You Can Hear The Whistle Blow A Hundred Miles

by Bommaloo

Summary

Sam leaves at the age of 15 to escape the homophobia of John and (he believes) Dean. Unable to force himself out of love with his brother, and resentful that John thinks him useless, he fakes his age and joins the marines. He's determined to prove that being gay, and being guilty of the crime of not being Dean, doesn't mean he couldn't hack it, like John's always telling him.

After years of excelling in the marines, mastering his psychic powers, and using his visions to protect his family long-distance, his destiny finally catches up with him and Sam is snatched from a botched covert mission by the YED.

Notes

Many, MANY thanks to Mark and Beth for research, writing support and beta, to Anon1Adult (Go read her fic) for a huge amount of help with posting and formatting, and for keeping me from jumping off the roof when nothing worked right, and most importantly to the amazingly talented (and patient) Malphigus for the wonderful, beautiful artwork to accompany this fic. I couldn't have asked for a better partner. Go check out the art!!
https://archiveofourown.org/users/malphigus/pseudos/malphigus
If you miss the train I'm on You will know that I am gone You can hear the whistle blow A hundred miles

In the early morning fog, his footsteps seemed unnaturally loud. His dark hair hung in damp clumps in his face, but he'd become so used to it that it barely even registered anymore. It didn't matter anyway. All that mattered was getting to the church before it was too late.

Behind him he could hear another set of footsteps, measured and even, but a touch faster than his own. They sounded a tiny bit further away with each stride, but he'd learned the hard way a long time ago that it never paid to relax his guard. Despite the slight burn from the cold morning air in his lungs, he picked up his pace a little more. Long lanky legs ate up the road as he finally hit his optimal pace. In the last few months, since just before his fourteenth birthday, it seemed like all he did was grow, eat, ache, grow, train, grow, ache, study, eat, grow, ache and grow some more. Every inch he gained seemed to make him more clumsy and awkward and he was pretty sure he looked like a Stretch Armstrong doll; none of the bulk and muscle he needed and wanted, just endless skinny limbs, constantly increasing in length so that every shirt had to have the sleeves rolled up to disguise how badly they fitted, and every pair of pants displayed far too much of his bony ankles.

The last two schools he'd been at, he'd gotten a lot of shit from the other students for his appearance, and more than a few sympathetic sideways looks and well-meaning chats with the counsellors, but that wasn't anything he couldn't handle. Over the years he'd become an expert at deflecting and providing just the right answers and expressions to deflect the unwanted attention. Anyway, compared to his other issues, his body's sudden determination to change every couple of days was the least of his problems. Much more disconcerting was his body's reaction to certain situations and certain people which it had no goddamn business reacting to at all.

He wasn't stupid. He knew what it meant. Sure, none of the myriad schools he'd attended had ever even mentioned the subject in health class – got to love that medieval attitude – but those same well-meaning counsellors had had plenty of leaflets for an experienced thief to swipe without being noticed, certain tv shows provided some insight and, well fuck there's always Google. So yeah, he knew what was going on with him, he knew there was nothing he could do about it, and he knew that – at least when it came to part of the issue – there was nothing wrong with him per say, but he also knew that in his father's world, a world in which he also had no choice but to live, he might as well confess to being a vampire as confess to the actual situation. The expressions of disgust, disappointment, shame and hatred would be pretty much the same either way. And if I was stupid enough to mention the part that even I'm ashamed of, I'd be lucky not to just get a bullet between the eyes. He thought to himself with a snort.

An unexpected dip in the road broke his stride for a second, almost making him stumble and he shook his head in irritation, driving out the distracting thoughts. He couldn't believe he'd allowed his attention to wander, now of all times. If he let himself get distracted right now it would cost him dearly.

Get. To. The. Church. Get. To. The. Church. Get. To. The. Church. He timed his breaths and strides to the thought, his ground eating pace setting him flying towards his goal. He felt like he could run for days at this pace, more comfortable in his own body than he'd been for months. Ahead a dark
shadow began to loom out of the fog, he was nearly there. This time he'd be safe; there was no way now that he'd be caught.

"Sam. What the fuck time do you call this?" The voice barking out of the fog almost made him stumble, but he caught his stride just in time and adjusted his direction slightly to intercept. A big grin broke out on his face as his father suddenly appeared in the swirling fog, leaning against the black and chrome Impala, stopwatch in hand.

"I call this a winning time, sir." He worked hard to keep his tone just on the right side of cocky, aiming to hit the irritatingly charming confidence that his older brother always seemed to pull off. Sam looked at his dad in triumph; finally, he'd beaten Dean at something. Finally, he was better than Dean at something their dad actually valued, and not just at academics. Finally, Sam was going to hear some praise from his father – something he'd waited his entire fourteen years on the planet for.

His grin froze on his face and dropped off as he registered the fury of his dad's expression. And his stride faltered to a halt.

"I call this a dumbass, cocky, dangerously over confident time." John growled at his, anger rippling through his clenched jaw. "You push your pace like that over a distance run and what have you got left in the tank at the end to fight with? I swear to god, Sam you just don't fucking listen. You keep pulling this kind of crap; showing off, thinking you know better, smart-mouthing me when I give you an order. How the fuck am I ever going to be able to trust you on the hunt if you can't even get it right in training?" John's clenched fist smashed against his own thigh in barely supressed rage.

"You're going to get yourself, or worse – your brother or me – killed one of these days, you stupid cocksucker."

There it was. One of John's standard go-to insults when he really got into his groove. Cocksucker, fairy, Queer, pillow-biter, and of course the one Sam hated the most; faggot. They all made an appearance at least once a day, depending on just how much he'd managed to piss John off. Once, about three months earlier Sam, in a fit of bitter irony had kept a tally for a week. Marking off each insult to see if there was a pattern to it. He'd created a complicated table for his results; each insult cross-referenced against the activity and situation that had inspired its use and color-coded to denote whether it was being used in reference to Sam, Dean, or someone else. It had gotten lost on their last move though and he hadn't bothered to start a new one.

"I gave you money for clothes a couple of months ago. School's not a fashion cat walk for you to mince up and down with the other pillow-biters."

"Get off your ass and help your brother clean the guns, you lazy fairy."

"You're not wasting any more of your time with that queer-boy soccer team."

"You're not coming back in this room until you've given me another fifty push ups, faggot."

Day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. Sam had hated it from the beginning – he's never felt it was right to sling insults at people for things they had no control over. Once he'd begun to suspect what his own sexuality, every slur had stung like a slap around the face. Sam wondered if perhaps his dad knew about him. Had always known – long before Sam had known himself. He refused to allow himself to feel shame over his sexuality (although the rest of it – the feelings he had for his brother was a different matter) but the daily barrage of homophobia made his determination an uphill battle, it grew harder and harder to feel positively about himself in the face of it.

At least he had Dean. Although his brother did occasionally parrot the insults and slurs from their
father, he never actually directed them at Sam. He was supportive and offered praise and pride for all of his achievements, both in training and academically – although the praise for the academics was usually mixed in with a fair dose of teasing. Dean made sure Sam ate as well as they could afford, would steal him clothes from the thrift stores whenever he noticed Sam had grown out of his again. He'd let Sam sit up late and watch crappy slasher movies with him when their dad was away on a hunt, and then pretend they'd scared him too when Sam got freaked out and was ashamed to admit it.

Everything was a lot more bearable as long as Dean was around to take the edge off it all. Sitting in the back of the car, quietly fuming at his father's response to his running achievement, Sam stared out into the fog, waiting for the sound of Dean's approach. His brother would nudge him and whisper some kind of grudging congratulations for beating him on the run, then make a dirty joke or something, and Sam would feel at least a little bit better. A small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. He could deal with anything as long as Dean was on his side.

Sam never could decide how he felt about how easy he found it to leave in the end. Not emotionally; that tore him up a little more every time he allowed his mind to dwell on it, but physically, it was an absolute breeze. Staying gone would almost certainly be much harder, but actually getting out in the first place was as simple as waiting for John to ditch his kids in the latest motel on the crappy side of the latest shit-kicker town, car-less and with the usual woefully inadequate handful of cash, and then holding out until Dean disappeared out the door with a cocky smirk, a lecherous wink and a "Don't wait up, Sammy!" after they'd eaten.

It's not like Sam wanted to find it difficult to make his escape, but the ease of the whole thing just seemed to highlight the total lack of care and attention from his family that he'd been feeling for the last few years. Actually, that's not completely true he reminded himself as he trudged along a sideroad towards the bus station. Dad's never paid much attention, but up until the last year or so, Dean's always looked out for me – almost annoyingly so.

But that flood of attention had slowed to a trickle and then pretty much dried up all together just before Sam turned fifteen.

About two months into his senior year at high school, Dean had suddenly announced that he was dropping out, and as that was pretty convenient to John, their dad had made no objections at all, simply slapping Dean on the back and telling him how useful it would be to have him on the hunt fulltime. Sam's objections were of course completely ignored by John, and carefully avoided by Dean, who changed the subject every time Sam tried to bring it up.

Sam couldn't even get Dean to tell him what had suddenly sparked his decision; it had seemingly come out of nowhere – no flunked test, no particularly difficult teachers, Dean had even had a couple of decent friends that he'd hung out with a few times. Then out of the blue, no more school and he even stopped hanging out with his new friends – volunteering to stay in with Sammy or go on errands or extra training runs in the evenings instead. Sam couldn't figure it out at all, but of course John didn't bat an eyelid, just nodding and sending Dean off to scout out the security at the cemetery they'd be digging in the following night.

Before long, Dean stopped volunteering to stay in with Sammy, instead he would take one of his fake IDs out to the nearest dive bar, coming back in the early hours of the morning reeking of stale beer, cigarette smoke, cheap perfume and sex.

Sam would lie silently in bed, faking sleep and fighting back a mix of tears and bile as he waited for Dean to slump of the edge of his bed, kick off his boots and then stagger off into the bathroom to shower. Guess I should be grateful he at least showers it off Sam would remind himself frequently,
even as he tried to shake of the now familiar twinned jealously and shame, knowing that he just wished Dean for himself.

Before The Change as Sam referred to it to himself, Dean had always been a fairly affectionate brother; not overly so, but slaps on the back or shoulder for a job well done, an elbow or shoulder check to emphasise a point, or even the occasional 'bro hug' were the norm. Then that all started to disappear too, even to the point that Dean would pull up one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs from the table at whatever shitty motel they were at rather than share the couch with Sam or sit on the same bed as they watched TV. He'd always make a point of cleaning a gun or sharpening a knife or tinkering with a car part or some other shit to make it look like a casual, unintentional thing, but Sam wasn't stupid, and he'd grown up learning to read body language – he knew that it was a deliberate move. It had confused the hell out of Sam right up until that morning.

As standard, on mornings when John was about, the brothers had been woken at Oh-fucking-stupid-hundred-hours for a run, John sending them off to a set destination and pointedly glaring at Sam as he clicked his stopwatch, before driving off to grab himself coffee and donuts and the papers so that at least he'd be comfortable warm and relaxed by the time Sam and Dean arrived at the checkpoint.

After that first blazing row, Sam had never again attempted to reason with John about his running speed, instead resolving to wait until John had driven off before he picked up his pace into one much more comfortable and ground-eating. About half a mile before reaching the checkpoint, He'd then stop and relax for a while until he could hear Dean's steady footfalls coming up behind him, then pretend to be doing a shoelace or stopping for a piss, or fake a cramp until his older brother had passed him – always with a sarcastic comment that made Sam's eyes roll – and he'd tag on a couple of paces behind, finishing the last half mile of the run in the choppy stilted gait he had to maintain to match strides with Dean. What neither John nor Dean knew wouldn't hurt them. Certainly not as much as the leg cramps and stitches from having to match pace with Dean over a five-mile run would hurt Sam.

That morning, after the glare and stopwatch click, and Sam's carefully hidden eyeroll in return, John drove off as usual and Sam started his run, carefully building his pace until he was eating up the road in front of him, his mind wandering off to his math homework that he'd not been able to get done the night before. Apparently, none of his homework was as important as an hour's extra sparring knife skills and target practice. An hour of each activity that is – it was nearly one in the morning by the time Sam fell into bed, and although he'd managed to get his History and English papers written before he got bitched at by John to turn out the light and get to bed, He'd only had time to glance at the questions on his math sheet. It was lucky then that one of the weird quirks of Sam's mind was that he could always call up an image of anything he'd read, meaning that he could work through the problems in his head from memory, and should be able to quickly write the answers on the worksheet during homeroom. He was almost distracted enough that he went too far before stopping to wait for Dean to catch up, but he caught a dead tree in his peripheral vison that he'd used as a marker for the last few runs just in time and slowed to a stop, stretching out his legs and twisting about to keep his muscles as loose as possible for the last torturous half mile once Dean got there.

Where the fuck is he? Dean seemed to be taking forever this morning, which was definitely unusual; Sam could set his watch by Dean on a run normally. After several more minutes with no sign of him coming along the road, Sam was starting to actually get concerned. The likelihood of anything having happened to Dean was fairly low, but that didn't do anything to stop the anxious feeling that was beginning to eat away at Sam's gut. With only a quick glance in the direction of the checkpoint, Sam started back down the road in the opposite direction, making his way as fast as he could back to where he'd last seen his brother.

As he neared a tight bend in the road, a meaty thwacking noise echoed out of the cold morning air
ahead of him, and Sam slowed to a walk, cautiously approaching the source of the noise in case Dean really was in some kind of trouble, but as he drew closer, Dean's voice joined the thwacking sound.


Sam's eyebrows shot up and he stuttered to a halt, just close enough that he could see his brother if he leaned to the left a little. Shaking his damp hair back from his face, he did just that, keeping his weight on his back foot as he'd been repeatedly taught so that he could pull himself back out of sight if needed.

For years to come he'd wish that he hadn't. That he'd never run back to check on Dean. That he'd just carried on running to meet John and just waited there for Dean to finally show up.

There in the small clearing just off the road, Dean was repeatedly punching a tree. Blood covered fists pounding at full strength against the rough bark of the trunk were going completely unnoticed as he continued his onslaught, each punch punctuated by one of John's favourite homophobic slurs. The look on Dean's face was like nothing that Sam had ever seen there before; absolute rage combined with fear and hate. Sam hadn't even seen that expression on Dean's face on a hunt. Not even when he'd shot that Black Dog in Michigan and Dean really hated those things.

"Nothing but a fucking disappointment, you Faggot. Can't get anything right. Can't be who you're supposed to be. Can't be who Dad wants you to be. Can't even stop yourself from checking out guys in the restroom, you stupid fucking fudge-packer!" The punches continued, not slowing even slightly, though Dean must've been exhausted and in severe pain. Dean growled as he threw a punch so hard that Sam was amazed he didn't hear a crack either from the tree or Dean's fists. Finally, what Dean was saying as he punched broke through Sam's shock and his whole chest seemed to freeze for a moment, air rushing in and out of his mouth, yet unable to breathe.

He knows. Dean knows. And he hates me for it. Was suddenly playing on repeat at full volume in Sam's skull and he dropped to his knees, legs completely devoid of bone or muscle in his panic.

Finally, Dean's crazed assault slowed and stopped, his bloodied and battered fists falling forgotten to his sides as he stood, chest and shoulders heaving and head hanging as he stared blankly at the ground.

Both brothers rested for a moment, Dean completely unaware of Sam, and Sam aware of nothing apart from Dean. Suddenly everything made sense to Sam; not only Dean's crazed attack on the tree, but his distancing himself from Sam, the reluctance to make physical contact with him, or even to sit near him, the repeated trips out to the bar in the evenings rather than spend time with Sam. Dean knew that Sam was gay, and he was clearly disgusted and furious.

Lurching to his feet, Sam staggered back around the corner and safely out of sight, leaning against a lamppost as he struggled to catch his breath.

That's it then. Time to go. He forced himself to still the wildly spinning thoughts in his head, ruthlessly shoving his devastation and heartbreak down, locking it up until he could think around it. He'd known that he couldn't stay with his family forever, but he'd hoped he'd be able to stick things out until he could go to college. But then again, he'd perhaps foolishly hoped that when he finally found the courage to come out, Dean at least would've handled the news kind of calmly. Sure, Sam had heard Dean utter the same homophobic shit that John spouted plenty of times over the years, but Sam had always assumed that his older brother was just parroting their dad, that there had never been any true malice behind the words. Well now he knew better.
There was no way that Sam was going to be able to stay. How long would it be before Either Dean
told John, or John worked it out for himself? How long could Sam handle Dean spitting those slurs
at him, knowing that his brother actually meant them in their fullest sense?

No. I can't do it. I can't. It's time to go.

Finally mastering his breathing, Sam spun wildly and ran off in the direction of the checkpoint, only
vaguely aware of how behind time he probably was. John was bound to lose his shit at both of his
sons this morning; there was no way Dean was going to reach John in what he considered a
reasonable time. He ran blindly on, only just remembering in time to adjust his pace so that it
appeared he'd paced himself at the approved stride and speed. By an absolute miracle, he actually
reached John almost bang on time, of course there was no congratulations or even approval offered.
John just threw his youngest and nod and a bottle of water and then glanced back up the road for
Dean. Not seeing him there immediately, John's eyebrow raised, and he frowned.

"Where's your brother?" he grunted roughly at Sam.

Sam shrugged as carelessly as he could manage. "I dunno. I was a bit ahead of him from the start
today." He replied, carefully keeping his voice level. John glared at him. Of course, Dean not
arriving yet was all Sam's fault. Any other time, Sam would've snapped back something about not
being his brother's caretaker, but with everything else scrabbling around in his head just then, he just
couldn't bring himself to give enough shits about this particular injustice.

Just as John was about to growl something at Sam which was bound to be some kind of accusation
accompanied by one of his favourite slurs, Dean's footfalls could be heard coming down the road,
faster paced than usual, but still metronome steady. The creases in John's forehead evened out a little,
though his annoyance was still evident on his face.

"Where the fuck were you, Dean?" he barked at his eldest as he came to a stop by the car.

"I tripped about a mile back and messed up my hands." Dean replied with a casual shrug. Sam was
amazed; there was no sign on Dean's face of his tirade less than an hour past. If Sam hadn't seen it
for himself, he never would've guessed anything had gone down. The only evidence that he hadn't
imagined the whole thing was the blood and scraps of dirt in Dean's fists.

"And you landed on your fists?" John asked sarcastically, clearly not believing Dean's bullshit. Dean
just shrugged casually and headed for the passenger side of the car.

"Guess so." He answered, calmly meeting his father's eyes and not flinching in the glare he was
getting back. John opened his mouth to bitch back at Dean but seemed to think better of it. His
mouth snapped shut again, jaw flexing in clear irritation as he jerked his head at Sam to get in the car.

"We're late. Shift yourself or you won't make it in time to school." Sam didn't bother with an answer.
There was no point. Anything he said at that moment was bound to set John off, and if he was
perfectly honest, Sam just couldn't bring himself to care enough about anything right then. The care
about anything would lift the lid on the box he'd shoved all his emotions in when he overheard Dean,
and that was just unacceptable. Silent in the backseat, he stared blankly out the window, not seeing
anything but the expression on Deans face as he repeatedly punched the tree. He'd do everything as
normal today; it wouldn't help him any to alert his dad or brother that anything unusual was going
on.

John was heading out later that day to check out reports in the paper that looked like an Al – a weird
kind of evil dwarf spirt that attacked babies and pregnant women – a few towns over, and he was
going to be gone for at least a few days, taking the car with him. It was ideal timing for Sam. He'd
wait until Dean made his usual visit to the bar that evening and head out. He'd be on the next bus out of town before Dean even made it back to the motel room, and if he got drunk enough, he might not even notice Sam was gone until morning. Something made Sam think Dean was going to be very, very drunk that evening.

Over the years Sam had been carefully stashing away any money he could without John or Dean noticing, breaking one of the cardinal rules of the Winchesters by opening up a junior account in his real name to keep his savings unnoticed by John and Dean. A new batch of credit cards had arrived a few days before; Sam could snake one of those to keep him going until he could get himself straight. He had a plan, he had the means to carry it out, it was time.

_Time to go._

Laying a false trail, living in hiding, evading detection; these were all things that came as easy as breathing to a Winchester, and yet Sam had to make some changes to standard practice this time. He couldn't rely on skills taught to him by John and Dean to hide from the very people who'd taught him – he'd be found in no time flat. If they bothered looking in the first place that was. Once they'd read the letters he'd left behind, Sam was pretty sure they wouldn't bother – probably relieved to finally be rid of him after so many years of barely tolerating his presence.

_Dad and Dean_

_I'm gay. I'm not sorry; it's just who I am. Don't bother looking for me – you won't find me. Stay safe._

_Sam_

Better to be safe than sorry though, and Sam was most certain to be very sorry indeed if they _did_ look for and find him.

So, Sam trudged his way along to the bus station, bought a ticket to South Dakota to lay a false trail to Bobby's, bought another ticket for the bus heading in the opposite direction, and then quietly slipped away without notice, hitching a ride from a trucker heading in a third direction.

He had a final destination in mind but adding as many twists and turns as possible seemed like the only sensible way to go. Sam caught rides with several more truckers, and with a group of college kids on some kind of road trip, doubling back on himself twice, and picking destinations at random until after four days, even he wasn't completely certain where in the country he was. Living off gas station sandwiches and chips was nothing new to him, but after two days, he was craving some hot food, so when Hank, the latest trucker dropped him off at a nondescript truck stop in the middle of Buttfuck, Nowhere, he headed inside to the little diner and sat himself at a corner table, back to the wall and facing the door.

"What can I get for you, Hun?" The waitress was one of those mom types, salt and pepper hair tied back from her face, flyaways sticking out like a halo all around her head. He glanced around, looking at the otherwise empty table with concern. "You here by yourself? No parents?" Sam straightened in his seat, working to show off his height without looking like he was trying too hard – nothing made adults more suspicious in his experience.

"Just me for now, Ma'am." He replied with a carefully light tone. "My Uncle had to make a quick run into the next town, but I was too hungry to wait on him. He's going to pick me back up once he's dropped off some furniture to a customer." He gave her a bright smile, just the right mix of cheek and innocence, a trick picked up from years of trouble-making with Dean in various towns. The vague
unease faded from her face and she offered Sam a kindly smile in return.

"So, what can I get you then, sweetie?" she enquired, pen at the ready. Sam mentally calculated the cash in his pocket; he'd plenty to hand right then, but until he worked out where his next lot of cash was coming from, he figured he'd better play it safe.

"Just a cheeseburger and fries and a Coke, please." He could've easily worked his way through the whole menu, but the burger would at least make a dent in his hunger for now. The waitress wrote down his order and wandered back to the counter with another kind smile at Sam.

His burger, when it arrived was surprisingly good and he turned, mouth bulging full, to share his appreciation with Dean. When the fact that he was alone and would probably never have the chance to compare notes over food with his brother ever again suddenly hit home like a sledgehammer, the juicy beef turned to ashes in his mouth. He woodenly and stubbornly chewed his way through his meal, firmly keeping his mind away from thoughts of his family and instead focusing on his next step once he left the diner. Ely, a small town in Minnesota was Sam's next (and hopefully final) stop. When Sam was just eight, the Winchesters had stayed in the town for nearly a month while John dealt with a Wendigo. As usual, Sam had settled right in to the school, and had even made a couple of friends. He wasn't holding on to any hope of meeting up with them again, what drew him to Ely was, of all things, the librarian at the tiny library there.

As had always been the case, Sam had spent countless hours in the library – both keeping up with his schoolwork and doing seemingly endless research for John. Usually, after a hard warning glance from the librarian in each library, Sam was pretty much ignored and left to get on with things, a librarian's dream child basically, reading quietly, finding the books he needed himself and always returning things to their correct shelves when he was done with them.

In Ely however, after the first warning glance, Sam had had that itchy feeling between his shoulder blades repeatedly. The one that warned him someone was looking at him. No matter how many times he casually looked round, he never actually caught the librarian looking his way, but nothing could remove the feeling of certainty from Sam's mind that she was staring at him whenever he looked away.

It took three days before she finally approached him, and even then, it was just to drop a card on the desk next to him, not even making eye contact, and wander off.

"We can't see when or why, but we know someday you'll need us. We'll be waiting when you do."

Sam hadn't understood it at the time, couldn't even understand why he'd kept the card all these years, carefully folded and transferred from pocket to pocket of pair after pair of jeans, safely out of sight of his brother and father; but kept it he had, and he couldn't escape the feeling that now was the time, and this was the why.

It wasn't perhaps the safest of choices for a final destination, being only a state over from Bobby, but at least it was up in the opposite corner of the state and was only a quick drive from the Canadian border in case an emergency retreat was called for. On the other hand, perhaps its closeness to Bobby's was an advantage; surely, they'd expect Sam to keep as far from anyone they knew as possible, and it certainly wasn't so close that he'd be likely to bump into Bobby in the milk aisle of the supermarket or something.

So, after paying his bill and waiting until the friendly waitress was distracted by a small rush of customers, so she wouldn't notice he was being picked up by anyone 'uncle looking', Sam walked out to the parking lot and hitched a ride with hopefully the last in a long line of helpful truckers, asking to be dropped off in Ely.
"Thanks for the ride." Sam offered the driver a half-hearted grin as he climbed out of the cab. He felt completely drained; almost five days of barely dozing, not feeling he could relax and let his guard down in a stranger's vehicle with no one having his back had him on the very edges of his reserves, and it seemed to him that having arrived in Ely, he'd finally run out of steam. Even the small drop out of the truck cab had him staggering on his feet for a few seconds before he regained control of his knees.

"You're welcome, kid. You gonna be ok? Someone meeting you?" The driver glanced uncertainly up the road he'd just pulled over on, obviously looking for the relatives Sam had told him he was meeting.

"Yeah I'll be just fine, thanks." Sam replied dismissively. "My grandparents live just a couple of blocks up that way." He gave a vague wave up one of the side streets and casually slung his bag over his shoulder, turning in the direction he'd just gestured in.

"Well alright then, kid. I'll see ya then," The driver reached across and pulled the door shut, pulling away just a moment later, as Sam trudged slowly up a side street.

It was only a few yards later that he dragged to a stop and flopped down onto the closest bunch, hauling his bag up next to him.

Ok, so that's the first part done. I've reached Ely safe and sound and undetected. Now what the fuck do I do now I'm here? He wondered, looking blankly around himself. The daylight was starting to go and this far north it was shaping up for a pretty cold night. He fished through his memory, trying to recall the direction of the crappy little motel they'd stayed at the last time he'd been in this town. As far as he could remember, it was on the far west of the town, almost as far from where he'd been dropped off as it was possible to be. Shit. He sighed to himself. Guess I'd better get moving then. He heaved himself back up onto his feet reluctantly with a groan, throwing his bag back over his shoulder and turning to the west and the motel.

He'd only taken a few steps, eyes on his feet as he trudged, when he walked straight into someone on the sidewalk.

"Shit! I'm sorry." He muttered, reaching out to keep the woman on her feet. He managed to catch her elbow before she stumbled right over his feet. "I wasn't looking where I was going. You ok?" The woman gave a low chuckle. A sound surprisingly young for the age of the woman as far as Sam could guess it.

"Oh, that's ok, Sam. If anyone should've been able to avoid that little bump, it's me," The woman chuckled again. Sam froze where he was, arm still outstretched.

"How do you know my name?" he growled low under his breath, pulling himself up to his full height, exhaustion forgotten as paranoia and adrenaline flooded his system. "I don't know you, you don't know me, and no one knew I was coming here. So, how'd you know my name?" He reached behind him, hand gripping the hilt of his favourite knife, tucked in the waistband of his jeans.

The woman raised her hands a little, palms outwards in a clear attempt to calm him a little and kept her voice low and slow, obviously wanting to defuse the situation a bit.

"You probably don't remember me too well; it was a fair few years ago and both of us have aged a bit since then, but I do know you, Sam. Well a little anyway. You used to come into my library at least once a day back then. Every day for weeks on end, and then one day you just never came back.
I gave you a card. Did you keep it? Isn't that why you came here? That's what we saw. Then and now. That's why I came out to find you this evening."

It was too much information all at once for Sam, exhausted as he was, body and mind. His brain felt scrambled as he tried to make sense of it all. His hand fell away from his knife hilt and the woman gently grasped his shoulder and led him back over to the bench, sitting the pair of them down side by side.

"My name's Mona." The woman told him as she sat. "I'm part of a group we call The Assembly." Sam looked at her blankly, the name not being at all familiar to him.

"This Assembly, that the 'we' you were talking about? Who are they and how did they know I was coming? You 'saw'? What's that even mean?"

"Follow me, Sam. It'll soon be far too cold for sitting around outside, and I can offer you a place to stay and some proper food. I'll explain as we walk." Sam didn't answer. Looking her over carefully, he weighed up his options. He needed answers, perhaps even more than he needed a roof over his head for the night. But while Mona didn't appear to be much of a threat herself, Sam had no idea who she was taking him to see, or how many of them there were. Let alone what sort of threat they might pose.

"Christo." He muttered under his breath, keeping a close watch on her eyes as he did so. There was no flinch and no change. Not a demon then. She grinned at his.

"You're quite right to be suspicious I suppose. You got anything silver I can touch to help you come to a decision?" Sam slowly reached for his knife once again. There was a reason it was his favourite; Bobby had given it to him three years before – Dean and John had one each too. Silver down the centre and blessed iron edges, it was good for most things the Winchesters encountered, and would reveal a were or shapeshifter of any kind if the silver was pressed against their skin. He pulled the knife out of his waistband and offered it to Mona, keeping a firm grip on the hilt. Mona held out her hand with another of her small smiles and let him press the flat of the blade against her palm; silver and blessed iron making full contact. Again nothing. Not a were or shifter then. Sam breathed a little easier and put his knife away.

There were still other supernatural creatures that Mona could be that couldn't be so easily tested for, and even a human could still be dangerous, but Sam felt it was worth the risk to get some answers. He hauled himself to his feet once again and glanced a question at Mona.

"Ok. I'll come, but I'd like some answers as we walk and then I'll decide if I'm going to stay or not." He tried to hide the weariness from his voice, but it was still there around the edges. They set off at a slow walk up one of the side streets, Sam's bag slung over his shoulder once more.

"So then tell me, who or what is The Assembly?" Sam prompted after a few minutes of silent walking.

"There are six of us. A real range of ages and backgrounds. The only thing we all have in common is that we're all psychics of one sort or another." She glanced at him from the corner of her eye, checking his reaction. There wasn't one. Sam had met several psychics over the years and although John didn't like them much, not liking the idea of someone rooting around in his mind, the Winchesters all knew how useful a psychic could be when needed. "Good. Not a blink. So, you know about that much at least. We struggle to see so much about you, so we couldn't tell if you'd have any trouble believing me." Sam frowned, both at the thought that people were using their abilities in his direction without him knowing about it, and also at the fact that apparently something about him made it difficult.
"Could my dad have had another psychic put some kind of protection over us to keep people out?" He wandered aloud.

"We don't think that's it. It doesn't feel separate from you." Mona gave a little shrug "Our best guess is that you've got a block - a natural wall built around your mind, which is pretty much unheard of for one as young as you. Natural mental abilities aren't supposed to emerge until adulthood." She stopped by a small house and gestured towards the blue door. "This is us."

"What do you mean by natural mental abilities?" Sam asked "Like psychic abilities? You think I've got some kind of psychic power?" He scoffed, expecting Mona to join in, but she didn't, she just fixed him with a steady gaze until he dropped his own.

"Yes, Sam. You do. I could feel it coming off you in small doses even years ago when I first saw you. And it just plain shouldn't be active yet, let alone back then, so you can understand why we're so eager to meet and help you out."

The inside of the house was small and cramped, but welcoming; the wood floors and panelling somehow creating a warmth to the rooms. In the front room there were six strangers, sitting in a collection of mis-matched easy chairs and couches. Strangely, Sam felt relaxed and at ease with them; not a common experience for a Winchester at the best of times.

"So, let me make some introductions." Mona said brightly. "Over there on the couch by the fireplace we've got Lynne, she's a Finder, Justin – a pagan witch and our resident hacker and Amanda, who runs an herbal remedy store and has a healing ability. The guy in the big armchair on your right is Stef, and he's got a mixed talent; clairvoyance and precognition, with a touch of telepathy on a good day, then finally over by the desk is my sister Fiona, another witch and our researcher and record keeper." As she named each of them they smiled and waved at Sam who was just trying to keep all the names and skills straight in.

"Um. Hi, I guess." Sam replied with a small guarded smile. His mind was whirling, and the exhaustion was hitting him hard. Mona gave him a look over and sharply clapped her hands together, making Sam jump.

"Well we can do proper introductions in the morning and get to know each other over the next few days, but it looks to me like Sam is dead on his feet. I've moved most of my stuff into Fiona's room, Sam so you can take my room. Come on; it's just up here and first on the left." She gestured at the stairs and Sam gratefully headed towards his room where he barely managed to pull off his shoes and tuck his knife under his pillow before he passed out cold for the night.

When he finally woke the next day, Sam was more than a little surprised at how well rested he felt. Normally any night spent without the reassuring quiet snoring from Dean in the opposite bed, or at least the louder and more throaty snoring from John, was a night filled with sudden jerking awake and panicked gasping for breath until he was sure of his safety. But there was something about the house he was staying in that seemed to just radiate safety and reassurance, a silent hum throughout the whole building. As he sat at the table for breakfast, surrounded by The Assembly, Sam was unsurprised to find that the same feeling poured off his new friends too. The laughter and teasing around the table spoke of family rather than a group of friends, although Sam was fairly sure he could see something deeper flowing between a few of the members. He was pulled out of his thoughts by a jabbing elbow from his left.

"So then, kid, I guess it's time we got started, eh?" Sam looked at him in confusion; Stef, if he was remembering the brief introductions from the night before correctly.

"Started with what exactly? I still don't really know precisely what I'm doing here with all of you, or
what you all get out of helping me."

"Well until we've given you a good looking over we're not exactly sure ourselves, but we do know that you need our help, and that helping you will help us all. The best way to go about answering all our questions is to go looking for the answers, and the best way to do that is to go sit and stare at some candles for a bit." Stef stood with a wide grin and a wink, his short blond hair and twinkling blue eyes making him look like a mischievous little boy even though before that grin Sam had him placed in his late forties.

"Stare at candles?" Sam asked, baffled. But Stef had already left the table and was walking out back.

Following behind, Sam found they were walking to a small outbuilding in the back yard. Inside Stef had set up a small table with a line of white church candles, a cushion on either side. Stef walked straight in and sat on one of the cushions, waving at the other for Sam to take a seat himself.

"So, before we can work out how to help you, we need to know exactly what your abilities are and how in the hell they became active so early in you. So, what I need you to do is to sit there real quiet and stare into the middle flame then the far left one, then the middle one again, then the one just left of centre, then…"

"Then the middle again and the far right and so on?" Sam interrupted.

"That's it. You just continue the pattern over and over again, focusing for a good five seconds or so on each flame in turn. Let everything else slip away into the distance and focus on nothing but the flames." As he spoke in a quiet soothing tone, Stef lit each of the candles and blew out the match. Sam began following instructions, letting his vision focus on each flame in turn, just the way his dad had taught him to focus on a target when shooting, letting everything else fade into the distance, even his own thoughts. He had no idea of time, so he could have been staring there for just a few minutes or for several hours, all he was aware of was the flames, growing taller and thinner now, then shorter and wider, each flame melding into the next creating a solid wall of flickering yellow flame. With no separate candles to direct his eyes, Sam just let his vision settle on the new single large flame and let his mind go still.

The flames flattened out, a brightly glowing movie screen and a picture began to form of Sam and Stef as they were sitting on either side of the table.

"That's excellent, Sam. Just what I needed. Now we need to hit rewind and find the beginning of your troubles, so we can understand how to help. Think back for me, let your mind take the story back to when you first met Mona." Stef's soothing voice directed, and Sam followed suit, casting his mind through his memories to the previous day and meeting Mona in the street.

"Ok, that's the right idea, but I need you to go much further back, look for the time when Mona first encountered you in the library when you were eight." Sam did as requested, the scene shifting effortlessly into a perfect picture of the Ely Public Library, a skinny, scruffy-clothed kid sat at a large oak table, surrounded by a mountain of huge old reference books.

"Perfect, Sam. That's perfect. Now can you take us back a year before that? A significant event maybe?" Sam changed the scene again, a dark graveyard replacing the library in the flames, Sam crouching behind a gravestone now, clutching shotgun that dwarfed his little frame. Dean's image came sprinting past the gravestone and Little Sam jumped to his feet, aiming and pulling the trigger almost instantaneously as a ghoul came past, hot on Dean's heels. The ghoul splattered everywhere as little Sam staggered under the kickback of the shotgun.

"Nice going, Sammy!" Dean's jubilant voice echoed dimly through the flames.
"Yeah yeah, Dean. Now can we please go back to the motel? My ass and toes are frozen, and I've got a history test to study for." Sam's reedy seven-year-old voice piped back, and the scene froze.

"Jesus fuck, kid. You're a hunter? What the hell were you doing hunting that young?" Stef muttered under his breath. The comment barely pinging on Sam's consciousness. Stef cleared his throat. "Ok, well that was certainly a significant event. Can you take us back another year again, find another event that sticks in your mind when you were about six?"

