

Season Four

Episode Ten: Dark Side Of The Sun

By Kittsbud

Part One

Dean rolled over on the huge bed and gave a loud snort, blinking as the early morning sun stung his eyes through the room's shades.

Sleeping here was almost like dropping from hell into heaven – almost. But then, maybe in his line of work that phrase was a little too close for comfort.

After the mayhem of Stull, though, the Winchesters couldn't ask for a better place to recover and lick their wounds, both physical and mental.

The vast and extremely luxurious log cabin belonged to the Williams family, and while Kyle, their priest friend, didn't exactly have exclusive rights to its use, he had been able to offer it to them for a month of relaxation.

A month here to Dean, Sam and John, would seem like a year, maybe two.

After all the seedy motel rooms they'd been subjected to over the years, it was like sleeping in a palace. A huge TV, a mammoth refrigerator filled with beer, a hot tub. Heck, Dean may never want to hunt again if he could just find a few local gals to share it all with.

Of course, that was in the little fantasy world that lived inside his head sometimes. Right now, in the real world, the Winchester family was hurting. Yes, they'd pulled off a miracle and saved their dad from the church in Stull, even that bitch Mia had been dealt with, but every victory had a price.

After just eight days at the cabin, Dean already knew what that price was.

John was acting perfectly normally, but every morning when Dean woke and climbed from his bed, he expected Sam to come tell him their dad was gone and all that was left to prove he'd ever been here was one of his customary goodbye notes.

Somehow, in fact, Dean already knew this was the day it would happen.

Their father had been subdued the previous evening, had been drinking heavily, like his mind had finally given in to what had happened to him. John masked it well, but Dean could see the pain in those deep eyes, and he could hear the ever-so-slight crack in that cavernous voice.

And if there was one thing John Winchester wouldn't allow to happen, it was for his sons to see him anything less than one hundred percent. He was a hunter, a fighter. He needed to always be strong for them. A leader, no matter what.

As his brother's gangly shadow fell over the bed, face scrunched in anguish, Dean sighed.

"Dad's gone, right?" Dean pulled himself up, the words coming out almost automatically.

Sam's face changed to one of uncertainty. "What? You *knew*?"

"Let's just say I've seen him that way before. After Mom..."

Sam let the small paper note drop from his fingers and Dean could tell his brother was torn between anger and sheer hurt.

They'd done so much, been through so much to save John, and now they'd lost him again. The only evidence that he'd ever been here just a few words scrawled on a piece of paper.

"All that talk about spending time with us? That was all just a bunch of crap, wasn't it?" Sam's brow furrowed and he spun around abruptly.

Was that moisture in his eyes?

"Sammy, we can't imagine what he's been through. Hell, we went through enough ourselves just trying to get his ass back...this is something he has to get through alone. Put yourself in his place."

Sam chewed on his bottom lip. "I have done, and I'd want my family, Dean."

"Yeah, well, you're not Dad. He's a soldier, not a wuss college boy." Dean stopped. This was becoming about them, and it shouldn't be. "Look, Dad needs time. We have to give him that."

Sam turned back and grimaced as if the suggestion was more than painful. "What happens when there is no more time, Dean? What happens when he does one of these vanishing tricks and we never see him again? We never get a chance to say things that need saying. We never..." His words trailed.

"It's never gonna happen." Dean ran a hand through the front of his hair.

"How can you be so sure?" Sam huffed.

"Because we won't let it. We just *won't*, alright?"

Sam half-heartedly nodded, but he didn't have chance to argue further. Outside, somewhere down the small lane that led to the cabin, a car horn hooted.

It was a pathetic hoot, well suited to the ancient Ford it belonged to.

"Break out the silver, Sammy. Looks like we got visitors!" Dean sighed with relief at the chance to change the subject, if only for a short while. Whatever they thought, whatever they wanted, ultimately, John's life was his own.

He'd see them again, maybe when he was ready to talk about what had happened.

If, he was ever ready to talk, then they would be ready waiting for him.

Twenty Minutes Later
Williams Family Cabin
Silver Creek
Montana

Dean watched Kyle Williams fumble with his hands for the hundredth time and new the little priest was making excuses for being here.

Whatever Kyle had come for, he'd abruptly put it on hold the minute he'd found out about John's absence.

Instead, he was blathering about old cases they'd worked, how the church was changing, anything, but what was actually troubling him.

And something was troubling him. Kyle was pretty useless at hiding his emotions. He just had too many tells. He fidgeted with his glasses, he stammered at least once in nearly every sentence, and on top of that, he couldn't stop looking at the cabin floor as if he daren't look either Winchester in the eye.

Dean poured their old friend another cup of black coffee and sat on the edge of the dining table in front of him. "Okay, Moses, spill it. You didn't drive all the way out here just to talk crap. What's eating at you?"

Kyle gulped, nervous as ever. "I...I really didn't want to bother you with my own pathetic little problems after all you've been through..."

"But?" Sam interjected.

Kyle squirmed. "No really, I'm sure it's nothing."

"A whole lotta nothing that's got you twitching like you sat on a nest of fire ants with attitude. C'mon, dude, you know us better than that."

"Well," Kyle strung out the word, his beard ticking slightly at the edge of his mouth. "I have this priest friend who lives down in a small rural Mexican town. I haven't heard from him in a while and was wondering if your father had any colleagues in the area who could check on him..."

"Check on him? You want hunters checking out a priest buddy just because he hasn't been in touch?" From Sam's expression, it was obvious he thought there was more to it than that.

So did Dean. "You think there's some kind of supernatural problem south of the border?"

"I...I don't really know," Kyle stammered again. "Father Alvaro hasn't answered any of my calls or letters for weeks. It's so not like him. And the last time I spoke to him..." The priest stopped mid-sentence.

"He mentioned something weird going on," Sam prodded as he took a sip of his coffee.

"Not really mentioned anything, no. Let's just say he was acting, well, rather strangely. Not quite himself." Kyle sighed and sat forward on his chair. "I'm sorry to even ask when you have so many problems of your own, but do you know of anyone who could check that he's..."

"That he's still Father Alvaro and not some black-eyed skank?" Dean didn't mess with niceties. Kyle wouldn't want him too, he knew the man well enough to know that.

"I'm not saying he's possessed, but, well, after some of my more recent experiences with you two, I can't rule anything out. It could simply be stress..."

"But you don't think so, or you wouldn't be here," Sam pointed out, picking at a piece of cold toast absently as if he had too much already buzzing through his head without the extra burden Kyle was offering.

"I don't know what to think. If you know anyone who is capable of finding out, or just a contact number, I'd be grateful."

"No need, Moses." Dean slapped Kyle on the shoulder so hard he was jarred forward and winced. "Sammy and I just lost our one reason to be holed up in this joint of yours. I guess that means we're available for business, huh, Sasquatch?"

Sam's expression said he'd rather be hitting the road after their father than some stressed out priest, but he smiled at Kyle anyway and nodded his head.

If Kyle noted the younger Winchester's reluctance, he didn't show it. "No really, I couldn't ask it of you." He swallowed hard.

"You're not asking, we're telling." Dean stole the last piece of wholewheat toast from the plate in front of his brother and grinned. "On one condition. You buy breakfast on the way out. I think your family eats way too healthily for me. I couldn't find one burger in your freezer, man."

Kyle couldn't help but chuckle. "I think I can manage that," he agreed. "Just don't expect me to partake."

Dean patted his stomach playfully. "Wouldn't dream of it, Moses. Gotta save all the greasy good stuff for me!"

***Ciudad Del Maldecido,
Mexico,
A Few Days Later...***

Sam watched as his brother drove the Impala down the dusty Mexican roads, wondering just what they were doing here so soon after Stull. They should have stayed at the Williams cabin longer. Dad should have stayed with them longer.

Why did the *should* always turn into the *never* with the Winchester family? Why did John *always* feel a need to shut his kids out?

Sam suspected that this time it was because of what he'd seen in the alternate universes. How did a father live with seeing his youngest son do terrible things? Because that was what Sam assumed had happened.

It was a simple fact that in some of those realities Sam had been a bastard. He'd met one such version himself, so it would be no surprise if John had too.

Of course, there was just as much chance their father had seen Dean doing awful deeds, or maybe Dean or Sam dying or...

The possibilities were endless, and until John actually opened up, they'd never really know.

They'd never be able to help him.

And what were they doing instead of finding him and actually trying? They were cruising down Mexican dirt tracks looking for a priest who was probably just too stressed and too busy to answer a few calls from a fellow cleric.

But Kyle isn't that shallow. He's been with us on hunts. He must sense something is really wrong down here. Sam appreciated Kyle's intuition, he had to – the priest was a fellow psychic who had visions just as scary as his own. *So, a priest acting strangely doesn't make him possessed...*

"Sammy, that bug crept a little too far?"

"Huh?" Sam jumped a little on the bench seat, startled slightly by his brother's sudden question. He'd been too deep in thought to expect it, and now he felt an ass because he had no clue what Dean was talking about.

"You know," Dean chuckled. "That bug that's obviously been up your ass since we left Montana."

Sam puffed out a deep breath of air. "Sorry, I just can't help thinking about Dad. About how we failed him again."

"I know," Dean simply said, surprising Sam. "But all we can do until he's ready to talk is hunt. Hell, it's *all* we know *how* to do."

"I guess," Sam admitted as they bounced over a pothole, passing a dusty sign announcing their arrival in town. "It never makes it feel better, though."

"Maybe a little sun on our bones will do that. With any luck there's squat happening down here and we can catch a few rays, then go find Dad. I'm kinda hoping he contacts Bobby or maybe Joe Bearwalker before too long."

Dean slid down his side window and slowed the car as they approached a corner with a small, wizened man standing aimlessly on its sandy tip.

"Hey there." Dean smiled. "We're looking for the only church in town. Father Alvaro ring any bells?"

The man's face crumpled into a smile in return and he suddenly looked like a shrunken piece of fruit more than a person. "Si," he chirped happily and pointed

towards another side road. "You can find Father Alvaro down that street, but he only rings bells on Sundays..."

Dean scowled and Sam knew his brother wasn't sure whether the man had genuinely misheard him, or was being sarcastic.

In the end, Dean simply nodded, slid up his window and pulled away.

"Dude, he was creepy."

"No, Dean, he was just a local who misunderstood your question. Seemed pretty pleasant to me."

"Yeah?" Dean's frown deepened. "Well he seemed like a human version of Speedy Gonzalez to me. Trust me, the guy knew what I meant."

Sam shook his head. "And I thought I was the one having a bad reaction to Dad leaving." He crossed his arms and watched more dusty pavements go by. This was going to be hard work.

Up ahead, as they passed over the brow of a hill, a small church appeared. The place was white and looked ancient, like villagers here had constructed it over a century ago.

Dean whistled. "Man, that thing would be at home in a friggin' Spaghetti western."

"Like the place better now it makes you think of Clint Eastwood?" Sam chuckled as Dean pulled the Impala over to the verge to inspect the tiny church further.

"Nope," Dean groused haughtily. "The whole town gives me the creeps. As in, I don't wanna stay one damn night here alone kinda creeps."

Sam looked taken aback. It wasn't like Dean to judge a place so quickly. They'd met one local, and seen Father Alvaro's church from a distance at best. What could make his brother so edgy, so fast?

"Are you serious?" he eventually asked.

Dean stuffed his hands in his pockets and began walking up a pebbled path to the church. "Damn straight I'm serious. I got a bad feeling about this one, Sammy, and I'm not getting caught with my pants down."

"Not unless there's a hot seniorita close by, at the very least," Sam mumbled under his breath as he trailed behind.

Dean apparently heard the comment and scowled back at him. "I'm not kidding here. In fact, once we've talked to the priest, I'm heading the Impala right back outta town and sleeping in my baby tonight. No local motels for me, dude."

Sam looked amazed. "*What?* You're scared Anthony Perkins is hiding behind the shower curtain?"

"Because I'm scared maybe something is hiding behind the shower curtain." Dean huffed, apparently not seeing the funny side of his brother's comments. He was definitely wired, but Sam couldn't figure out why. Not even John's disappearance should have made him this suspicious.

"So are we going inside," Dean prompted. "Or are we standing here all day talking about my apparent paranoia?"

Sam reached out a long gangly arm and grabbed the archaic wooden church door, tugging back until it creaked open. The inside of the little basilica smelled musty as they entered, the overall appearance of the place being more like a barn than a house of God.

"Jeez, are we sure Jesus wasn't born here? 'Cause it sure looks old enough..." Dean whirled, doing a one-eighty of the structure.

"Dean! That's blasphemy," Sam warned.

"What's God gonna do, sue me?"

Dean started as a terrified scream echoed from the bowels of the church, and for a moment Sam was pretty sure his brother believed he was being reprimanded for his profanity. He blinked, hesitated and then made a dash for the sound as it came again.

Sam followed close behind, both brothers instinctively drawing their weapons.

The scream was guttural this time, as if the perpetrator was giving in to whatever was assailing him. The rasping noise seemed to come from behind a thick velvet curtain, and as the Winchesters tore through it, it became apparent that this was the attending priest's quarters.

"What the..?" Sam skidded to a halt as he realized what was happening, the surprise on his face echoed by his sibling.

Father Alvaro seemed to be being attacked – but not by a human, by an ethereal form that manifested itself in a similar shape and cloudy appearance as a "suitless" demon.

Except this thing wasn't black. It wasn't even grey.

As the brothers stared on, they had to shield their eyes from the being, its white effervescent glow was so intense. The edges of the creature appeared even more iridescent, their shimmering, pulsing tendrils oozing with a deep yellow intensity.

"Sammy, that has got to be *the weirdest* demon I have ever seen." Dean gulped, and then suddenly seemed to remember exactly why he was here.

He stuffed a hand into his jacket and fumbled inside as the entity engulfed the flailing priest.

"It's going for his mouth and nose! Classic demon style!" Sam urged his brother to hurry, but other than his words or encouragement, there was little he could actually do to help.

Dean finally tugged out the angel feather from his pocket and paused, amazement crossing his features for a second time in one day. The feather should be bleeding in such close proximity to a demon, but there was nothing.

