

A Star of Fate Inside

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by [PoolWatcher](#)

Summary

Samantha Winchester never figured her first semester of college would be so challenging. Between juggling an intense course-load, an irritating classmate, and learning to live with a new roommate (for once not her older sister), she's lucky to have a moment to herself. And that's not even taking into account the monsters she has to fight on an almost-daily basis. Good thing she's got some magical superpowers to help with that part.

OR: The one where the Winchesters are, in fact, magical girls.

Notes

I have so many people to thank for this. First, to the whole Sabriel Mini-Bang community for even making it happen; to Dave, who told me to do it; to Disc, who read along as I was writing and worked as a fantastic sounding board; and finally to my wonderful artist, KDHeart, who picked me, which was something I wasn't even sure would happen. This is, actually, the longest single thing I've ever written, and I'm completely surprised at how well it turned out.

You can find the accompanying art for this piece over here: [KDHeart's wonderful art](#).

It started, as these things do, with a bang.

Samantha Winchester found herself flat on her ass with her backpack digging into her spine. Her head spun slightly from the impact and she squeezed her eyes shut to try and regain her equilibrium.

“Watch where you’re going, Sasquatch,” came a snarky voice above her. Sam snapped her eyes open to glare at the guy standing over her. She couldn’t stop the words from coming out of her mouth.

“Maybe I would have seen you if you were in my line of sight, shortstack,” she shot back as she hauled herself to her feet, patting her backpack absently to check that it was okay. Her hands paused for just a moment over the zippered side compartment, but it seemed everything was intact. Sam breathed a mental sigh of relief, and she looked again at the guy who’d knocked her down.

He looked a little dumbstruck, with a green Jolly Rancher clearly visible inside his open mouth. Sam cringed mentally. Ugh. Disgusting. Clearly this guy couldn’t handle someone tossing insults back at him.

“Whatever,” she muttered and turned her back on him, readjusting her backpack on her shoulders as she started toward the building where her Ethics class was. Guy was probably an asshole with no manners. She kept telling herself that it didn’t matter that he’d had possibly the most amazing eyes she’d ever seen; he’d still knocked her down and not apologized for it.

“DEE!” Shadow watched in horror as the Huntress got thrown into a high-rise. “Oh no you fucking don’t,” she muttered at the grotesque thing that had just launched her sister. It laughed at her as it raised its blocky arms to the sky. It reached down with one arm and pressed a button next to what looked like a tape deck on its chest.

“Boom-Boom like making booms!” it cackled, and Shadow rolled her eyes for a moment. Seriously? She twirled her knife, grinning as the sigils carved on the blade and handle began to glow.

Shadow concentrated for a moment, urging a rock to hurl itself at the monster’s head. In its moment of distraction, she ran. “Exorcizamus te,” she shouted, plunging the knife into the monster’s side. It screamed, a horrible screeching reminiscent of stereo feedback, before falling and fading into glittering black sparkles. Shadow huffed, wiping her knife on her skirt, and ran over to check on Huntress.

“Dee, you okay?” she asked her sister, helping her sit up from Huntress’ position against the wall. A cursory check showed no major injuries, but broken ribs didn’t always show right away.

“Yeah,” Huntress grunted, wincing. “I’m fine, Sammy. Thanks for ganking that thing.” Huntress grinned up at Shadow, her eyes raking over her sister in an obvious check for injuries. Yeah, like she had anything to worry about. Dee was the one who’d gotten thrown into a building. “Help me up,” Huntress said, reaching for Shadow’s arm. Shadow pulled her up easily and steadied her.

“Come on,” Shadow urged, “Let’s get out of here before the authorities show up. You know they never like us after the fact.” Huntress barked out a laugh, and the two sisters ran off to split up and avoid pursuers, with a standing agreement to meet back home in half an hour.

Blue Bay Harbor was quiet. Sam liked the quiet. She liked being just on “call” and not on “active duty” all the time. It was why she’d moved here, after all; Deanna had been insistent that Sam take the time to focus on her studies at a school that wasn’t plagued by monster attacks.

Which was why when the alarms started blaring during Sam’s Criminal Psychology class she nearly had a heart attack. The professor was calmly directing students to a safe area, but once in the chaos of the hallway, Sam was able to duck behind some doors and sneak outside. She brought her watch up to her lips and pressed the custom button on the side. “Cass, you there?” she whispered.

“Sam? I thought you were in class,” came a deeper feminine voice through the speaker. Sam breathed a sigh of relief.

“I *was*, Cass. But there are alarms going off and I hoped you’d have some info for me.” She ducked her head around the corner of the building, glancing around for bystanders. No one in sight, good.

“Are you certain? There should be no major cause for alarms in Blue Bay. Deanna and I scouted the location for that reason; other than a minor troublemaker dubbed ‘The Trickster’,” and Sam swore she could hear the air quotes on that, “There should be nothing of note.” Sam could faintly hear the clicking of keys over the communicator. “I have a surge of negative energy near the town,” Cass said with a note of surprise in her voice. “How did that slip past us?”

Sam huffed. “I don’t know, Cass, but could you tell me about what’s causing the alarms? Please, before someone sees me outside?” She felt her back pocket for her transformation wand. It doubled as a decorative pen during the day, which made it easy to carry around. She gripped it firmly, waiting for Cass’ info and instructions so she could transform. Their research hadn’t shown any resident caretakers in the city, but Sam would rather not step on anyone’s toes, unintentional or not. Other caretakers, she and Dee had found, could be pretty damn territorial.

“Sam,” Cass’ voice broke through her thoughts, “the disturbance appears to be on Pacific Avenue, between Sycamore and Elm streets. The readings show an organic mutation. Transform and move out.”

“Finally,” Sam sighed. She held her wand close to her heart as she ducked back into an alcove of the nearest building, and whispered, “*Shadow Power, Descend!*” There was a muted flash of light. Shadow checked that her mask was secure before taking off in the direction Cass had told her.

“Sammy? Sammy, you home?” Deanna’s voice rang through the empty house. Sam could hear it clearly from her position in their mother’s room. “Sam?” Sam lifted her tear-streaked face to look at her sister in the doorway. Dee’s eyes widened, and her gaze dropped to the objects strewn over Mary’s bed. “Shit.”

“Mom’s journal says it’s hereditary, Dee.” Sam’s voice was level, her crying done. Now a thread of despair and fear wound its way through her chest. “She did it, and her mom, and her grandmother, back generations. There’s no escape.” She took a deep, fortifying breath and tried desperately not to break into new tears.

Deanna rushed to her sister and wrapped her in a crushing hugs. “Don’t listen to that, Sammy,” she murmured fiercely in Sam’s ear. “We’ll fight this, okay? We got this. And we’ll figure out what that means,” she nodded to the black-accented transformation wand in Samantha’s hand.

None of Mary’s extensive records had indicated that their colors, which seemed to be reflections of their souls, should be anything other than bright. But Dee’s colors were green and brown, and now Sam’s seemed to be primarily black, with what looked like red accents. Dee had already been getting flak from other caretakers about her colors not being happy enough, but now with Sam in the mix...

“You are not anything less than the best damn person I know, Sammy, and those other bitches can go shove it,” Dee murmured into Sam’s long hair. Sam’s watery smile was worth it.

“Cass? Is that a rabbit?” Shadow stared incredulously down from the roof of the laundromat at the small creature frantically chasing after the few stray pedestrians still on the street.

“It... Appears so,” Cass replied distractedly through the earpiece. “I suggest you try to contain it before dispatching. Remember that we are trying to refrain from causing excessive property damage.”

Shadow sighed and scanned the street. “Okay, Cass. I’ll see what I can do,” she murmured, taking a breath and jumping down to street level to take on the mutant rabbit. “Hey, Fluffy!” she called, grabbing the monster’s attention. It turned toward her, and she cringed back upon seeing its distorted face and large, drool-covered fangs. “Here goes,” she muttered to herself.

Shadow launched herself down the street, sure in her low-heeled boots with the ease of experience, her knife glinting in her hand. The rabbit-monstrosity charged at her with its tongue lolling out. It snapped at her when she swiped at it, and they both sprang out of the way. Shadow cursed under her breath as she circled with the monster, scanning it for a weakness. It charged at her again, gaining speed rapidly; Shadow dodged to the side almost too late, swiping blindly with her knife. It missed.

The fluffy-eared terror rounded quickly and charged again. Shadow dodged to the side and nearly slammed into the wall of a bank. Fuck. This was where Dee would usually pin the monster-of-the-day down in one location with her energy pistols so Sam could get close enough to dispatch it, but her sister had stayed home, 50 miles away in the small house they’d inherited, where Cass had her command center in the basement and Dee ran the best mechanic shop in the county out of their garage.

The thing was picking up speed, recovering faster than Shadow could move out of the way. She took a hit to her leg, a sharp slice of over-large teeth leaving a gaping cut in her thigh. “Damn,” she cursed, bracing herself against the wall with her knife at the ready. Maybe another pass and she could actually get a hit on it.

A small ball clattered into the street between them. Both combatants froze, watching it with gazes somewhere between caution and curiosity. It looked, rather vaguely like...”A popcorn ball?” Shadow asked aloud, right before it started spewing sparks and smoke, creating an effective screen between her and the rabbit-demon. She could see it hopping away faintly through the haze.

“You know, I thought your type were supposed to be kinda speedy about this kind of thing.” It was the most insincere tone of voice Shadow had ever heard, and she’d grown up with Dee practically scamming the neighbor kids weekly. She whipped her head around in the direction of the voice. The guy had jumped down from wherever he’d been perched to watch her fight. As he approached and the smoke cleared out, she could see that he was wearing something just shy of formal wear; dark green slacks, a white dress shirt, and a dark gold vest delicately embroidered with what looked like vines, topped by a green mask. He was shorter than her, though that was no surprise for Shadow as most of the population fell into that category, and he seemed to have longish dark blond hair slicked back.

“Who the hell are you?” she snapped at him as she leaned against the wall and used her hand to put pressure on her wound. She scowled behind her own dark mask as he blatantly checked her out.

“Huh,” he said instead, ignoring her question, “You’re a lot darker than the others I’ve encountered.” His eyes raked over her again, and she bared her teeth at him.

“Fuck off,” she shot back at him, and opted to ignore him in favor of checking the healing on her leg. The wound was already starting to close, thankfully. The last thing she needed was to explain to her flatmate why she suddenly had lacerations on her leg. Tori was a great roommate and all, but they’d only known each other a few months.

“Ooooh, that looks painful.” He’d moved closer and was examining her leg. Shadow would have moved backwards if there was a place to go. She snorted.

“No shit, Sherlock.” She reapplied the pressure and winced at the bloodstains on her elbow-length gloves. Thank the magical higher powers these things cleaned themselves after they changed back to civilian clothes. Shadow paused for a moment, eyeing her ersatz rescuer. “Wait, are you the Trickster?”

The guy grinned and stood up from where he’d been leaning toward her. “Got it in one! You know, you’re smarter than you look.” Shadow rolled her eyes. Damn, this guy was a jackass. And Cass had only labeled him a “minor troublemaker”. At least she could rule him out as the source of the attacks. “Why the sour face, kiddo?”

