grudgingly allowing Dean to begin pulling her toward the exit.

"Maybe all this falling rock will block up the Conduit?" Sam asked hopefully, catching hold of Dean's arm as the older brother stumbled, the ground continuing to slip-slide beneath them as it tried to shake itself apart.

Gudrun shook her head. "Maybe," she echoed uncertainly, casting her eyes back in the direction of the Conduit and sucking in a sharp intake of breath.

Dean followed her gaze, squinting in the crimson half-light as shadows began once again to emerge from the Conduit.

"They're coming," Gudrun breathed, she and Dean taking a step backwards, even as Dean's eyes tried to tell him something his brain didn't seem to want to acknowledge.

"They're different," Sam noted. "Not just shadows anymore..."

Dean drew in a breath.

There were hundreds of them, like cockroaches crawling up out of the Gateway to Hell, evil-looking creatures, blacker than shadows, red eyes gleaming in the darkness as they crawled up out of the Pit on their bellies, black leathery wings slowly unfurling on their shoulders as long claws cut into the earth.

"Demons," Dean breathed softly.

"Corporeal demons," Sam amended, his hand still clutching at Dean's arm as they began a slow backward retreat.

Jon stood before them, sword raised. "Go now!" he cried. "I'll hold them off!"

"Wait!" Gudrun yelled. "Jon, no!"

But Volsung wasn't listening, despite the incessant juddering of the ground somehow managing to make a charge back down toward the Conduit, the sword flashing brightly above his head, seemingly the only light in the entire cavern.

"Helgi!" Gudrun screamed, and it was all Dean and Sam could do to keep her from running after him, each grabbing an arm and attempting to drag the girl to safety. "Helgi!"

The ground chose that moment to lurch violently sideways, Dean, Sam and Gudrun all thrown together in a heap on the floor as a deafening roar was followed by a rumble and a crash the likes of which Dean had never heard before.

"No!" he heard Daisy screaming. "No, this shouldn't be happening!"

He shot a glance in the direction of the young archeologist, who was kneeling on the floor, Maynard and Zach struggling to their feet on either side of her.

For a brief second her eyes glittered in the daylight streaming in through the cave entrance, before all light was suddenly extinguished, swallowed up by shadows until her face was bathed only in crimson.

Dean cast his gaze beyond her to the cave entrance, where rock continued to crash down from the ceiling, completely blocking the exit.

"Crap."

"We're trapped!" Zach yelled, stating the obvious as blind terror filled his dark eyes.

"Sam!" Dean yelled. "I think we might be in trouble here!"

"Uh—" Sam managed to return. "I think you might be right."

He was staring at the Conduit, the color draining from his face, and Dean followed his gaze almost reluctantly, not sure he wanted to see what his brother was looking at in the encroaching darkness.

Volsung was no longer visible, the Einherjar having disappeared beneath a writhing sea of black and red. Instead, demonic eyes, tiny pinpricks of blood-red in the utter darkness, were advancing toward them to the incessant accompaniment of twisted screams and leathery wings beating against the hot Hellish air belching up out of the Conduit.

Hell was rising. And they had nowhere to go but Down.

Mount Diablo, CA

"Helgi!"

Gudrun scrambled desperately to her feet, her former husband's name ripped violently from her throat as she tried to claw her way back toward the Conduit; back to the place where she had last seen him, charging toward the advancing army of shadows with his shining sword held aloft and a battle cry on his lips.

"Gudrun, no!"

Dean threw himself after her, finally managing to envelope her in firmly restraining arms while she struggled weakly against him.

"Helgi," she whispered again, for a moment continuing to fight before finally sagging back against him. "Please."

Dean took her weight, holding her up as her body trembled, all her strength seeming to abandon her as she frantically scanned the mass of seething darkness that had consumed the Einherjar warrior.

"He'll be okay," Dean whispered in the girl's ear. "Believe me, Erika, he can take care of himself."

"But there are so many..." Gudrun's cracked voice drifted off as she leaned back against Dean's shoulder, her body continuing to shake uncontrollably as she tried to muster her strength. "I have to help him..."

Dean's eyes followed Gudrun's, scanning the roiling blackness pouring out of the mouth of the Conduit for any sign of Volsung.

But there was nothing, only red eyes swarming toward them like an angry crimson sea.

But only swarming so far.

"Why aren't they coming for us?" Dean asked uncertainly, gaze never leaving the hoards of demons spewing forth from the Conduit.

"The remains of the angels," Gudrun replied softly. "The devil's trap may have gone, but the remains still have power over demons." She shook her head. "It may slow them down a little, but it won't hold them for long."

"We need to go," Sam urged from behind them, but Dean was no more willing to leave Jon behind than Gudrun was, and he noted Sam wasn't making any obvious attempts to escape either.

"Go where?" Dean shot back over his shoulder, his eyes never straying from the approaching mass of demons who were making slow but definite headway across the poisoned earth surrounding the mouth of the Conduit. "The exit's blocked, remember?"

"I have to help him," Gudrun insisted again, once more attempting to squirm away from Dean's grasp. But her struggles were weak and ineffectual and Dean merely wrapped his arms tighter around her.

"Not like this you don't," he told her, his voice lowered. "You're too weak. You'll just get yourself killed...or—" he faltered, "—whatever."

"I'll find the strength!" Gudrun asserted. "I *won't* let him die! I *won't*!" Suddenly she spun in Dean's arms, a new resolve hardening her features. "It's my *job* to protect him," she said, eyes locking with Dean's. "I have to protect him! You understand that, don't you, Dean? It's my *job*."

Dean swallowed, nodding slowly. He understood all right. "What do you want me to do?" he asked levelly, his voice cracking a little.

Gudrun paused for a second, thinking. "Finish the gunpowder," she ordered at length, her voice seeming to gain strength along with her body and her resolve. "I'll hold off the demons—"

"You and whose army?"

"*Reaper*. That's what you call me, don't you?" Gudrun sighed. "Well I suppose it's almost an accurate description."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "All the crap you've given me for calling you that and I was right all along?"

Gudrun huffed and rolled her eyes. "Almost." She shuffled her feet uncomfortably. "Okay, I'm sorry, but I just don't like that word, all right?"

"All right," Dean agreed. "Then I'm sorry too. I won't call you a Reaper anymore. I'm glad we got that cleared up. Now are we gonna just stand here chatting while the hoards of Hell get real up close and personal with us or was there a point to this conversation?"

Gudrun huffed again. "All right, don't get your boxers in a twist!" she snapped, causing Dean to virtually growl at her. "So you know I have the power to convey the souls of the dead to Valhalla, right?" When Dean nodded, she lowered her eyes before continuing. "Well I can kind of send them to Hell too."

Dean blinked. "Like a Reaper," he interjected drily.

"Yes, like a Reaper," Gudrun conceded. "So I figure if I can send a few of these demons back where they came from, I might be able to hold the rest of them off long enough for you to finish the gunpowder."

Dean's brow furrowed. "I thought you said gunpowder wouldn't be enough to close the Conduit?"

"It won't," Gudrun agreed. "But it might be enough to reinforce the devil's trap—to stop any more demons getting out."

"It will?"

"The angel remains have kept this Conduit sealed for millennia, remember?" Gudrun said. "The stuff's deadly to demons. If you use some in the gunpowder the explosions will stir up even more and hopefully scatter enough around the Conduit to repair the trap, at least long enough for us to come up with a more permanent solution."

"Such as?"

A sly grin lit up Gudrun's pale features. "Don't you worry your pretty little head about that, Dean," she said, patting his cheek fondly. "Go blow stuff up. It's what you're good at. Leave the thinking to me."

Dean scowled at her before shoving her hand away. "You know, just when I think maybe I misjudged you, you go prove me right!"

"And maybe I should believe you when you tell me you're never wrong?"

"You bet your eternal ass, honey," Dean agreed. He shook his head. "Okay I'm still not sure this is gonna work, but if you say it will then... where do I sign up?"

"Gunpowder. Now Dean, go!"

Dean hesitated as the Valkyrie pushed him away from her, his face becoming suddenly serious. "Erika, are you sure you can—?"

"Dean, I'm immortal," Gudrun interrupted him. "Jon isn't. Go blow something up for me!"

Dean nodded, reluctantly releasing his hold on her as she turned and headed down toward the Conduit, down toward the last place she'd seen her former love.

The place currently swarming with demons.