In fact, if anything, the plumage was causing a strange, tingling sensation in Dean's palm like static electricity.

"*Dean!* Hit the thing with the feather!" Sam was frantic as the entity pushed further at the feeble priest, testing Alvaro, wanting to get inside him to use him as its puppet.

When Dean still appeared dazed, simply staring at the feather, Sam pulled a short sawed-off from under his jacket and fired. Rock salt wouldn't hurt the thing, but it might piss it off enough to leave the priest alone.

The plan worked just a little too well.

Before he could even gauge if his shells would glean a response, Sam felt something pick up his body and throw it backwards.

The sensation felt wrong somehow, somehow a softer tackle than he had grown to expect from Lucifer's hellspawn. His spine argued differently as it hit a pew and he lay momentarily winded.

"Sammy, would you just stop getting tossed around like that? It's getting kinda old..."

Sam blinked and wanted to give a suitably sarcastic response, but somehow he just couldn't take his eyes from the fleeing demon creature as it vanished through the holes in the tiny church roof, dissipating into the warm Mexican sun.

"Are you two gentlemen alright?"

The voice was soft and unexpected from the small, conservative-looking priest who greeted them as Dean pulled Sam back to his feet.

Sam brushed himself down. "Just a little hurt pride." He looked at the priest, concern in his eyes. "What about you?"

"You saw it too, then?" Alvaro looked shaken, as if he'd expected them to deny the creature's existence.

"We saw," Dean confirmed.

Alvaro shook his head, the wide-brimmed hat he wore bobbing to and fro until it almost looked comical – almost. "I don't know why I should be singled out by such evil," he muttered, obviously still stunned. "I'm a simple, God-fearing man, and so are my congregation. Why would something like this appear in Ciudad Del Maldecido?"

"We don't know." Sam offered his hand. "But maybe we can help you find out. I'm Sam, and this is my brother Dean. We're friends of Father Williams. He got worried after you didn't reply to any of his messages, so we said we'd check on you while we're in town."

Alvaro took the proffered palm and shook it heartily. "Any friend of Kyle is a friend of mine. He's a little...shall we say, *timid* at times, but a very good cleric. I'm confused about his messages, though." Alvaro abruptly looked troubled. "I've never received any letters or missed any calls that I know of."

Sam shared a knowing look with his brother. If the thing that attacked Alvaro was a demon, it wasn't beyond the realms of possibility that it had blocked the calls and mail.

There was something here, something about Alvaro that it seemed to want badly.

"Has anything strange happened in town recently?" Dean slid the feather back in his pocket as he talked, apparently aware of Alvaro staring at it intently.

The priest shook his head. "Nothing strange *ever* happens in a small community like this." He chuckled weakly. "In fact, some might say nothing happens here at all, period." There was a pause while he considered something. "Although, we are getting ready for the spring festival. It's a happy time for the locals and visitors alike."

Sam caught a look from Dean at the priest's last sentence, and he realized that Alvaro might think it was a happy time here, but Dean definitely did not.

From one small expression, Sam could tell that Dean was still feeling the freaky vibe he'd sensed in the Impala.

And Dean wasn't even the psychic one.

So why aren't I sensing anything here? Sam internally questioned himself as Alvaro continued to talk.

"So are you staying over in town tonight?" The priest looked like he might actually be hoping they were. Was that fear on his tanned features? "You're very welcome to stay here with me for the night. You can then enjoy tomorrow's festivities without the hassle of returning."

Dean hastily stepped up to answer. "Nah, that's okay, padre, we already have a place for the night."

Sam huffed, knowing he'd be heard. What the hell was Dean up to here? They most definitely did not have a room, and from the looks of the size of the town, it wasn't exactly going to be full of hotels, motels and holiday cabins.

Dean ignored the huff as expected and pulled a card from his wallet with both brothers' cell numbers on. "If you see anything out of the ordinary, and I mean *anything*, just give us a call."

Alvaro took the card and looked at it skeptically. "I really doubt there is much anyone can do here." he sighed. "Except God, of course. We must all put our trust in him."

"Yeah, well just look upon us as God's favorite tool kit and you'll do alright." Dean pointed to the card again. "Just call if you think that skank sonofa – " He caught himself. "If that *thing* shows up here again, okay?"

The priest nodded sadly and watched as the two brothers left the church.

As Dean stepped through the arched doorway, he grunted as he narrowly escaped walking into a small boy. The native Mexican was sweeping up with what resembled a witch's broomstick.

"Hey, that thing could be lethal in the wrong hands," Dean quipped as the handle of the brush barely missed his groin. "What if some day I plan on having a runt like you?"

The boy pulled a face as if to say he didn't really care one way or the other. "Maybe you should look where you're going then?"

"He's right," Sam chuckled. "You do kinda walk around like you have blinkers on sometimes."

Dean scowled and looked back down at the boy. "What's a kid like you doin' hanging around a church anyhow? Shouldn't you be off playing with the other rugrats?"

The boy shrugged. "I help out here. I have no family to speak of, and Father Alvaro took me under his wing. It's better than some kids have around here."

Dean knelt until he was as level with the kid. "So, what's our regular boy scout's name? You do have a name, right?"

"Ernesto," the boy offered proudly, his chest puffing out.

Sam smiled. "So, Ernesto, have you ever seen anything weird around the church? Anything unexplainable?"

It was Ernesto's turn to chuckle. "Like what? *La Llorona*?" The boy huffed sarcastically and shook his head, ambling away with the broom still clutched firmly between his small fingers.

"That kid has entirely too much sass for his size," Dean noted with a scowl.

Sam's cheeks dimpled. "Kinda like someone else I knew at that age..."

Garcia's Grille
Calle Vallarta
Ciudad Del Maldecido

Dean munched on his shredded beef taco and attempted to continue talking at the same time – a fine art that he had managed to perfect as a small boy.

"I'm telling you, man, anything our angel feather can't fry has to be major league..."

"We don't know that," Sam countered, keeping his eyes on the brothers' laptop screen rather than his sibling's over-full mouth. "Let's face it, we don't even know that it's a demon."

"You're telling me there's somethin' else out there that looks and moves like one of Satan's bitches? C'mon, white smoke, black smoke, it all boils down to that freak trying to ice a priest. *That* has gotta be a bad guy..."

Sam sighed and finally looked up. "Well, if it is a demon, I'm not finding any activity here in town until today. No signs, no mysterious deaths, nothing." He frowned as the last part of the sentence left his lips.

"You got something? Other than gas from all those vegetables you eat," Dean quipped, picking up a second taco.

Sam brushed off the comment, scrutinizing the screen. "It's probably nothing, but there was a murder here just over a year ago."

"Got any details?"

Sam swiveled the laptop around so they could both get a view. A local newspaper's online archive filled the monitor. "It says the victim had his heart cut out and then the body was skinned."

Dean grimaced as his brother read out the information, the taco he was eating dropping back onto his plate as his appetite suddenly waned. "That's just gross."

"Yeah, the flayed flesh was never discovered, but some drifter was arrested for the crime." Sam brought up an image of the convicted man. "He was apparently sent to a local mental institute for evaluation and is still there – at least, according to this article."

"So you think this is all connected to Father Alvaro's attack or what, Samantha?" Dean eyed the half-eaten taco as if it contained the missing flesh.

But then, for all he knew, it might. They'd encountered weirder things in their time as hunters.

Sam shrugged. "I think we should go talk to Alvaro again in the morning. Right now we need to find a motel or room before it gets dark."

Dean shook his head. "No motels, dude. My hinky vibe hasn't gone away on this one. I'm thinkin' we drive outta town and find a nice place to park my baby for the night."

"Are you nuts? Camp out?" Sam screwed up his face, but it was clear from his brother's expression Dean wasn't going to back down. "I get the car," he begrudgingly yielded. "If you want to play Davy Crockett then you get to be the one to sleep under the stars."

"Suits me. Least I won't have to listen to you snoring all night long."

"I so don't snore!"

"Dream on, man." Dean smirked playfully. "Why do you think it's always me that gets the hot skirt action?"

Sam opened his mouth to answer, then shook his head and tucked into his own food, obviously not rising to the well-timed bait.

***Just Outside Ciudad Del Maldecido,
Later that night...***

The fire hissed, spitting sparks like an angry serpent as Dean tossed on a small segment of wood and watched as the flames dared to wrap around it. Fiery tendrils lapped at the ensnared piece of timber like a Venus Fly Trap, eating into the broken branch, needing to feed from its twisted form.

Dean wasn't cold, but the orange-yellow glow from the camp fire brought him an inner warmth he sorely needed after spending only a few hours in the local town.

It wasn't like him to spook easily, but the place was wrong somehow and he was damned if he could figure out where the gut feeling was coming from.

He glanced over at the Impala only a few feet away. Inside, Sam slept with his head against the half-open window, oblivious to his sibling's woes.

Every now and again, a small snort bubbled from his nose and throat as he dreamed fitfully of another time and place. In the morning, he would probably be sore from his cramped sleeping position and his brother would pay for suggesting their impromptu camping trip.

Dean wondered if Sam was recalling Stull as he groaned again, tossing over onto his side even further. But then, could either of them ever forget it?

Flashing, nightmarish imagery flickered across the hunter's inner psyche.

Images of a dark place.

A bad place where demons roamed in a smoke-filled Gehenna of blood and sulfur.

A church with no entry, no exit, but a thousand doors that just begged to be opened and then locked again forever at their master's whim.

Dean shuddered and lobbed another broken branch on the already blazing fire. He had to forget Stull. It was the past. It was over – at least for now.

It's never over, you know that, Winchester, his mind screamed. This is just a lull, another small time gig before the storm comes right on back and bites you in the ass.

Except this wasn't just another hunt. There was more to it than that, wasn't there?

Dean envisaged the interior of a stony, crumbling church again, but this time not the vanishing basilica from his hometown. The memory was fresher than that, but still as painful.

Churches were supposed to be holy places, protected by God, and yet God seemed to so often let his disciples be attacked, even killed under such divine roofs.

He closed his eyes, trying to picture the strange new demon that had attacked Father Alvaro. Despite hours of research until the laptop battery had finally died, Sam hadn't been able to find one heathen creature that fit the glowing thing's description.

And then there was the angel feather.

Why the hell hadn't it bled?

The thought occurred to Dean that maybe the feather had only so much magic to give, and they had used it all up back in Stull. Part of him even hoped the idea was right, because otherwise it meant there was a whole new entity out there they had no means of fighting.

As if friggin' Lucifer wasn't enough...

On a whim, Dean let his left hand slide to his jacket pocket and he pulled out the pure white feather whilst simultaneously taking a slug of beer with his right hand.

Sometimes there was nothing better than a little alcohol to help the synapses fire up, or better still, to help bury memories he'd rather not resurface.

As he gulped down the last of his Coors, he examined the piece of plumage, realizing for the first time it was larger than that of any bird.

It sat silently in his palm now, but he could still mentally recall the static charge it had emitted during his encounter with the new "demon." The feather had prickled his skin, making the tiny hairs on the back of his hand bristle.

There had been no pain, but he was sure there was a message to be had from its new reaction.

"Why didn't you bleed?" He mouthed at the inanimate and very silent object. "What makes that overgrown light bulb any different from any other freak you've helped me gank?"

The feather looked back innocently.

"How could you forsake the one person who has faith in you?"

Dean stifled the urge to toss down the ivory quill. He wanted so badly to crush the thing in his palm, and deny that it had ever existed.

Deny that angels had ever existed.

"It was never about faith, Dean..."

The voice was low and soft, with an ethereal tinge that stopped the hunter from instantly turning to see its owner.

Dean sucked down a breath from between his teeth, realizing that the sounds of every single nocturnal creature under the Mexican night sky had ceased.

Finally, he turned, one hand deliberately moving to the back of his belt where his .45 rested. He let his fingers caress the Colt, but as of yet, he didn't attempt to draw it.

The man before him looked wryly amused, his steely blue eyes flashing with some untold knowledge.

To Dean, the man looked like some Wall Street banker, dressed complete in a suit with a slightly disheveled tie and a long overcoat Colombo would have been proud of.

What such a person would be doing walking off a rutted Mexican back road was anyone's guess – unless, of course, he was a demon.

How the hell else would this freak know my name?

Maybe this was even the very thing that had attacked Father Alvaro.

"Who the hell are you?" Dean snapped. "Lucifer's still pissed enough over getting his ass whooped to send a goon after us, huh?"

"Not exactly..." The man's head cocked to the left just a tick, as if he were a child evaluating a new toy, and Dean noticed his lips looked dry and cracked, as if he'd been out in the sun too long.

But then, maybe he had. Maybe that was why he was acting like he had a bug up his ass.

Dean finally let his fingers encompass the Colt and he pulled it, aiming at the newcomer one-handed while he kept the feather in his other palm.

Maybe it hadn't worked in the church, but if he was about to get attacked, he wasn't above trying its powers again.

He dared to glance down for any signs of blood, but the plumage remained perfectly white. The fronds that erupted from its bony white shafts, however, seemed to bristle in the moonlight, as if charged by some unknown source of electricity.

Just like in the church...

Part Two

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" He asked again, the gun in his hand centered perfectly on the stranger's frontal lobe.

The man seemed unabashed. "My name is Castiel...I'm an angel of the Lord..."

Dean's lips curled into a sarcastic smirk. "Yeah? And I'm friggin' Barak Obama."

Castiel's expression remained emotionless. "I find that highly improbable."

"Oh, a funny man, huh?" Dean's finger itched on the trigger of his weapon. "So tell me *Castiel*, if angels are just flyin' around mixing among us mere mortals, how come Sammy and me have never bumped into one of you do-gooders before?"

"Because we have had no reason to show ourselves to you."

"Oh, and now suddenly we're worthy, huh?" Dean's lip curled in distaste. He didn't know what he was dealing with, but the thing had a weird way of thinking.

"Actually, no." Castiel seemed tired of having to explain himself. "You called me."

Dean almost choked down a laugh.

Almost.

"Mister, even if you are what you say, no way would you catch me calling on your kind. For one thing, I'm not sure I even believe in you."