“You haven’t done a damn thing but insult me since you showed up,” Shadow growled out. This Trickster was hitting every damn nerve she had, and the look on his face said he knew it, too.

“Now that’s not true at all, sweetheart. I rescued you from the big bad bunny rabbit, didn’t I?” The Trickster smirked infuriatingly at her, and Shadow felt her blood start to boil.

“You know what? Fuck off,” she snarled at him. “Either help me, or get the *hell* out of my way so I can do my fucking *job*.” The Trickster took a step back and raised his hands into a

non-threatening position.

“Woah there, sweetcheeks.” The Trickster took another step back as Shadow stood fully upright and leveled him with a glare. “I thought you girls weren’t allowed to curse,” he commented thoughtfully, furrowing his brow behind his mask.

“Apparently I’m just breaking *all* of your rules. Now are you coming or not?” Shadow stalked down the street in the direction she thought the killer rabbit had disappeared, not bothering to look behind her to see if he was following. If he did, great, ‘cause an extra set of hands would help. If not, she’d get some strategy help from Cass and just try to blow it away.

Shadow shakily picked herself off the floor, grunting, and looked to the right where Huntress was barely moving, slumped against one of the concrete pillars of the warehouse. Smug chuckling drew her gaze to where their quarry stood, not a hair out of place. The bitch looked human, for all that she had superhuman strength and powers; she was a far cry from their usually monstrous targets. Shadow wondered vaguely if she was a caretaker gone bad.

“You know, I was expecting more from you,” she said as she picked her way over the rubble in her heeled boots. “You two are legendary, you know.” Shadow crouched, bracing herself against the floor. She heard Huntress stirring, but she knew her sister wouldn’t be ready to fight anytime soon. Dee had been knocked around hard by this bitch and even magical healing powers could only do so much against that. “The Shadow and the Huntress, daughters of that bitch Lady of Letters.” She’d reached Shadow by then and leaned down to look at her with blank black eyes. Shadow gathered what little moisture was in her mouth and spit in the bitch’s face. She recoiled, wiping her sleeve over her face in disgust.

“Don’t talk about Mom like that, you black-eyed bitch,” Huntress spat out from where she was slowly levering herself into something resembling a fighting position.

“Like you’re in any place to make demands, Huntress,” the bitch shot back with a smirk, running a hand through short blonde tresses. She held out her palms toward them and the sisters buckled under the wave of dark energy that shot out at them. Shadow grunted and gritted her teeth, trying not to fall to the ground; she knew Huntress was doing the same, could hear it from her position.

The pain cut off abruptly and Shadow gasped for a breath. “You will not harm them further, demon,” an unfamiliar voice intoned, and Shadow whipped her head up to see the bitch in a chokehold. The woman holding her was tall, statuesque, with dark hair pulled up in a simple ponytail. Her outfit was similar to those of Shadow and Huntress, though done in shades of blue, and she had a pair of large black wings extending from her back.

As Sam and Dee watched, a bright light emitted from the stranger’s hand. The bitch screamed for several long moments, then seemed to dissolve into black smoke that quickly dissipated. The stranger turned toward them, and Shadow cursed their vulnerable position. She struggled to pull herself into a standing position, but Huntress was already moving, grunting to her feet and pulling the stranger’s attention toward her and away from Shadow.

“What the hell are you?” Huntress asked roughly, standing shakily in her heeled boots. The stranger stopped moving and tilted her head almost like a cat. Shadow could see from her position that the stranger seemed to be squinting at Dee.

“I’m an angel,” she said seriously. Huntress snorted, and the stranger’s squinting frown deepened. “That’s your problem,” she said. “You have no faith.”

It had taken about 20 minutes and some strategic help from Cass over the communicator for Sam to successfully dispatch the killer rabbit thing. The Trickster had disappeared, or at least hadn’t shown his face again. Sam sustained a few more gashes, but there was nothing life-threatening and Sam was able to bandage her wounds and hide them beneath clothing before returning home.

Tori’s big blue van/bus hybrid thing was sitting in its parking spot when Samantha arrived back at their flat. “Tori?” she called out as she dropped her bookbag in the front hall and toed off her shoes. Silence was the only answer, and as Sam went into the kitchen to get some food for her grumbling stomach, she found a note tacked on the fridge.

Catching some waves for a bit, then out to dinner with S and D. Feel free to eat the leftover pasta in the fridge! -Tori

Sam's stomach grumbled in agreement, and soon there was a bowl of salmon-lemon pesto pasta spinning calmly in the microwave. She changed into comfortable sweats and a tank and booted up her laptop while bringing it into the living room. Their couch, manfully assembled by Tori's best friends Dustin and Shane, was sinfully plush and just what she needed after the bruising she'd taken, but before she could sit down the microwave dinged and well, hot food trumped comfort right now.

Food retrieved, Sam sank back into the couch and sighed in relief. The pasta, which Tori had made for them the night before, was still good on the reheat. Two bites in, however, and Skype started beeping at her. Sam sighed again, much more put-upon, and set down her bowl of delicious, amazing sustenance to answer her sister's call. Deanna always got like this after a solo fight, needing to check on Samantha with her own eyes, as it were, and reassure herself that her baby sister was okay.

"Hey Dee," she said when the call connected. The video popped up after a moment to show Cass sitting in front of the screen with Deanna hanging comfortably over the angel's shoulder, her short blonde hair glinting the bright lights overhead. "Cass," she acknowledged, nodding to the angel.

"Hey, Sammy," Deanna replied with a grin, her eyes visibly scanning the screen for Sam's injuries. Cass must have told her how Sam had fared for Dee to be in such a good mood. Neither of them liked the idea of fighting without backup. "Everything okay?"

Sam nodded. "Yeah. It took longer than I'd have liked, but no big problems. Cass, did you find anything more about that Trickster character?" She turned her attention to Cass, who nodded.

"The being known as the Trickster has been a fixture in Blue Bay Harbor over the last five years," she informed the sisters, glancing down at the notepad Sam could see at her elbow. "He's mostly known for causing harmless, though often infuriating pranks on the general populace. *The Harbor Tribune* has run several articles on him, speculating on his identity and origin as well as detailing the complexity of his pranks, but has no further information in their databanks. Based on what you experienced today, Sam, he doesn't appear to be a demon or harbor sympathies for them but he is obviously well informed about caretakers and their functions and habits, even though Blue Bay has never actually had one in residence." Dee's brow furrowed on the screen as she frowned.

“I don’t like this guy being out there with you, Sammy,” Deanna said, scowling. Sam shrugged and sighed.

“Can’t say I was a big fan of him either, Dee, but he didn’t hurt me and he helped me get a break from the monster today.” Sam ran a hand through her hair, smoothing a tangle from it. “I’ll try to figure what his game is, if it happens again. If not, well,” she shrugged, quirkling her lips. “We might just have to let this one be.”

Sam notice Cass staring at her curiously, her head in that familiar half-tilt. Dee caught it too, and turned her head to raise an eyebrow. “What is it, Cass?”

“This Trickster unsettles me,” she said after a moment’s pause. “Sam, you should continue as you were. If these incidences increase in frequency, we may have to temporarily relocate. Contact me again if you have more information.”

Dee smiled at Cass and turned back to her sister. “Just let us know, okay? We’ll be there in a heartbeat, Sammy.”

Sam returned the smile. “I know, Dee. I’ll be in contact. But right now, I’d really like to finish my dinner and take a bath.”

“You do that, sis. Don’t want you getting hurt now!”

“Shut up, you old lady.”

Sometimes Dee woke up panting with choked off screams in her throat. She would sit there, gasping for breath in the dark of her room, trying to suppress the terrifying images of flames and her father’s last words to her before the house collapse in a fiery heap on top of him.

Sammy had been tiny then, able to fit in Dee's arms, but that was years ago and Sammy, at 4, was too big for that now.

Sometimes Mom was there to hold her after these nightmares, to hug her and comfort her. Dee would curl into her mother's side, taking comfort in the parent she had left. Other times, Sammy would wake up and crawl into Dee's bed, cuddling up to her sister and falling back asleep. Still other times Sam would already be in the bed when Dee was ripped from her nightmares, a warm, solid thing stealing the blankets.

The night they lost Dad still haunted her. Mom had been working, keeping the city safe from a monster, though Dee hadn't known that at the time. Dad had put her and Sammy to bed like usual. Deanna woke up to her father yelling, cursing at something, someone. She'd jumped out of bed, and the next thing she knew Dad was pushing Sammy into her arms and telling her to run outside. Terrified, she followed his instructions.

Mom came home later, after the fire department had put out the blaze and they'd found the remains of John Winchester. Deanna still cradled Samantha in her arms when Mom found them sitting on the hood of the car - Dad's car, a beautiful sleek black thing. She'd gathered both of her girls in her arms and they cried together for their loss.

The next month Mom moved them out of Lawrence, leaving it in the hands of another caretaker. A new start.

Dr. Bell's Creative Writing course was possibly Sam's favorite class. They had bi-weekly writing assignments, and on the weeks in between they shared and reviewed each other's pieces. Everyone was supportive and duly critical of their work, giving good, constructive criticism. Everyone, that is, except for Gabriel, the same smart-mouthed shortie who'd knocked Sam on her ass at the beginning of the semester. She'd been doubly embarrassed to realize he was in one of her classes, and it seemed he'd recognized her, too.

Gabriel, thereafter, seemed to have made it his mission to rip Sam's writing pieces to shreds with his critiques. Case in point: "This stream-of-consciousness section here just completely breaks the flow of the piece, what little there was before this. What was the point of that, exactly?" Gabriel's eyes zeroed in on Sam's and she felt her temper rising. She'd put a lot of

work into that particular piece, drawing from the fear, growing up, that she'd had of losing their mom in the middle of the night the same way that Dee described losing their dad. Writing about just one emotion was *hard*, and she thought she'd done a pretty good job of it.

But you wouldn't know that the way Gabriel was poking holes in her writing style, her word choice, hell even the *font* she'd chosen. Sam took a calming breath before replying, "I thought you knew that I was exploring the sensation of fear, Gabriel. Stream-of-consciousness is a writing technique often applied in order to facilitate a feeling of fear or confusion."

Gabriel snorted derisively. "Sure, if you're sixteen and writing emo poetry." Sam glared at him, and Dr. Bell *finally* stepped in to break up the growing storm.

"Class, I hope you can take the *constructive* criticism you received today and apply it to your next piece. I'll see you all on Monday; have a good weekend," he said, dismissing the class. Sam gathered up her bookbag and walked calmly out the door, right behind the unsuspecting Gabriel. Once they were outside, she tapped on his shoulder.

Gabriel turned, a smile on his face, which immediately dropped into something far more smarmy at the look of utter rage on Sam's. "What the hell is your problem with me, Gabriel?" she hissed at him. He raised his eyebrows and nodded his head over to the side of the building. Sam followed him to an alcove where they would have some privacy from the masses changing classes.

"Well, well. Big Sam Winchester has a problem with little ol' me?" Gabriel asked, saccharine sweet. Sam almost growled with frustration.

"Yes, you ass, because you *clearly* have a problem with me!" Sam balled her fists at her side to keep from punching this guy's lights out. '*You can only use your powers for good,*' she reminded herself.