Again, Sam obeyed, and then again, going back around a year each time and pulling up scenes of poltergeist hunts, salt and burns and werewolves, most often viewed by a progressively younger Sam through the window of the Impala.

"Fuck sake we're at two years old and the powers are already present. How young was he when they first developed?" Stef wondered out loud. "And what the hell kind of life this for a kid? Or kids, as I'm guessing this Dean must be his brother." With a tired sigh, Stef loosened his tight shoulder muscles and pressed on with his task. "Same again then, Sam. One year back, look for something memorable to focus on.

This time Sam called up a scene of him and Dean sitting in front of the TV on a dirty carpet in an equally dirty motel room. Over the sound of the TV, the faint muffled sobs of a broken-hearted man could be heard, echoing slightly from the bathroom. Stef could almost feel the despair through the flames, and he quickly directed Sam to make another jump back, eager to escape the strong emotion.

"One more time, Sam. Let's make it just six months this time." Stef directed, hoping that he wouldn't have to go back and witness Sam's birth first-hand to locate the beginning of his developing abilities. Sam followed his instructions, the scene changing once more to a nursery with a six-month-old Sam squirming slightly in his crib. "Finally!" Stef breathed. No sign of his abilities. But they were woken up this early? Between one and two years of age? That's crazy. How?" He mused as the nursery scene flickered in the flames. A man entered the room and walked over to the crib, leaning over the baby Sam and holding his hand up, directly over his face. Stef's eyes bugged out. "Demon!" he breathed in awed fear. "That's how your abilities got started up so early; the son-of-a-bitch demon jump started them for you."

A woman walked into the nursery scene and all hell broke loose. She slid up the wall, her stomach opened, and flames erupted around her as she laid there pinned to the ceiling. Another man rushed in through the door, grabbing up baby Sam and handing him off to another young boy, ordering him to run as he desperately tried to save his wife from the flames.

Wide eyed, Stef stared at Sam, noting the sweat pouring off the boy and the distressed breathing pattern. He pulled himself to his senses and as smoothly as he could, talked Sam away from the scene and to a happier image of two boys throwing a tatty old football back and forth in a dusty park somewhere. Quietly, Stef left Sam enjoying the scene as he slipped outside to try to catch his own breath and calm down. He didn't need a mirror to know that he was ashy grey and wild-eyed as he leaned against the wall, muttering the same phrase to himself over and over.

"What the ever-loving fuck was all that about?"


It took Stef several minutes to calm and centre himself enough to return inside to Sam, in the years since he'd honed his own abilities, he'd never seen anything even close to what Sam had shown him in the candle flames. Not just the type of life he'd already lived for such a young kid, or even the demon attack and the horrifying blood-feeding, though they were more than enough to shake Stef up beyond anything he'd experienced before, but on top of all that, the sheer scope of Sam's gifts was
staggering. On a first attempt, for anyone, let alone a child to successfully project their thoughts the way Sam had was unheard of. The clarity of the images was also beyond the skills of most of the gifted people Stef knew. Then there was the control and understanding of his ability that Sam had demonstrated almost immediately. There was no doubt about it; Sam was the most talented psychic Stef had ever met, and once he was fully trained, he would be several orders of magnitude better than anyone Stef had ever even heard of. And if he's only got that one talent tucked away in his brain, I'll eat all of Amanda's hat collection. With an amused snort, He walked quietly back inside to Sam, finding him just as he'd left him; sat staring into the candle flames at two happy brothers playing. He re-took his cushion opposite Sam and gently murmured. "Ok then, Sam. You did really great with following my instructions, so now we're going to change things up a little, ok?" Sam gave an almost imperceptible nod and Stef continued. "Right. I'm going to ask you to turn your focus away from the flames now, and instead, think real hard about your left arm. I want you to concentrate on every fibre, every vein, every nerve and bone. I want you to block out everything else in the universe apart from my voice and your left arm. Feel the bones deep inside, the tendons and the blood vessels, look at them inside your mind and know that they are, every single cell of them, under your total control."

A quick glance at Sam told Stef that the kid was following instructions, but whereas on the previous exercise Sam's face had been completely relaxed, his forehead now was furrowed, his expression tense and frustrated.

"Tell me, Sam. Can you feel every cell? Can you see them? Can you visualise the bones and tendons and veins?" Sam made an irritated noise.

"Kind of, but it's all fuzzy around the edges and I can tell that I should be able to control it all and make changes if I want to, but it's all out of focus and just out of reach. Kind of like a table full of Legos in a room behind a dirty window; I know how to use Legos, and I know what they do, but I can't see them properly or get to them through the glass." Sam explained in frustration.

"That's pretty good, Sam. You won't be able to do everything I ask you to try, we just got lucky the first time. With some of these things you won't be able to even grasp what I'm asking, some will seem like second nature, and some, like this one will be things you understand but aren't able to do just yet."

Sam's head shot up to stare at Stef; what he'd just heard was completely alien to him. With John, every new skill was drilled into him until it became second nature. From day one he was expected to understand it, master and excel in it, and failure would bring about a barrage of verbal abuse and emotionally crippling disappointment. Never in his life had he ever been told that it was okay if he didn't get something first time, if he didn't get it at all. Suddenly a weight was lifted from Sam's shoulders. Maybe here with The Assembly things would be better. Maybe here with the Assembly Sam could be himself, could come out safely and explore who he was, not just with the abilities Mona, Stef and the others seemed sure that he had, but also the rest of him. He felt lighter than he could remember ever feeling before.

"Alright then, so what's next?" he asked Stef with a new sense of hope and determination; he still felt the absence of Dean like he was missing one of his own limbs, but perhaps by filling in the rest of him, he could lessen the pain of that amputation.

For the next five hours or so, with just a few comfort breaks and a quick break for a sandwich, Stef and Sam worked steadily at identifying just what gifts Sam had, how strong they were and how much he'd need to learn in order to maximise his potential. By the time the pair of them dragged themselves back into the house for dinner, Sam's brain was once again sluggish and reeling, in desperate need of sleep. He slumped down onto the couch next to Amanda, one arm thrown across his eye to block out the low light that was spearing through his eyes into his brain like red hot nails.
Amanda quickly rose and crossed to a set of drawers on the other side of the room, rooting through the draws while muttering under her breath and pulling this bottle and that jar out.

"You look like you've been through the wringer, Sam." She murmured sympathetically "just give me a moment and I'll put something together that will at least lessen the headache I'm sure you're suffering with. Stef can be a real drill sergeant sometimes." Sam let out an amused snort.

"Trust me, Stef's got nothing on my Dad. I've lived my whole life training under a drill sergeant, so I can take anything Stef's got to dish out. It's just that this is mental instead of physical."

"Well be that as it may, there's something I can do about that headache and I'm going to do it." She started mixing various powders and pungent oils in a small wooden bowl and crossed back over to Sam on the couch. "And I'll be having words with Stef too. He's got no business pushing you this hard." She frowned. "Now sit back a little and let me at that sore head."

Amanda gently tugged Sam back to lie across the couch and started a light massage of his temples. The oily mix on her fingertips smelled strongly of several herbs Sam was vaguely familiar with from hunting. The pain behind his eyes started to gradually ease as she massaged, and Sam became aware of a strange buzzing and humming feeling inside his head. It didn't seem to be dangerous or damaging, but nonetheless Sam didn't like it. It felt alien and raised his naturally suspicious caution. Without really knowing exactly what he was doing, he sort of flexed his mind, pushing back against the foreign feeling, and suddenly it was gone, Amanda shoved back on her heels without Sam having touched her. She stared at him in shock.

"Wow, Sam. That was quite some block. How did you know how to do that?"

"Block?" Sam asked, confused. "I didn't even move."

"Not physically, no. But when you felt me tinkering around inside your head, trying to ease that pain, you threw up a big solid wall and shoved against it to get me out. I'm guessing you didn't like the feeling?" she slowly raised her hands to his head and paused, waiting for Sam to give her the go-ahead. He nodded, and Amanda went back to the temple massage, this time as far as he could tell without any other additional stimulus.

"It's not that it felt dangerous or painful or anything. It was just foreign – recognisably not me, - and I just kind of reacted on instinct. I'm sorry if I hurt you."

Amana smiled. "No, you didn't hurt me. But I am impressed; the fact that you could feel what I was doing and recognise it as an outside force is very impressive. As is the fact that you put up such an effective block without training. I'd be willing to bet that's why we've always had such a hard time searching for you and finding out what you needed from us. You've had a block built around you for all this time; a natural protective barrier you created without knowing it." She sat back on her heels and dropped her hands. "There. That should help a bit. I can't do anymore without getting inside your head and lifting the pain internally, and there's no way I'm going to get past that block of yours, and you're going to have to spend a while training yourself to let it down when you need to. There was something else in there too. I've not felt it before, but it was kind of dark and greasy. We'll need to sit down with Stef and work out a training schedule for you. Maybe work out what that extra something was too." Amanda stood and took the bowl out towards the kitchen.

"For now, though, you're going to need a big meal and plenty of sleep to recharge after such a draining day." She said over her shoulder. "Dinner will be at least half an hour, so why don't you go up and shower before that, get all that oil out of your hair."

Sam gave a tire chuckle and hauled himself up off the couch, his long limbs feeling heavy and
"A shower sounds good, and dinner even better." He agreed. "I'll be back down soon to help out."

Amanda waved him off. "Not needed. Oh, don't get me wrong; we'll have you taking your turn around the place before long – we all pull our own weight here – but for now your focus should be finding your gifts and training with them. We need to know as much as possible, so we can help you. And that's something we all know without any doubt, we need to help you. It's important to your wellbeing, ours, and maybe everyone else's too."

The thought troubled Sam, but Amanda had continued on into the kitchen and he was clearly dismissed. He took himself off to shower as instructed.

Amanda had been right to send Sam up for a shower; he felt much better once he'd rinsed off the herbal oil. He still felt drained of all energy and heavy-limbed, and he was starving hungry. Whatever was cooking downstairs smelled fantastic. His stomach growled loudly as he trudged slowly down the stairs. Walking into the kitchen, he found the whole Assembly crowded around a table heaving with food, Stef and Amanda already shovelling food into their mouths like they were competitively eating, and Fiona absentmindedly popping the odd mouthful in between making notes on the small book she had balanced on the only corner of the table not crowded with food. The others were patiently waiting for Sam to join them before they started eating.

"Come on and grab a chair, Sam." From the brief introduction the night before, Sam remembered this guy's name was Justin. He was a tall guy – about Sam's height – but a little more filled out. With each growth spurt, Sam's carefully built muscle mass had stretched out, making him appear scrawny which irritated him to no end. Justin appeared to be in his early twenties and had short dark hair and wide chocolate brown eyes. There was the same quiet peaceful feeling radiating off him that came from the other members of The Assembly, yet something about his eyes told Sam that Justin could be a real prankster when he felt like it. Sam liked him immediately.

"Thanks." Sam said as he sat down next to Justin. "So, what's for dinner?"

"Oh, we've got a full spread tonight." Justin replied with a wide arm gesture across the whole table. "We knew that however hungry Stef and Amanda would be after helping you, you'd be at least twice as hungry, if not more. Using mental gifts burns through calories like running a marathon. So, we've got a bit of everything; macaroni and cheese, burgers, baked ham, lasagne, pizza and Chinese. Not everything's been homemade, so you can take that worried look off your face and stop fretting that we've been slaving away in the kitchen for you all day." Justin said with an amused snort, correctly interpreting the concerned expression on Sam's face as he looked over the huge spread of food. "Some of it Fiona and Mona picked up from this really great diner in town." Sam remembered the local diner from his last stay in town years ago. Dean had raved about the burgers and the pie in the place for months after they'd left. Sam felt a guilty pang at the thought of being able to enjoy Dean's favourites without him and firmly shoved it down; Dean wouldn't want to eat from the Ely Diner again if it meant having to spend time with his gay brother to do so.

Shaking off that depressing thought, he picked up the bowl of mac and cheese and served himself a huge portion, grabbing some garlic bread and a couple of slices of baked ham to go with it. He tucked in without any further delay.

"We've been arguing…"

"Debating!" Interrupted Lynne from Sam's other side.

"Sorry Debating" Justin corrected himself with a smirk "How best to go about training you up, Sam.
Stef has made copious notes on what latent abilities you seem to have, and while you're not some miracle human with every ability known to mankind, you do have a wider spread of abilities than any of us have heard of before, and a couple of them have a scope and depth rarely seen even in a fully trained adult. Certainly, never in a child."

"I'm not a child." Sam grumbled through a mouthful of ham. Glaring at Justin. "I'm fifteen years old and a Winchester."

"Fifteen is legally a child, Sam." Justin replied with a tilt of his head. "And what does being a Winchester have to do with your age?"

"Numerically nothing." Sam answered with a casual shrug, swallowing his mouthful. "But my family isn't like others. My dad's been hunting since before I even turned a year old, and he put a gun in my hand the moment I had the strength to hold it up. Every day of my life until I left them a few days ago has been full of physical training, target practice, research, memorising hunting techniques for various monsters, and helping my dad and my brother save people and hunt things. I made my first kill when I was seven, dug up and burned my first dead body before that. I haven't been a child since I was two, maybe not even then if what Stef and I discovered about what happened to me when I was nine months old is true."

Sam glanced up; the whole table had gone silent. Looks ranging from sympathy to pity and horror were directed at him from The Assembly. Mona and Fiona were gripping each other's hands tightly and Stef was rubbing Amanda's back gently while she looked like she was trying hard not to burst into tears. Lynne stared blankly at her plate and Justin cautiously reached out his hand and rested it on Sam's wrist, not wanting to spook him. Sam wasn't spooked, but it was a little odd to him – apart from Dean, he'd never had anyone touch him with gentleness that he could remember – not even John. It wasn't that his dad was violent with Sam or Dean – it was just that for as long as Sam could remember, Dean had been the one to take care of him, dress him, hug him, feed him when he was young enough to need it, and treat wounds and illnesses when he grew older. Justin cleared his throat.

"Fair enough, Sam. I guess we can say that by all measures that we use to judge a man, apart from age, you qualify as an adult. I'm sorry if I offended you. All I meant was that we've never met or even heard of anyone under the age of eighteen managing to access their abilities, and we're impressed by your scope at such a young age." He patted Sam's wrist and pulled his hand back.

"It's alright I guess. I shouldn't have jumped down your throat. In fact, there's one way in which you're quite right: legally I am a child. If I stay here with all of you, that's going to create some problems, and I need to do something about completing high school. My brother ended up dropping out because our dad found it much more convenient to our hunting to have Dean on hand full time. I don't want to follow the same path. I'd always planned on going to college when I was old enough, as a way to escape the hunting life, but I've got other ideas now. Still I want to be able to graduate, or all the years of grinding myself practically to dust maintaining my A average despite school-hopping will be wasted."

The others around the table nodded in understanding, Mona and Fiona with approving smiles.

"Well I can do my thing and fix a lot of that." Justin said brightly, breaking the tension at the table. "I've not had a good hacking challenge for ages, so it'll be fun getting my teeth into the issue of your custody and school records. I take it you'd prefer to remain yourself, rather than having me set you up a whole new identity?"

Sam nodded emphatically. "Yes! Like I said, I've worked too damn hard for too long to lose everything I've worked for by becoming a whole new person. Besides, my new plan requires me to
be Sam Winchester for a good number of years yet."

"New plan?" Lynne asked, confused. "What new plan? What is it you want to do?"

"I've spent my entire life hearing how I'm not good enough. Not fast enough, strong enough, smart enough. Not Dean enough." He took a deep breath and met Lynne's eyes defiantly. "Not straight enough." He paused and looked around the other faces, looking for judgement, disgust. He found none. Understanding and sympathy from most around the table was all he could read, and pride from Lynne and Justin. That last confused him a little, but he put a pin in that for the moment and pressed on. "I got to hear daily how I'd never make it in the forces like my dad did; how a faggot like me would wash out before the end of boot camp. It didn't matter that I never actually came out to him or my brother. I'm pretty sure my dad either worked it out for himself or at least suspected it. If I'd ever told him outright it would've been a total fucking horror fest. My brother definitely worked it out. And he really wasn't happy about it." Sam stared off into the distance, remembering the expression of hate on Dean's face as he repeatedly punched that tree. With a gusting sigh he shook it off. "Anyway, I've heard my whole life about how I'd never make it in the marines like my dad did. I'm going to prove him wrong. I'm going to make him eat his words, and not only will I make it, I'm going to out-rank him in the process. We'll see what he thinks about his fairy-boy son after that!"

Silence had once again fallen across the table. Some of them had tears in their eyes, all of them looked angry, but not with Sam. He startled a little as once again Justin gently patted his wrist. Sam offered him a tight smile and went back to his meal. Steadily focusing his attention on his plate until he heard the tale-tale signs of the others returning to their own dinners. This time Justin gave Sam's wrist a little squeeze before letting go, and on his other side, Lynne leant against him for a brief moment, her body heat offering a little more comfort.

Across the table, Stef cleared his throat.

"Well alright then. Sam Winchester remains, and Justin will work his magic – the computer type – to change your legal custody over to one of us and have your school records follow you here. The only problem with that is that it'd make it easy as pie for anyone to find you. Which I'm guessing is not what you want, and while normally we're not in the business of assisting runaways, this is definitely a special case. The small amount that Mona and I could see gave us no doubt that you need help, and that help has to come from us. For everyone's sake. We can't help you if you're out all around the country with your family hunting, and that's how it will be if they find you here."

"So, I'll combine both types of magic to fix this." Justin piped up cheerfully. "Sam here can give me a list of people who might look for him, and as I hack into and change his files, I'll lay on a good old-fashioned glamour aimed at those specific people, making it look like the files are completely untouched. Fiona can help me reseach a likely spell for the job, and voila – Sam will legally be no longer in his dad's custody in the eyes of everyone who looks, apart from the ones who would come to get him if they knew." He grinned at Sam who returned it, another weight lifted from his shoulders.

"I really don't think they'll even bother looking for me to be honest, but it makes sense to be cautious – that's why I covered my tracks so carefully when I left. I can easily give you a list of who might look for me. There are only four people on it. My dad doesn't trust people easily, he's only got two people he calls friend, and even they are more hunting contacts than friends. Hell, one of them threatened him with a shotgun the last time we saw him." Sam snorted. "Your dad seems like a real peach." Lynne muttered with disgust. "Right, then we've worked out how to keep you here with us, what your plan is going forward, and how to get you graduated from high school. Justin and Fiona can each start working on all of that after dinner; the sooner we get it
all sorted, the better. I'm not clear on how getting you into the marines is going to be important in the wider scheme of things though, like how it's so important to the world in general that Mona and Stef had visions about how important it would be to help you. So, the only conclusion I can come to on that front is that it's important that The Assembly trains you in your gifts. In fact, if I follow that thought to its logical conclusion, we should probably train you in pagan magic and hacking too to be safe."

The round of "Huh?"s that came from everyone around the table made her lift an eyebrow in amused distain at her colleagues' lack of discernment.

"Well it's obvious isn't it? There are lots of people who could train Sam in his gifts. One or two of them might even be do a better job – no offence, Stef."

"Some taken." Stef replied with a tight jaw.

"My point is, that for him to have been pointed our way so distinctly, there must be something about our merry little band specifically that is important to Sam. So that means we need to teach him everything we all know. Or we might miss the exact thing he needs."

The shocked silence from the rest of The Assembly was as good as a resounding chorus of agreement.

So, for the rest of the evening the group traded ideas back and forth, putting together a schedule for Sam that included his school work, training in his gifts, learning his way around Amanda's herbal business, and training in Justin's magic and hacking skills. On top of all that, Sam insisted that his physical training and weapons training not suffer. He was going to need his fitness and fighting skills to complete his plan in the marines after all.

They'd been sitting in the outbuilding for nearly an hour, the candle had warmed the air until none of the morning's chill remains, but Sam still couldn't call up any images the way Stef was asking. Throwing up his hands in disgust, Sam let out a frustrated sigh.

"It's no good. We've been trying this for hours at a time for days and days. This isn't working. Either I'm just fucking useless at this, or you were wrong and it's not a gift in my goody bag."

"Mind the language, Sam." Stef warned half-heatedly. None of them had had any luck with cleaning up Sam's potty mouth. The dirty vocabulary was too well ingrained. "But you're right about one thing." He continued. "This isn't working. We need to change tracks. Find a new way of pulling the imaged forward." Stef sat and stared at his hands for a few minutes, thinking through the next step. Suddenly he clapped his hands sharply.

"I've got a new plan. I'm going to ask you to use your imagination a bit here. Everyone's imagination works a little differently, and what works for one person won't necessarily work for another. Similarly, what works with one of your gifts might not be effective when it comes to another. I know you've got this gift, Sam; and strongly too. In fact, I'm fairly sure it's the strongest of your skills. If you can go backwards in time and call up images, then you can go forward. It's just how clairvoyant projection works. Retrocog and precog always come as a pair. It's buy one, get one free." He gave Sam a wry smile. Sam just rolled his eyes in return. He was fast becoming used to Stef's weird sense of humour.

"What do you need me to do then?" Sam asked in resignation.
"I'll explain to you how I make it work for me. You might have some luck trying it my way, or you might need to tweak it to suit your own needs." He rolled his shoulders and took a breath. "What I do is I imagine a huge tv screen. I picture every tiny detail about the tv – the screen, the wire, the plug, the remote. I let myself focus on nothing other than the screen, the way that I had you focus completely on the candle flames before. I let everything else drift and fall away until I am the screen, as well as the person watching it. Then I pick a channel. I can pick a history channel or a news channel, or a sci-fi channel. Past, present, and future. I can then switch channels within those categories and find the exact moments I need to see. Eventually, my system fitted me so well that I can be busy with an everyday task, not meditating at all, and I'll get a "news flash" type deal. That's how I got the vision about you and knew that we had to help you." Stef chuckled under his breath. "Granted, the new report was fuzzy and badly tuned, due to that block you've got up, but your need was so urgent that the message still got through. Now for you, the tv thing might not work. You might need to take a different track. Maybe create a library for yourself or build yourself a cable car type deal. Whatever it is, you create a method that suits your mind and imagination. Pick a track and work out your way, okay?" He fixed Sam with a stern expression, clearly determined that Sam get this.

"I'll give it a go." Sam agreed. "But how do I even get started? How do I know what'll work for me?"

"You sit here and clear your mind of everything. Total blank up there in your noggin. Then you let the idea come to you. When it does, you just follow it along its route until you've got a complete working system. It'll take you surprisingly little time once you have an in. Fuck, with your scope and strength, I'd be willing to bet that you'll have your entire method up and running by dinner tonight and will be eating us out of house and home to pay off the calories."

"Mind the language, Stef." Sam said dryly, making Stef roll his eyes and laugh. "Ok. I'll sit here and float around in my consciousness like a good little hippy."

"Don't let Amanda hear you say stuff like that, kid. You'll be needing to eat and drink from sealed containers for months in case she slips some herb or another into you in payback." Stef threw over his shoulder as he left the room. Setting Sam to laughing for several minutes until he could get it under control.

He did as Stef had asked, letting every thought and desire slip away from his mind and fizzle into the darkness. One by one, he brushed off each thought until he was floating in a light blankness inside his own mind. As was usual to Sam, off to one side was a darker, formless blob that seemed to be independent from him. Stef and Mona had no clue about what this could be. Neither of them had ever experienced the like; their blank state was completely empty. Stef's only possible suggestion was that it might be to do with the demon blood – he pointed out that Amanda had sensed something a little dark and other in the brief moments she'd been inside Sam's head. In irritation Sam threw off his curiosity. It had no place in his mind right then. The thought fizzled away like the others and Sam was once again empty.

He had no idea how long he stayed in that state – time was another thing that had no place in the blankness – but then he became aware of a faint sound. Slowly, the sound became louder and clearer, more distinct. A train! No sooner had the thought popped into his head, then a set of tracks rolled out in front of him. Like a ribbon unrolling and transforming into solid tracks as they hit the ground.

*Well Stef said I needed to find another track.* Sam thought, turning to see the tracks stretch out as far as he could see in each direction. *Well I've got forward and back, so I guess that's past and future, and I must be standing in the present.* He mused. *But I'll need a way to travel each direction.* He
barely finished the thought before he found himself sitting in a train carriage, a huge window next to his seat.

_Cool! So, I've got transport, a viewing window, and tracks to go forward and back. Then I guess each station will be a point in time. I pick a station, and I pick a moment in time along with it. Huh. Stef has tv stations, I have train stations… well he did tell me to find a new track. I guess my subconscious took him literally._ He looked around his train carriage and out of the, presently black, window.

_Well now I've got a method, do I make use of it by myself, or hold off until Stef can supervise. For that matter, how can I project this so that Stef can witness with me? Is it even possible to do that? He mused. How much longer will I have to wait until he comes back out to see how I'm doing?_

The thought wasn't even complete when the train carriage slipped forward a few feet. The window was suddenly light, and a clean and well-maintained station came into view the sign on the station wall reading "The outbuilding, Assembly House, Ely, Minnesota." To the right of the sign was a large digital clock, the red numbers showing Sam that day's date and 3:22pm. On the platform, an image of Sam sitting in the outbuilding appeared, just as Sam knew he was right at that moment. The door opened, and Stef walked in. The Sam in the image opened his eyes and grinned at Stef.

Sam let his mind pour back into his body and opened his eyes, grinning at Stef as he walked in, just as he had on the train platform.

"3:22pm." Sam stated to Stef with authority. "That's the exact time right now. I knew you'd walk in at 3:22pm." Stef looked at his watch and then back up at Sam with an answering grin.

"Bang on, kid. I knew you'd get it quick once you had a method. I can't believe I didn't think of trying it this way days ago." He reached out a hand for Sam to grab and hauled the younger man to his feet. "I bet you're starving. Let's go grab a snack before dinner and you can tell me all about your system.

With broad grins on both faces, the two headed across the yard and into the house.

Dinner that evening was another huge spread, laughter and loud conversation flowing as quick as the beer and soda around the table. Suggestions and questions about Sam's new skill set flew back and forth, with everyone shouting each other down until no one could hear anything that was said. Mona stood suddenly and banged her beer bottle down on the table, startling everyone quiet.

"Alright, everyone. We've all obviously got questions and ideas, but if we don't make an effort to take turns here, none of us are going to get anywhere. So, let's start with Fiona and then make our way around the table until everyone's had their say. Keep it to one question or suggestion at a time; we can always circle back around if there are more." She sat back down, and Fiona leaned forward, elbows on the table.

"Sam, I wanted to know if you had any sense of driving the train. Or if it drove itself?"

Sam paused for a moment, calling up the memory and examining it carefully.

"Actually, it was a bit of both I think. A thought popped into my head – I was wondering how long it would be until Stef came back to check on me, and then the train slid forward on the tracks and the station appeared in the window. Location, time and date all clearly labelled for me," Stef chuckled a bit at that.

"Seriously, kid. Leave it to you and your controlled and organised mind to label your visions so
clearly for you. I have to scout around my visions looking for clues, like an envelope on a counter with an address, or the length of the shadows across the ground. Not you. All neatly labelled and filed." They all laughed, even Sam. Out of everyone in the house, he was the only neat freak and the only one who obsessed about organising all his school work. Even Fiona and Mona, the scholar and the librarian had nothing on Sam's retentiveness when it came to filing and organising. In fact, Sam had been taking advantage of his training time with Fiona to start cataloguing and organising her research and records. He'd been doing something similar in Amanda's herbal shop.

"My turn." Justin piped up cheerfully. "I'm wondering about the limitations; train tracks are linear, but the future isn't. Granted, there are some events that it's almost impossible to change once they've been set into motion. But decisions are the essence of chaos. Minute decisions can have big consequences - I decide to stop for coffee on my way into work, and I end up crossing the road a couple of minutes later, avoiding getting hit by the speeding car. Big decisions can have even bigger consequences – Herr and Frau Hitler decide not to have a baby, and six million Jews don't die in camps. How does that work within the framework of your train tracks?"

Sam was taken aback. He'd never really considered the nature of the future before. If pressed he probably would've said it was like a lightning flash – starting at a single point and spreading out at random in countless directions. But the moment his train tracks had appeared in his mind, his perspective was set; he didn't have any questions in his mind – he knew. He knew exactly how the future was laid out.

"The future IS linear. But it's not just one line." He could see the baffled looks around him, so he tried to explain it better. "The best way for me to explain this is to continue the train analogy, if that's ok?" Everyone nodded, so Sam took a breath and plunged onwards. "The moment of a person's birth isn't a terminal. The tracks run out behind that point as well as in front. For most people there are countless decisions that decide the line that their train follows. There's not just one line. Each decision is a switch on the track. The train continues on, maybe parallel to the original line, maybe in a completely separate direction, but either way, the stations and the destinations are different. With a later decision, it's even possible to re-join the original line, bypassing some of the stations. These are the people for whom a little decision could make a big difference."

The astonished expressions around the table also showed understanding. They were all amazed, but they got it. He continued.

"Some people have a predetermined journey. Somehow, somewhere in the past, before they were born, their train was set in motion, and they just took up residence when they were born. These people would have to make big, no HUGE decisions to make those big differences. Their little decisions are of no consequence whatsoever – their train is so firmly planted on their tracks, that only really big decisions can make their train jump to another track." He sat back and steadied himself. Even he was shocked with what had just come out of his mouth.

"Sam?" Lynne spoke carefully. "How do you know all that? I mean it sounds right to me, I can't explain why I think that, but it does sound right. But how do you know it?"

Sam shrugged. "I don't know how I know. Just, the second Justin asked the question, I knew the answer. It was just right there and so obvious. Like I'd known it my whole life."

Conversation around the table had dried up completely. Everyone just sat there, food cooling on their plates as they switched from digesting food, to digesting information. They sat there like that for several minutes, in total silence. Until Sam's stomach let out a loud grumble. His shoulders started to shake with suppressed laughter, Justin and Mona followed suit before long and soon they were all giggling like crazed pre-teen girls.
"I guess..." Sam stopped, trying to catch his breath "I guess that's a hint to tell us that life marches on even in the face of huge revelations." He picked up his fork and shovelled a huge mouthful of pot roast in, chewing around his chuckles as the others joined him.

"Tomorrow we need to get down to some real work then." Mona stated authoritatively. We need to work out what lies ahead on Sam's current track, how we can make changes, if it's even possible to do so, and there's still a question nagging at me. I want to know what this dark otherness is inside Sam. Stef's theory that it's got to do with the demon blood makes sense to me, and it was undoubtedly the blood that jump started his gifts." She turned to Sam and held his gaze firmly. "It's so important that you completely understand that, Sam. The demon blood didn't give you your abilities. It just woke up what was already there – far too early, and without your say-so, but that's all it did. You always had the potential for this. It's not good or evil any more than any human being is at birth. It all comes down to you and how you use them. Just like it's all down to any person with free will how they use it. Ok, Hun? It's real important that you get that." Sam nodded.

"I understand, Mona. Thank you. I know I would've torn myself apart wondering about that otherwise. If that darkness I'm carrying around is in fact the demon blood, maybe we can work out a way to get rid of it completely from my system, or at least contain it to one place so that it can't do me or anyone else any harm."

"That's a brilliant idea!" Amanda burst out. "I think I can work out a way to kind of herd it through your body and isolate it somewhere in an extremity. It's going to take a lot of meditation, and I think probably some tattoos, but I think it's possible."

The idea was pretty exciting to Sam. To get all that shit out of his system was well worth some hard work and a little ink.

"Tomorrow then. Tomorrow we get down to some serious work." Sam raised his glass to his companions in a toast.

They all copied him. "Tomorrow!"

Sam slept like a log that night and woke full of energy and determination. Sure, they'd been working on identifying and training his abilities already, but today felt like the real beginning of it all. He started back at school the following week and was determined that he was going to have at least some kind of handle on everything before that happened; he always found he worked better if he had everything organised and compartmentalised, and his schedule until he graduated and joined up was going to be fiercely busy. School, physical training and weapons training were all second nature to him – the balance was tricky, but he'd managed it before. Now he was adding in healing and herbal magic, coding, pagan magic and mental abilities training, oh and he'd better find himself a martial arts class somewhere too – not that he needed the lessons per say, but he couldn't let his skills lapse, and a martial arts teacher seemed the most sensible person for sparing practice.

After his morning run, a shower and a large breakfast, he and Stef headed out to the outbuilding as usual, this time accompanied by Amanda. Looks like we're tackling the demon blood thing first then. Sam surmised as they all filed in to find a cushion to sit on.

"We're tackling the demon blood thing first." Amanda stated firmly, making Sam bite the inside of his mouth to keep his laugh in. Next to her cushion, she had a pack of fine black sharpies, which had Sam lifting an eyebrow in silent enquiry.

"Fiona and I did a little research last night before Stef and I headed home." Amanda explained. "We
found an ancient symbol called a devil's trap. Actually, there are several different types. Some are for warding, some for banishing, and some do as advertised; they trap demons. We debated for quite a while about using the banishing symbol, but we didn't know what that might do to you after having the blood in your system almost your entire life, so we decided on using the warding symbol instead. Take off your shoes and socks." Sam stared at her blankly for a moment, not used to this business-like version of Amanda. She was usually so unassuming and soothing. Kind of your stereotypical patchouli-loving hippy type. But now she was being very type A. She gestured at him to get on with it and he followed her instructions, silently blessing himself that he'd showered before breakfast.

"So, the plan is to hear the demon blood around your body until we have it all collected into one place." Amanda explained as she took out a sharpie. "The most logical first step is to have you centre yourself and get you focussing on the blood and tissues in one of your big toes to watch for a reaction as I draw a symbol on the very tip of it. It's my theory and hope that the demon blood is in your blood vessels and not permeated through your tissues. It'll be difficult and time consuming enough even if I'm right. If I am correct, then as we get better at this, it should be possible to have you draw all the blood away from an extremity and towards you heart, slap on a warding symbol in the empty area, and then release the blood. It shouldn't be able to pass beyond the warding. Then we just keep at it, session by session, driving it along until we have it all trapped in one spot. Then we'll have another long, stand-up, throw-down debate about what to do with it." Sam nodded his understanding, offering Amanda his left foot and centring his entire focus on his big toe to watch the proceedings internally. He still wasn't very good in this discipline. The centring and focussing part were fine, but it was all so fuzzy and blurry still. And he couldn't get a grip on anything internally. It was as if it was all coated in a greasy, oily substance.

Once his full attention was on the blood and tissues of his left big toe, he gave Amanda a nod, and she started drawing a tiny but complicated symbol onto the very tip of it. It tickled, but Sam pushed the feeling to one side, laser focusing on any changes that might occur. He knew the second Amanda completed the warding symbol. There was a sudden lurching feeling in his blood, and the fuzzy, blurry view of his toe was, in an instant, crystal clear. He jumped. His eyes flying up to meet Amanda's, filled with hope and excitement.

"You're right! It's just in the bloodstream. It leapt away from that warding symbol as if it was red-hot, and it's not flowing back." Sam blurted out at speed. "And suddenly I can see everything without that murky, blurriness that was there before. It was the demon blood blocking me. My toe is clear up to the first joint now."

The three of them gave a loud cheer and hugged each other before Amanda brought up a small issue.

"Problem is, Sam. Sharpie rubs off. And when it does, the demon blood will just rush back down. The only way I can think of to make the process permanent is tattoos. And we can't cover your entire body with tiny devil's traps permanently. Especially not if you're joining the marines; a couple of tattoos in discrete places wouldn't affect you joining up, but full body art made of arcane symbols? No way." They all sat back and thought over the problem.

"How about using the sharpie to drive it up several steps per session, and then making the last one permanent by tattooing it on?" Stef suggested. Amanda screwed up her nose, thinking it over,

"Well that would be better than making every warding a tattoo, but it's still going to be far too much ink for the armed forces to approve." She said slowly.

"Wait. Who are we going to find to tattoo a fifteen-year-old anyway?" Sam asked, just now realising that his age was going to be a problem.

"Oh, I'll do it." Amanda told him in a blasé manner. "I've got my tattoo gun and inks in the car. I just
didn't want to hump it all out here if the warding didn't work like I hoped." Sam's eyebrows shot up.

"You're a tattoo artist?" he asked incredulously.

"Oh yeah. I spend a few years working in tattoo parlours here and there. I'm pretty good though I do say so myself. I keep my eye in by doing healing symbols for clients now and again." Stef grinned at her with pride.

"Hey!" Sam suddenly burst out. "If you're doing the tattooing, then it's simple. No need to explain things to an outside source." The other two just looked at him blankly, not following his train of thought. "Oh, sorry. I was just thinking that if we found a safe dye to use in a human body, we could do the tattoos with ultra violet ink. Would that work? I mean would the wardings have to be visible with the human eye, or would UV do the job?" Amanda looked up excitedly.

"Genius, Sam. Absolutely genius. We'd have to experiment, of course, make sure the UV ink would hold the warding, but I don't see why it wouldn't. We could decorate your entire body with anything we wanted if we did it in UV ink. YES!" Suddenly, hippy Amanda made a reappearance, and Sam realised just how tense and anxious she must've been that the wardings wouldn't work. His heart swelled as he realised how much she cared about him even though they hadn't known each other for long. Jumping up, he rushed over and wrapped her in his gangly arms, hugging the crap out of her. He was completely unaware that this was the first time he'd initiated any physical contact with any of The Assembly, let alone an affectionate touch, so he didn't notice Stef's wide eyes and raised brows or Amanda's burgeoning tears.

