Roll the Dice

by Disasteriffic_Kaz

Summary

A collection of Stand-Alone One Shots, heavy on the case!fic and each chapter prompted by a literal roll of the dice. See each chapter for details.
Hurt/comfort/awesome/bamf!Sam/Dean/and many others.

Notes

My brother-in-law got me a box of ‘Rory’s Story Cubes’ for Xmas. Dice with pictures meant as a tool for combatting writer’s block! Jenjoremy challenged me to use them to write fic and so here we are! Each chapter will be a stand-alone one shot inspired by a roll of the story dice; Three dice rolled for each chapter.

Beta’d by the always awesome JaniceC678 :D– Friend and Muse’s co-conspirator.

**Follow me on Facebook as "Disasteriffic Kaz" for frequent fic updates or just to chat!
~Reviews are Love~
Disclaimer: They’re not mine. The world’s not mine. But Kripke is my, er, Chuck? And I worship at his altar. Heh.
Chapter 1

Roll the Dice:
1: A labyrinth/maze
2: A wolf, howling at the moon.
3: A bindle or hobo’s knapsack on a branch.

Setting- Takes place after 1x05 “Bloody Mary”

Dean imagined the Impala was eating up the road as the blacktop flew beneath her a mile at a time. He leaned back in his seat feeling the comforting thrum of the engine and vibration of the seat under him. He tapped his fingers on the wheel to the beat of the rock music coming from the stereo and glanced to his right to find his little brother slumped down in his seat with his head hanging over the back. Dean snorted a laugh and shook his head fondly. He checked the road, finding it still empty of all but them, and looked back at Sam more carefully this time. Whatever his brother said, there was no way Dean would accept that he was just fine after bleeding from the eyes not once but twice thanks to that Bloody Mary bitch. And there was another thing nagging at him -- just what secret was it that had allowed the spirit to attack Sam? His little brother, who had never done well at keeping secrets from him in the past, was having no problem at all keeping this one. The fact that he was so determined to not share, even after the fact, set off warning bells in Dean’s mind that it must be a real doozy. And that was worrisome.

Dean looked back to the road with a long sigh and figured it would have to have something to do with Jessica. He knew Sam was still broken up from her loss. Dean could see the sorrow in his eyes like a flashing neon sign that said tears were never far away along with something darker. He’d seen it in their father’s eyes after mom had died. He felt sure that, back then, when the loss and the horror were still fresh, his dad had wished he could have died with her. That same dark wish was in Sam’s eyes sometimes and it tore at Dean.

His eyes flicked back to his brother as Sam began to twitch in the seat, lost in yet another nightmare. Dean shook his head for a little brother who had apparently grown up too much to confide in him anymore, and he slapped a hand out into Sam’s chest, bringing him awake with a lurch and a gasp. “Hey.”

“What?” Sam jerked upright in the seat and rubbed at his chest where his brother’s hand had
connected with a thump.

“Stop droolin’ on my upholstery, bitch,” Dean said and grinned as Sam whipped a hand up to wipe at his mouth.

Sam glared at him, finding his face dry. “Funny.”

“I’m hilarious.” Dean pointed to a sign along the highway as they passed. “Got eats comin’ up. You hungry?” He held up a finger as his brother opened his mouth. “The correct answer is ‘Yes, Dean.’ You haven’t eaten since yesterday.”

Sam rolled his eyes as he pushed himself fully upright in the seat. “Fine, yeah. Food.” He wasn’t hungry. He hadn’t really felt hungry since Jess, and he knew that without his annoying big brother to ‘mother’ him, he would likely have lost twenty pounds already. It annoyed him to be reliant on Dean, and he knew his brother was aware of that, though Dean likely had no idea of the real reason why. If Dean knew it was because Sam felt guilty over how much of Dean’s life had been subsumed raising him, he’d earn himself a big-brotherly beat down for raining emotions all over him. The thought made Sam smile and he coughed, looking out the window to avoid letting his brother see.

“There are we?”

“Ass end of middle-America.” Dean shrugged and took the exit ramp, regretfully easing off the gas as they turned into a small town and traffic, such as it was. “Somewhere in Oklahoma. I wasn’t paying attention.”

Sam chuckled, knowing that Dean had lost himself in the pleasure of simply eating up the open road in his car. “Find a place with WiFi so I can find us a job.”

Dean ground his teeth together but said nothing. He loved the hunt better than anyone he knew, but that was different from the single-minded obsession of their father… and now his little brother who had tried so hard to run from it. “We could take a few more days. It’s only been two days since crazy Mary tried to pop your eyeballs in your head.”

“Dean, I’m fine.” Sam resisted the urge to rub his forehead and the headache that had been centered there for two days. “And she got you too, you know.”

“Not twice, dude.” Dean spotted a Biggerson’s and cut across traffic to pull into the lot. “I’m surprised I didn’t have to carry your sasquatch ass outta that antique store.”

“Shut up. Please?” Sam smiled as his brother laughed.

Dean parked and rolled his eyes as they got out and he saw the stiff way Sam held himself. The idiot was clearly hurting. An hour later, Dean watched his brother pushing a salad around his plate while he focused on the screen of his laptop instead of his food. “You know, that works better if you eat it.”

“Huh?” Sam looked up at his brother and then down at his plate. He set his fork down and pushed the plate away. “I ate enough. I think I found us a job.”

Dean sighed and sat back, resigned. “Alright. Whatcha got?”

“So, get this. I found a website with reports of people going missing in…”

“What kind of website?” Dean interrupted, interpreting the look on his brother’s face. “Is this another one of your screwy conspiracy sites?”
“What? No.” Sam shook his head and tugged the laptop a little closer to him because it was a conspiracy website but he didn’t need to give his brother any ammo. “They were all last seen at or near an abandoned house. It’s in Watonga, about two hours north of here.”

Dean scowled. “How did you even find this case? If it is a case.” He watched Sam clear his throat and focus on the laptop and kicked him under the table.

“Ow! Hey!”

“Spill it,” Dean ordered.

Sam groaned and closed the laptop. “Fine. While you were in the bathroom, we got a call from someone looking for Dad.” He pushed his brother’s cell phone across the table to him. “The guy runs the homeless shelter in Watonga, and some of his regulars have gone missing. He said some of the others were talking about a house outside town where some of them squat.” He tapped the laptop. “And I found a website with articles going back over ten years about the house and how it’s supposed to be haunted.”

“Huh.” Dean pulled the laptop over before Sam could grab it and opened it. He looked at the website and snorted. “Harry’s House of Horrors dot com? Really?”

Sam laughed. “Forget the website. Father Waverly’s on the level. He needs help.”

“Alright. Alright.” Dean closed the laptop and pushed it back so his brother could put it away. “Let’s go talk to the good father and see if this is actually a job.” He tossed cash on the table and stood. “And not just a bunch of hobos deciding to go train hopping without telling him.”

Dean eyed the cheerfully painted sign above the doors of the homeless shelter and quirked a brow at his brother. “The Aloha Shelter? Seriously? It’s a crash pad for bums, not a cabana on the beach.”

“Dude. Empathy?” Sam hissed as they passed two men in the doors and received matching glares. The interior of the shelter was cleaner than Sam had expected, though he could tell it was a veneer. The walls and floor may have been clean, but he could see the marks of age and abuse under the shine -- chipped paint, cracked tiles in the ceiling, a flickering overhead light, and linoleum so old it had literally worn through to bare concrete in some spots. He wrinkled his nose at the smell of industrial grade detergents and body odor combined and strode up to the single desk and its occupant. The man was somewhere north of fifty, if Sam had to guess, with wavy, salt-and-pepper brown hair, and thick glasses over blue eyes, wearing beat-up, green work overalls. “Excuse me. We’re looking for Father Waverly.”

The man looked up, and up at Sam before smiling. “I’m Father Waverly. What can I do for you?” He tugged at the neck of his overalls and his collar appeared.

“I spoke to you on the phone this morning. I’m Sam Winchester. This is my brother Dean.” Sam waved a hand at Dean beside him while the Father’s eyes widened.

“Oh. Oh! Of course! Um… let’s go somewhere… my office.” Father Waverly rose and quickly led them down a hall. He nodded at each man they passed. “You’ve got good timing. Another hour and there wouldn’t be room to walk. Lunch time, you know. We serve anyone in the community so it gets a little hectic.”

“I can imagine.” Sam glanced in one room as they passed and was surprised to see it was a school room, complete with the alphabet ringing the top of the walls. “You have children here?”
“Oh, we get all ages.” Father Waverly turned a smile over his shoulder. “If we had more room, more money, we could so much more but…” he smirked as he opened the door to his office. “Faith manages.”

Sam stumbled to a stop and then barked out a laugh. “I think I like you, Father; quoting a Minbari. Very nice.”

Father Waverly chuckled and waved the boys to the two empty chairs in his cramped office. “Wisdom comes from surprising places.”

Dean rolled his eyes, realizing he was now trapped in a cramped office with two nerds. “So, Father.” He dropped into one of the two plastic chairs facing the desk and heard it creak under his weight. “What makes you think you need our kind of help?” He shrugged as Sam sat beside him and bumped his elbow meaningfully. “I mean, homeless guys aren’t exactly known for staying in one place.”

Father Waverly shook his head and sat behind his cluttered desk. “You’re wrong there, actually. They may be homeless, but they’re still human, Dean. People find a place they like and they tend to stay with it, either through hope or hopelessness. Walk around any city for a week, and you’ll notice you see the same faces on the same corners begging for pocket change. It’s in our nature.” He picked up a thick file folder and slid it across the desk. “These men have never been gone longer than a week, and they’ve always come back.” He sighed. “Until now. No one here knows what happened to them. The only common thread I can find, talking to some of my other residents, is that they all spent time in the Wheeler ranch house. It’s been abandoned for more than thirty years, and the local police routinely roust homeless out of it.”

Sam opened the file and started flipping through the pages. “You keep personnel records on them?”

“No one should be forgotten.” Father Waverly let out a breath, forcing his temper at the broken system down and met the elder brother’s eyes calmly. “These people are displaced and destitute. And, frankly, the police couldn’t care less. As far as they seem to be concerned, these are just a few less problems for them to worry about. I’m trusting you to do better. Your father would.”

Dean’s mouth thinned into a tight line at that but he nodded. “So will we.” They had spent most of their lives as itinerants, little better than the men and women who lived in the shelter, after all, always moving from one place to another and most times having nowhere but the car to call a home. “We’ll check out your mystery house. If there’s something there, we’ll find it.”

Sam gathered the file up and stood, reaching across the desk to shake the father’s hand. “We’ll let you know if we find anything. In the meantime, see if you can keep anyone else from going out to that house until we’ve had a look.”

“I’ll do my best, but…” Father Waverly spread his hands wide. “Taking charity from the shelter isn’t always easy for prideful people. Sometimes they’d rather squat in a rundown house.” He followed the brothers to the door. “They’re good people who don’t deserve this. Please find out what’s happening to them.”

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“This house has an interesting history,” Sam said and glanced up to find Dean loading the shotguns with rock salt rounds.

Dean grunted and chambered another round. “Define ‘interesting’.”
“It was the first actual house built outside the original tent city that founded Watonga. You know, it used to be a Cheyenne reservation, and then it was opened to white settlement.”

Dean groaned. “Right. And I bet the Cheyenne were totally happy about that. Are we gonna find honked off Native American ghosts in here?”

“Doubt it.” Sam looked back to the research the father had collected for them. “If there were burial grounds disturbed anywhere, they aren’t mentioned. No, I think it’s something else. Says here the Wheeler family who built the place were mostly your average farmers except for a Gerald Wheeler who came back from World War II with all kinds of treasures from Europe. Claimed he was a collector and had papers of authenticity for everything, but I’m betting most of those were fake.”

“So, he served?”

“Army. Yeah.” Sam flipped through the pages. “He came back with art, statues, jewelry.” He set the file down and grabbed his shotgun from his brother to load it himself. “Sounds to me like his unit found a Nazi storehouse and raided it.”

“No way a grunt comes home with that much loot.” Dean shoved his gun into the weapons duffel and checked his EMF meter and Sam’s. “Something’s hinky. So, cursed object maybe?”

“Could be. The Germans stole things from all over, from Egypt to Russia. Who knows what the guy brought into that house.” Sam added his loaded gun to the duffel and ran a hand through his hair. “But the house is empty now, according to the reports. Most of Gerald Wheeler’s collection was either repossessed or donated to a museum. I think ghost is still the likeliest candidate.” He pulled his jacket on, pocketing the EMF meter his brother tossed to him.

“Let’s boogie.” Dean hefted the duffel and headed out to the car. As he drove, he felt a cold feeling wash over him. His gut was telling him something bad was going to happen, and Dean squashed that feeling as best he could. Since Jessica’s death, that feeling was almost ever-present, that something big and bad was stalking them. He shook his head and turned down a narrow road between cornfields long gone to seed. He heard dirt and dust clattering along the undercarriage of his baby and grimaced as they reached the top of a low rise and got a first look at the house. “That is one lonely, damn house,” he muttered.

Sam nodded. The ranch house was only a single story but it sprawled across the little valley floor. It was going to be a nightmare to search. Most of the windows were black, the glass gone from weather or vandalism over the long years. In the scraps of moonlight, the house looked gray, though he knew from the picture in Father Waverly’s file that it had once been a bright, cheerful redwood. A broad cupola in the center of the roof drew his eye for a moment before Dean turned and parked.

“Think there’s anyone in there right now? Living, I mean.”

Dean huffed a laugh as he turned the car off and got out. He stood for a moment, taking it in, and shook his head. “I dunno. Feels like something’s payin’ attention in there.”

Sam looked over at his brother in surprise and smirked. “Using the force, Dean?”

“Shut the hell up,” Dean snarled and stalked to the trunk.

Sam grinned, but glanced at the house again, his face sobering. Despite his teasing, he knew his brother’s hunter instincts were seldom wrong. If Dean sensed something lurking, he was willing to trust that there probably was.

Dean turned back and handed Sam his shotgun, took his own, and gave the weapons bag to Sam.
“Let’s go see if ol’ Gerry is still around trying to protect his ill-gotten bootie.”

Sam chuckled softly, shouldering the bag, and stepped up onto the porch. The wood creaked and groaned beneath his feet. “Stay near the walls. There’s a cellar, and these floors don’t sound too sturdy anymore.”

“Awesome.” Dean took hold of the partially open front door and gave it a push. The hinges creaked loudly as though announcing their presence. “So much for being stealthy.” He clicked on his flashlight and stepped into the entrance hall. It was wide and empty with four doorways leading off, two on either side. “You take right and, you know, try to stay out of trouble for five whole minutes. We’ll meet in the middle.”

“Whatever.” Sam flipped Dean off and headed to the right, picking the far door. Once he was out of sight of his brother, he gave in for a moment and pressed his left hand to his forehead and the headache pounding there. He was fine, he knew he was, but he wished the lingering headache would go away. He was relieved that the pounding seemed to be his only price of having a vengeful spirit nearly clean his clock. He rubbed his forehead a last time, took a deep breath, and put his mind on the job where it needed to be.

Dean played his light over the peeling wallpaper and fading graffiti as he walked. Every step he took sent a creak or groan into the stillness of the house and made him twitch. He began to second-guess whether splitting up was a good idea or not. It was colder inside the house, and he shivered slightly before tugging out his EMF meter to make sure it wasn’t a ghost dropping the temperature, but the meter stayed stubbornly quiet. “Where the hell are you, Casper?”

He found evidence of squatters in what had probably been a living room -- blankets piled in a corner and trash from food along with empty beer bottles. Dean stopped in the next hall and listened. There was nothing except the faint sounds of his brother moving on the other side of the house. The creaking floorboards were good for something after all, he mused with a smirk and crossed into the next room. He found more blankets and a ratty sleeping bag but still no sign of life. Dean swung around toward an interior door at the soft sound of something rustling.

“Sammy?” Dean called but there was no response. He brought his shotgun up and tucked the EMF into his pocket where he could still hear it. Moonlight glowed in the door to the next room, and Dean moved cautiously into it to find himself in a wide, octagonal room beneath the cupola. The windows above let the glowing, silvery light filter down onto a strange dais as high as his chest. He moved closer and realized it was made of wood and built directly into the floor. Dean leaned over and his eyebrows flew up. “Huh.” Inset into the top of the dais was an intricate maze that looked to be in the shape of some sort of tree, well-oiled and seeming to glow on its own. “You get my vote for most likely haunted object in this place.”

Dean spun around as the meter in his pocket began to whine, growing in volume. “Sam! Center of the house!” he shouted and waited for the spirit to show itself. “Come on. Show me your ugly face. Soon as I know who you are for sure, buddy, I’m a go find your grave and roast your ass.” He heard the creaking of the floors that meant Sam was heading toward him and gasped as a spirit appeared before him.

“Holy crap!” Dean fired on instinct and threw himself backward, fetching up hard against the maze. He grunted and shifted to move around as the spirit, a man he recognized from the father’s research, screeched angrily and disappeared. “Sam! It’s the Wheeler dude! Let’s…” He didn’t get to finish the sentence as Gerald Wheeler screamed back into sight and Dean was picked up from the floor and thrown.

He crashed headfirst into the maze and slumped over the side to the floor while his head spun. “Ow.”
Dean raised a hand to his forehead and felt blood under his fingers. “Now you’re just pissin’ me off.” He dragged his shotgun back up and eased up so he was sitting against the base of the maze.

“Dean?”

Sam’s voice echoed and Dean smiled with relief. “Here!” Dean stared as drops of blood drifted into his vision. He could actually feel it being pulled from the wound on his head, and he scrambled to his feet as it floated up toward the maze. “What the hell is this?” He watched the drops float lazily down toward the maze, and a sinking sensation overcame him. “Aw, this can’t be good. Sam! Get in here!” He reached a hand out, trying to catch his blood before it could touch the wood but wasn’t quite fast enough as the first drops fell thickly onto the maze and slid down into the intricate paths. Dean felt a spinning, pulling sensation in his gut and shouted as he fell.

Sam burst through a door, following the sound of his brother’s voice and stared in confusion. The sound of Dean’s shout still echoed in the room but his brother was nowhere to be seen. Sam eased around a tall wooden dais in the middle of the room and found his brother’s flashlight still spinning on the floor. “Dean? Where are you?” He looked over at the dais and then leaned over the top, peering down at the maze. His eyes followed the paths and he reached a hand out, letting his fingers brush into the dark, wet drops he spotted near its center. He brought them up and knew that it was his brother’s blood.

“Dean? Answer me!” Sam’s EMF meter began to scream in his pocket as he studied the maze and felt sure he had seen it somewhere before. “I know this. Why do I know this?” He spun with his shotgun raised as the meter screamed and fired into Gerald Wheeler’s spirit before it could do anything. Sam dropped back a step and stared down at the maze, thinking furiously and the tumblers in his mind clicked into place. “Ok. Ok.” He shoved his flashlight into his back pocket, tucked the shotgun under his arm, and drew his knife from the small of his back. “You can kick my ass for this later, Dean. Assuming I’m right.” Sam drew the blade in a shallow cut across his left palm, re-sheathed the blade, and held his hand out over the center of the maze. He took a firmer hold on the shotgun with his right hand and tipped his left palm, letting the blood dribble out.

Sam held his breath as the first drops splattered onto the wood. He reeled back as a spinning sensation began in his head, and he felt as though some invisible force was tugging from his gut. The floor seemed to go out from under him, and he closed his eyes, falling. He felt air rushing around him and a peculiar sensation as though something was pressing around him, crushing the air from his lungs. Sam strained to breathe without effect and could not even cry out as he slammed down into a hard surface and came to rest. The crushing sensation dissipated, and he wheezed a long breath into an aching chest that set him coughing. He curled into a ball with his arms wrapped around his chest. He startled badly, feeling a hand land on the back of his head, and then all the tension seeped out of him with his brother’s voice in his ears.

“Jesus, Sammy. Bastard got you too.” Dean knelt beside his struggling brother and offered what comfort he could. He had felt the same way after his landing and had only just managed to compose himself when he had seen Sam come in for a landing. “Easy, buddy. Breathe through it.”

Sam coughed a last time and forced his eyes open. “D-Dean.”

“Yeah. Right here. And we are screwed, little brother.” Dean looked up and was still having trouble wrapping his mind around what he knew had happened. Somehow, they had both been shrunk down and dropped into the strange maze. The moonlight was no longer the only source of light. The wooden walls themselves glowed with a soft, golden illumination. “I don’t know what the hell’s goin’ on, but I got no clue how we get outta this one without some help.”

Sam slowly uncurled himself and managed to sit up with his brother’s help. “Yeah, about…” He
coughed again and shook his head. “About that. I, uh… I think I know.”

Dean looked at him and then saw the blood on his brother’s left hand and scowled. “Sam. Did Gerry toss you down here like he did me?”

“Oh, not really.” Sam gave his brother a weak smile and held up his bleeding hand. “I think I know what this is, and, uh, the only way out is from in here.”

“You think?” Dean all but yelled and took a calming breath when Sam raised a hand again in warning. “You got yourself tossed in here on purpose, and you only think you know what this is? What the hell, Sammy? You get hit with a stupid stick when I wasn’t lookin’?”

“Would you calm down?” Sam hissed. “I’m sure, alright? And we’re not alone in here.”

“Alright, genius. What the hell is this?” Dean demanded and got to his feet, pulling his brother up with him and giving him an angry shove into the wall of their narrow corridor. He pulled his bandana from his pocket and grabbed Sam’s bleeding hand, wrapping it up quickly. “Talk.”

“Yggdrasil’s labyrinth. Yggdrasil was the tree of knowledge. Well, depending on who you ask it was a lot of things, but…” Sam shook his head at himself and stopped before he wandered off into a lecture. He looked at the walls around them in wonder. “I took a comparative religion class at Stanford, and the professor had a real hard on for Norse mythology. There was this legend about a renegade sect of, well, monks, basically. They created a mystical labyrinth that was supposedly used to train Viking warriors to fight Fenrir at Ragnarok.” He met his brother’s eyes. “This maze is in the shape of Yggdrasil. And I saw a couple artist’s renderings of what it was supposed to look like, and this was it.”

“Fenrir? Are you kidding me?” Dean stared up and down the corridor worriedly.

“Well, not the actual Fenrir, or Fenris.” Sam took his now-bandaged hand back and bent to pick up his shotgun. “A mystical representation of him.”

“So, what you’re telling me is we’re stuck in this damn maze with a giant, evil, world-eating, wolf wannabe? Fenrir light?”

Sam huffed a soft laugh and shrugged. “ Basically, yeah. We have to kill it and reach the center of the labyrinth to be released.”

“And if we don’t?” Dean asked, knowing full well what the answer would be, but he wanted to hear it.

“The legend said Yggdrasil’s labyrinth was littered with the bones of Vikings who failed the test.” Sam pulled the weapons bag off his shoulder and handed the strap to his brother. “Let’s not fail.”

Dean groaned. “Son of a bitch.” He took the bag and dug out fresh shells for his shotgun. “We need silver for this thing?”

“I don’t know. It’s not a werewolf, and the ancient Vikings would have only had, you know, swords.”

“Good thing I packed the machetes then.” Dean knelt down, rethinking, and shoved the shotgun into the bag. He pulled out their machetes instead. “You got your Taurus on you?”

“Of course,” Sam said with a roll of his eyes.
“Here.” Dean handed him one of the machetes and took his shotgun, putting it away with his own. “We’ll try bullets. If those don’t work, we’ll take its damn head.” He stood again with the bag on his shoulder and took a minute to thread the machete’s sheath onto his belt, seeing Sam do the same. “We stick together in here. I am not losing you in this maze.”

“No argument from me.” Sam drew his Taurus, settling the gun in his grip and looked at his brother. “How exactly did you get in here anyway? I saw your blood.”