"Be careful!" Dean tossed after her, before turning back to Sam, who was standing expectantly behind him, alternating nervous glances between the approaching tide of demonkind and the securely blocked cave entrance behind them. "C'mon, Gigantor," Dean ordered him shortly. "You stand still much longer your body's gonna get bored and decide to have another of those monster growth spurts just to relieve the tedium. And you're not gonna fit in the damn car if you get much taller, dude!"

Sam blinked at him blankly, apparently not appreciating his brother's finely-honed distraction technique. "Dean, we can't just let her go down there—"

Dean's expression sobered as he caught Sam's arm. "Yes we can, Sammy," he said. "It's what she wants. Plus, y'know, she's got that whole *Who Wants To Live Forever* thing goin' on. If anyone can save Frodo's ass it's her."

Sam relented slightly, allowing Dean to pull him backwards toward the cave entrance as he continued to gaze at the sea of roiling blackness into which Gudrun had now completely disappeared.

"Here." Dean thrust two flashlights into Sam's hands before feverishly diving back into the duffel which was splayed open on the cave floor, rummaging around frantically before producing a couple more. "Sammy, I gotta say sometimes it pays you're such a Boy Scout. I mean, *four flashlights? Who packs four flashlights?*"

Sam huffed slightly. "Redundancy," he returned quickly. "And just in case we wind up doing what we're doing now." He paused for a beat. "What are we doing now?"

Dean rolled his eyes before choosing to ignore his brother's enquiry altogether. "Zach, Professor!" he called out instead, the two men who were currently rather fruitlessly attempting to help Daisy shift some of the rock blocking the cave's entrance both glancing up at his hail. "Little help?"

Zach straightened, taking a hesitant step toward Dean, while Maynard jumped up and practically stomped on the younger man's feet in his enthusiasm to offer Dean any assistance he could.

Dean raised an amused eyebrow. "Think you guys can get me sulfur and saltpeter?"

Maynard nodded so vociferously Dean thought his head might actually come off. "Of course, my boy!" he burst out, a knowing glint in his eye, and Dean was pretty sure the diminutive professor had caught on immediately to what he was up to. "Collecting mineral samples from dark caves? Takes me right back to my childhood!"

"You visit a lot of Hellgates when you were a kid?" Zach asked drily. "'Cause I think I missed that field trip."

The professor chuckled. "Come with me son," he insisted, taking a firm grip on Zach's arm and dragging him off toward a nearby cave wall. "I'll show you what real geology's all about!"

"Sammy?" Dean turned his attention back to his brother once he was sure Maynard and his less-than-willing assistant were getting busy scraping what he needed off the walls. "Need you to get me some of the earth from nearer to the Conduit."

Sam stared at him for a second. "*Nearer...?*" he burst out. "Please tell me you're not *seriously* thinking about using angel remains to make gunpowder?"

Dean kept his expression purposefully neutral. "Why yes I am, little brother," he confirmed, snatching the flashlights back out of Sam's hands now he'd finished rooting through the duffel. "An immortal Valkyrie told me to do it, and when an immortal Valkyrie tells me to do something I figure I better do it!"

"When have you *ever* done anything she's asked you to do before?"

"I went up in that freakin' *plane* didn't I?"

"And look how well that turned out."

"C'mon Negative Nancy, go get me some angel dirt."

Sam hesitated for a second. "You really think this is gonna work?"

Dean hesitated for even longer than his brother had. "Hecked if I know. Sure as hell don't have the tools to do it properly, so the yield'll probably suck. But right now? We're kinda running low on options, Sammy."

Sam nodded reluctantly. "Okay. How close you want me to get?"

"Nowhere near those demons," Dean returned.

"Sounds like a plan."

"And Sammy?"

"Yeah?"

"Be careful."

"Yeah."

"And gimme your shoelaces."

"Huh?"

Sam paused for a second, glancing down at his sneakers before looking back up at Dean, who was already tearing his own laces from his boots.

"Now, Sam!" Dean urged him impatiently, holding his left hand out toward him while with his right he resumed rooting around in the duffel, finally pulling out half a bottle of water and a couple of shotgun shells.

"Okay, okay!" Sam complied a little reluctantly, apparently having little clue what Dean was doing, but bending down to pull his laces out of his shoes nonetheless. "But if I trip and fall flat on my ass and get eviscerated by demons 'cause you made me take out my shoelaces, you'll have to live with the guilt, okay?"

The corner of Dean's mouth ticked up as he knelt down and pulled out his pocket knife, cutting open the shotgun shells and pouring the powder out onto a chunk of rock that appeared to have shaken itself free of the ceiling.

Yanking open the bottle of water, he added a little to the powder, mixing the stuff into a paste with the knife before dumping his and Sam's shoelaces into the whole soggy mess.

Sensing Sam still standing there watching him, still apparently clueless, Dean didn't look up as he muttered, "You know, if you still don't know what I'm doing, little brother, you *deserve* to fall on your ass and get eviscerated by demons."

Dean could almost see the light bulb snap on above his brother's head as Sam suddenly burst out triumphantly, "Fuses! You're making fuses!"

Dean shook his head. "And they say *you're* the smart one, Stanford," he commented, trying to sound exasperated but pretty much failing to keep a big grin from breaking out on his face. "Knew you were paying attention to Caleb. Even when you told Dad you weren't."

Sam shrugged dismissively. "You know me, Dean," he said, finally turning away from his brother and heading off toward the Conduit. "Anything to tick the old man off."

"Well don't tick him off by getting eviscerated by demons!" Dean instructed him sharply. "'Cause you know it'd be *my* ass he'd kick from here to Timbuktu if you did!"

"Well you'd deserve it," Sam tossed over his shoulder. "For taking my shoelaces."

* * * *

Sam didn't know how Dean ever got it into his head his little brother thought he was dumb. It was *so* not true and kind of hurt that Dean would think Sam looked down on him that way. Bad enough he should be constantly looking down on him in the physical sense, but intellectually? Dean might not have gotten a free ride

to Stanford, but Sam wasn't lying when he said Dean was one of the smartest people he knew.

Making fuses out of shoelaces? That was pretty ingenious, even for Dean, and he always had had a knack for conjuring something up out of nothing. Sam still remembered the madly creative meals his big brother used to come up with when they were kids and all they seemed to have in the fridge was a bulb of garlic and a jar of Cheez Whiz.

Sam smiled to himself at the memory, glad of the distraction from the churning mass of leathery wings and glowing red eyes only a few yards away from him. It was harder, however, to ignore the howls of frustrated anger and unpleasant sizzle of demon flesh emanating from the direction of the Conduit as one after another the demons attempted to crawl over the poisonous earth that stood between them and freedom.

This close to the Conduit, Sam had hoped to see some sign of Jon—the flash of a blade, a glimpse of pale blond hair—but so far he'd seen nothing, and there was no sign of Gudrun either. He just hoped the two of them were holding their own against the demonic onslaught.

Trying not to think too hard about that, he crouched down and began digging, carefully transferring the earth into an empty family-sized bag of peanut M&Ms, which had lasted Dean all of about an hour earlier this morning.

Sam was almost disappointed the earth didn't feel any different from regular dirt, having half hoped the angel remains within the soil would give off some kind of vibration or sign that there was more here than just decomposed flesh. Something important. Something *divine*.

Sighing, he transferred more earth to the packet, so intent on trying to figure out how much Dean might need that it took him a couple of seconds to register the dark shadow suddenly falling across him.

He looked up with a start, blood red eyes mere inches from his own.

Sucking in a startled breath, he fell backwards, just as the demon's claws slashed the air above his head where a second earlier his face had been.

"Oh *crap*...!"

Scrambling back on his elbows, Sam braced himself for the inevitable agony of the demon's talons slicing through his innards, but instead of feeling his insides shredded to hamburger meat, the scaly monstrosity hovering above him unexpectedly exploded in a cloud of black smoke, and Sam found himself coughing as the haze eventually cleared to reveal Gudrun standing there, her hand raised and her eyes squeezed tightly shut.

As the smoke cloud was sucked back toward the Conduit behind her, the Valkyrie opened her bright blue eyes and smiled at Sam, before abruptly collapsing to the ground at his feet.

"Gudrun!"

Sam scrambled to his knees, crawling over to the downed shield maiden and carefully pulling her into his arms, running his hand over her pale cheek and pushing her hair from her damp forehead as his eyes shot back toward the cave exit in the hope of attracting his brother's attention.