"If we're waiting on a safe UV ink, then I guess there's not much point in pressing on with this today." She choked out past her suddenly tight throat. "Let's just quickly go in and tell Fiona how well the first try went, and then you and Stef can come back out here and get to work while I make a start on researching safe UV inks."

No one had any argument for that suggestion, and so they all headed back to the house, Sam rushing ahead like an excited puppy, and Stef and Amanda following slowly behind, Amanda tucked neatly under Stef's arm as he helped her regain her equilibrium.

They only took a brief break before Amanda hustled herself off to the computer to start her hunt for safe UV ink for Sam, and he and Stef wandered back out to the outbuilding to press on with their work. As they walked, Sam remembered a question he'd had the day before.

"Stef, is there any way to project my precog visions the same way I did with my retrocog ones?" Stef shook his head. "Not that I've ever found or heard of, kid. I don't know why that would be, but there you have it."

They sat down on their respective cushions and Sam started finding his blank space. It seemed to come to him quicker and quicker each time he tried it. As he worked on his focus, Stef talked quietly to him in the background.

"Ok, Sam. So, what you're going to do here is both very simple and terribly complicated at the same time. You should find that asking yourself a question; wondering about a specific future event, will send you speeding along right where you need to be. The tricky part is to keep yourself distanced and unemotional while you're watching. If you let yourself get emotional then you'll just fall straight out of the vision. And you'll have the mother of all headaches for your trouble." Steff warned. "You've got to keep that shit on lockdown, kid."

Sam vaguely registered what the older man was telling him, even as he continued to place himself in his blank space. After just a few more moments, he found himself sitting once again in his train carriage, the black window beside him. Sensing he was ready, Stef started directing Sam's progress.
"First off, we're going to take you backwards a bit, Sam. Your decision to leave your family and come to find us here in Ely may have been big enough to jump you out of your tracks, so we need to get back to the original line and follow it forward. See where it was heading. Sam followed his direction, taking the carriage speeding back down the track to the day he'd seen Dean having his meltdown, and so decided it was time to leave. Sure enough, there in front of him he saw a stich point in the tracks.

"So, if you've got there, I want you to follow the original track, see what's along that way. Sam obeyed, watching out of the window to see the scenes at each station along the way. The first station he stopped at showed him a scene of an older Sam, maybe eighteen. He was in a stand-up row with John, Dean standing by helplessly as the pair tore verbal shreds off each other. Sam was leaving to go to college and John was issuing an ultimatum.

"If you walk out of that door, Sammy, don't you ever come back." John's words echoed through Sam, even as an impassionate observer. He saw the wisdom of Stef's advice about keeping an emotional distance. He pushed the train further ahead, seeing himself trying desperately to fit in at college, even going so far as to get himself a girlfriend that there was no way he could've actually been sexually attracted to, despite that fact that she was stunningly beautiful. If that was where his future had been headed, Sam was glad he'd taken a detour. He'd only been with The Assembly for a few days, and already he felt more at home with himself than he ever had since he'd been little and unaware of what attraction was. He pushed forward again and saw Dean breaking into his apartment.

"Easy Tiger!" The amused and condescending tone ripped into Sam, suddenly so homesick for his brother that he imagined he could smell his leather and gun oil scent. His vision wavered, and Sam ruthlessly pushed his emotions into the background, firming up the vision and moving forward quickly to avoid a repeat.

"Dad's missing." He watched as the Sam on this track left college with Dean for a weekend to search for their dad, and then returned, after an eventful woman in white hunt, but no sign of their dad. He watched as this Sam walked away from Dean, knowing just how much it must've been hurting, and then suddenly a kind of murky black curtain fell across the window. No matter how hard Sam tried, he couldn't see through the blackness, and even the tracks ahead were muted and dark. Seeing no other options, Sam reversed the train back to the switch point and onto his current track. Pulling it forward to the current time, he could see the track ahead clearly. No sign at all of that murky black from the other track. So, it looked like he'd avoided something majorly bad by coming to Ely. Just what it was, remained to be seen.

Sam allowed himself to fall back into his body and passed on all he had seen to Stef. The blond looked as troubled and confused as Sam himself felt, and between them they agreed to put a pin in the discussion, and to spend the rest of their time trying something a little different.

"We're going to see if you can precog for other people or if it's just a personal ability." Stef explained. "From the little you've told us, I know that you're closest to your brother, Dean. Or you were anyway before you left." Sam hid the wince that offhand comment brought on. Stef didn't intend to hurt Sam, he just didn't understand. "I want you to put yourself back into your blank state but hold onto one thought – Dean. What should happen is, you should be able to follow his future. I'm guessing for you that will mean a slightly different train carriage to follow along a different track."

Once again, Sam followed his instructions, and faster than he'd expected, he found himself in a nearly identical carriage. He almost burst out laughing as he realised that in the background he could hear a Muzak version of "Eye of the Tiger". *Dean would flip his shit if he heard that!* Sam thought to
himself. Working at maintaining his calm and staying in the meditative state. He glanced ahead at
Dean's tracks and was horrified to see that the same murky blackness that had shrouded Sam's
original line was covering Dean's. He pushed forward anyway, wanting, needing to see what he
could before he got to the shrouded section of track. Station after station, hunt after hunt, Sam saw
Dean's life playing out in the usual Winchester fashion, although it seemed to Sam that something
was a little off; Dean was hurling himself at monsters and ghosts in a reckless manner. Seeming
almost indifferent to his own wellbeing as he hunted. Sam frowned. Definitely not great. He wished
he could find a way to have Dean's back on the hunt without having to force his unwanted presence
on his brother. The answer came to him so suddenly that it jerked him back into his own body, the
threatened headache already blooming behind his eyes.

He forced them open, despite the pain and searched for Stef who was standing leaning against the
open door.

"Stef. I want to set up a new email account anonymously. Justin can do that for me, right?" He
asked, wincing against the pain his own voice brought him.

"Well yeah, kid. But what's that got to do with anything?" He took a second look at Sam. Scowling
as he noticed the squinted eyes and pinched expression. "You fell out of your blank space, didn't
you? Damn kid, that always hurts like a bitch. Come on. Let's go see if Amanda can help you out."
Sam obediently staggered to his feet and followed Stef out.

"I had an idea so brilliant that it jumped me out." Sam grimaced. "I could follow Dean's tracks easily,
but a few years into the future and they're as murky as my original line was. He's still going to be
hunting, and that's dangerous without me. Our dad's too single-minded to watch Dean's back
properly. But if I can look ahead for him, find the dangers in each hunt and direct him past them,
then I've still got his back from all the way out here, without him having to have me near him,
without him even knowing it's me." He rambled on eagerly, unaware of the dismayed look Stef was
giving him in response to his wording. "Justin can help me with that, right?" Sam asked again.
Deciding not to get into the backstory right now, Stef just reassured Sam that Justin would be able to
hook him up with an anonymous email account and led him inside to let Amanda work her particular
brand of healing on the kid.
From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger

December 12, 1998

Bobby

You don't know me, but I see you. I also see the Winchesters. You'll be receiving emails from me periodically and it's important that you pass the information on to them. I know that both you and they will be sceptical at first, but I'll prove my worth before long.

There's no point trying to trace this email address; all you'll get is a nasty headache and a renewed desire to curse John Winchester – after all if the man would just bite the bullet and join the rest of the world in the technological age, I could email him directly.

SeerWitch

From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger

February 22, 1999

Bobby

There's a poltergeist in Lincoln, Idaho. The Winchesters will stumble across it by accident. Warn them that the second floor is rotten almost all the way through. Placing the hex bags in just the first-floor corners will do it, no matter how much John bitches about it not being the proper procedure.

I'll bet you two bottles of single malt that John ignores you, so you'd better tell Dean to stock up on the good painkillers. John's broken ankle will make both of them miserable as sin until it heals otherwise.

Hope your headache from last time didn't last more than a week. I did warn you.

SeerWitch

From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger

March 4, 1999

Bobby

The ghoul in Hood River, Oregon isn't a ghoul. It's some twisted necrophiliac dude, and the Winchesters are going to get themselves arrested,

Tell John to hold back for just an hour by the Idlewild Cemetery, and he'll see the necro freak drive
in. He's got a white panel van.

You owe me two bottles of single malt. I'll collect one day.

SeerWitch

From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger

May 16, 1999

Bobby

Get your old white ass to Shreveport, Louisiana as fast as you can. You'll find Dean and John holed up in an abandoned house near the southern city limits. They'll be out of food, meds, dressings, and patience. Hell, they'll be out of everything but beer.

Remind Dean that beer isn't one of the food groups. The ladies won't flock to him if he's rocking the manorexic look.

SeerWitch

From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger

November 8, 1999

Bobby

Austin, Texas. In just over three weeks some weird-ass shit is going to go down. It's a shapeshifter. Send the Winchesters down now. As long as they get there before November 29, they'll be able to catch the thing as it sets up home in a disused sewer under the high school. Tell them to buy a cheap video camera and view the thing through that. The eyes will glow silver.

Tell John to quit bitching about the expense; it's not like he earned the money himself. What his beef is with spending money on anything other than ammo, food or motels with stolen credit cards is baffling to me.

Silver will waste the shifter.

Tell Dean to watch his footing. If he gets that slimy crap on his new boots they'll stain, and he'll literally never quit bitching about that. Literally never.

SeerWitch

From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger

April 9, 2000

Bobby

There's a new ammo dealer in Jasper, Arkansas who claims he'll make bullets out of anything you want. Just thought it'd be a good contact for you all.

SeerWitch
From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger

June 3, 2000

Bobby

Werewolf. Eufaula, Oklahoma. It's a fucking Kindergarten teacher, Bobby! If they get there before the next full moon they'll save the seven kids who will go out on a hayride with the bitch.

Tell Dean the scar isn't his fault. Tell John he wasn't that pretty anyway, and he should've damn well ducked when Dean told him.

SeerWitch

From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger

October 12, 2000

Bobby

Go to the doctor. Go today. It's still treatable now, but you leave it another month and you're in a world of trouble.

Sunscreen isn't just for little girls.

SeerWitch

From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger

January 27, 2001

Bobby

Send the Winchesters to Brownville, Nebraska. There's a coven of witches out there, pretending to be soccer mom types. The leader of the coven is Claire Denver, and she has a genuine Grimoire, but the real problem is she's got demon backing. A blessed Iron round to the forehead will take her out. The others will be powerless once she's gone. John can scare them straight. That something he's good at.

Tell Dean it's ok. The woman is so far gone she's half demon already. Just because they're technically human, doesn't make the hunt wrong. Tell John to keep his away from the bars that night. There's trouble and then there's drunk and hurting Dean trouble no one wants to see what happens if John lets him go to the bar.

SeerWitch

From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger

June 19, 2001

Bobby

These emails may get even spottier and shorter that they've been already. I've got stuff going on and
can't always get computer time when I want to.

Rest assured, when it's important I'll make sure the message gets to you.

Take the Grimoire to The Assembly House in Ely, Minnesota. They'll know you're coming. They're trustworthy and can probably help you plenty in the future. Fiona's got some research volumes you'd love.

Until the next time.

SeerWitch


Finally, he was here. Sam had waited a long time, it seemed, though some of it had almost flown by, with The Assembly. It had been necessary to wait, until he was old enough and, he was sure, until Stef and the others were satisfied that he was in control of his abilities, rather than the other way around. But now he was here, in the Marines. Not yet fully-fledged, still a 'maggot' in boot camp, but well on his way.

He lay on his bunk, eyes closed, feigning sleep. It was still early; early enough in the morning that it was still dark outside, but Sam knew that in a few minutes Drill Instructor Ermey would be storming into the barracks, shouting at the platoon to "Get your maggoty asses off those bunks!" Until then, he had a few moments to think, a short time to order his mind, and prepare for another day of training. He had expected to have some doubts, at first; second thoughts about joining up. But instead he had felt like he was home, like he was at last where he was meant to be. Now six weeks in, day T-45, he knew that unlike his fellow recruits, most of the training had been second nature for him. John had run the Winchester family like a Marine's platoon, so many aspects of Boot Camp had been like being thirteen again. Maintaining hygiene? – Simple. Field stripping a rifle (not a gun, mustn't call it that)? – Not a problem; hunting may not require a rifle much, but they used shotguns and handguns often enough, and John kept a rifle, all of which Sam and Dean were expected to keep clean, oiled and in perfect order at all times. Physical Training? – Sam was relieved that he had insisted on keeping up with his old routines while he was with The Assembly, it had proved to be more than worth it. His only difficulty with current training was that it turned out that John's attitude to his youngest son's pace over a distance run, was echoed by Instructors at Boot Camp. But Sam had overcome that before and was managing to cope with it again. Hand-to-hand combat, knife work, first aid, protocol, military history, marksmanship; all standard fare for John Winchester's sons. At times, Sam even had to pretend to find a drill difficult, just to avoid unwanted attention. He had no wish to explain to an officer why he already knew how to throw a knife accurately at that range. There had been one close call, during the second week, when an officer, observing the platoon stripping rifles, had asked Sam's name; "Winchester, huh? I served with a Winchester in 'Nam, good man. Your daddy serve, son?" Sam had told him his father had been a teacher, and the officer had lost interest and moved on.

Close order drill had been a new experience, but being shouted at, ordered about, and being referred to with various insults; this was old news to Sam. Indeed, now he finally understood where John had learnt not only his go-to insults, but his whole parenting rulebook. In fact, the most distressing part of the whole experience, so far, had been losing his hair to the barber's floor. Sam corrected himself; one of the most distressing parts. The general attitude towards recruits, the suppression of individuality, that was exercised and expected, went against the grain for Sam – especially after his years with The Assembly, where their differences were their strength. He couldn't help empathising with a comrade who was homesick, or one who missed listening to his favourite music, but this was something he had to learn to hide. Also, referring to himself as "This recruit" still felt vaguely
ridiculous. Ironically, Sam felt grateful to his dad for preparing him, however unknowingly, for this world.

The only other difficulty was also one he had been inadvertently trained for; the subject of his sexuality. "Don't ask, don't tell" was the official policy, and to Sam that meant -don't ask anyone for anything, and no matter what, -don't tell anyone you're gay.

One good thing about Boot Camp; he was too busy, and too tired to show any interest in another man anyway, let alone to make any attempt at approaching anyone. Still, it was best to be cautious, to keep his eyes on the wall when showering, and to bite his lip on occasion, rather than rising to the bait. "You a queer-boy, is that it son?" Drill Instructor Ermey had asked, when Sam had held back in MCMAP (Martial Arts) training. "Would you rather be fucking him, than throwing him?" In fact, Sam had been trying very hard not to break the recruit's arm, and to appear more of a novice than he really was. It had taken some effort not to reply; "Sir, this recruit prefers blondes, sir" or, "Sir, I doubt he could take what this recruit has, sir" another thing to thank John Winchester for, -Sam knew better than to respond to this sort of berating.

Once more he wondered if John considered himself dead, as far as the military was concerned, and had taken the old Marine Corps Cadence to heart: If I die in the combat zone Box me up and ship me home Pin my medals upon my chest Tell my ma I done my best Bury my body six foot down Till you hear it hit the ground When it hits the bottom you'll hear me shout; "I wanna be a Drill Instructor!" "I wanna cut off all o'my hair!" "I wanna be a Drill Instructor!" "I'm gonna wear my Smokey Bear!"

Certainly, in Sam's opinion, Corporal John Winchester had indeed become a Drill Instructor, dead or not. He may have been "a good man" in Vietnam, and an exemplary marine, but he'd never been much of a father, not to him, and probably not for Dean. In the dark of the barracks, he felt the change in the air as Ermey opened the door, preparing to wake his recruits. Sam smiled to himself. They'd be on the rifle range today. Not that they'd been told this, he just knew.

Day T-69, and Sam was taking the opportunity, whilst the other recruits were all otherwise occupied, to get online as Seer-Witch, and email Bobby. It was no surprise to him when the Colonel walked in; indeed, he'd been expecting this 'chance encounter' for some time and had thought it would happen sooner. Once he was sure the officer had assumed he'd been noticed, Sam quickly got to his feet, straight to attention.

"At ease, Marine." –Sam relaxed. "Please, sit down. I'm Colonel O'Neill." "Yessir." Sam sat, and did his best to appear puzzled. It wouldn't be a good idea to allow O'Neill to know he'd been expected, or that Sam knew he'd been observing this recruit's progress. This was an important junction in the tracks, and Sam had already decided which direction to take, how he would respond to the Colonel's offer, once it came.

"It's Family Day." The Colonel stated. Sam nodded. "You're graduating as Private First Class, I see. Been a Squad Leader all through Boot, top marks in marksmanship, MCMAP, various other skills... -Hell, top of the class almost across the board." Sam said nothing. He knew better than to brag, or show too much pride.

"Son, you heard what happened in New York? The World Trade Centre?" "Of course, sir." "The President's declared a 'War on terrorism'. The top brass want action, and it's the Marines who're expected to step up." O'Neill took a chair, sat
down next to Sam, and leaned in conspiratorially. "I've been tasked with setting up a special team. I've got a few veterans, guys who know their stuff, have seen some action. But I want the bulk of the group to be new recruits, -top class only, but without the habits acquired in the field. You get me?"

*You want your own private army.* "I think so, sir." "How would you like a promotion, to say, Sergeant? Maybe even Gunnery Sergeant? That'd take your pay grade up to E-5, E-7…" The Colonel looked at Sam expectantly. *Fuck you, 'Corporal John Winchester', I outrank you. "I… I don't know what to say, sir." "Of course that'd be after further training, a couple of months at least. During which you'd be assigned to a squad, expected to gel as a team, ecksetera… You interested, Winchester?" "I believe I am sir." "Good. We'll be on the books as a normal Company, part of a standard Battalion. But operations will be need-to-know, strictly off-record. We're planning on hitting these A-rabs where it hurts, right in their backyard." "Yes sir."

Colonel O'Neill went on to explain where Sam was to report, who to, and he reiterated the need to keep things 'quiet like'. "So I'll see you after your ten days, Winchester." "Sir?" "Your leave, Private. After graduation." "Sir." "Hoo-rah, Marine" "Hoo-rah, sir"

*And so it begins… Thought Sam.*

Ten days leave. Ten days in which a newly made Marine was supposed to go back to his family, rest, and hopefully pine for the Corps. There was no way Sam was going back to John and Dean. He had considered visiting Bobby, but only briefly. He knew that to do so, would ruin everything he had worked so hard to accomplish. But there was a part of him that wanted John to know, to hear from his old friend that Sam had graduated, was now a Marine. 'PFC Sam Winchester.' It was strange to see that written down, now that he looked at it, on his papers which also ordered him to report for duty, after leave, to Fox Company, under Colonel O'Neill.

Instead, Sam was headed back to Ely. As the bus rolled to a stop in the middle of town, he folded the papers, put them in his pocket. No rest for him, not yet. He had work to do. *No rest for the wicked,* he thought, **nor for those with wicked in them.**

Once off the bus, he looked around, expecting to see Mona waiting for him, or maybe Stef. Instead he saw, standing off to one side, away from the people greeting family, friends and loved ones, Amanda, looking tired but determined. He marched over to meet her. Still in full uniform, he blushed a little, as he realised how they must look to any onlookers; like a soldier coming home to his sweetheart. Still, it made for a good cover for what they really were; a man with demon blood in his veins, meeting the woman who was helping him cleanse himself.

It was a short drive back to Amanda's place, where he'd be staying for the next week or so. She was quiet during the drive, only once commenting on his uniform, about how smart he looked. Once they had got to her house, and he had unpacked and changed into civilian clothes, Amanda asked him about his hair; "Do you have to keep it high and tight?" "No, I can grow it a little. As long as it stays short of the collar." "Good, because we'll need another tattoo up there, and 'invisible' or not, it'll show where the hair can't grow."

With that, they began, returning once more to the same routine, bit by bit, inch by inch, isolating the demon blood, and driving it towards his left arm. The process was slow and tiring for both of them, and yet, when the time came for him to leave Ely once more, Sam felt like it had only been a day or two.

"Well, we've driven it all into your arm, now." -Said an exhausted Amanda, as she and Sam waited together for the bus. "You should be able to continue on your own, from here." He wondered how much she meant isolating the blood, and how much she meant this journey, or his life. "I hope so,"
he said, "I can contact you, if I have any problems?" "You can," Amanda replied. "But you won't."

On arriving at his new base, at an undisclosed and relatively secret location, PFC Winchester reported to Second Lieutenant Winters, who would be in charge of training the recruits to 'Black Fox', the newly formed Company. Winters directed Sam to his new barracks, and told him to get squared away, and then be in the briefing room by 1600 hours. It was now 1500. Sam chose a bunk, sorted out his kit, then having most of an hour to kill, headed out to find something to eat. He also wanted to find the other recruits, who presumably were also getting themselves fed, as the barracks room was otherwise empty.

The mess, where the Marines had chow, was small, meant to serve only Fox Company. This was intentional, as Colonel O'Neill didn't want his new men mixing with 'ordinary' Marines. As such, it didn't take Sam long to distinguish between the newbies, like himself, and the few veterans transferred to the company. Sensing an opportunity to play advocate, he deliberately sat himself in the, albeit small, gap between the youngsters and the more experienced men. Unusually quiet, for a group of Marines. Time to change that. Sam gently nudged the tray of the Corporal opposite him. "This food as good as it was in Boot, Corporal?" he said, his voice seeming extra loud in the tense silence. "No way, boy." Was the reply; "It's worse. Welcome to the Marine Corps." In the silence that followed, Sam almost expected to see tumbleweed rolling across the room. But after a second or two, that felt like hours, the Private next to him burst into a nervous, high pitched giggle, and another man, a veteran by the looks of him, snorted so hard that water flew out his nose. "Oh great," the Corporal said, "we've got a giggler, and a fire hose." The man next to the snorter spoke up; "That's SERGEANT Fire Hose, to you, Corporal." At this the room filled with laughter, and finally the new men of Black Fox started to talk. What conversation there was, was brief, and mainly concerned where each man had trained, and where the older men had served.

Soon enough it was time for them to head to the briefing room. There they were met by Lt Winters, who read out platoon assignments, and named the platoon leaders. He then introduced Colonel O'Neill, who stood in front of the men looking like he'd just won the lottery and announced; "Welcome to Black Fox. Over the next two months, you will be trained to the highest standards in the Marine Corps, if not in the world. You will be trained with the sole purpose of taking the war on terror, to the doorstep of the terrorists. Within your platoon, within your squads, -once training is complete- rank will become almost irrelevant. In the field you will be one entity, referring to rank only as a means of identification, deferring instead to the foremost expert, relevant to the mission at hand. To that end, you will each be expected to specialize in at least two disciplines and be proficient in many more. Upon completion of this training, each of you will receive promotion by a rank or two, so that the least of you will be a Sergeant. This is to ensure that when you are in the field, on mission, you have authority over men from any other unit you may come into contact with. This Fox Company will lead, gentlemen, from the front, and if need be, by the nose."

As it turned out, Sam (Usually called simply 'Winchester') found himself in a platoon with 'Fire Hose' and in a squad with 'Giggler' and the Corporal he'd first spoken to, a man called Walter Stone, who everyone decided to call 'Mitty'. Such is the wit of the average Marine.

It wasn't until Black Fox training was over and they were on liberty before deployment that Sam finally encountered something he found so challenging he wasn't sure he could do it. With the nature of the missions they would be sent on, the requirement was that each man write a last letter (or letters) to their family, which would be hand delivered in the event of them being notified of the death of their son/brother/husband/boyfriend/father. Sam stressed and struggled over his for days on
end before Carson finally got fed up with him staring at blank sheets of paper and smacked him around the back of the head.

"Fuck sake, Winchester. Just get drunk and write." It was either brilliant, or the worst advice he'd ever had, but nothing he'd tried before had worked for him, so he gave it a go. He drank far more than was wise, then grabbed a pen and wrote two letters.

_Dad_

It must be weird to be getting a letter from me after all these years, and maybe you didn't get any further than checking the signature before chucking this out, but just in case you're still reading, I guess I should let you know why you're getting this one.

I joined the Marine Corps. I heard from you for the first fifteen years of my life about how I'd never even make it through boot camp, how I'd crumble under the pressure, how I couldn't obey an order if my life depended on it, and it would in the Marines. Even more than that, I heard about how no faggot would ever last five minutes in the Marines. How mincing fairies couldn't make it in the military. How a cocksucker would fail out in the first week of Boot Camp.

Well this cock-sucking fairy faggot has proved you wrong.

_Boot Camp was piss easy. At least that's one thing you can congratulate yourself on. What passed for my childhood was worse than US Marine Corps Boot Camp. Well done._

I'm sure you're not that interested, but after I left you and Dean, I found some people who helped me. They kept me safe and well fed and clothed. They encouraged me to continue doing well at school – they were amazed by my straight A record considering how many schools you dragged me through – and I graduated top of my class. I could have gone to any college I chose, but I wanted to prove you wrong. I wanted to one day walk up to you in my uniform – outranking you – and maybe finally see something that approached pride in your face, however begrudging. But I guess if you're reading this, that never happened because this latter will only reach you if I die in action.

This letter probably reads like I hate you. I don't. It probably reads like I don't respect you. I do. It probably reads like I don't love you. I do.

I love you, dad, but I could never understand why you didn't love me.

I know I was never fast enough, strong enough, Dean enough for you, but couldn't you just have loved me for being Sam? Apparently not, so I'm sorry I couldn't give you that.

I'm not sorry that I left though. It was the best decision I ever made. For all of us I suspect. I no longer had to try and fail daily to please you, or to hear a daily barrage of homophobic slurs. You no longer had to deal with the difficult son and never had to try and beat the queer out of me (wouldn't have worked, by the way – even with Don't ask Don't tell, I still managed to stay as queer as a three-dollar bill.)

I always wondered actually – did you always know I was gay? Was that what all the bigoted language was about? A misguided attempt to scare me straight? Guess I'll never know now, but I was always curious about that.

I didn't plan on this letter being so bitter, but apparently that's what I needed to tell you before I die, so there it is. At least it's longer than the last letter.

I hope you stay safe. I hope you find the thing that killed Mom and destroy it. I hope you find a way to be happy again one day. I hope that maybe now you can find something about me to be proud of.
Because I did make it, dad. And I out-rank you already, not even a year in.

Tell Bobby I miss him. I'll write a letter for Dean too, so you don't need to tell him anything from me. But look after him, Dad. He'd run barefoot across broken glass into a burning house for you. You owe him the same in return.

Despite everything, I want you to know that the last thing I said to you was I love you, so there it is. I do.

See you on the other side, maybe.

Your youngest son,

Sam.

Dean,

I couldn't stay. It was killing me a little bit more every day. It wasn't so bad before the change. That's what I called it to myself after you started avoiding me. After you started going out of your way to never sit too close. To never touch me if you could help it. To keep eye contact at a minimum. But after that I couldn't keep going through dad's private boot camp and be so lonely along with it. At the time, I couldn't work out what I'd done wrong to make you distance yourself from me like that. I used to lie awake at night, frantically searching my memory for what I'd done to make you not love me anymore, so I could fix it, say sorry. I know now. It's because you'd worked out I'm gay. I suppose I should just be grateful that you never snitched on me to dad about it.

If there's one thing in this world I regret, it's that you bought into dad's homophobia bullshit and followed his 'burn in hell, faggot' mentality. You're better than that, Dean. Don't let that be what you leave behind in this world after you're gone. If you have kids, don't bring them up with that.

In this whole world there's never been anything, and never will be anything that I've ever loved as much as I love you. You were my entire world for the first fifteen years of my life, and even after I left, you were still the only reason the world kept turning. Yes, I know how gay that sounds, but HELLO!! Gay here!

You know by now that I joined the Marine Corps. I showed dad. Proved to him that I could too make it. That a gay man can make it. It was easy, you should try it. You'd do great.

You also know by now that this is my last letter to you because I'm dead.

I promised myself that I'd tell you this next part over my dead body, so I guess promise...

I love you, Dean. Like I said, you're my whole world. Thing is, I mean that to sound exactly as gay as it does. I was fourteen when I realised and accepted that I was gay. That part was easy. Realising and accepting that I was completely in love with my brother was much harder. But I was. I am. Even all these years later, even knowing that you hate me for being gay, doesn't change anything. I'm still completely in love with you. If I could have one perfect wish for my life it would be a life-long loving and romantic relationship with Dean Winchester.

That's probably made you hate me even more, made you even more disgusted with me than you already were. A part of me is sorry for that. Another part of me says it's probably for the best because it will make it much easier for you to shake off any sadness my death has brought you, and I want nothing more than for you to be happy, Dean.
Thank you for looking out for me for fifteen years. Thank you for dressing me, feeding me, wiping my tears when I hurt myself, holding me when I was afraid, making me laugh when I was sad. Thank you for giving me love and support during a childhood filled with disdain and insults. Thank you for being safety in the danger and terror.

I love you.

Sam.

The next morning, Sam woke up to two sealed envelopes addressed to his dad and brother, and the worst hangover he'd ever experienced, but at least he'd done it.

From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger

February 12, 2002

Bobby

Yes, I'm still here. I did warn you it might be a while. Send the Winchesters to Holmestown, Georgia. There's a house in Braff Street that's got a Poltergeist. Nothing big yet; it's just getting warmed up, killing the pets and pretty much everything in the yard, but if they exorcize it now, they'll save a twelve year old girl from watching her eight year old little brother choking to death with a lamp cord around his neck. They'll recognise the place by the wasteland that used to be a lawn, and the brand new pet cemetery in the back.

SeerWitch.

From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger

May 29, 2003

Bobby

Ghost – Willsburg, Virginia. Send them now, as fast as they can get there. It's targeting kids it thinks are 'bad'. Of course its definition of bad includes leaving homework until the last minute, so that pretty much means any kid in town is fair game to this spirit. Burning the bones won't work; the body was already cremated, but the Goodwill in town recently had a huge box of toys donated and the spirit is attached to something in there.

Got to go – Busier than hell.

SeerWitch

From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger

October 23, 2003

Bobby

The spirit killing women in Pittsburg isn't a spirit – it's a run-of-the-mill crazy serial killer. John's going to get himself arrested… again… if he insists on sticking his nose in. Head him off will you?
From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger

April 3, 2004

Bobby

It wasn't your fault. There was nothing you could possibly have done to save that girl. She lost her mind only a few hours after she got possessed a couple of months ago, and the demon was walking around in a corpse by the time you even got wind of the case. You've got to let it go, man. I'll say it again to make it clear… Not. Your. Fault.

From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger

December 9, 2004

Send John and Dean to Maresford, Ohio and tell them to take a couple of evergreen wood spears with them. There's a pair of pagan gods moving from town to town each year, killing 'sacrifices'. They'd probably run into this hunt in a few years anyway, but if they deal with them now, that's a good number of lives saved. Tell them to watch out for meadowsweet in the wreathes. That's the way to tell who the gods are after.

Have a good Christmas, Bobby but go steady on the eggnog.

From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger

October 12, 2005

Bobby

There's a Woman in White in Jericho, California. Nothing the Winchesters can't handle, but it might be worth warning Dean not to get cocky with the local PD if he doesn't want another lecture from John after he busts him out of jail.

More importantly, John's going to get what he thinks is a lead on the thing that killed his wife. It's not a lead. He's being jerked around, so tell him if he does what he'll want to do – go off and leave Dean to hunt alone while he chases the lead down Dean's going to end up dead within a month.

It's not true I don't think, not that I can see, but nothing short of that is going to keep the stubborn old asshole from running off without his son, and Dean's not going to cope well with that – that means too much booze, too many risks and… well actually, maybe I wasn't far off the truth. Do what you need to to keep the two of them together – feel free to make up a few lies and blame me for them if you need to.

From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger
November 3, 2005

Bobby

There's a wendigo in Lost Creek, Colorado of all places. If the Winchesters get there soon enough they can stop it before it kills again.

Oh… And do me a favour?

Can you check up on a girl called Jessica Lee Moore? She's a student at Stanford, living in Palo Alto. She's not anything to bother John and Dean with, just a human doing the college thing. But could you run out there and get a quick look at her, tell me she's alive and well – not burned to a crisp or eviscerated or something?

Thanks

SeerWitch

From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger

March 14, 2006

Bobby

Dean's going to love this one! A genuine urban legend hunt. In Ankeny, Iowa there's a real live (well dead) Hookman.

The preacher's daughter has a cross made of silver that he's attached to. A quick bit of theft and a salt and burn of the necklace, and they'll be done.

SeerWitch

From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger


Oh this isn't good, Bobby. Poltergeist in the Winchester's old house in Lawrence, Kansas. I think we both know how John will take that. You think you can take it? It's not even gotten started yet, so you should be able to get the jump on it (And on Missouri before she calls John in).

Don't be fooled after the first cleansing ritual; it's not gone, just weakened. Don't let that family back in too soon or they'll die.

I've given the heads-up on this one to the group I asked you to send that grimoire to a few years back too. They can help.

SeerWitch

From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger

April 2, 2006

Bobby
Have Dean go to Cape Girardeau, Missouri. His ex-girlfriend needs help, although she doesn't know it yet.

It's a possessed truck kind of a deal. Dead racist bigot going after the ones who killed him. Dean's ex's dad is on the hit list.

SeerWitch

From: SeerWitch To: JustJustin

June 10, 2006

Hey Justin, it's Sam. I'm going to send you a link in a few minutes to a website that's going to accidently raise a Tulpa in Richardson, Texas.

Can you hack the living shit out of them so the website never gets enough hits for the Tulpa to rise? And maybe someone could go down to the old abandoned house down there and burn the place to the fucking ground before the symbols they've painted on the walls do any real harm?

I'm doing well, but missing all of you. Maybe I can come and see you all the next time I have leave?

Sam x

From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger

November 14, 2006

Bobby

Some bastard demon has developed a damn demonic virus. If John and Dean head to River Grove, Oregon, they can get there before there are any deaths at all. But they need to be really, REALLY careful on this one. If you can talk them into hazmat suits, they'd be a hell of a lot safer. Getting themselves some CDC credentials would definitely help their case too. Tell them that whatever they do, don't let anyone infected bleed on them, and killing the infected and burning the bodies is their only recourse. It's going to be a real depressing one and I'm sorry as hell to have to put them in the way of it, but the Winchesters are the best, and that's what needed this time.

SeerWitch

From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger

April 24, 2007

Bobby

There's a werewolf in Chicago. In a few days he's going to attack a woman called Maddison – a secretary. The werewolf is one of her neighbours, not her ex-boyfriend, no matter what Dean thinks.

SeerWitch

From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger
March 8, 2007

Bobby

There's a Djinn in Joliet, Illinois. Tell them to stock up on lamb's blood. Got a meeting to get to, so I've got to run.

SeerWitch

Over the course of the next four years, Black Fox's 1st Battalion, of which Sam and 3rd Squad were a part, continued operations in the Middle East, from Afghanistan and Arabia, to Persia and Yemen. Doing their part in the war on terror, success followed success for the Squad, promotion followed promotion for its members. During a number of missions working as a Battalion, searching for small teams of insurgents who were laying Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), Sam's abilities, and his early training as a hunter led to the 3rd Squad being nicknamed 'The Seekers', due to their extraordinary knack of finding their targets so quickly, whether in mountainous terrain, or the vast emptiness of the desert.

Because of this, it soon became standard practice for 3rd Squad to be called on for missions in remote areas, where a target was difficult to locate, either hidden and/or constantly relocating. So, Sam found himself, though many thousands of miles away, working with similar methods to those of his father and brother, albeit with very different prey. No matter how busy he was, or how often The Seekers were in action, Sam still found the time to send the occasional email, keeping up SeekerWitch's correspondence with Bobby.

In February 2007, the government in Yemen launched a major offensive against the Houthis rebels. After a French student was killed in the ensuing violence, the world's media started to take special notice, and foreign journalists flocked to the area.

One evening towards the end of the month, Sam was looking along the tracks ahead, and saw his next mission; an American Journalist was going to be taken hostage, and Fox Company would be tasked with mounting a rescue.

Sure enough, in the early days of May, 3rd Squad was ordered to report to the now Major Winters and tasked with a new mission. "We have a US Citizen, a prominent journalist, who was kidnapped in Al Hazm." Major Winters told them. "The group responsible seem to be Houthis, a particularly zealous group, operating without support from the main group of militants. They are hiding our man somewhere in the Al Jawf region, close to the Jordanian border. As you know, the US is not officially involved in this conflict, so this mission is, as usual, strictly top secret. However, the powers that be believe we cannot stand by whilst one of our citizens is used as a bargaining chip. Your task will be to seek out this group, rescue the journalist, and ensure that no-one knows we were ever involved. Act with extreme prejudice, gentlemen; not one of these militants can be left to tell the tale. Understood?" Mitty spoke for all of them;

"Hoo-yah, Major."

"-Dismissed then. Lieutenant, prepare your Squad to move out at 02:00hrs tomorrow."

As the Squad prepared, Sam started to feel uneasy. Something about this felt wrong. He sat on his bunk and closed his eyes, drawing his blank space around him and focusing on his rail tracks. The first station he paused at though was a little murky. It wasn't dark and obscured like Sam had seen
before, but there was still something amiss. Like a decision was yet to be made that could shift the course of events. What he could make out in the station scene was something about the journalist, and fire, but he couldn't quite make sense of it. What could the Journalist do to mess this up? His thoughts were interrupted by 'Fire Hose'.