Dean picked a direction and started walking. “That asshole Wheeler slammed my head into the thing.” He turned and pointed to the cut above his eye. “Next thing I know, my blood’s floating up to land on this thing.”

“Wow.” Sam looked up above them to the cupola he could see far, far above. “That has to be what’s happened to all the people who’ve gone missing in this house. Gerald’s forcing them in here. Wonder why.”

“Does it matter? Crazy’ll wreck your day every time, you know that.” Dean reached an intersection and slowed. He eased up to the corner and looked out. “You sure super-wolf’s in here?”

“Probably. I mean, if the labyrinth is real and it is, it stands to reason.” Sam rolled out the tension in his shoulders and caught Dean’s elbow before he could cut straight across the four-way intersection. “Left. Follow the left wall.”

“Why?” Dean asked but changed direction anyway.

“Read it somewhere, that you can reach the center of any maze by always following the left or right wall.” Sam smiled when Dean looked at him. “Not like we have a better idea. So, we pick a side and stick to it. It’s not the shortest route by a long shot, but it gets you there.” Sam took his knife out again and used it to scratch an ‘x’ into the corner before he followed.

“We end up going in circles, I’m kicking your ass.” Dean picked up his pace, feeling a need to reach the center as quickly as possible. “Gonna kick your ass anyway for pulling this stunt.”

Sam smiled. As annoying as Dean could be, it was nice to have his big brother there again, watching his back and caring enough to kick at him. “Like you could still kick my ass. I’m bigger, remember?”

Dean snorted. “And slower, princess. I can still own you.”

“In your dreams.” Sam chuckled and stopped instantly when Dean slapped a hand back into his chest. He moved closer, keeping his gun ready.

Dean listened and heard something moving around the curve ahead of them -- heavy footfalls. He drew his machete and motioned Sam across to the other side of the hall. He would let his brother have first crack and hope bullets were enough to stop it.

Sam inched ahead of his brother with his gun out. He forced himself to breathe evenly as he squeezed his finger onto the trigger, ready as the sound grew closer. He felt a bead of sweat inching down his forehead just as a figure lumbered into view, and he pulled the muzzle of his gun up in surprise before he could fire. “Holy crap! Dean, it’s not the wolf. Hey!” Sam jogged ahead and caught one of the man’s arms before he could stumble into the wall. “Hey, you alright?”

Dean followed Sam and took in the man’s shaggy, dirty brown hair and his ragged clothes – dingy, ripped jeans, and a dirty, faded red, tattered shirt. “Must be one of Father Waverly’s missing guys.”

“Grab the water out of the bag,” Sam said and leaned the man against the wall, steadying him. “I’m
Sam. This is my brother Dean. Can you speak?"

The man nodded, staring between them in confusion. “Where...” His voice was hoarse and he grabbed greedily at the water bottle Dean held out to him. He drank in big gulps until Sam pulled it away from his mouth.

“Small sips, man,” Sam urged before the man could make himself sick. “What’s your name?”

“Uh, Bran. I’m... what’s going on? I don’t understand.” Bran drank more of the water, closing his eyes to savor the moisture. “I’ve been in here for days. I can’t... I was in the house, and there was... I don’t know what I saw. And there’s something in here, man. It’s... it’s big.”

Sam glanced over at his brother and got a shrug. He sighed. “We have to get to the center of the maze. Then we can get out.” He tried to sound hopeful and smiled for Bran who only stared bleakly at him.

“We’re gonna die in this crazy place,” Bran whispered. “If we don’t... don’t starve, that thing’s gonna eat us!”

“Hey. No, it’s not.” Dean stepped in and held up his machete. “If it comes for us, we’re gonna give it indigestion. Got it? You just stay with us and you’ll be fine.” The last thing they needed was the guy panicking and getting them killed, but they couldn’t very well leave him behind. “I’ll take point. You keep an eye on him.”

Sam nodded and turned Bran back the way he had come with Dean leading the way. “We do this kind of thing all the time.” He gave Bran a nudge until the man started walking. “Have you seen anyone else in here?”

Bran shook his head. “Not... not alive. There’s, uh, like bones and... and worse just kinda lying around. That thing...”

“Yeah.” Sam didn’t need to hear anymore. “Just stay close to me.”

“Why a freakin’ maze?” Dean asked abruptly from ahead and glanced back at his brother. “I mean, what the hell?”

Sam grinned. “The ancient Vikings believed walking a maze would give them good fortune at sea. I guess this is just an extension of that; good fortune at fighting in Ragnarok. If you had to face a world-eating demon, you’d want a leg up too.”

Dean snorted and turned back. “Should’a just knocked on wood for all the good it did them.” He flicked a look at their civilian. “Where’s the last place you saw it?”

Bran shuddered. “We’re heading toward it. Are... are you sure we shouldn’t turn around?”

Dean wanted nothing more than to turn around, but if Sam was right, they had no choice but to find and kill the wolf before they could escape. And Sam was rarely wrong about this stuff. “Just stay calm and let us handle it. And no more talking.”

Sam followed along, keeping Bran safely between them as they went deeper into the maze, always following the left wall. He worried that he had picked the wrong direction, that he was sending them the long way around, but there was no way to know where they were in relation to the center. The walls were too impossibly high to reach and climb. He looked up and gasped, staggering to a stop in shock. “Dean,” he hissed. Far above them, the massive spirit of Gerald Wheeler peered down at them.
“Crap.” Dean wondered if the rock salt in their guns would do anything, tiny as they now were. He waited for the ghost to do something, to attack, but Wheeler simply disappeared from sight. “That guy is gettin’ on my last nerve,” he muttered. “Keep moving.” Every turn of the maze made his teeth itch, wondering when the monster was going to jump them. He reached another intersection and crossed to the left, peering around the corner. An eerie, echoing howl went up and Dean hugged the wall, exchanging his machete for his pistol.

“Shit. Shit. Oh, shit!” Bran squeezed his arms around himself and dropped to his knees. “It’s coming for me.”

“Bran! Get up!” Sam bent and grabbed the man’s shoulder, trying to pull him back up. “You’ve gotta keep it together. Bran!”

Dean risked a look back at his brother, hearing his raised voice, and saw a dark shadow rise up behind him. “Sam! Look out!”

Sam let go of Bran and spun, firing before he even had a clear look at the thing behind him. It was huge, taller than him. Sam saw red puffs of blood from the midnight-black fur as its jaws opened impossibly wide and fetid breath made him choke as it roared. He fell back from the wolf, hearing Dean’s gun begin to fire from behind him and grunted as one of Fenrir’s huge paws slammed into his side and knocked him into a wall.

“No you don’t!” Dean fired a round in the beast’s face before it could snap its jaws down on his helpless brother. Fenrir reared back, clawing at its own eye, and Dean fired again aiming for its heart. The massive wolf let loose another howling cry and suddenly rushed at Dean. “Shit!” He slammed sideways into the wall and all the air rushed out of him as Fenrir’s shoulder impacted his chest as it ran past him. Dean locked his knees, refusing the slide to the floor they wanted to do, and took a last shot at the wolf’s back before it vanished around the curve.

“Son of a bitch,” Dean groaned. “Sammy?” He looked over, finding his brother where the wolf had left him, and then it dawned on him; they were alone. Bran was gone. “Aw fuck!” he shouted. A trail of blood sprays led in the direction Fenrir had fled. He rubbed a hand over his chest and staggered to Sam, dropping to his knees beside him. “Sam. Hey.” There was a worrying spatter of blood on the wall beside him, and Dean cautiously pulled his brother over to his back while Sam moaned softly in protest. “Shit.” Sam’s flannel had been torn open, and the t-shirt beneath was a mess of bloody rips. “Sam. Come on, sasquatch. Gimme a sign here.”

Sam scowled and fought to get his eyes open. When he did, he was rewarded with his big brother’s face peering worriedly down at him. He closed his eyes again and indulged in a deep groan. “That… hurt. Let’s not do that again.”

“Yeah. You sit up?” Dean took Sam’s shoulders and pulled, gritting his teeth in sympathy with each hissed breath Sam let out until his brother was sitting against the wall. “How bad is it?”

Sam knew Dean meant internally and he took stock for a moment. “Uh, think maybe some cracked ribs. Right side. And, shit, my right shoulder.”

Dean saw matching rips in the shoulder of his brother’s jacket and shook his head. “Fido got you good, little brother. Get that jacket off and what’s left of your flannel.”

Sam nodded and started slowly easing the jacket off his bad arm while Dean stood and jogged down the corridor to where their bag had fallen. He looked around and froze with the jacket half off his arm. “Where’s Bran?”
Dean knelt beside him again and dug out the first aid kit with a grim face. “Fenrir took him. Sorry, buddy. Bastard face-planted me into the wall on his way past.”

“You alright?” Sam reached for Dean only to have his hand knocked away and his brother took over dragging his jacket and flannel off. “Quit it. I can do it.”

“Today?” Dean snorted, trying to find some humor before the dire nature of their situation suffocated him. However badly Sam was hurt, there was no doctor and no hospital until they finished the job. “Gotta get you patched up, then I figure we can follow the trail.”

“Trail?” Sam asked and followed his brother’s hand. He swallowed as he saw the blood trail Bran had left behind. “There’s no way he survives losing that much.”

“No.” Dean pulled his brother’s t-shirt up once he had the jacket and flannel off and gave a low whistle. The right side of his chest was already turning blue from the impact, and four, long furrows crossed from his right shoulder, across his chest, and nearly to his hip on the left side. “You’re gonna have a couple new scars for the ladies, dude.”

“Great.” Sam groaned. It had ached before, but now that he could see the damage, it went from ‘ache’ to a burning pain that threatened to take his breath with every inhalation. “Hurry up.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Keep your pantyhose on.” Dean quickly bandaged his brother’s chest and shoulder. A quick run of his fingers down Sam’s chest proved that his brother was right and he had two ribs that shifted when Dean touched them. He set about wrapping their biggest bandage all the way around his brother to support them. “You gotta try not to move too much, man. I’m serious. You hang back and put holes in it while I get its head. Got it?”

Sam gave another nod and let out the breath he had been holding once Dean was finished. “Yeah.” He didn’t want to puncture a lung so hanging back was just fine with him, so long as Dean didn’t need him, but he wisely kept that to himself. “Get me up.” Getting to his feet took nearly more energy than he had, and he slumped into his brother, breathing heavily while he waited for the floor to stop spinning beneath him.

“Take it easy.” Dean held on to Sam and kept his ears attuned to the maze around them for any sign Fenrir was coming back to finish the job. He caught Sam’s head in his head and pushed it up until he could see his pale, sweaty face. “You with me?”

Sam managed a nod and got his eyes open again. “Yeah. Yeah.” He wrapped his left arm over his chest, holding his ribs loosely over the bandage. “Where’s my gun?”

Dean carefully leaned Sam against the wall and recovered his Taurus from the ground. “Here.” He dragged the weapons bag back onto his shoulder and took Sam’s elbow when he wobbled away from the wall.

“I’m good. We need to move fast.” Sam started down the hall, following Bran’s blood, with Dean at his side. “If we’re lucky, Fenrir dragged him to the center of the labyrinth. I mean, that’s got to be its nest.”

Dean let Sam set the pace, remaining at his side this time. He was not going to let the giant wolf get the drop on his little brother again if he could help it. The blood trail led them on through twists and turns, sometimes taking paths that led back parallel to where they had come from.

Sam managed a decent pace in spite of his injuries. Some small voice in the back of his mind was vainly hoping that they would reach the center of the maze and find Bran somehow alive, though he
knew there was no hope for the man. He stumbled to a stop at an intersection and braced his good arm on the wall. “Dean,” he whispered.

“Yeah, I heard it.” Dean moved ahead of Sam and cautiously looked out around the wall to where wet, crunching sounds carried on the air. The noise was a little stomach churning as there was only one thing it could be -- something eating messily. The hall continued for perhaps thirty feet and then opened into a large chamber beyond. He turned back and motioned Sam to follow him. Dean looked up and could just see the cupola centered above them.

Sam raised his gun as he followed his brother and propped his right hand in his left to steady his aim. His right shoulder sang with pain, and he ignored it as they neared the opening. His nerves twitched warningly as Dean stepped through first and slipped to the right and out of his field of view. He resisted the urge to call for him and give them away. He followed and, to his left, saw the dark bulk of Fenrir huddled over the remains of Bran. Sam saw a leg poking out around the beast’s feet and swallowed. He flicked his glance to the right and saw Dean moving away toward the center of the chamber with his gun trained on Fenrir. The floor at their feet was carved with an intricate representation of Yggdrasil that spread out across the circular chamber. It glowed softly with the same eerie warmth of the walls, and Sam could feel power thrumming up through his feet as he moved. Dean caught his eyes, nodded, and started toward Fenrir.

Sweat trickled in a cold line down Dean’s spine as he stalked closer to the beast. He raised his gun slightly, sighting at the back of the creature’s head, let out a little breath, and fired. The bark of the gun sounded louder than it should and made his ears ring. He heard Sam firing along with him as sprays of blood erupted from the back of the wolf’s head. Dean hastily shoved his gun behind his belt and drew his machete. Fenrir whirled drunkenly and dropped Bran’s torso, emptied of viscera, to thump wetly into the floor.

“Aw, that is just nasty,” Dean groaned and gave his machete a practice swing while one of Sam’s shots exploded the wolf’s miraculously healed right eye. “Come on, ugly. Let’s go.” He dodged to his right as the wolf lunged for him and spun back, watching it collapse to its belly. “Get the other eye!”

Sam walked quickly to the side, waited for Dean to move out of his line of fire, and took the shot. Fenrir’s left eye exploded like the other and it roared, enraged and blinded even if only for a few moments while it healed. “Dean, be careful!” he yelled while the wolf slashed blindly through the air.

Dean danced away from the deadly claws. He brought the machete back and swung as hard as he could toward Fenrir’s neck. The beast twisted at the last second, and his blade bit in and glanced off its shoulder. “Shit!” He reeled back and yelped as one of the wolf’s elbows connected with his knee and knocked him to the floor.

“No!” Sam moved closer. “Hey! Here I am! Come on!” He drew Fenrir’s attention and squeezed the trigger again and again as it reared up with its jaws wide.

Dean rolled to his feet and nearly went down again as his left knee protested. “Sam, dammit!” he muttered. It pissed him off that Sam was deliberately putting himself in harm’s way for him, but he wouldn’t ruin the breathing space he had given him. He tightened his grip on the machete as Fenrir snapped dangerously close to his brother’s chest.

“That’s it! Come get me!” Sam gasped and stumbled backward, landing painfully on his back to avoid the gnashing teeth that had nearly caught his hands and the gun. He aimed at the beast’s chest and realized he couldn’t fire; he had no idea where Dean was. Instead, he scrambled backward on the floor with his hands and feet as Fenrir followed his noises. He coughed as the wolf’s breath
flooded his face. “Yeck! Your breath stinks!”

Dean swung for the wolf’s neck again, and this time his aim was true. The razor-sharp blade sliced cleanly through fur and muscle, sliding halfway through only to be stopped and caught in the creature’s spine. “Son of a bitch. Come on!” He wrenched the blade, trying to free it while blood poured and splashed onto the carved floor, and instead had it torn from his hand when Fenrir tried to swing around for him.

Sam slid his own machete from its sheathe. “Dean!” He put it on the floor and slid it toward his brother with a strong shove and had to scramble again away from those jaws. The wolf’s right paw landed heavily on his lower leg and Sam shouted, feeling claws bite into his calf.

Dean took two running steps, stooped, and caught Sam’s machete in his hand while the wolf focused on his brother. He swung underhand, coming from underneath when Fenrir drew its head back to bite his brother. Once again, the blade cut cleanly through the wolf’s flesh, and, this time, Dean felt the momentary hitch when he reached the spine and then was through. The blade emerged on the other side, and Dean spun away. His own machete came free and clattered to the floor while Fenrir’s head wobbled on its massive neck and then toppled to the side, rolling away to land in the center of the room.

“Holy crap,” Dean gasped and bent, resting his hands on his knees while the wolf’s body slowly went still. “Sammy?”

“Uh, yeah.” Sam waited to be sure the beast was dead, and then laid back and let his head drop to the floor with a thump. Its claws were still in his calf, and at that moment, he didn’t care.

Dean limped over to him and gave the wolf’s head a parting kick on his way past. He lowered himself to the floor and looked around for the weapons bag finding it twenty feet away where Fenrir’s thrashing had launched it. He blew out a breath. “Dammit.” He decided the first aid kit could wait for a minute. He looked around the room and then down at his brother. “Wasn’t killing the fugly supposed to get us out of here?”

Sam nodded and struggled up onto his elbows. His ribs screamed at him for the movement, and he dropped to his back again with a groan. “Uh… might take… minute.” He opened his eyes and smirked up at his brother. “Plus, you know… mostly guessing here.”

Dean rolled his eyes with a soft laugh and patted his brother’s chest before knee-walking down to his leg. “Great.” He grabbed Fenrir’s foot and had to hug it to his chest to lift it off his brother. He heard Sam hiss in a breath as the claws emerged from his leg and then tossed it aside. “You were supposed to stay back, idiot.”

Sam laughed lightly and raised his head to look down at his leg while Dean tore his jeans open. “Should have let it eat you.” He dropped his head again and snorted. “Probably give it… give it indigestion.”

“Dude, stop talking.” Dean grinned fondly and was relieved to see the claws had only punctured the outside of his calf; painful, but not life-threatening.

“We do get out, there’s still Gerald’s ghost.” Sam looked up out of the labyrinth worriedly. “Probably gonna come… come after us again.”

Dean sighed and patted Sam’s knee. “We’ll shag ass for the car. Deal with him another day. Hang on.” He groaned his way back to his feet and went for the weapons bag. He grabbed the straps, sliding the bloodied machete inside and pulling out his shotgun instead before he went back to his
brother. He stopped in surprise and stared down. “Uh, Sammy? Something’s up. Check out the disco floor!”

Sam leaned up carefully on one elbow and looked over. “Whoa.” The carving of Yggdrasil along the floor ran with light in flickering golds and reds. They flickered bright and brighter as he watched until he had to look away and cover his eyes. “Hope this is a good thing!” The falling sensation began again but this time, rather than feeling as though he were being crushed, he felt like his body was expanding and would fly apart at any moment. Just when he thought he couldn’t take anymore, he felt his back thump into something solid and gasped in a breath, opening his eyes to find himself on the floor of the Wheeler house beside the labyrinth. Dean groaned beside him and Sam smiled. “I was right.”

“Shuddup.” Dean sat up, though all he wanted to do was curl up in a ball. “Gotta get outta here. Come on.” He thumped Sam’s good shoulder and got a grip, pulling and dragging his mostly boneless brother up. “Nope. Not touchin’ that again,” he said and tugged Sam forward to lean on him rather than the base of the labyrinth. “Gotta get you vertical.”

“M’workin’ on it.” Sam pulled his uninjured leg in and held on to Dean as his brother pulled him to his feet. “Oh, man. Crap.” He staggered and would have gone back down if not for Dean’s arm supporting him.

Dean shoved the strap for the weapons bag higher on his shoulder and ducked down to grab the shotgun while Sam balanced precariously. “Gerry’s gonna figure out we escaped any minute. Winchester luck, dude.”

“Yeah.” Sam slid his arm over his brother’s shoulders again and limp-hopped beside him away from the labyrinth. “I’ll find where he’s buried…” Sam coughed and wrapped his left arm across his ribs again, feeling them shift painfully as he moved. “… when we get… motel.”

“Nu-uh, little brother.” Dean led their way into the hall with his shotgun. “You’re gonna spend some quality time in that sad little hospital we passed on the way out here.”

“I don’t…”

“Again. Shut up.” Dean heard the EMF meter in his pocket start to whine. “Here he comes.”

Sam took his arm off Dean’s shoulders and braced himself on the wall instead. “He’s gonna be pissed.”

“Good. So am I.” Dean put Sam at his back as the meter reached a fever pitch and was ready the moment Gerald’s ghost began to coalesce. He fired both barrels into the spirit. “Hope that stings, you asshat. Come on.” He pulled Sam back into his side and headed for the front of the house as fast as he could with both of them gimping along. “We’re gonna torch his ghost and then I’m really gonna enjoy roasting that dust catcher back there.”

“Not sure setting it on fire is a good idea.” Sam hunched a little further, trying to relieve the pain in his chest. “Might… be bad. Crap.”

“How about you focus on breathin’ instead of yappin’,” Dean said and pulled his wheezing brother into a faster walk.

Dean pushed open the door with his hip and grinned at his brother’s disgusted face in the hospital bed. “Got food and one of your frou-frou coffee things.”
Sam scowled and managed to lob his pillow into his brother’s face with his left arm. “I do not need to stay in here.”

Dean kicked the pillow under the bed and set the bag of burgers and Sam’s coffee on the table beside it. “Two cracked ribs and one hundred and three stitches, bitch. You lost enough blood they had to transfuse you. Yeah. You’re stayin’ in another day.”

Sam settled back into the bed and scowled some more at the blanket. It irritated him that Dean was right. “Fine. How’d the salt and burn go?”

“Gerry showed up just in time to go up in a satisfying ball of flames.” Dean grinned. “Man, that felt good. And I still wanna go torch the crazy maze thing.”

“I did a little research.” Sam pulled the laptop out from under his blanket and rolled his eyes at the look on Dean’s face. “What? I got bored. So, the labyrinth, I think you can actually set it on fire.”

Dean’s eyes went wide and a grin spread across his face. “Really? You’re not just teasin’ me?”

Sam laughed. “It was created by Vikings. They were pretty big on the whole flaming burial thing. Turns out that wasn’t the only labyrinth, and I found a couple references online to them being burned in big funerary rites.”

Dean sat in the chair by the bed and chuckled. “Hell, yeah. Best news I’ve heard all day.”

Sam sipped his coffee and quirked another smile. “How about the news I beat your record for stitches?”

“What? Bullshit.” Dean kicked the side of the bed. “You’re not counting internal stitches. Remember that ghoul hunt when you were sixteen?” He patted his left hip and then pointed firmly at his brother. “One-twenty-seven. And that’s one record you don’t ever beat.”

Sam smiled while his brother bit into his burger with gusto. Every moment since losing Jess was a struggle, but knowing his big brother was there to worry about him and annoy him made it a little easier every day. “You’re such a jerk.”

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The End.
A/N: Fenrir’s many names in mythology of which our show used only one—Fenrir, Fenris, Fenrisulfur, Hroovitnir, and Vanagandr,

Rolling the dice…
Chapter 2

My brother-in-law got me a box of 'Rory's Story Cubes' for Xmas. Dice with pictures meant as a tool for combatting writer's block! Jenjoremy challenged me to use them to write fic and so here we are! Each chapter will be a stand-alone one shot inspired by a roll of the story dice; Three dice rolled for each chapter.

*For those reading on Fanfiction dot net, you can see pics of each roll on my Facebook page or the AO3 posting of this story, if you're interested. Lol

Beta'd by the always awesome JaniceC678 :D– Friend and Muse's co-conspirator.

**Follow me on Facebook as "Disasteriffic Kaz" for frequent fic updates or just to chat! ~Reviews are Love~

Disclaimer: They're not mine. The world's not mine. But Kripke is my, er, Chuck? And I worship at his altar. Heh.