But Dean was already standing right in front of him, right where the demon had been standing, a shotgun clutched in his hand and slightly out of breath from apparently having dashed down from the cave entrance the second he saw a demon rear up in front of his little brother.

"You okay Sammy?"

Half-panicked concern thrummed through the older brother's voice as Sam looked up at him and nodded, his heart rate slowly returning to something approaching normal.

"Yeah, I'm good," he lied, glancing down at the barely-conscious girl in his arms. "But I'm not sure I can say the same for Gudrun. Help me get her back to the exit will ya?"

Dean nodded, making to bend down to help the girl, but suddenly yanked clean off his feet by the hideous mass of demon unaccountably standing right behind him.

"Dean!"

Sam barely had time to register what was happening as the demon's ebony claws clamped tightly around Dean's throat, the older brother's eyes widening in shocked surprise as the shotgun clattered uselessly to the ground while his feet kicked out at empty air and his fingers scrabbled hopelessly at the huge hand intent on choking the life right out of him.

"*Winchester!*" the demon growled, its voice as deep and dark as Hell itself, and Dean's eyes widened still further, shooting helplessly in Sam's direction before the demon yanked him a couple more feet into the air, holding him up so they were at eye level, parched black lips and bloodstained fangs mere inches from Dean's neck.

"No! Let him go!"

Sam tried to get to his feet, but Gudrun was a dead weight in his arms, her eyes suddenly fluttering open to take in the scene before her. Alarm flooded her features and she tried to raise her hand toward the demon, her fingers shaking with the effort and her lips parted but no words escaping.

"Can't..." she managed finally, her voice so weak Sam could barely hear her. "Can't do it..." she whispered. "Too weak. Can't..."

Sam's frantic gaze shot back to his brother, whose lips had turned a distinct shade of blue, his eyes beginning to roll back in his head as he began to lose the battle to remain conscious.

"Dean! No!"

Just like in Phoenix, in Leicester, in Plano and Fort Worth, Sam felt the familiar tingle begin to build behind his eyeballs. Alyssa, Mia, *Lucifer*—all of them had succumbed to the force of Sam's "gift," all of them subjected to the power Sam now felt once again thrumming through his limbs: electricity and broken glass; power and pain; fear, love and anger; all of it building, building to something he couldn't define, couldn't quantify, couldn't even name.

Gritting his teeth he closed his eyes as the thunder of blood pounding through his veins almost deafened him, and just when he thought every cell in his body might explode with the force of it, it left him in a powerful burst of energy, lifting the seven foot demon clear into the air and shaking it hard until it released his brother, Dean dropping like a stone to the cave floor as the demon was tossed through the air like a football, landing with a howl and a hiss of burning flesh back where the angelic remains were their most powerful and potent.

Sam breathed hard as he tried to focus, the demon's screams reverberating in his ears as it struggled to its smoldering feet, one painful step after another toward him, toward Dean, and Sam felt the burning behind his eyes and the aching in his head, and suddenly Gudrun's fingers were interlaced with his own, her eyes turned up to his in wonder.

"You're a mirror!" she gasped. "Your purpose! That's your purpose, Sam!"

Closing her eyes once again, Gudrun gripped his hand tighter and Sam felt something else stir within him, a greater power, white hot and blinding, building and building within him. He tried to close his eyes but all he could see was the huge form of the demon taking another step toward his barely-conscious brother, looming over his downed form, lips pulled back in an ugly snarl and talons elongated like merciless blood-soaked razor blades.

"Dean!" He heard someone scream his brother's name, not entirely sure it wasn't him, his vision blurring and whiting out as something fizzled and crackled in his ears.

"Sam, *help* me!" Gudrun screamed from somewhere, and then he felt it, a power so overwhelming it was like nothing he'd ever experienced in his life before, his fingers tingling where he touched the Valkyrie's, and when he opened his eyes his hand was outstretched with hers and the demon was dissolving into a cloud of sulfurous smoke, billowing back toward the Conduit with a scream of anger still reverberating around the cave in its wake.

Sam held completely still, not even breathing, the shock of what just happened too much for him to process right away.

The demon. He'd *reaped* the demon...

"It's all right, Sam," Gudrun was softly murmuring into his ear, her hand still grasped in his own. "It's all right. Everyone has a purpose. Everyone has a purpose, Sam."

Sam sucked in a breath, his eyes finally meeting the Valkyrie's. "What... what did I—we... What did we do?"

Gudrun placed her free hand on his cheek. "You're a mirror, Sam. I used your ability to mirror my powers, concentrate them, augment them with your own."

Sam blinked at her. "*You used my power?*" he gasped a little incredulously.

"To make mine stronger, yes," Gudrun confirmed.

"Gudrun—"

"Help me, Sam," the girl repeated. "You can help me. You *have* to help me!" Her eyes widened and Sam followed her gaze as she glanced back in Dean's direction, the older Winchester struggling to his feet as yet another demon bore down upon him. "*Now, Sam!*"

"*Winchester!*"

The demon repeated its predecessor's taunt, throwing the name at Dean like an accusation, and before Sam really knew what was happening he once again felt Gudrun's weakened power flooding into him, through him, out of him. The Valkyrie was too weak to wield it by herself, her body trembling as Sam somehow managed to keep them both on their feet, but with the younger Winchester's help she made short work of reaping the demon, sending it back to Hell with an unearthly bellow that followed the twisting column of black smoke as it was dragged back down into the Conduit.

When Sam opened his eyes again, it was to see Dean looking at him, his face pale and his lips drawn into a tight line.

Sam wanted to say something, ask if he was okay, but there was something in Dean's eyes that stopped him cold and all he could do was return his gaze helplessly.

"Sam," Gudrun said again. "The demons. I can't hold them by myself. You have to help me!"

The Valkyrie was trying to stand and it took Sam a few seconds for his brain to catch up with her, pulling himself up shakily and helping her to her feet, his eyes never leaving Dean's.

The older brother swallowed, his hand moving cautiously to his throat, which was already painted an impressive array of purples and reds. "Sam?" he managed to croak. "You okay?"

Sam thought about that for a second before nodding. "As I'll ever be," he confirmed, glancing down at Gudrun and smiling a little awkwardly.

She returned his smile with a rather grim one of her own, her attention shifting to Dean as she suddenly barked, "Gunpowder! *Now, Dean!*"

Dean glanced at Sam uncertainly, the younger Winchester's slightly shell-shocked expression melting into something approaching reassurance.

"I'll be all right, Dean," Sam promised his brother. "I think I need to do this."

* * * *

Dean couldn't breathe, and he was pretty sure it wasn't because a seven foot demon had just tried to crush his windpipe.

He did his best to suck in a breath as Sam turned away from him, Gudrun clinging to him like some kind of six foot four inch crutch as the two of them headed off toward the Conduit, toward the heaviest concentration of demons.

His gut twisted, and not just out of fear for Sam's safety. What the hell had his little brother just done?

What had Sam just *done*?

In his head, he knew there was no way Sam just reaped a demon. He *knew* that. He *did*. But still, the sight of Gudrun using his baby brother to send a demon back to Hell? *That* he could have done without. Even though he knew it was Gudrun who did the actual reaping, not his brother. He knew *that*. He did. Sam wasn't a Reaper. He *wasn't*.

He took another breath, massaging his neck gingerly as he glanced about himself, trying to remember what the hell was going on here before Sam just reaped a demon.

The several hundred *more* demons pouring out of the Conduit quickly reminded him, flames shooting up higher and higher from the steadily widening breach in the barrier between Hell and Earth, lighting the entire cave an eerie blood red.

He glanced upwards as a loud crack tore the air above his head, fingers of flame reaching up from the Conduit toward a tiny sliver of blinding white light spearing down from what appeared to be a breach in the ceiling of the cave. And yet Dean knew that wasn't possible—the ceiling was still intact, and there was no way any daylight could be coming in from anywhere up there, not with several hundred feet of mountain still on top of them.

So where the hell was the light coming from?

Dean suddenly remembered how Gudrun had entered the cave; the white light that had almost blinded him when she'd opened the Conduit from Above.

Above.

Lucifer's demon army had forced its way up from Hell to Earth and now seemed intent on continuing its journey.

With a shudder, Dean realized that Sam had been right: Earth wasn't the demons' primary objective.

They were trying to force their way back into Heaven.