"You believe," Castiel countered. "Why else would you carry around my feather for protection? The feather I lost in the battle at Mount Diablo." He took a step forward, ignoring the barrel still pointed at his skull. "The feather you have used several times to tap my power against the fallen ones..."

Was there an actual tinge of annoyance in his tone?

Dean pushed further, hoping to get a rise out of the man/creature. "*Your* feather? C'mon...you aren't exactly bristling with plumage there, bucko." He swallowed. "So let me get this straight, you want me to believe you guys are just walking around, looking like us, mingling with us and we've never known about it?"

"We appear to humans in the form in which they are most likely to accept us according to their beliefs. There are many different planes of existence, and my kind are privileged to walk them all."

Dean balked. "You mean like the places Sam and me got stuck in back in Stull church? Like where Dad was? You're tellin' me Heaven and Hell are all part of some screwed up dimensional crap outta the friggin' *X-Files*?"

Castiel didn't respond. He just gazed at Dean, steely eyes burning into the hunter until Dean had to look away, just for an instant.

When he looked back up, Castiel's stare had softened, just a touch. "Why appear now?" Dean asked. "It's not like we haven't been using that damn feather for months. Kinda late to want your wings back, dude."

"The feather must be returned because you attempted to use it against one of my brethren." The hint of annoyance was there again, just below the surface of his low timbre.

"Say *what*?" The surprise was enough to make Dean lower his weapon and pull a face of incredulity. "An *angel* was trying to gank Father Alvaro? Isn't that kinda

like killing one of your own? Have you guys gone nuts? Assuming I even believe you are what you say you are..."

Castiel turned away, the length of his coat flapping out behind him like a bird stretching its wings. He was distant now, as if talking about the subject was painful. "There are forces at work in this town," he whispered. "Forces that must be stopped at *any* price."

Dean exhaled deeply, suddenly feeling deflated. Wasn't that just the story of his life? Different towns, same shit – a Winchester's life never changed. "Even if I believe you, I'm not gonna help you ventilate some poor priest just because he's in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Ventilate *a priest?*" Sam's sleepy-headed voice filled the desert and Dean spun quickly around to face him, ready to do some fast talking. "Dean, who were you talking to?"

Dean frowned and glanced back over his shoulder, but the man in the trench coat had vanished into the night.

Looking down, Dean stared at the feather for the longest moment, wondering just what he believed, and how much, or how little he should tell his brother just yet.

Everything just felt wrong – too wrong to go admitting he'd been in contact with a being that might, just might, be some kind of heavenly spirit.

No, for now it was best not to tell Sam about his conversation with "Castiel."

"I was just thinking out loud, dude. Wondering who'd want to ventilate Father Alvaro..."

Sam's brow scrunched as if he was unconvinced, but his eyes were already drooping from the desire for more sleep.

"Sammy, get your gangly ass back to sleep, we can talk more in the morning over breakfast."

Sam dropped back down into the Impala and tossed an empty potato chip packet at his brother despairingly. "Yeah, right, *breakfast*. I mean, the room service is just so good in this motel you got us, dude."

Rio Conchos Mental Facility The Next Day...

As Sam walked through the sparsely furnished hospital, he couldn't help but wonder if this would be his and Dean's fate some day. In their line of work, it could only be a matter of time before they ended up deader than a dodo or madder than Jack Nicholson in *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*.

Right now, though, they were using Sam's cover as a U.S. government attaché to get them through the security here. So far, it had worked better than he'd expected, and they were being led towards a small interview room to speak with Miles Barker.

Barker was the man convicted of the flaying the previous year, and his shrink at the facility had informed them he had moments of total lucidity, interspersed with episodes of completely psychotic behavior.

If this was true, they were going to have their work cut out trying to tell which parts of his story to believe.

"Over here," a short and particularly chubby orderly instructed them. "Barker is already waiting for you." He slid a security card into a reader and the metal door in front of them clicked open. "I'll be right outside if you need me."

Folding his arms over his chest the orderly watched them go in and closed the door behind them.

Sam glanced over his shoulder as it snapped shut. Should they really be left alone with a psychotic murderer? *Maybe Dean's right. Something is "off" about this case...*

Sam took a seat anyway, fiddling with his tie as it dangled loosely before him. "Mr. Barker? My name is Sam Wayne and this is my associate Dean Kent. We're from the U.S. government. We're here to see you about what happened last year."

Barker looked them both over with sparkling green eyes. Was that an expression of curiosity, or something more? "You're here to help me get out?" He eventually asked, wringing his hands every few seconds nervously.

"It's a possibility," Dean lied. "But we need a few facts first."

"I told the authorities here everything I know. They just think I'm mad. But I'm not insane, *they* are for not seeing what's going on."

"So, you're saying you didn't kill anyone?" Sam sat forward on the edge of his chair, carefully appraising just how well restrained Barker was. The man seemed to be cuffed to a bar on the table that separated them, but sometimes looks could be deceiving.

Jeez, I'm getting as paranoid as Dean. What's with this town?

"I'm telling you, the local cops set me up. Why would I kill a total stranger?" Barker defended.

"Because you're buckets of crazy?" Dean smiled back, obviously not caring if he offended.

Sam shot his brother a dipped brow that screamed "shut your piehole" and then probed further before Dean had the chance to do more damage. "Mr. Barker, why would the police want to frame you?"

Barker huffed, his eyes suddenly becoming more feral. He pulled at the chains on his wrists, rocking back and forth on his chair until the metal restraints actually started to bite into his flesh, drawing a thin line of blood.

"Because the locals are all in on it," Barker growled. "They want the flesh, that's all they want, the bloody flesh of the innocents."

Sam glanced at Dean. This could be a real clue, or it could be a mad man ranting to his audience. "Why do they want the flesh?" He risked another question.

Barker grinned. "You'll see! Oh, you'll see so soon...so *SOON!*" He yanked harder at his cuffs in a steady rhythm that sounded like he was trying to make music – but it was far from sweet. "Today it's all going to happen again, but this time he won't be sated with one body, one skin..."

Dean looked over his shoulder to check on the orderly outside. So far, he had either not noticed the ruckus, or was ignoring it. "Listen, buddy," he soothed. "Maybe you'll wanna keep the noise down before the baboons in the white coats come take you away to a nice padded cell, huh?"

"We can help you if you just stay calm." Sam attempted a similar tactic. The last thing they wanted right now was for the staff to sedate Barker before they'd finished talking to him.

Nothing either Winchester had to say had any effect, however.

Barker had retreated into some inner world that seemed to both terrify and excite him at the same time.

"They want the flesh!" He screamed over and over until his voice became hoarse with the effort. "They want the flesh! *Need the FLESH!*"

Sam winced and shook his head pitifully. If Barker had ever been sane, that part of him was gone now, and with it any information that might have helped them. "I think we're done here," he said sadly.

Dean's brow ticked up as if to suggest he'd known that five minutes previously. "Like I said," he muttered. "A whole lotta buckets of crazy..."

Father Alvaro's Church

The church looked different to Dean somehow as they once again walked along the pebbled pathway to its door. He couldn't put his finger on why, but the place seemed to ooze a kind of foreboding that no holy house should.

Of course, he'd felt weird ever since he'd come to this town, so maybe it was just his imagination. *Imagination hell, there's some seriously bad mojo going on around here.*

And then, let's not forget we've got an angel stalking our asses...

Dean glanced over at his brother. What would Sam think if he knew about this "Castiel?" Sam was the believer of the Winchesters, but an angel that was willing to gank a man of God?

"Something on your mind?" Sam asked intuitively.

Dean stuffed his hands in his jeans pockets and paused in front of the church. "Sam, if angels really exist, do you think they would actually kill if the reason was good enough?"

Sam appeared taken aback at the sudden question. "Okay," he eventually mouthed, his face ticking into a confused expression. "Since when did you start talking about angels as if they're on every street corner?"

"Since I saw Cage in *City of Angels*?" Dean snarked back, not wanting to admit the truth.

Sam huffed as if the explanation wasn't good enough, but Dean reached out for the church door, brushing off any further conversation.

As his fingers touched the aged wood, Ernesto seemed to materialize from the ether to stand beside him.

Dean took a step back, surprised at the young boy's abrupt appearance. "Sheesh, what are you, the friggin' invisible man?"

Ernesto sniffed. "If you're looking for the padre he isn't here."

"Do you know where he is?" Sam asked softly.

"Father Alvaro is busy arranging the yearly celebrations..." Ernesto paused, watching as three police cruisers screamed by, sirens wailing as they disappeared into the distance.

"Wonder what's got them so all fired up?" Dean pondered. "I mean, I wouldn't have thought a back woods town like this even *had* three cop cars."

Ernesto's nose puckered as if he found the comment slightly insulting. For his age, the kid was sharp. "A skinned body has been found," he eventually explained as if the brothers should already be aware of the fact.

"How do you know that?" Sam looked to Dean as he asked the question.

"Because it always happens on this day!" Ernesto shook his head as if he were teaching a kindergarten class. "What are you two? *Stupid?*"

Dean let the comment slide, instead thinking of what Barker had told them back at the mental institute.

"You'll see! Oh, you'll see so soon...so SOON! Today it's all going to happen again, but this time he won't be sated with one body, one skin..."

Was Barker sane after all, despite his ravings?

"Why is today so special?" Sam continued to question the boy, the concern on his face suggesting he was having the same thoughts as Dean.

Ernesto sighed deeply. "Because it's *his* day, of course!"

"Who?" Dean scowled, finally becoming annoyed at the kid's tone. "The friggin' Tooth Fairy gone rabid?"

Ernesto took the comment as yet another insult and grimaced. "No, today is the festival of Tlacaxipehualizti!"

"Gesundheit!" Dean countered.

"What does that actually mean?" Sam asked pointedly, apparently ignoring the banter that seemed to be going back and forth in front of him.

Ernesto blinked as if he was unsure how much to say. "The flaying of men in honor of Xipe," he eventually elaborated.

Dean blinked in amazement and looked straight at Sam. "Dude, what the hell have we dropped into here? *Predator?*"

Sam shook his head, obviously deeply worried by what he'd just heard. "I wish this was just a movie, but its not, and we're stuck right in the middle of it ..."

Dean nodded. "Yeah, and dude, I so plan on keeping the skin I'm in." He cocked his head, listening to the fading sirens.

Maybe in this town, that was going to prove impossible.

Garcia's Grille
Calle Vallarta
Ciudad Del Maldecido

Dean watched his brother work their laptop hard, digging up as much as he could on the so called "Xipe Totec." Being a Mexican deity had meant they hadn't actually had to look very hard to find the creature.

How they interpreted what they'd discovered, and how a small town priest fit into the equation was another matter.

"Okay, so Xipe is some sun god or something?" Dean asked – for once his mouth devoid of food.

"Not exactly," Sam corrected. "Xipe was more a god of agriculture. He's listed as a life-death-rebirth deity."

"Great," Dean groaned as he eyed the menu in front of him longingly. "What does that make him, some kinda Antichrist risen from the grave?"

"That supposes Xipe is actually doing the killings here," Sam pointed out. "During the Spanish conquests, worshippers used to sacrifice slaves to Xipe. Maybe that's what's going on?"

"You think the locals are ganking one another to appease some ancient god?" Dean shook his head despairingly. "Reminds me of Burkitsville all over again."

"According to sources, the sacrificial slaves had their hearts cut out and then the body was carefully flayed to produce a nearly whole skin. This was then worn by the priests for twenty days during the fertility rituals."

"Nice, in a grunge kinda way."

"Yeah, and it gets worse, today is the start of the annual festival to honor Xipe."

"So all that crap Barker was spouting is most likely true," Dean reasoned. "And Alvaro said this was a quiet little town where nothing ever happened. I'm thinking the padre is either at one with the natives or he's a few short of a six pack."

"Well, it could get worse."

Dean scowled. "It *could*?"

Sam nodded, taking a sip from a glass of ice water. "There are other forms of sacrifice we need to look out for. An arrow sacrifice was another method used by worshippers. The victim was bound, spread-eagled to a wooden frame, and then shot with arrows until his blood spilled onto the ground in honor of Xipe."

"Dude, so not my kind of bondage."

"Mine either," Sam agreed. "But it does mean a whole lot of people in this town might be in trouble, and we have no clue who is friend or foe."

"All that crap you dug up on Xipe and I'm not hearing anything on how to kill the grisly S.O.B. either."

"That's because so far I got squat." Sam sighed. "At least everything is starting to fall into place. All we need to do now is figure out who's batting for the opposition. Do you really think the cops could be involved like Barker suggested?"

"Hell, I wouldn't rule anything out." Dean stared at the menu again, but thoughts of flayed flesh kept creeping into his mind until his stomach growled angrily, telling him not to dare eat here. "Heck, we don't even know how Alvaro fits into this mess."

But he does fit somehow, because he's got at least one angel after ganking his ass...

"He's a friend of Kyle's. Shouldn't we give him the benefit of the doubt? I mean he is a priest, Dean."

"Yeah, well a dog collar doesn't make him one of the good guys, Sammy."

Sam closed up the laptop, apparently finished with his research. He seemed to think long and hard about an answer before simply offering. "If we can't trust a man of God, who can we trust?"

Dean didn't even have to think about his reply. "Ourselves. We trust ourselves, because there ain't nobody else I want watching my back." *Not even Castiel, angel or no angel...*

Sam let out a long breath. "So," he rubbed at his brow in frustration. "We can't trust the cops, the locals, or a priest who just happens to be Kyle Williams' buddy. Where exactly does that leave us?"

"I'm thinkin' it leaves us in a whole bunch of hurt," Dean confirmed. "Right now, though, we gotta figure out who or what we're hunting here. Maybe you can check out the most recent murder scene and find out if we're dealing with Xipe himself or just a few rabid followers. I'll go talk to our not-so-innocent priest again."

"And if Xipe really is walking among men once more, we have squat to fight him with," Sam squirmed, obviously hating that he hadn't discovered a way to subdue the god.

"Then," Dean admitted. "We're crap outta luck..."