Roll the Dice:

1: A man hanging from shackles
2: A knight's helmet
3: A pig roasting on a spit

Setting- After 2x04 "Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things"

The night air flowed past him as he ran. His legs felt ready to give out at any moment and his lungs burned, begging for rest he had no time for. He had to get away. He stumbled and caught himself on the rough bark of a tree, bouncing away dizzily and trying to remember which direction he was headed.
"Doesn' matter," he groaned and started running again, though his legs were sluggish beneath him and his bare feet seemed determined to catch every root and dip in the forest floor. The wind cooled the tears on his face as he ran. "M'sorry. Sorry," he gasped and caught himself on another tree before he could fall. He held on, digging his fingers into the bark, and tried to catch his breath. He pressed his forehead into the tree as hopelessness choked him. "I'm so sorry. God, forgive me. Oh, God, I'm…"

He spun as new sounds carried on the night air - feet crashing through the underbrush. "Shit. Shit!" He threw himself away from the tree and started running again. He could hear nothing over the pounding of his own feet and imagined they were right behind him at every turn. The trees thinned ahead of him, and he saw light moving - headlights. It spurred him on, unfeeling of the twigs scratching his face or digging bloody gouges in his feet. "Help!" He tried to scream it, but his voice came out in a hoarse growl. He sobbed and climbed up a short incline before he burst out of the trees and onto a dirt road. He spun to look behind him for his pursuers and had no time to register the truck speeding toward him from his left before it slammed into him and sent him flying through the air with a sickening crunch.

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Sam opened the bathroom door, letting out a cloud of steam, and hitched up his jeans with a disgusted grumble. "Dean?"

Dean glanced up from the laptop screen and snorted a laugh at his brother with his plastic-wrapped cast and hair sticking up in six different directions. "Need a hand?"

"I can't…" Sam groaned and waved a hand at his belt. "I can't do my damn belt." He had tried in the bathroom, but the fingers on his right hand refused to cooperate with the cast.

"Oh, man." Dean ducked his hand, swallowing a laugh and waved him over. "Come on. Hasn't been that long since little Sammy needed help tyin' his shoes."

"You are such an ass," Sam snarled at him, but he went and looked up at the ceiling with his face burning while his brother closed his belt for him. There was a peculiar sort of tension in the air between them that they both pretended not to feel, a tension born of Dean's admission of how their father had died and his belief that he should be the one who was dead. Part of Sam wanted to shake him until his brother talked it out with him, but the rational part of his mind knew that was his way of coping, not Dean's. He would just have to wait him out and, in the meantime, give Dean the harmless banter he seemed to need. "This sucks."

"Dude, it's only been two days since zombie chick snapped your wrist. Give it a break." Dean took the slap to the top of his head with a laugh and leaned back while Sam stalked away. "I deserved that one, yeah."

Sam peeled the plastic off his cast and tossed it on his bed. He cradled his aching arm in against his chest while he dug through his bag for a t-shirt. "You better not be looking at porn on my laptop again."

"Busty Asian Beauties need love too, Sammy." Dean snapped the laptop closed and leaned back. "Actually, Bobby called while you were in the shower. Thinks he's got a job for us."

"What kind of job?" Sam asked as he struggled into his t-shirt. He spared a dark look for his brother when Dean half-stood from his chair and nodded as his brother sat back down; he did not need help with his shirt.
Dean chuckled and looked away before he burst out laughing as Sam's cast got stuck in the sleeve. "Uh, yeah. So, we got bodies on the ground." That sobered him. "Bobby says he's got six confirmed kills, but he's not sure what's goin' on. He's got his money on ghouls with a taste for warm flesh instead of dead. The bodies are all kinds of chewed up and dumped in the river. Last victim was a hunter."

"Anyone we know?" he asked worriedly and sighed when Dean shook his head solemnly. Sam tugged his shirt down his chest and shook his head. "Man, I hate ghouls."

"Do like poppin' their heads off, though." Dean smirked and stood. He leaned over and caught his brother's flannel out of his hands. "We'll pack up and get movin'. Here."

"I wait for you to get this on, we'll still be here next week. Come on, get your armsies in the sleevies."

Sam stared, turned away, and drove an elbow into his brother's stomach before he shot his arms into the sleeves of the flannel and danced away before Dean could retaliate. "Teach you to be a smart ass. I'll start packing."

Dean rubbed his ribs and nodded while he wheezed. "Get you back… later. Ow."

Sam leaned away from the examining table in the morgue and felt his brother's shoulder bump his. Ordinarily, Dean would begin a game of disgusting chicken with him, seeing who could handle the grossest part of the body before someone gave, but even Dean seemed to be having a hard time as they stared down at the bloated remains of a fellow hunter.

"How long was he in the river?" Sam asked in a tight voice and swallowed hard as his stomach threatened to revolt at the sight. The body had been mangled. Before or after it went into the water, he didn't know, but one arm was bent the wrong way, a leg was held together by a loose string of muscle, and over it all, the flesh glistened and had sloughed away from most of the bones. But it was the smell that was doing the most damage. It seemed to fill the air and cling to his tongue.

"Days at least." The coroner poked a gloved finger into the open chest cavity making a 'squishing' sound, oblivious to the choked noises coming from the two federal agents. "Probably closer to a week, honestly. And the other bodies don't look much better. Whatever sicko's killin' these people just keeps dumpin' 'em in the river. Had a hell of a time getting a print on this one to ID him." He shrugged and looked up finally. He frowned at the pale complexions that met him. "I thought feds were supposed to be hard-core? You two look like you're ready to paint my floor."

"Dude," Dean protested and waved a hand at the body's chest. "You can't just poke it like that. You gotta warn us, man." He coughed, swallowed, and clapped a hand over his mouth when he could taste the air. Dean allowed himself a short gag before he forced it down and wasn't surprised when Sam spun and walked quickly out the door. "God, that is… that is foul. Ok, so, what killed them?"

The coroner snorted derisively and waved a hand. "Take your pick. We got massive bodily trauma, blood loss, but that could have gone in the river; no way of knowin' now. Hell, he could have had a damn heart attack. Can't tell you because his heart didn't come with him." He poked the chest cavity again and grinned at the agent's quickly paling face. "That's likely still floating downriver somewhere. Turn up in the spring maybe."

"Great," Dean said hoarsely and backed up another step. "Thanks for… yeah." He turned and made his own hasty retreat while the coroner chuckled behind him. He slammed out the doors and leaned against the far wall, breathing heavily.
"Even for us," Sam said as he returned from his hasty stop in the bathroom, "that was disgusting." He grimaced. "I rinsed out my mouth and I can still taste it." He held his arm up to his nose and groaned. "Think I can still smell it too."

Dean nodded and pushed away from the wall once he had his stomach under control. "Yeah. Come on. Showers and then I want a look at a map of the area." He ran his tongue over his teeth and shuddered. "And about a gallon of Listerine to get this taste outta my damn mouth."

The drive back to the motel hadn't been fast enough for either of them, and, for once, Dean had won the toss on rock-paper-scissors with his brother for dibs on the bathroom. He gave the Listerine in his mouth a last swish before spitting it out, and, at last, the hideous taste from the morgue was gone. He pulled open the door and found his brother with a map of the county up on the wall while he tucked a plastic bag into his cast. "What have you got?" Sam turned around, and Dean burst out laughing, seeing his brother's puffed cheeks as he swished mouthwash of his own. "Dude."

Sam pushed past his brother to the bathroom and spit it out, tasting nothing but minty-freshness. "I've got an area for us to check out," he said, coming back out. "Body dumps make it harder to find where they're being killed, but I think I've got a likely prospect."

Dean tugged on his jeans and looked for himself. "What's that?"

"Abandoned lumber mill." Sam tapped it with his finger. "I called Bobby. He said he's found two hunters who came out to this area in the last few years that haven't been heard from since. He's gonna do some checking and see if there's more." He pulled his t-shirt off, tossed it into the corner along with his suit jacket and tie, all of which still smelled of the dead body. "My turn in the shower."

"I'm burning our suits," Dean told him seriously. "No way that smell's coming out."

Sam chuckled and shook his head. "Yes, it will. Just might take more than one wash."

Dean bent and gathered up the suits in the plastic bag Sam had mostly tossed them in. He was careful not to actually touch them and wrinkled his nose; he could still smell the stench. "Man, no more floaters." He went outside, jogged to the end of the motel, and tossed the bag into the dumpster with a satisfied grin. By the time Sam emerged from the bathroom, he was sitting comfortably and staring at the map. "I did some digging with that Google Maps crap." He waved at the map. "That's the only structure in that area. Well, couple of trappers' cabins, but that whole side of the mountain's pretty much people-free this time of year."

"Good place to be if you need somewhere to kill and dump the bodies." Sam nodded and finished dressing, skipping his belt in the interests of not being humiliated by his big brother again. "There's a logging road that goes up there. We could be there in an hour if we left now."

"That'll give us maybe an hour before dark." He stood and carefully took the map down off the wall. "Wear your hikin' boots, Sammy."

Sam pulled on his boots and then frowned. "Hey, where'd the bag with our suits go?"

The forest rose up dark and deep around them as Dean urged the Impala up the packed earth of the logging road. He grimaced with each thump and ping of rock to the undercarriage of his car, and leaned forward to peer up through the window. "This road's gonna tear up her shocks."

Sam braced a hand on the roof to keep from banging his head into it while the car bounced and...
jumped over a particularly rough patch. "Maybe we should have rented a jeep in town."

Dean scoffed with all the disgust that comment deserved. "My baby can take it. There's the old mill." He nodded toward the long, weathered roof emerging above the trees beyond the curve ahead. Dean eased the Impala to a stop before the turn and cut the engine. "Hike in from here?"

"Yeah. They'll hear the engine otherwise." Sam twisted and shoved open his door with his left hand and climbed out. "How many do you think?"

Dean popped open the trunk and took out their shotguns, handing Sam one. "You know ghouls, man. Could be two or ten. Make your head shots count." He frowned, looking at his brother's broken wrist.

"I'll be fine," Sam said before Dean could say anything and took the shotgun with his left, carefully fitting his right finger into the trigger guard. "I can still shoot. With either hand, if I have to." Their father had made sure early on that they could load and fire both shotguns and pistols with either hand if they had to, though Sam had despised the training.

All the same, it worried Dean. He took a machete as well and quickly threaded the sheathe through his belt while Sam grabbed flashlights for them both. "We stick together until we know how many there are."

Sam rolled his eyes for his over-protective brother and started into the trees. "You coming?" He heard Dean's grumbled curse behind him and smiled as the trunk thumped closed and Dean jogged after him. Sam slowed his pace and shivered in the chillier air beneath the dense forest canopy. Winter was definitely coming, and he was glad this job had come up when it did and not a month later with a foot of snow on the ground. He wasn't surprised when Dean appeared on his right, his weak side. Of course. Though the sun was still up, it was already twilight in the forest. He could feel tension creeping up his spine and stopped when his brother did as a strange sound carried on the air.

"What the hell is that?" Dean whispered. He craned his ear toward the lumber mill they could no longer see.

The sound came again and Sam swallowed. "I think that's a scream." It was muffled and distorted, but it was definitely the voice of a human being. "They've got another victim."

"Dammit." Dean clenched his hands around his shotgun and then motioned Sam to keep moving. That made their job more complicated and simpler at the same time. Hopefully, the ghouls would be distracted playing with their next meal and not see them coming until it was too late. They moved quickly through the trees and up a steep incline. Dean used the trees to pull himself up, half crawling the last couple of feet and reached back to grab his brother's elbow and tug him to the top.

Sam blew out a breath and scowled as he resettled his grip on his shotgun. "That sucks with one good arm."

Dean gave a soft chuckle and eyed the wall of the mill through the screen of trees ahead of them. "We should split up."

"Yeah."

Dean chewed on his lower lip and shook his head, changing his mind. "No; I don't like it. Something feels wrong."

"We have to get in there before it's too late. They have someone." Sam took a step forward and stopped with Dean's arm across his chest. "We've got to save them if we can, Dean. We have to try."
Dean snarled and finally nodded. "Alright. But together. We go in the back."

Sam let Dean take the lead. They moved quick and quiet through the forest, keeping to the trees until they reached the rear of the long, sheet-metal building. It was a massive structure, sagging in the middle from age, and the gray steel was brown with rust and age.

There had been no more screams from their victim since they reached the top of the rise, and it was making Sam nervous that they would be too late. He looked up as they came out of the trees and saw a narrow metal staircase switch-backed from the ground to a second-floor entrance, their only way in unless they went back around to the front. He met Dean's look with a shake of his head; he didn't think there was time for that. Dean nodded and jogged for the stairs.

The metal treads under Dean's feet remained blissfully silent as he and Sam trudged up them. He kept waiting for the shriek of rusted metal and was thankful it never came. They reached the top, and Dean edged along the narrow catwalk to the door at the far end. He stopped beside a window and shook his head; it was covered with a metal shutter he didn't dare try to move. As he reached for the handle of the door, a fresh scream sounded from inside. Dean resisted the need to rush, even feeling Sam at his back. He eased the door open and slipped inside.

Sam pulled the door silently closed behind them and blinked, trying to adjust his vision to the dimly lit interior. He could hear the echo of wide space around them but could only make out the shadows of crates piled higher than their heads on either side of them. He tapped Dean's shoulder and pointed to the railing ahead of them outlined by flickering firelight from somewhere below. They inched toward the rail, and Sam leaned cautiously forward to see below.

A trough had been dug down the center of the mill floor and was filled with glowing coals, and bonfires burned at either end. Chains hung down from the roof and dangling at the end of them, suspended by his wrists, was a man struggling feebly with his head hanging. The floor on either side of the coals was stained a disturbing dark brown that could only be from blood.

Dean scowled down at the scene below and could see no one other than the victim. He backed up a step listening to the bad feeling screaming in his head and bumped into Sam's shoulder. He turned to push him back toward the door and saw shadows rising up on the boxes above them. "Sam! Look out!"

Sam managed only a half turn before something heavy slammed into his left side and he crashed to the metal walkway. "Dean!" he yelled, seeing his brother's booted feet move away while the sound of his shotgun blasted in his ears. Sam threw his weight against the body on his back and managed to wrench the butt of his shotgun around, slamming it over his shoulder. There was a satisfying crunch, an angry shout, and Sam shoved up with his arms trying to gain leverage.

Dean blasted his shotgun into the face of a man who leaped from the boxes toward him. His head vanished in a cloud of red, and as Dean fired at a second, a third man dropped beside him and wrenched his gun up, crushing the barrel with his bare hand as he did. Dean stared in horror. "Oh, crap." He shook off his surprise and threw an elbow into the face of his attacker, nailing the man's huge, bulbous nose. He drew his pistol from the small of his back and knew they were screwed before three more men leaped into view over the boxes and did their best to flatten him to the floor. Dean managed to lift his head and find his brother, similarly weighed down beneath a dog-pile of bodies. He snarled angrily, terrified and pissed off that they were going to die, and, at the same time, oddly comforted that at least they were together. His eyes widened in shock, watching the man atop his brother's back open his mouth as rows of razor-sharp teeth descended into view. "Vampires? You're fucking vampires?"

"Boy, did you pick the wrong place for a walk today, sunshine."
Dean reared his head back, hoping to hit the man who had spoken and grunted as his face was forced to the floor instead. He craned his head as much as he could, and managed to see his brother just as the vampire riding him sank fangs into his neck. Sam's pained shout dumped fresh adrenaline into Dean's system, and he threw himself at the men holding him in desperation. A moment later, he felt fingers like iron bands around his head before it slammed into the floor and the world went away.

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The first thing Dean was aware of was heat. He was warm, hot, covered in sweat, and it was hard to breathe. Then came the realization that every damn part of him hurt. He groaned and fought to open his eyes. "Sammy?" he said, and coughed. He blinked, clearing his vision, and found he was trussed up, hands behind his back and legs wrapped in rope beside the hot coals on the lumber mill floor. His brother was beside him and tied up just as well. Sam's body twitched and he gave a low moan. Dean saw the blood beginning to congeal on his brother's collar and hoped they hadn't drained him too badly.

"Back with us, sunshine?"

Dean jerked his head up and saw the vampire whose nose he had smashed. He grinned. "Think I improved your face, fang-face." He took the boot to his gut with a choked laugh. "Didn't im-improve your personality. What… what now? We the dinner buffet?"

"Well, you were going to be, but then our hunter friend up there," he pointed behind them, "said you two just happen to be hunters. And not just any hunters." He chuckled. "You're the fucking Winchester boys. And we have a bone to pick with you." He smirked. "Well, with your great-grandfather, but you'll do."

"We had a great-grandfather who hunted?" Dean asked, confused. He leaned back as far as he could without ending up in the coals and got a look at the man still hanging above them. He had no idea who he was. "Who the hell are you?"

"He can't speak right now. I'll talk for him. You can call me Nicholaus." He smiled at Dean.

"Yeah, ok, Nick." Dean looked over at his brother whose head was now lolling drunkenly toward actual consciousness. "Why you got such a hard-on for hunters?"

Nicholaus studied the man at his feet. "Nicholaus. And because some of your hunter brethren were foolish enough to attack my brethren and slaughter them. It was well before your time but…" He gave a toothy grin. "Blood matters to us."

Dean snorted. "Sorry 'bout your luck, Nicky. Couldn't'a happened to a better bunch of blood-suckers."

"It's Nicholaus," the vampire snarled and landed a punch to Dean's jaw that snapped his head around. He straightened and frowned when he heard the younger brother chuckling softly. "Something amuses you?"

Sam rolled his neck out, wincing at the pain in his neck from the bite, and smiled up at the vampire. "The more you tell him not to call you something, the more he's going to do it. Trust me on this."

"How you feelin', Sammy?" Dean asked and quirked a bloody smile at his brother when he huffed a laughed and failed to correct him.

"Great." He looked up at Nicholaus and tried to ignore the fear curling in the pit of his stomach about how they were going to escape this. Bravado aside, their odds of getting out of the nest alive were
Nicholaus raised a brow and nodded. "Excellent. We're not your run-of-the-mill vampires, you see."
He knelt in front of the men, carefully out of range of their legs should either of them decide to try
and kick him. "We're so very much older than you're used to. We are, or were, members of the
Knights of St. Lazarus. Do you know them?"

Sam's brows flew up his head. "Uh, yeah."

"Share with the class, Sam." Dean turned slightly toward his brother to give himself room, trying to
find some give in the rope binding his hands.

Sam took a moment, wrapping his head around the knowledge, and really 'looked' at Nicholaus.
"They were crusaders, founded in, uh, eleventh century Jerusalem, I think."

"Correct." Nicholaus smiled, impressed.

"They were lepers. All of them." Sam frowned, looking at Nicholaus and the other vampires around
him. "Did being turned heal the leprosy?"

"It did." Nicholaus pressed a finger gently into his broken nose and eyed Dean darkly. "This, too,
will heal. I'll be sure to thank you for this later."

"I don't need thanks. Just doin' my job." Dean couldn't seem to stop mouthing off. He couldn't help
but think that his father would have slapped him in the back of the head by now. Pissing off the
leader of the band of monsters who have you at their mercy was stupid, but he could not find it in
himself to care right then.

"Dean," Sam said warningly, concerned that his brother's still-simmering anger and grief over their
father's loss was going to get him killed. "You are – were - Catholic knights. How are you… how
did you…"

Nicholaus chuckled. "How did we end up like this?" He nodded to one of his men and waved a
hand toward the hanging man. "It was nine-hundred years ago. There was a battle and we were
dying. She came to us like a dark angel and offered immortality." He shrugged and got back to his
feet. "What more could the truly devout want than the ability to carry on God's work into eternity?"

"How about a pulse?" Dean sneered up at him while he twisted his hands behind his back, feeling
the warm slick of blood over abraded skin, ignoring Sam's hissed, "Dean, shut up."

Nicholaus resisted the urge to beat the man further for the moment and continued to smile. "Once we
woke to our new lives, well, God's work seemed less important than it had, not when the world had
such delicious wonders to explore."

"You know what annoys me, Sammy?" Dean turned and met his brother's eyes, getting a small nod
in return. "These freaks know more about our family tree than we do."

Nicholaus rolled his eyes upward for patience. "You're really becoming tiresome, Mr. Winchester.
Let's see if we can give you something more interesting to say."

"Nah. We're getting bored." Dean flexed his arms and pulled his hands loose from the rope while
Sam did the same beside him. He lunged to his right for the knife hanging from a vampire's belt
while Sam kicked his legs into Nicholaus' knees, dropping the vampire to the floor. His fingers
grazed the hilt of the knife when he was crushed to the floor under a press of bodies.
Sam had nearly freed his legs when he was grabbed from behind and dragged up to his knees. "Get off!" he shouted angrily and saw his brother was recaptured as well. He pulled and thrashed against the arms holding him, but vampire strength was more than a match for him when they had all the leverage. "Dean?"

"Yeah." Dean struggled for form's sake, knowing full well they had him. He was furious. "Blew that."

Nicholaus got back to his feet, rubbing his left knee that was still singing from Sam's kick, and gave a short laugh. "We're vampires, Dean. You think we couldn't smell the fresh blood from you two rubbing your wrists free from the ropes? Give us some credit. We were ready for you."

"This is not our best day ever," Dean grumbled while the vampires dragged him back up and turned him toward the coals. His heart was thundering in his chest because, for once, he had no clear idea how they would get out of this. Hell, he didn't even have a vague notion to work with.

"We would have come for you sooner or later." Nicholaus said. "Get that one down." He looked over at Dean and pointed to Sam. "Get the manacles on the younger brother."

"Hey. Hey! You leave him alone!" Dean threw himself against his captors with little effect, even as it gave him a small hit of pride that it took five vampires to effectively restrain Sam while they tore off his jacket and shirts. "Get off him!"

Nicholaus clapped his hands slowly and smiled. "Now that's more like it."

Two other vampires dragged the mysterious hunter out from over the coals while the chains stringing him up lowered him. Dean could see the man's feet were raw and blistered from the heat as he collapsed into the arms of his captors. "Use me!" Dean shouted and turned back to Nicholaus. "You wanna roast someone, you take me! I'm the one pissin' you off!"

Nicholaus nodded while heavy manacles were affixed to Sam's wrists. "That's why I'm choosing him." He scowled while his men tried to clamp the right one around the boy's casted arm. "Crack the cast. He won't be worried about knitting bones much longer." He smiled while Sam visibly gritted his teeth. "Bad break is it?"

"Put me up there, damn it!" Dean swung his leg out and barely threw his captors off-balance.

"Dean, shut up!" Sam said evenly. "I don't need you sacrificing yourself for me." He met his brother's eyes and saw the comment hit home when his brother's eyes widened. Dean was tearing himself up over the fear that their dad had sacrificed himself, and Sam was asking him not to do the same. He took a deep breath and held it while one of the vampires wrapped his hands around his cast and twisted.

Dean winced in sympathy, hearing the plaster crack and the groan of pain his brother did not quite manage to muffle. "I'm gonna kill every one of you bastards."

"No. You're not. Hoist him up, please." Nicholaus told his men. He went to the limp form of their last captive and lifted the man's head. "David. You've been a great help. Thanks to you, we'll be able to find the last four men we need to avenge our order." He smiled as the man's eyes cracked open and managed a short glare before closing again. "Don't feel bad, David. Everyone breaks eventually. And now we're going to set you free." He released David's head and nodded to his men. "Make it quick. He's earned that."

"You son of a bitch," Dean snarled.
Sam's efforts to free his arms came to nothing, and he couldn't stop the shout of pain when they dragged his right arm up and hooked his broken right wrist to a crossbeam. The sudden hot agony took his knees out from under him and he sagged while they hooked up his other wrist and he was left spread-armed, supported by two vampires with the heat of the coals warming his bare back. "Crap," he gasped and convinced his legs to take his weight again, registering the sound of his brother's voice calling his name. "Yeah. I'm good."

"Bullshit." Dean suffered, watching his brother. He grunted as his arms were dragged behind him again and felt fresh ropes being wrapped too tightly around his forearms. "So what, you get your kicks playin' with your food?"

"Yes." Nicholaus chuckled and gave another nod to his men. He grinned widely as the chains above Sam went taut and jerked him from the floor to swing over the coals. Sam could not choke back the scream that tore from him as his full weight was suddenly shifted to his injured arm.