He could only watch in mute horror as a phalanx of demons poured from the Conduit, one by one unfurling leathery black wings and launching themselves up toward the light. With a painful thud, each came to a sudden and incongruous halt just inches away from the opening, as if the light—and what lay beyond—was protected by some kind of invisible barrier.

As demon after hideous demon slammed into the barrier, undaunted by their comrades falling back to the poisoned earth with screams of disgruntled protest and obvious pain, Dean wondered whether the remaining power of the devil's trap and the angel remains extended upwards, or whether this was something else, something generated from Above, one last line of defense designed to keep out anyone—or anything—that should attempt to enter Heaven by force.

A battle cry from over to Dean's left drew his attention back to the edge of the Conduit, where with some relief he spied Volsung striding among the demon hoards, his silver sword held high above his head, cutting them down one after another. He seemed untouchable, hacking and slicing at anything that came within striking distance, black blood and demonic entrails smeared across his face and his torso.

Dean could only watch in admiration as the Einherjar advanced upon a large group of demons, most of which, quickly realizing the danger, immediately fell back, corralled toward the lip of the Pit as they endeavored to retreat as far from the certain death offered by the blade of Volsung's sword as they possibly could. Some of them screamed as they toppled backwards, swallowed by the flames and the heat as they were dragged back into Hell's fiery embrace. Others tried to fly to safety, but Jon made quick work of them, hacking at their wings dispassionately, the obsidian feathers turning to ash the instant they made contact with his blade.

Dean briefly considered offering to help the Einherjar, but it was painfully obvious Volsung didn't need his help, and neither did Sammy, mirroring Gudrun's reaping powers and sending demon after demon back down into the Pit with what appeared to be effortless ease.

So what *could* a mere mortal like Dean do to help the cause?

Blow stuff up.

His gaze slid to the bag of earth Sam had left at his feet, and he snatched it up purposefully, scooting back toward the cave entrance where Daisy, Zach and Maynard were currently crouched, having given up on trying to shift the mountain of rock still denying them escape.

"Is Sam okay?" Zach asked as Dean skidded to a halt in front of the small pile of minerals he and the professor had managed to collect from the cave walls. "Where is he?"

Dean glanced back over his shoulder, no longer able to pick out Sam, Gudrun or Volsung in the mass of writhing demons, but somehow knowing as long as he had Gudrun by his side, his little brother would survive.

"As okay as he's gonna get," Dean replied shortly, echoing his brother's earlier reassurances. "But we need to get some of those demons off his ass or he's not gonna stay that way for long."

Upending the M&M bag onto the pile of sulfur and saltpeter, Dean grabbed his bowie knife from the duffel and began mixing his explosive concoction together, absolutely no idea whether this crazy idea of his had a hope in Hell of working.

He chuckled to himself wryly. *Hope in Hell...* Yeah that's exactly what he had.

Snatching up the four discarded flashlights, Dean twisted off the end caps, removing the bulbs and cutting the housing from the plastic case with his pocket knife before shaking the batteries out of each tube. Carefully, he packed the empty tubes with the makeshift gunpowder, threading one of his patented shoelace fuses through the hole he'd made where the bulb housing used to be before screwing the end caps back onto the gunpowder-packed tubes and finally taking a very shaky breath.

He sat back and admired his handiwork for a second, oddly proud of the jury-rigged explosives.

"Are those things gonna work?" Daisy asked a little skeptically, and Dean honestly wished he could assure her "yes."

As it was, the opportunity to respond never arose, Daisy's attention abruptly torn away from him and a scream ripped from her throat as Zach simultaneously let out a cry of surprised terror.

Dean's head shot up just as a demon threw itself on top of Sam's former college buddy.

"Zach, *no!*" Daisy cried out, and Dean's fingers instantly began scrabbling about on the ground, desperately tried to find the shotgun.

With no weapon in sight save the bowie knife which, if Dean was honest, he knew wasn't going to be much use against a demon, it didn't take a genius with a Sammy-sized brain to figure out they were in trouble.

Which was when the earth beneath them decided to give a familiar judder, his focus skittering instantly back to Daisy.

Her eyes were closed, forehead creased in concentration, the rocks blocking the cave entrance shuddering and shifting against one another as the ground around them suddenly lurched with enough force to throw the demon from on top of Zach, the monster rolling and landing with a thud a couple of feet away from him.

Regrouping, the demon pulled itself to its feet as Daisy's eyes opened and the ground beneath them stilled.

She took a breath, eyes meeting Dean's awkwardly.

Dean didn't say anything—he didn't have to. Her sheepish gaze told him everything he needed to know.

Daisy *had* been causing earthquakes. Just not *all* of them....

Dean was shaken back to the current danger by the demon suddenly letting loose a ferocious growl, its Hellish gaze now turned on Daisy rather than Zach, as if it knew where the real danger lay in the group of puny humans laid out at its feet.

It took a step toward the girl, coal-dark wings extended up and out creating the illusion of a creature much bigger than the one in front of them. Although it was plenty big enough, Dean mused, trying not to think too much about that as he jumped to his feet and firmly planted himself between the Hellspawn and the

young archeologist, only then once again remembering he had no weapon with which to defend either of them.

It occurred to him he had no idea what had happened to the shotgun, vaguely remembering dropping it when the first demon had decided to play chew toy with him, and for a brief moment his gaze slid longingly to his bowie and his pocket knife discarded several feet across the cavern floor near his homemade pipe bombs. They might be useless against a demon, but at least he'd go down swinging. Or slashing. Or both.

He smiled nervously. "Nice demon," he muttered, hands raised placatingly in front of him. "Just a big pussycat really, aren't ya? Just misunderstood. Bet you don't really want to rip me to shreds and eat me for lunch, now do you, huh?"

The demon shook out its wings in response, narrowing its crimson eyes and baring its fangs threateningly.

"I think someone has some anger issues," Dean observed, taking a nervous step back as the demon advanced on him, quickly chancing a glance over his shoulder at the girl cowering behind him on the ground. "Hey Daisy?" he managed, doing his level best to sound calm and collected, as if he faced off with seven-foot demons every day of the week. "Could use some of that rocking 'n rolling of yours right about now!"

Daisy was trembling visibly, Zach having scooted over to her and wrapped her in his arms protectively.

"I'm not a freak!" she insisted, her voice tremulous and tear-filled. "I'm not!" She shook her head at him before burying her face against Zach's shoulder, as if that would make the approaching demon somehow disappear.

Dean swallowed, shifting his attention back to the demon, which he was rather alarmed to discover was now only inches from him, so close he could feel the heat of its breath on his cheek, smell the sulfur in every exhale.

Locking eyes with the Hellspawn, Dean only had time to think, "Dammit, not again!" before he was unceremoniously grabbed by the throat, yanked into the air and tossed several feet across the cave like a rag doll, landing hard and striking his shoulder painfully against a chunk of rock no doubt dislodged from the ceiling.

"*Goddammit!*" he cried out, somehow managing to stifle a string of further profanities as he rolled onto his back and raised himself up onto his elbows.

Only to find himself looking up into the demon's blood red eyes.

"Crap," he muttered, once again wondering where the hell he'd left his shotgun.

* * * *

So this wasn't so bad, Sam told himself, another blast of Gudrun's augmented reaping power shooting from their entwined fingertips and sending Hell's most recent escapee tumbling back into the Pit with a howl of protest.

Sam allowed himself a tiny smile of triumph, which quickly died on his lips as two more demons emerged from the Conduit where the first had fallen, nostrils flared and black lips pulled back over snarling fangs.

"There's just too many of them!" Gudrun gasped, sagging a little at Sam's side. "No matter how many we send back to Hell, there's always twice as many to take their place!"

Sam hadn't been keeping a tally of the number of demons he and Gudrun had reaped so far, but as he glanced around himself at the advancing throng of Hellspawn, it was pretty obvious their numbers hadn't noticeably lessened.

He turned his attention upwards for a second as the blinding white sliver of light spearing down from the Conduit became inexplicably brighter, the tiny crack Lucifer's army had opened in the gateway to Heaven widening considerably, accompanied by the sound of something that may have been a cheer had the demons battering themselves against the opening been human.

"They're forcing their way past the barrier," Gudrun told him. "If they make it through..." She didn't have to voice her fears about what would happen should Lucifer's advance guard successfully batter their way into Heaven the way they had battered their way up to the Earth.