***Latest Crime Scene,
41 Avenida Guerrero
Ciudad Del Maldecido***

Sam straightened his tie and took a deep breath before approaching the police line that clearly marked the crime scene. While he felt totally at home crashing a U.S. murder scene, Mexico was something else.

He'd read about all the different law enforcement agencies here, and about how some local officers were dependant on bribes because of their poor pay - something that would support Barker's accusations that the police were a part of the mess here, rather than a cure.

Then of course, there was the small fact that he couldn't just masquerade as an F.B.I. agent here and get away with it. No, Sam's cover had to be a little more complex. No doubt the reason he'd been given this job and Dean had ambled off in search of Father Alvaro.

Sam grunted at the idea he'd drawn the short straw, *again*, and then drew out several fake "official" papers giving him clearance to be here.

"Hi, I've been told to speak with a..." he glanced at the forms, feigning uncertainty, "...Comandante Chavez?"

The officer on guard at the police line looked unimpressed. He took the paperwork and inspected it. "F.B.I. attaché assigned to the Chihuahua regional office, huh?" He scowled, his creased skin wrinkling further. "We don't appreciate your kind meddling in local matters..."

"Miguel, is there a problem?"

Sam looked across the crime scene to see a tall, lean looking man heading towards them. From his uniform, the man was probably Luis Chavez, the equivalent of a U.S. police chief.

"He's from the U.S. government," Miguel sniffed. "Come down here to poke his nose in our affairs."

"Actually, I was hoping to be able to help." Sam frowned at the second sergeant and hoped his boss was more amenable, or this was going to be one hell of a short gig. He looked Chavez straight in the eye and offered up a hand. "Sam Skinner."

Chavez took the proffered hand and shook heartily. "Sorry about Miguel, he's...not used to dealing with outsiders. How can I help?"

"Well, I'm working in conjunction with the Policia Federal," Sam lied convincingly. "We're looking into the murder last year involving Miles Barker, and when I heard there had been another flaying while Barker is still inside..."

"You're considering the fact that he's innocent, and his claims that the police are involved might be true?"

Sam sighed for effect, wanting the cop to think he was on the law's side. "No, sir, not at all – at least not the police involvement at any rate. We are considering that Barker might be innocent, or possibly even have an accomplice."

Chavez put a hand on his hip and slid on a pair of Raybans Horatio Cain style. "Well then I guess I better assist you. Is there anything particular you're looking for?"

Was that sincerity, or sarcasm? With the accent and demeanor, it was hard for Sam to tell.

"I was hoping to get a look at the body before the meat wagon arrives. Compare injuries from last year's case."

Chavez jerked a thumb towards a nearby clump of bushes. Even at this distance, Sam could clearly see splashes of coagulating blood on the shrubbery. What lay beyond wouldn't be pleasant.

But then, that was what he'd come here to see.

Taking several long strides, he moved swiftly and decisively to where the corpse lay waiting.

The thing stretched out before him in the dusty earth had apparently once been a woman, but now it was simply a pile of raw meat and sinew, with eyes that seemed to pop from its skull.

Sam kneeled, unfazed by what he was seeing.

Even in this condition, it was obviously apparent where the victim's heart had been removed, Xipe style. The job was neat and accomplished, as if it had been carried out by a craftsman rather than an angry god. *Which tells me zip about who did this...*

Sam's brow furrowed in the way it always did when he was feeling pensive. He had to take a risk here, push a few buttons, because he wasn't going to get any clues from the crime scene itself.

"Tell me Comandante, do you think any of your men could be involved in this?"

Chavez chuckled wryly. "Why Agent Skinner, I thought you weren't looking at my delegación for corruption?"

"I have to look at every option – even you." Sam straightened up from his position, staring at the cop intently with the hope his size alone made him just a little intimidating.

If he was shocked, Chavez didn't show it. "Anything is possible," he acknowledged. "But if there is corruption in my department, then it's well hidden."

"Like this girl's body, then," Sam pushed. "Are you a churchgoing man, Comandante? Perhaps you know Father Alvaro?"

Chavez reddened just a touch. "It's a small town, everyone knows Alvaro. He's a great priest. Just what this community has needed for a long time."

Sam licked his lips, the Mexican heat making them dry and cracked like a sheet of sand paper. Not that Sam noticed, because something was going on here – at least between Chavez and Alvaro. Now he had to find out what.

"Can you tell me more about the festivities Alvaro is overseeing? Some kind of celebration of the god Xipe Totec, isn't it?"

Chavez's head snapped around and he jerked off the sunglasses to glare at Sam. Definitely the action of a man who had been caught off guard. "It's nothing the F.B.I. need worry themselves about. Just a simple fiesta that has endured the test of our great nation's history. Just like your Independence Day."

"Except we let off fireworks, we don't skin people," Sam countered.

The head cop seemed to sag as if he didn't want the war of words anymore. His shoulders dropped and he nodded sadly. Whether his sudden lack of recalcitrance was due to genuine concern or deep-seated guilt, Sam couldn't be sure.

What came next from Chavez could be a bold lie, or an admission that he had lost control of the situation. In honesty, Sam expected the lie, but he had to give the man the benefit of the doubt.

Dean would probably have wanted to ventilate the cop by now, but that approach wasn't likely to help in front of several local officers who wouldn't give a crap about shooting Sam to make a fast buck, or rather a fast peso.

Chavez rubbed a hand across his slick hair and then pinched the bridge of his nose. "You're right, of course. Something could be going on here that is, shall we say, beyond my capabilities. I was first at the scene, and there was disturbing evidence. Evidence I didn't want my men to see for fear they might think I was going mad."

"Such as?" Sam probed.

"I bagged and tagged it," Chavez explained, taking a slow gait towards his cruiser. "It's in my trunk. I didn't know what else to do with it until you showed up."

Sam cautiously followed the cop to the rear of the car. Maybe this was the proof he needed that Xipe was back in town. Or at least that some kind of following was continuing the god's love of skin flaying.

As Chavez popped the trunk, Sam realized his mistake.

The rear of the car was completely empty, and to add to that suspicious fact, two of the Comandante's subordinates suddenly joined them – one either side Sam.

"You didn't really think you'd be allowed to just walk in here and pull rank did you?" Chavez still looked angry.

"You can't just make me disappear," Sam defended, even though his heart told him otherwise. "There are people at the Policia Federal office that know I'm here."

"And what would you say if I told you that I have people there too? People who can help make you disappear."

I'd have to borrow a phrase from my brother and say I'm so screwed, Sam thought. Except that would be an understatement.

Chavez nodded to the officer on the left and Sam felt something hard crash down on the back of his skull without warning.

Maybe it was the butt of a gun, maybe it was some kind of police baton, but the choice of weapon was pretty much irrelevant.

Sam felt his body pushed forward as his world turned black, and he realized that if he was lucky enough to ever regain consciousness again, then he'd find himself locked inside the trunk of a police cruiser.

Or worse still, with no skin...

Father Alvaro's Church

Dean wasn't really sure why he'd come here. After all, despite the place being Alvaro's place of worship, the little priest was hardly ever around when anyone came to call.

Of course, that could easily be explained if he was off in some dark place worshipping a long dead god – although the Winchesters had yet to see evidence of it.

"Huh," Dean groaned to himself as he walked up to the tiny pulpit. "The only proof we have is from a friggin' freak who calls himself an angel. Who'd actually want to be a damn angel in this whacked out world anyway?"

"You should be more careful of your choice of words in a house of the Lord."

Dean whirled to see Castiel eyeing him distastefully. "Well maybe if you guys didn't creep around like friggin' ninjas I might not need to cuss so much, dude."

Castiel's expression remained dry. "Your language was inappropriate before my appearance." He slid his hands in his long overcoat pockets and walked slowly to the pulpit. "In fact, your language is...somewhat colorful far too often."

"Yeah? Well stick around and I'll show you a whole new meaning to the word 'colorful.'" Dean pulled a face but the angel's stoic expression never faltered.

He has stubble, Dean noted randomly. What kind of heavenly creature comes down here with a designer beard? And I've still not seen any sign of those damn feathers...

"My wings are not visible in this form," Castiel offered helpfully, even though Dean hadn't made the comment vocally.

Dean nodded as if he really should have known that. "*Riiight!* Stupid me. Why didn't I realize that. 'Cause I mean, no angel is gonna want to show off his plumage to prove he actually is an angel."

Castiel sighed, obviously frustrated and confused by Dean's behavior. He remained silent apparently waiting for some kind of heavenly intervention to tell him what to do next.

Dean decided he didn't want to wait that long. After all, it might be forty days and forty nights, or some other such biblical number, before the guy upstairs bothered to answer.

"So," Dean asked. "Why have you taken to suddenly stalking my ass? I mean, apart from me having your one true feather. And a truly amazing ass... 'Cause, either way man, I'm telling you, it's so not healthy."

Castiel faced-off Dean as if what he was about to say was for heavenly ears only.

To Dean, that thought wasn't exactly comforting.

"Because we have a common cause," Castiel breathed in his customary whisper. "Alvaro is the reason you came here, and he is also what I was sent here to deal with."

"So do I at least get to know what the padre has done before you vanish off back to the pearly gates this time?"

Castiel turned until his back was to Dean. He was probably thinking again, or somehow conversing with others of his kind, the hunter surmised.

"Alvaro has corrupted some of his congregation, and he must be stopped." Castiel explained matter-of-factly. "He has given up on today's society and gone back to the old ways. Bad ways that mean he now reveres an unworthy god to such an extent that he is willing to sacrifice to it, Dean."

"Yeah, I've seen that kinda thing before," Dean admitted, thinking again of the scarecrow town in Indiana. "Never saw me a corrupt priest that liked to skin people before, though. That's just too whacked."

"If we do not stop him today, he will complete enough sacrifices to cause Xipe Totec to rise from his current resting place..." The angel's sentence cut off as if the very thought of what might happen next was too unspeakable, even to him.

"Resting place?" Dean asked with a frown. "You mean like a grave or some kinda temple?"

Castiel didn't mess with words. "Like Hell, Dean."

"But didn't you just say this creep is some kinda god?"

Castiel's mood remained somber. "A fallen one, like Lucifer, yes..."

Dean almost gaped. Just what kind of civilization were he and Sam fighting for when even the good guys weren't good anymore?

"You're telling me Alvaro, a priest for crying out loud, is messed up in this, and we're supposed to stop him?"

Castiel turned away for a second time, looking sad, almost bitter even. He locked his hands behind his back and Dean thought he heard a tiny sigh escape the angel's lungs.

"Everything has a dark side, Dean."

The church fell silent, save for a bird fluttering in the rafters where it had inadvertently become trapped. Even the rays of sunlight that descended through the cracks in the roof seemed muted.

It was as if God had abandoned this place suddenly, leaving only his two soldiers behind to deliberate their next actions.

Dean watched Castiel. Were their fates really so alike, despite their different origins?

Had they both been put on the planet to fight the supernatural any way they could?

Brothers in arms.

"If Alvaro succeeds with the sacrifices today, can we still try and gank this Xipe freak somehow?" Dean eventually asked.

"Not easily." The monotone response suggested that Castiel had retreated into his usual emotionless state.

Dean wasn't sure which way he preferred the angel.

He cringed, knowing that Castiel – one of God's minions – was suggesting something tantamount to murder.

Alvaro had to die to stop the rebirth of an evil god.

"Can't we find a way to just stop Alvaro making the sacrifices? You're an angel, can't you just zap him or something?"

"My brother would already have stopped him, if you had not intervened," Castiel intoned.

Dean began to pace along the aisle, rubbing a hand over his hair in frustration. Nothing was going right, and he was talking, actually *talking* to an *angel* to boot. Today was definitely going down as one of the weirdest in his life so far.

"Dude, how were we supposed to know what was going on?" The hunter eventually asked. "It's not every day you get to see a priest getting his butt spanked by one of God's pets."

"We are *not* pets," Castiel corrected unflinchingly. "We are soldiers – like you."

Dean looked at the angel. "Not like me," he grumbled. "Even I have a conscience."

Castiel's head cocked to one side as if he didn't really understand the point. "In my Father's business, there is no time for earthly principles."

"Yeah, I get it. No shades of grey, only right and wrong as the Big Guy sees it, right?" Dean perched himself precariously on the edge of a pew. "Now can we cut through all the heavenly red tape here and actually do some work?"

"Work?" Castiel asked, as if he had no concept of such a word.

Boy, this is hard work, Dean considered before remembering the angel had read his thoughts earlier. "Can we just find our rabid priest before anyone else loses their skin today?"

"I think I know where to look." The angel walked towards the door, obviously expecting Dean to follow him. When Dean didn't, Castiel turned back and explained. "There are ancient Aztec ruins out in the desert. It would be a perfect place for more sacrifices."

Dean rubbed his hands together.

Finally.

Now they had somewhere to look and something to do besides chasing their tails, even if the idea had come from a freak with hidden wings.

He slapped Castiel on the back "Tell me, has your angelic ass ever ridden in the finest set of wheels in the whole dang universe, Cas?"

"I do not believe so," the angel frowned uncertainly. "And my name is Castiel..."

Dean grinned. "Hang onto those wing feathers there, Cas, because you're about to witness a *miracle* of classic motor construction..."

* * * *

Sam suspected before he even opened his eyes that he was no longer in Chavez's trunk. Somehow he could feel the sun beating down on his body as if he'd stripped off his shirt and was trying to catch a few rays.

He blinked, finally daring to actually check out his situation.

Sam appeared to still be in Mexico – probably the desert just outside of town, but there was no real evidence to suggest where.

As he'd suspected, his shirt and t-shirt had been stripped away to leave bare flesh exposed to the elements, and whatever else his captive had in mind.

At this point, he was sure Dean would have been having lewd thoughts and hoping his kidnapper was a skinny blonde, with or without brains.

Sam wasn't so enamored with the way he'd been splayed out.

Both his wrists and ankles had been bound to some kind of wooden frame until he was effectively spread-eagled. It didn't really take much imagination to guess he'd been prepared for the arrow sacrifice he'd described to his brother.