"What, you can't take a little criticism?"

It was Sam's turn to snort at him. "If that was criticism, you'd be giving everyone in class the same amount of scrutiny. But no, you didn't tear apart Jessica's piece on determination, or Gary's bit on weightlessness, and you sat nice and quiet through Alex's paper on loneliness," she bit out, listing decisive examples of their fellow classmates. Gabriel's eyebrow rose, a look somewhere between mocking admiration and true respect growing on his face.

"Looks like you've been paying attention, Samsquatch," he smirked at her. "In fact, that's an awful lot of observation of just one person." He gasped in mock surprise. "Could it be you have a crush on me?"

Sam reined in her temper, leaned forward and said in a low voice, "It is taking everything I have not to punch you in the face right now." Gabriel's eyes widened, though Sam noticed a distinct lack of fear there. "And if you ever call me that again, I may not be able to stop myself."

Gabriel's only reply, as he took a step back and around her, out of the alcove, was a wink and a hurried, "You're making that sound like a challenge, kiddo." As Sam watched him disappear she wondered how much brain damage one could incur from banging their head against the wall, and if it would help the insanity that was, apparently, her life.

The first time Sam had seen their mother work, she'd been terrified. She knew what her mother did, of course, how she worked a waitressing job during the day while the girls were in school, and went out as needed to fight evil. All caretakers, Sam had learned later, had a bank account opened in their name once their powers activated, so Mom was just waitressing for something to do. It was normal, she said, and not to worry about it. Mom kept the bad guys away from them.

So when the extra-large monstrosity, shaped vaguely as a tennis racquet, blasted into the side of Sam and Dean's elementary school, Sam wasn't quite prepared. The alarms, they said later, were under repair and that's why none in the building were alerted to the attack. Sam ran, following her teacher's instructions as she led the rest of the first grade classes to the shelter under the building. She could hear her mother's voice shouting at the monster, trying to draw it away from such a vulnerable area. Sam hesitated for a moment, but another teacher hustled her down the stairs.

All they could hear was the rumbling of demolition. The fight was taking longer than Mom said they usually did, and Sam started to worry. She couldn't see the fight, couldn't react to it, couldn't hardly hear it, and that, more than anything, scared her.

Later, when Mom picked them up from the school - standard procedure after attacks - Samantha could do little more than cling to Mary and breathe in hiccuping sobs into her shoulder while Deanna hugged them both.

Shadow arrived to examine the scene of the latest attack to find the Trickster already there, dancing wildly out of the way of projectiles fired by the monster. It was a crude, blocky shape and shot black discs at the Trickster's feet. She laughed at the expression on his face as he dove out of the way. He definitely heard her, if the glare he shot in her direction was any indication, which only made Shadow laugh harder.

Calming, she reached out with her powers for a loose trash can with which she could distract the monster. She reached out her hand and, with a slight mental tug, sent the garbage can flying into the back of its head. It spun around dizzily, clearly dazed, and the Trickster used the opportunity to escape up to her vantage point above the bowling alley. "Hey there, happy feet," she shot in lieu of a greeting, and her grin only grew wider at his sour expression.

"You couldn't have come a little sooner?" he grumbled, trying to catch his breath. Shadow winked at him.

"What can I say? I'm a busy girl," she replied before turning to examine their enemy. "What can you tell me about it, twinkle toes?"

The Trickster grunted at her. "Seems to be made from, of all things, a record player." Shadow turned and stared at him incredulously.

“A record player? Where the hell did they get a *record player*?” she asked. Her voice reached an unusually high pitch at the end of that sentence, and Shadow almost blushed at the tone.

“Not a damn clue, sweetheart,” Trickster smirked back at her, regaining some of his composure. Shadow sighed and rolled her eyes.

“Way to be a big help, short stuff.” With a huff, she blocked his protestations and focused on what she could manipulate to aid in the fight. She found the trash can from earlier, and it seemed that part of the parking lot was in serious disrepair. She could work with that. “You ready to get this show on the road?”

Trickster nodded and pulled out some candy-shaped accessories that Shadow had come to know, over the weeks of their slow-building working relationship, were in fact helpful things like smoke bombs and small traps that would trip up the monsters. Shadow pulled out her knife, twirling it in her hand. Together they turned to face the mutated record player stumbling around the bowling alley parking lot. Shadow caught the Trickster’s eye and nodded, and they launched their attack.

Mentally, Shadow lifted a chunk of broken concrete and hurled it at the monster. Right before her attack hit, Trickster threw a caramel-shaped flash grenade in its face, blinding the monster and making it susceptible to the attack. The monster stumbled to the ground, the supersized vinyl on its turntable rattling loudly. Shadow raced in, using the distraction, and stabbed the monster, whispering “*Exorcizamus te.*” It screamed piercingly before disintegrating into black sparkles.

Shadow panted a bit, running high on the adrenaline, and grinned up at the Trickster at his perch above her. “Good job,” he called down, and Shadow just laughed in response.

“Isn’t this sweet?” a voice snidely interrupted them before Shadow could get out a proper reply. The pair spun around to see a brunette bombshell in a black leather jacket walking toward them from the opposite side of the parking lot.

The Trickster’s lip curled up in a sneer. “Demon,” he bit out, and fell into a defensive stance. The demon, if that’s what she was, barked out a laugh but didn’t pause in her approach.

Shadow shot the Trickster a questioning look. “Demon?” she asked him softly, though she followed his lead and took her own fighting stance.

Trickster nodded. “The fallen ones,” he said, just as softly. “Humans, angels, spirits who’ve been corrupted, turned dark. They create havoc with things like the monsters you caretakers fight.” Shadow looked again at the woman with a critical eye.

“She looks like a regular human,” she murmured, and the Trickster nodded.

“They do that,” he said drily. Then he called out to the demon, who had halted her approach about 20 yards from the pair. “Who are you working for?”

The demon laughed sardonically. “Funny. I thought it was courtesy to ask my name first.” She gave a mocking bow before proudly declaring, “Ruby, at your service. Not that the name would mean anything to you worms, but I am a devoted servant of our lord and master, Lucifer, may his praises be ever sung.” Shadow felt the Trickster stiffen beside her for a moment before he relaxed into an easier fighting stance.

“Best be crawling back to him, hellbitch,” he replied as he casually tossed a handful colorfully wrapped bonbons at the ground between them. Shadow flinched back when they exploded into shrapnel, all vectored directly at Ruby. She jumped back, but several shards still hit her, including a vicious-looking slice along her cheek.

Ruby snarled at them, holding the cut on her face. “Oh, you will pay for that, little man.” In a swirl of black smoke, she disappeared.

Shadow turned to her ersatz partner. “You wanna tell me what *that* was all about?” she asked him. He grimaced and looked away.

“No, not really,” he said with a sigh. Shadow felt her frustration levels building. Trickster clearly knew a *lot* about what was going on, more than he’d ever indicated that he knew, and now he didn’t want to talk to her about it? She’d thought, over the past few months, that they’d developed a good working relationship, taking care of the Blue Bay Harbor together. Her indignation grew quickly, and she almost missed his reply.

“But I guess I will. You deserve that much at least.”

Mom's journals had a lot of stuff in them: stickers, dried flowers and herbs, information on monsters, the powers and specialties of other caretakers. What Samantha found, that summer after her fourteenth birthday, was a smaller notebook, hidden well behind the others. It detailed all the information Mom had been able to find about the cause of Dad's death.

Mary had always been upfront with them about John's death. He'd been attacked by an enemy, a bastard who didn't care about the rules and felt that a caretaker's family, should she have one, was fair game. The journal detailed everything she'd been able to find out: his name was Azazel, he worked for Lucifer, his main element was fire, and he had the power to corrupt. Dee had told her once that Dad had been in her nursery that night, had shoved Sam into her sister's arms with orders to get out; Sam could only guess that Azazel had been there for her, though she couldn't fathom why.

Azazel had been defeated, though, when the Lady of Letters had happened to team up with Starshine and Nightmare. Their combined powers were enough to destroy him, though all three caretakers were severely drained afterwards.

Mary Winchester, in her weakened state, caught a virulent strain of influenza. Her body was unable to fight off the disease, and she died a week after avenging her husband's death.

They settled onto the roof of the Ocean Breeze apartment complex; Shadow sat on the ledge, her back to the open air, and watched the Trickster pace in front of her. He stopped and ran a hand through his hair, before turning towards her. “You inherited your powers, right?” he asked abruptly.

Shadow nodded, eyeing him warily. “Yeah, from my mom’s side. It’s been passed down in her family for generations.” The Trickster nodded, as though this information was what he was looking for.

“That’s because someone way back in your genetic line met an angel, who decided that she was worthy to protect the world, or at least her city, from the forces of Hell,” he explained. Shadow raised an eyebrow at him.

“Two things,” she said. “One, how the hell do you know about angels, and two, the forces of *Hell*?”

Trickster grimaced. “I know, it sounds cliché. But it’s the truth, I swear!” He looked at her earnestly. “I wasn’t kidding earlier, about them being fallen and corrupted. Lucifer’s the worst of the lot, too,” he said as his expression dropped and became almost sad. He took a deep breath, visibly steeling himself. “He was an angel, you know. One of the brightest, the strongest. And he fell.”

“So he’s an extra-powerful demon?” Shadow asked. Trickster shrugged.

“More than that, I think. He’s set himself up as a ruler of sorts, from what I’ve been able to tell.” The Trickster sat down next to her, staring pensively at his hands in his lap. The silence stretched between them, each digesting their own thoughts.

“Hey.” Trickster looked up at Shadow when she spoke. “You never answered number one. Angels?” she reminded him, and he flashed her a pained smile.

“I’ve known about angels for a long time,” he said after a moment of gathering his thoughts. “They, well, they’ve always been part of my life.” He gave her a small smile. “You’ve been around them. I can feel it.”

Shadow shot him an incredulous look, but shrugged and let the matter drop. “So what do we have to look forward to, now?” she asked, feeling a growing urge to call Dee and Cass and try to sort this new information.

Trickster snorted. "I'd expect to see a lot more of that Ruby bitch. She knows we're here now, and she's not just going to let that go."

Shadow let out an explosive sigh and stood, stretching her arms above her head. "Well then. I should get home, Trickster. I'll see you around."

He stood as well and smirked at her. "It was a pleasure as always, Shadow." With a mutual nod, they leapt in opposite directions from the rooftop.

"Dee, I can't stay here," Sam explained to her sister, who was staring at the college applications on the table. Deanna's face was suspiciously blank; Samantha felt her heart rate triple, waiting for some kind of response. She hadn't intended for Dee to find out like this.

Dee took a deep breath, then called out, "Cass!" The angel appeared a beat later, dressed in her usual civilian clothes of ratty jeans and a solid tank top.

"Yes, Deanna?" Sam would have said that Cass was a little pissed at being called like that, judging from the look she was giving Dee.

Dee just nodded at the table. "Sit down. We're having a family meeting," she said, indicating that Sam should also take a seat. Sam caught Cass' eye and they both grabbed their usual chairs. Dee took hers and spun it around so that she was leaning her arms against the backrest. "Sammy? You wanna start from the top?"