"Message from Winters, one of the kidnappers has been intercepted, he was carrying a CD. Seems they've made a video, announcing that unless demands are met, they're gonna burn this guy alive." He grimaced, "Nasty stuff. Of course, the video won't go out, now, but best you know." With that, he left the Squad to their packing. "I'd kill myself, before I let them burn me," Carson remarked. Ah, that must be it. If we don't get to him soon enough, he'll burn, or try to commit suicide. All the more reason to act fast. Shoulndering his pack, Sam followed his teammates out to the waiting chopper.

"Ok" Mitty announced, once they had been dropped into the Al Jawf area. "This will be our fall-back position. If things go south, we rendezvous here. Stash any unnecessary gear amongst those rocks, we'll leave spare ammo, some rations and water."

"I'll leave my backup radio here too, just in case," Carson remarked, and each man passed him their extra kit, for him to conceal. They wanted to be travelling light, and fast. Mitty opened up a map.

"So, the courier was picked up on this road, travelling west." He pointed to the spot. "I figure they must be holed up east of there, that's dead north from our position. Winchester, you're the bloodhound; you take point." With that, the Squad moved out.

As they moved, Sam felt a growing urgency, something pulling him towards their goal. After an hour's march, he knew he was near. He slowed as he approached the top of a small hill, crouched, motioning for the Squad to halt, and took out his binoculars. Just ahead and below him, was a small stone building. It might have been a farmhouse once but had clearly been abandoned some time ago. Now however, it was occupied once more. In the morning light he could see through a window near the door, two armed men standing by some sort of pressurised gas tank. Guess where they got the idea of burning their hostage, Sam said to himself. While he waited for Mitty to reach his position, Sam observed, and assessed the situation.

"What you got?" Mitty asked.

"Single building; one room. Vehicle parked out back. Four, maybe five men, all inside, I reckon our boy is in there too. Wait –someone's coming out." Sam paused as a man with an automatic rifle stepped out of the house, stepped around the corner, and apparently, decided to take a leak.

"We've got a guy having a piss. Door is unlocked, partly open. If we go now…” Mitty didn't wait for him to finish;

"Let's move, Marines! Giggler; you lead, then Winchester. Once Giggler makes it to the door, you drop the guy outside, and we take them." He said to Sam. Then quietly; "We good?" Sam nodded. "Let's go then!"

Moving fast, but with a practised, quiet gait, Giggler and Sam closed the distance to the building. Before the urinating man could finish and zip up, Joe was at the door. Sam, just short of the house, dropped to one knee, bringing his silenced rifle up. Thunk. Click-click. The man dropped with his hands still at his fly. The rest of the Squad a few yards behind him, Sam nodded at Giggler, who reached for the door.

Alarm bells rang in Sam Winchester's head, along with a brief image of flames, and one thought: IT'S A TRAP!
The next few seconds seemed to take hours, the scene and Sam's legs moving in slow-motion, like he was underwater. He should have seen this, known it was coming. Springing to his feet, he launched himself towards his friend, Joe Pizarro, the man who giggled in front of a room full of Marines, his nickname forgotten in the moment. "JOE, NO!" Someone inside, someone smiled, and ignited the gas tank.

Sam was cold. That couldn't be a good sign, bearing in mind the average temperature in Yemen was 89 degrees. The air smelled weird too. Not the dry dusty smell he was expecting. This was damp and musty and had a background of old wood. Also, not good signs.

Careful not to move a single muscle or open his eyes so as to give no hint that he was conscious to anyone who might be watching him, he blanked his mind and ran inventory over his body and internal systems. There were no injuries from the explosion, not even a single burn. Ruthlessly crushing the need to grieve over Giggles until later when it was safer, Sam sent out a quick emergency burst of awareness to Stef and Mona, letting them know he was in trouble, and then slowly opened one eye a crack. There was no one in his immediate vicinity, but Sam was pretty sure there were a number of people close by. The characteristic low hum of human mental background activity was low, but present; no more than six people, he estimated. He'd not challenged himself like this in years, not since Stef had him working on his limits and building his psychic awareness.

Behind the low hum of active human minds, Sam could sense something else. Something that over the years of slowly herding and warding the demon blood through his system, he recognised immediately. That greasy, oily darkness that could only be the presence of demon blood. The concentration was much higher than Sam was used to, but he didn't think there was enough there to worry about a demon actually being present. Rather, he suspected, there was at least one other person infected with demon blood in the area. Someone just like him. He'd not encountered anyone else who was carrying demon blood before, and a part of him was almost excited over the prospect, The rest of him was behaving much more sensibly and exercising extreme caution.

Having established that he was in no immediate physical danger, Sam sat up and started checking for his concealed weapons, Sidearm; gone. Knife in ankle holster; gone. Knife at belt; gone. Knife hanging between his shoulder blades; gone. Unsurprised as he was, Sam couldn't help a twinge of disappointment. Not least because the knife from between his shoulders was his favourite. The iron and silver blade he'd had since childhood. Someone better be praying I get that back, or I'm really going to make them sorry. He grumbled to himself.

The next step in his process would be to identify his location and the time and date. A simple glance around had informed him he wasn't in Yemen anymore. His best guess for his new locale was either North America or Europe. The old wooden buildings around spoke to the former rather than the latter – European countries favoured stone and brick buildings over wood, Especially in buildings this old. But there was a much simpler way of finding out where he was. I'll just jump on a train real quick. He thought wryly to himself, and he started centring his thoughts and focusing on emptying his mind. Over the years, he'd cut the time for this process down to under a minute, and so he was unsurprised when a moment later he was sat in a carriage, looking out the window. What did surprise him, however, was the murky black he was seeing instead of a station. It wasn't something he'd seen on his own train line in years. The only conclusion he could come to was that whatever person (demon) had shrouded Sam's future on his original line, had finally made their way to Sam's new line and was forcing their agenda onto Sam's life.

Well I've worked too fucking hard for me to just roll over and let that stand. He thought grimly. Looks like it's finally come time to make full use of everything The Assembly helped me train myself with.
Totally stymied in his psychic quest for useful information, Sam pulled himself to his feet and started a bit of physical recon, keeping his ears, eyes and mind wide open for company. If others here (wherever here was) had demon blood in their system, then it was entirely possible that they might have some of the same skill set as Sam. Better to be safe than sorry.

Rounding a corner, Sam almost tripped over a male body about Sam's age, slumped on the ground. He bent down, casting his eyes all around as he did – he was no stranger to ambushes, and this was an ideal setup for one – and checked for a pulse. The guy was alive. A low hum of mental activity, pulse and breathing were all normal. The oily shade of demon blood hanging over the guy wasn't. Still, Sam wasn't going to start making judgements on people based on a little demon blood. The Assembly hadn't judged Sam for it, who was he to not follow their example. Caution is fine, assumption of guilt isn't. He reminded himself. He grasped a shoulder and gave the guy a gentle shake. The guy was white, with not even a tan, scruffy and dirty from lying on the ground, and overall gave off a vibe somewhat similar to Amanda's. Sam chuckled under his breath as he caught the unmistakable whiff of marijuana coming off the guy's clothes. Amanda would not be happy if she knew I equated her hippy vibe with a stoner.

The guy started to wake up, so Sam sat back on his heels a little to give the guy some space. In the space of a few seconds, the unconscious guy went from barely blinking to sitting bolt upright, his eyes wide and staring, a look of complete panic coming over his face as he took in his surroundings.

"What?... What the fuck? Where the hell am I?" The guy started mumbling, patting himself down, looking for who knows what as his eyes continued to scan his surroundings blankly. "Great. Not even a spliff on me." He grumbled under his breath, making Sam snort in amusement. At the sound, the guy spun around.

"Hi. I'm Sam." The guy scrambled back away from him, fists clenching ready to defend himself. "Hey, hey. It's ok. I'm not going to hurt you. I woke up here just like you did, just around the corner there." The guy unclenched his fists but still looked at Sam warily. "What's your name?" Sam asked him, hoping to get him calm down a little.

"Andy. Andy Gallagher."

"Ok, Andy. Like I said, my name's Sam. Sam Winchester. Where are you from, Andy?"

"Guthrie, Oklahoma."

"Is that where you were taken from?"

"I guess. What about you? Where were you taken from?" Andy asked Sam in return, casting his eyes over him and staring in his uniform.

"Yemen." Sam rolled his eyes at himself. A top-secret mission and he just blurts out his previous location to some strange stoner he just woke up in the street. Maybe being on the brink of being blown up rattled his brain loose a bit. Huh. I wonder if he was snatched away from death at the last second too... "Hey, what's the last thing you remember before waking up here?" He asked Andy. The guy snorted.

"My fourth bong load." He replied with a half-smile. Sam chuckled at Andy's stoner attitude. Despite the circumstances he couldn't help liking this Andy dude. Not looking likely that he was snatched away from death. He thought to himself, hauling Andy to his feet.

"We should look around a bit. Work out where we are and if there's anyone else here." He told Andy, glancing around to pick a direction to search first.
"Yeah. And how the hell we get out of here too." Andy agreed.

"That's the eventual goal, yes. But whoever or whatever dragged us here has a reason, and probably doesn't want us to leave, so we need to make sure that we find a safe way of leaving."

"Whatever? What do you mean whatever?" Andy stared at Sam, confused.

"I'm sure you're not going to believe me, but I mean that in this world, humans aren't the only thinking beings that might do something like this. In fact, in my experience they aren't even the first suspects in a situation like this." Sam explained, watching Andy carefully for his reaction.

"Seriously?" Andy threw up his hands. "Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse, I discover the guy I'm stuck with in who-the-hell-knows-where is a total fucking Fruit Loop." He grumbled to himself. Sam laughed.

"Hey, I know it sounds, but bear in mind that one second you were smoking it up, and the next you were here – wherever here is – which isn't exactly in the normal run of things." Sam reminded him.

Andy stopped walking and turned to face Sam, his face serious suddenly.

"Tell me where we are and why I'm here." He demanded suddenly. As he spoke, Sam felt a psychic power brush across the block he held over his mind. He looked at Andy a little closer but said nothing. "Tell me!" Andy demanded again. Another push came against Sam's block, and this time he felt a familiar oily touch along with it. Again, Sam didn't reply. Andy looked scared and confused. Well more so than before. "Tell me now!" Andy tried one more time, and the mental push this time was more like a shove. Ready for it this time, Sam shoved back, flexing his mental block against the intruding power. Andy staggered a little as his psychic shove rebounded on him. "What the…?"

"Yeah, that's not going to work on me." Sam informed him calmly. "I'm guessing that normally using that on someone gets you exactly what you want?" He asked. Andy, pale and shaking now nodded and took a step back. "Relax, I'm still not going to hurt you. I couldn't have answered your question even if your little psychic push had worked on me, but as long as you don't try that shit on me again, we're still good. Just… mind your manners." Sam told him with a wry grin. Andy relaxed a little. "Tell me about your little Jedi mind trick then." Sam asked him. Andy let out a little giggle with a slightly hysterical edge.

"Yeah ok. So, a while back I started noticing that people would do whatever I told them to, if I used the right tone of voice; if I put the right feeling behind it. I didn't do anything bad with it." He asked. Andy, pale and shaking now nodded and took a step back. "Just, like, used it to get free stuff and get people off my back, shit like that." Sam nodded in understanding and waved his hand to get Andy to continue. "Yeah, so then it got stronger, and I found I could kind of shove images into other people's heads. Make them see whatever I wanted them to. Like anything I want. It's like bam – people, they see it. This one guy I know, total dick. I use it on him…gay porn. All hours of the day. It's just like, you should've seen the look on his face." And trailed off, chuckling away to himself. Sam couldn't help but join in. There were more than a few homophobic dicks he'd have quite enjoyed doing that to. Not that he'd have given in to the temptation. The Assembly had taught him better than that.

"So, you're totally ok with being a Jedi and controlling people, but when I tell you that there are other creatures out there which might be responsible for us finding ourselves here, and you decide I'm a Fruit Loop?" Sam asked Andy, raising his eyebrows. Andy shrugged.

"Point." He conceded. "But you've got to know how that sounds just out of the blue like that. It didn't work on you, and then you did something to shove it back at me, so does that mean you can
"Not that exactly, no. At least I don't think so, I've never tried." Sam replied. "But there's a lot of other things I can do. Visions of the future and the past, healing, moving stuff, talking with others mind to mind, and finding things." He listed off, making an effort not to sound like he was boasting. "I've spent several years training with people who can do this sort of thing, learning how to use my gifts and use them safely. For me and for everyone else." He fixed Andy with a stern look, making the other guy shift uncomfortably, clearly knowing he'd not been acting responsibly with his own gift. "Come on." Sam waved his arm down an old street. "Let's keep scoping this place out." They started walking again.

From the look of things, they were in a very old, small abandoned town. The buildings were all wooden, the streets unpaved and dotted with weeds here and there. They rounded a corner and up ahead of them they saw another person slumped on the ground and yet another crouched over them. She looked up as they approached.

"Help! You've got to help me. He's unconscious!" She yelled shrilly and Andy and Sam jogged over. Andy immediately dropped to his knees and began shaking the shoulder of the unconscious man, a tall black guy in army fatigues. Sam stood over them, casting his eyes around for any signs of danger before he engaged. He couldn't see anything, but the oily feeling was stronger now, Sam could only guess that it was the demon blood concentrated in one area. If he and Andy both had it, the odds were good that these two did as well. He reached out to gently grasp the shoulder of the panicking woman and she skittered away from his touch nervously.

"Don't touch me." She demanded, moving a step backwards. Sam raised his hands and took a step back himself.

"It's ok, I won't hurt you." He reassured her. "I'm Sam. Andy here and I found ourselves here just like this guy." He gestured towards the now stirring man on the ground.

"I'm not worried about you hurting me." She replied. "I'm worried that I might hurt you." Her voice trembled. "Bad things happen to people who touch me, and I can't stop it from happening." She broke off sobbing.

"Hey, it's ok." Sam reassured her again. "I won't touch you if that's what you want, but I don't actually think it's possible for you to hurt me." The woman scoffed and rolled her eyes.

"Yeah. Well you aren't the first to think that and regret it." She replied. Sam changed tack.

"What's your name?" He asked her.

"Lily." She replied, running her hand through her dark blond hair. "You're Sam?" She asked.

"Yes, and that's Andy." Sam told her, pointing down to the man who was now helping the soldier on the ground to sit up. "Shall we find out who this other guy is now?" Sam asked her gently, trying to calm her and redirect her attention towards the man she'd been trying to help. She stepped forward to look at the now conscious man sitting in the street.

"Hey man. You ok? What's your name?" She asked their new companion. He groaned and rubbed his head.

"Jake. Jake Talley." The man replied. "Where the hell are we?" he asked, looking around.

"Where do you last remember being, Private?" Sam asked in a calm but firm tone, knowing instinctively that with this guy, maintaining his dependence on the chain of command would be the
best course, at least until the man regained his equilibrium. Jake looked up at Sam, his eyes widening as he recognised a superior in the forces and he scrambled to his feet, swaying a little. He drew himself to attention.

"Sir, Afghanistan, Sir." He replied with a crisp salute. Sam returned it even as Andy and Lily scoffed at them. Sam ignored them. Having an officer present would be reassuring to Jake for the moment, and Sam was happy to give him that until the man could pull himself together at least.

"At ease, Private. I'm just gathering intel. None of us know where here is, and we all woke up on the street just like you. These two are Lily and Andy, civilians, and I'm Lieutenant Sam Winchester, US Marine Corp." Sam relaxed his posture, relieved to see Jake follow suit after a moment's hesitation.

"Is this some kind of exercise, Sir?" Jake asked, not unreasonably. Sam shook his head.

"No. Before I woke up here, the last thing I remember is being about half a second from being swallowed by an explosion." He noted the surprised expressions on all three of his companions. "Ambush during an extraction." He briefly explained. "Andy here last remembers hitting the bong. How about you two?" Sam looked to Lily first for an answer.

"All I remember is going to bed in San Diego, then waking up here." She told them, looking to Jake for his reply.

"Yeah me too. I remember hitting my bunk, and then that's it; I'm in some weird-ass old town." He looked around him. "This definitely isn't Afghanistan." The other three all snorted.

"No shit." Both Lily and Andy replied at once, chuckling a little at their synchronised response.

"We need to complete a recon of the area and find somewhere safe to rest while we work where we are and a safe route out." Sam said, half to himself. Lily looked a little sceptical, but Andy nodded, and Jake snapped back into military mode.

"You want me to go on recon, Sir?" He asked. Sam smiled.

"Didn't anyone ever teach you the first rule, Private?" He asked wryly. Jake chuckled.

"Yeah. Never volunteer." He replied. "But I figure this situation falls outside normal parameters, Sir. I can do a pass around the area and see what there is to see?" He offered again. Sam thought quickly.

"Ok, you do that, but not alone. Andy can go with you?" He phrased it as a question, waiting until Andy agreed before he continued. "Do not engage without backup. With anyone. You see anyone or anything, you yell out and return to base double time, understood?" Andy nodded, serious and focused for once and Jake drew himself to attention once again.

"Sir, yes Sir." He replied. "Um what base though, Sir?" Sam gestured to the building behind him. The door was locked, but it only took a couple of light shoves with his shoulder to force it open, and he led the way inside.
"Look for a decent sized room with intact walls, floors ceiling and windows." He told Lily. We need a room we can all be safe in while we work this shit out." Andy and Lily nodded in agreement and started looking around what must have been an old house in the abandoned town. The floor creaked under Sam's feet. "Oh, and watch your footing; these old floors aren't going to be too reliable."

They found a suitable room without much trouble and took the few bits of still sturdy furniture in there in case it was needed. Just as they were setting up the chairs they'd found, they heard a noise outside.

"Hello?" A voice was calling out. "Hello? Anyone there? I need help!" The voice belonged to a woman and she sounded scared. Sam looked over at Lily and gestured for her to stay behind him as they walked outside. He opened the door cautiously and there in the street, standing and looking around her in a daze. She looked to be around the same age as the rest of them, but there was something a little different with this one. Where the oily feeling was muted and dull around the others, it was louder and clearer in this woman. It felt almost like a vibration to Sam, it felt like he should be able to hear it, like the buzzing you hear near high powered pylons. Again, he wasn't planning on re-judging the woman, but he was definitely going to be a lot more careful and aware around this one.

"Hi." He spoke calmly and quietly, careful not to escalate the tension. "Are you ok?" She spun around at the sound of his voice, her shoulders sagging in relief at finding someone else.

"Oh my God I'm so glad to see you. I was beginning to think I was all alone here." She rushed over to him, grabbing his hands. The oily black buzzing increased twofold. Sam definitely didn't feel comfortable around this woman. "I'm Eva. What's your name?" She asked him.

"I'm Sam." He replied. He was about to introduce Lily too, when Eva raised her fingers to her temples, rubbing as if she had a headache. Sam could feel the oily back buzzing starting to build, there was no longer any question in his mind. This woman wasn't to be trusted. He prepared himself to ward off a psychic attack, no longer having any attention of introducing Lily. Unfortunately, Lily didn't realise the danger and took a sidestep out from behind Sam.

"Hi." She waved at Eva. "I'm Lily. Are you ok? You got a headache?" Eva dropped her hands and the building of power stopped.

"Hi, Lily. Yes, a bit of a headache, but nothing too bad." She replied with a little smile. She wasn't quick enough to hide the edge of irritation that flashed across her face from Sam though. Rather than forcing a confrontation before he knew more about the woman, Sam pretended to be oblivious.

"There are a couple of others here too. They've just gone to look around the town and see if they can find anything useful." Sam told her, watching carefully for her reaction. A slightly cunning look crossed her face. "Lily and I were just about to go and find a water source if we can."

"Oh, I passed by a well as I was looking for other people." I'll go get us some water." She made as if to leave, but Sam shifted a little, so he was in front of her. "We should all go together. It's not a good idea for any of us to be alone around here." He said reasonably, watching that little flash of irritation crossing Eva's face once again. "Yeah that's probably more sensible." She agreed, turning to Lily. "You ready to go then?" Lily nodded, and they all set out, Sam taking care to walk between the two women, offering as much protection to Lily as he could without making it noticeable.

The trip to the well didn't take long, the water was still good, but they'd need to find a way of storing and carrying it; they couldn't all walk back and forth to the well any time someone was thirsty. By the time they got back to their makeshift base, Jake and Andy had returned. They weren't empty-handed.
"Hey, Sam. Check out our haul!" Andy called out cheerfully as he, Lily and Eva approached. Andy waved his arm over the collection of stuff on the ground between he and Jake. Jake was eyeing Eva with curiosity, Andy hadn't noticed her yet.

"Nice!" Sam replied casually to Andy. "Good work, Private." He added to Jake.

The 'haul' wasn't much to write home about on a normal day, but it was all useful stuff in the current circumstances. A few sturdy chunks of wood for clubs, six iron lengths that looked like they might've been part of some kind of farming equipment, and two heavy sacks filled with what appeared to be salt. The bags were ancient, giving even more evidence that this town had been abandoned a very long time ago. Something tweaked Sam's memory. He stopped for a moment and searched back through his mind, looking at everything he'd seen since his arrival in the town. *There! That Bell. We're in Cold Oak. Shit!* The realisation came suddenly but offered no real comfort apart from finally knowing where they were. Cold Oak was a legendary haunted town, so haunted that eventually all the inhabitants abandoned it, moving away to escape the horror. Sam was under no illusions that things had improved over the years. They were lucky they'd not run into any trouble yet. By nightfall it was going to be a very different story. Also, with the town being abandoned for so long, there were no decent roads in or out. Getting out of here was going to be a real hike. He heaved a frustrated sigh.

"Alright, everyone. Let's get all of this lot inside, and I'll give you all a debrief." Everyone but Jake looked at him blankly, so he explained in more civilian-friendly language. "I'll fill you all in on what I've managed to put together about our situation, and we'll work out a plan to get out of here alive." That last turn of phrase seemed to put anyone on their guard, looking around subconsciously as they each picked up a part of Jake and Andy's haul and carried it inside.

Once everyone was in the room Lily and Sam had set up, Sam grabbed up one of the sacks of salt and began to pour a barrier around the edge of the room. As the door opened inwards, he opened the door and poured another line of salt across the threshold. Turning to go back into the room, he stopped suddenly in his tracks. The others were all stood staring at him in confusion. He sighed.  

"The town we're in is called Cold Oak. I recognised a symbol on a bell out there in the town. So, the good news is that we know where we are, and that we're in the good old U.S. of A. The bad news is much more numerous; Cold Oaks is maybe the most haunted town in the world." He ignored the scoffs and pressed on – he could work on convincing them all when he was done. "That's why it was abandoned. There's no way things have changed over the years, that's not how ghosts work, so we're going to need to be hypervigilant and protect ourselves with salt and iron." Sam ignored the protests and questions that started with that statement and just talked louder over them. "With the town being so old and having been abandoned so long ago, there's not going to be any simple easy way in and out of here. It's going to be a long hike. And that's not the worst of it." Sam took a breath, knowing that the last bit of news wasn't going to go over easily. "The really bad part is that I'm almost a hundred percent sure that we've been brought here by a demon. I don't know what it wants with us, but I know it can't be good." With that, Sam stopped talking and sat down, waiting for the explosion that was sure to come.

It came.

Everyone started talking all at once. Derision, anger, ridicule and accusations all running out on top of each other so that none of it was understandable. Sam let it run its course for a few minutes until they'd gotten the worst of it out of his systems, and then did the only thing he could think of to shock them into silence. Everyone was standing as they argued, so Sam flexed his mental muscles, grabbed psychically at all of the chairs in the room, and lifted them into the air until they were all at eye-level. The sudden silence was somehow louder than the shouting had been. Once he had their attention, he
gently lowered all of the chairs and calmly sat down on the nearest one. The others all stood frozen in shock.

"Sorry, guys but I had to get your attention somehow." He apologised. "Now how about we all sit and talk calmly and quietly. I can answer some questions, if you've got them, and we can work together to figure out a plan." Everyone followed his request and sat, some of them trembling a bit. Sam noticed that Eva had wide eyes like the others, but the looks she was giving Sam were assessing rather than fearful. "So, I guess the best place to start is, yes. I did just lift those chairs with my mind. I can do that. Along with a few other things I've learned over the years." He gave Andy a hard look, warning him not to expound on that point. "Now I know that Andy can put thoughts into people's heads and make people do things, and Lily mentioned that bad things happen when people touch her." He offered her a sympathetic look as her eyes filled with tears and she nodded and pressed on. "With there being three of us with extra gifts, I'm willing to bet that Jake and Eva have a little parlour trick each too. Care to fill us in?" Sam looked at each of them expectantly. Jake spoke up first.

"I've got a kind of super strength thing. I lifted a jeep off a soldier when it rolled over him. I passed it off as adrenaline, but then later, completely calm and collected, I bench-pressed 800 pounds without breaking a sweat." The group all looked impressed and Sam nodded.

"That might be useful. Eva? Feel like sharing with the group?" Eva looked down at her hands. I can see things. Visions of people being killed. It's usually a dream, but sometimes I see it when I'm awake too." Again, Sam just calmly nodded, accepting her statement as fact. "Ok. So, all of us have a little something extra. Not, I'm sure, something that falls in the category of shit you guys hear about every day. Then if these things are facts, what makes it so hard for you to grasp that there are other things out there that are real too?" No one had an answer for that.

"Well ok, I can accept that some people are a bit more special than others, but ghosts? Demons? Come on, dude. Seriously?" Andy piped up. Sam grinned at him. It wasn't a cheerful expression.

"Ghosts, demons, werewolves, hellhounds, ghouls… The list goes on and on. If you've heard a story about it, chances are it really does exist." Sam paused and looked up. Waiting for the inevitable question. It always came, whenever this talk was necessary.

"Sir, Can I ask how you know all this then?" There it was.

"It's the family business." He explained simply. "I grew up in it until I left and joined up. There are people who call themselves hunters, who go around the country trying to take out as much of this shit as they can. That's what my family does." Sam ignored the pinch of loneliness and homesickness he felt at that last.

"What's with the salt?" Lily asked bluntly.

"Salt is pure. A lot of these creatures can stand its touch or cross a line of it. Ghosts and demons are on that list. You create a salt barrier and stand inside it; no ghost or demon can reach you." Sam explained simply. "Also, neither one can stand the touch of iron, so we'll each arm ourselves with one of these iron bars Jake and Andy scared up." Sam glanced at the one he'd just picked up. The end was sheared off. "Just tore them out by hand?" He asked Jake, who nodded with a shrug. "Nice!"

"Thank you, Sir." Jake replied.

"I think you can drop the 'Sir' for now, Jake. We're both in the same boat here, and it's not a military exercise." Jake nodded and looked out the window.
"If we're going to have to hike out of here, shouldn't get started while we still have decent daylight?" He asked Sam.

"ordinarily I'd say yes, but first off, I don't think we'd make it back to civilisation before nightfall, and I don't want to meet what's out there in the dark. Secondly, having gone to such trouble bringing us all here like this, I very much doubt the demon that's pulled this off will just willingly let us wander out of here. I think that's the best way to lose one or more of us." The others nodded in understanding, but Eva jumped in.

"You still haven't explained how it is you 'know' it's a 'demon', so how about filling us in on that?" Eva asked, her hostility barely concealed. She didn't need to physically do the air quotes – her tone of voice did it for her. Sam ignored the tone.

"There's a certain feeling that comes off a demon. If you're trained to recognise it, it's a clear signpost. This whole town is buzzing with it." Sam felt a little bad not filling them all in on the demon blood thing, but then they were having enough trouble with what he was already sharing with them. "Now I suggest that our best option is to stick here until tomorrow morning and then, sticking together as a group, we all try to hike out of here with a full day of light to work with." He looked around to see if the others agreed. Surprisingly, Eva looked more than happy with the plan, Jake and Andy looked resigned, but in agreement. Lily was shaking her head.

"Lily?" Sam asked her. "You have a different option?"

"I don't want to stay in a place I don't know, with people I don't know, where I've been placed by someone or something I don't know for any longer than I have to. Especially if it turns out you're not batshit crazy and there are ghosts and demons wrapped up in all this." She stood up abruptly and rushed from the room. "You guys can all sit here like sitting ducks if you want, but I'm walking out of here, right now." She called back over her shoulder as she crossed the salt line. She had one of the iron bars in her hand at least, but Sam knew that she had no chance out there alone if this demon wanted to keep them there. He jumped up.

"You guys stay here. Stick together and stay inside the salt line. I'll bring her back." He instructed as he grabbed the half-sack of salt and an iron bar and followed Lily outside. When he got out to the street, Lily was already out of sight. Sam checked the ground for the most recent footprints and followed them around the side of the building. Lily was headed towards the woodland along the west side of the town. With a groan, Sam began to follow, pulling his mental abilities to the fore and clearing his mind so he could be ready for anything.

In the woods, the oily buzz was thick and heavy. There were more layers to it too. Not just the single demon responsible for the group all being present in the town. Shit shit shit! He swore to himself.

"Lily!" he called out, listening ahead of him for any hint of where she might be. The tracks had been easier to follow in the dusty street, but although they were fainter, he could still follow the signs of her through the brush. She wasn't answering his calls though, and he couldn't hear any disturbance through the brush up ahead. He kept on following the signs of her passing, without any luck for several minutes more, but he was beginning to get suspicious. "Shit. False trail." He groaned out loud and heard a nasty giggle from up ahead. Another sounded to his left and yet a third came from behind him. Great! He thought. What now? He turned slowly, opening up his mind and trying to read what was out there. Definitely a demon of some kind. He confirmed. Out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of a child-like figure. Acheri demons. He resisted the urge to spit. He wasn't going to be able to kill them, only fend them off. The only way to get rid of them was to get rid of whoever was summoning and controlling them. Sam gripped the iron bar a little tighter and loosened up his shoulders, ready to fight the Acheri demons off. Slowly he turned around and started walking
back towards the town. The Acheri demons closed on him, three of them, like pale skinny children with razor sharp claws. He waited until one came close enough and swung one handed, dropping the half sack of salt to the ground so some spilled out. As his iron bar passed through the demon, making it shriek with anger and pain before dissipating, Sam ducked and grabbed a handful of the salt, flinging it at the next closest demon. It too screeched and dissipated and Sam swung upwards at the last demon as it closed on him with claws outstretched. The iron bar passed through as if through empty air, but the piercing howl as it went proved that Sam had made contact. Suddenly alone in the woods, he snatched the salt sack up again and sprinted back towards town. As he got closer, he could hear screams, female screams coming from behind one of the buildings.

"LILY!" Sam yelled out as he ran, only to skid to a halt as he rounded the corner. It wasn't Lily doing the screaming. It was Eva, and she was pointing up to Lily's body hanging above them. Sam's blood ran cold. Lily had probably never even made it out of the town. While he'd been chasing a false trail through the woods, Lily was being attacked and strung up back here. His shoulders slumped. Jake and Andy were stood either side of Eva, trying to calm and comfort her. "What happened?" Sam asked Jake.

"We were all sitting around, and Eva got a headache. A real bad one that had her grabbing her head. So, we decided to walk her over to the well to get some water, and we found Lily like this." Jake gestured up at the body. Sam sighed.

"We can't just leave her up there like that, but Eva's going to start screaming if she's here to see us cut her down.” Sam mused out loud.” I don't think we should split up anymore at all. Not for anything. There's no way that Lily managed to climb up there all by herself and anything strong enough to haul her up there is strong enough to take on two of us at a time. We need to keep to the biggest group possible.” Jake nodded in agreement. "So, we get Andy to distract Eva over by the well, where we can still see each other, and you and I cut Lily down, ok?"

"Yeah, that sounds like a plan." Jake agreed. "I'll climb up there; I'm the strongest." Sam agreed and walked the few steps over to Eva and Andy.

"Why don't you two go get some water from the well and wait there while we take care of Lily, OK?" He asked them gently, then turned away and walked back to Jake before he had to hear the reply; he was almost positive that Eva had had something to do with this, and he wouldn't be able to hold his temper if he had to hear her false grief. Jake was already climbing up to retrieve Lily's body, so Sam quietly and calmly talked him through the process until Jake and Lily were both back on the ground. They laid her body in the nearest building, on a bed that was barely holding together, and quietly closed the door behind them as they left. Collecting the other two as they passed, the whole group slowly trudged towards their temporary based in silence.

Once they were all inside, Sam checked the salt lines. All complete and good and thick. He slumped in a chair and looked around at the others. They were all in shock and feeling scared. That wasn't going to help them get through this, and Sam needed to get a hold of the situation before it spiralled any further. He let the silence sit for another minute while he gathered his thoughts, and then sat up straighter.

"I'm not going to bad-mouth Lily here – she was scared, and she reacted on her instincts to that fear. What happened to her is awful, and I'm sure that all of us will carry that image for a long time, but we can't let it paralyse us now. Right now, we need to be thinking about how to save ourselves, so we don't go out the same way Lily did." He tried to keep his voice sympathetic and quiet. "It's far too late in the day now for us to walk out of here, and when I went into the woods looking for Lily, I was attacked by three Acheri demons. These are non-solid forms that look like classic horror movie children, but with long claws on their hands. The salt and iron were effective against them though, so
that's good news." He shifted and turned to Jake. I figure that we should take turns taking watch while the others sleep. That way we'll all be as well rested as possible when we make our move in the morning." Jake nodded, and Andy jumped in.

"I'll take a shift too, if one of you can just give me a few basics on how to swing an iron bar effectively." Sam was happy to agree to this and then turned to Eva.

"I'm not being sexist here – just getting the guys to take turns. You've been suffering with headaches all day, and we need you as healthy as possible tomorrow so that you can keep up. Ok?" Eva nodded reluctantly. "I think our best bet is for the four of us to keep together at all times. Even if one of us needs the bathroom. I know it's awkward, but from now on if one of us needs to pee, we all need to pee. I guess that makes the fact that there's no food an advantage." He gave a rueful grimace. The others didn't look happy, but at least they weren't arguing.

"We didn't find anything to carry water while we were out looking around, so I guess it's regular group trips to the well." Sam sighed but agreed.

"I guess so. You know, Jake. It occurs to me that you and I have another problem once we get out of this." Jake looked confused. "We're both technically AWOL. Neither one of us can just jump on a commercial flight back to where we got picked up from, and neither one of us can just pop us here in the states when we were last seen with our units on deployment." He watched as realisation dawned across Jake's face. "Let's just step to the side over here and try to work out what the hell to do about that." He turned to the others. "No offense – it's just that even under these circumstances we can't risk telling civilians anything that should be a military secret." The other two gave vague nods, even while Jake looked at him in confusion, knowing what nonsense Sam had just spouted. Sam gave Jake a hard look and nodded over to the other side of the room where they could talk without being overheard as long as they kept their voices low. Jake walked over with him.

"Sir, what's this about?" Jake asked quietly the moment they were out of earshot.

"You don't need to 'sir' me anymore Jake, remember?" Sam reminded him. "Now don't look over there, just listen and keep your eyes on me. Look relaxed ok?" Jake gave a tight grin and nodded. "You understand what I was saying about feeling a demon's presence?"

"Not really, but I don't need to understand how a system works to accept the intel." Jake replied. The consummate soldier. Sam rolled his eyes and grinned at him.

"Ok. Well I can feel it in the air, like a static charge when there's a demon present. This place has had a faint buzz around it since I woke up. But every time Eva has one of her headaches, the energy level spikes crazily. Now I'm not outright accusing her of anything, but this is the real reason why I don't want us pairing off. You or I might make it through another attack, but Andy would be a sitting duck, and if Eva's completely innocent here, then she might go the way of Lily next time she gets a headache. If she's not completely innocent, then we've got a whole other problem." He glanced at Jake and saw him fighting to keep his expression neutral.

"You think she's doing something to make the demons come?" Jake asked in a strained voice.

"I think that someone is, and I know that her headaches always come along with an extra side of demon energy. That's as far as I'm willing to go until something undeniable happens." Sam hedged. "So, we need to keep all of us together as much as possible, and anytime her head starts hurting, we need to grow eyes in the back of our heads. Ok?" Sam was relieved when Jake nodded without hesitation. That was one problem handled for now. "We still have that AWOL problem, but we're going to have to shelve it for now. We can't have that eating away at our concentration while we handle all the rest of this shit show. We'll work the rest out after. Alright?" Again, Jake nodded,
some of the tension dropping out of his shoulders.

"So, we make it through tonight, and then we've got a long trek tomorrow without food or water. We'd better get several trips to the well in tonight before we sleep, and then get out of here at first light after one more water trip. That's the plan?" Sam nodded. "Then I vote we go get a drink in about an hour, and while we're out there we can show Andy and Eva how to defend themselves if need be."

"Yeah that seems like a decent plan. Try not to get too uptight tonight. We all stick together and keep our heads and we've got a decent chance."
The rest of the day went pretty much as planned, boring, but in the circumstances that was a good thing. Sam and Jake drummed a few basics into Andy and Eva on how to defend themselves and they made regular water trips until the sun went down. Eva slumped in her chair once it started getting dark, her head on the small wobbly table they’d found and seemed to be asleep almost instantly. Andy followed before long, and Sam took steps to put himself to sleep – Jake was taking the first watch, Andy was next, and Sam had the last watch before dawn.