Dean struggled desperately against his bonds, but there was no give to be had and all he could do was suffer himself as Sam struggled to control the pain.

"Higher, please. I don't want his feet bursting into flames just yet. Just close enough to roast them slowly." He turned to Dean and smiled to see him well-restrained and how his frantic eyes were fixed on the swaying figure of his younger brother. "The other hunters we've brought here, we needed information from. It's not as easy as you think to find information on descendants of hunters when your kind works so far in the shadows." He smirked. "Rather like our kind in that regard. I don't disrespect you, you know."

"I'm tickled," Dean ground the words out while watching his brother as Sam tipped his head back and gasped. "He can't breathe."

Nicholaus looked over his shoulder and nodded. "Hmm. He's much heavier than the other men and women we've had up there. His own body weight is working against him." He looked back to Dean and reveled in the naked pain on the man's face. "I wonder how long he'll last?"

"Oh, you son of a bitch." Dean threw his weight against the vampires holding him and shouted in pure rage as he was forced to his knees.

"I do love the classics, Sunshine." Nicholaus said, and patted the top of Dean's head before looking back to Sam. "Do you know how men and women who were crucified really died? It wasn't blood loss or starvation. Occasionally, they survived long enough to expire from dehydration, but almost every time it was this." He gestured to Sam who was visibly pulling on his arms to lift his chest up and gasp for a breath. "Asphyxiation." He looked back to Dean's furious face happily. "The rib cage overextends and loses the ability to expand properly. He'd be having a much easier time right now if that right wrist were up to the challenge."

Dean saw his brother's right arm shaking, and, as he watched, it collapsed and left him hanging again, head down and his hair obscuring his face. "God, Sammy." Dean viciously fought the tears he felt forming in his eyes as he watched his brother suffer. He'd be damned if he'd give their captors that particular satisfaction.

"As long as he can continue to lift himself up, he'll survive." Nicholaus clapped his hands together. "Of course, I wouldn't want you to get bored watching. You did say you were bored earlier. Petrus. Martinus. His arms, please."

Dean gritted his teeth as his bound arms were lifted and raised behind him. He felt his shoulders burn at being twisted the wrong way, and he was forced forward into a hunch. He could just see his
brother if he lifted his head. "You are one sick twist."

"So I've been told." Nicholaus took the cane another of his men handed him. "The longer you stay in that position, the more likely one or both of your shoulders will be forced out of the socket. The pain builds slowly." He gave the cane a test swing, whistling it through the air, and tightened his grip. "I've had centuries to perfect certain skills, Sunshine."

"Stop calling me that, you freak," Dean growled the words and tried to ignore the steady burn in his shoulders.

Sam could just hear everything the vampire and his brother were saying through the roaring of blood in his ears. He lifted his head enough to see his brother with his arms wrenched up and out behind him and whistled a breath into his tight chest. It felt like iron bands were preventing him from breathing. Already spots were dancing in front of his eyes. Each time he used his arms to lift himself, he felt the bones in his right wrist grind and pull sickeningly. He was in serious danger of throwing up and didn't want to even imagine what would happen if he did. "Dean," he said in a tight whisper with a precious breath. He knew he should save what he had but the little brother in him needed to hear Dean's voice.

"Here, Sammy." Dean groaned and forced his head up to see him. "I'm right here."

"This is sweet." Nicholaus smiled. He drew the cane back and let it swing, slapping it into Sam's abdomen with enough force to send him swinging wildly back and forth.

"Stop!" Dean shouted, anguished for his brother. He saw Nicholaus catch Sam's beltloop and stop him swinging; saw wisps of smoke curl up from his brother's shoes still dangling far too close above the coals. And he knew they were done. They were absolutely going to die there together, slowly and painfully, and there was nothing he could do. With a whispered, "I'm sorry, Sammy," he let his head drop, closing his eyes, and didn't see the cane swinging toward him.

Sam jerked his head up when he heard Dean cry out. His eyes focused long enough to see Nicholaus swing the cane into his brother's stomach again and again until Dean was coughing and gagging on his knees. He twitched his feet as the heat from the coals burned up his calves. Sam strained his left arm to lift up just enough to take a whole breath and dropped again with tears in his eyes from the agony of his right wrist and the fresh pain the cane had laid into his stomach. His only consolation was that they were together. He didn't want to die, but going at his brother's side was a small comfort.

"Still with us, Sam?" Nicholaus asked and swung the cane to crack across the man's ribs. He enjoyed the wheeze of pain it earned him and shifted to swing at Sam's side and knew he had cracked a rib that time. "Pull yourself up, boy. You need to breathe or this is all going to be over too soon. Come on. You've still got some fight left in you." He watched Sam struggle to lift himself and grinned, reaching out to pat Sam's ribs like a dog. "Good boy."

"Piss." Sam gasped in a breath and lifted his head to aim a glare at the vampire. "Off."

"That's my boy," Dean groaned and found himself smiling, in spite of the dire situation.

Nicholaus shook his head. "You Winchesters are something." He gave Sam another pat and went to Dean, dropping down to one knee so he could see his face better. "I'm almost tempted to have you join my men. The Order of St. Lazarus could use warriors with your strength of conviction."

Dean lifted his head and met Nicholaus' eyes. "You're vampires. How can you asshats still call yourselves that? You're evil, blood-sucking sons of bitches, not…" He coughed a laugh. "Not
warriors for freakin' God anymore."

"Hypocrites," Sam managed, fighting to hold himself up with one arm. "You... you're hypocrites."

Nicholaus straightened and turned to Sam. "We are warriors of an old and sacred order." He smirked. "Whatever our diet may be." He pulled the cane back over his shoulder, deciding where to strike the boy next. "And I've changed my mind. Making you two part of our order would be a horrible idea. I think the moment we freed you, you'd do your best to slaughter us for form's sake." He turned to look down at Dean. "What do you think, Sunshine?"

Dean snorted. "First chance we get. Yeah."

"I have to appreciate the honesty." Nicholaus studied the man at his feet before turning back to Sam. "Lesser men would have lied." He adjusted his grip on the cane and smiled. "I am going to enjoy taking you two apart." He wound up for another crack at Sam's ribs and staggered forward a step. He looked down in surprise and saw the head of an arrow protruding from his own chest. "What?"

A wave of weakness swept through him, and he dropped to his knees, letting the cane roll to the floor in a clatter. Nicholaus looked around in time to see two more arrows strike his men holding Dean and then he went over to his back.

Sam watched in confusion, lungs screaming for air he was no longer getting, as vampires screamed and fell. He focused on his brother and saw Dean fall to his side. "Dean," he breathed in the barest whisper, feeling despair that his brother was dying before his eyes, and as he lost consciousness to the sound of his heart thudding in his head, his last thought was a brief prayer that, whatever lay on the other side, he would get to be with his brother again.

Dean grunted in pain as his left shoulder banged into the floor. It took the breath from him for a moment, and he lay there before the sound of the vampires yelling brought him all the way back. "Sam," he groaned and tried to get his legs under him, rolling partially to his back with a hiss for his burning shoulders. "The hell is going on?" Dean finally got a knee under him and pushed himself up. Five vampires, including Nicholaus, were splayed on the ground, one of them was steaming atop the coals at Sam's feet and struggling weakly. All of them sported arrows standing out of their chests and backs.

"Dean! Down!"

Dean listened to that voice instinctively and let himself fall back to the floor. He heard the whistle of an arrow flying over him and craned his head. Another of the vampires collapsed beside him, and Dean rolled over as Bobby emerged from behind a stack of crates and lowered a crossbow. "Holy crap, Bobby. How?"

"Did some more digging after I sent you boys out here and something stunk." Bobby set his crossbow down and drew a machete. "How bad you hurt?" he asked Dean, but his eyes were all for Sam.

"Good. I'm good. Get me loose, dammit." Dean rolled to his stomach and found himself staring into Nicholaus' rage-filled eyes. "Gonna keep my word to you in a minute," he said darkly.

"Sam?" Bobby called and peered up into the boy's face. He shook his head when he didn't get an answer and went to Dean. "Hold still, son." He sliced through the ropes binding his arms together and pulled him around by the shoulder, ignoring the groan of protest. "Get the feeling back in your arms while I take these assholes out."

"Hurry. We gotta get Sam down. He can't breathe and those coals are cooking him." Dean stood and
cautiously moved his arms, trying to roll out his shoulders and had to stop, unable to lift his arms above his head.

"Here." Bobby handed Dean a second machete and then stood over the first vampire he had taken down. "I'd have been here sooner, but it took me a while to get hold of enough dead man's blood."

"Not him," Dean said and waved Bobby off. "That one's mine. Get the others and then go up there and see if you can figure out how to lower Sam down." He wanted to ignore the vamps and get his brother down right then, but he couldn't risk any of them recuperating from the dead man's blood enough to attack them. Sam would have to hold on for a few more minutes.

Dean knelt and slapped away the shaking hand Nicholaus stretched toward his throat. "Hey, Nicky. How you feelin'?" He smiled while the vampire snarled a mouth full of too many teeth at him. Dean shook his head and stood. He hefted the machete and sighed, knowing he couldn't get it overhead for a strike. "This could have been fast," Dean said as he leaned down instead. He put the point of the blade on the floor and pressed it against Nicholaus' throat, bracing it with the toe of his boot. "Pretty sure this is gonna hurt a little more, and I'm all broken up about that. Sayonara, asshat." He used his body weight and dropped to his shoulder while he shoved the blade down to the floor and through Nicholaus' neck in a wash of blood. He stumbled back to his feet and away from the spreading pool of blood while the vampire's head rolled clear of his body.

"Bobby?" Dean called as he moved to the edge of the coals and his brother.

"Hang on." Bobby beheaded the last vampire and jogged for the nearest set of stairs.

Dean let the machete drop to the floor and ran a hand over his face as he looked at his brother. He was unconscious, or worse. "Damn, Sammy. Hold on, you hear me?" He swallowed around the lump in his throat as he watched Sam's hanging head. "Don't you leave me alone," he whispered fiercely.

"I got it, Dean." Bobby looked down, seeing Sam directly below him and even so high, he could feel the faint warmth of the coals. "Christ. Get a hold of his legs!"

Dean shook out his arms, ignored his own pain, and managed to catch hold of his brother's knee. He tugged him forward and got his arms around Sam's hips, feeling the heat from Sam's skin through his own shirts. "Alright, lower him!"

Bobby braced his feet against the railing and unwrapped the chain. "Here he comes!"

Dean grunted as Sam's weight was suddenly in his arms and he pulled, backing up a step and then two. The heat from the coals cooked the front of his jeans before he got Sam clear. He tried not to think of how long his brother had been slowly roasting up there. He let Sam slip through his arms toward the floor until his they were wrapped around his chest. "Got ya'. I got ya'. Bobby get down here!" he shouted. Dean went to his knees as slowly as he could. Sam's face was pressed into his neck and his heart thumped painfully in his chest because there were no warm puffs of air from his brother.

"No. No. No." Dean fought to get Sam on his back. The crossbar with his brother's outstretched arms was a cumbersome nightmare, but he managed it just as his shoulders gave out and Sam dropped the last few inches to the floor with a thump. "Crap. Sam?" Dean palmed the side of his brother's face and tilted his head back. "Sam! Breathe dammit!"

"Sam?" Bobby was gasping for breath by the time he reached the main floor again and slid to his knees on the other side of the younger Winchester. He put a hand on Sam's chest and shook his
head. "Still not breathing." Bobby pressed hard down into Sam's diaphragm, waited a moment and did it again. "Come on, son. Breathe for us. Give him a breath, Dean."

Dean leaned down over Sam's head and his brother gave a sudden gasp, his eyes flying open. "Hey. Hey. You're good." Dean smiled and went weak with relief as he held Sam's head while his brother sucked in one long, wheezing breath after another. He saw Sam's arms flexing and tugging at his restraints as panic started to set in. "Take it easy. We're gonna get you outta this, ok?" He looked over and Bobby nodded.

Bobby patted Sam's heaving chest. "Just hang on. Have you loose in a minute."

"Watch his right arm. No way that isn't rebroken. Hey, stop pulling, Sammy." Dean patted the side of his brother's neck and kept eye-contact with him, watching as he slowly calmed.

Sam coughed, clearing his throat. "Vampires?" he rasped.

"Dead," Dean assured him. "Took care of our buddy Nicky personally."

"This is gonna hurt," Bobby warned and snapped open the manacle around Sam's right wrist. Given how swollen the boy's arm was around the heavy metal, he wasn't surprised when Sam shouted hoarsely and arched up from the floor before passing out. He blew out a breath and put a hand in Sam's shaggy, sweat-soaked hair for a moment. "Better he's out. I think that left shoulder's dislocated too."

Dean gritted his teeth together at that and barely resisted getting up to take a last kick at Nicholaus' body. "Probably some broken ribs too. That son of a bitch wailed on him with that cane."

Bobby freed Sam's other arm and slid his hand up to the boy's shoulder and groaned, finding it swollen and hot to the touch. "Yeah, it's out. I'll get this. You check his legs." He moved to get a better position for leverage. "Why'd these blood-suckers have such a hard-on for hunters?"

"According to fang-face over there, our great-grandfather and a bunch of hunter yahoos tried to wipe out their nest or whatever." Dean snorted while he tugged at his brother's left boot. "They were wiping out the descendants. They'd have gotten to us sooner or later."

Bobby looked up from Sam's shoulder in surprise. "You got a great-granddaddy who hunted?"

Dean shrugged. "Or something. Dad sure as hell didn't know anything about it." He scowled as Sam's boot refused to come off and slipped his fingers down the side of his brother's ankle. "Aw man. I think the sole of this one's actually melted to his foot."

Bobby hissed between his teeth in sympathy. "Leave it then. He's goin' to the nearest hospital."

"Yeah." Dean rolled up his brother's pantleg and shook his head at the red skin revealed. "No blisters here so there's that, I guess. Just first degree."

"You wanna get back up here so he doesn't slug me if this wakes him up?" Bobby asked, trying to inject some levity into the situation. He reached out when Dean resettled next to his brother's chest and took hold of Dean's shoulder, giving it a quick shake. "He's alive. You're alive. Vamps are dead."

Dean nodded, swallowing back the fear that had choked him for the last hour. He took a careful hold of his brother's right arm, well above the break, and nodded. "Do it," he said and was ready to catch and hold Sam as he shouted his way back to consciousness when Bobby reset his shoulder with a quick wrench. "Easy, Sammy. Easy. We gotcha."
The sound of Bobby's voice berating a hunter over the phone carried out from the living room and made Dean chuckle as he went up the stairs. It felt like home. He quickly righted the tray in his hands before the bowl of soup and two mugs of coffee could slide off and turned down the hall to his and Sam's room. "Sammy! Rise and... what the hell are you doing up?" Dean demanded as he walked into the room. His brother was shuffling slowly back to the bed on thickly, bandage-wrapped feet. "What part of 'stay off your feet' didn't translate for you, college-boy?"

Sam rolled his eyes and sat carefully on the side of his bed. He braced his left arm in its sling with his newly casted right arm and blew his bangs out of his eyes. "I'm not crippled. And I had to pee."

"You fall down, I'm laughing. Fair warning." Dean set the tray on the table between the beds. "Lay the hell down already. I'm hurting just looking at you. How's the ribs?"

Sam sighed. "Sore. They're fine."

Dean snorted. "Right. Two cracked ribs and you're fine." He helped Sam get both legs back up on the bed and eased him back into the pile of pillows at the head, not missing the sheen of sweat on his brother's face from the effort.

"Can't believe you let them cut my boots off." Sam slumped back into the pillows and for a moment, didn't care if Dean saw how much he was hurting. And everything hurt.

"You're worried about your boots?" Dean laughed and sat on the side of the bed. He had no trouble seeing just how much pain Sam was still in. But having him there to moan and bitch was just what Dean needed to settle the last of his fears from how close they had come to dying. He thumped a fist lightly into Sam's thigh and smiled. "Priorities, little brother. Soup or coffee?"

"I can feed myself."

"Right. With what? Your elbows?" Dean picked up the mug of coffee and held it out. "Stop whining and open up for the coffee choo-choo, bitch."

"Jerk," Sam said and laughed, though he did manage to get the fingers of his right hand in the handle of the mug. "Stop babying me and go annoy Bobby."

"Naw. He's busy tearing strips off some poor bastard on the phone." Dean steadied the mug for his brother and grinned. "Heard something about misconjugating a Latin verb in an exorcism before I came up here."

Sam chuckled and took a cautious sip of the coffee. "Poor bastard." He handed the mug back to his brother. "Give me the tray and go away, please."

Dean smirked and slid the tray over his brother's legs before he rose and headed for the door. "Just fall down and make a good thump if you want somethin'. Shouldn't be hard for you, sasquatch."

"Get out." Sam smiled once his brother was gone, listening to Dean's heavy steps down the stairs, to Bobby's voice raised suddenly in a curse, and closed his eyes. He was safe. They were safe, at least for a while, and that was all that mattered.
Rolling the Dice…
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: My brother-in-law got me a box of 'Rory's Story Cubes' for Xmas. Dice with pictures meant as a tool for combatting writer's block! Jenjoremy challenged me to use them to write fic and so here we are! Each chapter will be a stand-alone one shot inspired by a roll of the story dice; Three dice rolled for each chapter.

*For those reading on Fanfiction dot net, you can see pics of each roll on my Facebook page or the AO3 posting of this story, if you're interested. Lol

Beta'd by the always awesome JaniceC678 :D– Friend and Muse's co-conspirator.

**Follow me on Facebook as "Disasteriffic Kaz" for frequent fic updates or just to chat!
~Reviews are Love~
Disclaimer: They're not mine. The world's not mine. But Kripke is my, er, Chuck? And I worship at his altar. Heh.

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Roll the Dice:
1: A quill and ink
2: A demon
3: A harp

Setting- After 3x08 "A Very Supernatural Christmas"

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Sam leaned over the sink, resting his elbows on the tile, and carefully peeled off the Band-Aids covering his right index finger. He gritted his teeth together, refusing to let out the annoying whimper that tried to escape as the bandage clung to his exposed nailbed.

"Stupid… damn… ow. Evil Santas," he muttered and sighed in relief as it finally came loose. Sam ran his hand under the water and rolled his eyes as his brother pounded on the closed bathroom door.
"Patience is a virtue, jerk!"

"My virtue needs to take a leak, bitch! Stop hoggin' the damn bathroom!" The door opened and Dean grinned at Sam's 'bitch-face'. He saw his brother's fingers wrapped in a washcloth and winced slightly. "How's the finger?"

Sam ducked his brother's grab for his hand. "It's fine. How's your head?"

"Harder than yours," Dean smirked and went into the bathroom while his brother snorted a laugh behind him. Dean groaned. "You know what I mean!" he said. He gave Sam a shove back into the room and slammed the door. The sound pierced through his aching head and he winced. "Man." Wrapping his hand over his eyes eased the pain a little as the light darkened. "Concussions suck."

In the bedroom, Sam sat at the table with the first aid kit and resting his pounding head in his hands for a moment. "Concussions suck," he groaned in known unison with his brother. A day and a half was not enough time for the effects of having his head slammed into a concrete wall to fade. And no matter what Dean said, he knew his brother was feeling it just as much. He opened his eyes and chuckled at the half-empty bottle of painkillers Dean had left out like a silent hint. Sam dry-swallowed a couple and jumped when his laptop chirped into the silence. He pulled it over from where Dean had been sitting and frowned. "Huh."

Dean flushed and schooled his face to hide the pain he was still in before he opened the door and went back out. He grabbed his beer while Sam typed and took a swig, leaning over his brother's shoulder. Dean groaned. "Dude. Your nasty finger is getting blood on the keys. That's disgusting."

"What?" Sam looked at his hand and the spots of blood on the keyboard. "Right. Sorry."

"What's so interesting?" Dean studied the open web age while Sam wrapped his finger in fresh Band-Aids, having waved off Dean's offer to help.

"One of my alerts went off." Sam pointed to the page. "I've got a system set up in a few federal databases to search for key words and phrases." He saw Dean's frown and nodded. "Like 'catastrophic blood loss', 'fangs', 'animal attack'. That sort of thing."

"Huh." Dean leaned back and grinned, impressed. "Not too shabby, college boy. So, what's this?"

"Animal attacks. Suspected." Sam pulled a map up on the screen. "In an area without any actual wild animals to do the attacking, which is why it hit my alerts. It's too urban and it's not far from here. That and the fact that the ear drums of every victim are shattered."

"Ok, could be hinky." Dean shrugged. "Let's check it out." He watched while Sam began to gather up their things, stuffing them into the bags and sighed. Though they were laughing and joking, he could see the lines between his brother's eyes and the signs he was gritting his teeth. Every day that pulled Dean's deadline closer made it harder for each of them to pretend nothing was wrong, and even a Christmas spent warmly drunk and yelling at football together couldn't make either of them forget it.

"Dean?" Sam asked, seeing a strange look on his brother's face.

"Yeah." Dean closed the laptop and slid it into its bag, forcing a smirk onto his face. "Hey, grab my socks outta the bathroom."

"Ew. No." Sam tossed his brother's bag up on the bed for him. "Get your own stinky socks."

Dean snorted and then laughed when one of his socks hit the side of his head. His brother had good
aim. They were packed and back on the road in no time. The quiet as they drove was comforting until Dean realized he could feel the weight of his brother's eyes on him from the passenger seat. "What, Sammy?"

Sam startled and whipped his head around to look out the window. He hadn't realized he was staring until that moment. "Uh, nothing. Sorry."

Dean scowled and was about to poke at him when he suddenly understood; his little brother was trying to memorize the image of him behind the wheel because in a few short months, he would be gone. He took in a shaky breath and let it out slowly, then reached over and flicked on the radio. He let the sounds of some easy listening station fill the car and still heard the moment his brother let out a long sigh. The last four hours of their drive was spent in uncomfortable silences peppered with awkward attempts at conversation while they both avoided the elephant in the back seat - Dean's dwindling time on Earth.

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Dean stood inside the doors to the Randall Park police station with his brother and chuckled. It was barely controlled, noisy bedlam as too few officers wrangled a dozen teenagers, and Dean elbowed his brother in the ribs. "Dude, those two are blue. What the hell?"

Sam smiled and shook his head, leaning in so his brother could hear him. "Senior prank night, I think." He watched the two young men, painted bright blue from the waist up, be led out of sight and ducked his head. "I, uh… yeah, it's senior prank night."

"Well, at least you never painted yourself blue." Dean shook his own head and strode along the wall, looking for someone in charge and not distracted by teenage stupidity. He paused and glanced at his brother. "You didn't, did you?" and grinned as Sam flipped him off in silent reply. "Pretty sure December's a shit time to strip off and paint yourself."

"That's kind of the point." Sam ducked aside as one of the blue teens reappeared with a 'whoop' of glee and dashed past them on his way back out. He couldn't help the laugh when a harried deputy slid into sight behind him. "He went that way!" Sam pointed behind him toward the entrance. "Ah, hell." The deputy threw his arms up in the air. "Forget it. The idiot can freeze his blue ass off out there for a while." He narrowed his eyes at the two over-tall men in suits. "You boys need something?"

"Sorry about this." Dean grinned as a badly-tuned chorus of 'drunken sailor' echoed out from what had to be the holding cells. "They rob a liquor store while they were at it?"

Deputy Allen chuckled. "More or less. Hey, Chief!" he called, pushing through the doors ahead and heard an annoyed 'What?' yelled from the left. "He's in his office. Come on."

"Milo! Go down to holding and stuff a sock in someone's mouth and stop that damn singing!"

"Got visitors of the federal kind, Chief Warner." Deputy Allen waved the boys in ahead of him. "Agents Nash and Crosby." He stuck his head around the door and saw his chief's reddening face.
"Try not to shoot them. I hear they frown on that."