Samantha sighed and took a deep breath before beginning. "I've started looking at schools. They're all in cities without regular monster attacks, 'cause I'd really like the chance to focus on my schoolwork without worrying about the safety of the city, and I don't think I can be here and not fight with you guys. If I'm here, I'm fighting, and that's that."

Though they didn't know it, Dee and Cass were both giving Sam the same assessing look. Sam felt her palms start to sweat under the weight of their stares, and she had to forcibly stop her leg from bouncing in nervousness. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Deanna nodded.

"Okay then. Let's start narrowing down these schools to make sure you're going to the best one," she said with finality, reaching for the brochures. "Do you have some kind of spreadsheet to organize these?" Cass followed her lead, opening the nearest brochure, while Sam stared at them, dumbfounded.

"Aren't you going to fight me about this?" she finally burst out, her confusion written clear across her face. Dee just gave her a look that clearly said 'why would I?' "I thought you'd fight me tooth and nail about this," Sam explained with a furrowed brow.

Deanna shrugged at her sister. "Look at it this way, Sammy. I want you to go to college, get an education, and be better than this life. If that means you gotta be away from us to do it, then that's what we'll do."

"Deanna and I would both feel better knowing you are somewhere safe from major fighting as well, Samantha," Cass cut in, looking up at Sam from over the top of the brochure. Sam felt her breath catch in her throat as she looked between her sister and the angel who had come to be like one.

"Thanks, guys," she choked out. "Let me get my laptop and I'll show you what I've been working on." Sam left the room, blinking back tears from her eyes.

Dr. Bell was trying to kill her, Sam would swear it on any and all holy books. Their newest assignment was a late addition to the syllabus: cooperative writing. And he'd assigned the groups for it, too, so of course she was paired with Gabriel. The little shit just seemed bound and determined to get on her very last nerve during the course of the assignment.

“No one’s going to want to read a magical girl story,” he drawled from where he lay sprawled across Sam and Tori’s couch, shooting down Sam’s suggestion. Sam almost regretted inviting Gabriel over, citing the wifi and privacy of her apartment as reasonable alternatives to getting themselves kicked out of the library when they would eventually get into an argument. Gabriel had agreed, surprisingly; Sam had nearly thought that he’d argue just because he could.

Sam glared at him from her position in the recliner that had been Hunter’s adamant addition to the living room. Bless Tori’s friends for their taste in furniture. “So what do *you* think we should write about? This is a huge part of our final grade, Gabriel.”

Gabriel idly waved his hand in the air. “Well aware of that, my giantess. But the story’s got to be edgier than a happy-sappy superheroine story.” He lifted his head from the cushions to look at her. “What about something from the villain’s perspective?” he offered.

Sam had to repress an automatic shudder. Getting into her enemies’ heads had never resulted in anything good, from her point of view. “No, I don’t think I can do that, really,” she said, and something in her face must have shown because Gabriel let the matter drop. They sat in silence, thinking, for a few minutes.

“What about,” Gabriel said slowly, as if he was still gathering his thoughts, “A former villain who’s changed his ways?” He wasn’t looking at her, but rather staring at the ceiling as if its opinion mattered most. Sam glanced at him, thinking about the Trickster and his change of allegiance over the last few months. Ruby had appeared frequently since their introduction, and Trickster had never once shown signs of wavering from Sam’s, or rather Shadow’s, side. It warmed her heart a bit to know that, after everything and the seeming failures of her personal life, she could still make friends in her professional life.

“That actually sounds like something we could do,” she replied. Gabriel lifted his head again and grinned at her, and Sam was taken aback by how familiar it looked. She blinked and looked again, but it must have been a trick of the light as whatever she’d seen that looked so familiar was gone. Still, the excited expression on Gabriel’s face made something twist in her chest, and Sam chuffed out a laugh to cover up the feeling. “Well,” she said, pulling out a notebook and pen, “What should we call this character? What’s his background, why was he evil and why did he change?”

Gabriel's face screwed up in concentration. "He's lonely, I think," he said after a moment. "He comes from a large family but gets lost in the shuffle of his many siblings." Sam scribbled that down.

"So what, he's acting out of middle-child syndrome?" she asked, glancing up at her partner again. Gabriel looked distinctly uncomfortable.

"I suppose. Maybe he didn't think there was any other way to stand out," he offered. Sam nodded.

"I can see that. It may not be the best reason, but it's still totally valid. So, lots of siblings, turned to mischief as a way to stand out. What made him switch gears then?" Sam asked, looking over her notes. She didn't see Gabriel's eyes soften as he looked at her.

"A girl, of course. One who wouldn't put up with his shit, who showed him how childish he was being, who he maybe fell in love with just a little bit," he said softly. Sam glance at him with slightly incredulous eyes.

"So we're gonna turn this into a love story?" she asked with eyebrows raised. Gabriel shrugged at her.

"Only if she finds out who he really is, but the odds of that happening aren't exactly good, you know. They have a working relationship," he said suggestively, waggling his eyebrows at her.

Samantha rolled her eyes and chucked the notebook at him. "Does everything have to be an innuendo with you?" she asked with an exasperated smile.

He opened his mouth to answer but was interrupted by the shrieking of the monster-alert sirens. They both froze for a moment, and Sam's mind went into panic mode. She needed to get Gabriel somewhere safe, out of the danger zone. He was a civilian, after all, and civilians needed to be protected.

She jumped up from her chair and started stuffing papers into her bookbag. “Come on, we’ve got to get downstairs to the shelter,” she tried to hurry Gabriel along. He seemed to be taking his time, however, in complete opposition to Sam’s rushed movements, and kept looking at her with an unreadable expression on his face.

“I’ll be okay, Sam,” he told her as she hustled him out of the door and locked it behind her. “The monster isn’t even anywhere close to here.” Sam gave him a questioning glance.

“How do you know that?” she asked, starting to grow suspicious. Gabriel shrugged uncomfortably.

“Because these are proximity alarms that activate at a radius of one mile?” he offered, and Sam felt her face heat up.

“Oh.” Their earlier talk was getting to her, ideas banging around in her head about secret identities and motivations and who *was* the Trickster, anyway? He had to go *somewhere* after their battles, right?

“Overthinking much?” he asked her around a grin, and Sam ducked her head, embarrassed. They made their way down the stairs to the shelter at a much less hurried pace, though with every step Sam’s mind spun faster and faster. How could she drop Gabriel at the shelter and still slip away to go fight whatever new creature Ruby’s brought out? She scanned the area, looking for an escape point, and missed the looks Gabriel was giving her.

They reached the shelter in the basement of the apartment building. Sam gasped, bringing a hand to her forehead. “Shit!” she exclaimed. “I forgot something up in my apartment. Go on, I’ll just run up and grab it real quick.” She shooed Gabriel into the shelter and bolted back up the stairs, ignoring the way he seemed to sigh after her. In the stairwell of the 2nd floor, she whispered, “*Shadow Power, Descend!*” and Shadow bounded out to fight.

“So rumor has it that the lovely Miss Samantha Winchester is abandoning us and running off to Blue Bay Harbor,” Andy Gallagher, Sam’s best friend and the most laid-back person she

knew, announced accusingly as he sat down next to her on the picnic bench for lunch. He nudged her in the ribs and laughed as she ducked her head and hunched her shoulders.

“Yeah,” Sam admitted sheepishly. “Sorry I didn’t say anything. We’re kind of keeping it on the DL, you know?” She took a bite of the sandwich Deanna had made her while Andy laughed. They ate their lunch a comfortable silence that was spattered with Andy’s occasional commentary on their peers. Sam got most of her gossip from him, actually; Andy sat at the heart of the school’s gossip network and used his powers well. Sometimes, though, he liked to bring up old rumors and rehash them.

“Look, I’m just saying that there was no way that Benny wasn’t crushing hard on your sister,” Andy argued, waving the fries in his hand to accentuate his point. Sam smiled and rolled her eyes at him.

“Dude, I’ve told you. Dee was never into Benny that way, and she can’t be responsible if he was carrying a torch for her.” Andy looked like he was about to argue that point and Sam held up a hand to stop him. “Don’t. They were friends, kinda like how we’re friends, and besides, I think he’s getting married soon? Some girl he met at college,” she concluded. Andy’s eyebrows shot up in interest.

“Oh really? And is Miss Dee going to the wedding?” Sam shoved at him and nearly succeeded in knocking him off the bench.

“Oh stop. I’m not feeding into the rumor mill, jackass.”

Andy sat up, nursing his elbow, and shot her a hurt look. “I’m just doing the service of keeping the denizens of this school well-informed of the goings-on of the outside world!” he protested with a pout.

Sam laughed. “Fine, you turd. Yes, Dee’s going to the wedding, and she’s taking Cass with her.” Andy’s triumphant grin turned into a leer.

“You mean that dark-haired hottie is actually going to be leaving your house and entering the public?”

Sam did push him off the bench this time, and he fell to ground with a clatter. "If you think that was bad," she told him over his exaggerated groans, "You'd better not let Dee or Cass hear that. You know they can both kick your ass, right?"

"Right, I'll remember that," came the muffled agreement from below.

The Trickster wasn't there. He usually beat her to the battles, and here she was, 20 minutes into fighting this thing that was made out of some kind of house plant, and he'd yet to show his face. Shadow would have been angry had she not been worried about him.

That distraction was starting to cost her in the fight; Shadow couldn't concentrate on the creature's myriad of vines enough to prevent them tripping her up, and she knew she was going to have some impressive scrapes and bruises before this was over. She staggered to her feet after another fantastic faceplant and almost sighed in relief when a familiar voice spoke up from behind her.

"I thought you'd graduated to *not* getting your ass kicked by every minion that showed up?" Trickster drawled from his vantage point on a fire escape. Shadow could feel her face light up at the sight of him.

"You came!" she exclaimed, barely dodging another set of flying vines. Trickster threw a small handful of candies behind her which exploded into little balls of flame that chased the vines back from them as Shadow jumped up to join him.

"Sure did, sweetheart," he winked at her, "But word on the street is that you ditched a hot date to get out here." Shadow gaped at him and nearly took an exploding seed pod to the back for it. Trickster pulled her out of the way just in time with a laugh at her dumbfounded expression.

“One,” she said, finally gathering her wits to reply, “It was not a hot date, it was working on an assignment. Two, how did you know that?”

He just smirked smugly at her. “I have my ways,” he said loftily. Shadow was about to reply, but he beat her to it. “We can discuss your love life later, princess, after we dust this thing.” Shadow bristled at the nickname but turned to face their ignored enemy.

With some skillfully placed explosives and strategic use of Shadow’s powers, the monster was swiftly dispatched. Once the Trickster joined the battle, it took a matter of minutes. Shadow was troubled to realize that she was so ineffective on her own. Was it an inherent flaw of her upbringing and fighting style, having always had her sister the Huntress at her side? She almost forgot about her unfinished conversation with Trickster, she was so lost in her thoughts. he brought her back by snapping his fingers in her face.

“Shadow, honey, are you in there?” he teased her, grinning at the startled look on her face. She blinked at him for a moment.

“Yeah, sorry,” she said, shaking her head. “Just had some thoughts is all.”

“What, missing your hot date?” Trickster asked smugly. Shadow glared at him, then gasped.