Sam used his meditation techniques to put himself on the edge of sleep and then let go so that he dropped over. I went against the grain to trust strangers, but he had little choice. He needed to be as close to top form the next day as possible. He'd only been asleep for a few minutes when he jerked awake as a strange man walked into the room. He jumped to his feet and yelled out to the others, but none of them made any show of even hearing him.

"You can't be here, I salted the area." He looked around the room, noting the hyper-real quality of the details. "Except this is a dream which you've invaded, so the salt is irrelevant. He flexed his shield to expel what had to be a demon from his mind and it staggered against the mental shove. It gritted its teeth and gripped hard on to the back of a chair, holding himself in Sam's dreamscape by the skin of his teeth.

"Woo hoo. That's quite some punch you've got there. Where did you pick that up?" The demon asked. "Well not that it matters – your power comes from me, so I can over-ride it when I want. You just took me by surprise." Sam chose not to disabuse the demon just then. He needed intel, and this was his best source. "Let's start over, shall we?" Asked the demon, with a gratingly cheerful grin. "Hi there, Sammy. You've been a real hard guy to find you know. You almost ruined all my plans when you left daddy and big brother you know. And you have no idea just how long those plans have been in the making." His eyes flashed yellow and he scowled at Sam and Sam scowled right back.

"Don't call me Sammy. What do you want with all of us?" He asked.

"Oh, I don't want anything with all of you. Just one of you. Whichever one makes it out of here alive. You hear of survival of the fittest? Well I only want the fittest, and the best way to ensure that is to set you all against each other. Like Thunderdome. Only here it's five enter and one leaves. That's the only way out of here. To be the last one standing. You're all my children, and I shouldn't play favourites, but I've got to tell you, Sammy." He looked around in a grotesque parody of comedic caution, then continued in a stage whisper. "You're my favourite." He grinned over at Sam, but his grin slowly left him as he realised Sam wasn't reacting to any of his taunts, not even the crack about being his kids. That one at least should have confused him. "Not going to ask about how you're all my kids, Sam? I thought you were intelligent enough to be curious." Sam just stared evenly back, and the demon let his eyes glow yellow again.

"I don't need to ask. I know what you did when I was a baby. And I'm assuming you did it to the others too. I can feel your greasy stink all over them. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I'm not going to
play your games. Now fuck off out of my head." Then, to the demon's amazement, Sam drew on his mental strength and shoved with all his will against his mental block. It flexed and literally threw the demon backwards, through the door and out of sight. Sam instantly woke up. Jake and Andy were both fast asleep. Looked like Andy had fallen asleep on his watch, judging by the position of the moon out the window. Sam looked around but there was no sign of Eva. Great. Now we've got to go hunt around for that suspect bitch. I'm amazed she didn't just kill us all in our sleep. He wondered what that was. Maybe the demon wanted to make sure we all knew the rules before the final games begin. He mused. Stand up quickly, he shook the other two awake. There was no sense of the demon being present, but that didn't mean much. He could easily have visited Sam last.

"Did you guys just have a really funky dream? Featuring a guy with yellow eyes?" The other two paled and nodded.

"That was real? Was that this demon you were talking about?" Andy asked, panicked.

"Try to calm yourself a little, Andy. Yes, that was the demon. You Need to know that we don't have to listen to anything he says. We can all get out of here. Together." And visibly tried to relax.

"Ok. Ok. Calm. I can do that." Andy breathed.

"Jake? You ok there?"

"Yeah. I'm good." Jake looked around. "Where's Eva?" He eyed Sam suspiciously.

"That's a good question. She wasn't here when I woke up. We're going to have to go look for her." Sam ran a frustrated hand through his hair. "We stick together and search each building and street systematically." Grabbing an iron pipe and one of the salt sacks, she strode toward the door. The other two following.

They were three buildings into the search when they all heard a muffled cry from outside.

"Eva! Andy shouted, and darted outside and around the corner before Sam or Jake could stop him. They looked at each other in horror and tore out after the stoner. Jake made it around the corner first and stumbled to a halt so fast that Sam almost slammed right into his back. Andy laid on the ground, blood pouring from his head. Eva was standing over him with an iron bar. "I didn't mean to. I thought he was one of those demons." She stammered, dropping the iron bar. Her hands flew to her face in apparent distress. "No no no no. I didn't mean to, I didn't mean to."

The demon buzz in the air began to build, and Sam stepped around Jake.

"Watch it, Jake. It's building again." Sam warned. Jake just nodded in acknowledgement.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it, I didn't." Eva kept up her muttering as the power built. Suddenly to Their left, Sam and Jake saw an Acheri dive towards them. Sam turned to swipe at it with his iron bar, but Jake darted forward and with one hand reached out and broke Eva's neck. Immediately the Acheri demon faded away. Sam turned to Jake in horror.

"What the fuck, man? You didn't have to do that. Just knocking her out would've done it." Sam shouted at him.

"She killed Andy, and she was trying to kill us. I did what I had to do, and you know it." Jake replied coldly. "That demon guy made it clear; only one of us is leaving here alive, and I'm not planning on it being you."

Without any further warning, Jake lunged at Sam, throwing a deadly punch with his super-strength
that would've damn near torn Sam's head off it he hadn't been quick enough to dodge it.

"You don't have to do this, Jake. I told you. We can still get out of here, both of us, alive." Sam tried again, dodging punches and kicks. "I don't want to hurt you, Jake. You need to stop this right now."

Jake ignored him completely. Aiming another punch at Sam's head and then dodging to the side to grab an iron bar. Sam could see in Jake's eyes that he wasn't going to stop. This was only going to end one way. Jake might have the strength and his basic army boot camp combat training, but Sam had a lifetime of combat training – first at the knee of a marine, then with the karate trainer in Ely, and then with Fox company. Jake was totally outclassed (especially if Sam used his telekinesis to counter Jake's strength) and Jake didn't even realise it.

Sam let go of his personal feelings and let himself view Jake as the enemy he'd become. Assessing each move, he made and watching for an opening. It wasn't long in coming. A drawn-out fight was never in the cards for this man. Sam was just the better fighter on all fronts. Jake ran forwards, attempting to take Sam by surprise with an all-out frontal attack. Sam barely had to try. He sidestepped Jake's attack and spun around behind him, wrapping his arm tightly around Jake's neck. With a simple twist, and using Jake's own momentum against him, the fight was over almost before it had begun. Jake's neck snapped, and he dropped to the ground like a sack of flour. Sam stood staring off into the distance. He'd never wanted this. He'd tried his best to avoid it. But when it came down to it, Sam was a trained warrior and weapon, and he'd done what he had to to survive.

A loud slow clap echoed off the wooden buildings and a figure strode out of the darkness. The demon again.

"Well done, Sammy. That was just beautiful work. That poor schmuck never stood a chance." The demon was almost dancing in excitement. Sam growled in anger.

"Fuck you. I didn't want that to happen. And I told you – don't call me Sammy."

"Language, Sammy." The demon ignored Sam's demand completely. "Now perhaps it time for introductions. My name is Azazel." He held out his hand for Sam to shake. Sam ignored it.

"Don't tell me, Bobo. This is the part where you finally tell me what you're planning." The demon looked irritated at Sam's cold tone.

"My name is Azazel, Sammy, Not Bobo. But yes, I guess it's time for you to know your role in all of this. You're going to be my general. How's that for a promotion? We're going to raise a demon army, Sammy, and you're going to command them." He grinned gleefully.

"What makes you think I'm going to do anything you want, Bobo? I'm inclined to just rip off your head and go back to my life instead."


"I'll get it right when you get mine right, Bobo." Sam replied calmly. "Now again. I ask you what makes you think I'm going to do anything you want?"

"Fine, SAM." Azazel muttered sarcastically. "You'll do what I want because it's my power that runs through you veins. Everything that you're capable of psychically? That's me, dancing through your every cell. If I want you to do something, you have two choices. Do what I ask, or howl in agony while I roast every cell in your body, and then do what I want." He gave Sam a triumphant grin. "I'll show you." He chuckled and pulled out an old-fashioned revolver. "This is a key to a lock I need you to unlock for me." He handed the revolver to Sam. "It's also the only gun in the world capable of
killing me, and it's loaded." He looked at Sam expectantly.

"Oh, is it now?" Sam asked, raising the gun and aiming at the demon's forehead. "Then why would you be stupid enough to hand it to someone who wants you dead?" The demon just laughed.

"You think I didn't expect you to turn it on me?" He raised his brow. "But you won't be able to pull the trigger. Like I told you. I run through your every cell. So, I can do what I want with your body. If I don't want the trigger pulled, it won't be. Look, I'll demonstrate." He raised one hand and slowly closed his fist. Sam had no idea just what Azazel expected to happen, but he couldn't help the grin on his face when all that occurred was a twitch in his pinkie finger. The demon looked thunderstruck.

"What did you do? It's impossible. What did you do?" He screeched at Sam

"You know all that time you were searching for me? You said I was hard to find. Do you know why?" Sam taunted him. "I was busy driving all your demon filth out of me. I was collecting every last stinking, greasy, oily blood cell, and pushing it out of my veins until nothing of you had any control over me." Sam had the biggest smile as he pulled the trigger, and the horrified surprise on Azazel's face as a small hole appeared in his forehead and blue lightning crackled around his body was the most beautiful sight Sam had ever seen. The demon's body slumped to the ground and Sam felt a lifetime of hate and fear of the thing that had killed his mom drop away, leaving him lighter and more relaxed than he'd ever felt. The demon was dead.

Sam stood over the body for what felt like hours, but was probably only a few minutes, staring at the face that had torn his family apart and terrorised them for years. Odd that when it finally came down to the end it had been so easy.

With the demon's death, the haze of demon stink had completely gone from the town, well all except for a tiny pulsing blur near Eva, Jake and Andy's bodies. Sam turned to them in confusion. With their deaths, the demon energy in their bodies should have passed too. He crouched down and checked pulses. Eva and Jake were definitely gone, but Andy had a weak, thread pulse. With a burst of hope, Sam quickly pulled his calmness around him, seeking the blankness that he needed to work his healing gift. He wasn't as good at it outside his own body – certainly he had nothing on Amanda on this front – but he hoped that he could do enough to keep Andy alive until help arrived. That little distress call he'd sent out when he first woke in the town would've alerted The Assembly, and they were only a state away. If he called for help and asked for Amanda to come, Andy might have a chance. Sam felt with his mind into the wound on Andy's head. There was quite a lot of damage, but ironically, the fact that he'd lost so much blood had probably been a good thing; an open head wound gave the brain a way to release the blood, whereas a closed wound could've resulted in an intracranial bleed. Slowly and carefully, Sam pinched the worst of the bleeding blood vessels shut and felt around for any brain damage. There seemed to be a hell of a lot of bruising, but he could feel anything permanent. That had to be a good sign. Well he hoped so anyway. Having done everything he could for Andy with his healing gift, Sam lifted him gently and carried him back to their temporary base. It was the best he could do for the moment. Having laid him down on the floor inside the salt line, Sam sat down next to him and re-entered his blank state. Concentrating hard on an image of Stef's face, Sam pushed forward a thought.


Without waiting for a response, he broke away. This kind of communication was draining, and Sam hadn't eaten for nearly two days, had only slept for about four hours in that time, and it wasn't looking like he'd be getting any more of either until help arrived. Carrying Andy out of town was next to impossible so he had no choice but to wait. Sam sighed.
"Damn it, Andy. You're a real pain in the ass. You're lucky that your stoner ass is likeable." He leaned back against the wall and pondered what to do next. He had a burning curiosity about just what Azazel's plan might've been. Previously he'd been unable to look down the train lines for his future because the demon had pulled Sam back onto the original line from before he left his family. Now he finally had a chance to see what had been in store for him. As afraid as he was of what might lie ahead, Sam felt he had no choice; forewarned was forearmed. The demon Azazel might be gone, but what if another demon tried to muscle in on his plan? No. Sam had to look. He had to know what he'd just escaped in case it came for him again.

Willing himself into his blank space, Sam found himself sitting in the carriage. He rolled the train back to just before he'd been grabbed from Yemen and directed the train down the new switch that the demon had created in the line. This line would show the future that would've happened if Azazel had had his way. Skipping past the events of the last day, Sam pushed the train on into the immediate future. The images in the stations were horrendous. In the first station he saw Jake get in a lucky shot and kill Sam. In the next he saw Dean somehow arrive at Cold Oak and snatch up his body from the ground, howling with loss. The heart-breaking sound tore into Sam, and his vision wobbled. That hadn't happened for years. Sam usually had more control. He ruthlessly clamped down on his emotions and pressed on.

It only got worse. At the next station, a drained and desperate Dean was standing at a crossroads, getting Sam's life and a single year in return for his soul. The next was Jake opening a gate to hell, then the next few stations were a seemingly endless round of hunts and desperate attempts to find a way out of Dean's deal, until finally at another station Sam witnessed the most horrific vision he'd ever had. He watched as Dean was ripped apart by Hellhounds and his soul dragged to hell. How he didn't lose his vision, Sam couldn't say. Station bay station, things got worse and worse; Dean in hell being tortured. Dean refusing to step down from the rack and do some torture himself, Dean giving in and picking up the knife, the first seal on Lucifer's cage breaking. An angel called Castiel raising Dean from perdition, Sam drinking demon blood, Sam and Dean parting ways, more demon blood, more seals breaking, Lilith's death, Lucifer rising, More angels, these ones complete dicks, Michael and Lucifer trying to claim Dean and Sam as their vessels. Sam saying yes. Sam going to hell.

That last one did it. Sam fell out of his vision with a horrified yell and slumped over sideways, his head feeling like it might burst. He should've known better that to try this before Amanda arrived. Unable to move with the pain, Sam lay there for more than an hour, the images he'd seen playing in front of his eyes over and over. This had been Azazel's plan for the future? The apocalypse? Sam shuddered. He'd never even dreamed that Lucifer was actually real. And angels? They really did exist? That was just crazy.

Sam knew he'd need to go back and search ahead on this new train line he was following. Azazel had jumped Sam back onto his original track, but by Killing Azazel, Sam had once again created a new switch in the line. Just because the fate he'd been born with led towards the apocalypse, didn't mean Sam had to keep blindly down that track. He could search out a new line for himself. He'd done it once by accident and had maintained that track once he was aware. He could do it again on purpose. If Sam had any say in it, and he did, that apocalypse would never happen. As soon as he had time and energy to do so, Sam was going to sit down and scope out a new track for his future. But for now, it was his more immediate future that was a worry.

After all these years, after all that work, he was within reach of his goal. His career in the marines had been very successful. Despite what John had always told him, this faggot had more than made it in the corps. He'd achieved his goal of outranking his father in under two years, and on top of that, he'd still kept helping in the hunt as much as he could and had developed innumerable skills which would help him when he retired from the corp. Sam had always figured he'd go back to hunting but do it solo. But that heart-breaking despair he'd seen in Dean in that vision was making him question
that. Sam had always assumed that Dean's disgust of him had lasted until the present but based on that despair that Sam had seen and heard, it would seem that Dean's stance had changed. Sam held out no hope that John was at all forgiving, but maybe it was possible for Sam to have some kind of relationship with his brother now.

He'd have to be careful; his feelings for Dean had never wavered, he was still completely in love with the man. Over the years, Sam hadn't been a monk. With the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy he'd had to be incredibly careful. Always flirting when out with his friends to throw them off the scent, always limiting his exploits to times he was on leave, always giving a fake name and carrying a fake ID, always going to their place so that no one could go through his stuff and find out he was in the corps. His caution had paid off – no one had ever worked out that he was gay. Dean already knew, but it wouldn't be too hard to hide his feelings for one man from one man after hiding his attraction to a whole gender from the entirety of the armed forces. Once he'd retired, Sam decided he would try to make contact with Dean. But first he had to retire. To do that he had to be alive, and without even needing to check, Sam knew that he'd been reported as killed in that explosion. He couldn't go from dead in Yemen to alive in America. Even ignoring the impossibility of the whole thing, he was now technically AWOL, and to undo that he needed to get back to where he'd disappeared from. He'd need injuries too. Something that would tie in with the explosion his unit had witnessed and would also explain him not reporting in for a few days. The injuries wouldn't be fun, but Sam knew he could manage that part himself. It was getting back to Yemen that was the big problem.

His head was still pounding, but the feeling that it was going to split right open had eased off at least. Trying to puzzle out an impossible solution to his Yemen problem probably wasn't helping, so Sam turned his attention to some of the new things he'd learned from his latest visions. The angels were fascinating to him. He'd prayed every day of his life that he could remember, but he'd never seen any true evidence of the existence of God and His angels until these visions. He felt at once exonerated and betrayed. All that unwavering faith, and his reward was going to have been getting to be the dress that Lucifer wore to the prom and a one-way trip to hell. How was that fair and just? What sort of a deity allowed that?

He ran over what he'd learned about angels in his visions as he lay waiting for the pain to pass. The angel that had raised Dean seemed from Sam's vision to have become a friend of sorts. Well to Dean at least. He hadn't liked Sam at all. Had referred to him as "The Abomination", which struck Sam as more than a little unfair. He was labelled abomination based on a future he had no say in, and a forced demon blood feeding, in which he again had no say. Fair enough – once he'd started in on the demon blood willingly, he'd kind of put himself in the abomination category, but this Castiel character had started calling Sam that almost from the moment they'd met. Sam was vaguely amused at how irritated he was with an angel he'd never met and probably never would, because of something that angel had called him. His visions had given quite a lot of details as was the norm for Sam. Over the years his ability here had become his strongest talent by far and the detail he was able to glean with just the smallest of visions often surprised even him. An idea began to form. Sam knew that Castiel could jump from one place in the world to another. He'd seen Dean and himself refer to it as "angel air" when they had Castiel give them a ride. If Sam could find Castiel, he could try to talk him into taking him back to Yemen.

Now he had an idea, Sam set about nailing down the details. That was something else about him that had never changed; he was still hyper organised and detail oriented. So, true to form, Sam began walking through each detail of this plan. First, he'd need to contact the angel Castiel. He could wander the world for a thousand lifetimes and never find him if he didn't want to be found, but from what he'd gleaned from his visions, Sam knew that a prayer to a specific angel goes right to the ears of that angel. They weren't obligated to respond - in fact from what Sam had seen from the now defunct track, this castile had refused to respond to Sam's prayers in the past, only coming when Dean prayed - but they couldn't stop hearing the prayers. Fine. Then I'll just keep praying and
praying until I become so annoying to the angel that he has no choice but to put in an appearance, even if it's just to shut me up.

The next issue he would face would be the fact that from first meeting, the Castiel in the visions had detested Sam, had referred to Sam as "The Abomination". Sam would have to combat that belief and it would be a real challenge to get through to him, but there were very few people in the world who could out-stubborn and out-argue Lieutenant Sam Winchester. He believed he could do it. When Amanda arrived, she'd have her phone with her. Sam would call Fiona for help with finding out how to keep an angel still long enough to argue with him. The plan was shaping up. Slowly opening his eyes and squinting against the pain, He sat up and leaned back against the wall, staring down blankly at his hands, and in particular at the last two fingers of his left hand. He'd lied to Azazel. The demon blood was still in him, even if it was contained. Maybe that would be the key to convincing Castiel. If it was the presence of demon blood that made him "The Abomination", then maybe sacrificing the last part of him that carried the taint would convince Castiel that Sam was no longer a carrier of evil. He was going to have to give himself some pretty serious injuries anyway, what were a couple of fingers in the grand scheme of things? Oh! And bonus, I get the last of the demon blood out and I'm finally completely free of it. We were never really completely positive that the banishing symbol was going to work anyway. It really did seem like a minor sacrifice.

Once He got himself back to Yemen, the process of getting extracted would be only a minor problem; all he had to do was get to the agreed rendezvous point in Al Jawf and use Carson's spare radio and he'd be picked up by a helicopter and taken to the medical bay on the USS Kitty Hawk in a matter of hours.

The only question left was how bad to make the injuries. Was he ready to retire now? Sam turned the question over in his mind, looking at it from every angle. From the beginning he'd considered the marine corps simply a means to an end. He'd just wanted to prove a point to his dad. Looking back on it now, he could see how juvenile that really was. An epic level version of flipping John off behind his back. Sam's stubbornness had served to hold his course throughout his three years with The Assembly and on into Boot camp, but once he was there, his "fuck you" to his dad had no longer been the only thing making him press onward. He'd found a place there, a place to belong. It wasn't perfect for him, not by a longshot. Having to hide his sexuality had been incredibly hard logistically, emotionally and mentally. He couldn't stay in for the long term. Being in the closet would eventually destroy him. In Ely he'd been able to be open about being gay, but only with The Assembly. There was no judgement from the group, and Lynne and Justin had been so helpful sharing their experiences in coming out, making Sam feel less alone. But as relaxed as The Assembly was, Ely was still a small town, with small town mentalities, and because he knew his stay there would only be for a few years, Sam hadn't wanted to take on the inevitable hassle of coming out fully there. His life had already been full enough, with school, psychic training, research, working in the herbal shop with Amanda, physical training and martial arts training. Dating just hadn't been an option, so there was no point opening himself up to the casual homophobia of the general population of Ely.

Stop avoiding the issue. He told himself. Sam pulled his thoughts back on track and got back to the real issue at hand. So, the corps had always been intended as a step on the path, not the destination. Granted he'd excelled way beyond the point he'd aimed for and had exceeded his original goal by a long way. All he'd originally wanted was to succeed the way his dad had always told him he wouldn't, and to prove it by outranking John. Well mission accomplished. In fact, he'd achieved that moment he completed his special forces training. He'd only really stuck with the corps after that because of his stubbornness, his loyalty to his squad and a lack of any other direction. But what else had he stuck with determinedly the whole time? What else had he grimly clung to like a dog with a bone? The hunting. He hadn't been able to physically hunt, but he'd done everything he could under the circumstances to keep a hand in. He'd spent endless hours searching his visions for ways to help

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his dad and brother – mainly Dean if he was honest – in their hunts and had given any scrap of useful information to Bobby where it could help the hunting community. Then there was the fact that even when he’d removed himself from the physical side of hunting, eventually it had come back to snatch him up again. Clearly hunting wasn’t done with him, and now he was being completely honest he had to admit that he wasn’t done with hunting either. The skills he’d learned with The Assembly along with the skills he’d learned in the marines added to the skills the Winchester lifestyle had drummed into him would make him a formidable hunter. He could hunt alone with little difficulty and being gay or straight would be an irrelevance as long as he watched his back in the small towns.

This was the correct path. He could feel it. He’d be able to put together each of his lives and create one that fit him perfectly. The only thing missing to make things perfect would be having Dean by his side, but there was no point wishing for the impossible. It would have to be enough that apparently Dean wouldn’t be against meeting up sometimes.

The corps had given him what he’d needed, and in return Sam had given them six years of loyal service in return. It was time to retire.

That meant wounds bad enough to get him a medical discharge and explain why he’d been M.I.A, but not so bad that it would take him and Amanda too long to heal well enough to start hunting. The fingers weren’t going to be enough, he knew that. He’d need burns – before he’d been snatched away, he’s seen the explosion. There had been a lot of flames – and as much as he wasn’t looking forward to it, he’d have to break one of his legs. That would tie in with being thrown by the explosion and would justify the time taken to get to the rendezvous. It really wasn’t going to be a fun experience, but as long as he could eat and sleep beforehand to regain his energy, he’d be able to make use of his healing abilities to minimise the pain. He heaved a sigh. Well there's no point bitching about it. I've gotta do what I've gotta do.

Sam's headache was at a more manageable level now, so he crawled over and checked on Andy. He was still relatively stable and nothing Sam could do right then was going to improve Andy's condition any. There was no way other than re-entering his blank space and checking a station to know what the time was to estimate when Amanda might show up, and that was a worsening of his already throbbing head that he wasn’t willing to risk just then, so just about the only useful thing Sam could do with his time was get some decent sleep and re-charge a little. He looked around to make sure the salt line was still solid and that he had one of the iron bars handy; just because the demon threat was gone, didn’t make the town of Cold Oak any less haunted. It would really be ironic if they survived Azazel's Thunderdome just to get wasted by a ghost. They were as safe as Sam could make them for the time being and it was still early in the day, minimising the risk of a ghost attacking, so he judged it was safe enough to risk sleeping. He stretched out a foot or so away and let himself give in to his exhaustion.

From the length of the shadows when his foot was kicked to wake him, Sam guessed it was about two in the afternoon. He’d gotten a good solid chunk of sleep, and although he was wolf hungry, he was still feeling better than he had when he fell asleep. He didn't even need to turn to see who had kicked him awake; he could feel who had arrived and only one person he knew would repeatedly kick the sole of his boot repeatedly in that irritating way. He tried and failed to subdue the grin working its way across his face.

"Quit that, you bitch." He grumbled, making an attempt to make his voice sound grumpy. "Don't you know I'm a very dangerous and scary man? Just because I'm devastatingly handsome and damn near irresistible, doesn't mean you can just manhandle me." The loud bark of laughter from above him was familiar and welcome.
"I'll give you a man handle." Came the almost inevitable response, and Sam sat up as he laughed out loud.

"Hi Justin. Help me up, would you?" A hand came out, but instead of helping Sam up, Justin flicked his nose.

"Not so fast, Baby Gay. Amanda will want to check you over after she's looked at your friend there, and as you had the bad manners to grow so tall that none of us can check your head properly when you stand up, it's best if you stay down." He ran his eyes over Sam's body appreciatively and waggled his eyebrows. "Actually, while you're down there…" Sam laughed and flipped him off.

"One day I'll take you up on your flirting, Justin and then what will you do?" Justin chuckled back.

"Ask Jack if he's up for a threesome?" They both roared with laughter. Jack was a real old-fashioned type and so was Justin behind his flirting. There was no way either of them would go for an addition in the bedroom.

"Nice to see nothing changes." Mona's voice cut across the laughter. She handed Sam a large filled baguette. "Get that inside you. You need to build up your energy." Sam and Justin met each other's eyes and quickly looked away, biting their lips to hold back the giggling at her unintentional double entendre. Mona would never change. She was forever making innocent comments that just begged for a 'that's what she said' to be tagged on. Comedy aside, the sight of food had Sam's stomach growling. He grabbed the sandwich and started tearing into it, only stopping to take a huge swig of water every few mouthfuls until the sandwich was done.

"Mona. It's great to see you." Sam said softly once he'd finished. She leaned down and gave him a hug.

"Good to see you too, Honey. Although I've got to say, you've looked better. Care to fill me in on what in the name of all that's holy has been going on here?" She looked around and shuddered. "And why it had to be here of all places? This place feels like the place ghost go to die." Sam knew what she meant.

"It's a very long story. Short version? The demon that fed me his blood finally worked his way around all of my wardings and protection symbols and spells. Zapped me here from Yemen, along with four other people he'd force fed his blood to and pitted us against each other, so it was kill or be killed. Andy over there looked dead, so after that soldier out there made me kill him to defend myself, the demon popped in to congratulate me and made the mistake of thinking he'd be able to control me via his blood in my system. He handed me a gun that could actually kill him, monologed for a bit, and then I shot him." Sam broke it down simply. None of the others were fooled by the blasé tone. They knew this whole thing had been very hard on Sam, but also knew that he'd talk properly when he was ready. "I didn't expect more than Amanda and maybe Stef." Sam changed the subject. "Did all of you come?"

"Yep." Justin grinned. "We couldn't agree on who got to come and who had to stay, so we gave up and hired a minivan, so we could all come for a field trip." Stef's outside with Lynne and Fiona, looking for a place to bury the bodies." His grin disappeared with that. "I'm sorry you had to do that, Sam."

"Yeah me too." Sam replied. "There's another body in one of the buildings. I'll go show them in a bit." He looked down at his hands. "You know, I only killed one of them. The soldier. Well him and the demon that is." He looked back up at the others, looking for and finding understanding. "We can't bury that body with the others you know. It's the same body he was possessing back when he killed my mom. Who knows what else he's done in that body. It needs to be salted and burned;"
there's no way it won't haunt." Mona and Justin nodded in agreement. Sam looked over at Amanda. "I think she's going to be at it for a while yet. There's still so much to do and I can't get it done sitting here waiting. If I promise to come and sit nicely when Amanda's ready to check me over, will you guys let me up, so I can go say hi to the others and get to work?"

"As long as you only help physically and not mentally until you've been looked over, then I can't see why not," Mona replied. "I'll stay here with Amanda and Andy, and you two boys go on out to the others. Oh! And there's more food in the backpacks out there, Sam. Keep eating; you obviously pushed yourself until you nearly burnt out."

Sam and Justin wandered outside to find the others just walking up to the building.

"Hey you!" Cried Lynne, falling into Sam's arms for a hug. "We were just coming to see you."

"Hi, Lynnie." Sam replied affectionately, hugging back "I've missed you. He looked over her shoulder. Hi Stef, Fiona. I've missed you guys too." They patted his shoulders in greeting and then they all walked towards the backpacks where Justin was already unpacking more food for Sam.

While he ate, Sam caught up on recent events with his friends and gave them the same brief overview of his last couple of days as he'd given Mona and Justin inside. "Stef, so much has happened in such a short time, and I've come to so many important conclusions, that it would be much easier and quicker if once I've got my juice back I project it all to you and then you can share with the others later. That ok with you?"

"Sure, kid. If that's what you think is best, then we'll do it that way. It's a bit of a hike out of here, but we brought the minivan in as close as we could without getting stuck. Maybe a couple of us should go back so we can get some more food and some fuel to burn What's-his-name the demon over there."

"Bobo," Sam told him. He told me his name was Azazel, but I just called him Bobo." His friends looked at him with a mix of amusement and confusion.

"Why would you do that?" Lynne asked

"He kept calling me Sammy." Sam replied with a shrug and their expressions changed to understanding. They'd all learned a long time ago that no one was allowed to call him that, though none of them knew why. "Anyway, yeah that's probably a good idea to do a supply run. I need to recharge fully as soon as possible, and Bobo needs burning ASAP. Hey, Fiona?" Sam turned to their researcher. "Would you mind going along? I really need you to do some urgent research and maybe pick up some more unusual items for me. I need to know how to trap an angel." The shock on every face was clear. "An angel? They exist? How do you know? Why would you want to trap one?"

Fiona was full of questions, sensible ones, but an unnecessary delay nonetheless.

"I promise you'll get full answers to all of that, but for now, time is of the essence. Yes, they really do exist, and I have to trap one because I need his help and I'm going to have to Sam Winchester stubborn him into it." He grinned wryly as he used The Assembly shorthand for a long, drawn out verbal battle with Sam. All of them had experience at least one over the years. They all chuckled.

"Ok, Sam Hun. I'll see what I can find." Fiona agreed, squeezing his hand. "I'll drag Lynne along with me. Maybe she can find what we need if I can't find it." That seemed wise to Sam.

"Sounds like a sensible plan. Um… have you got any more food in those packs?" He asked sheepishly. Justin rolled his eyes and started digging for more.
Once Fiona and Lynne had set out for the minivan, the others got to work digging in the stony ground at the side of the little church. They figured that the consecrated ground, combined with the salt they were going to throw in the graves would be the best chance of keeping the dead from haunting. As for Bobo, they dragged him nearer to the woods and started collecting logs to help keep him burning long enough to be effective. It was hard work and long; it was starting to get dark by the time they were done, and Fiona and Lynne had already returned.

The whole group sat and ate cold takeout in Sam's makeshift base, surrounded by a thick salt line and lit by storm lanterns. It was strangely warm and comforting if you ignored the sight and sounds of the spectral residents of the town. Sam gave them all a brief rundown on his next steps, helping them to understand the what and why of what he was doing. He couldn't hang about any longer – the longer he was missing, the harder it would be to make his reappearance convincing, and he had no idea how long it was going to take him to get Castiel to come, let alone how long it would take to argue him into helping.

"First light, I'm going to make the angel trap and start in on nagging – I mean praying – to get him to come." They all laughed. We should run outside and light up Bobo real quick tonight before we go to sleep, and then if you guys could maybe check on him before you leave in the morning? Make sure he's extra crispy?" Amanda wrinkled her nose.

"Samuel Winchester, if you manage to ruin bacon for me with that talk, I will end you." Again, the laughter bubbled around the room. "Now Sam, let's discuss your friend here." She gestured to Andy. "You did a good 'field dressing' on him with what you had left of your strength, but there was quite a lot of deep brain tissue damage." Sam looked concerned.

"Is he going to be ok?"

"Oh yes. It's going to take a while, but I can get him back to normal for certain. What I wanted to ask you is if he's safe." She looked a little worried. "Having become familiar with it after working for years with you, I can easily recognise the feeling of demon blood. Andy's dose is all still there. Do I try to help him shift it the way we did for you? Will he want me to? And is he a good person?"

"He seems like a decent guy, Amanda." Sam reassured her. "Granted I haven't known him very long, but he never gave me a bad vibe. He seems basically good, if a little irresponsible now and again. A typical stoner type, but good deep down. If you guys help him the way you helped me, he'll be a real asset in the future. I think he'll want you to help him shift the blood. He was real shaken up after he learned about it."

They finished eating and Sam and Stef headed out to light up Bobo, each of them armed with an iron bar. Sam took an enormous amount of satisfaction in throwing the matchbook onto the salted and gas-soaked body. A victory for the Winchesters. He even had Stef film it from match strike to the crackling burning of the body, making sure his face wasn't in the picture. I'll email that to Bobby when I've got time – they'd want to see it. I'm just sorry they didn't get to see him actually die.

He felt sombre but focused as they returned to their friends. Fiona had talked him through trapping the angel, and he had a very good feeling about the whole plan. Apparently, the Holy Oil needed for trapping an angel was very rare and pretty much impossible to source. But Lynne with her finding, had managed to locate some in the very small town they'd visited for supplies. If that impossibility wasn't a sign that he was on the right track, then what would be? A miracle even before he'd located the angel. This was going to work.

Waving goodbye to his friends the next morning was harder than he'd expected, but he had faith he'd be seeing them again real soon. Sam sighed and turned to the two circles he'd drawn with Holy Oil. One inside the other. He didn't know how long the oil would burn when he lit it, and if arguing
down Castiel took too long, then having a second circle to burn would double his time. He walked to the centre and sat cross-legged, ready to begin the praying. He was surrounded by plenty of food and water; once he began, he didn't want to risk leaving the circle and missing his shot. He cleared his throat and began.

"Oh, Castiel, Angel of Thursday, please assist me. Protect my brother. Help me make this right."

That was how the prayers began; reasonably formal, and with all the most vital information engrained. He knew that Castiel would take some nagging before he showed, but it seemed best to start off formal and polite.

Of course, it wasn't that easy.

Sam waited. He waited for a whole hour before he began again. Patience, determination and sheer bloody-mindedness were going to be the key. *Perhaps Castiel didn't hear me? Perhaps he was just busy.* Sam tried again; the same words, the same passion, the same everything.

Another hour passed with no angel.

He decided that polite and formal just wasn't working. *I know you can hear me, you dumbass. So, that's how you want to play it? Fine.* He gave the issue a bit of thought. How could he get the angel's attention? *How did you try to get Dean's attention as kids?*

It was time to drop polite and start in with irritating.

He started with a little teasing with a mixed with stuff he'd learned from his visions and some guess work.

"Oh, Castiel, who likes to wear a trench coat and eats his pizza cold; come to see me, and I'll introduce you to the pizza man." Sam made little attempt to stifle his grin.

"Oh, Castiel, whose head is of average size; I will not stop praying to you until you help me."

"Oh, Castiel, who probably never felt love like an eighties song; come to me, and I will show you the highlights of my eighties DVD collection."

After six hours had passed, he began throwing in random drivel that popped into his head just for shits and giggles.

"Oh, Castiel, hear my prayer like the cries of an overworked kindergarten teacher; I could really use your help."

"Oh, Castiel, who has but two legs; I've got three legs- come and see."

"Oh, Castiel, who's mom's so stupid, she stared at a carton of orange juice for hours because it said concentrate.

"Oh, Castiel, who probably secretly likes to ice skate on Tuesday evenings."

"Oh, Castiel, who wears comfortable shoes."

"Oh, Castiel, who is being driven mad by a lowly human.

"Oh, Castiel, who probably studied the harp at school. I bet you sound lovely. Drop by and *sing for me, my angel of music!*"
The sun was low in the sky when *finally*, Sam was met with success.

"Oh, Castiel, I wanna know what love is, and I want you to show me!"

The angel in a trench coat appeared. The second he popped into being, Sam lit and threw a match, trapping them both in a circle of incredibly hot fire.

"*You.*" Castiel said with steely eyes, clearly furious, "*Why have you done this?*" He stormed over to Sam and loomed over him. Slowly, Sam raised himself to his feet.

"You mean the annoying, frivolous and childish praying marathon, or the trapping you part?" He asked the angel cheekily. He didn't know why, but something about this guy made him feel like channelling Dean at his most smart-ass. The angel scowled.

"Both!" He thundered.

Sam shrugged, standing his ground and refusing to cower at the waves of power coming off the angel.

"Because I need your help." He responded. Castiel continued his glare.

"Why would I help you when all you've done is to plague me?" Sam wasn't certain if Castiel knew who he was – one of the things he'd not managed to work out from his visions was how aware angels in general were of the apocalypse Azazel had planned. Sam took a step towards the angel.