"Get the hell out of my office," Chief Warner said with a laugh and eyed the two men in front of him. "Picked a hell of a night for a visit, boys. You've gotta be here about the murders. Yeah?"

"Yeah." Dean sat in one of the two wooden chairs facing the battered metal desk and stretched his legs out, studying the sharp brown eyes under a shaggy cap of greying, red curls. "But if you want me to go in there and put the fear of me into some teenage blockheads, I can do that too." He smirked. "I've got this little brother; plenty of experience." It took everything he had not to look to his right and laugh at the scowl he knew his brother would be sporting. His comment, though, had the desired effect as the chief laughed and sat back down.

"Call me Bob." The sheriff swallowed his gut-reaction to snap at the federal agents. "So, I'm gonna give you guys the benefit of the doubt since it's not your fault half the senior class decided to crap all over movie night with my wife."

"Good movie?" Sam asked.


"Nice." Dean nodded and laughed. "Promise we'll do our best to get outta your hair. Boss sent us in to have a look at your murder vics from the last couple weeks. Wants us to see if they're connected."

"Well, they all died hard." Bob shrugged and rifled through his desk for the file. "Honestly, we've got plenty on our plates with this stupidity for the next couple days." He nodded out toward where the off-key singers had moved on to counting bottles of beer on the walls. "Every year after Christmas." He rolled his eyes and handed a thick file over his desk. "It's like a damn tradition in this town."

Sam leaned forward and took the file. "Could I borrow your database and check out the victims?"

"And I'm gonna want a look at the bodies," Dean said and hooked a thumb at his brother. "While my partner conveniently avoids the messy stuff. Again."

"Bite me, Dean." Sam chuckled and stood. "Sheriff?"

"Grab Milo. He can set you up at a computer." Bob rose and shook Sam's hand before he nodded to Dean. "Morgue's downstairs. I'll introduce you to the coroner. Harry Forbes. He's, uh… a little eccentric. Just roll with it."

Dean laughed and followed the man to a stairwell. "Sure you don't want to hide down here with me?"

Bob laughed and shook his head. "Wish I could." He shoved through a set of double doors at the bottom of the stairs. "Hey, Harry! Got a victim with a heartbeat for you!"

"Funny." Dean smiled as another man emerged from a metal door across from them.

"This is Agent Dean Crosby. He needs to see the murder vics." Bob clapped a hand on Dean's shoulder. "Good luck."

"Uh, thanks." Dean watched the coroner drag a hand over his bald head before straightening his glasses. "So, Harry. Got some corpsicles for me to look at?"

"Corpsicles." Harry chuckled and waved the man over. "I'm using that one. You got any idea who's
"Not yet." Dean said and walked over to a body covered in a white sheet. "This the latest victim?"

"One Robert Matheson." Harry grabbed his patient's chart and handed it to Dean before he flipped the sheet away from the body. "Multiple lacerations, and, from the patterns, I'm guessing one really pissed off, oversized housecat."

Dean snorted a laugh while he swallowed at the sight of the many open, bloody wounds that decorated the man's body in front of him. "Maybe a big dog." He leaned over a gaping hole in the man's chest. "Killer take anything?"

"Party favors. Yeah." Harry smiled and pulled on a pair of gloves before he put his hands on the body again. "Most of the heart's gone." He smiled up at Dean. "Not all of it; got a good chunk, though. Also, part of the spleen." He pointed inside the cavity and pulled one of his incisions open to show the agent, smirking when the man cleared his throat and leaned back. "Now, what's more interesting to me is this."

Dean looked up to the ceiling for a moment and took a deep breath which he instantly regretted as his stomach gave a lurch at the odor of death and disinfectant. He coughed and rubbed a hand over his face before following Harry to look at the dead man's head. "What?"

"You don't wanna get some gloves on?" Harry gave the body's chest a pat, making the blood squelch beneath his gloves and made the agent grimace. "Get your fingers in here?"

"Dude." Dean stared and held up his hands. "I'm good here, and you... you're kinda creepy, you know that?"

Harry shrugged with a laugh. "It's been said. Anyway! Here." He turned the dead man's head to the side and pointed to blood trails coming from the ears. "His ear drums, both ears, have been ruptured."

Dean frowned and leaned down for a better look. "Something poked his ear drums out?"

"Nope. Blew them out." Harry turned the head to the other side and poked at a small blob of flesh stuck to the man's cheek. "This is a piece of the ear drum. Mangled to hell of course."

Dean put a hand over his mouth and swallowed again. "Oh, that's just wrong." He shook his head. "So, what actually killed him and the others?"

"Blood loss, as far as I can tell." Harry waved a hand over the body. "The others look just like him, more or less. No foreign hair or fibers on any of the bodies. Toxicology's clean. Got one DB with weed in his system and a blood-alcohol content that probably had him seeing dancing pink elephants, but I'm pretty sure that was incidental."

That made Dean chuckle and he backed away. "Alright, well, uh, it's been memorable. Stay freaky, man."

"Oh, no problem." Harry waggled his bloody fingers at Dean in farewell. "See you later, agent."

"Not if I can help it," Dean muttered as he left and gave himself a shake once he was outside the doors. "Man." He started up the stairs and stopped, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. Dean whipped back around and looked up and down the hall, but there was nothing to see. He waited a moment, listening to his instincts and finally shook his head. "Dude, made me paranoid."
Sam leaned back from the computer and rubbed his eyes. He tipped his head back, staring at the ceiling, and, for a moment, tried to let his mind go blank, but the ever-present thoughts of his brother refused to stop spinning through his mind. He tried to remember when the last time was he actually got a decent night's sleep and couldn't, though he figured it had to be more than a year, and it was just getting worse as time ticked on. He was just so tired. He closed his eyes and tried to take a deep breath through the tightness in his chest that had not left since the moment he had found out his brother was going to die for him.

"Dammit," Sam whispered and leaned forward, rested his elbows on the desk, and hung his head in his hands. He blew out a breath and then jerked upright with the sensation that he was being watched. He turned in his chair, scanning the squad room behind him through the open office door but could see no one looking in. He almost turned away when he spotted Dean who appeared from around a corner. Sam waved until his brother saw him and then shook his head at himself for his paranoia.

"Hey." Dean ducked into the office with his brother and dropped into the chair beside him. "The coroner is seriously twisted, dude. We gotta deal with him again, you're talking to him."

Sam chuckled and nudged the file folder beside the keyboard toward him. "I went through the information the sheriff gave us. On paper, none of the victims have anything in common."

Dean quirked a brow at his brother. "You've got happy face. What'd you find?"

"Credit card transactions." Sam twisted the monitor of the computer so his brother could see it. "All of our victims visited the same mall right around the time they went missing. They went to different stores, but they were all there."

"I smell a lead." Dean grinned.

Sam turned off the computer and stood. "Yeah, well. I want to do some more digging, see if I can come up with something, or we're going to be searching that mall for days. It's big."

"Define 'big'," Dean said and followed his brother back through the squad room.

"There are just over a hundred stores inside the mall on two floors; three if you count the sub-basement." Sam pushed outside and took a deep breath of the cold, night air. "And most of them are closed down. Randall Park Mall's close to abandoned at this point."

"Sounds like a good place to hunt if you're one of the monsters." Dean strode to the Impala, opened his door, and leaned over the roof to look at his brother. "Hey. You get the feeling something's watching us?" He saw his brother's eyes widen in surprise and then narrow meaningfully. Dean nodded. "Cause I got that feeling earlier, and I'm getting it again right now."

"Yeah; me too." Sam pulled his own door open and resisted the urge to look around while his gut told him something was watching. "Motel?"

"Yep. Let's see if it follows us." Dean slid behind the wheel and pulled out of the parking lot. "I'll grab the weapons bag from the trunk, you scuff the salt line, and we'll give whatever it is a little invite to party time."

By the time they reached the motel, Sam's nerves were singing with tension. He climbed out of the Impala and dug the room key out of his pocket. He turned as he opened the door and used the heel of his boot to scatter the line of salt just inside, calling back to his brother who was still at the car, "I'm
gonna hit the shower, then we should find food. Actual food, Dean. Not deep-fried hell."

Dean gave that comment the look of scorn it deserved. "Don't use all the hot water!" He closed the trunk and followed his brother inside. He tossed the heavy weapons bag on the near bed and shoved the door closed behind him. He drew his gun and backed away from the door.

Sam stepped up beside him with his own gun drawn. "Hope whatever it is assumes we're distracted." He shifted his grip on the weapon, staring at the door. "What do you think it is?"

Dean shrugged. "Dunno. 'm just hoping we don't spend half the night standing around like paranoid asshats."

Sam chuckled but stopped as the knob on the room door began to turn. He sighted along the barrel of his gun and began to squeeze the trigger as the door opened. "Shit," Sam said in an explosion of breath and lowered his gun while a familiar blonde demon leaned against the door jamb and grinned. "Ruby."

"Hey tall, dark, and moody." Ruby smiled at Sam and flicked her eyes to Dean. "Idiot."

"Great." Dean rolled out the tension in his neck, but didn't lower his gun. "Demon Barbie's back."

"You know, Dean," Ruby nodded to Dean's gun as she came in and closed the door behind her. "That's an awful tiny weapon for hands that big."

Sam snorted a laugh while his brother sputtered. He scrubbed a hand over his face and forced it back down. "I take it you're the one who's been stalking us."

Ruby nodded and pulled one of the chairs out from the table to sit. "Took you two idiots long enough to catch on. Seriously, it's like you aren't even real hunters. You just play them on TV." She straightened her jacket, stretched out her legs, and looked at Sam. "So, what are we hunting today?"

"Don't you have anything better to do than annoy us with your perky hair?" Dean set his gun on the table and took off his jacket, tossing it on another chair.

"My perky hair?" Ruby snorted. "Says the guy who uses more product than a high school cheerleader."

"Hey!" Dean kicked her booted feet angrily.

"Ok. I'm gonna go grab some food." Sam sighed with a tired roll of his eyes. "Try not to get any blood on the walls."

Ruby watched him leave and frowned, looking over at Dean. "What's his problem?"

Dean shook his head. He grabbed the cleaning kit from his bag on the bed and sat down at the table across from her to deftly start taking his gun apart. "He wants to ask if you've found a way to save my ass from the fire, but he doesn't want to hear you say no. Typical Sam." He shook his head and glanced up at her from his gun. "What do you want?"

"You're not going to like it." Ruby shrugged. "Got any beer?" She got up and went to the mini-fridge, pulling it open and smiled. "Trust you to stock a room with the basics." She pulled out a beer, opened it, and took a long drink. "You should walk away from this job. It's too dangerous."

Dean scowled, anger darkening his features. "Well, that's not gonna happen. People are dying. Unlike you demonic assholes, we don't walk away from that.
"Yeah. I figured," Ruby said tiredly. "That would have been the smart thing to do." She sat back down, hearing Dean's angry growl, and watched him cleaning his gun for a few minutes with a faintly bemused expression on her face. "There's some big, bad demon in this town from what I've been able to find out. I'm guessing Sam hasn't done the research yet or he'd have seen the signs."

"I do research!" Dean protested and then shook his head, dismissing the insult. "So which demon is it? What's he after?"

Ruby snorted derisively. "I have no idea. I just know there's at least one powerful demon in town looking for something, and that's never a good thing for our side."

"What kind of 'something'? And if it's a demon, why do the victims look like Cujo's chew toys?" He let the 'our side' comment slide for the moment.

"You get that I'm on the run, right? Lilith wants me as dead as she wants you and Sam, genius."

Ruby gave him a scornful look. "I'm off the demonic mailing list these days."

"Right." Dean didn't believe her for a second; not completely, anyway. Oh, she had been useful here and there, but she was still a demon. He couldn't quite figure out her angle in trying to play friendsies with them, but he did not doubt for a second there was one. He heard Sam's key in the door and shoved the clip of his gun home. "Blondie, if you screw us, I'm gonna pin your head to the wall by those tiny little ears of yours, capisce?"

"I'm shaking in my boots," Ruby said with a sneer and quickly schooled her face into a smile as the door opened.

Sam looked between his brother and Ruby with a frown. "What did I miss?"

"Nothing. Thought you were getting food." Dean stood and repacked the cleaning kit.

"Ordered take out from the office instead." Sam went to his bed and pulled his laptop out as he sat. "I went in there to ask about local restaurants and it turns out the old guy at the desk like to gossip about the area." He looked up while his laptop booted. "He's real fond of that mall. He says there's been weird crap going on in that area since before the mall was even built. Deaths and perfectly sane people losing their minds."

"Nice." Dean got a beer for himself and one for his brother, handing it to him. "He got any specifics? Ruby here seems to think it's a demon."

Sam glanced over at her quirking an eyebrow in surprise. with a "Nothing concrete. He said mostly people get torn up." Sam started a search for the mall in the local newspaper's database. "He did say there's an urban legend about a banshee that he's heard all his life."

Dean's interest perked up and he saw Ruby lean forward as well. "Actual banshee?"

Sam shook his head. "I don't know, but it would explain the ruptured ear drums."

"Not the way the victims have been shredded, though." Ruby smiled when Dean scowled at her. "Sue me. I checked the reports myself before you two chuckle-heads showed up." She waved her beer bottle in the air. "Banshees don't slice and dice their victims."

Sam made an absent 'hmm' sound and Dean chuckled. "Yeah, we've lost him for a few minutes. That means he's found something. Alright, if it's not a banshee, then what? You said there's a demon in town. This black-eyed-freak have a name?"
"Andy-something." Ruby finished her beer and thumped the bottle on the table. "I wasn't really in a position to hear more without being caught." She saw Sam's head jerk up and met his eyes. "What? I say something interesting?"

Sam looked back down at his laptop and then set it aside. "Gotta call Bobby." He took out his phone and headed for the bathroom while someone knocked at the door. "Someone pay for the food."

Dean shook his head fondly while Sam closed himself in the bathroom and went to the door. "This job is starting to get on my nerves." He paid for the take-out and set the bag on the table. He pulled out two burgers with fries with a grin, a salad that made him roll his eyes for his brother's stupid rabbit diet, and frowned when he found a wrapped sandwich in the bottom of the bag. "What's this?"

Ruby plucked it out of his hand and opened the wrapper. She smiled. "It's for me." She held it out toward him. "Turkey and cheese with extra tomatoes and mustard."

"How'd he know that?" Dean grumbled around the first bite of his burger.


Dean gave a scowl of his own while his brother's voice rumbled in the bathroom. It annoyed him when Ruby did or said something that made her seem like an actual person and not just another demon. He shook his head at himself and was halfway through his second burger when Sam emerged from the bathroom. "You and Bobby get your geek on?"

"Andusias," Sam said in response and sat back with his laptop. "Not Andy. He's a demon."

"We already knew that," Ruby pointed out.

Sam glared at her until she looked away. "I recognized the name from the Ars Goetia." He glanced up from his typing and saw Dean's 'what' face. He smirked. "It's the same book the Key of Solomon comes from."

"Right. Bobby's ceiling graffiti." Dean chuckled.

"I had him look it up. Bobby says he's a duke of hell, whatever that means." Sam met Dean's 'what' face. "And he has claws instead of fingers."

"That sounds more like it." Dean nodded. "Why's he here though? Or maybe he just has a thing for mallrats." He looked over at Ruby. "And what the hell is a duke of hell?"

Ruby shrugged and took another bite of her sandwich with a mumbled, "Not a clue. Probably the usual hell-inspired ego trip."

"Has to be something inside the mall. All the victims were there before they died. And there's got to be a reason for the banshee myth around here." Sam sighed and closed the laptop. "Not sure what it could be, though, but I did find some references to people hearing music they couldn't explain in and around the mall. It should be closed by now. We should go have a look."

"Sounds like a plan. Piss off, blondie. We got this." Dean grinned at her and tossed his empty wrapper across the room into the trash can.

"Nice, Dean." Ruby flipped her middle finger at him. She held up a hand when Sam opened his mouth. "Forget it. You idiots want to tangle with some bad-ass demon alone? Knock yourselves out. I've got better things to do."
Sam watched her stalk out of the room and then raised a brow at his brother. "Way to be a team player, Dean."

"Oh, bite me. She's a demon, Sam." Dean pulled his jacket off the chair and shrugged it on. "She may play nice for us once in a while, but at the end of the day, she's one of them. Come on."

"Wow." Sam breathed while Dean drove them around the outside of Randall Park Mall. "This place has really gone to hell." The Impala cut through a lake-sized puddle that looked more like a pond while water splashed up the windows. The water had eaten most of the parking lot outside what had once been an upscale department store. The pavement made the car bounce and shake, it was so torn up by time and use. The whole area looked less like a shopping mall people still used and more like something out of a post-apocalypse film. "Back there." Sam pointed out the window. "There should be a service entrance next to the old Sears loading dock."

"Yeah, I see it." Dean shook his head at the state of the pavement and cursed under his breath. "This is gonna trash her shocks."

Sam smirked but said nothing. His brother's love affair with their car was something that would never change, and truthfully, he didn't want it to. He swallowed around the sudden lump in his throat and shook the feeling of impending loss away. There was no room for that right now if he wanted to be able to function. "There's the loading dock."

Dean slowed at the top of the low hill down to the dock and shook his head. It was flooded. "We're gonna get wet." He pulled up around a tall, brick barrier wall and parked. "I'm surprised most of the security lights are still on out here."

Sam climbed out and met Dean at the trunk under a pool of orange light. "Wish we had a clue what it is we're actually after here."

"My money's on that demon, Andouille." Dean grinned at his brother while he pulled the weapons bag over his own shoulder.

"Andusias." Sam chuckled. "He's a demon, not a sausage."

Dean slammed the trunk closed and headed for the loading dock. He sighed as they started down and splashed into the water. "I liked these boots." He grimaced while the freezing water climbed up to his knees. He was sure they could have smashed their way in somewhere else, but Sam had been right when he insisted a passing police car might spot it and bust them. "Gonna need a tetanus shot after we get out of this."

Sam moved ahead of him to the narrow door under the truck bays above and bent to the lock. He grabbed the knob and turned it and stared in surprise when it opened. "So much for locking up. Come on."

"Well, that was too easy," Dean muttered. He followed Sam inside and drew his gun and a flashlight. "Find the stairs."

"Straight ahead." Sam waded quickly through the water to the stairs and jogged up, stomping water out of his boots with each step. He moved aside so Dean could get out and hid his smile while his brother held up one of his feet and stared angrily at his boot. "We may as well start our search here. This place has two floors."

"Great." Dean closed his mouth when his single word echoed out into the empty store. "Really tore
this place apart, huh?" he whispered, moving down a wide, empty hall where even the ceiling tiles were gone. The beam of his flashlight cut along bare wall to a set of double doors, and he cautiously pushed through. The main floor of the store was littered with empty counters and shelves whose white paint had been covered in graffiti.

"Front of the store is that way." Sam motioned with his gun and headed for the escalators he could see on the other side. "I'll check upstairs."

"Nothing up there worth looking at unless you want to raid the lingerie department."

Sam jumped and lowered his gun with a muttered curse as Ruby appeared on the escalator and jogged down. "Are you trying to get shot?"

"Pretty sure I told you we had this," Dean snarled at her. His nerves were still twitching from her jarring entrance.

"Pretty sure you're not my mommy and I don't have to listen to you." Ruby showed him her favorite finger again and looked to Sam instead with a smile. "I don't have anything better to do just now so I figured I'd come save you guys some time."

"Gee, I'm underwhelmed." Dean saw his brother's face and rolled his eyes. "Yeah. Whatever. You're here now."

"Stop being a dick," Sam muttered at his brother as he moved past him toward the front of the store. He took three steps around a six-foot-wide pillar and grunted as something slammed into him and threw him to the floor.

"Sam!" Dean bellowed his brother's name and fired into the back of the thing sitting atop him. Red eyes spun to stare at him. Dean resisted the urge to retreat and took two steps forward instead, unloading his clip into the thing's head.

"Dean, look out!" Ruby threw herself at him before the dark creature could body slam him and took the hit herself. She grunted in pain and felt her head slam into the tile floor.

"Shit!" Dean slid across the floor into an empty counter and rolled to his knees. He spun and found Ruby on her back with the dark creature stalking back toward his brother. "Hey!" It turned toward him instead. He quickly traded out the empty clip in his gun and slapped a full one home. "That's it. Come on, big ugly." It stood up impossibly tall, and Dean grinned with the sound of Sam's gun behind it. It jerked and snarled angrily before rearing back and throwing its arms out wide.

Sam gasped as he was picked up by an invisible force and slammed into a wall, several feet off the ground. A moment later, Dean crashed in beside him, and when the creature turned, Sam saw that Ruby was suspended against a pillar behind one of the counters. "Demon," he rasped over the pressure against his chest. He closed his eyes and forced air into his lungs. "An… Andusias."

"What?" Dean stared in surprise. The man-shaped creature began to laugh, and, as they watched, the black began to slough away toward the floor like a dark tide receding from the shore. In its place was a man, taller than Sam and bare-chested with skin that looked burnt to a leathery brown from too many years in the sun. His head was bald. Big, heavy golden hoops hung from his ears in concentric rings that tinkled softly as he moved his head, and, when he rested his huge hands on the belt of a blood-red kilt that skimmed the floor over his legs, the curved talons that took the place of fingers glinted in the emergency light above them.

"A human who knows my name. Wonderful!" Andusias' voice was as big as he was and resonated
in the open space. He narrowed his eyes, looking at the two men on the wall. "And who are you? I know what that is." He stretched one arm out to point toward Ruby. "Little she-demon." He cocked his head to the side when neither man spoke and could practically see the stubbornness radiating from them.

Andusias pursed his lips for a moment and then began to smile. "The little she-demon called you Sam." He pointed to Sam, obviously amused. "Sam Winchester. Which makes you Dean," he said and pointed over at him. "Because one is never far from the other, from what I hear. So, you…" Andusias moved back to Ruby and scraped a talon along the bottom of her jaw until blood dripped onto the floor from the open furrow and she jerked her head away. "…are our little turncoat." He leaned in and licked at her blood before stepping back with a happy expression. "Delicious. And I know just how to ruin your day."

"What?" Ruby panted and struggled vainly against the hold his power had over her. "You're not my type, sweetheart."

"Don't flatter yourself." Andusias waved a clawed hand at her and turned back to the Winchesters. "You see," he said conversationally, "there's an artifact I've been trying to get my hands on, but the people who hid it away were wise enough to set up safeguards so that only a pure human could reach it or even touch it." He gave an elegant shrug. "So far, none of my volunteers have survived."

"Volunteers?" Dean gasped in a breath when the pressure weighing down his chest lessened slightly and heard his brother do the same beside him. He glared up at the demon. "You mean the poor bastards you've been dropping all over town?"

"Sometimes you have to break a few eggs, Dean." Andusias smiled at him, pleased with the night's distraction.

"Like when we offed your pal, Yellow Eyes." Dean smirked at the demon and pulled uselessly on his arms. "You let me down from here and I'll send your happy ass right to him."

"Cheeky." Andusias chuckled at the human's vain attempts to free himself. "Azazel was a punk. Such a daddy's boy." He moved closer and tapped a claw against the center of Dean's chest. "A position I believe you are familiar with."

"Leave him alone!" Sam grunted as the weight on his chest constricted again, and a moment later, it vanished altogether and he fell to the floor on shaky legs with his brother beside him. Dean reached over and caught Sam's shoulder, steadying him when he staggered. "What? You wanna play with your food?"

"No." Andusias grinned again. "You're going to retrieve my item for me."

"Like hell," Dean snarled.

"What item?" Sam asked and gave his brother a quelling glare, silently urging him to be patient; the more they knew, the better off they would be dealing with the demon.

"I knew you would be the curious one." Andusias gifted the human a fond smile. "I think it's been far too long since I came topside to play with mortals." He spread his hands. "What I seek is an instrument."