He squinted as the sun dipped from behind a cloud, momentarily blinding him.

Once its rays had once again been veiled by more puffs of white in the heavens, he began to take stock of his situation.

There was no way for Dean to know he'd been taken, or indeed where he'd been taken. That meant no rescue. His only chance was to escape.

Sam glanced down at the cord that held him fast. It was thick and new – there was no chance to break free from its clutches.

Looking around, he saw ruins both to the left and right. Ancient stonework that had once been part of vast temples and maybe even local pyramids.

In their heyday, they would have held hundreds of worshippers and followers, but today, no living soul remained here that could help Sam.

Dammit, this isn't good. Not good at all...

Sam heard a sudden movement behind him and desperately tried to crane his neck to see what was causing the noise. Had he been wrong? Was there someone here who could help him after all?

But the interloper wasn't a friend.

It was Alvaro, or at least it looked like Alvaro beneath a hideous human skin that he seemed to wear with as much ease as his dog collar.

The coat of flesh appeared to have been recently removed from its owner, and Sam guessed this was the latest murder victim's hide.

To add to the grotesque picture that belonged in the history books was the frightening fact that Alvaro was carrying a crudely fashioned bow, and several arrows.

He's going to do the sacrifice, and I'm the lamb to the slaughter!

"Father, you don't know what you're doing. You're not yourself. Kyle told me..."

"Kyle Williams is a fool," Alvaro snapped. "He still puts his trust in the Church, in the new ways, when in reality we should be looking back to the days of our forefathers."

"You don't mean that," Sam blurted, thinking of nothing else constructive to argue with.

The skin-cloaked priest snorted. "Don't I? What has your God given me after all my years of service? What has he given the poor peasants that live in this place except constant hardship? Xipe will not see his followers in such poverty once he is reborn..."

"Wanna bet?" Sam yanked at his bonds again as the priest turned away to concentrate more on some bizarre Mexican chant.

Alvaro wasn't interested in conversation, he was only interested in how many he could kill to appease his new master.

With an abrupt sense of panic eating at his soul, Sam realized that, in fact, he wasn't even the first to die in this place today.

Around the stone plinth where he'd been tied were several coagulating pools of dark blood, some of which contained blobs of meat that he could only guess were lumps of fatty tissue left over from earlier flayings.

Crap! And I'm next on the menu!

Alvaro stopped his strange, throaty ritual and sucked down a deep, calming breath before taking several long steps back.

When he was happy he was far enough away, he slowly lifted the home-crafted bow and took aim at Sam's chest.

The weapon shook in his hands as he placed the arrow ready to fire, but Sam guessed it was more from excitement than shame.

This was it, of all the hunts he'd been on, he was going to die here at the hands of a demented priest.

Irony was sometimes so not funny.

Sam saw the sweat on Alvaro's palms, saw the manic joy in the priest's glistening orbs, and decided he didn't want to see the instrument of his own death.

He closed his eyes, and as he heard the twang of the bow's release, he tried to think of all the good times he and Dean had shared before the arrow took away any chance of him ever seeing his brother again.

Part Three

Dean edged his way along the ruins, Colt pressed into his sweating palms like it had been glued there from birth.

The angel had brought him here, and he had to grudgingly admit that he was beginning to accept the fact that Castiel was indeed what he claimed to be. That, of course, didn't mean that Dean had to like it.

"You are making too much noise. You will undoubtedly draw attention to our concealed position." Castiel looked down to where Dean's CAT boots were causing a crunching noise as he walked on a section of fallen temple wall.

"Yeah, well you ain't exactly creeping Jesus yourself there," Dean snarked back in a whisper. "Besides, I'm not seeing anyone around this joint to actually worry about."

Castiel cocked a brow, then his head. "That is because you lack my knowledge," the angel informed. "And you also lack my hearing." He nodded as some hideous thing stepped backwards into view from behind the vestiges of what was once an interior partition.

As Dean stared at it, he realized he was actually looking at a man wearing a coat of human skin – and not just any man. It was Alvaro.

The priest was brandishing a crude bow and arrow as if he were about to fire. "Well I'll be, if it ain't William frickin' Tell himself. Wonder what he's practicing his archery skills on?"

"I believe it is your brother..."

Dean's body froze and his hands instantly brought the Colt to bear on the priest. As Alvaro's fingers twitched, ready to let loose his arrow, Dean fired.

It was a clean, almost perfect shot, the bullet hitting Alvaro's bow and sending its projectile mercifully astray from Sam's chest.

Alvaro dropped the bow reflexively, stumbling backwards both in shock and lack of balance caused by the force of the impact.

His disorientation was momentary, and when the priest looked up again, his face was a mask of anger. He glared in the direction of the bullet, eyes locking with Castiel's as he recognized the angel for what he truly was.

Dean watched, amazed that Alvaro showed no fear before his supposed master. "Don't move or I'll punch a hole in both your skins." He aimed the Colt again, but Alvaro wasn't afraid of the weapon any more than he was of a seraphim.

Diving sideways, the deceptively lithe priest vanished into the nearby ruins, his knowledge of the local landmarks clearly showing as even his shadow disappeared before Dean could chase it.

The hunter tried anyway, ducking and weaving through crumbling brick and stonework until he arrived at some kind of chamber. The place had once clearly been inside the place of worship, its mosaic flooring and altar lending credence to the idea that this may once have been a place of sacrifice.

Dean shuddered and looked around. If there was a secret tunnel here, he couldn't see an entrance. *That's why they call them secret, you jerk*, he chided himself.

Not that it mattered, Alvaro was long gone, possibly in search of more victims.

Dean let his hands relax a touch and allowed the Colt to drop to his side as he jogged back to where Sam and Castiel were waiting.

The ever-stoic angel was carefully untying Sam without saying a word. It was like he had lost all ability to speak.

Sam pulled a face as Dean approached and quietly mouthed, "Where did you pick up such a freaky hitchhiker? Forget Rutger, man, this guy's the real deal."

"You don't know the half of it."

Castiel raised a brow, signaling he'd heard, but Dean wasn't sure if the look was because he'd been called freaky, or because the *Hitcher* reference had confused him.

For someone who seemed to know a whole lot, Castiel sometimes didn't actually understand squat.

Maybe that was what Dean was already getting to like about him. Although he'd never admit it.

He opened his mouth to ask what next, but Castiel suddenly stopped dead as he pulled away the last section of twine on Sam's wrist.

The angel turned, his eyes darting to and fro like a dog catching a scent. After a few seconds, his brow scrunched and he looked to Dean as if Sam wasn't even there. "We have to hurry. Alvaro has returned to the church to complete the ritual sacrifices. Without our intervention he will be able raise Xipe."

Sam rubbed at his wrists and scowled at the angel, wondering how he knew so much about what they were doing. His eyes searched Dean's, mentally asking, "Who is this guy?"

Dean shrugged and stuck his .45 in the back of his waistband. "I'll explain on the way, but you're so not gonna believe this." He began to jog towards where the Impala was parked, turning as he ran to smirk. "Oh, and you might wanna get dressed before we go in church. Don't wanna frighten the old ladies."

Castiel blinked. "I believe old ladies would find you most attractive," he offered less-than-helpfully to Sam.

Sam clambered from where he'd been spread-eagled and shot the angel a scathing glance. "That," he explained, thinking of Vera Macon back in Michigan, "is exactly what I'm afraid of..."

* * * *

Dean dared to glance in the rearview as the Impala fishtailed on the loose shale road that led from the ruins. While his hands remained firmly on the wheel, his eyes locked with the angel's on the backseat.

"Dude, shouldn't you be 'leaping' over to the church or something?" he asked dryly.

Castiel sighed. "I believe it is customary to have a strategy rather than jumping into the frying pan."

"It's jumping *out* of the frying pan," Dean corrected gruffly. "And since when did Winchesters plan anything?"

Sam watched the exchange, his expression becoming more and more bemused. "Jeez, I don't want to break up Laurel and Hardy or anything, but do you mind telling me who your new partner in crime is? Have I been fired?"

Dean squirmed.

Actually, physically squirmed.

"He's...kinda a..."

"I'm an angel of the Lord," Castiel finished obligingly.

Sam's mouth opened, but no sound came out. His bottom lip hung low for several seconds, then he croaked. "You're...?"

"He's an angel, Sammy. And I don't mean one of Charlie's." Dean let the idea sink into his brother's head a little before adding, "Just don't expect him to do miracles or show you his feathers, because he's more likely to gank a priest than he is kiss a baby."

Dean saw Castiel scowl in the mirror and found it mildly amusing that he could piss off one of God's finest so easily. *Guess I better watch my mouth or I might get smited...*

"I do not gank priests," the angel argued. "I merely enforce God's will."

Dean looked at Sam and shrugged. "Okay, so he only ganks priests his boss doesn't get along with..."

"You're nuts, both of you," Sam squeaked out. "In fact, who are you, and what have you done with my brother?"

"Your brother is driving the car," Castiel suggested, not realizing the question hadn't even been directed at him. "However, may I suggest we turn our attention outside the vehicle..."

Dean tapped the brakes and slowed the car just a little. Outside, the streets were empty.

No, not just empty, *eerily* empty.

"Where is everyone?" Sam pulled a face. "Shouldn't there at least be some traffic at this time of day?"

"Man, I'm getting that *I Am Legend* vibe all over again," Dean grouched. "Please tell me this doesn't mean Alvaro raised Xipe the skinhead already."

"This does not mean Alvaro raised Xipe," Castiel drawled. "But he is close."

"What, your angelic spidey-sense mojo tell you so?" Dean spun the Impala's wheel with the palm of his hand, taking the monster machine down a small side street that eventually led to the rear of the church.

As he came out of the turn, he picked up speed again until the tires spewed out an all-enveloping dust cloud behind them.

"Dean, I think I see someone." Sam was pointing to a lone figure walking on the excuse for a sidewalk.

Even from behind, the man seemed familiar somehow.

Dean grudgingly slowed again, bringing the Chevy alongside the pedestrian until they could see his face. "Holy crap, it's Barker. What the hell is he doing here? I mean, you don't just walk out of a secure mental facility on the same day there's another local bloodbath...."

"We should ask him," Castiel suggested, strangely not urging them on to the church instead. "In fact, we should pick him up. I believe he may be instrumental in what is happening."

Sam swiveled until he was facing the angel. "And you know this how?"

Castiel remained silent and unnervingly motionless.

Sam let out a deep breath of exasperation and wound down his window. "Need a ride?"

Barker turned, but didn't stop walking. When he realized who was addressing him, he almost broke into a run, apparently believing he was about to be arrested.

"Whoa, slow down there," Dean barked. "We're not here to take your ass into custody, we're here to stop the locals turning Hannibal on one another."

Barker flinched, but apparently resisted the urge to take flight. "It's...happening again, isn't it?" he eventually stammered.

"Pretty much," Dean agreed, keeping the Chevy at a crawl. "We were kinda hoping you might wanna help us out and stop this thing."

"C'mon," Sam said softly. "At least let us give you a ride. You'd be safer with us than on your own out there." He looked over his shoulder. "Won't he..." And then his voice trailed off.

The man in the back seat – the *angel* – had vanished.

He'd not opened the door and jumped out. He'd not moved over to make room for Barker.

He'd literally *vanished*.

Sam gulped and looked to his brother.

Dean simply cocked his head and smiled. "Told you so," he offered.

Sam licked his lips. Angel or not, their weird "friend" had disappeared and there was a whole lot of work to do. He turned his attention back to the man still ambling alongside of the rolling car. "You want that ride?"

Barker looked skittishly around and then nodded a little too enthusiastically. One minute he was still sane, but the next he was like Howlin' Mad Murdock from *The A Team*.

Today, Sam wasn't sure whether that was a good thing or not.

"I guess I should say thanks for picking up my butt," Barker's eyes surveyed the Chevy's interior as if he'd been abducted by an alien spacecraft. "So, you still think I'm crazy, huh?"

"Certifiable," Dean chuckled as he hit the gas again, back on track towards the church. "But that's okay. Me and Sammy are a little whacked out of our gourds some days too."

"I'm not crazy, not really." Barker blinked rapidly, fumbling with his hands. "This is all my fault. All mine. If only they'd have listened to me. I should have made someone, anyone, listen a year ago when I was accused of the first death..."

"Listen, man, you couldn't have done anything. You were locked in a padded cell with no room service."

Barker shook his head. "It's strange, wrong, but I feel a part of what is happening here, and today is my second chance. My chance to stop more deaths. I can stop them, I need to stop them..."

The sentences became more incoherent as Barker began to ramble on and on about the townspeople needing "the flesh" again.

"I think his reasoning is a little skewed," Sam muttered under his breath as they took the final turn before the church. "Should we really be taking him straight into the firing line?"

Dean shrugged. "I dunno, Sasquatch, but Cas seemed to think he was part of the bigger picture."

"And you trust this angel with your life, even though you've only just met him?" Sam couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Dean didn't believe in *anything* except bullets, beer and women.

Dean's resolve didn't waver. "Dude, just one of his feathers has saved our asses enough times to give him the benefit of the doubt."

"And you're sure it's his feather?" Sam countered irritably.

There was a short pause, Barker watching both brothers intently from the rear seat.

"I'm sure, Sammy..."

Father Alvaro's Church

The first thing Dean heard when he entered the claustrophobic stairwell was the chanting. It wasn't loud. It wasn't a recognizable language, even.

But it was sickening, like the noise of someone scraping their nails down a chalkboard, and the more you asked them to stop, the more they carried on.

Dean looked over his shoulder to Sam and Barker, and through the gloom, their expressions told a similar tale.

Dean swallowed and forced himself on, somehow already expecting to find some indescribable horror awaiting him.

Alvaro didn't disappoint.

The small, dank crypt room had an altar at its farthest wall – an altar that now dripped the blood of a small boy who would never live to watch another cartoon, never marry and grow old with his wife.

Ernesto's body was sprawled across the dais, his tanned skin looking like it had been bleached from blood loss.

Standing over him with a short, pointed ceremonial dagger, Alvaro was oblivious to the atrocity he had performed. Instead, he seemed to feed from the death, wallowing in the evil as he held Ernesto's recently excised heart aloft in his left hand.