“Shit,” she swore vehemently. “I’ve gotta go, I left a friend in the lurch when the attack hit. Later!” she called behind her, leaping off vaguely in the direction of her apartment complex. She didn’t see the Trickster disappear in a sparkle of silvery light with a frustrated expression clearly visible on his face.

Samantha sighed. Trying to sneak into Mr. Harris’ 4th bell biology class was next to impossible; She should know, she’d attempted it four times already this school year. She needed the class, too, in order to graduate, but the thought of facing that man’s disapproving expression one more time, not to mention likely getting an after school detention for her troubles, was making Sam feel like she either needed to cry or punch something. Hiding out in the girls’ bathroom was looking more appealing with every second.

She'd already had to skip Ms. Badger's 3rd bell trig class to join Dee in a fight, and she prayed that Andy had taken notes. None of her teachers knew about her double life, for their own safety. The monsters had ways of finding out who you were and what was important to you; That was when they'd take away everything you'd ever loved. Mom's journal detailed several cases of caretakers letting friends get too close and the bastards going after loved ones.

Sam sighed again and looked at her watch. She might as well just sneak into the cafeteria now and claim a table. Maybe she could claim she was sick the whole period.

Gabriel had been weird with her ever since their interrupted planning meeting. He would often stop himself mid-sentence and visibly rethink his words. Sam wondered if she'd done something to make him think he had to be different around her, but she didn't think so. He'd been very vocal in his worry when she'd reappeared, all "Where'd you run off to?" and "I know you look like an amazon, Sammy, but that doesn't make you a warrior princess!" and "I didn't think I was *that* bad of a date!"

On the other hand, he'd seemingly thrown himself wholeheartedly into their co-writing assignment. Sam ended up doing most of the transcribing, since Gabriel just seemed to be a fountain of inspiration. He was able to describe their lead character so well, to detail his adventures, that Sam had taken to having a tape recorder on hand, so she could edit his words at her own leisure. Sam wondered idly, watching Gabriel play with a stuffed dolphin while lounging on the couch again, if they could possibly look into getting this published after the course was done. There were some self-publishing websites around, right?

"Gabe?" she asked idly, and Gabriel lazily lifted his head from the couch to look at her.

"Yes, your highness?" he drawled. Sam shot him an unamused look.

"Do you think we could get this published?" she asked him, gesturing at the laptop and sheafs of red-marked papers on the coffee table. Gabriel looked at her curiously, like he couldn't really fathom where she was going with this. "It's a really good story," she

explained. "I like where it's going and how we're working together and I think we could sell it."

"Really?" he returned skeptically. "It's not much of a story, Sam-I-am." Sam shrugged, pulling on some nonchalance.

"I think it's interesting. Captivating." She eyed him for a moment. "It'd be worth a shot, don't you think?" Gabriel seemed distinctly uncomfortable with the idea, and shrugged uneasily.

"I guess," he said, and Sam let the matter drop. She turned her attention back to the rough draft on her laptop instead.

"So," she said briskly, deftly changing the subject. "Loki's left home and started his minor villainy. How does he meet this girl?" she sat with fingers poised over the keyboard.

Her name was Castiel, and she seemed to have a fixation on Dee. Wherever Deanna was in the house, there was Castiel right behind her. It was driving Dee nuts, and Sam braced herself for the inevitable explosion.

"Will you fucking STOP?" The dam of frustration finally broke on a calm Saturday morning when Deanna was tinkering with the Impala. She whipped around from under the hood of the car and nearly took Castiel out with the wrench in her hand.

Castiel tilted her head, her dark hair falling to the side in its ponytail. "I don't understand, Deanna. I haven't been doing anything."

Dee dropped the wrench and ran her hands through her own short hair in frustration. "Personal space, Cass. It's called personal space, and I used to have it before you showed up." The angel continued to stare at Deanna with a slightly perplexed expression on her face.

Dee made an aborted hand motion, then reached out and pushed Castiel back two paces. "There," she said, breathing a small sigh of relief.

Sam watched from the doorway as Castiel took half a step back towards Dee. Her sister hadn't really noticed, though, having turned back to one of the few remnants of their father. Silence fell, broken only by the faint strains of staticy music from the radio, as Sam watched the angel watch her sister.

This fight was different from the others they'd had over the last semester. Shadow could feel it in her heart. It was November and fast approaching Thanksgiving, a fact that seemed to escape these demons. Each battle lately had been pushing them harder, and Sam's performance in school was starting to slip. Her bruises weren't healing as quickly and she was tired constantly. Tori had started dropping vitamin C tablets next to her plate at dinner. Gabriel hadn't mentioned anything yet, but she'd caught him giving her worried looks while they worked on their project. She forced a smile to try and set him at ease, but she wasn't sure it was working so well.

Shadow dodged out of the way of Ruby's attack, but just missed and the slicing pressure wave nicked her ankle. Trickster threw a smoke grenade onto the field and jumped down to help her up. "You okay there, kiddo?" He asked, and Sam could make out genuine concern in his eyes behind his mask. Shadow tried to smile reassuringly at him, but it was lost in a grunt of pain when she put weight on her left foot. She sagged against him, hissing against the pain. It felt like fire shooting up her leg from her ankle.

"Having some problems?" Ruby's snide, mocking tones carried clearly through the dissipating smoke. Shadow glared in the demon's direction, and she could hear the Trickster growl softly in his throat. Taking a deep breath, Shadow straightened up, leaning heavily on him to lessen the pressure on her ankle.

"Nothing you need to worry about," Shadow shot back through gritted teeth. Yep, definitely felt like something was sliced down there. Even with magical healing, that was going to take some time to fix that up.

“Oh, look at that! Seems I clipped the poor birdie’s wings,” Ruby returned with an insincere pout. She sauntered toward them from across the empty lot, clearly unconcerned about being attacked.

“Back the fuck up, hell bitch,” Trickster spat at her, and Shadow was almost startled by the vehemence in his voice.

“Oh, I think you need to learn a lesson too, Munchkin.” Ruby raised her hand, readying her power directly toward them. Shadow braced herself; there was no quick escape this time, not with her immobilized so.

“Enough, Ruby,” a deceptively mild voice ordered. Ruby immediately stood down, flipping her dark hair over the shoulder of her leather jacket. Shadow sagged a bit in relief, but then noticed that the Trickster had only grown even tenser at the new voice.

“Trick?” she murmured to him, but he didn’t seem to hear her. Shadow peered through the lingering haze; she could just make out the figure of a man approaching them. Tall, from what she could make out, with close-cropped hair and wearing what looked like casual clothes.

“Lucifer,” Trickster hissed under his breath. Shadow’s eyes widened and she tried to fall into a defensive stance, swallowing a grimace of pain from her ankle. The pair watched warily as the man identified as the lord of the demons walked nonchalantly toward them.

“You must be the infamous Shadow,” the King of Hell said, a mild expression on his face. Shadow felt her paranoia increase tenfold in that one statement.

“Don’t come any closer,” she ground out, trying not to let the small tendrils of fear seep into her voice. To her surprise, Lucifer stopped where he was.

“There’s no need for such hostility, my dear. I haven’t done anything to hurt you,” he continued in a calm, even tone, his hands raised in innocence.

“So, what? Ruby’s been attacking us for shits and giggles?” Trickster spoke up, his hand on Shadow’s arm like a vise.

“Well, no,” Lucifer conceded with a thoughtful look on his face. “She is supposed to be working on this area. But that was before I knew about you.” He looked directly at Shadow, and a small part of her mind felt like his gaze was searing into her soul.

“Me?” she couldn’t stop herself from asking. There was a tug on her arm, enough to break her staring contest with Lucifer and make her glance back at the Trickster. His face was guarded, more than she’d ever seen it. What was going on here?

“Oh yes. I can clearly see Azazel’s influence on you.” Lucifer sighed, shaking his head sadly. “A shame your mother took him out.” Shadow froze in place, confused. Azazel? What did he have to do with this?

“Stop it, Lucifer,” Trickster said. His free hand, the one not helping hold Shadow up, was clenched into a tight fist. “Your games are *not* welcome here.” Lucifer canted his head to the side in a manner eerily reminiscent of Cass, and he seemed to take in the Trickster for the first time.

“I really wasn’t expecting to see you here, and defending them.” Lucifer’s expression turned to one of mild disgust. “You know we’re better than them,” he said, with a slight sneer on his lips.

“They’re worth it,” Trickster replied, his focus wholly on Lucifer. Shadow felt relegated to the background of this fight, but she was fascinated and confused by their back-and-forth. “They try so hard to be better. I’ve been watching, and they are *worth it*.”

Lucifer laughed cruelly. “You’re smitten, brother. You’ve gone and committed a worse crime than I was ever guilty of.” He shook his head as though he couldn’t believe it himself. “Gabriel, Gabriel, Gabriel. You’ve fallen in love with a *human*.” She glanced at the Trickster, confused and hoping for some kind of answer, only to see a combination of fear, desperation, and fury on his face. He didn’t look at her, but his profile in that moment struck a chord of recognition in her; it was one she’d gotten to know very well over the last few weeks.

Shadow froze; her heart stopped for a brief second and her stomach fell so rapidly she was hit with a wave of nausea. Gabriel? *Her* Gabriel? Gabriel, who was the most annoying, aggravating, frustrating person she knew, and yet they had the best working relationship she'd ever had on a project? Gabriel was the Trickster, who'd been her friend, comrade-in-arms, *partner* over the last several months.

The Trickster - no, *Gabriel* - caught her gaze and she could see the pain and reluctance in his eyes. "Sam, I - " he started, but she wrenched herself out of his grip and threw herself backwards, away from him. The pain in her ankle was dimmed, numbed under the shock of what Lucifer had just revealed.

"I *trusted* you," she barely heard herself whisper. Gabriel's face beneath the mask looked as broken as her heart felt, shattered into pieces like the trust between them. He moved toward her, but Shadow - Sam - scrambled backwards. "No," she murmured. Her identities felt jumbled, confused. She couldn't do this. Not now. She ran.

Somewhere along the route home Sam un-transformed, since she was back in civilian clothes by the time she stumbled in on Tori, Shane, and Dustin watching awful action movies from the couch. Sam must have looked a wreck, because Tori took one look at her and subsequently shooed the boys out before guiding her gently to the corner of the couch piled with the most cushions and pillows and wrapping her in a blanket.

"Let me just make a few calls," Tori said gently. Sam nodded blankly, and Tori moved to the kitchen to use her phone. She reappeared a few minutes later with a glass of water and wordlessly handed it to Sam. Sam drank it while watching Tori take the action movie out of the DVD player and replace it with something she couldn't quite make out from where she was, not that she was trying very hard.

By the time *Clue* had queued up on the TV, Marah and Kapri (Dustin and Shane's girlfriends, respectively) were crashing through the door loaded down with pizza, ice cream, and all the fixings for cosmopolitans.

"So, like, Tori said you had a break-up," Kapri said, plonking the drinks down on the coffee table next to the pizza boxes and flipping her pink-tinted hair over her shoulder. "So we're totally gonna watch a movie and pig out and do makeover stuff, 'cause boys can be dicks and sometimes we just like to feel pretty."