Sam scowled, confused. "Of torture?"

Andusias threw his head back and roared a laugh before he looked at Sam again. "I'd imagine that
depends on who's playing it. A musical instrument, Sam. Find it, bring it back to me, and you and your brother and even your pet demon may go on your merry way."

"Just like that?" Dean nudged his brother slightly behind him. "Bullshit. You're gonna try and kill us either way."

"You Winchesters." Andusias shook his head fondly. "Always acting as though humans are so morally superior. I give you my word. Bring me what I want, and I won't harm a hair on any of your adorable heads, however good I think they would look mounted on my wall."

"Well, crap." Ruby stared at Andusias in surprise. "He means it." She turned her gaze to the brothers and would have shrugged if she could have moved more than her head.

Sam looked down at his feet for a moment, thinking, and then put a hand on his brother's shoulder while he met Andusias' glowing, red eyes. "He can't lie. It's in the lore," Sam added when Dean whipped his head around to stare at him. "If Andusias gives his word to a mortal, he has to honor it."

Dean shook his head, unconvinced. "Go get it yourself, baldy. We are not your lackeys."

"Today you are, if you want to live." Andusias raised his arms, tipped his head back so his earrings tinkled musically again, and closed his eyes. A piercing cacophony of sound, like an out of tune orchestra, erupted into the room.

Dean clapped his hands over his ears at the assault of sound, but it did little to save him from the pain drilling into his skull. He went to his knees as Sam did the same, and squeezed his eyes closed. He knew he was screaming; he could feel the vibration of sound in his throat, but he couldn't hear his own voice. As suddenly as it began, it stopped, and Dean gasped in shock, looking back up while his ears still rang with the after-effects.

"Call that lesson one." Andusias dropped his hands back to his belt and waited for the two humans to regain their feet. "There will not be a second. You'll simply die in agony. And now that I have touched you both, my power will find you however far from me you go. Distance will not save you."

Sam lowered his hands from his ears and found drops of blood; he had bled from his ears. A quick look showed him the same damage to both his brother and Ruby. He blew out a breath and knew they were screwed. "Fine. Where do we go?"

"Sam!"

"Not a lot of choice right now, Dean," Sam said ruefully. "We bring back what he wants and he has to let us go unharmed. Pretty sure that's the best deal either of us has gotten from a demon in a long time."

Dean flinched at the tone in his brother's voice and ducked his head as the comment hit home and took the fight out of him. He shook out his shoulders and raised his chin. "Yeah, alright. Fine. Let's do this."

Andusias hummed happily to himself. "Good. Beneath the old theater, you'll find access to the floor below this. From there, look for tunnels. You'll know the instrument when you see it." He raised his hand again when Sam took a step toward Ruby. "The little she-demon will keep me company while you're gone."

Sam scowled. "Do you promise not to hurt her too?"
"No," Andusias said firmly. "Now go."

"I'll be fine, Sam." Ruby managed a smile though inside she was afraid, her fear spiking as Andusias dragged his talons through her blonde hair. "I can handle one demonic frat boy."

"Go. Go." Dean shoved Sam ahead of him toward the front of the store. He ducked down, collecting their guns and caught up the straps of their weapons bag while they moved. Andusias' laugh followed them out of the store, and he shuddered once they were out of sight. "She can take care of herself," Dean snarled seeing Sam hesitate momentarily and knowing the reason why. And Dean would never admit to anyone the moment of guilt he felt at leaving her behind, even though she was a demon. "Where's the theater?"

"Uh, dunno." Sam shook his head and pointed. "Mall map."

Dean followed behind him and cursed. "Shit, Sam." He caught his brother's arm when Sam stopped to check the map. "How bad is this?" he asked, seeing the bloody slashes in the back of his jacket.

Sam shrugged stiffly. "Didn't really feel it until now."

"Yeah, not comforting. Hold still." Dean tugged up the back of his brother's jacket and his shirts and hissed between his teeth. "Dude." Four long furrows had been dragged down Sam's back and were still bleeding sluggishly. He shoved Sam back toward the map when he tried to turn. "Hold still."

Sam sighed, hearing the heavy bag hit the floor behind him. He put his attention on the map instead. "We need to go through the atrium, then around to the right. It's next to a men's store. Ow." He hunched forward while his brother started slapping bandages over his wounds.

"Suck it up." Dean smiled grimly as he finished patching up his brother. He tucked the med kit away and pulled out one of the shotguns instead. They both moved quickly through the echoing, empty space of the mall, and Dean waited until they were in the atrium to speak again. "So this demon asshole…"

"Andusias." Sam looked up at the ceiling two floors above and two glass walkways that crossed the space overhead. It was beautiful, even empty of people. "If the lore is right, he's not one of the worst demons. Hell, Bobby said it's full of stories of him actually doing favors for humans if they're polite when they summon him."

"Seriously?" Dean shook his head. "A demon with manners?"

"It makes sense, I guess, that he's sending us after a musical instrument." Sam checked around the next corner and, finding another empty hall, waved his brother forward. "The Ars Goetia lists him as the demon in charge of cacophonous music in hell."

Dean rubbed his pounding forehead ruefully. "I get that. Hey." He slapped Sam's shoulder and pointed. "There's your men's shop. That's gotta be where the theater was." Dean jogged ahead toward a set of three, wide stairs up to a boarded-up booth and two doors on either side. "Think there's any popcorn still in here?"

Sam shook his head fondly and followed him up the stairs. "I wouldn't eat it if there is." He grinned. "The rats probably would have gotten to it already anyway," he added knowing his nearly fearless older brother had a particular loathing of creatures that bordered on phobic.

Dean stifled a groan at the thought and tried the door and sighed. "Locked." He handed his gun back to Sam and got out his lockpicks. It only took him a moment to open the door, and he had to dig out another flashlight from the bag before they headed into the darkness. "No night lights in here."
Sam handed the shotgun back and took out his own flashlight. "Looks like they're using this for storage."

"Back here." Dean found a central hall and followed it back. The threadbare carpeting on the floor muffled their steps. "You know, there's no way this thing he's making us get is good for us, right? I mean, a demon wants it. It can't be good."

Sam nodded in agreement. "There has to be something special about it." He lowered his voice, in case the demon was tracking them. "We might be able to use it against him if we can figure out what it actually does."

Dean smiled. "Exactly what I was thinking. Got a security door on the right." He tapped the 'Employees Only' sign with the barrel of his shotgun and shoved it open. "Stairs down." Every second they moved without something trying to kill them drove Dean's tension level higher. A quick glance back at his brother in the light of Sam's flashlight showed he felt the same.

"Why was the door locked?" Sam asked suddenly, following Dean through a hall and down another flight of stairs that opened into a sub-basement beneath the mall. "The door to the theater. It was locked. We're not the first people he's sent down here."

"Probably mall security." Dean wasn't sure he believed that, but it was as good a reason as any. He looked down at the floor and blew out a breath. A trail of blood drops on the bare cement floor led deeper in to the darkness. "There's a blood trail here."

They followed the macabre path at a steady pace through the darkness. Sam could feel the weight of the mall above them. It gave him a claustrophobic feeling and he wished they could simply leave. A new smell distracted him and Sam wrinkled his nose with distaste. "You smell that?"

Dean coughed softly. "Like something's been rotting down here for a while. I don't like this." He stopped at the mouth of a rough-hewn stone tunnel. The floor around it was covered in rubble that looked as though someone had blown it open with explosives. "This has to be it."

Sam turned to check behind them as they entered the tunnel and couldn't shake the feeling of something holding its breath, waiting for them.

"Sam, catch up," Dean called softly. He waited until his brother was at his back again. "Stay close," he ordered barely above a whisper and headed deeper into the tunnel. It began to slope down while they walked, the angle becoming steep enough after several minutes that Dean was forced to lean backwards and brace himself on the wall to keep from sliding forward.

"This is going to be a pain coming back up," Sam muttered. The roof of the tunnel was low enough that he had to hunch. He aimed his flashlight at the ground and shook his head, seeing the smeared blood trails from whoever had left them climbing back out on hands and knees.

"It's already a pain." Dean turned a corner and found stairs waiting. They led down and turned out of sight, but there was dim, orange light glowing from somewhere further down. "I hate ominous."

Sam smirked. He gritted his teeth as he hunched under the low ceiling and felt the wounds on his back pull painfully beneath the bandages. He shook his head when Dean looked back at him. "I'm fine. Keep going."

Dean shook his head for his stubborn brother, but he couldn't very well call him on his shit; Sam had learned it from his big brother, after all. He hissed out a breath in surprise when his feet lost traction as the stairs turned to ramp, and Dean slid the last few feet to the bottom. He thumped into the
smooth stone wall and dodged aside just in time to avoid being crushed by Sam as he joined him. "Ouch." Dean rubbed his shoulder and looked around them. The tunnel opened into a wide doorway, and he could see a well-lit cavern beyond. "Underground friggin’ caves under a mall in central Ohio. Only us, dude."

Sam chuckled and gave his brother’s shoulder a push. "Stop stalling. Come on." He moved ahead of Dean and had his gun up, entering the chamber. It curved around to the left. Sam turned and his eyes widened in surprise. "Whoa."

Dean stared for a second and nodded. "Yeah. Whoa. That's new." The cave spread out in front of them, sloping down into a shallow bowl. The low roof was completely covered in golden, glowing moss. The very center of the cave had a small pond, and rising from the middle was a stone pedestal with a small, gilt harp resting atop it. "A harp? Seriously? Giant, bad-ass demon dude wants to get his harp on?"

Sam frowned while he and his brother walked cautiously down to the edge of the pool. He brushed the fingers of his left hand over the metallic looking moss above him and ducked his head while tiny, glowing specks scattered in the air like snowflakes. As they got closer, Sam could see writing etched in the metal of the harp’s frame. He splashed a foot into the pool and leaned in for a better look. "Dean, I think… that's the Dagda's harp." His voice held more than a trace of awe.

"Ok, for those of us who haven't read Bobby's whole library for fun…" Dean waved a hand toward the instrument, "…what the hell is a Dagda's harp?"

"Uh, it's Celtic lore." Sam moved around the plinth to get a better look. "The Dagda was a sort of god of war."

"With a harp?" Dean asked incredulously.

Sam smirked. "The harp was supposed to be able to rally an entire army. It'd make them loyal and make them fight like, well, demons. And you could use it to demoralize an opposing army or put them to sleep." He shrugged. "At least that's the lore. But, I mean, how does some all-powerful musical instrument from ancient Ireland - that belonged to a god, no less - end up under a mall in Ohio?"

Dean studied the instrument. He looked around them, but they were the only ones in the cavern. "Think we gotta bring it to big ugly. Unless you can think of a way to protect us from havin' our brains exploded out our ears."

Sam shook his head. "No. I don't like this."

"Me either. No choice." Dean reached for it the same moment as his brother, and together they gripped the frame and lifted it from the pedestal.

Sam grunted and had to put his gun up to steady the harp with his other hand. "Heavier than it looks. Wow." He felt the metal warming uncomfortably under his hands and flinched. "It's getting hotter."

"I don't feel anything. Put it back down." Dean scowled when his brother’s hands jerked on the harp. "Sam, let it go."

"I can't." Sam's fingers weren't obeying his commands. It felt as if they were glued to the harp and the metal was becoming burning hot. "Dean? I can't let it go!"

"Shit!" Dean tossed his shotgun safely away from the water and grabbed the harp with both hands. He twisted it viciously and pulled and succeeded in ripping his brother's hands free. "Ok. Ok. Stupid
"piece of crap." He thumped the harp back onto its pedestal and spun when Sam splashed down into the water. "Hey, you alright?"

Sam shook his head and tore his jacket off. He ripped his flannel open, buttons flying, and ripped that off as well. "Burning. It's burning up my arms!"

"What?" Dean knelt in the water and caught Sam's left arm before he could submerge it. "Let me look."

"It hurts." Sam dunked his right arm beneath the water, trying to alleviate the burning sensation, and looked over at his left arm stretched out in Dean's hands.

"What the hell is this?" Dean turned Sam's arm up to the golden light from above. Dark marks began to crawl across his skin, moving from his hand up his forearm. He took a closer look, staring. "Are these… musical notes? What the fuck?"

Sam pulled his right arm out of the water to stare. "It is. It's… it's music. Dean!" He caught Dean's arm and shoved his sleeve back to bare his forearm. "Are you alright?"

Dean turned his own arm back and forth in the light, confused. "I'm fine. No screwy graffiti. What the hell?"

Sam's eyes followed the black ink as it slowly crawled toward his elbow and under the bandage covering the cut the evil Santa had given him. He looked up at the harp and back down at his arm while a sickening feeling began to curl in his gut. "I, uh… I think I get it."

"What?" Dean took the corner of his flannel and tried scrubbing the marks from his brother's bare arm with no effect.

"Andusias. He said it had to be a 'pure' human." Sam swallowed around the lump in his throat. "Demon blood, Dean. There's… I'm not pure," Sam whispered, staring at the truth of that on his skin while the burning sensation settled into an uncomfortable warmth he could feel spreading.

"Shit," Dean hissed. He shook his head and slapped a hand to his brother's shoulder. "You're plenty pure, Sammy. Your pathetic love life's proof of that, dude. I've seen your lack of game in action." He smirked, pleased to see the hint of a smile on his brother's face. "Come on. We'll take the damn thing back to that asshole and he can fix this. Get up."

Sam used his brother's arm to shove himself to his feet and left the harp to him; he didn't want to risk touching it again and making whatever was happening to him move even faster. He looked up while Dean angrily shoved the harp into the weapons bag, and Sam froze. "Dean," he whispered. "Think we're about to find out why the other 'volunteers' never made it." All around them, eyes were blinking.

"What the hell are those?" Dean swung the weapons bag to his back and started easing toward where he had tossed the shotgun. The bodies of whatever creatures were watching them were hidden in the moss.

"I'd rather not know," Sam muttered. He followed at Dean's back until they were up out of the water. He turned his head to look back into the cavern, and the floor seemed to roll beneath his feet. His head was spinning and he couldn't find his balance. He felt Dean catch him before he could fall and gasped in a breath. "Shit. Shit."

Dean didn't bother asking what was wrong; he could see the mystical notes crawling further up his brother's arms, under the sleeves of his t-shirt, until they swirled into view running up his throat.
"Lean on me. Hold on, Sammy."

Sam nodded, powerless to argue. "Gotta go."

"Yeah." Dean pulled his brother with him and, not for the first time, cursed the fact that he had gone and grown taller than his big brother. He grunted, dragging Sam in a drunken stumble to the tunnel out. "It's like… trying to wrangle a giraffe."

"Shut up." Sam huffed a soft laugh in spite of the spinning in his head and the growing warmth spreading through his body. He blinked his eyes open when they reached the tunnel and looked back. "Light's going."

Dean pushed Sam ahead of him and turned back. His brother was right; the golden glow from the moss was dimming as he watched, sparkling and then fading out. The eyes moved as the light went, coming closer, and now Dean heard something hiss in the growing darkness. "Crap." He turned back and shoved Sam up the incline. "We gotta move."

Sam groaned and dug in, forcing his legs to move. He kept both hands on the wall to brace himself against the spinning only he could feel. The burning sensation from his hands had climbed up his arms and was even then spreading down through his chest toward his legs. He didn't need to lift his shirt to know that the mystical ink was spreading.

Dean backed up reflexively as the golden light faded completely, leaving only the creepy glowing eyes blinking at them. And then they rushed forward. "Sam, move!" Dean spun and shoved Sam up the hill. They scrambled up to the first turn, and, once around it, Dean aimed his shotgun back down toward the cavern and pulled the trigger. The sound was deafening in the enclosed space, making his ears ring, and it was answered by a chorus of high-pitched screams. "Shit. Shit!"

"Dean, come on!" Sam reached behind him and found Dean's shoulder. He pulled, tugging his brother up with him.

"Flashlight," Dean gasped and pulled his own out. A moment later he heard Sam's click on and their little passage was filled with the harsh, white light. "Go. Go. Go."

"Did you see them?" Sam asked as he bounced from one side of the tunnel to the other while they climbed. He groaned the third time he cracked his head on the low ceiling.

"No." Dean shone his light behind them. He heard something snarl but there was nothing to see, and that only made him more nervous. He caught Sam against his side when his brother slipped and braced them both. "How bad?"

Sam shook his head. "M'fine." He leaned more heavily on Dean than he wanted to but couldn't stop himself. "Just… ground needs to stop spinning. Crap." He let Dean drag him along in a daze, barely registering when the tunnel leveled out again and they were moving more quickly. He startled in surprise as he was shoved into a wall with a thump. "Dean?"

"Company." Dean turned back, aiming his light along the shotgun, and every muscle in his body tensed as the eyes from the cavern below rushed into view. They boiled into the light like an angry, dark tide, and the beam glinted off sharp claws he could hear scrabbling against the rock. Dean fired his shotgun again into the center of the swarm and grabbed his brother. They ran in a stumbling gait with Dean barely keeping his brother on his feet and the feel of something dark and hungry nipping at their heels.

Sam was gasping for breath by the time they burst from the tunnel back into the basement of the
mall. He staggered and went to his knees. He grabbed his gun from the small of his back and turned, falling back on his rear when Dean's voice rose up in a shout. "Dean!" He raised shaking arms, sighting along the wildly swinging beam of his brother's flashlight and fired above Dean's body where he had gone to the ground.

Dean kicked against the thing that had grabbed his right leg. His foot connected, and he threw his arms over his head while Sam's shots rang out over his head. "Son of a bitch!" he shouted and pulled himself over the floor toward his flashlight and, he hoped, his shotgun; it had gone flying when they'd taken his feet out from under him. "Dammit." His fingers touched the butt of the shotgun. He wrapped his fingers around the barrel of the gun, pulling it in, and cried out as claws pierced his right calf.

Sam swung his flashlight toward his brother again and saw the black creature hunched over his leg. "Dean, don't move!" He blinked, trying to clear his fuzzy vision, and fired along the beam of his light. The creature was torn from Dean's leg with a shriek and rolled into the darkness out of sight. "You alright?"

Dean groaned and sat up. "Yeah. Sam, watch out!" he called while a group of the creatures rushed toward his fallen brother. He spun the shotgun around and pulled the trigger. It clicked empty and Dean cursed. "Ah! Son of a bitch!" He rolled to his feet, ignoring the burn in his leg, and went to his brother. He used the shotgun like a club and swung at the nearest creature. "Fore!"

Sam rolled away from the onrushing creatures and got to his knees. He braced a hand on the floor to steady himself and looked up to watch Dean bat three more of the creatures back down the tunnel. He gave a soft laugh and shook his head, amused in spite of their situation. "Who knew you… your mini-golf addiction would pay off?"

Dean grinned. He used the moment of respite and quickly loaded new shells into the shotgun. "You get up?"

Sam nodded and struggled to his feet even though he was sure he wouldn't stay on them long. If he didn't move, he would lose his brother ahead of time, and that was no option for Sam. "We should… we should run," he panted and had to fight to push the words out of lungs that felt as though they were being constricted.

"One hasty retreat coming up." Dean fired two more rounds into the tunnel, making the creatures scream angrily as he dragged Sam's arm over his shoulder to pull him along. "Keep up, little brother." The beam from Dean's flashlight on the floor behind them gave him just enough light to run.

"Wasn't Andusias," Sam said suddenly while they ran.

"What?" Dean turned and fired another round at the creatures behind them. He only had three more before he would have to stop and reload again.

"Killings. He didn't…" Sam stumbled and nearly took his brother down with him. "Just disposed of the bodies."

"Now's not the time, Sammy." Dean sobbed a breath in relief when they reached the stairs. "Geek later. Stairs now." He heaved Sam up beside him as they went, and the light from the flashlight faded quickly into darkness.

"Spare light… jacket pocket."
"Sam." Dean stopped for a moment and leaned his brother on the wall. "Your jacket's down in that
cave. Remember?" He quickly put the shotgun back in the duffel and took out his phone. He flipped
it open and blinked in the light from the screen. He shone it back down the stairs behind them and
they were thankfully empty. "Ok, here we go."

They reached the top of the stairs with Dean pulling his brother along while Sam grew heavier with
each passing step. "Sam. Sammy? You still with me?" In answer, Sam collapsed against him and
took them both to the floor. "No, no, no! Hey. Hey!" Dean aimed his flashlight at Sam's face and felt
a cold chill pass along his spine. The magical ink crawled across Sam's cheeks in writhing lines.
"Shit. Shit! No. This is not happening."

Dean knelt up, took a deep breath, and pulled Sam's heavy frame over his shoulders. "Friggin'…
sasquatch. Holy crap." He groaned under Sam's weight as he headed for the front of the theater.
"Just hold on, buddy." He made a silent promise as he carried his brother out into the empty mall—he
would make Andusias fix his brother or take the bastard down with him, whatever it took. The
weight of the harp in the bag on his shoulder felt like an accusation. If only he had taken it before
Sam had touched it. He shook his head at himself and hitched Sam a little higher. His wounded calf
protested the extra heft of his giant, little brother, and Dean was limping dangerously by the time the
Sears storefront came into view.

"Hey!" Dean shouted as he staggered inside. "Hey! Get over here, you demonic asshole!" He went
to his knees inside the store and let Sam slide gently off his shoulders to the tile floor. "Your screwy,
dagwood harp thing did something to him!" Dean looked up as Andusias walked slowly toward
them and stopped, staring down at them. "You fix this."

"Fascinating." Andusias knelt beside them and, ignoring the snarl of warning from the elder brother,
rán a claw lightly up Sam's bare arm to his shoulder while the black notes writhed in its wake across
his skin. "Evidence of the taint Azazel left in his blood. I suppose I should have warned him not to
touch the harp." He turned his eyes to Dean and smiled thinly. "Do you have my harp?"

Dean sucked in a breath for patience. "You gave us your word if we brought you the damn harp,
you'd let us go unharmed." He thumped the flat of his hand on his brother's chest and glared up at the
demon's red eyes. "This ain't unharmed, chuckles."

Andusias sighed as he stood. "I suppose allowing the harp to drain his life now that you've returned
would constitute an abuse of my bond."

Dean let out a breath in relief and then realized what was missing; Ruby. "Where'd peroxide Barbie
go?"

Andusias let out a soft laugh at that description. "I released her. Her conversation became tedious,
and she did not scream pretty enough to keep my attention." He quirked a brow at the expression of
mingled disgust and relief on Dean's face. Do you care about the little she-demon?"

"Not even a little," Dean said quickly. "But he apparently does. Now fix him." He could feel Sam's
breathing stuttering under his hand on his chest.

Andusias stretched one clawed hand down toward the brothers. "For that I will need the Dagda's
harp." He smiled broadly at Dean's angry expression and shifted his gaze meaningfully toward Sam.
"You should hurry. The curse does not usually take so long to do its work. His mind must be quite
strong."

"Dammit." Dean let the weapons bag slide off his shoulder to the floor with a thump. He pulled it
open and withdrew the Dagda's harp. "Don't you screw with us, Baldy."
Andusias plucked the harp from Dean's hands and held it up so the gold glittered in the security lights. He caressed a claw over the strings and hummed happily to himself when they chimed. "Such a tiny thing to contain such power."

Dean's eyes were on his brother where the notes were slowing their dance over his skin. "Gloat later and fix this!"

"I would normally punish a human who spoke to me with such disrespect," Andusias growled at him. "However," here he stretched one hand toward Dean and extended his claws like a contented cat. "I have only to wait a few short months and you will be within my reach again." He threw his head back and laughed as the blood drained from Dean's face, even while the human attempted to hide his fear. "Delicious. The taste of damnation on a mortal's soul. Now, stand away from him."