Dean wanted to curl over and hurl. Even though he'd seen a thousand deaths before, they'd never been like this. He sensed bile rising in his throat but gulped it back, thankful at least that Ernesto's desecrated body still had its skin.

Alvaro had to pay for this. Maybe his demonic masters would escape Dean's wrath, but the priest would not.

Bringing the Colt in his hand up in line with Alvaro's spine he felt his hands begin to shake, not with fear, but with adrenalin-fuelled temper. If this was what Sam had felt like after Kathy Denison had died in La Jolla, then he understood now why his brother had brooded for weeks after.

"Turn and face me, you sonofabitch, so I can see the fear in your eyes when I send you back to your maker."

You're not thinking straight. Shoot him and you're no better than he is. Oh yeah, then how come even the angels want to cream his ass? Dean's mind screamed, inner turmoil rather than rational thought taking control of his actions.

"Dean! *NO!*" Sam was yelling, but Dean didn't want to hear. "Dean, *stop*. This could be what Alvaro wants! His self-sacrifice could be the end of the ritual!"

The words seemed jumbled to Dean, like he was underwater. And yet somehow, another voice was more discernable through the fog in his mind.

"Everything has a dark side, Dean."

They were Castiel's words, but was he using them to make excuses for himself? Was this the time he would give in to his dark side?

Is it so wrong to kill a man who is so purely evil? A man who has already taken the lives of so many innocents?

Moisture welled in Dean's eyes, but he fought it back, wrestling with his conscience and his trigger finger to make the right choices.

Alvaro wasn't a ghost, he wasn't a creature of the night. He was a man. Killing him here like this would still be murder, whatever justification Dean tried to make.

Dean's trembling forefinger relaxed a little, and as he gave in to reason, Alvaro finally turned to stare him in the face.

"Just didn't have the jewels to do it, did you Winchester?"

"Maybe he didn't, but what's a madman got to lose?" Barker pushed past Sam before he could react and snatched Dean's .45 from the hunter's still shaky grip.

Without hesitation, without even a flinch from the recoil, he emptied the Colt's clip into the priest, his eyes blazing with determination.

When it was finally over, his body sagged and he seemed to fall forwards, dropping onto his knees just a few feet from Alvaro's body.

The priest's cadaver twitched, but there was no life left in it to get up and fight. As silent seconds passed, Alvaro simply oozed out a scarlet pool that mingled with Ernesto's already coagulating puddle.

Barker remained on the floor, his head bowed, his hands stretching out into the mire of blood. Every few seconds, he appeared to go into spasm in time with Alvaro's ticking body.

Dean looked at the scene in front of him with wide eyes, trying to assimilate what had just happened.

What he had just let happen by not reacting sooner.

Should he have pulled the trigger himself?

He felt a huge bear-like palm sit gently on his shoulder, and knew that was Sam's way of offering reassurance.

Dean nodded, cleared his throat and let the self-derogation wash away – at least on the surface. There was a mess to be cleaned up, excuses to be made, the usual mop up after a bad gig.

"I know what my role was now." It was Barker, and as he talked, he began swirling his hands further and further into the blood he had helped spill. It clung to his fingers as if it belonged there. "I had to finish what had been started here..."

"It's over," Sam mistakenly soothed. "We've stopped the evil. We've stopped any more killing."

"No. You haven't."

Sam jolted as a new voice came from behind him. A voice he seemed to recognize. He whirled in surprise to find Castiel staring at him with that resolute gaze he so often wore.

The angel nodded back at Barker, indicating something was about to happen. "He is ready," Castiel offered cryptically.

Dean grunted. "Ready for what? Friggin' finger painting *in blood*? I know they like whackos to keep busy back in the nuthouse but this is just buckets of..."

Barker pushed up from the floor, slowly dragging his body into a standing position. He seemed to jerk as his back locked, and he mechanically turned.

Suddenly, all eyes were on Miles Barker as he raised his head to glare at them.

And in that moment, both Sam and Dean realized that whatever they were looking at, it was no longer human.

Barker's yellowed orbs now appeared to have vertical stripes running down them – stripes that glowed like muted candle flames in the darkness of the crypt.

As they watched, his skin began to change color to match the new shade of his eyes, until eventually, all the flesh that was visible was either yellow or a strange orange tan.

In places, it even looked like his skin was peeling, taking on the gruesome appearance of a molting snake.

"This is his true fate," Castiel explained, taking a step forward so that he was in line with the brothers.

"Barker isn't possessed is he? He isn't even a vessel..." Dean couldn't believe what he was witnessing, because that meant there was no way to fight it.

"He is, and always was, Xipe Totec. He just did not realize it until today." Castiel appeared to watch Barker as he answered the hunter's questions, but he didn't attempt to make a move on the creature as it continued to transform.

"You're saying that thing lay dormant inside Barker, kinda like our friend Jon Volsung and his other life as an Einherjar?" From his look of amazement, even Sam was finding the math a little hard to handle.

"Yes," Castiel answered, without even having the need to ask just who Volsung was. But then, perhaps Einherjar were simply another form of angel in his world.

Dean was slightly less understanding than his brother. "Back in the car, you said Barker was a part of all this. You knew what he was all along, didn't you? You sonofabitch, you knew and you still let this crap play out. You let that freakin' thing rise..."

His eyes involuntarily slid to Ernesto's pale body.

Was this what he and Sam fought for every day?

Was this the kind of thing the higher powers allowed to happen?

Because if it was, Dean wasn't sure he belonged in this war any more.

Castiel opened his mouth to respond, but then clamped it shut again as Barker/Xipe took a step towards them.

Dean felt like punching the angel for his lack of answers, but now wasn't the time to break his fist on what was most likely an unbreakable jaw.

Instead, he let his hand slide back to his Colt as they all watched the ancient god, waiting for its next move.

Xipe paused, holding out his hands as if he was paying reverence to some unseen being.

At first, Dean expected the display to be some kind of show of force, and found himself imagining being thrown against the crypt wall, demon-style.

The back-wrenching satanic pitch, however, never came.

In its place, the ground in front of them began to shake, like a six-point-nine on the Richter scale was hitting the town.

As the quake rumbled through the catacombs, Xipe began to chant in some heinous language, his striped eyes rolling back until only some off shade of white remained.

Cracks began to appear in the soft earth floor, growing wider and wider until a haze of black seeped through the fractures, its dense form coalescing between Xipe and the other three men.

The raven smog had a smell to it Dean recognized all too well.

It was sulfur – the rank odor of Hell.

Lucifer smiled wanly and nodded at Xipe as his transformation from vapor to man became complete. Then he looked to the Winchesters and Castiel, his smirk never wavering.

"As Jesus had his disciples, so shall I have mine..."

Xipe appeared to take the reference as a cue and bowed to the white clad Prince of Darkness, his head lowered in worship. Wherever he had been since his exile from earth, it had obviously made the god most grateful to be "alive" again.

Lucifer sniffed appreciatively, savoring the attention. His beady eyes looked the Winchesters and Castiel up and down, as if he were appraising their attire – or perhaps, their very souls.

“And now,” he announced. “It is time to give my new soldier his first kill here amongst you humans.” His gaze turned to Castiel who didn’t flinch. “I’ll even throw in an angel for good measure...”

With a bob of his head, the Devil sent Castiel hurtling backwards, crashing into the crypt’s far wall with a bone-smashing thud. As the angel slumped down, his crumpled form left a man-sized crater in the wall, showing just how much force he’d been tossed with.

“So much for your precious ‘father’ now, hmmn?” Lucifer burst into a fit of uncontrolled laughter and instantly vanished in a poof of soot that made the air around the basement crackle with ozone.

Either he had work to do elsewhere, or the proceedings here were now of little consequence to him.

Dean winced, looking at Castiel’s unconscious body on the floor and then up to his brother. “Dude, would it be wrong to say we’re in deep doggie do right about now?”

Sam nodded. “And then some,” he admitted looking behind him as if considering making a run for the crypt stairs.

Xipe apparently read his mind.

Stretching out his fingers, he aimed his hand at the bottom of the ancient steps, and within seconds, the earthen walls either side the stairwell began to crumble.

And with the cave-in, came even more darkness.

Dean clenched his fists as the crypt was plunged into almost total gloom.

He could smell the soil from the collapsed stairway, he could feel the walls around him closing in – at least in his mind.

You’re not in a coffin this time, dude. You’re not alone. You can get out of here...

Claustrophobia was taking hold, pushing out any rational thought.

Dean whirled around, abruptly bumping into something solid. Something fleshy.

A wave of nausea overwhelmed him as fear convinced him he was touching Ernesto’s body. The body of the kid he’d helped get killed.

“Dean?” The calming voice was Sam’s.

Instantly, the nausea faded.

He couldn’t afford to lose it over a little loose earth, not here, not now.

"We need light," Dean growled. "Dammit, I can't see a thing." He fumbled in his jacket for his faithful Zippo, but the item remained elusive.

"I can see enough." Sam's tone had changed, and even though he couldn't see his brother, Dean sensed the direction Sam was looking.

Dean looked too, unable to avoid the sudden lights that were filling the now buried chamber.

Except, they weren't really lights at all.

The two pulsing spheres headed their way were the yellow striped orbs of Xipe Totec, and he was hungry; hungry for their hearts, for their flesh...

Part Four

Sam could smell the fetid breath of the approaching god, he could see the hunger in Xipe's eyes, and yet, in that moment, he also felt a strange sense of peace wash over him.

Was this what it was like when you resigned yourself to death?

As the thought crossed his mind in the darkness, he sensed movement behind him, and the tiny hairs on the back of his neck suddenly sprang to attention.

A blinding white light filled the crypt, enveloping both the hunters and the thing attempting to attack them.

The radiance was so intense, Sam had to shield his eyes from its powerful discharge or risk the chance of being blinded by its encompassing power.

As he protected himself, he heard his brother cursing, and knew that Dean was witnessing the same strange phenomenon.

And yet, somehow, Sam knew that this wasn't Xipe's doing. This was something pure, something believers waited all their lives to see and yet were never rewarded with the experience.

Because even though he couldn't see, Sam knew this was Castiel, rising from the catacomb floor and spreading his wings.

A birdlike fluttering filled the crypt, and the light was gone, taking with it the serene sensation the brothers had felt.

Sam blinked and risked opening his eyes just a fraction.

Castiel was standing before them, having placed himself between the hunters and Totec. His wings were wide, as if he was about to try and take flight, even though it would be impossible in such a confined space.

Any damage that had been done to his earthly body by Lucifer's throw had apparently vanished, healed by the hand of God, perhaps?

Sam felt his mouth open in awe, and he was powerless to stop the reaction. At his side, Dean's expression suggested he was even more freaked by what he was seeing.

Castiel ignored their response, focusing his steely gaze on Totec.

In the gloom of the crypt, the angry god had paused, his bizarrely-colored features contorting in pain. His hellish master may not be fearful of an angel's wrath, but Xipe apparently was.

"You cannot kill me, angel," he snarled, outlandishly sharpened teeth bared as he growled.

Castiel didn't falter. "No," he agreed. "But I can stop you."

Xipe swallowed, apparently weighing up just how far his enemy would and could go. After just a moment of indecision, he attacked, leaping onto the angel like a skydiver jumping from a plane.

Sam heard his brother cuss as Dean dived clear of the two struggling creatures, but beyond staying clear, there was very little either of them could do to help Castiel.

Forced to watch as the fallen god and unyielding angel tussled, Sam suddenly realized he was watching a fight that no human had probably witnessed before, and he was powerless to intervene.

He winced, feeling every punch the angel took, flares of opaline light pulsing every time Castiel returned a blow, his heavenly powers burning into Xipe like a branding iron.

And yet still the skin-loving god would not surrender.

"Who'd have thought it, a pissed off, ass-kicking angel..." Dean dodged another blow that narrowly missed Castiel's jaw and then quickly rolled across the damp floor to avoid the angel's flapping wings.

Xipe punched again, this time his blow connecting with Castiel's lower lip and drawing blood.

The angel didn't appear to even notice, his batting feather's catching Totec's forearm and stinging Xipe's orange flesh as if hot oil was being poured onto his skin.

Xipe screamed out in anger, retreating a little to glare at his scorched arm.

"You dare to touch the sacred flesh?" he roared, spittle flying from his mouth. "He who touches the flesh shall die by it..."

The god snorted and then stepped backwards into the shadows. As Sam watched, Xipe seemed to simply melt away as if his form had become part of the darkness around them.

"Well, that was better than any Saturday afternoon wrestling smackdown I've seen in a while," Dean offered, his eyes scanning the crypt for signs Xipe might just be playing possum.

"Angels do not watch television," Castiel enlightened. "Nor do we 'smackdown.'" He frowned, suggesting he wasn't actually sure what he was talking about. "At least, I do not think..."

Dean cocked his head cheekily. "What, you never checked out *Highway to Heaven* just for the hell of it?"

Castiel didn't grace him with an answer.

"Guys," Sam intervened. "I hate to be the one to say this, but our man just walked through the wall and we're kinda buried here. You think we could have a more constructive conversation?"

"We are not buried here." The angel looked to the cave-in and his tousled feathers bristled then vanished, leaving behind his usual, slightly crumpled tan overcoat.

"Oh yeah? Well it sure looks like we're buried to me, oh winged one," Dean snarked, eyeing the collapsed stair walls distastefully.

Sam wasn't sure, but he thought, just for a second, that he saw a small smile creep onto the angel's lips. Then it was gone, replaced by more pale light and vivid golden imagery.

Sam blinked, his eyelids reacting to the brightness, and when he reopened his eyes, he was back outside the church, sitting in the Impala.

Dean was behind the wheel, looking as shocked as Sam was feeling. Castiel was on the rear seat, his expression back to its normal blank mode.

"Oh, so you do 'leap' on occasion after all?" Dean asked the angel, obviously shaken by being transported through space so easily.

"It is within my power, yes."

"So can you whisk me up a double cheeseburger to go that way? I'm not seeing any drive-ins for miles here, and dude, I'm starving."