"Because if you don't, we're all in a giant pile of sh-"

"Do not make threats, Samuel Winchester!" Castiel boomed. *Well I guess he at least knows my name.* Now, *I wonder if this early in time he already links that name with the term 'Abomination'.*

"It's not a threat, Castiel. The trouble coming isn't my doing. I'm trying to warn, not threaten." Sam spoke reasonably.

"What is it that you expect of me?" Castiel asked, his tone remaining cold and unmoved.

"I've killed the demon Azazel and put a stop to his plan to raise a demon army, Break the seals and raise Lucifer." Sam informed him without emotion. "*His eventual goal was to start the apocalypse.*"

Castiel reeled back, his eyes wide in shock.

"You killed a demon? How?" Sam pointed to the revolver on the ground by his feet.

"Apparently, this was the only weapon capable of it. He made the mistake of giving it to me, thinking he could control me and stop me from shooting him. He was very wrong." Castiel narrowed his eyes at Sam and stared in silence for a long minute.

"So, you killed your master, Abomination. You think that entitles you to something? What do you know of the seals?" The angel ground out. *Ah. There it is. Apparently, my label is already in play.* Sam thought in resignation. The appellation still stung.

"That demon was no master of mine. He never was. And I know about the seals and all the rest of it because I used my ability with precognition to read the future lines. *I saw* his plans for me and this world."

Castiel looked like he wanted to spit.
“You use your demon gifts freely, yet claim the demon was not your master?”

“My gifts are not given to me by any demon. I was born with my abilities. The only part in it that the demon Azazel had was that he woke them up earlier than they should’ve been.” Sam retorted angrily. “I can understand your zeal against demons, but I’m not going to stand here and listen to you spout ignorant crap like that. Psychics are born, not made. And they’re only as good or evil as they choose to be. I chose to not take an evil path.” He stopped and took a deep breath, forcing himself to calm. Castiel eyed him warily, not yet willing to concede Sam’s point.

“You have not yet told me what it is that you want of me, Abomination.”

“Well first off, I’ll take you giving up on the Abomination crap. It’s as outdated and ignorant as your suggestion that my powers are demon-given.” Castiel’s brow furrowed in confusion.

“Of course, you’re the Abomination. This is known.” Sam scoffed.

“Do you even know why?” He asked in exasperation.

“Because of the demon blood you carry.” Castiel snapped back.

“Bullshit.” Sam replied calmly “You’re telling me that I’m called The Abomination simply because of the demon blood? Ok, So was I an abomination when I was born?”

“No, of course not. All babies are born innocent.”

“How about when I was a month old? Was I an abomination then?”

“No.”

“When I was three months old, was I an abomination?”

“No. You became The Abomination when you drank the demon blood.” Castiel looked pleased with his argument.

“Drank the blood… You make it sound like I did it wilfully! I was a baby! A six-month-old baby!” Sam yelled in frustration. When I was six months old - six months- I was force fed demon blood.” He growled. “Let me ask you; would you ask a six-month-old to decide a legal verdict?” Castiel shook his head. It all sounded so different when it was put like that.

“No.” He answered again, brushing his fingers through the longest section of his hair.

“No. Of course you wouldn’t. Why?” Sam asked, looking straight at Castiel, but feeling a little less hostile with the lack of frown staring back.

“A baby would not understand the world.” Sam nodded. Progress.

“Right. If you fed a baby poison, it wouldn’t be able to stop you, even if it could understand. So, would the baby be held responsible for its own death?” Castiel shuffled uncomfortably, his moral ground suddenly felt shaky.

“I would not feed a baby poison.” He replied, stalling, Sam thought. He raised an eyebrow.

“I’m not saying you would; it’s an analogy. My point is that it is ludicrous in the extreme to regard a five month and twenty-nine-day old baby as an innocent one day, yet the next day label that same
baby 'The Abomination' simply by virtue of it being poisoned without its knowledge and against its will. So that can't logically be the source of the title 'Abomination'." Sam reasoned. "I can tell you what the true reason is. If Lucifer were to rise, I'm his meat suit. That's the reason for my title."

Castiel looked shell-shocked again. "So, it follows, that for me to be labelled that, someone on your side knew what was coming. Knew it and did nothing to stop it. NOTHING!" He was panting by now with his anger. "No! I had to put a stop to it myself. No help form any of your feathered dudes. So, which of us is evil, Castiel? Answer that. The one who worked tirelessly for years do drive the demon taint that was forced on them as a baby from their body and then threw a spanner in the works of the apocalypse, or the one who's working for the side that was willing to just let the apocalypse roll on ahead?" Castiel slumped to his knees, his trust in his superiors suddenly shattering. He couldn't refute The Abomination's logic.

Sam let Castiel kneel there for a few minutes, aware that the angel needed to adjust to this new way of thinking. When his breathing calmed, Sam reached out and helped him to his feet.

"I don't know if I've put an end to things for good, or if this is just a temporary respite, but at least I've stopped this version of the plan." He said gently to Castiel. "I'm not asking for a reward for what I've done – I know that's not how things work. But Azazel messed up my life good and proper, and I need your help to fix his mess. And if this apocalypse gets started again, I'm going to ask for your help to head it off again. Castiel nodded blankly.

"What do you need from me, Samuel Winchester?" Sam bit back his smile at being addressed by name.

"I was on a mission in Yemen when Azazel snatched me up. I need you to take me back there, so I can cover up his mess. I need you to help me injure myself to help make my cover-up convincing and then I need something else." Sam looked at his hands.

"What else do you need?" Castiel asked.

"I need you to cut off my fingers." Sam said quietly.

"Explain?" Castiel asked, staring hard at Sam's hand.

"I worked hard to move the blood- to separate the demon blood. It's isolated." He referenced the points at which he had his tattoos to trap the blood- not that they were exactly that visible. "These two fingers contain all my demon blood. Locked down and as safe as I could make it, but still in my body and I hate that." He sighed deeply. "I willingly ask you to rid me of this demon blood." Sam stated, in a formal manner. "Cut off my fingers. Please."

"Cut off your fingers?" He double checked. This conversation had been the strangest and most disturbing of his entire existence. Sam nodded hopefully.

"Yes."
"Samuel Winchester, you are a very strange man." Castiel paused. "But... You are a man, not an abomination." The angel gave Sam something which almost resembled a smile, but it seemed more than a little awkward. "I will help you." He retrieved a blade from inside his trench coat and held out his hand for Sam's.

"What? Right now?" Sam yelped in surprise. Castiel's almost-smile fell away and was replaced with a frown.

"I'm sorry, I am not very good at human social cues. Did you need five minutes alone with your fingers?" He asked. Sam screwed up his eyes, pinching at the bridge of his nose.

"That... What... Castiel Please never repeat that sentence." Sam shuddered at the awkward, then held his hand out to the angel.

"Ready?" The angel asked, no flinching in his expression. Sam took a deep breath and concentrated on achieving blank calm. He focused every part of his attention and energy on the blood vessels in his last two fingers in his left hand, clamping them down tight in preparation, and then shutting off the nerves to the same fingers, H could sacrifice the digits, but he didn't want to feel it.

"Ready." He confirmed steadily. No shake in his hand or voice.

Castiel brought the blade down on Sam's outstretched pinkie finger. Off it came, clean as could be. No blood spurting, no sudden draining feeling. Nothing.

"That looks a hell of a lot weirder than I thought it would." Sam said, finding the sight strangely fascinating. Castiel shrugged casually, moving on to the ring finger. The blade sank through the joint easily, severing the top half of the digit and leaving a view of exposed pearly white bone, with cut tendons for good measure.

Sam tilted his head, observing as his severed fingers dropped into Castiel's free hand.

"Castiel, can I ask you a question?" Sam tilted his head and looked closely at the angel.

"Certainly." He replied.

"Where do you get your clothes? That trench coat... Why?" Sam trailed off, staring the angel over.

Castiel scowled at Sam once again.

"It's functional." He growled. Sam chuckled quietly.

"Ok, dude. If you say so." He picked up the revolver and handed it to Castiel. "Would you be able to keep this safe for a couple of months for me?" He requested. "Just don't let anyone, and I mean anyone else know that you've got it." Castiel agreed, tucking it into the inside pocket of his trench coat. Sam took a few deep breaths and started to centre himself once more for the next ordeal. Even with his full concentration, he probably wouldn't be able to hold all the pain at bay and once he let go of the blankness it would all rush back in regardless of how well he managed to hold it back at the present.

"I'm going to burn myself – that much I can manage myself. But once I've done that, I'm going to need you to break my leg on the opposite side to the burns." Sam said in a business-like voice, walking closer to the burning Holy Oil. Castiel looked confused.

"You need me to break your leg? And on the opposite side? Why?" The angel asked.

"Because my squad believe they saw me caught in an explosion. The demon snatched me out a split
second before the blast reached me, so I don't have a scratch on me. There's no way I can explain that. So, I need to look like the explosion blew me away from the scene. Burns on the left, which was closest to the explosion, and a break on the other side to imitate a hard landing after the blast." Sam explained. "Once I'm injured I'm going to need every bit of my energy to focus on controlling the pain. So, while I'm still dealing with only the pain from my fingers. And fairly compos mentis, is there something you need from me to make sure you drop me in the right place?" Castiel shook his head.

"No. I can pull the location directly from your mind without a problem."

"Even past my block?" Sam wondered. "No one else has ever managed to get past it before."

"No one else who tried was an angel." Castiel pointed out. "It won't be a problem. This Holy Oil will be though." He gestured towards the circle of fire. I can't carry you out of here until it burns out." Sam gave him a tight grin.

"Yeah, no that won't be an issue. I've got to burn myself anyway – might as well use the tools at hand. I'll roll through it. That'll kill two birds with one stone; break the circle and burn me." Castiel nodded.

"You are correct. That will be most efficient. Holy Fire burns hotter than most flames, so the burns will be very convincing." Sam bit his lip to hold in his laugh. This angel wasn't so bad once Sam had fought through his prejudices. But his literal interpretation hang-up and his lack of empathy were strangely amusing quirks that made Castiel someone Sam wouldn't mind knowing better.

"Good. So, shall we get this show on the road?" Sam said casually, fighting down the nervousness. If he lost his calm now, then he'd be battling the pain from his fingers, let alone the pain he had coming. Castiel looked up and down the street.

"We are already on the road, Sam Winchester." He pointed out. This time Sam laughed out loud.

"Right you are. You know, you don't need to use my full name every time. Just Sam is fine." The angel's brow furrowed a little.

"If that's preferable to you, then I will do that. Sam."

"What I was meaning was, shall we begin?" Sam clarified. He lowered himself to the floor and laid himself parallel to the fire with his back to it. "It would be better for me if we do this quickly. I'll roll over through the fire and once I'm on my left side in the flames, you can break my right leg for me." Castiel nodded calmly, watching Sam with interest.

"A thought has occurred to me, Sam. It is clear that you know of a way to be reunited with your military companions, or you would not be going to these lengths." Sam nodded, wondering where this was going. "But given the fact they must believe you dead, will they not already have moved on to their next mission without you?"

"No." Sam replied. "The Kitty Hawk wasn't due to ship out before next week. Them thinking I'm dead won't affect…" He broke off. "Oh shit!" He spat out. "I can't believe I didn't think of that!" Sam's concentration wavered, and a flood of pain from his hand washed over him, reminding him to catch hols of his calm. Re-centring himself, he looked wide-eyed at the angel, who's expression remained impassive and curious. "If they think I'm dead, they'll report that to my family. My last letters will probably be on their way to them already, if they haven't already arrived. My family will think I'm dead. Dean will think I'm dead!"
"I do not understand the importance of this." Castiel answered. "Their misconception will be corrected very shortly."

"Yes, but what will happen in the meantime, Castiel? I've seen what Dean does when I'm dead. He goes straight to a crossroad." The expression on the angel's face turned hard and angry.

"Then his damned soul will be his own fault." He answered shortly. Sam narrowed his eyes at the angel.

"I get that you have no personal feelings to be hurt by that idea, Castiel, but it's what he'll do in hell that should have your blood running cold. Dean will break the first seal. It will take them decades, well in hell years anyway, to break him. But eventually he will break. The righteous man will spill blood in hell." Castiel's face drained of blood.

"Can he be stopped?" he asked Sam urgently.

"I hope so. As soon as I'm where I need to be, find Dean and keep him away from crossroads. The moment I'm able to, I'll send a message to Bobby Singer and have him tell Dean I'm alive, and I'll get to Dean myself as soon as I possibly can. I only hope that will be enough. Dean's as stubborn as I am and can be a slippery bastard when he wants to be. You have to keep him away from crossroads however you can manage it." Sam considered the angel's tendency to take thing too literally. "Short of hurting or killing him of course." He added in clarification.

"Very well, Sam. I will do as you ask. We should begin. Every moment lost is a moment your brother is unsupervised." Castiel was right. Sam took a deep breath and pulled his blank space more firmly around him.

Without any further delay, he rolled into the flames. The stench of his own hair and skin burning almost made his concentration fail, but he held on grimly. The pain was enough to cut through Sam's carefully prepared defences, but not at full force, He gritted his teeth and fought back a scream.

"Now, Castiel. Get it done no…" He didn't even manage to complete his sentence before Castiel stamped on his right hip, a loud crack like a snapping broom handle making it clear that a bone had broken. The strength of the pain Sam was fighting off jumped instantly. Once he left his blank space we was going to be in a world of hurt.

Castiel bent and picked Sam up surprisingly gently. With one hand he reached out and touched Sam's forehead with two fingertips and instantly a rushing feeling surrounded them, followed by a dizzying change in air pressure. The scent in the air of musty old wood and damp was gone, replaced by the dry and dusty smell that Sam recognised as night in Yemen. He was back.
Chapter 4

Castiel lowered Sam gently do the ground and looked around.

"There is no one here, Sam. How will you be found?" Sam gestured with his good hand towards the outcrop of rocks about twenty feet to their right.

"There should be a spare radio and some food and water stashed over there. After the mission went FUBAR, they won't have wasted time stopping to grab it." He groaned as his control over the pain started to wane. "I just need to get over there and make a call, and before you know it, I'll be choppered out of here and onto the USS Kitty Hawk." Not wanting to waste time while his ability to hold back his agony faded, Sam began dragging himself painfully across the rocky ground towards the stash. Castiel rushed forward.

"I can collect the radio and supplies for you. You should not exhaust yourself further. Furthermore, dragging yourself across this terrain will create further injuries." Sam tried to grin up at the angel, but the burns on his face had created a tightness that threatened to crack open with the change of expression. *I bet I don't look too pretty right now.* He surmised.

"That's the point, Castiel. The explosion happened down there. He eyed the ruins of the building they'd tried to take on their mission. There's no way I would have been blown this far. Especially as the guys would've last seen me on the other side of the building. It has to look like I dragged myself up here after. It'll also help explain the delay in contact. That's why my leg needed breaking. Taking a couple of days to drag my sorry ass up here makes more sense that way. The angel blinked in surprise.

"Very well, Sam. I believe it would be best now for me to go and find Dean Winchester." He hesitated. "That is, unless you would prefer me to wait with you until you are collected?" Sam's heart was warmed by the concern. I wouldn't have come naturally to the angel.

"That's very kind of you, Castiel, but You're right; it's best if you go and find Dean before he does something stupid. Please keep him safe. And the revolver too. Neither one of them should be in the hands of evil, the world wouldn't survive it." Castiel nodded firmly and gently grasped Sam's unburnt shoulder.

"I will do as you ask. Be Safe, Sam Winchester." He said quietly, then paused and thought for a moment. "If you pray to me again, I'll come."

With that, he was gone. Before Sam had a chance to reply. With a slight shake of his head, Sam eyed the distance to the supply stash and groaned. His strength, both psychic and physical, was fading fast and he had a long crawl before he could rest. Grimly he put out his good arm and pulled himself a few inches forward, careful not to put too much weight on his broken hip. Of course, this made him roll onto his burned hip. He closed his eyes in despair. This was going to be horrendous.

In the end it took Sam nearly three hours to cross the twenty feet of rocky ground to the emergency stash and he had been less than halfway there when his ability to block any of the pain left him. His only consolation there was that he'd had the presence of mind to step deliberately out of his blank space rather than allow himself to just fall out of it. That would've just added a brain-splitting headache into the mix. Calling for an extraction team had been straightforward once the guy on the
other end of the radio call had had a moment to get over his total shock; Sam had been right – they had assumed he was dead, but having the correct callsigns and responses had cut through the red tape, and so Sam was now half lying, half sitting in the sparse shade of the rocky outcrop, radio in his lap and the now empty water cannister in his good hand. He'd forced himself to eat the emergency rations left behind, despite the extra pain in his face from chewing, because he needed to rebuild his energy after the extreme strain he'd put his psychic abilities through. The rations we're nearly enough, but something was better than nothing and he knew that standard procedure once he was in the medical bay would be nil by mouth. It was a precaution taken in case emergency surgery was necessary. If he didn't eat before being picked up, he wouldn't get to for several more hours and that would mean his energy levels would crash – a much longer recovery. Sam needed to be out of hospital and en-route to Bobby's house to contact Dean as soon as possible; no one could keep Dean away from trouble for very long – not even an angel.

Very faintly in the distance, the distinctive sound of a helicopter became noticeable and Sam gave a relieved groan. It wouldn't be long now, and he'd be able to rest. His eyes were barely open a slit when a shadow fell over him, signalling that someone was there to help.

"Holy shit on a stick, man. Look at the state of him." Sam recognised Carson's voice over the still spinning helicopter blades. "Always knew he was a tough son of a bitch, but to survive that blast and then drag himself all the way up here? That's some next level shit. Shame about his face though." Carson's voice became subdued. "The ladies loved that pretty boy." Sam pulled forth enough energy to fold down all of his fingers except the middle one on his good hand and weakly wave it in Carson's general direction.

"Screw you, Carson. Bet I still look better than you." He mumbled to everyone's amazement.

"He's conscious?" Another voice spoke in amazement. "That's the strongest guy I've ever seen."

"Yeah and if he's going to continue that way, then you men need to get out of the way so that we can get the lieutenant stabilised and prepped to travel. He needs pain relief, too." No matter how Sam struggled to focus his eyes, he couldn't make out the medic, but he turned his head in the guy's direction anyway. "Lieutenant, there are a couple of packs of morphine syrettes in with these other supplies, but they're all unopened. Do you have an allergy or intolerance that's not noted on your file?"

"No." Sam muttered with the last of his strength. "Needed to stay alert." He added and then finally let himself slide sideways into unconsciousness.

When he woke up, Sam was lying on crisp white sheets in a bright, clean room. A drip was attached to his right arm, delivering fluids and painkillers, he assumed, and he was wired up to all manner of electrical equipment. The regular beeping was kind of annoying. He turned his head to look around and found that Carson was slumped in a chair next to his bed. He snorted in amusement, wishing he had a camera. There was a thin line of drool dangling from the corner of his mouth. Giggles would have never let him forget that. His amusement fled. Giggles had been a good guy and a superb marine, but there was no way he could've survived that explosion. Sam himself wouldn't have if he'd not been snatched.

He shifted in the bed a little, groaning at the white-hot agony in his broken hip and waking Carson from his doze.

"Hey, man." Sam murmured, trying not to wince as his facial burned flared with pain.
"Hey." Carson replied, subdued. "Look, Winchester, I'm just going to come straight out with it. I'm so sorry."

"Huh?" Sam replied intelligently.

"We should've searched better. We should've found you and brought you back. We never should've left you out there like that." He slammed his fist into his thigh. "I'm so sorry." Carson sat hanging his head, fighting back tears.

"Carson, there's no way you could've known that I was blown clear during the explosion. Believe me, it's a total miracle I survived." Sam told him truthfully. "I don't hold it against any of you. I mean it, man." Carson barked out a sour, sarcastic laugh.

"Never leave a man behind. That's supposed to be how it is. But that's exactly what we did, and I feel like shit for it." He scrubbed a hand over his face tiredly. "Especially as there were so many times that you were the one who helped run the extractions for us and for other squads when other men were down but not dead. Then when you needed us, we left you to rot."

Carson seemed beyond angry with himself and Sam was beginning to worry about him.

"Just listen to me, Carson." Sam said firmly, ignoring his pain and reaching out to tap him on the knee with his good hand. The move put weight on his broken hip and he gasped. "Those cases were all completely different to mine. In every case, the man down was visibly alive, or had at least disappeared without witness. I got blown up. You get that? Blown. Up. Not just shot, not just missing. A fucking building exploded into me. None of you had any reason to think for a second that was survivable. So, you need to quit this. Your guilt will get you killed if you let it fester. So, shake it off. I don't have any axe to grind with any of you, ok?" He stared at Carson hard, until the man nodded. Silence stretched out between them until Carson started to chuckle.

"So not even getting blown halfway to hell can stop your stubborn streak then, huh?" Sam started laughing too, but immediately broke off with an agonised gasp.

"Fuck, Carson. Don't make me laugh." He complained. They settled into a more companionable silence this time before Sam broke it. "Hey, when are they shipping me out?"

"ASAP as far as I know. I was listening in on the doc while he reported back to Winters. I figured you'd want the straight deal rather than the whitewash you'd get from him." They both rolled their eyes, the doc prided himself on his bedside manner, but he couldn't seem to get it through his head that military men don't want to hear a sanitised, 'positive thinking' diagnosis – they wanted straight talking and realism.

"Yeah, you're not wrong there." Sam agreed. "So, let's hear it then." Sam didn't need to fake a brave front; he knew that between Amanda and himself, none of his injuries bar the missing fingers would be permanent. Probably not even the burn scars given long enough. He momentarily wondered if it was possible to use psychic healing to regrow his fingers, then shook the thought off. Time enough to look into that later. He told himself.

"Well doc was telling Winters that your right hip is broken and will need a replacement." Carson told him with no preamble. They both knew that was a career-ending injury, and Sam appreciated Carson's well-meant attempt to get the worst of it out of the way. After all, the other man had no idea that Sam would be one hundred percent sound on that leg within a couple of months. When Sam didn't so much as blink at the news, Carson continued. "You've got burns ranging from first degree to full thickness down your left side; face, shoulder, arm, hip and thigh, and it looks like a piece of metal of some kind came at you so fast that it sliced clean through your third and fourth fingers on
"Well shit. I guess I'll never play the piano again then." Sam deadpanned, surprising a bark of laughter from the other man. "Thanks for telling me, man."

The sound of approaching footsteps in the corridor had both men turning to the door just as Major Winters walked in. Carson jumped to his feet and stood to attention, while Sam tried awkwardly to at least straighten up in his bed. Winters gave Sam an exasperated look, then turned and dismissed Carson who threw a wink and a grin over his shoulder at Sam as he left the room.

"Back among the living then, Winchester?" Winters asked, taking the seat Carson had recently vacated.

"I guess so, sir." Sam replied, trying to smile with just the right side of his face.

"Stop that. You're making my face hurt just watching you. Now, officially I'm here to debrief you before we ship you state-side for your surgery." Sam attempted to arrange his face in a confused expression – he wasn't supposed to know that he'd need a hip replacement yet. Winters rolled his eyes. "Don't even try that one, Winchester. You think I didn't know Carson would fill you in? Why do you think I talked to doc somewhere we could be overheard? You wouldn't appreciate that man pussyfooting his way around the facts any more than any of us."

"I appreciate the effort, Sir. Thank you." Winters waved him off.

"Anyway," he continued "officially I'm here for your debrief, but unofficially, I'm here to apologise for leaving you behind." Sam sighed. Would he have to go through this conversation over and over?

"Sir, I just got done reaming Carson for thinking that way, and I don't think I'm allowed to yell at you like I did him." Sam began, making Winters chuckle.

"Damn right you're not." He told Sam. "Don't worry, Winchester. Logically I know that I made the correct call in pulling out. Logically I know that I made the best call I could at the time. But it still turned out to be the wrong choice and I don't think I would be able to trust myself with any decision in the future if I didn't admit that fact and apologise for my mistake." Sam got it. His dad had been a big proponent of owning up to your mistakes and never repeating them. He just nodded at the Major.

"I can understand that, Sir. All I can say is that if it had been someone else in my place, and I'd still been running the mission, I'd have made the exact same call." Winters nodded gravely and looked down at his hands for a moment before shaking the subject off and moving on with the conversation.

"Your conduct in Black Fox Battalion has always been exemplary, Winchester. You've always completed your missions with precision and efficiency, and your loyalty to your squad has always been unshakable." Sam looked away, embarrassed by the praise. He'd never quite got used to praise from authority figures after having John's example as his starting point. Winters went on regardless.

"But your conduct over the last few days has been truly beyond all expectations. You understand that you're going to be receiving a medical discharge?" Sam nodded. "I want you to know that Colonel O'Neill and I will both be putting in a commendation to be attached to your discharge." Winters nodded. "I want you to know that Colonel O'Neill and I will both be putting in a commendation to be attached to your discharge." Sam opened his mouth to protest, but Winters waved him down. "You'll be getting another purple heart to add to your collection anyway, but both the colonel and I are putting you forward for the Navy Cross." At Sam's wide-eyed expression, Winters grinned. "We would've liked to put you forward for the Medal of Honour, but given the top-secret nature of the mission, that's just not possible. So, the best we could do was a Navy Cross, and a final promotion. You'll be discharged as First Lieutenant." There was no room for argument in Winters' tone or expression, so Sam swallowed down his protests.
"I don't know what to say, Sir. Except thank you." Winters smiled.

"I'll be seriously offended if the last I ever hear of you is the moment you get shipped back stateside, Winchester. Seriously." He shifted in his chair. "Now, there's not much point debriefing you when you're only," he looked at his watch "five minutes from your next morphine dose. So, we'll table that for now. In the meantime, is there anything you need?" Sam nodded.

"Actually, sir yes there is. Did my last personal letters already go out?" Winters' face fell.

"I'm afraid they did, yes. We were so sure. Your family was notified officially too." Sam's stomach dropped.

"Then it's extremely urgent that I get immediate access to my emails, Sir. I have to get an email sent before someone does something really, really stupid when they hear I'm dead."

Winters was about to argue that Sam was in no shape to be sitting up or typing, but the panicked look on the face of a marine he knew to be impossible to panic had him calling out to a private stationed in the corridor for a laptop. Sam slumped back in relief. There was a chance he'd get a message to Bobby in time to head Dean off, and if not, at the very least, Castiel was watching him and could hopefully keep him at bay until Sam was there to fix this.

It was only a few minutes before the laptop arrived, and a nurse helped Sam into a semi-comfortable position, so he could type, then left the room, along with Winters. Sam wasted no time in opening his email account.

From: SeerWitch To: BeeSinger

May 26th, 2007

Bobby

SAM WINCHESTER IS NOT DEAD. SAM WINCHESTER IS NOT DEAD! I recognise that I just repeated myself, but some things are important enough to say twice.

Here's something else that's maybe more important: KEEP DEAN AWAY FROM CROSSROADS!

Yes, I know. He's an eejit. Don't doubt for a second that he'll do it. I've seen him do it. And then the whole world goes to shit. Not hyperbole. I mean that almost literally. So, KEEP DEAN AWAY FROM CROSSWORDS.

The third piece of important news is: The Yellow Eyed Demon is dead. Dead, not exorcized. Literally, hole in the forehead, flickering blue lightning, magic colt revolver, dead.

Use that information to its best advantage, Bobby. Maybe it'll stall Dean for a while too.

I'll be in contact again soon.

SeerWitch.


It took Sam three more weeks to finally get out of the military hospital. The doctors were very pleased with his recovery, but Sam knew he could heal a whole lot faster out of the hospital than he could in it. The watchful eyes of the doctors were more detrimental to his health than the infections
and complications they were attempting to prevent.

The entirety of the first week, Sam had spent in a sterile environment – even the doctors and nurses changing their scrubs as they entered and left so as to avoid infection in his open burns. The surgery to debride his burns had lasted more than four hours, and he'd had to very carefully affect minor repairs to his own hip so as to prevent them from doing a complete hip replacement. Luckily the doctors had just concluded there had been some mix up with the x-rays and not looked any closer.

He'd had a hell of a time talking the doctors out of beginning his skin grafts immediately too. In the end he'd convinced them that he needed time to recover mentally from his ordeal before he went through the skin graft process, and that he's return for future surgeries when he was ready. Three weeks of not only being poked and prodded, but of not being able to make contact with Castiel to make sure that everything was ok with Dean. To add insult to injury, Dean hadn't even been able to go and search for visions or use his abilities to lessen his own pain; the doctors at the hospital insisted on having him wired up to a heart rate monitor at all times, and the thing went haywire whenever he began focusing and entering his blank space.

He felt completely out of touch with everything and everyone important and he hated the feeling.

When he finally walked out of the military hospital, on crutches, he had a severe limp and raised, ugly red scars over every burnt area. Not how he wanted to look when he met his family again for the first time in years, but there wasn't time for him to affect much of an improvement.

Maybe I can get Amanda to come visit at Bobby's. We could do a bit of work on my injuries together.

But that was a problem for another time. For now, he needed to make contact with Castiel. He limped and crutched his way into the motel room he'd just rented near the hospital. He'd got a flight booked for the following day to Dakota, but he hadn't wanted to stay even one more day at the hospital. Dropping his duffle on the bed, Sam picked up the handful of take out menus by the phone and set about ordering himself a huge spread. He was going to get a lot of work done that evening – both with his healing and with his visions, so having plenty of food to hand and a safe place to sleep was essential.

After ordering a huge quantity of food to be delivered, Sam carefully lowered himself into the armchair in the room and closed his eyes.

"Castiel, Angel of Thursday, owner of a very efficient trench coat, and taker of everything literal, I pray that you hear me. I pray that you visi…" Sam didn't have to go any further, as with a rustle of feathers and a rush of air, Castiel appeared in the room.

"Sam. I am pleased to see you." Castiel said seriously.

"Thanks, Castiel. It's nice to see you too." Sam smiled. The scars on the left of his face twisted the expression and made it look a little grotesque. Sam knew it would, but he wasn't too upset by it. Some work with his healing ability would improve things.

"I am pleased to see you because it means that I can soon be relieved of my obligation to watch over your brother." Castiel grumbled. "The man is very irritating. He is almost always drunk. He mocks my clothing and my speech, and he refuses to call me by my proper name." Sam tried very, very hard not to laugh.

"What does he call you then?" Sam could guess, but then again, it depended on how much Castiel had annoyed Dean.
"He calls me Cas." The angel protested. "I am not at all fond of it." Sam couldn't control the chuckle this time.

"Yeah, Dean can be difficult sometimes." Sam agreed. "Has he been trying to get to a crossroads?"
Castiel frowned and nodded.

"He has made several attempts. Robert Singer prevented two of his efforts and I have thwarted a few myself. He was angry and violent in his earliest efforts, but in the last few days he has become sly and secretive. I believe he is planning another attempt." Sam slapped the bed in irritation.

"Damnit, Dean." He growled. "This is really unhelpful." Castiel nodded in enthusiastic agreement.
"Ok, Castiel. I'm going to be there at Bobby's tomorrow. Is there any way that you can monitor Dean without him seeing you? If he thinks he's free of you, he might lose the edge of desperation and hesitate long enough for me to get there. If he does act, maybe you could just 'zap' him back to Bobby's place before he can get himself into trouble?" Sam asked. Castiel sighed.

"Very well, Sam. I will do as you ask again. Would you appreciate my presence at Robert Singer's home tomorrow when you meet your family?" He offered.

"That would be very helpful actually. Yes please. But there will be a lot of shouting and recriminations at first, so maybe it would be best if you waited for my prayer?"

"Agreed. Shall I return the weapon now?" Castiel asked, reaching inside his trench coat for the revolver.

"I can't take it on the flight to Dakota. If you don't mind keeping it for one more day, I can relieve you of both your obligations at the same time tomorrow?" Sam asked the angel politely. He figured that a little politeness might counteract Dean's ability to be a pain in the ass.

"Very well, Sam. I shall await your call tomorrow and watch over Dean tonight." Castiel nodded to Sam with something that looked almost like respect. Sam smiled in return.

"Thank you Castiel." Sam had barely finished speaking before the angel had once again disappeared.

Most of the rest of Sam's day was spent in his blank space, concentrating hard on improving his scars and his hip. By the time he was finished working, it was dark out, he was starving, and he was exhausted, but also, he was in much less pain, and a good look in the mirror showed that his facial scars at least had faded and softened, the first step needed before he could start re-growing new skin which would be better done with Amanda's help. He shifted far enough over on the bed to reach the huge spread of food and started gracelessly shovelling it into his mouth. The refuelling more important than the flavour right then. He ate until he felt like he would puke if he tried one more mouthful and then lay back and fell straight asleep, not waking until his alarm went off the following morning with just enough time for him to get a cab to the airport for check-in.

Sam couldn't remember being quite this nervous ever before. Not on his first day of Boot camp, Not even on his first mission. He sat in the back of a cab outside the gates of Bobby's place for nearly twenty minutes, ignoring the irritation of the driver; he'd paid the guy extra for the delay, so he was essentially getting paid for nothing. He could put up with nervous silence in return.

Finally taking a deep breath, Sam opened the door and pulled himself out of the cab, grabbing his duffle and his crutches. The cab drove off the second Sam closed the door and Sam crutched and limped his way into Bobby's yard. A large dog ran up to him barking and Sam stood still, allowing the ugly but well cared for mutt to sniff all around him and decide if he was a threat or not. Apparently, Sam qualified as not a threat, and the dog lost interest in him and trotted off towards the
house.

Apparently alerted by the barking, a middle-aged man, scruffy and overweight and wearing a plaid shirt and a tatty old baseball cap came out of the house. Somehow, Bobby had barely changed over the years. Sam continued crutching his way towards the house, head down to watch his footing. He was wearing his service uniform, The khaki green material crisp and well cared for, with his new lieutenant's insignia and his medal ribbons attached. He was aware that it was probably overkill and childish too – a hark back to his 'fuck you, dad' phase – but he knew that Dean and his dad had received his last letters, and he felt like he needed some kind of barrier between them and him now that he knew that they knew.

"Can I help you, Son?" Bobby called out from the porch." Sam drew to a stop and looked up. He smiled, the scars on his face still pulling it off to one side a little, but he'd practiced in the mirror and he knew that it looked a lot better than before.

"Well I guess that depends, Bobby." Sam replied, "You maybe got a beer up there I could have?" Bobby froze, narrowing his eyes at Sam and giving him a proper look over.

"If I didn't know better, I'd say that was Sammy Winchester standing in my yard," He said carefully "But I'm in two minds about whether or not that's possible. I'm getting very mixed reports about him being dead or alive."

Sam wasn't surprised by Bobby's wariness; hunters didn't live long if they weren't wary. He couldn't help the grin on his face as he took in Bobby and his house. Most of the good memories from his childhood feature these images.

"What do you want me to do, Bobby? I could walk across a devil's trap for you? Drink some holy water? I've already walked over your iron cattle grid and the rock salt boxes under it." Sam reeled off the protections and tests his dad and Bobby had drilled into him. "I could slice myself with a silver knife?" Bobby held up one hand.

"How about we start with a couple of questions only Sammy Winchester would know the answer to." He suggested.

"It's Sam. But sure, if you want. Although if I know the answer, a shapeshifter would too." Sam replied. After his first words, Bobby jerked a little bit straighter, but he didn't come any closer.

"What did you do to celebrate your thirteenth birthday?" Came Bobby's first question. Sam scoffed.

"The same thing that happened half the nights of my life. "Dean and I did a salt and burn out the back of an old farmhouse in Ohio. Dad wasn't there, again. He was hunting a black dog in a small town near Maine."

"What did I give you for you to give your dad one year?"

"An amulet. You said it would keep him safe. But I was mad at him, so I gave it to Dean instead. He loved it. He'd wear it all the time." Sam replied. Bobby grunted and gestured for Sam to come a little closer. He did as requested, noting the devils trap marked out in iron and then covered with dirt. He limped and crutched his way right through the centre and out the other side and looked up to give Bobby a cheeky grin. "I'd do the Hokey Pokey in and out of it for you if only my leg wasn't still fucked up." "Mind your language, Sammy." Bobby warned him.

"It's Sam." Sam reminded him "And you never had any luck getting me to mind it when I was a kid, so I don't know why you'd think I'll mind it now." He could see Bobby fighting the urge to chuckle
at him. Quick as a flash, Bobby threw a shiny object to Sam.

"Think fast." He called as it glinted in the air. Sam dropped his right crutch and caught the object one-handed. He looked down to see what it was. A pure silver bar by the look of it. Sam held it in both hands and rubbed it between his palms before throwing it back to Bobby, then showing his unharmed hands to the older man. "I'll be damned. It's really you, Sammy?" Bobby said hopefully, beckoning Sam up the steps and offering him a beer.

"It's Sam, Bobby, for the last time. And yes, it's really me." He took a swig of the beer, letting a little drip onto his chin so Bobby could see it make real contact with his skin. "You know, You should really just offer people holy water shots. Watering down beer is just a crime." Bobby grabbed him and wrapped him up in a tight hug, a tremble in his hands.

"My god, Sam. It's so damn good to see you again." He told the younger man. "I should've known I could trust that email. She's always right." He added under his breath. Sam managed not to smirk, but it was close.