It would be war. And it would be Apocalyptic.

They both turned sharply at the sound of a pained yelp, Jon coming into view for the first time since he'd initially disappeared into the roiling throng of demons.

"Helgi!" Gudrun yelled.

The demons had him surrounded, a semi-circle of Hellish teeth and claws snapping and tearing at him, forcing him back, back toward the precipice of the Conduit. He continued to hack at them with the silver sword, limbs and wings and the occasional head all turning to ash with each arc of his blade, but their numbers were too great, and even if he was still partly Einherjar, he was just one man.

"We have to help him!" Gudrun insisted, making a desperate move toward him.

Sam didn't argue, racing after the Valkyrie with his hand still clasped in hers, demon after demon thrown unceremoniously out of their path as Gudrun's now-familiar power coursed through his body, dispatching the enemy back to Hell with frighteningly cool efficiency.

"Helgi!"

This time it felt different as Gudrun halted her forward momentum, planting her feet and closing her eyes.

She was still clutching his hand in hers, holding on for all she was worth, but instead of feeling her power within him, Sam felt something else. That familiar vibration, that energy he'd felt when the demon had grabbed hold of Dean, when Lucifer had threatened to throw him into Hell, when Alyssa had wiped his memory and Mia had told Sam Dean was dead; that power was what he felt now. *His* power. But it wasn't his concern for Dean that was fueling it.

It was Gudrun's love for Jon.

With a startled gasp, it suddenly dawned on him what was going on here.

Up until this point, Gudrun had been using Sam's powers to bolster her own, using his gift to reflect her ability to reap the souls of the Damned and vanquish more demons than she ever could have done by herself, particularly in her currently weakened state.

But now, things were changing. Their positions were becoming reversed. Gudrun wasn't using Sam's abilities anymore: she was letting Sam use *hers*.

Sam could feel everything she felt: her overwhelming devotion to her former husband; the devastation she had felt when he had been ripped from her side and laid in the ground; the intense power of her love for him, which transcended everything she was and everything she could be to such an extent that she would *die* for him if such a thing were possible. And she had. Back in Canada. And now she was prepared to do it again.

But she didn't need to.

Because this time, she had Sam on her side.

And this time, he knew what he was supposed to do.

Closing his eyes, he allowed Gudrun's love for Jon to fill him up completely, let her need to protect him block out every other thought in his head as the familiar tingle began once again in his fingertips, working its way up his arms and lodging in his chest, building up to a crescendo over his heart before bursting out of him in a sudden rush of power even more fearsome than anything he'd experienced previously.

He was everything and he was nothing; he was the universe and he was empty space. He was Erika Gudrun and he was Sam Winchester.

And the world would end before he'd let a demon take from him another person he cared about.

"Sam!"

It was Gudrun and it was Dean; Jon Volsung and John Winchester; Jessica Moore and Sarah Blake; Kyle Williams and Bobby Singer; Nathan Cole, David Mitchum, Matthew Ismay. It was Alyssa Medina and Mia Cameron. And it was Mary. Mary Winchester. Sam's mother. Every person he'd saved, every person he'd failed to save. Mother, father, brother, lover, friend, ally and enemy.

He would save them all.

Even if it meant ending everything.

"No!" Gudrun screamed at his side, and suddenly everything went white....

* * * *

It felt chillingly familiar, this tightness in Dean's chest, the demon looming over him with glowing eyes aflame and an outstretched hand.

It wore its true face this one, hadn't put on the flesh of an innocent the way Haris had worn his father like protective wrapping. *Dean won't shoot Daddy, and neither will Sammy...* He'd relied on that, that bastard demon.

But still it was the cabin all over again, and Dean clutched at the flesh above his heart, remembering. Haris' yellow eyes peering out at him from Dad's face. *"He's gonna tear you apart. Taste the iron in your blood..."*

Dean thought his head might explode, or at the very least he might pass out, struggling for every breath as the demon leaned in closer, saliva dripping from bared teeth and a hungry glint in fiery eyes.

Dean fought to draw in another breath as a wet warmth crept across his constricting chest, and he was back in the cabin, the demon shredding him from the inside out just as Haris had.

And yet there was no pain.

Somehow managing to glance down, Dean watched the crimson stain blossoming across his shirt in fascination, a pool of blood spreading over his chest that he wasn't entirely sure was his own.

The demon snarled, nostrils flared as it smelt the blood, and sensed the life of its prey right there for the taking.

Reaching out one taloned hand, it gripped Dean's t-shirt, scrabbling for purchase on the slick material as the blood collecting on the shirt oozed between bony black fingers.

Dean prepared himself for the inevitable, expecting screams of agony to be torn from his throat at any second.

Instead, a howl of pure anguish was unaccountably ripped from the demon's scaly lips, the creature throwing back its head and screeching as the hand clutching at Dean abruptly exploded into ash.

Dean's eyes widened in stunned astonishment as the demon continued to wail and thrash, its arm, then its torso and finally its entire body crumbling into dust and ash, a cloud of blackness raining down on Dean until the only parts remaining of the demon were its two red eyes glowing fiercely at him in the darkness, before they too dissipated into nothing.

Dean coughed, anxious not to breathe in anything that had once been part of a demon, and not entirely sure what the hell just happened.

He lay completely still for a second, listening to the sound of his own accelerated heartbeat and waiting for the cloud of ash to fall to the ground around him before managing to drag himself up into a sitting position.

His head swam, the demon's screams still ringing in his ears as he apprehensively began examining himself for a wound he knew would not be there.

He wasn't bleeding. He wasn't mortally wounded. *It wasn't his blood...*

What the *hell*?

He tugged at his shirt, fingers slipping in the slick crimson staining the cotton. Thankfully, unlike the demon, his flesh remained intact and all he had to show for his exploration was a bloodstained hand.

No ash, no dust, no pain, no injury.

Seriously. What the hell?

Gingerly, he peeled back his jacket, looking for something, anything, that could explain what just happened, where the blood was coming from, what the hell was bleeding all over him.

What he found was the feather.

The same feather Jon had dug up from the earth by the Conduit; the same feather Dean had wanted to discard, but instead had secreted safely in his inside jacket pocket, mindful of Volsung's insistence that the thing might come in handy someday.

Who knew that day would be today?

Gently extricating the feather from his bloodstained pocket, Dean held it a little warily in the palm of his hand.

It was glowing.

And it was *bleeding*.

As Dean continued to hold the thing uncertainly, the blood dripping from the end of the hollow shaft like a quill pen in some clichéd horror movie gradually began to slow, finally desisting altogether, the soft glow gently fading to the feather's customary gray.

"Holy crap!" Dean muttered to himself as he stared at the innocuous-looking object in the palm of his hand. "Demon-killing angel feather!"

Jon hadn't been kidding when he'd said it might come in handy....

* * * *

Sam couldn't breathe, couldn't move, couldn't think. Every nerve ending felt like it was on fire, his skin tingling and burning, his vision blurred and colorless. All he could hear was the roar of his own blood in his ears and Gudrun's terrified scream of "No!"

Everything was lit up a brilliant white—like when he used a flare to banish the Daevas back in Chicago. Shadow demons. He could hear them screaming all around him, demons, hundreds of them, and in his confused state he thought he was once again running from the Daevas, supporting his dad and his brother, blood dripping down his face where their claws had ripped at his skin.

"Sam don't—it's too much!"

But he heard Gudrun. Gudrun hadn't been in Chicago, only Dad and Dean and Meg, and Meg was dead and Dad was God knows where and Dean... Where was Dean?

He tried to see, tried to open his eyes, but all he saw was white, angel bones all around him glowing, brilliant and blinding, and everything was melting together inside his head, ice and fire and glass and sand and Gudrun's power thrumming through him, right there, he could *feel* it, tearing, ripping and shredding the demons, rending their bodies and tossing their miserable souls back to Hell where they belonged.

But there was more, so much more. Not just Gudrun's power, not just her love for Jon. It was almost as if Sam couldn't tell where the Valkyrie ended and he began, her need to protect Jon almost indistinguishable from Sam's need to protect Dean. It was all confused and mixed up, so much emotion, so much love and need and power, and something *else*, something that made the ground tremble, something—*someone*—he'd not felt in his head like this before. Another power; another need to protect. Another kid from a cursed family, just like Sam. Trembling ground and earthquakes and "Zach, *no!*"

Daisy.