Sam shot his brother a look and frowned. Then he focused on the angel. "Okay, so, food aside, now what? We still have a rabid god on the loose and a whole town of whackos that want to worship the thing, little knowing exactly who they're selling their souls to."

Castiel gazed out of the Impala window, staring at the cloudless sky as if he were seeing far into the heavens and beyond into a place only visible to him. Eventually he sighed. "Without Alvaro to lead them, the town might give up their beliefs – at least, if we can silence Xipe Totec."

"Yeah, right, 'cause the locals are way more likely to see what a bunch of dicks they've been just 'cause we're around," Dean grouched.

"I could always call in *reinforcements* to show these people the error of their ways..."

Dean rubbed at the light growth of stubble on his chin and suddenly appeared annoyed – apparently both with the angel and himself. "Don't you think you screwed this one up enough without calling in more of your self-righteous brethren? I mean, you got a *kid* killed back there! You used us, knowing all along how it was gonna end..."

"I do not make the rules." Castiel looked genuinely sorry, his stoic features softening for the first time.

"Don't gimme that," Dean retaliated irritably. "Next you'll be blaming this on the big guy with the fuzzy white beard."

Castiel frowned. "I do not work for Father Christmas. He is...*another* department."

"I meant God, alright?"

The angel ignored the correction. "There are fixed points in time even my kind cannot interfere with. The chain of events had to happen the way it did."

"But why?" Sam questioned, shaking his head as though the angel's logic made no sense.

"Until he revealed his true self, my brothers and I could not be sure Miles Barker was the dormant Mexican god. The timeline had to progress in its natural state to expose him."

Sam watched as his brother pouted and crossed his arms moodily. Ernesto's death had hit him hard, and this was his way of dealing with it.

"So," Dean growled testily. "Just how do we find and subdue Xipe before he decides he needs to chow down on some more local flesh?"

Knowledge flashed across Castiel's mirthless eyes. "I would suggest a trip into Tenochtitlan."

"Huh?" Dean frowned.

"It's the ruins of a temple in Mexico City," Sam clarified.

Castiel nodded grimly, his cryptic air returning. "Just not the Mexico City you know..."

Yopico ***The Great Temple of Tenochtitlan***

It was hotter in the tunnels than Dean had imagined. A warm zephyr blew deep in the heart of the complex, its source no doubt emanating from hellish places beneath the temple.

Dean gripped his sawed-off a little harder and cussed under his breath.

When Castiel had said Mexico City, Dean had envisaged the bustling metropolis that was the city of today. This stench-ridden black hole couldn't be further from that description.

This was Yopico, a temple/pyramid dedicated to Xipe Totec. A temple that hadn't actually existed for centuries in the real world.

Right now, if there even was a "right now" Dean pondered, Yopico was nothing more than a bunch of ruins.

But here, here in this netherworld it was whole. It was functional.

Who'd o' thought a friggin' angel would lie? Except Castiel hadn't actually told an untruth. This place really was where Mexico City now stood. Yeah, well the winged freak wasn't exactly being frank now, was he?

Dean huffed to himself, but as Sam and Cas continued up front, no one heard him.

Or maybe they were just pretending not to hear his grumbling?

Dean was well aware that since Castiel had brought them here using his "leaping" thing, Dean had been nothing but grouchy, but then how else was he supposed to react?

Xipe, the bad guy, was hiding away in a plane of existence that was out of sync with the real world – just like Stull and the other dimensions the Winchesters had been thrown into via the church there.

In this place, the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan was still intact, and good old Xipe was using it as his lair.

It was just too much like the place where they'd lost John, and it was bringing back bad memories Dean didn't want resurfacing right now. In fact, if Dean had never seen another plane of existence again, it would have been too soon.

Angels...whoever said you can put your trust in 'em must be nuts. As in buckets of...

Castiel turned around as he walked, apparently mind reading again. "People who believe are not nuts, Dean Winchester. Perhaps you should try it some time..."

"Maybe if you were a bit more open with all this crap I might be," Dean countered, hastily clambering over something that looked like a dead rat on the ground. "I mean, is this place another gateway? Like Stull?"

The angel turned back and forged on through the darkness as if he hadn't heard.

"Figures," Dean grumbled under his breath as he lagged behind slightly. *I mean, all we're told is on a heavenly need to know basis, and apparently we don't need to know squat. Bosses' orders. We're risking our asses here, and it's not like we can just zip off like an angel...*

As Dean continued his diatribe under his breath, Sam and Castiel paused momentarily at an intersection in the network of tunnels.

Sam swept his flashlight into the gloom and inspected each passageway for obstacles, or the enemy. "So, we're wandering around an ancient temple like a bunch of tourists. Any ideas on how we actually deal with Xipe now we're in his territory?" He raised a brow suggestively, signifying it was time Castiel told all.

Cas sniffed at the musty air around them, stuffing his hands in his overcoat pockets as if it somehow brought out his intelligent side. "We cannot 'deal with him' in the way you would like. Even an angel cannot *gank* a god. We must use a binding spell on him instead, locking him in this place forever."

"Just a simple binding spell?" Sam looked surprised.

"Not simple, no," Castiel's gaze sank to the sandy earth beneath their feet. "It will take a very powerful ritual to contain a god of Xipe's standing. If we are successful, it will dampen my gifts also. I will be trapped here by our plan if I go any further inside."

Dean pushed forward until he was level with the two men. Coming here to this netherworld had been against his better judgment, but now they were being asked to go it alone by the angel who had gotten them into this mess in the first place.

And that just plain pissed Dean off. "*What?* You're telling me you can only go so far in this deal and then me and Sammy get to do all God's dirty work? No wonder you invited us on this gig!"

Castiel looked away into the dank-smelling darkness. Was there a hint of shame in his expression? "It is not my wish to leave you...but I cannot be lost here. There are too few of my kind left for the fight already..."

"Spoken like a true coward..."

Dean's rebuke was cut short by a gust of hot air from above, swiftly followed by a massive stone tablet falling into place in front of them. The thing looked like it belonged on a henge rather than in a pyramid, its mottled grey surface contrasting wildly with the orange-red walls of their surroundings.

Dean reached out and touched the thing, needing to know that it was real. From his experiences in Stull's catacombs, he'd learned the hard way not to trust things at face value in a place like this.

"Well ain't this just a bitch," he eventually grumbled as he realized their path to the right was cut off.

Castiel's eyes ignored the tablet, scanning the masonry of the tunnel as if it might sprout a gargoye – or worse – at any given second. "He knows we're here," he elaborated dryly. "It has begun..."

"There's no way forward unless we take the left tunnel." Sam noted warily. "He's herding us like sheep."

Dean grabbed the flashlight from his brother's hand and let the beam play along the only tunnel left open to them. A short distance into the gloom, a scarecrow made of human flesh awaited them.

The grotesque figure was made from shafts of wood, elaborately covered in oozingly fresh skin. Thankfully, it had no eyes.

Beyond the effigy lay even more atrocities, as Dean soon discovered as he played the light across the dusty floor, trying not to gag at the stench assaulting his nostrils.

At least eight bodies littered the ground. All had been here long enough to attract an abundance of maggots and other wildlife that enjoyed gorging on the dead.

Strangely, none of the corpses had been skinned, but from what Dean could tell, all had lost their heads – not that the missing skulls had been taken. They too were scattered around, skin blackened and rotting.

"What the hell is this place?" Dean choked out, suddenly wishing he had a handkerchief to cover his nose and mouth.

"This is the testing place for Xipe's followers. These people...failed the test."

"You kinda mean like the huge friggin' stone ball in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, huh?" Dean queried, abruptly feeling uncomfortable. "'Cause I so don't feel like Harrison Ford right now."

"That is probably because you do not look like Harrison Ford right now," Castiel informed. "You look more like..."

Sam put a hand on the angel's arm, silencing him. "Man, I wouldn't finish that sentence if I were you, or he's liable to start swinging."

Castiel nodded and took down a long breath. After a moment, he nodded into the darkness, indicating a small sacrificial table neither brother had noticed.

The plinth sat right in the middle of the pile of decaying bodies, indicating it was central to what had happened here, and what was likely to happen again.

"There is a ceremonial dagger on the altar," Castiel explained. "Xipe's worshippers were expected to retrieve the blade and plunge it deep into their heart as a sign of their allegiance. No one can enter Xipe's chamber without first passing the test."

"So the only way we can get inside it to stab ourselves to death with a dagger?" Sam pulled a face that suggested he wasn't liking the idea.

"That is correct."

"And right about now, you're going to tell us this is the place you can't go beyond, right?" Dean questioned the angel with a tinge of scorn in his voice.

Cas didn't notice. "Again, you are correct. If I proceed beyond this point, I will be trapped in the chamber with Xipe once the ritual is complete." The angel looked to Sam as if what he was suggesting was the easiest thing in the world.

Reaching inside his long overcoat, he tugged out two small parchments that looked like they'd been pulled straight from the very first Bible.

"These are the symbols which must be painted on the chamber walls – in blood. The last symbol must be painted on the tablet doorway, and the door closed behind you."

"Great," Dean huffed. "We'll use the blood that's oozing from our chests after we've ganked ourselves to get in," he snarked.

Sam took the ancient writings and looked them over. "Even if we could do this, how do we get past the 'test' first?" He glanced over the angel's shoulder to stare at the altar stained with the blood of hundreds.

"You must *believe*."

"In a god that skins his victims? A god that kills little kids?" Sam shook his head, then frowned when he saw his brother move towards the dais. "Dean, you can't be serious!"

But Dean moved on, taking careful steps over the ground until he was in front of the altar. He let the light in his hand illuminate the top of the podium until it revealed the dagger.

The blade glinted back at him, taunting.

Was Xipe watching this, laughing at the hunter's stupidity? Laughing at his *faith*?

Dean sensed something shift under his weight and he realized he'd triggered some kind of pressure sensor. Now he had no choice but to go ahead with the test.

Placing the flashlight down, he picked the dagger up with both hands and raised it over his head. In the background, he could faintly hear Sam begging him to stop, but that somehow didn't seem relevant now.

Closing his eyes, Dean lunged at his chest with the blade, and as the tip struck his jacket, he felt something give.

His eyes snapped back open to see the dagger's sharpened edge had retracted inside the hilt once it had touched him.

As his hammering heart began to slow, something grated and scraped further down the tunnel.

Dean grabbed the flashlight back and aimed it in the direction of the noise to see another stone tablet – this time moving out of their path to reveal the inner chamber.

Xipe's chamber.

"Dude, don't ever do that again," Sam panted as he joined his brother beside the dais.

"Yeah, well I'm just glad I didn't listen to you."

"Huh?"

Dean pointed to the ground where he'd felt the pressure plate. "There's some kind of sensor under there. Once you step on it, I'm guessing you've a few seconds to try and gank yourself, and if you don't have the faith to do it, something comes along and whips off your head." He pointed to the fetid corpses. "If you believe enough to actually try killing yourself, the blade retracts on contact and Open Sesame!"

Sam gaped. "Man, that was one heck of a risk."

Dean shook his head and slowly plucked his sawed-off from back under his jacket. "Not half as risky as walking our asses right into Xipe's boudoir. And that's pretty much what comes next. Hope you got those symbols clear in your head Samantha, or this could be a very short gig."

Sam looked at the parchments in his left hand and his face became almost as stoic as Castiel's – almost. "Let's do it," he mouthed, his eyes already locked on the entrance to Xipe's inner sanctum.

* * * *

Sam could swear he could feel a strange tingle from the scrolls in his left hand. Maybe he was imagining the heavenly power that flowed within them, but he doubted it. Whether he liked Castiel or not, there was no denying he was an angel.

That, of course, didn't mean they could automatically win here today. Xipe was a god in his own right, and there wasn't a chance in hell he would go down without a fight.

Dean stopped ahead of Sam and held up a palm to signal they were about to enter into the flesh-loving deity's lair. This was it.

In the shadows, it was hard to see if Xipe was waiting for them, but both brothers moved on anyway. As they reached the entrance to the chamber, Sam paused to check out the elusive door Castiel had insisted must be closed behind them.

As he realized just how the stone doorway mechanism worked, Sam felt his heart sink in his chest. The "door" was a section of stone like the one they had come across earlier in the passageway – except this time it was held above the door by large pieces of rope. Somewhere, no doubt there was a pulley device that allowed the mammoth rock to be moved.

While it could be closed by severing the rope from this side, there was no way short of blowing it down that it could be lowered from the other.

In short, either he or Dean would have to stay behind to trap Xipe here.

*I'm the one who was supposed to do this. Castiel gave **me** the parchments...*

Dean nudged Sam, cutting short his internal dilemma for a while.

"Over there," the elder Winchester whispered. "Looks like Totec is taking a friggin' nap."

Yet another pedestal sat at the center of the room, and atop it, Xipe Totec sat like a mystical guru, legs crossed, arms folded, and head bowed until his eyes weren't visible.

Illumination from a tiny fissure in the top of the pyramid cascaded down to play light over his static form, making him look somehow magical.

"Kinda reminds me of that creepy ass garden gnome mom used to have," Dean remarked, checking the floor for more sensor plates before moving closer to the sleeping deity.

Sam put out a hand to hold his sibling back. "He's not taking a nap," he warned. "He's *concentrating!*"

Dean whirled and shot his brother a "huh?" look, but as Sam nodded towards the god, Xipe abruptly jumped from his podium and outstretched his arms.

"Welcome!" He announced as if he was having dinner guests. But then, perhaps he was – literally. "I've been waiting for you. I have a few...*friends* I'd like you to meet."

Xipe clicked his fingers together and something moved both to his left and right.

Sam's mouth opened as he realized there were recesses in the walls – probably used for mummified remains. Except now, *things* were slowly breaking free from the confines that had held them for centuries.

And these things had arms, and legs and...

"These are my high priests," Xipe explained with glee. "They served me until their deaths, and then they were interred here to protect me, *forever...*"

He clicked his fingers again, and the grotesque corpses' reanimation became complete. Bodies that had scraps of ancient cured flesh still clinging to them jumped down onto the ground in front of Sam and Dean, their bony fingers clawing at the air like talons ready to strike.