“Oh!” Marah said, running in from the kitchen where she’d been putting the ice cream in the freezer. “Sam, can I do your hair? I’m so good at doing hair.”

Sam caught Tori’s eye and smiled weakly at her roommate. It wasn’t solving any of her problems at the moment, but maybe this was just the kind of distraction she needed. She’d have to call Dee and Cass later, but... “Sure,” she said to Marah. “Can we take pictures to send to my sister? She’ll never believe I went through with it otherwise.”

The laughing chorus from the other girls was answer enough. “Got my camera right here,” said Tori with a grin.

Sam settled down in her usual chair at the kitchen table with a steaming mug of coffee and a freshly made egg and cheese bagel sandwich in front of her. Her laptop was open and she started her daily trawling through the forums of OnAMissionFromAngels.net, the online network for caretakers that she helped run. It looked as though it had been a slow night overall, with only a handful of skirmishes to log into the database. Sam decided, around a bite of her breakfast, to send messages to the caretakers involved, just to make sure nothing got left out and every possible piece of information was logged. With another fortifying sip of caffeine, she started typing up individual messages.

Twenty minutes and the rest of her coffee later, Sam clicked ‘send’ on the last message just as Dee stumbled blearily into the kitchen, making a beeline for the coffee pot. Sam wouldn’t have been surprised if one day her sister simply upended the carafe into her mouth, to be honest. She didn’t this time, instead managing to pour her beverage into a blue mug decorated with raven wings. Sam raised her eyebrows when Dee plopped down at the table; her sister looked even more sleep-mussed than usual with her short-cropped hair sticking straight up on one side and shorts and tank top in rumpled disarray. Not that Dee usually looked pristine in the mornings, but this was a bit much, even for her.

Sam’s unspoken questions were answered when Cass wandered in a few minutes later, her hair pulled into a messy ponytail and wearing what Sam clearly recognized as one of Dee’s old band tees and a pair of threadbare boxer shorts. It was like a switch had clicked into place for her, and suddenly she could see how Cass brushed her hand across the back of

Dee's neck as she passed on her way to get her own dose of coffee. Deanna leaned back into the touch just a hair, and Sam was ready to smack herself over being so blind.

She waited until the other two occupants of the house at least looked somewhat coherent before clearing her throat. Dee and Cass looked up from their respective stupors. "So," she said, eyes flicking back and forth between them, "Were you actually going to tell me you were sleeping together, or is this something I'm supposed to figure out on my own?"

Cass canted her head slightly and squinted at Sam, while Deanna seemed to choke on her own breath. She spluttered into her coffee, going red in the face and casting guilty looks at Cass. "Sammy, what?" she finally got out. "Where the hell-? What gave you that idea?"

Sam tossed her an unamused look. "Really, Dee?" she returned. Cass turned her confused stare onto Dee.

"But, Deanna, why are you saying that?" the angel said to Dee, whose flushed face was getting progressively more red. "You shouldn't keep something like this from your sister."

Dee seemed to decide that the best course of action was to bury her head in her arms on the table. Sam grinned at her sister's embarrassment and turned to Castiel. "Glad to have you officially part of the family," she said, standing up and taking Cass' cup to the coffee maker for a refill. "Don't hurt her or I'll come after you, and if you've got any angel mojo you could spare for making your room soundproof, that would be great."

When Sam turned around, Cass' coffee in hand, the angel was turning a bright shade of pink at the table.

Her phone dinged at her, the trilling notes letting her know that she'd received an email. It took far more effort than it should have for Sam to reach out and grope for the damnable thing on her night stand. Black Friday was, after all, one of the only days of indulgence Sam allowed herself. She grunted, barely lifting her head, and peered blearily at the screen. The subject line simply said *Please Read: Ending Enclosed*. It was from Gabriel.

She hadn't seen him since Lucifer's appearance. They'd only had one class meeting, and Gabriel had been conspicuously absent. Not that Sam had been ready or willing to see him anyway, but still. The knowledge that he was avoiding her made something twist in her chest. Sam knew that she was the one who'd run off, who'd said she couldn't face him and his revelations. It made sense that he was respecting her wishes.

That didn't stop it from hurting. She'd gone home for the holidays in a bit of a daze. Cass and Dee, of course, had heard. Sam had called them after the self-indulgent movie marathon had finished and Marah and Kapri had finally gone home. Dee had been ready to drive over to Blue Bay and rip Gabriel a new one (*"I will tear that pipsqueak to shreds for this, rules be damned. No one hurts my baby sister like this."*); fortunately Cass' cooler head had prevailed. It also hadn't hurt when Cass mentioned that Gabriel must be her long-absent older brother, though Deanna had been nearly ready to have a coronary at that point (*"You couldn't have mentioned this earlier?" "Gabriel has been gone from heaven for many years. His name is also rather popular amongst humans."*).

There'd been a lot of Sam's favorite foods around the house when she'd arrived home, at which she smiled weakly, and Dee and Cass let her be, mostly. She'd helped with Thanksgiving dinner yesterday, of course, because Dee could only do so much in the kitchen before she needed some extra hands to help get the dinner on the table in time. And it had been the wonderful family meal that they'd all needed, especially in light of recent developments in Sam's personal and professional life. Full of good food, they'd watched terrible movies until late last night, when they'd all finally crashed.

Now, though, on her morning to sleep in before Dee dragged her out to work on the Impala for hours, she had an email from Gabriel that was making something uneasy twist in her chest. The message was blank except for an attachment, a document titled "Loki's Reasons". Sam put her phone down and took a deep breath before getting out of bed. She knew she needed to look at that document, but it wasn't something she wanted to do from her bed; she needed to wake up properly and start ingesting some coffee before she'd be ready to tackle this.

Twenty minutes later, Sam seated herself at the kitchen table with her computer and an extra-large mug decorated with constellations. She opened the document with a feeling of dreadfully anxious anticipation pooling in stomach. *'Hey there, Amazon,'* it started out, and Sam could almost see Gabriel's little smirk at the nickname. It hurt, just a little. *'I hope you're reading this, 'cause if you are then you don't hate me as much as I thought you did. Do. Whatever. Anyway. I know the co-writing thing's coming due after the Turkey Day break,*

and you've been doing all the writing so far, so. Here. ' It was hard for her not to smile, despite the pain of hearing Gabriel's mental voice. She started reading.

The first day that Loki saw her, he ran into her. Literally. Like, knocked-her-flat-on-her-ass ran into her. Which, he later found out, is actually kinda hard to do, considering that she's a freaking Amazon princess in disguise, all long legs and fit physique and amazing strength. Frankly, he was more stunned from their encounter than she was; the gift of the angels was radiating off of her in waves, even though he could tell that it was tinted, darkened. All of the extra sensory input from senses he hadn't used since he'd left home and started his reign of mischief made him snap at her, and to his surprise she snapped right back. It went against everything he'd ever learned about the angel-touched, and he let her leave in a huff.

To later find out that they shared a class made Loki giddy with anticipation. He could push her, see where her limits were and if she was *really* up for battling those who worked for his long-fallen brother. After all, Satan himself had incredible powers, though Loki was no slouch either. This area had been quiet too long; something was in the works, he could feel it. So he started with heavy critiques of her work in class. Oh, he tried so hard to get a rise out of her. It both pleased and worried Loki that he could so easily read her face; she held in her anger better than the Hulk, but even saints (and angel-touched) have limits.

Her uniform was black. Loki fell back on sarcasm as he rushed to process what this meant. Was she the one that Azazel had been after, so many years ago? The timing seemed right, but to what end? What could one of Satan's generals be after with this girl?

She was more receptive to him when they fought, he found. She was getting under his skin and Loki couldn't help but want to help her. The angel-touched were supposed to work in teams, and yet here she was all by herself. It wasn't right, a part of him (the part that still yearned for home and family and everything he told himself he didn't miss, being on Earth by himself) argued vehemently. Where was her team? He could tell she'd been around another angel (Sachiel, another part of his mind quietly catalogued), and she clearly wasn't used to working on her own, so where the hell was her team?

But no team ever showed to assist her, and Loki got drawn into doing it himself. The alarms would go off, he'd sneak out of wherever he was making mischief, and together they'd fight the demons. He... He liked it, really, which surprised him. He was the wayward son (well, only *slightly* wayward if it came down to it, considering he hadn't been cast into perdition for his transgressions, but Loki knew for a fact he'd gotten his sense of humor from his father), not the ever-vigilant and obedient soldier. Maybe, though, maybe this could work. His Amazon princess was growing on him, after all, and he couldn't let her get hurt.

It only took Loki a month to realize that what he felt for her was, in fact, a love so deep it scared him. And so he buried the feeling and relied on his wit and charm to perchance win her over. After all, that kind of love is what could cause angels to fall.

I'm sorry I hid this from you, Sam. It seemed like the best idea at the time. I just didn't know big brother would show up and ruin this for us. Forgive me?

She pressed send before she could talk herself out of it, and every ring through the receiver twisted in her gut. She was just about to hang up when a sleepy, familiar voice answered, "H'lo?" Sam nearly choked on the combination of humor, frustration, and relief she felt.

"I should have known you couldn't be up at 10AM, even though you sent me an email not 3 hours ago," she choked out. There was rustling on the other end of the line, and Gabriel sounded more awake when he spoke next.

"Do you know how long it took me to write that?" he shot back, grumbling. Sam could hear him yawn in the silence that followed, but she made no move to reply. "Kiddo?" he asked, a note of concern creeping into his voice, "You there? Or am I just imagining this call?"

Sam couldn't help herself; she snorted softly. "Can you come here? I can't do this over the phone," she said quietly.

“Be right over, sweetheart,” came Gabriel’s gentle reply. The line clicked dead. Sam heard a sound like flapping wings, and then Gabriel was there.

He looked tired, as if he hadn’t been sleeping well. Sam knew from experience that angels didn’t need much sleep (the sight of Cass sitting nearly naked in the dark kitchen at 3AM was not one she was likely to forget anytime soon); To see Gabriel looking so haggard was worrying. But he looked right in her eyes and quirked his mouth up in a tired smile. “Hey, kiddo,” he murmured.

Sam nearly choked on her own breath. “You’re being terribly blasé about this,” she returned, gesturing with her head at his exhausted figure. He smirked back at her for a second and shrugged.

“You asked me to come, so here I am.” Gabriel’s gaze stayed soft across the few feet between where he’d appeared and where Sam still sat at the kitchen table. Sam echoed his smile with her own.

“Hey Sammy, you up yet?” Dee half-shouted as she came into the mudroom from the detached garage. The shout caused Sam and Gabriel to jump guiltily, even though they had nothing to be guilty about. Except perhaps, Sam reasoned, Gabriel’s very presence in the house.

“Uh, yeah. In here!” she stammered, shooting Gabriel a wide-eyed look. He just raised his eyebrows at her and rocked back on his heels, casually sticking his hands in his pockets. They were still trying to communicate silently when Dee strolled in, wiping her grease-covered hands on a stained rag, with Cass following close behind.