Dean reluctantly stood and backed a few grudging steps from his brother while the demon knelt again next to Sam. He vibrated with tension, allowing a demon so close to his helpless brother, but there was no alternative. His anger peaked when Andusias snagged a claw in his brother's t-shirt and ripped it open over his chest. "Hey! Leave him alone!"

"Be still." Andusias flung a hand at Dean and pinned him to the wall. He looked back down at Sam and the mystical notes decorating his flesh and had to fight to resist the urge to open him up with his claws. It was so very tempting. He shook his head at himself and instead held the harp, plucking the strings gently with a claw. "This instrument is capable of many things, Dean Winchester. It can win wars, fell nations, and in the right hands…" He closed his eyes and plucked an intricate chord on the ancient instrument. "…it can heal any wound."

Dean struggled against the demon's power holding him in place, but could only watch. Music grew softly from the harp, filling the air around him. The harp shimmered in Andusias' hands, and motes of light began to float down from it to his brother's bare chest while the soft, melodic tune continued. He let out a breath of the tension in his body while the music moved over him and was surprised to feel a sense of peace. "What's the hell's happening?"

Andusias continued playing, ignoring the human, and kept his eyes on Sam's chest instead. The unnatural ink playing across his skin began to slow and finally to fade while the music grew.

"Sammy, come on," Dean breathed while the demon played. He could see the notes beginning to fade from Sam's chest and face. Sam's back arched up from the floor suddenly as he sucked in a deep breath and then collapsed as the music slowed and stopped. "Sam? Let me down, dammit!" He grunted in surprise as he fell to the floor. Dean crawled over to his brother and caught his shoulder while Sam groaned softly and opened his eyes. "Hey, Sammy."

Andusias stood and cradled the harp in the crook of one arm. He watched the brothers and clicked the claws of his free hand against his belt. "It is too bad the trow failed to kill him."

"What?" Dean demanded angrily, but the demon only laughed. Before he could say anything else, the lights flickered and Andusias was gone. "Shit."

"Dean." Sam blinked groggily. He braced his hands on the floor to sit up.

"Whoa, hang on." Dean slid an arm behind his brother's back to help.

"I feel fine." Sam looked down at his arms and chest and frowned. He caught the edge of the Band-Aid on his right arm and pulled. "I mean, I feel… I feel fine." He pulled it off and looked in surprise at the undamaged skin. "The cut's gone." He looked at his finger and yanked the Band-Aid off. "Dude, my nail grew back!"
"Whoa!" Dean pulled what was left of Sam's shirt off his arms and then peeled the uppermost bandage off his brother's back. "Your back's healed too."

Sam shook his head in wonder. "The harp did this?"

"Yeah." Dean stood and pulled Sam up with him. "That demon asshole kept his word and healed you." He looked down at his own leg and grinned with the realization that the pain from the creature's claw was gone from his calf. "Damn, that thing was effective."

Sam looked around the empty store and could feel that they were alone. "Where's Ruby?"

"She annoyed him so much he let her go." Dean smirked and picked up the weapons bag. "This is my surprised face."

Sam rolled his eyes fondly and wrapped his arms around himself, shivering in the chill air. "What do you suppose he's going to do with it?"

Dean shrugged and started off to the back of the store and the Impala. "Hell if I know. You wanna summon him up and ask?"

Sam snorted. "No way. Ruby might know."

"I've had all the demons I can take today. Move it." Dean gave his brother a push ahead of him. Wearing nothing but his jeans and boots and huddled around himself against the cold, his little brother appeared more like the kid Dean remembered than the capable hunter he had become. It made his heart ache all the more with the knowledge he would be leaving him soon. "Sorry, Sammy," he whispered.

"What?" Sam turned back to his brother and saw a fleeting expression of sadness before it was wiped away by a smirk.

"Sorry I didn't grab your damn jacket before we left that cave." Dean strode past him to the stairs and jogged down them into the water on the loading dock. "Lookin' at you half naked was not on my to-do list today. You can have mine."

"Shut up, jerk." Sam gave a full-body shudder when his legs sank into the water to his knees. "Holy crap that's cold. And your jacket wouldn't fit me. I'm not fun-sized."

"Quit whining, bitch. We'll come back tomorrow with some flame-throwers and clear those little bastards out of the cave." Dean pulled open the door with a laugh and looked up the incline to his baby parked at the top, gleaming in the moonlight. "Let's go home."

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The End.

Rolling the dice…
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Info: A collection of Stand-Alone One Shots, each chapter prompted by a literal roll of the dice. See each chapter for details. Hurt/comfort/awesome/bamf!Sam/Dean/and many others.

Author's Note: I held off on this one until after the Olympics. I didn't figure many people would even notice the wait with all that Olympic goodness going on. Lol Also, I FINALLY GOT A DAMN JOB! So that's sucking some time as well. Heh. But that's a good reason.

For the record, I've mostly avoided writing in season 4 over the years because my pathetically soft widdle Winchester heart can't handle the rift between the boys in this season. I admit it. XD But since I decided to go up by season in this collection, I refuse to wuss out here in chapter 4/Season 4. :P I'm gonna try to bring the angst but don't be surprised if I slip off the wagon back into comfort town by the end. Heh.

*For those reading on Fanfiction dot net, you can see pics of each roll on my Facebook page or the AO3 posting of this story, if you're interested. Lol

Beta'd by the always awesome JaniceC678 :D– Friend and Muse's co-conspirator.

**Follow me on Facebook as "Disasteriffic Kaz" for frequent fic updates or just to chat! ~Reviews are Love~

Disclaimer: They're not mine. The world's not mine. But Kripke is my, er, Chuck? And I worship at his altar. Heh.

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Roll the Dice:
1: A treasure chest
2: A mirror
3: A ship

Setting- Season 4

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Dean looked up with a scowl as the motel room door opened and his brother appeared. "You duckin' out while I'm in the shower for a reason? And it better not be short, hot, and demonic. Again."

Sam stopped half in the door and stared while Dean's angry words hung in the air. He shook his head and came in all the way holding up a brown take-out bag. "I got dinner."

"Oh." Dean cleared his throat uncomfortably while Sam closed the door and came over to the table,
setting the bag down. "Uh, thanks."

"Yeah." Sam set the bag on the table and swallowed the bitter taste in his mouth at the evidence of his brother's lingering distrust. "Chinese from the place down the street." He opened the bag and started pulling out boxes. "And you need to stop worrying about me every time I'm out of your sight for more than ten seconds."

Dean snorted and grabbed the Kung Pao before his brother could. "This where you tell me you're a big boy now? 'Cause I've got evidence to the contrary."

"Dean, dammit." Sam blew out a breath and threw his hands up in frustration, pacing away from the table. He took a moment to collect himself and his temper, reminding himself again, as he always did, that his big brother was alive and that was worth some frustration. It didn't stop the constant distrust and lack of communication from making him want to pull his hair out, though. "You and Castiel made it clear if I keep trying to learn to use my power, I'm dead." He turned back to his brother and shrugged. "So I stopped."

"Because it's wrong, Sam." Dean stared him down angrily.

Sam shook his head. "No. It's how we're going to stop Lilith." He waved a hand and headed for the bathroom. "Or it was. Can we just... can we not argue about this?"

Dean sat back with his food while Sam put the bathroom door between them. "Dammit," he muttered. On the one hand, he could understand how Sam had been taken in by that Ruby bitch and even how his little brother could see 'good' in the powers given to him by a demon. Hadn't they spent the better part of two years once trying to use Sam's visions for good? Sam could pull demons from people without harming the host; Saving people. He could see how his brother was seduced by that. Yet, as great as that might seem on the surface, Dean knew with every fiber of his being, even without the angelic commentary, that it would only lead to a dark place that Sam might not come back from.

He shook his head and took a bite of his food. On the other hand, the rage that had built up in him during his time in hell sure seemed to enjoy using Sam for a target and 'rational' didn't always enter into it. Dean knew that objectively, yet even the thought of Sam with Ruby made him see red. Some soft voice in the back of his mind wondered if his emotions had been screwed with, knowing the angels had pieced him back together from the ground up and weren't above manipulating them, but it was quickly silenced and forgotten as the bathroom door opened and Sam came back into the room.

"Food's getting cold."

Sam took that for what it was - the only peace offering Dean was able to give him just then. "Thanks." He took the container of Mu shoo before his brother could complain and sat across from him. "You find any trace of Lilith while I was gone."

"Not sure." Dean nudged the laptop toward his brother. "Got signs of demonic activity near San Diego. Could be anything, though."

"It is Lilith."

"Shit!" Dean yelped and spun with his gun out and Sam beside him, only to be faced with the serious expression of Castiel behind his chair. He briefly considered shooting the angel on principle but wisely lowered his gun. "Wear a damn bell, Cas!" He waved his left hand back and forth between them with a scowl. "And how many times we gotta discuss personal space? Get off my ass."
Sam quickly put his own gun away and took several steps back from the angel of the Lord. He wondered if it would ever *not* hurt that the angels he had spent his life praying to thought he was an abomination. He gave his head a shake, stuffing those thoughts back down deep. They were right, and there was nothing he could do about it. "Castiel. Are you sure it's Lilith?"

"Her or her demons, yes." Castiel moved away when Dean turned and dropped back into his chair and pulled the laptop closer. "She's trying to break another seal."

"Which one?" Sam asked curiously.

"We are unsure," Castiel said with a scowl for the youngest Winchester. "She is after more than one seal right now. We are tracking her demons attempting to break two other seals." He looked down at Dean and nodded. "You will have to stop her in San Diego. We can't spare the troops."

"Wait. You're gonna send us after a pack of demons, and you're not comin' along for backup?" Dean stood angrily and gave the angel a hefty push to his shoulder that would have sent a human reeling but did little more than nudge Castiel.

"We can only fight this war on so many fronts, Dean," Castiel's gaze slid past the hunter to his brother. He felt a brief, slight twinge of guilt at the danger he was sending them in to but he ruthlessly crushed it before it could show on his face. He had his orders. "I must go. They are in the San Diego Museum of Art. Stop them from breaking this seal."

"How many?" Sam asked hurriedly before the angel could vanish again. "How many has she opened now?"

Castiel's lips thinned. "If she succeeds in breaking all three seals she is after right now, she will have broken thirty-three."

Sam sucked in a breath as the angel vanished with a soft fluttering sound. "Half. She'll be halfway there," he whispered and felt cold inside at the implications. "I didn't think she'd broken that many already."

Dean ran his hands through his hair in a moment of frustration. "Ok, let's go. If we shag ass, we can be in San Diego by morning." He caught his brother's eyes before they both started packing, and Dean could not shake the sinking feeling that was settling into the pit of his stomach.

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Sam stood on the sidewalk and looked up at the carved stone façade of the museum. He smiled. "You know those statues are actual artists?" He pointed. "That's Diego Velasquez. He painted for King Phillip in seventeenth century Spain, and…"

"Only nerds care, Sammy." Dean interrupted and chuckled at the disgusted look his brother gave him. "Come on." He looked around the empty parking lot and headed for the side of the building. "We need to get in before the next security pass."

They rounded the side of the building and Sam grabbed his brother's arm, pulling him to a stop. "Dean. Look." A white SUV with 'security' painted across the doors sat at a diagonal, front end resting against the white brick of the building with the headlights still gleaming.


"Not a chance," Sam said with a roll of his eyes. He drew his gun and approached the car cautiously with Dean at his side. "Body behind the wheel."
"Yeah." Dean moved up on the driver's side and pulled the door open. "Ah, crap. This poor bastard's had it." The front of the security guard's white uniform shirt was red with his own blood from a gaping wound sliced in the front of his throat.

"They're already here." Sam put his gun away and pulled the shotguns out of the bag on his brother's back, passing Dean his.

"No parlor tricks, Sam," Dean said firmly. "I mean it. You do not give those dick angels a reason to smite you."

Sam gritted his teeth together and gave a short nod. "Can we focus on not getting killed now?" He beat Dean to the side door and pulled it open, peering inside. "Clear."

Dean followed him through the door and felt tension singing along his nerves. He heard their footsteps echo softly on the marble floor, and they stopped at the end of the short hall to listen. "You hear anything?"

Sam frowned, moving out into the impressive entry of the museum. "Nothing." He looked around at the stone and glass and posters for the various exhibits. He closed his eyes.

The silence was making him twitchy, and Dean gave a low growl in his throat when he saw Sam with his eyes closed, concentrating. He slapped his brother's shoulder. "Dude! What did I say not two minutes ago?"

"I'm not..." Sam sighed and opened his eyes to look at Dean. "I wasn't doing anything bad, alright? I don't think they're here anymore. We missed them." He strode out into the museum. "We need to know what they were here after."

"And if they already broke the damn seal." Dean shrugged off the urge to ask how he knew the demons were gone and headed for the first exhibit hall. He already knew the answer and bringing it up would just be poking an already sore spot. Regardless of what Sam said, though, he kept his shotgun out and ready. "Place like this, there should be more security guards somewhere." He had a feeling, though, they were either already dead, like the man outside, or worse, walking around with black eyes.

Sam knew they were alone but kept his gun out anyway; it never paid to be cocky, he knew. No demons in the building didn't mean no threat, and his hunter senses were still telling him there was something there. "You feel that?" he whispered.

Dean nodded. "Yeah. There's something lurkin' in here." It was an itch along his spine he had learned long ago to never ignore; a lifetime of honed instincts that warned him they were not as alone as they thought they were. He spotted a flickering light through a doorway ahead of them and waved a hand at his brother to peel off to the far end and a second door so they could flank whatever was waiting for them. He moved quickly to the door and led inside with his shotgun.

"Anybody home?" Dean asked as he surveyed the room. It was a display of jewels and ornate, wooden boxes like treasure chests. The banners hanging from the thirty-foot ceiling proclaimed it to be a collection of Russian antiquities. Three bodies lay sprawled across the floor, staining the marble red with blood. Between them, lay the remains of one of the chests. It had been smashed open, and pieces of wood were scattered around the room. Dean frowned and knelt down.

"Find something?" Sam asked softly as he eased into the room opposite his brother.

Dean picked up one of the slats of the destroyed chest and held it up, looking at it in the light
flickering from above. "Dude, I think this used to be a curse box. There's runes burned into the wood."

Sam lowered his shotgun in surprise and looked around for a bigger piece. He spotted what must have been the lid and went to a knee. "I think you're right." He turned over the wood and traced his fingers over symbols he recognized. "This looks like ancient Slavic maybe. I'd need a reference to actually read this, but I'm pretty sure that's the symbol for binding of power."

"Man, am I glad you spent your teens inhaling Bobby's library." Dean looked up and smirked at his brother. "Nerd."

"Shut up," Sam muttered but he smiled, pleased to hear the familiar teasing tone in his brother's voice. Being on a hunt together felt natural. It felt right as few things had since his big brother had been saved from Hell. It was comforting that, at least for a while, they could slip back into the easy balance that had always been a part of who they were. "Do you think this was the seal?"

Dean shook his head and stood, turning to survey the room again. "Last seal she broke while we were around was total mayhem and bodies dropping like flies." He nodded to the three dead men on the floor. "This ain't enough for a broken seal."

"And demons didn't kill these guys either," Sam observed. He bent over the nearest body, careful to keep his knee out of the blood pool. "These look like slash marks, like claws."

"What the hell happened here?"

Sam put his fingers against the dead man's throat and his frown deepened. "This guy might actually have been a demon. He's cold." He wiped his fingers on his jeans and got back to his feet. "Like, long dead. Skin's already going stiff."

"And we know demons don't mind rackin' up the mileage on their meat suits," Dean muttered. "So whatever they let out, it can take down demons. Great." He turned back to his brother and froze. "Sam," he hissed. There was something large and dark in the shadows behind Sam's exposed back, something with a single yellow eye watching him, and that particular eye color had never meant good things for them.

Sam managed to half-turn before his brother's shotgun roared in front of him and something heavy slammed into his back and rode him to the floor. He shouted in surprised pain, feeling the bite of claws into his back and left arm. "Get... off!" Sam shouted. He shoved up against the thing on his back with all his strength and saw Dean's boots suddenly in front of his face.

"Head down, Sammy!" Dean yelled. He turned his shotgun and used the butt like a golf club, taking a swing at the ugly head of the creature. His strike drove it from Sam's back in a tumble, and Dean grabbed his brother's arm, dragging Sam to his feet. "You good? What the hell is that thing?"

Sam wheezed for breath and aimed the shotgun he had managed to hold onto at the creature. It had a single wide, yellow eye in a bald head. Its body was covered in tough brown, leathery skin, and Sam shuddered when the long, talon-like claws on its fingers scrabbled over the marble floor. "Likho. I think... looks like a likho."

Dean backed them both up a step until he felt his heel hit one of the bodies behind them. "Great. How do we kill it?"

"Aim for the eye?" Sam said and raised his own shotgun accordingly.

"You don't sound sure of that." Dean felt Sam stagger against him and used his shoulder to keep him
"Best guess." Sam's vision was beginning to blur, from blood loss or pain he wasn't sure, but he knew he needed to sit down and soon. He fired into the likho's face at the same moment his brother did, the sound of the shotguns firing filling the air around them. The creature screamed, clawed at its own face, and spun away from them.

"Come on." Dean pulled Sam with him out of the room and shoved him into the wall outside the door. He let the weapons bag slide off his shoulder to the floor with a thump and shoved his shotgun inside. "You stay here."

"Dean, no," Sam protested. He had to slam his eyes closed for a moment when Dean pushed his shoulder, and hence his back, into the wall. The pain radiated through his body and took his breath.

"Yeah. You're outta this one, little brother." Dean eyed the smear of blood Sam's back left on the wall worriedly. He drew his gun from the small of his back and ducked down to pull one of the machetes from the bag. "Give it another face full of salt if it tries to get past me."

"Dammit." Sam scrubbed his free hand over his face and then forced his aching body upright. He would not let his brother down. "Be careful."

Dean snorted. "Not in the job description. Ok, ugly. Let's dance." He rushed back into the exhibit room and found the likho huddled over one of the bodies with its claws speared into the man's chest over his heart. "Playin' with your food. Nice." He sent a lead bullet into the beast's eye that whipped its head back and quickly followed with a second shot and then a third into where he hoped its heart was. It howled and fell to the floor, writhing with its hands curled over the bloody hole where its eye had been.

"Dean?"

"I'm good." Dean spared a look and found Sam leaning in the door with his shotgun pointed at the creature. He tucked his handgun away and gave the machete a twirl. "Let's see how this thing does without a head." He stood over the creature, and, as it raised its head from the floor with a snarl, swung his blade and severed the head with a grunt of effort. It fell to the floor with a wet splat, and Dean kicked it across the room.

"You better step back," Sam warned while the likho's body continued to twitch, one clawed hand shooting out toward his brother's leg.

"Crap." Dean danced away from the claws and stomped his boot down on the wrist. Another swing of the blade severed the hand and left a chip in the marble floor that quickly filled with blood.

Sam allowed his shotgun to droop and leaned more heavily against the wall now that the immediate danger had passed. "They were cannon fodder."

Dean nodded. "Yeah. They left these bastards behind to keep one-eye busy while they got away with whatever was in the box."

"If you start quoting 'Seven', I'm taking the car and leaving you here." Sam smiled when Dean grinned at him. He spotted the empty display the curse box must have come from and walked stiffly over while his brother dragged the likho's body and head into the center of the room with the dead demons. "You're not setting a fire in a museum."

"You got a better idea?" Dean waved a hand. "We can't just leave that thing here for anyone to find."
"Plenty of room in the trunk." Sam walked stiffly to the empty display. He reached in, careful of the jagged pieces of broken glass, and pulled out the information plaque.

Dean nudged the likho's body with the toe of his boot and scowled. Sam was right, he supposed. He stripped a suit jacket off one of the dead men and wrapped the creature's head in it. He had a feeling that he should keep it away from the body. "What do you got?" he asked, looking up at his brother.

"According to this, the box was found in a burial mound in the northern Ukraine." Sam looked down at the remnants on the floor. "It was in a crypt with old east Slavic poems carved into the stone depicting the figure of Baba Yaga and how God imprisoned her."

"Baba-who?"

Sam shook his head. "We need to get out of here first."

Dean sighed. He picked up the head and handed the make-shift sack to his brother. "You carry that." He narrowed his eyes, watching Sam move stiffly and carefully. "How bad you hurt?"

"I've had worse," Sam said simply. He left the room and bent to pick up the weapons bag. He slapped a hand out to the wall to stay standing when his back protested the movement. "Crap." He forced himself to straighten before Dean could see just how injured he was.

"Not foolin' anyone," Dean muttered at his brother's retreating back. He knew Sam was hurt worse than he was admitting to, and he would damn soon find out just how bad. First though, they had a body to deal with.

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"Sam, get the hell out here already!" Dean shouted through the closed bathroom door. His little brother had made a beeline for the bathroom as soon as they got to the motel. Dean had glanced over at Sam's vacated seat and the sight of the blood staining the vinyl had scared the crap out of him. Whatever issues might be between them at the moment did not change in the slightest Dean's instinctive need to protect and take care of his little brother.

He had the first aid kit in hand now and pounded a fist on the door. "I mean it, Sammy. You open this door or I'm knockin' it down!" He let out a breath, reigning in his temper, remembering the empty tone in his brother's voice when Sam had spoken about his months spent alone patching himself up. "Sam, come on. You're not alone anymore, remember? Let me look at it. Sooner we get you patched up, sooner we get on with this job," he said, trying for reasonable. Dean let out a relieved breath when he heard the lock click and the door inched open.

Sam let the door swing open and shook his head at himself. "Yeah, alright." He had fully planned on taking care of his own wounds, but even stubbornness couldn't get past the fact they were mostly on his back and out of his reach. "Sorry. Uh… old habits."

"Uh-huh." Dean gave him a push toward the table. "Sit down and get your shirts off," he ordered, seeing that Sam had already left his jacket on the sink. He bit his lip when Sam went past him and he saw the bloody tears in the back of his flannel. "Geez, dude."

Sam gave a soft huff of laughter as he sat. "That jacket's toast. Gonna need a new one. That thing had claws like a freak."

"I'll go roast it in those woods behind the motel after I get you patched up." Dean grabbed the ice bucket off the bathroom counter and pointed an imperious finger at his brother on the way to the door. "Don't go anywhere."
Sam rolled his eyes while Dean stepped out to the ice machine and closed the door. He pulled his t-shirt and flannel up and struggled to get them off over his head, cursing his usual habit of wearing layers just then. He was gasping for breath by the time he got them off and left them in a pile on the floor next to his chair. Sam slumped forward over the table and rested his head on his forearms, giving in to a moment of weakness now that he knew Dean was going to fix it. He snorted another laugh and felt tears burn his eyes, realizing just how much he had missed that. For his entire life, the one sure thing that remained as constant as the tides was that, no matter what happened, his big brother would be there to fix it. Until he wasn't. Sam squeezed his eyes closed as the motel room door opened again and Dean's heavy steps returned, setting the ice bucket next to his head.

"Sammy?" Dean asked, concerned when his brother didn't lift his head. He heard a sniff and swallowed back the snarky comment. Instead, he rested a hand on the back of Sam's neck for a second, the age-old gesture of comfort coming easily for a change. "Your back looks like burger meat. This ain't gonna feel good. Stay like that."

"Ok." Sam ducked his head a little further when his voice came out rough, feeling humiliated at letting his emotions get a hold of him like that. The fact that Dean wasn't poking at him about made it all the harder to breathe past the lump in his throat.

Dean knew he could be a dick sometimes, but he wasn't so much of a dick that he would harass his little brother for missing him. Even now, years later, the memory of that fateful night in Cold Oak and the pain of that loss was as clear in his mind as if it happened yesterday. He eyed the three long furrows clawed down his brother's back and opened the bottle of disinfectant. "Incoming."