"It's good to see you too, Bobby. Seriously." He replied, returning the hug. "So, where are they?" he asked, looking over the older man's shoulder towards the house.

"Your daddy's sitting outside the spare room door, minding Dean and making sure he doesn't leave. That boy's been a complete eejit lately; determined to get himself in the worst kind of trouble." Sam admired the way Bobby managed to tell Sam the truth, while still maintaining Dean's privacy.

"Yeah, well he's a Winchester, Bobby. What do you expect?" Bobby laughed, finally letting go of Sam and leaning back against the wall.

"Look, Sam. I know my house ain't much, but I'm kind of attached to it. I've got a feeling that if your reunion happens inside, there won't be much left beyond the foundations, so I'm gonna go get Dean and your Daddy and have them come out here. It helps that I've got a handy dandy devils trap sitting out here, because you know that they're going to have you jumping through the same hoops that I just put you through. In fact..." Bobby broke off and laid out the silver bar and an iron knife which he pulled from his belt. "I'll bring out a shot of holy water with me this time too. It'll be quicker if we just get it all done before the pair of them get their crazy on." He looked at Sam seriously. "You know, they sent a heavily decorated officer type out here to notify Your Daddy and brother, wouldn't even tell me what it was about, only that it was an emergency that he talk to them. Poor guy had to wait nearly two days in town until they showed up here. Getting them to break off from their hunt was a real bear of a job too. I had to threaten John with telling our ammo dealer that he was working with the ATF to get them here." Bobby rolled his eyes. "Hooeoe, did your daddy come rolling in here with a bee in his bonnet. Roaring and swearing from the second he opened the car door he was. Of course, the second the officer type started speaking, he shut up faster than I've ever seen." Bobby trailed off, looking into the middle distance. "The look on his face when he heard the news. Dean dropped to his knees and started yelling and that damn near broke me, but the look on your daddy's face finished the job." Bobby was almost whispering by the end of that.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that, Bobby." Sam told him quietly. "I've got to say that Dean's reaction isn't much of a surprise, but after the way things finished up, I'm kind of surprised that my Dad gave a shit at all." Bobby grabbed Sam hard by the left shoulder, making him bite back a gasp as the pain shot through him.

"You never did understand that man, Sam. Now I'm not saying that's your fault – John Winchester is an enigma most of the time, and you were just a kid when you left – not old enough to see things from his perspective, and angry enough to not even want to try. But I'm gonna tell you this once, and you're gonna listen and listen well. That man, your daddy, he loves you. Just as much as he loves
Dean. He ain't good at showing it, and he'd rather bluster and bitch than mention thing one about his feelings, but that don't mean he ain't got those feelings." Sam pulled back carefully, the pain in his shoulder and the pain in his heart from what Bobby had just said battling for position.

"Ok, Bobby. I hear what you're saying. It's in complete opposition to my experience with him, and I think that there's information you don't have, that supports my take on things over yours, but I won't go on the offensive with John. I'll let his behaviour guide the conversation. Will that suit?" Bobby sighed.

"Gad damned stubborn Winchesters. Each one as bad as the next." He muttered under his breath. "Fine, kid. I suppose that's the best I'm going to get out of you right now, and it's more than I'd probably get out of either of the other two. Just, I don't know, don't pull your old smart-ass crap and deliberately bait the man." Bobby eyed Sam's uniform, his eyes catching on the lieutenant bars and the medal ribbons. "Don't you think for a moment that I don't get the reasoning behind you turning up in full service uniform when fatigues would've been more usual and more comfortable." Sam looked away, embarrassed at being called out on his childishness.

"Yeah, well I never denied I had daddy issues." He said sullenly. "I told you I wouldn't just kick off when I see him. It's too late for me to get changed, even if I wanted too, and yeah, maybe I'm trying to rub his nose in my rank and success a little" Bobby scoffed. "Alright, a lot, but you've got to consider that every son wants to shout 'look at me! Look what I can do!' to his father when he succeeds." Sam said as calmly as he could. Bobby backed down a little.

"Yeah, Sam. I know. You've got no idea how many times I tried to get that through John's head when you were little. But the past is done, and you've got a chance to make changes here. All I'm asking is that you give it a go, even when the old man says exactly the wrong thing." They both gave a bark of laughter at that – it was pretty much a certainty that John would do just that."

"I'll try, Bobby. I'll try." Sam leaned back against the wall and jerked his chin towards the house. "Now how about we get this shit show started?"

Bobby walked inside and slowly climbed the stairs towards the guest room, torn between his eagerness to end the Winchesters' grieving and his dread at how badly things might go. When the Marine Corps officer had arrived, demanding that Bobby locate the Winchesters and bring them there, the old hunter had had a nasty feeling that he knew what was going on. Not that he'd had any idea before then that Sam had joined up, but what else could it have been about? He'd known that threatening John would bring him there in a terrible temper, but nothing else would've made John drop the hunt short of mentioning Sam, and the tiny sliver of hope he had left that this wasn't about Sam kept Bobby from bringing him up.

The absolute devastation that Bobby saw crashing across both Winchesters hit him very nearly as hard as his own grief for Sam's death, a double blow to his heart that had him struggling to breathe. He didn't ask either of the Winchesters what had been in the letters the officer had handed them, but what else could it have been about? He'd known that threatening John would bring him there in a terrible temper, but nothing else would've made John drop the hunt short of mentioning Sam, and the tiny sliver of hope he had left that this wasn't about Sam kept Bobby from bringing him up.

The email from SeerWitch had given Bobby a tiny glimmer of new hope; the woman had never been wrong, had never once missed a vital detail in all the years she'd been contacting him. But without knowing who she was, without being able to provide any proof for John or Dean, Bobby had been unable to convince either of them that Sam was alive. Truth be told, he hadn't been convinced himself, so how was he supposed to make them believe it? SeerWitch had definitely called it on
Dean though. After more than two days of silent zombie-like staring, Dean had suddenly thrown himself into a frenzy of activity, grabbing books from Bobby's collection and tearing through his supplies looking for something specific. Thank goodness he'd had the warning from SeerWitch, or Dean might've made it out of the junkyard before Bobby had worked out what he was up to. As it was, he'd had to resort to any number of tricks, traps and on occasion on brute force with John's help, to keep Dean from getting to a crossroads and damning himself to save his brother. The bitch of it was, Bobby wasn't completely convinced that John wasn't thinking about doing something along those lines himself. It was likely only having to constantly mind Dean that had prevented John from doing something stupid instead. Bobby sighed. One day these Winchesters would be the end of him.

The day after his first failed attempt, Dean had gotten fall down drunk and staggered off into the junkyard to rage alone. He'd come back in hours later, covered in his own vomit and rambling on about "some dick called Cas." From that point on, every time that Dean slipped Bobby and John's custody, before long he came back to the house blustering and bitching about this Cas, who apparently kept interfering in his plans. Bobby was baffled about who the guy was but was very grateful that he seemed to be on the same side.

He reached the top of the stairs and stood for a moment looking down at John who was slumped fast asleep in the narrow corridor against the guest room door. Even asleep, John's face was marked with grief. New lines creased his face, there were bags under his eyes, and he'd dropped weight. Hopefully, a lot of that would improve now. Bobby nudged John's knee with his foot, for too knowing to risk shaking the man awake by hand. That was a mistake he'd never be stupid enough to make. Hunters lived on the edge of danger at all times, and when woken unexpectedly, they woke swinging. If a knife or a gun was to hand, then they'd be in play at the same instant as the hunter's eyes opened.

Sure enough, the nudge to John's leg had him instantly awake, knife in hand. Bobby waited for a moment for John to register who had woken him, then spoke.

"Get Dean and then the both of you come outside. Bring your holy water." That last had John on full alert, jumping to his feet and banging on the door for Dean. "Calmly, John. Calmly. There's no emergency. I only want you to bring the water because it'll make things a lot easier in the long run." John stopped and looked at Bobby, confused but still wary. He called through the door.

"Dean. Get out here. Bobby needs us outside with some holy water. I've got no clue what the old man is up to, but he's caught my interest. How about you?" The slow steps coming towards the door told them that Dean was interested enough to come out and see what was going on. John turned and started back down the stairs, hearing the door open and close and then two sets of footsteps on the stairs behind him. Good. They were coming. Bobby's stomach roiled as his nervousness increased, however this went it was going to be an emotional rollercoaster. He grabbed a shot glass on his way through the living room.

Opening the door, Bobby saw that Sam was just where he'd left him – leaning against the house and his crutches and staring out into the junkyard. He didn't look across as Bobby walked out, just continued staring into the yard, the undamaged right side of his face on view. Bobby guessed he could understand that. The scarring to the other side of Sam's face was extensive and for the first time Bobby wondered what his other injuries were; he'd been so relieved to see the youngest Winchester alive that he'd not thought past that fact. He walked over and stood in front of Sam, shot glass in hand.

"So, come on then, old man. What's so important that we had to come…" Dean broke off, stopping in his tracks and staring wide-eyed. Beside him, John was similarly dumbstruck. The tableau only lasted for a moment. In an explosive flash of movement, Dean practically flew through the space
between them and grabbed Sam by the neck. The speed he'd moved at throwing them both to off the
porch and onto the ground in the yard, Dean on top of Sam. Sam yelled in pain.

"Ow get off me, you stupid dick." He shouted at Dean as the burned side of his body ground into the
dirt and Dean's weight on his bad hip sending shooting pain through him "Seriously, dude. You
didn't see the crutches? You're going to fuck up my leg even worse!"

"As if I care about your pain, you bastard." For a second, Sam thought he'd made a terrible mistake,
that Dean still hated him. Or maybe hated him anew after reading his letter. Then Dean continued
speaking. "I couldn't give two shits about the pain of the thing that stole my brother's body. How
dare you come here looking like him?" As he spoke, Dean punctuated his words with shoves to
Sam's face, grating the already sensitive scar tissue against the rough ground. Sam gritted his teeth
against the pain. "Is that actually his body you're wearing, or are you a shifter and that's a copy?"
Dean growled. Before Sam could come up with a reply, a deafening bang sounded out and echoed
around the junkers in the yard.

"Dean, you absolute eejit. Try using your head for something other than wearing your hair. You
think I didn't run the checks on him the second I saw him?" Bobby bellowed, shotgun in hand and
loading the next round. "That ain't no shifter. I had him handle pure silver and it didn't leave a mark."

Dean didn't let up.

"Then it's a demon, wearing Sam's dead body for shits and giggles." Dean yelled back furiously. He
started to reach for his gun, tucked in the back of his jeans. Sam wasn't willing to wat and see if
Dean would shoot him. Quicker than either of the Winchesters or Bobby had ever seen him move
when he was a kid, Sam twisted, hooked Dean's legs with one of his, a wrist with his good hand,
and flipped the pair of them over. Dean didn't even have time to react before he was on his back, one
of his arms stretched painfully, wrist bent close to breaking, and a booted foot pressing against his
carotid.

Dean froze instantly, his only movement his breathing as he looked at his dad and Bobby in panic.
He couldn't turn his head to see Sam – the boot on his neck prevented it. For some reason, although
John looked horrified at the sight of Dean on the verge of either having his arm ripped off or his neck
crushed, Bobby just looked impressed and vaguely amused. He didn't even train his shotgun on
them. Instead he leaned it up against the door frame and folded his arms. In the ensuing silence Sam
spoke.

"I've kind of gotta wonder if all the alcohol over the years has killed off too many brain cells." He
grated out between gritted teeth, the combination of pain and anger turning his voice into a growl.
"Because I don't remember you being quite this stupid, Dean. You think Bobby didn't have me
march my ass right through that devil's trap before he'd say much more than hello? You think he
didn't give me a beer with holy water in it, like he always thinks is so subtle? You think I even
walked into the junkyard over the iron cattle grid and the salt boxes with a demon at the controls?
Fuck's sake man grow a brain." Sam finished, adding just a half ounce more pressure to Dean's wrist
just to make him yelp the way Dean always had to him when they were kids and then letting go.
Dean rolled away fast, but Sam was suffering the effects of both Dean's attack and his own counter;
his hip had locked up and was burning with pain. "Bobby? Can you bring my crutches and help me
up, please?" He called out. "Pulling that move, even slowly like that was a really bad idea for my
hip. The genius here has fucked it right up again. Oh, and bring the holy water, it might settle things
down a little if they see me drink it."

Bobby took the holy water flask from John's loose grip and poured a shot, then picked up the fallen
crutches and paused to grab the holy water, silver bar and his iron knife. He walked past a still shell-
shocked John and down the steps towards Sam. As he passed Dean who was still sitting panting on
the ground, now with his eyes fixed on Sam, Bobby kicked him gently in the butt. "Eejit." He muttered and continued past. He helped Sam haul himself to his feet and passed him his crutches. Sam took them both in one hand and held the other, his left one with the missing fingers, out for Bobby to pass him the water. Turning to face first John and then Dean, Sam raised the glass in a toast, and then threw back the shot of water. When there was no reaction, both the other Winchesters relaxed a fraction, and then even more so when Bobby passed Sam the silver and the iron knife and nothing happened. Sam handed them back to Bobby and started crutch-limping his way back to the house, wincing and biting back his groans each time his weight was fully on his right leg. He adjusted his direction a little, making sure he went straight through the centre of the devil's trap on his way. As he passed out the other side, John dropped to his knees and Dean started struggling to his feet.

"Sammy?" Dean's voice was strangled – barely there. Sam turned and looked at him.

"Yeah Dean. It's me." He replied with a pained smile. "You owe me for dry cleaning my uniform. Jerk."

Sam had only reached the bottom of the steps up to Bobby's porch when he found himself grabbed again. He immediately tensed, ready to fend off another attack, but was surprised to instead find himself in a tight, but gentle embrace. The scent of his dad washed over him, gun oil, engine oil and leather with a hint of beer. Sam hadn't even realised he remembered it so well. He didn't know how to react. He couldn't remember ever having a hug from his dad before. Hesitantly, he lifted his arms and awkwardly returned the hug, landing a few gentle pats on John's shoulder. The moment his hand made contact, John burst out in a broken sob, his shoulders shaking as he fought to hold back his tears.

"I'm so sorry, Sam. I'm so, so sorry. I tried so hard to keep you and your brother safe in crappy circumstances. I should never have taken you on the hunt with me, but once I had, I would lie awake at night, images of you or Dean or both of you ripped apart by a ghoul or killed by a werewolf, or burn-burning on the ceiling, and I just couldn't – I just couldn't let that happen, so I did the only thing I knew how to do." He paused and gave a broken humourless laugh, then carefully pulled back from Sam, making sure his youngest wasn't going to leave. When Sam didn't move, John slowly stepped backwards until he could sit on the steps. "When I got drafted, we were drilled so incredibly hard because it was the best way to make us safe once we were deployed. They were ruthless because the enemy would be, and the only chance we had for survival was to have it all come to us as second nature. It was the only way I knew, and after you left I realised what I'd done, I knew I was wrong and I tried to find you. I promise. We both did. And Bobby and Pastor Jim too. We followed every lead, not that there were many – I taught you too well." John broke off with another dry laugh. "But nothing ever panned out. You'd just disappeared off the face of the planet."

"I was in Ely." Sam mumbled nonsensically. He was reeling in shock. Every single scenario he'd pictured of meeting John again had featured an angry and verbally abusive father, but this? Nothing had ever come even close to this. The irony of finding himself suddenly wondering if John was possessed or maybe a shapeshifter wasn't lost on him.

"What? Ely? That small town in North Dakota?" John asked, staggered by the idea. Bobby had an amazed expression on his face.

"Minnesota." Both Dean and Sam corrected him together, bringing a tight smile from everyone. John asked again.

"Ely?" You were there the whole time?"
"It took me a little less than a week to get to Ely, after laying false trails and doubling back on myself here and there, then I stayed in Ely until I was able to sign up." Bobby looked at Sam with narrowed eyes and Sam shifted his weight a little. "Look, can we go inside? I really need to sit down." John jumped to his feet, holding out an arm to help and Bobby rushed forward doing the same, but neither one was quick enough. Dean was at Sam's side almost before he'd finished speaking, gently taking away his left crutch and sliding his arm around Sam's waist to take the weight. Sam grunted at his right hip took the brunt. "Wrong side, man." He grumbled. Dean swore and handed Sam back his crutch, rushing around to this other side.

"Sorry." He said quietly, and he gently took Sam's weight once more, helping his brother into the house. The two older men followed behind and they all filed into Bobby's house.

Dean helped Sam sit in one of Bobby's overstuffed, ratty old armchairs and, after getting a nod of permission from Sam, gently lifted his brother's leg up so his boot was supported on the coffee table. Bobby scowled but let it go for the moment. Dean didn't seem to know what to do with himself, hovering around Sam's chair, apparently looking for something else he could do to help him. Sam had never seen Dean unsure of himself before and he didn't like it. It didn't suit his older brother to be so tentative.

"Thanks, dude. I'm good now. We should probably all sit down – there's a hell of a lot to talk through." Dean nodded, relieved to have some direction. Once everyone had seated themselves an awkward silence stretched out. Sam recalled a similar silence in Cold Oak. He'd had to break that one by launching right into the issues, and he guessed he was going to have to do the same here. Huh. Maybe it's a family trait. Dad just did the same thing outside. He sighed and leaned back in his chair.

"As much as I love an awkward silence, this one could last for years if we don't get into things, and as I'm the one who left and changed my whole life, I guess it's down to me to do the talking." He gave a weak smile and began. "So, I guess I'll start right at the very beginning, even if I didn't know it was the beginning until later. When we were in Ely when I was around eight, I was in the library one day and this lady came up to talk to me. She was the librarian. She handed me her card and said she didn't know when or why, but that one day I'd need her help, and that when I did, I should come find her. I didn't know back then that psychics were real. I just thought she was a crazy lady. We left Ely the next day, and I never gave her another thought until the day I left, and then what she said jumped into my head. So, I bought bus tickets here and there to throw you off, and then hitched back and forth in as many directions as I could manage for a few days, and then decided I'd confused my tracks enough and I hitched a ride to Ely. The librarian, Mona was waiting for me when I climbed down out of the cab." Sam took a deep breath and cleared his throat.

"You want a beer, Sam?" Bobby asked in the lull. Sam nodded. When Bobby asked the others they accepted too, and so Bobby fetched them all a drink and Sam began again.

"I should probably keep this chronological, well as much as I can anyway" He added wryly, no one other than him really understanding what he meant. "So, in the interests of doing that, and also to chase the big ass elephant out of the room, I need, and want to make something clear right now." Sam looked John right in the eye. "I'm gay. I first guessed I might be when I was about twelve. But the time I was fourteen, I was damn certain." Sam turned to John. "I want you to know that I heard what you said outside, and I'm about to say isn't to deliberately hurt you, but I have to explain things from my perspective." He told him. John nodded, gritting his teeth and visibly bracing himself. "I had heard repeated homophobic slurs from you and sometimes from Dean too, parroting you I thought, for as long as I have any memories. I was surrounded by a daily diet of hate speech and derision which led me to one conclusion; I might as well tell you I was a wendigo as tell you I was gay."
John smothered a sob in his fist and stared down at the ground in shame. Sam heard Dean make a similar noise, but he couldn't bring himself to look over at him just then. Bobby remained silent, no trace of judgement in his face, no disgust, and no real surprise. *Hmm. Interesting.*

"I actually thought that you'd guessed, and that was why you taunted me like that. But I genuinely believed that if I told you outright, that the best-case scenario would be a severe beating and being turned out, and a worst-case scenario, you'd just shoot me and move on to the next hunt." His whole life, Sam had imagined angrily throwing that in John's face, but there was no satisfaction now. Not that he was looking for any. He'd seen, felt and heard the genuine remorse from John outside, and now understood that what he'd perceived wasn't actually how things really was. Now he was sitting and calmly explaining his childhood experience and his dad was sitting there, tears streaming down his face and sobs wracking his body. Sam felt bad opening up the old wounds.

"I understand now that I misunderstood a lot of things back then, and I and see that now you don't hate me for being gay, but I don't know if you being all gay friendly these days is a new development, or if you've always been fine with the gays and were just repeating the tired old, ignorant slurs you heard in Boot camp. Because *trust me*, I heard almost verbatim every slur you ever threw my way when I was in Boot camp." John wiped his face roughly with his hand.

"Sam, I was training you and Dean the same way I'd been trained, as much as I recognise what a mistake that was now. I just lifted my whole Boot camp experience and replayed the whole thing with you and Dean in my place. The homophobic stuff was all a part of that. I never knew or even guessed that you might be gay until I read your last letter when we were notified. If I'd known I wouldn't have let any of that crap leave my mouth and I need to you to know that I never *never* would've turned you out or laid hands on you. I promise you that." John vowed in a broken voice. He was clearly devastated that the ham-fisted way he'd brought up his sons had led to one of them leaving in genuine fear for his life, and the other one… John looked over to Dean who gave a tiny shake of his head. Well apparently, that was going to have to wait for later.

"Ok, Dad. I hear you. It's going to take a lot of sorting through, but I believe what you're saying." Sam told his father. John looked so pathetically grateful for even the partial forgiveness that Sam had to look away. He cleared his throat and took a long swig of his beer.

"So that's the elephant shuffled out of the way… where was I? Oh yeah, Mona met me in Ely. She's a part of a group called The Assembly." The others all gave a start of recognition. Sam pretended not to notice. "The Assembly is a group of psychics, witches, healers, finders and even hackers who work together to do good acts, to help either individuals or groups. Their two precogs – one much stronger than the other – had *seen* that I would come to them for help and that they *had* to help. That it had to be them specifically that helped, and that if they didn't, I, they and *everyone else* would suffer for it. So, Mona was there when I arrived, they took me in and they helped keep me hidden. From *everyone* who might be looking for me. And…" Sam paused for a steadying breath "they helped me train my own abilities." He waited for the inevitable questions.

"Abilities?" Dean asked, confused.

"Abilities?" John asked, confused and more than a little wary, but not hostile.

"Abilities? Plural?" Bobby asked, drawing everyone's eyes in surprise.

"Did you know I had a gift, Bobby?" Sam asked.

"I always suspected you had a little something else, Sam. But I asked someone I trusted about abilities in children and I was told that gifts only awaken in adults, so I convinced myself I must've been wrong."
"Ordinarily, your contact would be correct, Bobby." Sam told him "But my gifts were given a kick-start when I was very young." Sam met John's eyes again. "Exactly six months old to be precise."

The horrified expression on John's face confirmed Sam's theory that John had known what the demon Azazel had done to him. "You did know then." He said to his dad coldly, not a question.

"I knew." John agreed. "A woman called Missouri, a psychic, she told me that she could feel a darkness in you when you were still a baby. She searched or scryed, or something and saw in her mind the yellow eyed demon dripping blood in your mouth. I was so angry with her for saying you had a darkness in you that I didn't speak to her again for years. I never asked for a second opinion. It was too dangerous, whether true or not. Hunters don't stop and ask, they kill and burn and move on. The fewer people that knew, you safer you were, and I was never going to let the demon bastard get his claws into you so whatever his plans were, it was irrelevant."

John's explanation burned away Sam's anger about his dad having known. Once again, however misguided, he'd been acting to protect Sam.

"And the thought that I might have demon powers never made you wary of me?" Sam asked, actually more curious than angry now.

"I was worried about what having demon powers would do to you. Not what you would do with the powers." John explained. "Despite all the fuck-ups I've made in your upbringing, despite everything you've seen in the world, I never knew anyone as good as you, Sam. So, no, I never worried that you would turn evil, if that's what you're asking. But I worried that you would be so afraid of turning evil that you'd do something drastic about it." John fixed Sam with a stern expression – the first glimpse of the dad he remembered, but Sam was actually warmed by it. He gave his dad a gentle smile.

"Thank you." He said simply. "As it happens, the question is moot for more than one reason. First and foremost because it's not possible for a power to be evil. The gift is neutral – only as good or bad as the person using it. Psychics are born, not made. All the demon did was unlock what was already there. Far too early and against my will, but by doing so, he made it possible for me to begin training, developing and strengthening my gifts from the early age of fifteen. That was a bad plan. For him."

Sam raised his hand, holding off the sudden burst of questions that last statement had sparked. "I'll get back to that, I promise, but I can't get out of order or we'll never get done here. So, to cut to the chase about Ely and the Assembly, They told me they'd found it hard to see me because I'd built a block, a kind of mental shield around myself and my family for protection. They helped me learn about my gifts, train them, strengthen them and expand them. Just as importantly, they helped me clear the demon blood from my system. It took years and years of work, and several dozen tattoos – we used UV ink – but eventually we had it all corralled in the last two fingers in my left hand. Sam waved his mangled hand at them and faked an astonished look at it. He gave a sarcastic fake gasp.

"Oh my god, would you look at that? Those fingers are gone! I must have lost the last traces of demon blood in the explosion!" Dean was the first one to bust out laughing, but before long they were all laughing fit to burst. It lifted the tension from the room quite nicely.

"Sammy Winchester, now available in demon blood free." Dean chuckled, setting Sam back off again. It was good to see a little of Dean's usual personality coming through.

Once they'd all settled down, Sam picked up the story again. He explained about how he joined the Marine Corps mainly at first because he wanted to prove John wrong – that a gay man in general and Sam in particular could make it – but then after that because he'd found a good place for himself. He gave a general overview of Black Fox Battalion without breaking too many rules, and then he began to explain about his last mission.
"There are a lot of details that I just can't share," he apologised "but I'll tell you what I can, and a little bit of what I shouldn't. We were in Yemen, our mission was going perfectly, then I had a nudge from my precog gift and I knew it was all about to get FUBAR. There was an explosion, one of my guys was killed and I was fractions of a second from getting blown up myself and then suddenly I wasn't." There were a lot of very confused expressions. Sam continued. "I woke up in Cold Oak. Weapon less and without supplies, and in the company of four other people who had also been zapped there without them knowing how or why. They'd all been dosed with demon blood too, and they all had gifts. Super-strength, future visions, that sort of thing. One of them died pretty soon, so I organised us all into working together. It didn't matter. We got a visit from a certain demon in our dreams during the night. One with a sarcastic nature and yellow eyes."

Once again, the tension in the room could be cut with a knife.

"What did the bastard do?" John ground out.

"Right then? He talked. A lot. He was enjoying himself, showing off. You know how the bad guys enjoy a good monologue." The others all nodded in understanding. "He had a plan. To pit us against each other until only one was left. He wanted a commander for his demon army he was planning to raise. I tried to keep us all as one cohesive unit, but fear and paranoia took their toll, and in the early hours of the morning it turned into a total shit show. One of them hit another in the head with an iron bar, we all thought she'd killed him. Then the other guy killed her and attacked me. I tried to talk him down but failed. He tried to kill me, I killed him." Sam reported all of this in the driest of tones, keeping himself emotionally distanced from the events.

"Then, the demon showed up again. This time in the flesh. He did a bit more monologing and told me he was going to use me to raise and command his demon army. He…" Sam broke off with a sudden realisation. At the time, he'd wished that his dad and Dean could be there at the final victory over the demon. He'd even had Stef film the burning of Bobo's body. Just so he could send the clip to Bobby, so the Winchesters could see it. It had suddenly occurred to Sam that with his retrocog projection they could do just that – see the events as they had occurred.

"Bobby – could you grab five large church candles from your storeroom for me?" He asked. Bobby nodded and went to get them without wasting time asking why. Dean wasn't so patient.

"What do you need them for, Sammy? Got a sudden urge to pray?" He teased. Sam snorted in amusement. *If only he knew. He thought to himself. Actually, very soon he will.*

"One of my gifts is called retrocognition. I can look backwards in time and see visions of events. Retrocog can be combined with projection, so once I get these candles lit," He paused and lit each candle that Bobby had brought over. "I can project an image into the flames. I can *show* you exactly what happened. You'll be able to see, hear, and smell the whole event."

Bobby looked fascinated, Dean looked a little wary but mostly impressed and John looked… *Holy shit! He looks proud!* Sam realised. He'd never seen his dad look proud of him before. It was weird but a good feeling. Sam leaned forward in his chair and stared into the flames. His focus came easily, and the candles flared brightly, flattening and conjoining into a single flat sheet. Sam found his blankness and filtered back to find the right moment. It only took seconds for the image to form. The others all crowded around the candles and watched as the demon appeared. John and Dean tensed and swore under their breaths but kept watching. They witnessed Sam sarcastically baiting the demon, calling him Bobo, which cracked Dean up and had Bobby grinning. John stared avidly as the demon handed Sam the revolver and explained its importance.

"The Colt!" he breathed reverently. Bobby had told him that the email which had claimed the demon was dead, but John had refused to believe it was possible. But there was the Colt. The gun that was
rumoured to be able to kill anything. Suddenly hope began to bloom in him. Was he about to see his wife's killer die? He couldn't tear his eyes away from the image Sam was showing them. The look of shock and fear as his power wouldn't work on Sam was food for John's soul, and the sight of the smoking hole in the demon and the blue lightning crackling around and through him was one of the most wonderful things he'd ever seen. It was over. His wife's death was finally avenged. His eyes filled with tears and he ignored them as they ran down his face. As the image faded away, John looked over to Dean and saw tears flowing down his face too.

It was finally done.

By mutual decision, they took a break. John stood and gripped Sam's good shoulder in a single tight squeeze.

"Thank you." He said simply and quietly. Then he placed his hand on Dean's head, a silent loving touch, and walked outside to sit alone on the steps.

Bobby sat staring into the middle distance for a few minutes and then stood and grabbed his truck keys.

"I'm going to go on a grocery run." He told the brothers. From what I know about using gifts, Sam's going to need to eat like a bear prepping for hibernation after his little home movie show. I'm guessing he's also going to need to do some healing work after your display of genius earlier too." Bobby gave Dean a hard look. "So, keep things quiet while I'm out, you hear?" Dean looked ashamed of himself and Sam didn't want a return of the uncertainty from earlier; it made him edgy when Dean wasn't Dean.

"We'll be fine, Bobby. You mind if I use your phone though? I need to get hold of a couple of people in The Assembly, and using telepathy burns too much energy over distance." Bobby blinked at Sam's casual admittance of another gift, but otherwise mad no fuss.

"That's fine, Sam. You can invite them to stay for a few days if they need to. I can clear out another couple of rooms for them."

"Thanks, Bobby, I'll let them know they're welcome." Sam replied with a tired but grateful smile.

"Dean, you should fix your brother something to eat from what's left in the kitchen. He's looking a little drained." Bobby walked out the side door to his truck, leaving Sam and Dean sitting facing each other across the table. He wasn't wrong – Sam was feeling a little drained. Nothing too bad, but some food would definitely help.

"What do you want to eat then, Sammy?" Dean asked, clearly feeling a little awkward. Sam considered what Bobby would likely have in his kitchen on a day when a grocery run was needed. Nothing else about Bobby seemed to have changed, so Sam figured his kitchen contents were probably just like they used to be.

"You think he's got the stuff for hotdogaroni?" Sam asked with a little grin. Dean rolled his eyes.

"Seriously dude? Hasn't your diet matured at all as you've aged?" Dean groaned. Sam decided to see if the puppy dog eyes and whiny voice still worked on Dean like they used to.

"Pleeease, Dee?" He asked, his eyes wide and unblinking. It had a result. Just not the one Sam had expected. Dean's eye filled with tears and then without warning, he just crumpled. Great heaving sobs escaped him, and he collapsed forward over his knees in his chair. Alarmed, Sam struggled to
his feet and hobble-hopped over to his brother, sliding down to sit on the arm of the seat, but unsure if touching was ok or not.

It didn't appear that Dean was angry with Sam over the confession in his letter, or that he was disgusted with him, or anything else like that actually. But Sam would be crazy not to expect some kind of kick back from what he'd revealed. Maybe it was just delayed due to the shock of the day's events.

In the meantime, Sam had no idea what the right thing was to do. He tentatively put his hand on Dean's shoulder, half expecting him to pull away in disgust. He didn't. Dean threw himself into Sam's arms, burying his head into the material of Sam's service uniform and clinging onto his back with clenched fists. His strangled sobs were muffled a little against Sam's chest, but still they were heart breaking to hear. Sam's own eyes filled, and his shoulders started to shake with his own supressed sobs. He couldn't hold them back. For the first time in years, his emotions got away from him and soon both brothers were tangled together in a broken, snotty ball of tears.

They stayed wrapped in their tight embrace long after the flood of tears stopped. Until the silence once again became awkward. Finally, Sam pulled away, scrubbing at his face. Dean cleared his throat.

"Sorry man, I think your uniform's a total write off now. If I didn't owe your dry cleaning before, I certainly do now." Sam snorted.

"Doesn't matter." He fixed Dean with a serious expression. "What was all that about, Dean?" His brother squirmed uncomfortably in his seat.

"I... Just... Well..." He was at a complete loss of words. Sam wasn't about to let him off the hook though. Dean, or at least the Dean Sam remembered, was the king of avoidance when it came to emotional conversations. If he could, he'd shut this down and Sam would never get to the bottom of it.

"you just well what, Dean? Clearly something major just hit you. Is it me? Are you not comfortable around me now? Cos if you're uncomfortable being alone with me, I can make sure to avoid it when possible." Sam knew that wasn't what had kicked off Dean's breakdown – if it had been he wouldn't have allowed Sam so close to him. It could well come up once the relief of Sam being alive wore off, in fact Sam was certain that's exactly what would happen before too much longer. Sometimes though the best way to make someone talk about something they didn't want to discuss was to put words in their mouth and then sit back and let them correct you.

"NO!" Dean burst out. "No, that's not it, man. It was just... When I first saw you, I only saw the unscarred side of your face, and I was so angry that I could clearly see the kid I knew in the face in front of me – a face that I thought was stolen – that I just went off on you." He grimaced apologetically. "Then once you let me up from that submission hold – and that's the first time you ever got me in a hold you know – I got a look at both sides of your face, and suddenly the Sammy I'd recognised kind of blurred and I couldn't see him in you anymore. Maybe a part of it was because of the way you fought. It's so different from when you were a kid, but it was also to do with your facial expressions." Dean grimaced. "I'm not explaining this right. It's not that the burns themselves upset me, apart from the fact that you got hurt, it's more that they were keeping me from seeing the Sammy I knew. But then when you did that stupid fucking puppy eyes thing, just, all of a sudden, I could see him, see you and it was like, finally I could believe it. I could believe you were alive." Dean blinked back more tears.

"You've got no idea how bad it was, Sammy. Thinking you were dead. I just felt like half of myself was suddenly missing. I was kind of hollowed out and I couldn't breathe right or make anything
matter. It was so much worse than when you left, and that was the worst thing I'd ever felt before."

Sam's brow furrowed. Why on earth would Dean have felt bad when Sam left? Sam could still see the hate and disgust on Dean's face when he'd gone berserk on that tree. He should have been relieved when Sam left. He was about to ask what Dean was talking about, when Dean continued.

"I… I nearly did something drastic. I tried to several times, but Bobby or this weirdo called Cas always got in the way." Dean broke off, realising that what he'd just said could be misconstrued. "I don't mean I was going to top myself or anything. I was just going to find a crossroads demon and do a deal to get you back." Sam rolled his eyes at how reasonable Dean was trying to make his actions sound.

"Yeah, I know exactly what you were trying to do, Jerk. You forget that I've got mystical powers these days. That's why I discharged myself from the hospital so early. I needed to get here before you finally managed to pull off your plan." Sam resisted the urge to slap some sense into his brother. I'll do it later. He promised himself There are more important issues right now. Dean gave a sharp bark of laughter at Sam's description of his gifts.

"That's definitely going to take some getting used to. You got any other cool stuff you can do? Jump from one place to another? Move things with your mind? Start fires? Oh! That would be so cool! I'd love to be able to do that! No more fucking around with matches in the wind and rain on a salt and burn. Just, POOF, and the bones are burning." Sam laughed at Dean's exuberance and waved him down.

"Yeah I can do some other stuff." He admitted. "Not fires." He said quickly, heading off Dean's next bout of excitement. "But I do have several gifts. We can get into all that later though, when dad and Bobby are ready to start talking again. I don't want to have to repeat it all and there are far more important things that we all need to discuss together anyway." He moved slowly and carefully with a lot of wincing back to his armchair and lowered himself down with a groan. "While we've got a bit of time without the others, there's something else you and I need to talk about." Dean shifted awkwardly and nervously.

"I don't think there's anything we need to go over just between the two of us." He said edgily.

"Well sorry, but I think we do." Sam replied firmly. "The day I left. I was running out in front of you like I always did, remember?" Dean gave a reluctant nod. "But when I waited for you to catch up you didn't come. So, I came looking for you." Dean's wild-eyed expression told Sam that he remembered the occasion all too well, but he clamped his lips together, refusing to respond. Sam pressed on. "When I found you, you were going crazy and taking it out on a tree. You must've broken a few bones in your hands, you were punching so hard." Sam paused, looking Dean directly in the eye. "And with every punch, you were shouting out some homophobic slur. Every punch came along with one of dad's old favourites and the look on your face, Dean." Sam rushed on. "I've never seen anyone filled with so much hate and disgust, and definitely never you. But that morning, you were filled with it and all it came rushing out of you. And that's when I knew." Dean froze like a rabbit in the headlights. "That's when I knew that you'd worked out I was gay. And that you hated me for it." Sam finished quietly, looking down at his hands. He couldn't look up from his hands. "But either way, it didn't matter. Whichever direction I looked I could only see misery and disaster; if you knew how I felt about you then your hate and disgust was only natural, and I couldn't stay and force you to be around me. If you only knew about me being gay and that was the source of the hate and disgust, then I couldn't stay and have the most important person in my world make me feel that way about
myself. If you told dad I was gay I believed he'd either beat the shit out of me and kick me out or kill me outright. So, I couldn't see any other way. I had to leave. I really didn't think you or dad would bother looking for me. I figured you'd be relieved I was gone." He was interrupted by Dean's hand grabbing both of his where they rested in his lap and when he looked up Dean was kneeling at his feet, crying again and shaking his head repeatedly.