Dean raised his sawed-off and aimed at the lead priest, somehow transfixed by the way the thing moved. He waited precious seconds, just watching it, before finally pulling the trigger.

Rock salt hit the priest slightly to the left, and the creature's arm was torn off with the force of the impact. But still it came, marching with its brethren as if nothing had happened. The severed arm tried to crawl back to its master, scratching around on the ground with a disturbing sentience to its movements.

"Man, I feel like I've been dumped in a Harryhausen movie," Dean grumbled, backing up slightly as Sam took the next shot at their assailants.

Another roaring shotgun boom filled the chamber, and one of the taller walking corpses was cut in two at the waist. "Huh?" Sam didn't see the connection.

"Dude, you've never seen *Jason and the Argonauts*? I swear you're such a girl. Probably too busy watching *Pretty in Pink* at the movies or something..."

Sam brushed off the remark, knowing it was Dean's way of dealing with the situation. If there was danger, then it was a given Dean's snark level would redline.

One of the skeletal priests appeared to decide payback for his dead comrades was in order, and suddenly leapt the distance between the group and the brothers.

Catching both Sam and Dean by surprise with its monkey-like prowess, the creature grabbed Dean's weapon and yanked it from his grasp.

Dean tried to take a swing back at the thing, but he was wide and his fist punched thin air where once a stomach had been. His fingers eventually impacted with yellowed rib bones and he winced as parts of the skeleton snapped, shards of bone cutting into his flesh.

Sam quickly retaliated, smashing at the attacking priest with the butt of his shotgun until the thing's skull detached from its body and rolled across the chamber like a bowling ball.

The beheaded frame wobbled and then tumbled to the floor, breaking up like a falling house of cards.

Dean snatched his shotgun back from where it had fallen and opened up a new barrage against the rest of Xipe's protective horde.

"Sammy, I think it's about time you started painting those symbols while I hold off Xipe's god squad here..." He fired again, quickly reloading from his side pocket as the salt shells dissipated, "killing" more of the freak creatures.

Sam took down a breath. Should he tell Dean about the last symbol and the door it must be painted on?

"Dean, you need to go. Get out of here while you still can!"

Dean looked confused, then horrified in the breadth of one second. "Are you friggin' nuts? I got an angel that won't come *in*, and a brother that won't go *out*? Have you guys been smoking something I should know about?"

Sam shook the parchment in the air and let off two shells with his other hand as he talked. "I was meant to do this, Dean. If you believe in that angel so much, then you should know that..."

"Do *what* exactly?"

Smoke and the smell of gunpowder filled the chamber around them as they yelled over the sound of their own weapons.

"The door, Dean, it can't be closed from the outside. I have to stay behind and bring it down, then put the last symbol on it..."

"Like hell." Dean copped another priest and then pulled a face at his brother. "You're the smart one. You do the math. I'm way more expendable than you. Gimme the damn scrolls and I'll take out this freak..."

Sam shook his head and dodged lithely past the three remaining skeleton soldiers and his brother, heading for the first wall where the symbols had to be placed. If he couldn't talk sense into Dean, then he'd just have to get the job done any way he could, and eventually Dean would have to see reason.

As he ran, he pulled a knife from his jacket and quickly sliced it across the palm of his hand. A thick film of blood appeared and quickly pooled as he squeezed.

Xipe was watching him now, Sam could feel the god's eyes burning into his back as he worked on scrawling the angelic symbol on the rough wall's surface.

Once finished, he repeated the operation until all the symbols had been placed bar one.

The door.

Sam looked over his shoulder to see Dean on the ground, tumbling around with the last of the skeleton crew. Dean obviously had the upper hand.

Just finish him and GO! Sam's mind begged as he began to scramble towards the rope holding the door.

For a second, he'd forgotten about Xipe to the extent that he thought he might actually make his target.

Then he felt a tug on his jacket like a hand had him by the collar. He was jerked backwards then spun around like a naughty school kid being chastised by his professor.

Except there were no visible hands on Sam. Xipe was doing the controlling with just simple eye movements, all from his central podium.

The god breathed in with a satisfied smirk as Sam's mission was thwarted.

"You will die here. And I shall wear your skin as an overcoat," the god goaded.

Sam pulled a defiant face. Maybe while Xipe was busy with him, Dean would finish the job on the door and at least kill Totec.

They would all be trapped here, but somehow, it would be worth it.

"Yeah, well I hope I make you itch," Sam snarled back.

Xipe's face almost creased into a smirk – almost – but something, or someone, had suddenly grabbed his attention.

The god's head snapped around, just in time to see Castiel enter the chamber, the expression on his face as cold as granite. Then, without warning, Xipe screeched as his body was ripped from the dais into midair.

His yellow body whirled around in a shaft of golden light that stretched from the podium to the chamber's ceiling.

Whether it was some kind of heavenly forcefield or not, Sam couldn't be certain. But for now, the angel held the god captive.

As if reading Sam's mind, Castiel tore his eyes from Xipe and looked at the hunter. His voice boomed in the inner room like it was amplified a thousand times.

"Go. Take your brother from this place."

Sam realized the sacrifice the angel was trying to make. But it wasn't fair. Wasn't this his destiny? Wasn't this something that could redeem his tainted soul?

"Leave!" Castiel roared again, and this time the very chamber began to rock, its walls shaking so hard they began to crumble.

But then, Sam guessed that was the desired effect.

If the chamber collapsed in on itself, Xipe would be trapped in this weird out of sync dimension – with Castiel.

Dean finally joined Sam, not quite understanding what was going on. "Something tells me this is time to shag ass, little brother."

"We can't just leave him..."

Finally, Dean's mind seemed to catch up with reality and he looked at the angel. "Maybe heaven owes us one, Sammy. Besides, Xipe can't gank Cas's ass. He can sure as hell gank ours..."

"Go!" The angel's voice had changed from demanding to almost pleading, but the thunder behind it still continued to send shockwaves that were dislodging the rope-hinged door.

Finally, Sam gave in as Dean tugged at his shoulder, and the two brothers launched into a sprint towards the exit.

As they reached the passageway entrance, Sam turned just briefly enough to see Castiel smile and mouth a message to him.

"Maybe even angels have a destiny, Sam Winchester..."

Then, large shards of rock began to detach from the main body of the door, showering the entrance with basketball-sized boulders. Sam took the new avalanche as a sign it was time to go, and broke into a faster run towards the light from Dean's flashlight ahead of him.

The ground beneath his feet started to judder and tremble, and Sam found he had to slow and try and brace himself using the tunnel walls.

"Crap, we're gonna get our asses stuck down here." He heard Dean curse, and realized his brother was probably right.

They would be trapped in this weird plane, and it would be like Stull all over again.

As Sam pondered the prospect, he heard Dean gasp, and the whole passageway turned black.

Maybe even Hell wasn't this dark?

But the darkness didn't last. In the second it took for Sam to think it, a bright radiance suddenly reappeared, and it wasn't just the faint glow from Dean's pocket light.

They were outside, in the direct glare of the Mexican sun.

And they were back in their own century.

Around them, Ciudad Del Maldecido bristled with activity.

Dean scratched at his head a second in thought and then deftly hid his weapon under his shirt now that they were apparently in a public place. "I guess Cas worked his god mojo one last time, huh?"

"Yeah." Sam nodded, still disorientated by the ride. "But where exactly did he drop us off?"

Dean pulled a face. "Dude, even I can see we're back in town."

"Look around us, Dean. Sure, we're back in town, but it looks *normal*. It's like any other Mexican town at this time of day. Where are all the Xipe worshippers gone rabid? What about the murders? The bodies?"

"Maybe, we just landed in a quiet part of Maldecido," Dean suggested unhelpfully. "I mean, there have to be normal people still living in this joint."

Sam wasn't buying it. Although he couldn't put his finger on what "it" was. The whole thing just felt wrong – different somehow to what they had left. "We should go to the church. Maybe we can at least find some answers there."

"And we need to bury Alvaro and Ernesto before they start drawing flies."

Dean scrunched up his face, and Sam knew it wasn't because his brother was bothered by dead bodies. It was because he'd really liked the young kid Alvaro had slain.

Sam bobbed his head in agreement. "Yeah," he sighed, feeling awkward around a version of Dean that showed any kind of susceptibility. "Ernesto at least deserves a proper burial."

Father Alvaro's Church

Dean paused at the door that led to the stairwell. The flight of steps down into the church crypt was probably still blocked – maybe even beyond their ability to clear it. But still, if it was possible, he would hand-dig Ernesto's body free from the rubble and give the kid a decent grave.

He wasn't exactly a religious man, not even after all his interaction with Castiel, but the kid had believed, and that was all that mattered.

"You ready?" Sam asked, probably noting the trepidation on his brother's face.

Dean nodded, and reaching out a hand, swung the door open, its ancient hinges creaking like some evil night creature.

"Well I'll be..."

Dean stared for a moment, transfixed by the fact that the stairwell was intact. Could someone have cleared it that fast? And if they had, then the bodies were surely already discovered?

Why aren't the local cops buzzing all over this joint?

Sam moved forward onto the first step and dug into his pocket, retrieving a small flashlight to illuminate the passage. There was no sign the walls had ever crumpled. "This is just wrong on so many levels."

"Tell me about it." Dean pushed past him and jogged down the steps two, sometimes three at a time, until he was at the bottom of the stairs.

The crypt lay waiting for him, empty, and somehow much warmer than it had been on his last visit.

It felt almost – *holy*.

"So, where are the bodies?" Sam pondered, catching up to his sibling. "You think those bent cops took them and tried to cover this mess up?"

Dean shook his head. "I don't know, dude, but somehow I don't think that's the most likely option."

He ran a hand over the central altar, but instead of blood, a thick sheen of dust and grime came away on his palm.

On a whim, Dean hastily jogged back up the stairs and spun around in the center of the little church. It was clean here too, like the place had been washed over by...

The hand of God? His mind asked, incredulously.

"The place is empty," Sam offered, his brow creased in an expression of deep confusion.

"Not empty!" A new, younger voice countered. "*I'm here. I'm always here...*"

Dean and Sam both jerked around in the direction of the sound, mouthing the same name simultaneously. "Ernesto!"

The kid shrugged. "Well, that's what people usually call me," he said mockingly. "Unless my name got changed when I wasn't looking..."

Sam shot Dean a look that the elder hunter instantly picked up on, and it wasn't just surprise.

Sam's inner voice was screaming "*Spook, revenant...trick of the mind?*"

Dean shook his head. This was more than that. Just like the inner warmth of the crypt meant something, so did Ernesto's presence.

"So what's with King Kong?" Ernesto questioned, glowering at Sam. "He hasn't stopped staring at me since I got here."

Sirens began to wail in the distance as the kid pulled a face back at both brothers. The wailing grew closer, until Dean realized it sounded familiar. Not one cop car, but many.

"Wonder what they're so all fired up about?" Dean wondered, subconsciously thinking that maybe some of the townfolk had still gone rabid after all.

Ernesto's smirk instantly changed and he dipped his head, obviously deeply saddened. "Are you two *stupid?*" he asked almost angrily. "Father Alvaro was found murdered just a few hours ago. The whole town is in mourning."

"Murdered huh? That sucks..." Dean glanced at Sam and said more softly, out of Ernesto's earshot, "Dude, I'm getting a whole *déjà vu* vibe about this crap."

Sam agreed. "It's like we're living through some parts of yesterday all over again, but some things are different." He checked the date on his watch, swallowing hard at what he saw. "I don't know how, but when we came back from the alternate reality, or whatever that place was, we came back a day early."

"But it's like parts of the timeline have been changed." Dean bit his bottom lip. "Things have been erased. I dunno, set right somehow?"

"*How, Dean?*"

Dean wasn't ready to share his theory on the subject, not now, not to Sam. He slumped down onto a pew and then shrugged, even though he had a very good idea how.

Sam joined him on the bench, peering distantly at a large crucifix that adorned the far wall. "Maybe it's best if we just don't question it," he suggested, lowering his head in reverence to the now "clean" church and its masters.

"Maybe..." Dean agreed, but didn't lower his own head.

He couldn't, because suddenly he felt like he was being watched.

Not both of them. Not Sam. Just him.

Dean turned around to see the once empty church now had another visitor.

The man was sitting behind him, wearing a long, brown overcoat. His suit and tie were disheveled too – reminding Dean of a lost friend.

As Dean stared, the stranger seemed to notice him. The man smiled, but it came across as somehow fabricated, like a plastic doll's expression.

Like the man wasn't used to the emotion that was usually behind such a gesture.

"Consider me...a friend of a friend," the newcomer intoned like a robot. "He wants you to know that everyone might have a dark side, but that not everyone uses it. You proved that."

Dean squirmed on his seat. It was weird, but Sam didn't seem to be hearing this conversation. In fact, it was like Sam had been frozen in one specific point outside of time while the conversation took place.

The thought scared Dean, but he tried not to let it show. He looked back to the man as he heard a strange sound, like the fluttering of huge wings. But as he blinked, the stranger simply ceased to exist – at least in this dimension.

Inside his head, Dean heard Castiel's words from earlier.

"I can call...*reinforcements* to show these people the error of their ways..."

And somehow, from his time-locked prison, Castiel had kept his word – and then some. Not only had his kind fixed the town, they had bent time itself so the innocent might live.

How much of that had been down to Castiel?

"So, you think this dude Castiel was really an angel?" Sam abruptly asked, seemingly returning from his own "Twilight Zone."

Dean shrugged again, even though he knew the answer. "I don't know, man, but if he wasn't, he can sure kick butt with those crazy-assed feathers of his..."

"Enough to help us defeat Lucifer maybe?"

Dean considered it. Maybe for once, despite their recent altercation with Ferinacci, they might just have a chance of winning the good versus bad war they seemed to have gotten themselves sucked into.

Mankind might just have a chance after all.

"Man, I don't know," he eventually admitted. "But I'm sure glad him and his buddies are batting on our side..."

Otherwise, what hope was left?

The End