It was *Daisy*. Sam could feel her power too, vibrating through his body just as Gudrun's did, the ground, the walls, the ceiling beginning to tremble around him as demon after demon was dispatched back to the Underworld, all that need, all that love, all of it mixed up in his head—Jon, Zach, Dean—he was Sam and he was Gudrun and he was Daisy and the earth moved when he told it to, while he made demons scream with a single thought.

Too much. It was too much.

The world was ending, and all he could do was protect his family—Jon, Zach, Dean—send away the demons before they took those lives he valued more than his own—Gudrun, Daisy, Sam—send every demon that had escaped back to Hell before it was too late; before Earth, Heaven and his family fell.

End it all.

He had to end it all.

"Sam! *No!*"

He was falling, falling off the world and falling to his knees, hands gripping his shoulders as someone—Gudrun?—fell with him, and dimly, as if he was underwater, he heard explosions in the distance, rock shattering, more demons howling in anger and anguish and *pain*.

There was another loud bang, and another, and something in the back of his head whispered *gunpowder*. Gunpowder. *Dean*.

"Dean?!"

Sam called his brother's name, but the sound barely made it out of his throat, his voice as spent as the rest of his body.

"Dean!" he tried again, more strength in the word, forcing opening his eyes, but still able to see nothing but white, hear nothing but white noise.

"Sam, it's all right."

He could feel Gudrun clinging to him, as weak and exhausted as he was, her cold hand pressed flat against the side of his face where he still had sensation, could feel her near him, even if he couldn't see her and could barely hear her.

"It's all right Sam. We're all right now."

As sensation made its way back to the rest of his body, he realized he could still feel the ground trembling beneath him, but the fire, the power, *Daisy's* power, had gone, leaving Sam alone again. One person alone in his head.

But the ground was still shaking.

"I'm not—I'm not—the earthquake... It's not me..."

"That's okay, Sammy."

Suddenly there were strong arms around him and he was being hauled gently to his feet. Warmth and strength and a familiar presence anchoring him to the world.

"Dean?"

"C'mon, Sammy," he heard his brother say. "Time to go."

Dean's face swam into focus inches from his own, the color slowly returning to the world as Sam recognized the green in his brother's eyes. There was red on his face. Blood. His face was streaked with blood and dirt and Sam blinked hard, needing to see. There was blood all over him, all over his shirt. Lots of blood, garish red to Sam's color-sensitive eyes and he was tugging at Dean's shirt, desperately trying to find the injury, the source, stem the bleeding, stop him dying, anything....

"Sam? Sam! Sam it's okay!" Dean caught his brother's hands, stilling them, the warmth of his fingers reassuring Sam he was really there, really alive. "It's okay, Sammy, it's not my blood, okay? I'm okay, okay?"

Sam frowned at his brother, not sure he understood. Not sure he understood anything.

"C'mon, Sammy," Dean continued to coax him. "You did great. You did *really* great. But now we need to go."

Sam was standing somehow, more by strength of his brother's will alone than under his own power, blinking as the garish colors resolved themselves into something resembling reality, Dean's face turned up to his in concern, an arm

wrapped around his waist holding him up, solid and real, and Sam was trembling so hard he wasn't sure he could move.

Was he trembling? Or was it the ground?

"Sammy, just let me get you out of here, okay? Before Daisy brings the whole place down on top of us."

"Daisy?"

Sam heard the name and was pretty sure it came from his own mouth, screwing up his face in confusion.

"Yeah, Sammy," Dean continued, shrugging slightly as he readjusted Sam's weight against his shoulder. "She's—uh—pretty much picking up where you left off."

"Left? What did I leave?"

"Not much," Dean replied shortly.

Sam blinked again, the colors finally beginning to resolve into shapes. Gudrun in Jon's arms, carrying her, running for the cave entrance; light spearing in from the outside. Outside. The rocks that had been blocking their escape were gone, shattered, Daisy standing in front of them with her eyes closed as the earth continued to quake at her direction, Zach watching her wide-eyed as Maynard gripped his arm.

"Yeah, Sammy. You—you pretty much—they're..." Dean didn't—couldn't—finish what he was trying to say, eyes skittering around the cavern, behind them, back towards the Conduit.

Somehow Sam managed to twist in Dean's grip, looking up to see that the shaft of light that had been forcing its way out through the rift created by Lucifer's attacking army had been extinguished, the breach now sealed. Below, the flames of Hell were receding, dragging with them black shadows, demons screaming and writhing in agony, carcasses pulled back toward the Pit against their will with flesh sizzling from their bones and wings broken and burnt to cinders.

Dean swallowed. He seemed a little more than perturbed as he followed Sam's gaze, but managed a half-hearted smile. "Gunpowder worked," he informed his brother. "Better than napalm."

Sam winced, eyes scanning the cave for the mass of demons that had been advancing on him when he was last fully aware of his surroundings. But, save for the damned souls still clinging to the rim of the Conduit with torn, bloodied claws, screeching and wailing as the earth disturbed by Dean's explosions clung to and scorched their skin, there were no more shadows, only trembling rock and Sam's shell-shocked friends, pale-faced and uncertain.

Zach was glancing nervously between Sam and Daisy, his face creased in concern and worry and—fear?

Was Zach afraid of him?

"Dean, what did I do?"

It took Sam everything he had to ask the question, eyes never straying from Zach's, and Dean merely tightened his grip on his brother, urging him toward the exit insistently.

"You did good, Sammy," the older brother repeated, the certainty in his voice causing the knot in Sam's stomach to untwist a little. "Mass exorcism. Or mass reaping, I guess. Never seen anything like it. And the bastards you didn't get? Boy, was Gudrun ever right about the angel remains. Sent 'em scuttling back to Lucifer's favorite Hotspot with a suntan they ain't never gonna forget."

Sam nodded minutely.

"Okay so no more emo, Sam," Dean continued. "We gotta get the hell outta here before Daisy gets *really* pissed."

Even as Dean finished his sentence, chunks of rock once again began to break free of the cave ceiling, raining down all around them as Daisy continued to stand stock still, eyes closed and expression oddly serene.

"Think Cousin Daisy's found her true calling, Sammy," Dean continued, finally managing to get Sam's feet moving in the direction of the exit. "Now come on, before we wind up like these angel bones."

Sam let Dean half-shove half-drag him toward the exit, stumbling over fallen boulders, dodging showers of rock.

"Dean?" Jon was standing at the mouth of the cave, blessed daylight making his blond hair glow like a halo around his head, Gudrun apparently still insensible in his arms.

"Right there with ya, Frodo," Dean replied, pushing Sam toward him before casting a glance in Maynard's direction. "C'mon Professor, time to go!"

Maynard nodded, gently pulling at Zach's arm. "This way, my boy. Time to get your young lady to safety, hmm?"

Zach paused for a second before hesitantly approaching Daisy, one gentle hand on her shoulder before he murmured, "Come on, baby. You've done enough now."

The ground gave one last enormous lurch before Daisy's eyes flew open, looking at Zach but not really seeing him, her pupils dilated and sluggish and her skin the color of milk.

"I'm not a freak," she mumbled. "Not. Not a freak."

Zach nodded slightly before wrapping his arm around her and pulling her to him, yanking her out of the way just as a boulder the size of her Jeep almost landed on top of her.

"The ceiling's collapsing!" Jon yelled.

"No kidding," Dean returned. "Full marks for observation there, Frodo!"

Sam felt Dean give one last shove against the small of his back, and the next thing he knew he was standing in daylight, golden sunshine streaming down onto his skin as behind him the cave continued to shake itself into wretched, shadowy oblivion.

Dean push-pulled him down the sloping pile of boulders leading back to Daisy's dig site, Jon and Gudrun ahead of them while Maynard, Zach and Daisy brought up the rear.

"It's gonna be okay, Sammy," Dean kept reassuring him as they picked up the pace, hightailing it back to the relative safety of the Jeeps. "It's gonna be okay."

Sam wasn't entirely sure his big brother believed what he was telling him as the earth beneath their feet continued to rumble and judder, and as Daisy and Zach caught up with them, he could hear Zach reassuring Daisy in a similar fashion and sounding equally as unconvinced.

"It's okay, baby," the young man was muttering. "We're gonna get through this."

"It's not me," Daisy was saying, bringing herself to a stop and turning back toward the mountain. "I'm not doing this. It's not me. All I did was unblock the exit. I swear. I'm not a freak, Zach. I just unblocked the exit."