Sam nodded and sucked in a breath while Dean performed well-meaning torture on his back, pouring the disinfectant over the wounds. He gritted his teeth together, digging his nails into his palms until finally he got the two solid pats on his shoulder that meant it was over. He blew out the breath he had been holding and lifted his head. "Stitches?"

"Too ragged." Dean caught the other chair with his foot and dragged it over. "Probably would have been cleaner if the claws hadn't had to go through the jacket first."

Sam looked over at his left biceps where there were two more sluggishly bleeding marks, more puncture than slash. "Give me a bandage."

Dean glanced at Sam's arm and nodded, handing him one of the self-adhesive ones and the disinfectant. "Clean that out first. Don't lose it to freaky Slavic monster spit rabies."

That made Sam laugh. "Pretty sure that's not actually a thing."

"Like hell it's not." Dean started the laborious process of closing Sam's wounds with butterfly strips. By the time he was nearly finished, he almost wished he had gone with stitches anyway given how many of the strips he used. "I'll see if Cas can heal this crap next time he checks in. Otherwise, you're gonna have a hell of a roadmap back here."

Sam snorted. "What's it look like?"

Dean turned his head sideways to change the angle and shrugged. "I dunno. Montana maybe." He chuckled. "Think I'm closing up I15 here." He flicked a finger at the mole on his brother's back. "So that must be Helena."

"Are you done yet?" Sam tossed a hunk of bloodied gauze over his shoulder and only got a laugh in return. "I need the laptop. I've got to figure out what was in that curse box."
"Stop squirmin'." Dean slapped his brother's good shoulder and bent back to finish closing the last slash.

Sam did his best to wait patiently through the rest of Dean's ministrations and the expected slap to his wounded back once everything had been bandaged. He winced and rolled his eyes for Dean's inability to avoid the customary big brother poke.

"There." Dean rose and went to the bathroom. He washed his hands quickly and Sam was already bent over his laptop when he came back out. "I'm gonna go roast ugly while you do that. You need anything?"

"Five minutes of quiet?" Sam said facetiously and looked up in time to catch Dean's sneer. He smiled. "Go burn something. That always puts you in a good mood."

Dean chuckled and left his brother to his research. He pulled his jacket tighter against the chill night air before he slid behind the wheel of his baby and got the engine running. He pulled around the back of the motel, up against the woods before he cut the engine again. Dean took a moment as he got out to check the area and nodded, seeing that he was safely alone and away from prying eyes. He popped the trunk and looked down at the remains of the likho. "Ok, ugly. Time for s'mores."

The flames from Dean's impromptu bonfire rose up into the night. He watched the glowing embers flicker up in between the trees for a moment, remembering simpler times that seemed ten lifetimes ago; back when he and Sam could park under the stars with a six pack and call it a good night. Now, after Cold Oak and hell and Ruby and angels, he wondered if they would ever be able to get back to the way they had been before. He blew out a breath and looked back down, checking to make sure the body was burning well. He wrinkled his nose at the vaguely sulfurous smell.

"Man, you stink." Dean ducked down and grabbed the bundle containing the head. He had wanted to make sure the body was good and toast first. He swung the head toward the fire and had almost let it go when he felt something in the jacket wrapped around it. "Hang on." Dean knelt, set the head down, and untied the sleeves of the suit jacket wrapped around it. He pulled it open, ignoring the creature's dead eyes and checked the pockets.

"What do we have here?" Dean muttered. He quickly tossed the head into the flames and went back to rifling the dead man's pockets. He pulled out a wrinkled, blood-spotted brochure and unfolded it so he could see it in the firelight. "San Diego naval training center." Dean stood and tossed the now empty jacket onto the flames with the rest. "Demons sight-seeing?" He left the fire to burn out on its own and found Sam where he had left him by the time he returned to the motel.

"Dude. Have you even moved in the last hour?" Dean demanded with a half-laugh.

Sam looked up from the screen and shrugged, then winced as it pulled the wounds on his back. "Uh, no. I think I know what they were after though."

"Yeah, and I know where they're going." Dean held up the brochure. "Don't know why though. Got any idea why they'd be headed to a naval training center?"

Sam's eyes widened and he nodded. "Actually, yeah. So, get this; the artifact in that curse box was..." he stopped and shook his head as he looked at the screen. "It was the mirror that God supposedly used to trap the original Baba Yaga for all time. There's lesser versions of her, like a twisted Bloody Mary. But this is the first one."

"A mirror?" Dean frowned. "That box wasn't that big."
"It's a hand mirror." Sam turned the laptop so his brother could see the screen and the image there. "An ornate golden hand mirror." He tapped the picture of the ancient mirror. "According to the lore, Baba Yaga was basically gobbling up God's children."

"Us." Dean nodded and sat down for a better look. "She liked long-pig is what you're tellin' me here."

Sam snorted. "Dude. Ew. And yeah. She wouldn't stop, so God supposedly crafted this magical mirror. He threw it on the ground in front of her and it became a lake that swallowed her up. Then God sealed the mirror away for all time."

"All time, my ass. Great. So not only have we got demons to dodge, we're gonna have some primordial badass after us too?"

"I don't think so." Sam pulled the laptop back. "If I'm right, they have to release Baba Yaga and then kill her to break the seal."

Dean groaned. "Fantastic." He tossed the brochure on the table. "Guess that explains why a navy training yard. They need a boat for this lake-mirror thing."

Sam opened the brochure and read through it himself. He quirked a brow. "Decommissioned training yard. There aren't any boats there anymore. Wait. Hang on, I think..." He scowled and pulled up a new browser page.

"What?" Dean shifted his chair around so he could see. "You know you didn't actually finish that sentence, right?"

"Jess had this uncle who served in the Navy." Sam typed furiously and then sat back with a smile when he found what he was looking for. "I remember he said he got posted to the USS Never-sail once. I didn't know what he meant so I looked it up. It's a dummy ship, a two-thirds scale replica of a naval destroyer escort used for training new recruits. It doesn't have an engine or anything, and..." he turned the screen to his brother to show him. "It's on dry land. That's where they're going to open the mirror."

"That's only twenty minutes from here." Dean stood and closed the laptop. "We gotta shag ass."

"We might already be too late." Sam stood and stiffly pulled on a new flannel, not bothering to try and get a t-shirt over his head.

Dean shook his head. "No way. If we were, you can bet Cas would already be here to tell us we blew it. Come on."

The clouds broke as the brothers slipped through the empty naval yard. They had easily gotten in through a gaping hole left in the fence, no doubt by the demons who had beaten them to it. The few buildings remaining were dark, their windows boarded up against the elements. As they rounded the tiny visitor's center, the bulk of the USS Recruit came into view. It looked like a small destroyer had been dropped into the middle of a parking lot. Between the moonlight and the street lamps on the pavement around it, they could see several shadowy figures moving on the bow.

Dean nudged his brother's arm and pointed. "Gangplank." He glanced over at his brother's face, glistening with sweat in the moonlight just from their run. "You up for this?"

"I'm good." Sam gave him a smile. "Try to keep up."
"Try to…" Dean snarled when Sam broke into a sprint toward the ship. "Oh, I'm gonna kick your ass, little brother." He followed Sam's lead and easily caught up, even with the weight of the weapons bag on his shoulder. That alone told him how much Sam was hurting. They miraculously reached the gangplank without anyone sending up the alarm, and Dean easily slipped ahead of his brother to go up first. He waited until they were close to the top before he stopped and pulled their shotguns from the weapons bag. He handed Sam one and then took out two bottles of holy water, passing one of those to his brother as well.

"Sure as hell hope there aren't too many of them up there." Dean peered up over the rail and ducked back down. "Looks clear. I'm gonna draw them off. You go for the mirror." He smirked. "Probably need to check your hair anyway, princess."

"Cute, Dean." Sam gave him a shove. "I wish we had more time to plan this."

"Yeah." Dean blew out a worried breath. "Alright, let's move."

"What if Lilith's up there?" Sam asked suddenly.

Dean ground his teeth together for a moment. "Give her a face full of rock salt, grab the mirror, and shag ass for the car. Simple."

"No Shining up there. You got me?" Dean stared his brother down until Sam gave him a nod. He felt like an ass for making the demand yet again, but he couldn't shake the knowledge that there were angels willing to kill Sam if he didn't stop. The thought scared the crap out of him, so he would do whatever he had to keep Sam safe. He took the lead and stepped out onto the starboard deck of the ship. The control tower above them left them in shadow, hidden from the moon, and they moved quickly toward the bow. They began to hear voices as they neared, several of them raised and chanting in what Dean had come to know was Enochian. They were out of time.

"Go." Sam gave Dean a push toward the front of the mock-boat and fell back, pulling out the can of spray paint he had stuffed in his pocket earlier. Sam knelt down, ignoring the pain in his back, and began to hastily mark out a devil's trap on the deck in silver paint. With any luck, the demons would be so busy chasing his brother, they wouldn't see it until they were on top of it and trapped.

Dean jogged up to the front of the boat and peered around the corner of the con tower. Four demons stood at the compass points of some arcane symbol scrawled on the steel deck. A fifth stood in the center with the mirror held up above her head, short, green hair dancing around her head in the stiff, ocean wind. Dean's only relief was that it wasn't Lilith they were facing, assuming, of course, she hadn't simply found a new meat suit. He turned for a quick look over his shoulder and saw his brother's shadow dash out of sight at the back of the con tower, no doubt heading for the starboard side to give Dean room to work.

"Here goes nothing." Dean rolled out his shoulders and aimed his shotgun at the nearest demon. "Hey, ugly!" he shouted and fired a round into the man's chest. The demon screamed and went to his knees. Dean fired again, this time at the woman holding the mirror, and knew he was just that second too late as the mirror gave a brilliant silver flash and flew over the bow and out of sight while the demon screamed angrily. "Crap!" They were too late and Dean's hopes of stopping this seal from breaking sank. He gritted his teeth together and fired another salt round at the woman, knocking her back. Dean turned as the two remaining demons came after him and ran.

Sam heard all hell break loose at the front of the boat - shouts, Dean's shotgun blasting, and a scream. He picked up his pace, jogging up the starboard side, and bolted around the front of the con tower.
He swallowed a lump of fear because there was only one demon left. That meant the others, however many there were, were chasing Dean.

"Where is it?" Sam asked under his breath when he could see no sign of the mirror, but he heard a roll of thunder from the front of the boat. He gave the woman demon moaning on the deck a wide berth and went to the rail. He leaned over to look down at the pavement and stared in surprise. The mirror had shattered on the cement. The pieces glittered in the lights and seemed to be expanding as he watched. They grew and, he realized, flowed like water. The rumble came again. A bright white flash of light filled the night air, and, when Sam blinked his eyes clear, he saw the mock ship was surrounded by water as though it were truly at sea.

"Whoa. This is bad." Sam shook his head. He turned to look for his brother and instead found himself facing the demon, now back on her feet and glaring at him with soulless, black eyes.

"Sam Winchester." She smiled and wagged a finger at him playfully. "Lilith said there was a chance you two would show up." She brushed green hair out of her face and blew him a kiss. "Day late and a dollar short, Sammy."

"It's Sam," he said and swung his shotgun up toward her face only to have it ripped away. He felt her power pick him up until he was floating a foot above the deck. He frowned, seeing that she was looking around him suddenly. "What?" He tried to turn his head, but the demon's grip was too strong.

She looked back up at him and smiled again. "I'd really love to take the time to play with you. I mean, seriously." She let her eyes drag up and down his body appreciatively. "You have no idea how much I want to peel all that pretty skin off." She shrugged sadly. "But duty calls. We're not done here yet, and you'll just be in the way. Shame you two chuckle-heads didn't show up a few minutes earlier. You might have stopped this."

Sam opened his mouth to try and distract her, but instead he gasped as he was lifted and thrown backward over the bow of the ship. Sam tumbled through the air and felt the impact with the water like a physical blow, knocking the breath from his lungs, while a dark figure towered above him. He struggled and kicked until he reached the surface, spitting water and coughing. Sam looked up and shouted for his brother just before a massive dark hand pushed him back under. "Dean!"

Dean slid to a stop beside the gangplank and spun back, aiming at the demons behind him, and he grinned as all three of them came to an abrupt stop in Sam's devil's trap. "Heh. Can't believe you asshats didn't see that coming." He lowered the shotgun and cleared his throat. "Exorcizamus te, Omnis immundus spiritus. Omnis satanica potestas..." His brother's voice calling his name rang out in the night along with a peal of thunder he could feel through the deck beneath his feet. He took a step forward, but then stopped, resisting the instinctive urge to run instantly to Sam's aid, and made himself finish the exorcism. He didn't want to leave three demons at their backs. It was the longest exorcism of his life before he finished and the demons smoked out of their meatsuits in a black cloud back to hell. The men they had been riding all collapsed to the deck in a heap, unmoving.

"Sorry, fellas," Dean muttered. He jumped over them and headed for the bow at a run. "Sam!" He jacke a fresh salt round into the shotgun and burst onto the front deck. He skidded to a stop and stared. The green-haired demon woman was at the rail being held aloft by the shadowy figure of a gnarled woman holding her by her throat. He raked the deck with his eyes but couldn't see his brother anywhere. He flinched as the shadow woman's voice cut through the air like knives on his ears.

"A demon-spawn of hell thinks it's strong enough to destroy Baba Yaga?" She laughed in the demon's face. "You're a fool, like all of your kind."
The demon struggled in the monster's grasp. She flung both hands out, shoving power toward Baba Yaga and snarled when it barely nudged her. She choked out words around the crushing grip on her throat. "You... shouldn't be... this strong. What..." She screamed as Baba Yaga threw her into the side of the con tower.

Dean watched the demon slide down the wall, leaving a bloody smear behind, and hit the deck with a heavy thud. He cringed. "Man, you should'a brought the big guns, huh?"

"Puny mortal."

"Uh-oh," Dean muttered and warily turned back to the creature. He rolled out his shoulders with her bright, red eyes glaring down at him. "Hey, bitch! Where's my brother?"

Baba Yaga tilted her misshapen head and a smirk spread across her dark face. "He matters to you?"

Dean swallowed as Baba Yaga floated slowly away from the bow of the ship over shimmering water he only then realized surrounded the mock ship. "He's my brother, you loony bitch. Where is he?" he shouted while a sick feeling began to fill him with dread.

Baba Yaga laughed. She opened her arms wide. "I am free to feed once more after so long. Your brother is the first to slake my thirst."

"What?" Dean ran to the rail and leaned over to look down. The waters beneath Baba Yaga began to boil, and, out of that churning water, just for a moment, he saw Sam's back rise up before it sank out of sight again. "NO!" He dropped the weapons bag to the deck and turned just in time to watch the demon smoke out of the woman Baba Yaga had broken. "Great."

"You're not strong enough to stop me, mortal." Baba Yaga flicked her fingers and water rose up to wash over the deck and knocked Dean to his back.

He washed up hard against the base of the con tower. The impact forced the air out of his lungs, which saved him from being drowned by the flood. Dean coughed and got to his knees, bracing a hand against the cold metal. "Crap." He caught the strap of the weapons bag before it could slide away and quickly pulled out his machete. Dean climbed to his feet with the cold knowledge that every moment Baba Yaga remained alive was one minute less his brother had to survive. For all he knew, it was already too late. Dean shook his head and forced that thought away. "Alright, bitch. Time to die."

Baba Yaga laughed again and floated back to the bow of the ship. She lifted above the rail and settled on two legs that looked like twisted, gnarled tree trunks. "Your brother fought valiantly," she taunted Dean. "He tried so hard to reach the surface." She leaned in fearlessly to the hunter, flashing him a mouth full of blackened teeth. "Your name is Dean, isn't it?" She pressed one clawed finger to Dean's chest over his heart. "Your name was the last thing he said." She laughed. "Before you failed him."

"NO!" Rage blew through Dean like a hot wind. He shoved Baba Yaga back and swung the machete up. She reared back, but he managed to hack at her left arm and sliced it off cleanly. It flew out and over the rail into the water with a splash.

"What have you done?" Baba Yaga's voice roared out into the night.

Dean ducked under the swing of her remaining arm and came up behind her. He spun, using both hands to put all his weight behind the swing, and cut into Baba Yaga's neck. Dean shouted with the effort, turning his whole body into the motion. He knew he had gotten lucky, surprising her with the
pain of a severed limb, and he didn't wait to give her the chance to recover and make him a smear on
the deck like she had the demon.

Baba Yaga toppled to her right side with Dean following her down. He shouted in surprised pain
when she managed to sink the claws of her left hand into his calf, and then the machete blade bit
through her spine. It sliced cleanly through the rest of her flesh and hit the deck with a clang while
Baba Yaga's head rolled away with a splash.

"Son of a bitch," Dean gasped, going to his knees. Baba Yaga's body gave a massive twitch and
Dean reared back. He waited a moment, but she stayed still and he nodded, sure that she was dead -
or at least dead enough for now. He scrambled back to his feet and ran to the rail. "SAM!" Dean
bellowed his brother's name down at the water, but there was nothing to see. He dropped the
machete and climbed up onto the rail, ready to jump in and find him when there was a sudden clap of
thunder. The force of it knocked him back to the deck with a grunt. Bright light flared, blinding him,
and he threw an arm over his eyes to protect them. A fierce wind rushed past him, freezing his wet
clothes to his skin, and then it went silent.

"What the hell?" Dean gasped. He got back to his feet and leaned over the rail. The mystical water
was gone. In its place was a drenched parking lot and Sam's unmoving body lying face down in a
puddle. "No! Sammy!" He snarled and ran back to the gangplank, snatching up the weapons bag on
his way in case Sam needed the first aid kit. He leaped over the unfortunate victims of the demons
and all but flew down the ramp to the ground. It seemed to take forever to run the length of the ship
before Dean was sliding to a stop beside his brother in a wave of leftover water. He dropped to his
knees with a splash and quickly rolled Sam to his back.

"Sam?" Dean tilted Sam's head back and saw his blue lips in the lights. "Sammy, come on. Don't
you do this." Sam's shirt was shredded from Baba Yaga's claws, but he ignored it; he could worry
about that later once Sam was breathing again. "Come on." Dean leaned up and pressed hard in and
up just below his brother's sternum. He did it again and again, watching while water bubbled up out
of Sam's mouth. "Come on, please!"

Whatever issues were between them were instantly forgotten in a rush of desperation as Dean offered
up a silent prayer to whatever cosmic entity might choose to listen. He leaned down over Sam's head,
pinched his brother's nose closed, and blew two quick breaths into his lungs. "Ever tease me about
mouth-to-mouth and I'm kickin' your ass." He gave him two more and leaned up just as water
fountained out of his brother's mouth with the first, beautiful cough. "That's it! That's it. You got it.
Breathe, little brother." Dean pulled Sam up and rested him against his shoulder, letting Sam cough
water down his back and gasp like a marathon runner. "I got you." He thumped his hand into his
brother's back a few times and then scrubbed it over his face, taking away tears he hadn't felt himself
shedding. His own heart was thundering in his chest for just how close he had come to watching
Sam die again. "I got you."

Sam coughed his way back to awareness. He choked on water and felt a rough hand hitting his back
a moment before Dean's voice registered in his ears above the rushing of his own blood. He had
thought he was dead. He vividly remembered trying to escape Baba Yaga's hand as she had shoved
him under the water and held him there, how her red eyes had gleamed at him as she watched and
laughed. The moment he had been forced to breathe and sucked in water instead of air was going to
be seared into his mind for a long time to come, along with the pain of his realization that he was
never going to have the chance to make things right with Dean again. He was going to die with so
much left unresolved between them.

"Keep breathin', buddy." Dean held on to his brother with Sam's head resting heavy on his shoulder
and tried in vain not to be reminded of the last time he had held Sam like this, when there had been
no groans, no gasps for air, or the feel of Sam's hand even then curled in the back of his jacket holding on - nothing but death. "I got ya'."

Sam finally coughed up enough water through a throat that felt raw and managed to choke out his first word. "Dean." He figured that would always be his first and last word, no matter what happened between them or how strained things became; he could always count on his brother to be there for him. "Get her?"

"Yeah, she's toast." Dean slowly, grudgingly eased Sam back up so he could see his face and was relieved to see the blue tinge gone from his lips. "Her and the demons."

Sam closed his eyes and let his head drop forward. "Broke the seal."

"Screw it," Dean said fiercely. "They didn't give us enough damn time to stop this in the first place." He propped Sam's head up with a hand on his jaw, scowling fiercely in reaction to nearly losing him again. "You good? We need to shag ass outta here in case someone heard all this and called the cops."

Sam nodded, weary beyond words, but he let Dean pull him to his feet never the less. "You alright?"

"Am I…" Dean shook his head fondly. He tossed the weapons bag back over his shoulder and took his brother's arm, pulling him toward where they had left the Impala. "You realize you're bleedin' all over the place?"

"Huh?" Sam looked down at himself, saw the bloody slashes in his shirts, and only then did the pain strike, as if it had been waiting for him to see the wounds first. "Ow," he groaned suddenly and hunched forward as he wrapped his right arm across his chest.

Dean gave a breathless chuckle, light-headed with relief. "Yeah. She did a number on you. I'll fix it up back at the motel." He didn't look back at the mock ship until he had settled Sam safely in the front seat with their ratty, green, army-issue blanket pressed to his chest to stop the bleeding. The moon glinted off the con tower as Dean closed the car door and he gave a little shiver. The parking lot around the ship still glistened wetly from the mystical water. Dean gave himself a shake and looked away, walking around the car, and slid into the driver's seat where he finally let out the breath he had been holding since he had seen Sam drowned.

"Dean?" Sam reached tentatively across the seat and rested a hand on his brother's shoulder. There was a look on Dean's face he couldn't decipher. "You sure you're alright?"

"Yeah, Sammy." Dean glanced over and quirked a brow. "Leg's a little stiff but it's nothin'. How about you use both hands to keep your insides where they belong 'til we get to the motel?"

Sam smirked, nodded and wrapped his arms back over the blanket to hold it to him. He let out a long breath, shuddery with pain, and sucked it back again when he felt his brother's hand land on the back of his neck. He closed his eyes, remembering how much he had missed this; missed Dean in the months that Sam had lived without him. He thought back to all the times he had dealt with wounds like this alone and how he had prayed to have Dean back to take care of him, to be there with that hand on his neck that said 'It's alright. I got you. I love you.' And that had been Sam's one, true constant the whole of his life. Even as he chafed at still being treated like the 'little brother', he would never not want Dean there to give him that uncompromising care and love.

"Dean, I'm sorry. When I thought I was…I couldn't…I didn't want things to be left like they have been and not…" The words seemed to burst out of him without his permission. He tried to swallow around the fresh lump of emotion in his throat and couldn't. He coughed and ducked his head, trying
to hide what he was feeling.

"Hey, just keep breathin', ok?" Dean looked over worriedly as he drove. "We'll figure out the rest of that crap later. We always do."

Sam raised his head slightly and glanced over at his brother. He managed a grateful nod and a small smile but could not hide the tears that still shone in his eyes.

"Seriously, how bad you hurt? Hospital bad?" Dean scowled when Sam quickly shook his head. "Dude, really."

"M'ok," Sam wheezed. He coughed again and put his head back up, managing a more convincing smile before Dean full-on panicked and took him to an emergency room. "S'tough." He caught his brother's gaze and smirked. "Being mostly dead all day… hard on a guy."

Dean stared and then laughed, putting his eyes back on the road. "Dude. If you can quote the Princess Bride, you're better than you look."

Sam huffed a soft laugh and leaned back more against the seat, trying to look less like the corpse Dean had found him as. He could still see the tightness around his brother's eyes and knew it had been bad. He looked out the window as they drove away and said a silent thank you to whoever might be listening that they had both come out of it alive and a prayer that the angels he had always believed in wouldn't get them killed. "I'm good. Promise."

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_The End._

_Rolling the dice…_

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