“There any coffee left?” Dee asked as she made a beeline to the counter where the coffee pot stood. Cass, on the other hand, stopped dead in the doorway and stared at Gabriel. She tilted her head and squinted, and Gabriel just stared evenly back at her. Deanna noticed that Cass wasn’t mobbing the coffee pot with her and turned to see what the problem was. “The hell!?” she exclaimed. “Who’s this? Cass?”

“Gabriel,” Cass stated quietly, and Gabriel’s mouth quirked again.

“Hey sis,” he said with an acknowledging nod. Castiel returned the nod seriously.

“Cass?” Dee ventured again, moving closer to her girlfriend. Cass broke her gaze with Gabriel and smiled a little at Dee.

“Dee, I’d like you to meet my brother, Gabriel.” Deanna raised her eyebrows and gave Cass a skeptical look.

“Okay, but what’s he doing in my house?” Dee started to slip into a defensive stance but was stopped by Cass’ hand on her arm.

“I, uh I invited him,” Sam spoke up, scooting her chair out and standing. She winced at her sister’s glare. “Dee, this is the Gabriel I was talking about. From school?”

Dee’s eyes widened comically. “Gabriel? *The* Gabriel? The one you wanted to murder?” Sam grimaced under Dee’s ever more gleeful expression.

“Aww, Sammich, you wanted to kill me?” Gabriel’s grin made her flush and mumble incoherently while looking at the floor, unable to be heard over the sound of Dee and Gabriel’s combined laughter. Cass gave her a long-suffering, sympathetic look. Maybe this hadn’t been a good idea.

“So what does this bastard want with my sister?” They’d settled around the table, and a fresh pot of coffee was brewing at Cass’ insistence (‘*Gabriel, you look dead on your feet. If we’re having this meeting then you need stimulants.*’ ‘*Cassie, I swear I’m fine...okay. Don’t look at me like that.*’). Deanna, of course, broke into the conversation with her usual bluntness.

Castiel and Gabriel both winced; Sam remembered then that Lucifer was, in fact, their brother. She elbowed Dee in the side, making her sister scowl at her. Sam made a “what the hell was that?” face at her. Dee shrugged back, conveying “what? I didn’t do anything

wrong” with her expression. Sam sighed and rolled her eyes, turning back to the two angels sitting at the table. “Despite Dee’s insensitivity, she raises a good point. Gabriel?”

Gabriel sighed. “Honestly? I’m not sure. He’s probably attracted to your darker nature, maybe want to get you to join him.” He ran a hand through his hair and missed Dee and Sam’s incredulous looks.

“Darker nature?” Samantha echoed, dumbfounded. What the hell did that mean?

Gabriel looked at her quizzically. “Uh, yeah? You know, what with Azazel tainting your blood when you were a baby?” At Sam’s horrified expression, Gabriel turned on Cass. “You didn’t tell them?” he asked the other angel, a hint of you-have-to-be-shitting-me creeping into his voice.

“It didn’t seem prudent or relevant at the time,” Cass said even, meeting Gabriel’s gaze. Gabriel ran his hand through his hair again and sighed in exasperation.

“Great. Guess not all of that seraph training has worked out of you yet?” Gabriel’s sardonic grin quickly turned troubled. “You really didn’t know? About Azazel?” Sam shook her head.

“We know he’s the son of a bitch that killed our Dad, and the fight with him ruined Mom’s immune system so that she died not long after,” Dee offered, her hand squeezing Cass’ tight under the table.

“He’s more than that.” Gone was any trace of playfulness in his face. “Azazel was one of Luci’s top generals, able to run around on the surface here and set things into motion. From what I’ve been able to gather, he was trying to set you up, Sam, to be some kind of high general. By feeding you demon blood as a baby.” Sam felt her world spin for a moment and nearly didn’t catch his next words. “-He was doing when your dad interrupted him.” She felt Dee gripping her arm, trying to steady her, and glanced up to see Gabriel’s sad, sympathetic face. She closed her eyes to the twisty feeling in her gut that that evoked and concentrated on taking deep breaths, tuning out the voices of Dee and Cass continuing the conversation with Gabriel around her. Sam could feel his eyes on her, a steady heat that both warmed and frightened her.

It was a lot to take in. She'd known there was something different about her; her uniform colors attested to that. And Gabriel had said "tainted", like she wasn't the pure ideal of a caretaker, or maybe she never had been... Another deep breath. Focus, Sam. The stuff about Azazel, she could worry about later. Lucifer was the issue right now; it was Lucifer they should be focusing on. She let the issues twist and reorganize themselves in her mind, changing places in the priorities queue. When she felt stable enough, Sam opened her eyes and raised her head.

The others fell silent. Sam brushed back her hair from her face and looked squarely at Gabriel. "What do we need to do?" she asked. Gabriel opened his mouth to protest, but Sam cut him off. "No. Just, whatever you're going to say? Save it. I can't let anyone else go through this. It doesn't matter that Azazel's dead; Lucifer has other generals who can cause just as much damage. I can't let that happen to anyone else. So how do we stop him?"

Gabriel seemed to deflate after a moment. "You're not even going to allow me a token protest, are you? Fine. But you're not going in alone. Caretakers are meant to work in teams. I don't know what happened here, but I think the only thing that's kept you two going for so long is that you've had each other. I want Deanna and Castiel to be there too, when we face my brother." He caught her eyes, and she could see the resignation there, and the support. They could do this.

Sam opened the door to her apartment to the wonderful smell of baking cookies. "Sam? Is that you?" Tori called from the kitchen. Sam shouted back an affirmative, thumping her duffle bag on the floor while she shouldered the door shut. Tori stuck her head out of the kitchen, her blonde hair piled up in a messy bun and flour streaked across her shirt. "You want some snickerdoodles? The just came out of the oven about five minutes ago."

"Absolutely," Sam grinned, happy to fall back into the routine of living with Tori and the regular gang of friends she had over. It made Sam feel less alone to have Tori's friends over, especially when they left an open invitation for her to join them. And Tori's cookies were the absolute best. Sam dumped her bag in her room and joined her roommate in the kitchen, where Tori had a steaming mug of hot chocolate waiting for her with a plate of cookies. Sam shot her a smile. "You are the best, you know that?"

“Oh, I know,” Tori said slyly. “And now you’re going to tell me why Gabriel’s been hanging around outside the building all day.” Sam spluttered into her hot chocolate.

“He’s been *what*?”

Tori laughed. “He thinks he’s being clever, but he’s been skulking around the far end of the parking lot for *hours*,” she explained. She waggled her eyebrows, adding, “Almost like he’s been waiting for you to get back.”

Sam could do nothing to stop the flush that started to creep over her face. “Oh lord,” she murmured, setting her drink on the table and dropping her face into her hands. As if on cue, someone, and Sam was sure it was Gabriel, knocked at their door.

Tori giggled and went to answer it. “Hi, Gabe,” Sam heard Tori greet him from the entrance to the apartment, and she couldn’t help the small smile that appeared on her face. She was sitting up properly by the time the wayward angel appeared in the kitchen looking just slightly uncomfortable.

“Hey,” she greeted as she glimpsed Tori disappearing into her own room. “What’s up?”

Gabriel shifted on his feet. “Hey, moose,” he smiled at her. “We, uh, we really didn’t get a chance to talk this weekend, just the two of us.” Sam felt the awkwardness in the room increase as she remembered Gabriel’s email and confession. They really *hadn’t* had a chance to talk about it, with the time of Gabriel’s visit being used to plan their attack on Lucifer. She shifted uncomfortably in her chair and nodded at him.

“Wanna head up to the roof? It’s usually pretty empty, we won’t be interrupted,” she offered. Gabriel’s quick “Sure” propelled her out of her seat. On a whim she snagged a handful of cookies from the cooling rack and wrapped them in a napkin, leading Gabriel out the door and up to the roof.

Sam settled on the ground with her back to the lip of the roof, sheltered just slightly from the wind; Gabriel sat down next to her, and she offered him a cookie in the silence that fell between them. Gabriel took it and stared at it as if it had all the answers to his life.

“I meant it, you know,” Gabriel said suddenly, not looking at her. Sam glanced at him, but his gaze stayed firmly on the horizon. “Loki’s story is mine, and every word of that was true.”

Sam smirked at him. “I kinda figured that,” she teased, and Gabriel looked at her, finally, with a small grin. “It was...enlightening. You’re far more complex than you present yourself to be.”

Gabriel shrugged, falling back into the familiar banter of their alter egos. “What can I say? I can’t give away *all* my secrets on the first date,” he replied with a wink. Sam laughed, throwing her head back and gazing at the sky for a second.

“So what’s this, then? The twentieth date?” she asked after a moment, her tone light, but with an undercurrent of gravity.

“I guess,” Gabriel answered. “Though I think we should try for a date where we’re not working for once. You know, either of our jobs.” He met her eyes, a sly grin on his face. “Pizza over at Big Rico’s?”

“Sure,” she said with a big grin. “Sure.”

Their second date was a hurried affair in a coffee shop just off of campus, almost lost in the rush of last-minute assignments and studying for finals. Sam polished up their story, “Loki’s Tale,” and they submitted it to Dr. Bell with a huge feeling of relief. It was only a brief respite, however, as Sam and Gabriel buckled down for final week. They didn’t see much of each other, which left Sam feeling a little off-kilter; Gabriel had become such a fixture in her life, both at school and while fighting, that not seeing him for several days was disconcerting. He did text her regularly, usually with something sarcastic and ridiculous to keep her sane from the insanity that was finals.

Finally, the last exam was finished and Sam jumped at the chance that weekend to spend some quality time at the boardwalk. Much to Sam's chagrin, Gabriel insisted on tasting every sugary concoction he could get his hands on (and making her try them as well, usually with some outrageous maneuvering). They were sitting on the beach, watching the waves and arguing half-heartedly over which major was worse (Sam presented Pre-Law's workload as solid evidence, but Gabriel countered with Veterinary Studies' required field work) when the sirens went off. Sam jumped to her feet, her heart racing, and turned back toward the city. Gabriel grabbed her shoulder, holding her for just a second and nodding. Sam pressed a button on her communicator.

"Cass?" she said into the device. "It's time." She lowered her wrist and met Gabriel's solemn gaze. "Now or never," she said, and was rewarded with a crooked, broken smile.

"No time like the present, princess," he returned, and they transformed together for the first time. In a moment, Shadow and Trickster were standing in their places.

Fighting together with Huntress and Cass was, for Shadow, like falling back into old routines. They had a rhythm, a synergy together based on long years of practical experiences. Trickster quickly found his ways to flit in and help, most often with his candy-shaped distractions that let the women do the heavy damage. All too soon, Cass dealt the monster a final blow, and as the smoke cleared they heard slow clapping.

Lucifer stepped out from the building he'd been leaning against. "My, my," he said. "I didn't realize I was going to get such a reception." He eyed each of them from his position across the street. "Shadow, so good to see you again, and you too, brother. And this must be the famous Huntress, into whose esteemed company poor little Castiel has fallen." Dee bristled visibly at the words, held back from attacking Lucifer only by sheer force of will, and Cass' hand on her arm.

"You will not hurt them, brother," Cass responded with her body tensed for the inevitable confrontation. Lucifer tilted his head, his expression puzzled, but before he could say anything, Shadow launched a chunk of concrete at the back of his head. Lucifer sensed it and spun out of the way, though it still clipped his shoulder.