Zach pulled her gently into his arms, rubbing slow circles on her back. "I know, honey, I know."

"Sam?" Dean asked his brother a little uncertainly. "Are you...?"

For a second, Sam wasn't sure of the question, finally turning to look at his brother and reading the concern in his eyes. Sam would have laughed if it hadn't been for that thread of fear lingering in the set of Dean's mouth and the tightness of his shoulders.

"No," Sam shook his head vehemently. "No, it's not me either."

Dean nodded, blowing out a short breath as his attention slid back to Daisy, still enfolded in Zach's protective embrace.

"It's okay," Zach was murmuring. "It's okay. We're okay now."

"Uh, I wouldn't speak too soon..." Dean commented, as a deep rumbling thrum began to emanate from somewhere far beneath their feet, rocks and dirt and angel remains slowly sliding down into the crack threading its way from where they stood to the base of Mount Diablo.

"What's happening?" Zach asked, looking from Dean to Sam, and finally back to Daisy, whose face was still pressed against his shoulder.

"It's over," Gudrun's tired voice drifted from where Jon was still holding her in his arms. "The Conduit. It's over."

As the rumbling intensified, the ground shook harder, the huge chasm finally collapsing in on itself, obliterating all trace of the angel remains and Daisy's archeological find of the millennium.

Sam felt Dean tense by his side, as if he was waiting for something, waiting to run, waiting to hide, waiting to drag Sam off to safety somewhere. If anywhere around here could ever be described as safe again.

"It's not me. It's not me." Daisy repeated her assertion, the rumbling intensifying in pitch and volume until a final, ear-splitting crack seemed to tear a hole in the sky above their heads and the whole mountain gave one long hard shake, rattling from its double peak to its footings deep in the earth, loose rocks, shale and boulders the size of a person shaking loose and sliding down toward the plain beneath where they hit the ground in a plume of dust and debris that billowed out several feet in every direction.

Sam felt Dean pull on his sleeve urgently.

"I think we need to find cover," the older brother said nervously, urging Sam back a step toward the Jeeps. "If this quake gets any worse, the whole thing could come down..."

"No," Gudrun suddenly put in from behind them, her voice sounding tired and washed out. "It's all right."

"It is?" Dean asked a little skeptically.

Sam turned his attention from the whey-faced Valkyrie back to the mountain, which seemed to have stilled as if drawing breath.

Slowly, a powerful rumble began to build in volume and intensity beneath them, a crash like an explosion shattering the brief silence as the entire mountain shifted and lurched violently. A resounding thud nearly shook them off their feet as the mountain swayed dangerously, before the twin peaks seemed to plummet, as if the whole of Mount Diablo was collapsing in on itself.

The mountain gave one last judder before it seemed to settle, still mostly intact but its peaks a good fifty feet lower in the sky than they had been before Lucifer's minions had decided to open an unearthly Conduit deep within its bowels.

The silence that followed was almost deafening, not a bird, not a coyote, not a living creature anywhere on the plain making a single sound, and all Sam could hear was his brother's breathing, short and choppy, right there by his side, proof of life, proof that this wasn't all some terrible nightmare and Sam really was standing here beneath azure Californian skies with his brother at his side and his friends around him, very much alive.

It was at this point he remembered to breathe himself.

"What—what just...?" Zach couldn't even frame the question, and Dean blew out a long whistle in response.

"Dude," he muttered, shaking his head and blinking owlishly at the transformed shape of Mount Diablo, now seemingly settled into its new position. "I thought

dropping a factory on a Hellgate was somethin'. But a *mountain*? How freakin' *awesome* are *we*?"

**Sometime later,
Mount Diablo State Park, CA**

Dean glanced down at the blood slowly drying on his t-shirt and shuddered. *Demon-killing angel blood. Go figure.*

He knew they really ought to get moving—the National Guard or at the very least a whole slew of park rangers could show up at any minute, wondering how their mountain suddenly got fifty feet shorter.

That was one conversation he *really* didn't want to have.

Nothing he could say would ever explain what happened here today.

And yet here they sat, their little band, feeling the warm earth beneath their bodies and the sun on their faces as they did their best to catch their breath and get their heads into some sort of order. Dean wondered if he was the only one whose thoughts kept straying to the cave and the Conduit, to demons and angels, Gateways and gunpowder, to Heaven and Hell and Earth caught somewhere in the middle.

What the hell just happened? What did they just do? And was it over now?

Gudrun smiled wistfully as he caught her eye, as if she knew exactly what he was thinking.

She leaned back against Jon, who in turn had his back propped against Daisy's Jeep, and Dean hoped to God—or someone—that one of them had some answers.

"This all happened for a reason, Dean," Gudrun said carefully, still smiling that damn enigmatic smile of hers, and Dean couldn't help thinking she'd give the Mona Lisa a run for her money.

"Oh yeah?" Dean said uncertainly.

"Yes," Gudrun insisted. "Or are you that much of a believer in coincidence?"

Dean raised an eyebrow and snorted. "Coincidence like us and Jon showing up at the site of an ancient Conduit between Heaven and Hell at the exact same time? Like us getting called here by Sam's old college buddy whose girlfriend turns out to be another of Haris' Psychic Wonders, and, oh yeah, let's not forget she's also our distant cousin? Like you showing up just as we're about to get our asses kicked by a whole mess of demons?"

Gudrun continued to smile at him. "Something like that."

Dean shook his head. "No," he insisted. "That's all a little bit too convenient for me."

Gudrun's lips quirked. "A little bit *too* coincidental," she agreed. "As if we someone brought us here for a reason. As if we were *meant* to be here. And this was *meant* to happen."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "You're not sellin' me on divine intervention if that's what you're after, sweetheart."

"Dean," Gudrun continued. "Look at what just happened. If Jon hadn't been here to protect us, I wouldn't have been able to use Sam's powers to magnify my own and send all those demons back to Hell. If you hadn't been here to make that holy gunpowder of yours, the devil's trap wouldn't have been partially re-established and kept the demons in so that Sam could use *my* powers to reap the whole lot that were left. If Zach hadn't known Sam and asked for his help, you guys wouldn't have been here at all, wouldn't have met Daisy, wouldn't have found out you were related, and she wouldn't have been here to use her powers to get us out of the cave once the earthquakes sealed us in there. Dean, we were all meant to be here, to help seal the Conduit. You see that, don't you?"

Dean held Gudrun's gaze for a couple of seconds before shrugging reluctantly. "Well if you put it *that way*..."

"How long?" Sam asked suddenly, and Dean glanced over at him, his brother's attention fixed solely on Daisy.

The archeologist's cheeks colored and she nestled closer to Zach, embarrassment and shame turning her neck almost the same shade as her hair.

"Twenty-second birthday," she admitted quietly, not meeting Sam's inquisitive gaze as she picked at imaginary threads on the thighs of her jeans. "I—I thought I was imagining it at first. I got angry with Zach because he wanted to stay home and watch the game. On my birthday. My *birthday*! One little tremor, and the TV fell off its stand and exploded on the living room floor."

Zach shifted uncomfortably, gently stroking the girl's hair and offering quiet reassurances that only she could hear.

"Since then," Daisy continued, brushing an errant tear from her freckled cheek, "whenever I've gotten angry or upset, the ground's kind of shaken. Just a little bit." She looked up reluctantly at Sam. "But nothing like—like *this*. I swear."

"It's okay," Sam told her. "You're not on your own here. When I hit twenty-two I started to get death visions. Real helpful. And now—" he shrugged awkwardly. "Now, you see what *I* can do."

Daisy swallowed. "What is it?" she asked. "Is it a family curse or something? Is it because we're related?" She looked over at Dean. "What can you do?"

Dean laughed hollowly. "Me? I can't do much of anything," he told her. "But as long as I keep this thing on?" He waved the amulet at her. "As long as I keep it safe I don't die." He shrugged a little dismissively. "But that's a different deal altogether. That's the Claviger family secret, not Sam's deal."

"Family secret?"

"We protect the amulet. Firstborns. Big honor. Or something."

"What we can do?" Sam added. "Death visions, earthquakes? Something else entirely."

"Then we're not—" Daisy swallowed, "—demonic or anything?"

Sam almost flinched. "No," he assured her quickly. "There was this demon called Haris. He took advantage of our powers. Then Lucifer killed a bunch of us." He flexed his left hand unconsciously, and Dean shifted where he sat. "But neither of them was responsible for what we are."

"L-Lucifer?" Daisy blinked at him before taking a long shuddering breath. "And— and what *are* we?"

Sam paused before shrugging one shoulder. "The universe balancing itself out?" he offered. "All of us have some ancestor who—who did something so bad that we're the universe's way of making our families atone for what they did."

"Winchester. Like the rifle." Daisy nodded. "That's why you asked me if I had any infamous relatives, huh?"

Sam nodded. "Yeah," he conceded. "Fact checking."

"Well I don't," Daisy informed him. "Not that I know of."

"Yeah, we figured," Sam said. "We guessed maybe Haris didn't notice you because of that. Could have been something someone did centuries ago."

"That's a little unfair," Daisy said. "Punishing us for something that happened before we were even born."

"Only if you see it as a bad thing," Gudrun put in. "Look what Sam just did—look what *you* just did! You just saved all our lives! And helped stop a demonic mutiny!"

Daisy sniffed. "Almost killing you all in the process."

"Daisy, you didn't cause the earthquakes that destabilized the mountain if that's what you're thinking," Gudrun said.

"And you didn't cause the lake or the ocean to boil either," Jon put in. "That was the demons trying to break through the Conduit."

"He's right, my dear," Maynard added, abruptly reminding Dean he was still there. "The heat they were generating trying to battle their way—uh—up? It must have been phenomenal! Superheating the water from below—like an undersea volcano. You weren't responsible for any of that, as far as I can tell."

Daisy nodded a little reluctantly, and Dean twisted to look at Gudrun again. "So now that the Conduit's gone bye-bye?" he hazarded. "It's over? They can't try this again?"

Again with the enigmatic smile!

"Do you think those who exist in the plane above this one would be any more willing to allow their home to be invaded by demons than you were?" Gudrun asked him. "Any less willing to defend their territory?"

"Wait—" Dean held up a hand. "Just hold on there, Yoda. You're not saying—" He blinked, glancing around at the rest of the group, who were looking at Gudrun a little uncertainly. "You're not saying—" Dean looked up. "You're saying the *Big Guy Upstairs* sealed the Conduit?" He laughed, even though he didn't find it remotely funny.

Gudrun shrugged. "Working through us, maybe. Why not? You know what they say about His mysterious ways, right? *Someone* put children like Sam and Daisy into this world as a counterbalance to all the evil that exists here. You said so yourself."

"Sure, but *God*?"

"God. The Universe. Fate. Destiny. Maybe we're not supposed to know."

"You're a friggin' *Reaper*! If you don't know, who does?"

Gudrun sighed. "Mysterious ways, Dean. Mysterious ways. And you promised you wouldn't call me 'Reaper' anymore," she added lightly.

Dean sighed. "Yeah," he mumbled, eyes downcast. "I guess I did. Okay, sorry your Valkyrieness."

Gudrun nodded, laughing just a little bit. "That's better," she agreed imperiously, before inclining her head and gazing at the altered horizon, the smile slipping slightly from her lips. "For now, the danger's past," she continued. "No more demons are escaping from Hell here."

"For now," Sam echoed.

"That's the best any of us can do," Gudrun replied. "We did our best. That's all anyone can ask of us."

An uncomfortable silence fell upon the small group, Dean fighting the urge to look up. No one was watching him from Up There. No way. That idea was just... disturbing.

"So what happens next?" Zach asked suddenly.

"Well it's the end of my dig, that's for sure," Daisy lamented. "No way I'm coming back here ever again."

"It might be interesting to study the area from a geological standpoint," Maynard put in, his gaze drifting to the foreshortened mountain in the distance. "But then again," he continued wistfully, "if those bones really *were* left here as a warning for us nosy humans to keep away... then maybe we ought to keep away." He sighed. "It's not like we'll ever be able to get back inside that incredible cave ever again."

"God, I hope not," Dean observed. Again he glanced over at Gudrun, as if she was the only one who could possibly answer any of the questions he had about all

this. "So the Conduit's closed in both directions now?" he asked. "Can you—can you get back home?"

Gudrun smiled wistfully before turning her watery gaze to Jon, squeezing his hand with her own. "I think maybe I'm going to stick around down here for a while," she said.

Jon returned her smile, and Dean treated them to an exaggerated bout of retching.

Gudrun pinned him with a good-natured scowl before continuing. "Anyway, I'm needed here." Her face became deadly serious and she gripped Jon's hand even tighter. "If Lucifer really is mobilizing his troops—if he's brazen enough to mount some kind of sneak attack on the Hosts of Heaven—then this is where I should be. This is where I'm needed. Fighting the good fight."

Jon nodded his agreement, gently running one large thumb along her cheek. "With me," he said. "Fighting the good fight here with me."

"Always," Gudrun whispered. "And forever."

Dean cleared his throat exaggeratedly before pulling the angel feather out of his jacket pocket. "And what about this thing?"

Gudrun tore her gaze from Jon for a second. "Everything has its purpose," she said, looking pointedly at Sam, who shifted awkwardly. "Just as everyone has their purpose. Helgi—*Jon*—was meant to find that for you."

"To save my life?" Dean asked.

"Maybe," Gudrun offered. "But it has the potential to do so much more, save so many more lives than just yours, Dean."

"But why us?" Sam asked suddenly. "Why give the thing to us if it has the potential to be such a powerful weapon? Why not keep it yourselves? You're in this fight just as much as we are."

"I know in my bones that feather was meant for you," Jon replied. "Those demons *knew* you. They knew you by *name*. They know you are a force to be reckoned with, the two of you. *You* should wield the power of the angels, not me. Look what just happened. Erika was too weak to have sent those demons back to Hell without your help, Sam. Daisy wasn't strong enough to bring that mountain down and seal the Conduit. Don't tell me you didn't have a hand in that too."

Sam shook his head, a tiny spark of anger igniting behind his usually placid eyes. "So that's *my* purpose?" he burst out. "To let other people use *me* as some sort of 'conduit'?"

"Daisy and I didn't *use* you," Gudrun pointed out gently. "You used *us*, Sam! You used *our* power! Whoever—whatever—wanted that Conduit closed worked through all of us, but you most of all. And yet ultimately it was *your* power that saved us, Sam! You survived Lucifer's slaughter of the others like you for a reason. Maybe today was it. Or maybe this is just the beginning. Sam, the universe looked in your heart and saw that you could be its greatest ally. That's why you were brought here today. That's why we were all brought here."

Sam bit his lip. "I don't know what that means," he admitted. "I don't know what that means for me. For Dean. For Daisy. For any of us."

"And that's the mystery, Sam," Gudrun replied. "None of us know what life—what death—has in store for us. But we're not puppets. We have free will. Destiny is what we make of it. While it might not feel to you that you've found your place, your calling in life, I'm sure you're where you're supposed to be, doing what you're supposed to be doing. You and your brother both. You wouldn't be here without him, either. None of us would. Sam, that feather wouldn't have found its way to the two of you if it wasn't supposed to. If you weren't supposed to be here, doing this, right now."

"But we're in charge of our own destiny?"

Gudrun laughed. "Most of the time."

Sam shook his head, running a hand through his hair tiredly. "I don't know," he admitted. "I don't know whether this is where I'm supposed to be, whether this is what I'm supposed to be doing." He paused for a second, collecting his thoughts. "But I do know something's coming," he continued. "Something dark and terrible. Something we have to fight until we can't fight anymore. Lucifer and his armies might just be the tip of the iceberg."

"Yes," Gudrun agreed. "I've felt it too."

"Jeez, way to lighten the mood, guys," Dean pointed out. "We just dropped a mountain on a Hellgate, remember?"

"Yes we did," Gudrun nodded. "But there are other Hellgates, other ways out of Hell. Lucifer will find them." She sighed, settling once again into Jon's embrace. "We must be vigilant, all of us." She held each of their gazes in turn. "Demons are everywhere. We're in danger wherever we go, even in places we think are safe. *Anything* could be a trap. *Anyone* could be a demon. Our enemies are closing in. The Signs are everywhere."

She took a deep breath, her eyes drifting once again to the mountain, to the bright blue sky and the golden sunshine, to the trees and the birds and the living things all around her.

"If the Apocalypse isn't coming," she said slowly. "Then Lucifer is faking it for a reason..."

The End