Huntress took advantage of his staggering and sprinted to the side, opening fire at the fallen angel. Shadow broke the other way with her knife in hand, while the Trickster disappeared in a puff of sparkles. Shadow didn't look for him; she knew that he was relocating somewhere

to better assist with his projectile attacks. Cass, meanwhile, charged directly at him with her dark wings flaring behind her. Lucifer jumped back, dodging the spray of energy from Huntress' guns, only to trip over a convenient metal pipe Shadow had uprooted and rolled into place behind him. He stumbled, and Cass moved in for a blow, but Lucifer looked up at her and grinned.

Cass frowned at him, confused, and slowed her charge as she quickly scanned the area. She missed Lucifer's hand twitching at his side, but the Trickster didn't from his position on a nearby fire escape, and he threw a bonbon grenade at Lucifer, making him jump to the side. Cass jumped as well, just barely dodging a small knife Lucifer had thrown. Lucifer laughed from his new location down the street. "You are no match for me, not even together," he said confidently. Casually he waved his hand and sent out a blast of dark energy. The force knocked Shadow back into a storefront, and she heard Huntress grunt with pain over to one side.

"Fuck," she muttered, pulling herself up. Shadow looked around at her team: Huntress was glaring down the barrels of her guns from where she crouched on the ground, Cass was catching her breath and eyeing Lucifer intently, and Trickster was...not where he should be. She whipped her head around, hair flying behind her, and scanned the area for Gabriel.

She caught sight of him approaching Lucifer from the side. What the hell was he doing? "I wish you wouldn't do this, brother," the Trickster said, drawing Lucifer's attention to him. Lucifer watched him steadily as he approached.

"You're the one standing against me, brother. Why would you choose *them*?" Lucifer glanced away to where Dee and Sam were regrouping with Cass, his face disgusted.

Gabriel pulled off his Trickster mask with one hand and rolled his eyes. "Because they're *worth it*, Luci. Worth every damn moment of pain and heartache." Shadow could have sworn his eyes flicked over to her.

Lucifer laughed. "You're a fool, Gabriel. You've been corrupted by these...*things*," he sneered. Gabriel smirked.

"Oh, but what a way to go, brother," he returned. Lucifer spun, materializing a knife that he plunged into the Gabriel sneaking up behind him. The second Gabriel choked, dropping the

knife that he'd been holding up in attack. The first Gabriel, the one who'd been talking to Lucifer, shimmered and disappeared, a simple illusion.

"NO!" Sam screamed. Her heart felt like it was being ripped out of her chest. Gabriel's face was going slack with shock and pain.

"Oh brother," Lucifer said, jerking the knife in Gabriel's gut, "I taught you that, remember?" Sam's vision narrowed in focus on Lucifer. His back was to them. She bolted, rushing toward him, her knife clenched in her hand. It was a speed she'd never shown before, one born of desperation and heartache. She lashed out, slicing wildly.

"Not him, you fucker," she gritted out, slicing through Lucifer's neck and severing his spine. The fallen angel dropped, limp and lifeless, on the ground. She shielded her eyes from the bright glow that emitted from him for a second, and when it cleared she dropped to Gabriel's side. He was already unconscious from the shock, but still breathing.

"Come on, you little shit, you can't die on me," she muttered frantically, pressing her gloved hands against the wound in his abdomen in an effort to stop the bleeding. "Fuck. CASS!" she called. "Quick, you have to help him! Please!" Then Cass was there, pressing lightly around Sam's hands, a soft glow emanating from her hands.

"Shadow, you have to back up," Cass said, not unkindly, her eyes focused on her work. "You'll mix your energies if you don't move away." Dee had to pull her away to let Cass work. Sam watched shakily, leaning on Dee for support, as Cass was infused with a soft blue glow. Gabriel's body responded in kind with a pale golden light. Sam would have been fascinated and pestering Cass with a million questions had she not been unable to concentrate on anything but Gabriel's well-being. Dee squeezed her shoulder in silent support.

Cass' hands started trembling, and the sisters rushed over to her. "Cass? What's wrong?" Dee asked in obvious concern for her girlfriend.

"It's taking more of my energy than I'd thought it would," Cass gritted out, and Sam could see beads of sweat forming on her brow. "I don't know that I have enough power to heal him."

Sam automatically stepped forward and placed her hands on Cass'. "Use me," she said, her tone brooking no argument. "You know I hardly use my power. Just - save him. Please." Cass studied her for a moment, then nodded. Sam felt Cass' energies nudging her own into a useful form. It was draining in a way Sam wasn't used to, and the exhaustion of it came quickly. It felt like forever but couldn't have been more than a minute or two before Cass gently, tiredly, pulled their hands away and stopped drawing on Sam's power. They slumped together next to Gabriel's still form and waited.

After several moments Gabriel twitched, and Cass leaned back with a sigh, her glow fading. "I've healed his wounds," she announced gravely, looking at Sam with something akin to sympathy in her eyes. "He should awaken soon."

Sam felt something like a smile, but not quite, cross her face. She sent Cass a questioning glance and, at the angel's tired nod, moved away from Dee to crumple next to Gabriel on the ground. She socked lightly in the arm. "You son of a bitch," she murmured to him in a voice stuck between laughing and crying with relief, "Fuck you for doing that do me."

"As much as I'd love to, I don't think I'll be up for that for a while," Gabriel grunted, squeezing his eyes before squinting at her face. He shifted slowly to sit up, and Sam immediately moved to support him with a choked off laugh.

"I could kill you for that stunt, you know," she told him as she blinked back the tears of relief in her eyes. Gabriel smiled crookedly at her.

"Pretty sure that would kinda negate all of Cassie's hard work in putting little old me back together," he said. Sam just pulled him in close and buried her face in his neck.

"Don't fucking care. You don't get to die on me."

Gabriel laughed gently. "That goes ditto for you, kiddo."

There was an insistent knocking at the front door that eventually broke through Samantha's sleep-fogged brain. She groaned and rolled over, burying her face in the pillows. Ever since the fight with Lucifer she'd been exhausted. She hadn't even bothered going home for the holiday break yet, wanting to give Dee and Cass time to recover as well, since Cass had also been particularly drained as well. She'd explained it, kind of, before they'd taken off for home: Cass had nearly depleted her own reserves before Sam had stepped in to save Gabriel, and then she'd pulled deeply from Sam's power reserves in order to heal Gabriel's wounds.

The reason, she'd said, that they'd needed so much energy was because Gabriel was actually an archangel, one of the elite upper echelon of angel hierarchy. The didn't get injured often, as a rule, and to heal one of them took extraordinary amounts of energy. Of course, another side effect of Cass pulling so heavily on Sam's energy was that the two of them had a very small mental connection, nothing more than a subconscious knowledge of the other's emotions. After having it brought to her attention, Sam had been doing her best to ignore it; Cass assured her it would fade in a short amount of time.

Cass also said that resting up and not being around each other would help both replenish their reserves and weaken the bond, which was why Sam was still in her lonely apartment. She'd rather not be around Dee and Cas for the next few days, all things considered. Her sister was shameless about Cass.

The knocking wasn't stopping. Sam groaned again, mentally berating whomever it was had decided to bother her. "Coming," she grumbled, hauling herself out of bed. She threw on her robe and cinched it around her middle, stepping into her slippers on her way out of her room. Blearily she opened the door.

Gabriel stood there, a bright grin on his face and several plastic bags in hand. Sam had hardly seen him since the fight several days before, given that she'd been sleeping, eating, and then sleeping again for most of that time. There was a warm feeling in her chest at the sight of him, but her brain overruled that with grouchiness at being woken. "What, Gabriel?" she asked, even as she stepped aside to allow him entrance.

"Sam, my wonderful knight in shining armor," he began with a wink, turning to face her as she closed the door, "Please allow me to repay you for your services so recently rendered." Sam raised her eyebrows skeptically at him, and he rolled his eyes and sighed. "Just go relax on the couch for a bit, okay?" With that he turned and disappeared into the kitchen, bags rustling.

Sam stared after him for a moment. What did he think he was up to? But the idea of snoozing on the couch appealed to her, especially with the poor state of her energy levels. With one last glance in Gabriel's direction, she shuffled over to the couch and laid down. It was the clicking of a few buttons to start Pandora streaming some soft piano instrumentals through the speakers. She bundled herself up in a fleece blanket and relaxed, letting the music wash over her.

"Sam?" Gabriel asked gently, lightly shaking her shoulder. Sam cracked open eyes she didn't actually remember closing to find him leaning over her with a small smile. "Hey there, Sleeping Beauty." She made a confused noise, and he chuckled. "You've been passed out here for a couple of hours," he told her.

Sam groaned and shut her eyes again. "Can't I go *back* to sleep?" she muttered. Gabriel just laughed.

"Fraid not, sweetheart," he said, gently pulling her up into a sitting position. "We need to get some good food into you first." Sam caught sight then of the small feast spread out on the coffee table, and her heart melted a little. She looked back at him still hovering next to her, leaned in, and kissed him.

"Thanks," she said. Gabriel's answering smile was blinding.

"So long as you return the favor next time I'm sick," he said with a wink. Sam rolled her eyes.

"You're an angel, Gabriel. You don't *get* sick. Cass told us."

"Doesn't mean I can't roleplay!"

Sam's laughter rang through the apartment, drowning out Gabriel's feeble protests. "Sure you can't."

He cosied up next to her on the couch and passed her the bowl of hearty-looking soup with a kiss to the cheek once they'd both calmed down. They fell into a comfortable kind of silence while Sam ate and Gabriel nibbled on some of the cookies leftover from Tori's baking spree. Sam was nearly done when Gabriel sighed heavily. She cocked an eyebrow at him. "What's up, shortstack?"

Gabriel made a face and moved the now-empty bowl from her hand back to the table before snuggling up next to her. "I've missed you,okay?" he mumbled, not looking up at her. "You did this amazing thing - which I've never heard of any angel-touched being able to do before - and then you nearly passed out right after. And you've been recovering, which is great, but I nearly died and I just kinda want to be with you right now," he finished in a small voice.

Sam smile, maybe a little goofily, and hugged him close. "We can do that. I'm warning you though, I may pass out on you again." Gabriel shrugged and snuggled closer, and Sam chuckled.

She watched them through the coffee shop window, bundled up against the slight chill in the air. They looked happy, she decided, when the tall woman threw back her head and laughed in response to the shameless grin from the young man with her. She didn't want to have to do this, but Aunt A had told her it was the best way for her to stay safe. Mom's journals that she'd found had even mentioned something odd about this time period, but still...it didn't sit well with her. She took a deep breath, steeled her resolve, and entered the cafe.

She walked right up to the young couple (so new to their relationship, she knew, this was going to hurt) and adopted a hopeful expression. "Mommy?" asked six-year-old Mary, while she tried not to wince at the shocked and disbelieving expressions on her parents' young faces. 'This isn't them,' a part of her cried out, but Mommy had the same long dark hair and Daddy had the same twinkling green-gold eyes and their auras felt the same and Mary couldn't help it, she burst into tears right then.

Samantha and Gabriel stared at each other, wide-eyed and confused. What the hell was going on now?

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