"Sammy." He croaked "Sammy you've got it all so wrong. I'm so sorry that that's what you thought all these years. I'm so, so sorry. No one should ever have to feel like you must've felt. But here's the thing, Sammy. What you saw? It wasn't me hating or being disgusted with you." Dean paused and took a deep breath. "I was feeling that way about myself."

Sam looked up at his brother in confusion and shock. What the... What? Did he just say...? He could feel his face scrunching up as he tried to understand.

"You're saying that you're gay?" He asked incredulously. "But, but there's no way you were faking with all those girls. I know how hard it is to pretend to be interested in girls when they do nothing for you at all; I spent my entire military career fake flirting and hiding my real attraction. And that's not what you were doing with all those girls back then. You were definitely into them."

"You know there's not just gay and straight, right? The Kinsey scale is called a scale for a reason. I'm bi, dude. I play for both teams." Dean sat back on his heels, scrubbing the fresh tears away. "I was working out that I wasn't exactly straight, and hating myself for it while you, baby brother, had already worked out your own sexuality, and accepted it and yourself." He laughed. "Always the precocious over achiever, Sammy. I'd heard the same shit from dad growing up that you did, and instead of realising it was wrong, I figured that I was wrong, and I couldn't seem to fix it. No matter how many girls I picked up, every so often there would be some guy that would turn my head and it freaked me out so bad." He shook his head at his younger self and sighed, his expression growing determined and he squared his jaw and continued. "And then I started to realise that I had other feelings too. That I could never ever give in to. I kept giving in to my attraction to guys and I was terrified by the thought that that meant I'd give in to the other feelings too. The fear made me angry and bitter, but I just tried to use that to help me not give in to those feelings." He swallowed. "Feelings for you."

It was Sam's turn to freeze like the proverbial rabbit. Everything he thought had been wrong. His dad hadn't been as homophobic as he'd thought, Dean wasn't as straight as he'd thought, hadn't hated him like he'd thought, he wasn't alone in having feelings for his brother like he'd thought. Could it have all been different if I'd stayed? He wondered. If I'd come out to Dean? If I'd confessed how I felt about him? His brain was whirring. Then he remembered the future track he'd been on before he left and realised that everything might very well have gone a lot worse if he'd stayed. There was no point second guessing his actions at this point. He couldn't go back and change things. All he could do was move forward and try to make it different in the future. He was good at that.

Snapping himself out of his frozen stupor, Sam reached forward and gently held Dean's face between his palms.

"You read my letter. I know you did, so you know that my feelings for you have never changed, not even a little. So, I ned to know, Dean. What about you? Have yours changed over the years?" Dean carefully pulled his face from Sam's hands and looked down.

"It doesn't matter, Sammy. I was wrong to try and fight against being bi, but I wasn't wrong to fight against my feelings for you. Back then you were just a kid, so it would've been wrong whoever you were, but now, even though you're not a kid any more, you're still my brother. It's still wrong. However, I feel, it's irrelevant. It shouldn't and can't happen." Dean stood and walked towards the
kitchen. Talking with his back firmly to his brother. "You shouldn't be wasting your feelings on me anyway, Sammy. I've got nothing worthwhile to offer you, and I'm never going to stop hunting. We both know you always hated the hunt and at least a tiny part of you leaving had to be about getting away from that as well as getting away from dad and me. So even if we took away the fact that we're brothers, I'd still be no good for you. You've got a brilliant military record behind you and brains and skills up to here." Dean lifted his hand above his head. "You could choose pretty much any career and be successful in it. Me? I'm going to be a broke homeless hunter forever until some monster finally takes me down. No good for you at all." With that, Dean walked into the kitchen, conversation clearly over as far as he was concerned.

Sam sat in shock for a few minutes, vaguely registering the sounds of Dean cooking in the kitchen. He narrowed his eyes. Damn you, Dean! He growled to himself. So, what you meant was, yes, you still feel the same way about me that you used to, but rather than act on it, you're going to wallow in this self-sacrificing bullshit. He disregarded the part about a relationship between them being wrong; neither of them had ever had much use for laws or rules that didn't relate to someone hurting someone else. No one would be hurt by Sam and Dean being together. Dean had clearly gotten over his internalised homophobia, so there would be no issues regarding the gay aspect, and Dean had never believed in God like Sam had, so it wasn't a Christian morals thing. Hell, it's not like one of them could get knocked up either, so it wasn't even a genetic thing. No, Dean was throwing himself on his own sword in a mistaken attempt to save Sam from the terrible fate of ending up on the road hunting with a man Dean considered not worthy of Sam.

Sam squared his shoulders. If Dean could've seen his expression right then he'd have been very nervous indeed. A stubborn Sam was a force to be reckoned with, and right then Sam was feeling very, very stubborn.
Chapter 5

Sam knew better than to follow Dean and keep pressing his point; Winchester stubbornness came in different flavours. Sam's variety was a total blanket determination. He could argue until the end of time if need be, would stick to a plan with blinkered bloody-mindedness (as proved by his joining the Marine Corps and then going into Black Fox Battalion and staying there for years) and would hold on to anything that he truly wanted, no matter what the cost. John's variety was mainly demonstrated in his refusal to believe that he didn't know best. About everything. He'd form an opinion and then cling to it like a dog with a bone, no matter what evidence was presented to prove him wrong, and he'd only ever follow a plan if it was his plan, because to his mind, no one else could possibly come up with one better than he could.

Dean however had a more quiet but gritty stubbornness. He would decide a route, set his feet on the path and walk it no matter how hard the path became. In fact, the more resistance he met, the harder he would push forward. But what Dean didn't realise was that Sam had literally taken lessons in battle strategy. He'd learned tactics, tricks and new ways to achieve his goals since he was fifteen, whereas Dean only had his same old methods to use.

Sam's best strategy in this case was to provide no resistance for Dean to push against. Drop the subject entirely and go on as if he didn't care about the issue at all. Dean wouldn't know how to respond. He'd be thrown off balance, would scramble around trying to find his footing and would probably be torn between hurt that his rejection had meant so little to Sam in the end, and relief that the issue was settled, and he'd won his point. Dean would then set himself on a new path – making himself forget about his feelings the way he would believe Sam had. That would be Sam's best moment to strike. A well-crafted ambush could win a war in one move. It was a lesson Sam had had drilled into him in the special forces training, and he kind of enjoyed the naughty, dirty irony of using the homophobic military's strategies to further his incestual gay agenda.

He was overcome by a bout of hysterical laughter at the turn of phrase – one day when Dean had gotten over himself and had taken what he wanted for once (Sam) instead of giving everyone else (also Sam) what he thought they wanted, he knew that Dean would piss himself laughing at Sam's thought. Dean came running back into the room, hand going to the gun at his back and eyes searching for danger. No time like the present. Sam thought. Might as well put my strategy in action now. I couldn't really ask for a better starting point.

"I'm not sure if I should be insulted that you think my laugh indicates danger or feel bad that it's such an unfamiliar noise that you grab your gun when you hear it." Sam said dryly to his brother when he turned to face him. Dean moved his hand away from his gun sheepishly and stared confusedly at his brother.

"What the fuck?" he stammered. Sam looked at him blankly.

"What the fuck what?"

"You.. we just… and now you're not… you're just…” Dean blathered, making no sense whatsoever. Sam carefully kept his amusement and satisfaction hidden. As he'd thought would be the case, Dean was off balance and maybe a little hurt. Sam was sorry to cause any hurt to his brother, but Dean had been hurting them both with his refusal and Sam was going to put a stop to it.

"Well that makes everything much clearer, dude." Sam chuckled. How's the hotdogaroni coming?

"The hot.. Its… I'm just…” Dean stopped and took a deep breath, determined to prevent himself
from looking any stupider. "It'll be about fifteen minutes." He said emotionlessly. "You need a hand getting upstairs to freshen up?"

"Maybe later on, thanks. I'm going to use Bobby's phone and call The Assembly, see if any of them can come here. Amanda would be particularly helpful; she's a very talented healer. Helped me get rid of the demon blood among other things." Sam snapped his fingers as a sudden thought hit him. "I'll get her to bring her tattoo gun and the UV ink too. I lost a boatload of my tats with my burns, and I want those protections back ASAP. The healing symbols too. That's probably why I'm struggling to heal myself this time." He looked over at Dean who was carefully concealing his confusion and hurt behind a blank expression. "You, dad and Bobby should probably get some ink too. I know dad's not big on tattoos, but they'll be invisible unless he's in black light, so maybe..." Sam reached for the phone on the desk.

"That phone's busted." Dean said tonelessly. "You'll have to use the one in the kitchen. You need help getting up?"

"Nah, I think I can do it. Thanks though." Sam heaved himself up and tucked his crutches under his arms, following Dean back to the kitchen and the phone. Dean shoved one of the kitchen chairs closer to the old-fashioned landline so that Sam could sit and call. And Sam smiled his thanks.

He deliberately called Justin rather than Amanda, knowing that Dean wouldn't be aware that they all had separate homes. Sneaky though it was, he couldn't resist having Dean listening in to one side of a conversation between himself and Justin. He knew exactly how it would sound to Dean and planned to use it to good effect. Then he's lay off and just carry on normally for a good long while until the next opportunity arose to needle Dean without being caught in the act. Don't want to overdo it and make him suspicious.

"Justin? Hey, it's Sam." He told Justin when he answered.

"Hey, Baby Gay. How's it hanging?" Justin replied, a smile in his voice.

"Oh, you know, long and thick." Sam replied in a jokey but flirtatious tone. Dean's shoulders stiffened a little, but he didn't turn. "I'm out of the hospital and came to South Dakota. Met up with my dad and brother at Bobby Singer's place."

"On purpose?" Justin's voice was suddenly wary with an edge of anger. He'd been livid when Sam had shared some details of why he'd left his family, and Justin didn't forgive easily.

"Yeah. I figured it was time. You'd be really proud of me; I came out to them officially. It went surprisingly well." Sam admitted. So far, the call wasn't living up to the potential he knew it had, but Dean was relaxing, unsuspicious but definitely eavesdropping.

"No shit? Well Baby Gay, then maybe there's hope for this world after all."

"I don't know why you still call me that. You may be older than me, but we both know I'm bigger." Sam teased, and Justin laughed.

"It's not how big it is, it's how you use it that counts, Sweets."

"Yeah I know. But when its big and you know how to use it, that's where it's at." Sam replied. They both chuckled and Dean tensed up again.

"How are you healing? Stef says he saw your injuries and how you got them. From what he told us the scarring is pretty bad." His voice held admiration and concern.
"They're doing a little better, but I'm struggling to focus my healing – it's draining me more than I thought it would and it's going much slower. I figure it's because I burnt off my healing symbol on my left hip, so the help it gave in directing my focus has stopped." Justin grunted "Yeah that sounds about right. You coming to see us?" he asked hopefully.

"I was kind of hoping that you'd come." Sam loaded the statement with suggestion. Again, Dean's shoulders tensed, and Sam carefully adjusted his tone, making it look to Dean as if he'd imagined it. "Here I mean. Bobby's given an official invite for The Assembly. If Amanda can get someone to mind the store for a couple of days, maybe she could come and help me with my healing? Maybe slap a new symbol or two on me to replace the ones I burned off?"

"I guess some of us could come over there. Wild horses couldn't keep Amanda from you. I'm definitely coming; I want to see if your family have actually changed their ways or are pulling the wool over your eyes." Justin growled.

"Hey now, gorgeous. No need to get riled." Sam chuckled "It's all good." Justin paused before he replied.

"One of them is eavesdropping on you, aren't they?" Justin asked.

"Yeah. I'm just hanging with my brother in the kitchen. He's cooking me up something." Sam replied casually.

"You feel like flirting a bit to see if it'll piss him off, don't you?" Justin guessed, laughing. "That's why you called me instead of Amanda."

"Of course, Sweets. You gonna give me what I want?" Justin snorted.

"Jeeze, Sam. Ease up. He'll know you're trying to piss him off if you lay it on too thick. And here I thought you had brains as well as beauty. Apparently now you've got neither – until you grow some new skin. Sam laughed, not at all offended. Justin could be a bitch sometimes, but he never said anything he knew would really hurt. Sam could take a bit of dark humour and Justin knew it.

"You know I'm still the prettiest thing you've ever seen, even with half my face melted." Sam teased him back.

"Yeah yeah. Well you can be as pretty as you want, but my ass will always be finer than yours."

"Oh please! We all know my ass is better. Hell, my everything is better. I'm God's gift to gay men." Sam retorted by rote, it was an argument they'd pretended to have many times over the years. By now Dean was gripping a wooden spoon so hard that he might break it. Sam thought he get in just one or two more hits and then let it rest. Justin was right; Dean wasn't stupid and if Sam pushed too far his brother would pick up on the plan. "So, when can you come?"

"For you? I can come anytime." Justin drawled, sending Sam into a fresh gale of laughter. "I'll round up the others. It's not much of a drive, So expect us by the end of tomorrow. Should we limit numbers to allow for lack of space?"

"Bobby said he'd be happy to make some room, and people can always double up." Sam went for one last dig. "You can bunk in with me, no problem." Justin laughed once again.

"Oh, the things I'll do to you, Baby Gay." He replied. "How do we find you?"

"It's Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Ping me when you enter the town and I'll send out sounding pings, so you can locate. Unless you have Lynne with you, then you'll just arrive without even stopping for
directions." Sam told him. "It'll be really good to see you, man." He added seriously "And don't worry; it really is all good here. I meant it when I said that." Justin sighed a little.

"I hope you're right, Baby Gay. Don't worry – I'll be polite and friendly, but I'll also be wary and watchful." That made Sam smile fondly, unaware that that expression grated on Dean more than all the flirting had.

"Alright Justin. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Not if I see you first." Justin threw in his tired old psychic joke in, making Sam roll his eyes and snort as they both hung up.

"So, they're coming then?" Dean asked casually.

"Yeah. They'll be here by tomorrow afternoon. I hope Bobby's picking up a good load of supplies." Sam mused "I'll throw a quick thought to Stef after I've eaten and make sure they bring a good load of food too. Amanda and I are going to need to eat like a pair of horses once we're done."

Dean put two plates of food on the table and they both tucked in, Sam shovelling his in like he'd not eaten in a month. Dean watched in fascination.

"What?" Sam asked, catching Dean watching him.

"I was just remembering how you'd bitch at me when I ate like that." Dean mumbled, looking back at his food.

"Yeah, I'm not usually such a pig, honest. But I burn through a lot of energy projecting, so now I'm starving." He shovelled in another few mouthfuls. This is great, Dean. Thanks. I've missed hotdogaroni." He grinned at his brother as he finished the last bites, and pulled himself to his feet, moving to pick up his plate and put it in the sink.

"I've got it." Dean told him, waving him toward the living room. "You go and sit down in Bobby's recliner and rest until dad and Bobby come back in to talk some more." It sounded like a good idea, so Sam crutched his way into the other room and settled down for a quick power nap. A turn of phrase that always made him chuckle a little.

He'd only been in the recliner with his eyes shut for a few minutes when he sensed Dean walk into the doorway and stand watching him. He deliberately didn't react. He'd more than half expected it anyway, and something about it made him feel… safe. He'd not slept knowing that Dean was right there in a very long time. It feels right. Warm. Reassuring. He was asleep even before he finished the thought.

Sam woke to the sound of Boots shuffling across the floor. He didn't blink or tense a muscle, just like when he'd woken in Cold Oak. Old habits die hard. He thought to himself.

"He always did sleep hard, even as a baby." Sam heard his dad's quiet murmur.

"He's got to recharge his energy. From what I've read, psychic gifts eat a lot of calories and burn through the energy reserves." Bobby replied, also keeping his voice low.

"Maybe he slept so hard back then because he was always holding up that mental block thing he mentioned." Dean suggested. The two older men went silent for a moment.

"You know, I bet that's right." Bobby agreed. I must've been an effort, even doing it subconsciously. Sam thought it was probably correct too. He'd never really thought about it before then.
"I think he's right." Sam spoke without opening his eyes, smiling as he heard them all gasp in surprise. He sat up and looked around, his smile turning into a smirk. "Sorry. I couldn't resist." Bobby rolled his eyes.

"You feeling a little better?" He asked.

"Yeah. I've got enough juice to do a bit of healing before dinner, then we can eat, and I'll crash for the night if that's ok?"

"Sure, Sam. That sounds good." Bobby nodded. "You ready to get started again?"

"Yeah, no problem." Sam shifted into a more comfortable position and ran his mind back to where they'd left off. "So, I killed Bobo, but then I had a new problem; I was technically AWOL and needed a way to get back to Yemen and a convincing reason to have been MIA." John tensed.

"Sam are you saying what I think you're saying?" He asked through clenched teeth. Sam shrugged and kept his expression deliberately blank.

"Probably." He replied.

"You mind actually saying what it is he thinks you're saying?" Dean spat out angrily. "You're setting my teeth on edge here." Sam grimaced and inclined his head.

"I had to create injuries that spoke to the explosion my guys witnessed, and that would justify me taking a couple of days to drag myself to the emergency radio to call for an extraction." He explained simply.

"And what did you do to yourself?" Dean asked, also through clenched teeth. Sam sighed.

"Before I tell you, you need to know that I was able to block out a lot of the pain while it happened, and I always knew that I could go a long way to healing the damage I did." Sam temporised.

"Just spit it out, Sammy." Dean ground out.

"I had burns ranging from first degree to full thickness all along my left side. My face, shoulder, arm, hip and thigh. I was missing" He paused and smirked for a second "my last finger and half my ring finger on my left hand, and my right him was fractured so bad they were planning to do a full replacement." Sam smirked again. "But apparently there was some kind of mix up with the x-rays they took on board the ship before I was evacced, because when they took new pictures in the hospital, the damage wasn't severe enough to warrant a replacement." He had a smug edge to that last part and it wasn't until he looked up at the others that he realised they weren't feeling as blasé about the whole thing as he was. Three horrified expressions met his eyes as John, Bobby and Dean tried to digest what Sam had just reeled off as casually as a shopping list.

"You did all that to yourself?" Dean yelped.

"Um. Some of it." Sam hedged. "I had to get a… friend to do the rest." He blew out a breath. I was trying to keep this all in chronological order, but it looks like I'm going to have to jump ahead a bit. He looked at Bobby. "Do you mind if I have someone drop in real quick?" he asked the older man. Bobby looked a little nonplussed by the question but nodded anyway.

"Sure, Sam. You need to use the phone?"

"No. I can call him without one." Sam looked at the others. "I'm going to need you to stay calm. I promise you that there's absolutely nothing evil coming, quite the opposite actually. But he's going to
be a bit of a shock when he gets here." No one looked the slightest bit enlightened, but he'd warned
them the best he could without getting into a long drawn out argument. He closed his eyes and
called. "Oh Castiel, Angel of Thursday. I pray that you hear me. I pray that you grant us with your
presence here with my fami..." He didn't need to go any further. The rush of feathers and wind told
him that the angel had arrived. He opened his eyes. The room had gained another presence and a lot
more tension. Dean was staring in astonishment, Bobby was slowly reaching behind him for his
shotgun and John had his handgun trained on the angel.

"Hello Sam." Castiel said simply, either oblivious to or uncaring of the gun trained on him and the
tension in the room. He turned to Dean. "Hello Dean Winchester. It is nice to see you sober and not
covered in vomit."

"Cas?" Dean questioned "How did you just appear like that? What's going on"

"You know this... person, Dean?" John asked tensely. Castiel turned at the sound of John's voice.

"John Winchester. I am pleased to meet you." He looked over at Bobby. "And you, Robert Singer.
Sam, your father is training a weapon on me. Do I ignore it? It seems like a hostile gesture, but as
you know, I am not very adept with human social interactions." Sam smiled.

"I'll just ask him to put the gun down, Castiel. Thank you for coming." The angel shrugged.

"You prayed. I told you I would come if you prayed." Sam nodded, touched by the angel's simple
but honest words.

"Dad. Please lower the gun." Sam asked his father quietly. "I'd like to introduce you all to Castiel,
angel of Thursday."

"Angel?" Asked three voices at once.

"Yes. I am an angel of the lord." Castiel confirmed. John, Bobby and Dean continued staring.

"Dad? Your gun?" Sam reminded him as he still had it trained on Castiel. John reluctantly lowered
his weapon but didn't put it away.

"Sam, nothing we've ever seen has ever indicated that angels are real. What makes you think this...guy is the real deal?" John asked his youngest, uncaring that Castiel could hear. Castiel didn't even
blink – he didn't care that he could hear either.

"It's yet another long story, dad. But the short version is, my visions, the fact that he came when I
prayed."

"Repeatedly and annoyingly," Castiel interjected. Sam grinned.

"The fact that he was trapped when surrounded by burning Holy Oil, and the fact that I can feel
demons, but I get no demon stink off him, yet he can do things only a highest-level demon could do,
or an angel." John relaxed a little.

"Dean. Is this the 'Cas' you've been moaning about for a couple of weeks? The one that was
interfering with your... plans?" Bobby asked. Dean just nodded, still in shock that he'd been
spending time with – and mocking the dress sense of – an angel.

"Sam asked me to keep Dean Winchester away from all crossroads. I agreed. He also asked me to
look after this weapon." Castiel reached inside his trench coat and pulled out the revolver, John and
Bobby instantly raised their weapons again. Castiel either didn't notice or didn't care. "May I return
this to you now, Sam?" Sam reached out and took the gun back with his thanks, and the older men once again lowered their firearms.

"Is that the colt?" John breathed reverently.

"Yeah I guess so. It's the revolver the demon Bobo gave me anyway. I couldn't keep it on me when I went back to Yemen, and I couldn't risk it falling into the wrong hands, what with it being the key to a gate into hell and all, so Castiel agreed to look after it for me." Sam looked up at Castiel who was standing stock still in the middle of the room. "Castiel, would you like to sit down? I'm getting a crick in my neck looking up at you."

"If you wish, Sam." Castiel sat on the wooden chair next to the desk. "Have you finished informing your family about thwarting the apocalypse?" He asked. Sam closed his eyes and bit back a sigh. It was his own fault – he should've picked the story up at another point and avoided this bit until the end. For what felt like the hundredth time, the room echoed with shocked silence.

"No, Castiel. I hadn't gotten to that part yet." He replied wearily. "Looks like I'm going to have to give them the full rundown now though. You might as well get comfortable; this is going to take a long time."

Sam began talking. First, he had to explain about his precognition and how he visualised the future in order to read his visions correctly. He told them all about the darkness the demon had cast over his original track and how he had scouted out possible alternative tracks to follow in order to avoid trouble, how it had helped him on missions, how it had helped him keep his family safe long-distance.

"You're SeerWitch?" Bobby broke in incredulously. Sam gave him a cheeky grin.

"Sam Winchester, S.W. SeerWitch. I'm amazed you didn't work it out sooner." He chuckled. "Now we can go over all this later, for now I need to finish this up. I'm hurting and need to heal, eat and sleep." His family agreed, and Sam plunged on.

The story was getting darker and harder to tell. He explained about the demon darkness leaving the tracks once Bobo was dead and what he'd seen when he went back to look at the original tracks fate had laid out. College, hunting, Dean nearly dying, John selling his soul for Dean's survival, Sam dying in Cold Oak and Dean selling his soul to bring him back, Dean's last year, Sam drinking demon blood, Dean getting ripped apart by hellhounds, his ordeal in hell, breaking the first seal, Castiel raising him, Lilith, the broken seals, Lucifer and Michael, Sam diving into hell. He left absolutely nothing out. Several times during the telling one or all of them cried. Several times during the telling, Sam's voice dried up and he had to stop and drink a glass of water before he could continue, But finally, after hours of talking, Sam had told them every last part of it.

When he was finished, he dragged himself to his feet and crutched his way to the door.

"I need to be by myself for a while. Centre myself and find my calm. I won't go far; I can't with these." He gestured towards his crutches. I'm sure you all have a lot to get your brains around too. But while you're thinking about it all, you need to hold this thought right at the front of your minds – I stopped it before, albeit temporarily. Twice. Blindly and pretty much by myself. I can stop it again. Especially if I have help I can trust and rely on. I trust all of you." He turned and left the room.

Sam sat outside on the top step of Bobby's porch for nearly two hours in the dark, staring out into the junkyard, his eyes automatically tracking the shapes and shadows of the junkers without him taking
any of it in. He'd *seen* all of the apocalyptic future before, had even explained it in basic form out loud before to Castiel, but it hadn't hit him as hard as it did this evening. Maybe it was because he'd already had such a long day full of emotional turmoil, maybe it hit home harder with his family right there, or maybe it was just the simple fact that sharing every tiny detail out loud made it all more real, made it strike home harder. Whatever the reason, he felt so drained that he didn't have the first idea how to pull himself up off that step and go inside the house to face the others and their distress. The door behind him opened and Sam tensed, not yet ready to talk to his dad, Bibby or Dean.

Luckily for Sam, it was none of them.

"Is this sitting in silence a ritual or a social convention?" Castiel asked without a trace of distress. I have been attempting to discover which it is, but none of your family seems to understand my question." A spike of fond amusement flashed across Sam's mind. He cleared his throat and answered, his voice croaky from overuse.

"It's neither. Humans can become overwhelmed by an excess of emotions." He explained. "The difficulty of facing so many or such strong emotions causes us to kind of lose out ability to function for a while. Sometimes it only lasts seconds, sometimes hours, sometimes years, in the case of severe emotional trauma."

"So, you are all attempting to regain control?"

"Basically yes. I'm sure that each of us is trying to make sense of why as well."

"Why?" Castiel asked, confused.

"Why we had to be the ones chosen for this melodrama. What did any of us ever do to deserve being victimised by angels and demons, heaven and hell? Is it me? Is there something evil about me that called down this fate as punishment?" Castiel sat down beside Sam and awkwardly patted his shoulder. Sam looked at him questioning.

"I have witnessed humans doing this to express comfort. Did I do it wrong?" Sam smiled and shook his head.

"No. It was just unexpected."

"The answer, Sam is no. You have nothing evil about you. I have spent much of time since we first met thinking about what you said about being labelled The Abomination through no fault of your own. You were correct. The more I considered it, the more I was drawn to the conclusion that your fate and your brothers has been deliberately manipulated to force a certain end. I do not believe it is God's will. The Lord my God always maintained the highest importance on the free will of humankind. Yet nothing about the fate engineered for you or Dean Winchester allows for that. Your label, as you call it is universally accepted without being questioned by the angels because free will was never a part of our existence. We are told what to do, what to say, what to believe and we do as we are told. But It has been many centuries since God Himself spoke his will to us. Long before you came into the world. So, who spoke the Word that labelled you? It never occurred to me, to any of us to question it. Until I talked with you." Castiel looked very troubled.

"God hasn't spoken to the angels for centuries?" Sam asked, surprised.

"No." The angel confirmed. "Which means that another has been manipulating and directing the events that led to your fate, and by simple extrapolation it can be concluded that this other must be colluding with forces in hell, or the manipulation from the other side could not tie in so tightly." In a peculiarly human gesture, Castiel scrubbed at his face with his hands. "I cannot be a part of such a
thing. It goes against God's will." Sam breathed out gustily.

"It may sound strange to you, Castiel, but to be honest, what you just told me is a relief. I find it
easier to cope with on heaven/hell conspiracy than to think that I was the cause of all this horror and
grief." He took a deep breath. "For the most part I have no qualms about how I've lived my life. I've
never been perfect, obviously, but I've always tried to be essentially good. There's only ever been
one thing that I worried might be wrong about me, and I very recently decided that it was all ok
despite my earlier worries. Then after talking through all of that in there, the thought suddenly
occurred to me that what I wanted might be wrong after all – that the very fact that I wanted it at all
might point to there being something very wrong about me, and threat that something might have
been the reason why so much suffering lay in my fate." Now that he'd blurted it out, Sam suddenly
understood why he'd been so disturbed that evening. He looked at Castiel, waiting for his input on
the subject. He knew the angel would be completely honest.

"Are you attempting to obliquely refer to your sexual attraction and romantic love for your brother?"
Castiel asked bluntly. Sam choked a little and nodded.

"Yes."

"Sam Winchester. There are some parts of the manipulation of your fate and your brother's that you
have not clearly understood. In order for you to be the perfect true vessel for Lucifer and for Dean
Winchester to be the perfect true vessel for Michael, countless changes and twists were made to
events for several generations. You see Lucifer and Michael are brothers, so you and Dean
Winchester had to be brothers, but more importantly, Lucifer and Michael are soul mates. So, you
and your brother had to be too. That is why generations of your family have been manoeuvred and
manipulated to be together, in order to create the perfect vessels genetically and also circumstantially.
In every world in the universe, in every world in every universe, neither of you could ever find a
more perfect match for your soul. In fact, I believe that no other being could ever find as perfect a
match. Because no other beings have had their DNA or circumstances so carefully manipulated."
Castiel gripped Sam's shoulder painfully tightly. "No, Sam. There is nothing wrong with your
feelings for your brother, or his for you. They are an inevitability."

Sam felt several tons lighter than he had since he'd finished talking to his family. He'd been
completely honest with Castiel – the moment he'd known that Dean felt the same way, Sam had
abandoned any thought that their feelings were morally wrong. To have flipped his way of thinking
about him and Dean on its head – not once but twice in under twelve hours had left him reeling,
unable to come to any conclusions. He couldn't even begin to focus on the rest of the whole
apocalypse shit show because of his Dean issues. He now felt ready to go back in and start planning with
his family about how to do it all over again.

Sam patted Castiel's knee gratefully.

"Thank you, Castiel. Really. You've removed the weight of the world from my shoulders." Sam held
up a hand, interrupting the angel's interruption. "Metaphor." He said shortly. "You've also answered
a truckload of questions I'd never even thought to ask and given me a whole load of new ones. If you
don't mind, please would you not mention the whole soul mate and Dean's and my feelings for each
other part of the story? Human nature would make that extremely awkward and uncomfortable for
everyone." Castiel looked confused but was clearly so used to the feeling that he just shrugged it off.

"Very well, Sam. I can inform your family about the rest of it this evening for you, as it would seem
that your voice is too tired to do more speaking?"
"I'd be happy for you to do the explaining," Sam agreed, "but maybe leave it until tomorrow? I think we've all had enough today." The angel stood and held his hand out to help Sam to his feet.

"Perhaps that would be wise. I will leave and return tomorrow when you need me."

"You don't want to stay and eat with us?" Sam asked. Castiel blinked, surprised by the offer.

"That is very kind of you, Sam. I think I would like that." Sam hid his smile and the two of them walked back inside.

The rest of Sam's family was, surprisingly, all working together in the kitchen, getting a large spread ready to eat. They seemed a little wary of Castiel but didn't object to the angel staying to share their meal. Sam figured it would take a little while before they were completely comfortable around him, odd as he was. Dean chased Sam out to go and work on healing himself, acting completely normal around his brother if Sam missed the fact that he was going to great lengths to never actually touch him. Sam didn't miss it. He counted it as a sign that his strategy was working and fought back a smirk.

By the time he'd finished what healing he could manage, Sam's hip was a little less painful, his stomach a lot emptier and his eyes a lot droopier. Crutch limping back to the kitchen was easier than before, despite the dragging fatigue.

"Something smells good in here." He said brightly, announcing his entrance. Everyone apart from Castiel spun around at the sound of his voice. The angel just continued methodically stirring the pot he was in front of, his speed and direction regimentally regular, a look of intense concentration on his face.

"I think you'll find it all smells good." Bobby retorted. "Your friend over there has been doing a great job stirring the gravy, but I think it must be done by now. Can you have him help you set the table?"

The roll of his eyes gave away his unspoken thoughts that the angel was getting on his nerves with the obsessive stirring. Sam grinned and went to get Castiel away from the food.

"Castiel, would you mind helping me carry the plates, flat wear and glasses over to the table please? Then we can get it set ready for dinner." Castiel looked worriedly at the pot he was still stirring.

"I would be happy to, Sam but Robert Singer asked me to stir this pot and I do not wish to ruin the meal." Sam bit back his laugh. He carefully inspected the gravy, taking pains to maintain his serious expression.

"It looks like you've done a very good job to me. I'm looking forward to trying it. It'll be fine to leave it now." He gave a little chin jerk towards the table. "So, the table?"

Dinner was relaxed and kind of funny. Castiel's tendency towards literal interpretation at a table filled with men who talked in metaphors, in-jokes and pop culture references as often as not, resulted in a veritable epidemic of coughs smothered in napkins. It seemed that the information overload Sam had thrown at them in the afternoon had been taken on board and filed under 'We'll handle it'. None of Sam's family were letting it get in the way of what was in essence a victory celebration. Sam was alive, the demon that had ripped their family apart was dead and they were all together.

Sam shovelled food into his mouth as fast as he could chew, but despite the good food, laughter and companionship, the longer he sat at the table, the harder he found it to keep his eyes open. The sooner I get that new healing symbol, the better. Trying to fix myself without it is really kicking my ass. His ability to keep track of the conversation slowly slipped away and his eyes grew heavier and heavier, before he knew it, Sam was fast asleep with his head on the table.
Sam was vaguely aware of being lifted and carried in strong arms. For a moment he thought it was Dean holding him, then he remembered Dean's determination to avoid physical contact. He drowsily turned his head and a waft of his dad's scent hit him. It was weird, as Sam couldn't consciously recall a single time that John had held him as a child, yet twice today he'd experienced it, and, on both occasions, there had been a feeling of familiarity and comfort. He drifted back off without any further thoughts.

The smell of bacon filled Sam's nose the next morning, pulling him from his sleep. He looked around and found he was in the first-floor guest room that he and Dean had shared whenever they visited as kids. Only his duffle was on the floor by the door – no sign of Dean's – so Sam concluded that this room was his alone. Whoever had carried him to bed (Dad did) had removed his jacket and boots and placed them carefully on the chair beside his bed. His crutches were leaning against the wall next to the dresser.

He focussed internally and assessed his injuries – after his hard work the night before, he was still not quite as healed as he'd been the previous morning; Dean's impulsive attack had caused more damage than Sam had let on. Allowing himself to slip into his blank space, Sam searched the tracks and pulled up to a station showing the arrival of The Assembly. Fiona, Mona, Justin and Amanda climbed out of Mona's old station wagon. No Stef or Lynne. Sam looked at the time display; it read 12:18. With a grin, Sam drew himself back from his blank space and sat up. He checked his watch. It was already past ten – he'd not slept so well or for so long in one chunk for years, maybe a combination of an eventful and emotionally draining day, projection and psychic healing and knowing he was under the same roof as his family had combined to cause his unusually deep sleep.

He shrugged off the thought for the time being and headed towards the bathroom with his crutches. He stopped abruptly at the threshold though – he'd forgotten that both of Bobby's bathrooms had full baths with shower attachments, rather than shower stalls. Climbing in and out of the tub was going to be impossible alone. He ran through his options. I can ask Dean, but he'll either panic, make an excuse and run off, or he'll think I'm trying to make him change his mind. Either way, he'll refuse to help me shower. Dad would help without making any comment, but I'm still not comfortable enough with him yet, Bobby would agree, but he'd be muttering under his breath about eejits who injure themselves and then expect to be waited on hand and foot. Sam thought. He supposed he could always ask Castiel to come and help. The thought set off a gale of laughter. Castiel wouldn't balk at the request for help and he'd do his best to comply with Sam's every request, but Sam's imagination supplied a picture of himself under the shower hear, the angel standing and staring in fascination at the process, unaware that he was being completely inappropriate.

Hearing the laughter, John came through the corridor to investigate. "What's so funny, Sammy?"

"It's Sam, dad." He replied calmly. "I was just considering my options for getting a shower versus awkwardness." Sam broke off and waved his hand as John's mouth opened, no doubt to offer his help. "I know you'd help, but I don't think the awkwardness of that would help us with getting our relationship back on track." John looked resigned but accepting. Sam continued. "I'd just crossed Bobby off the list – I really don't need muttered lectures about eejits who injure themselves on purpose – when my imagination treated me to the thought of Castiel helping, then watching me shower with fascination." Sam began laughing again and John joined in, leaning against the wall as he tried to catch his breath.

"You could always just go stand in the yard in your boxers and we could hose you down?" John offered with an evil glint in his eye. Sam scoffed.
"Yeah I think I'll pass on that, thanks dad." He replied "I can just wash up at the sink for now. Maybe after Amanda and I have done some work later today my hip will be good enough for me to climb into the tub by myself." John shrugged

"If that's how you want to play it, son. Just be aware that if you start to stink, I'm keeping the hose in mind as an option." He winked at Sam and walked away, chuckling to himself. Sam was amazed at the change in John. The death of the demon Bobo seemed to have released him from the grim and serious persona Sam had always seen. He remembered Dean telling him that once their dad had a sense of humour and was good fun. Sam had never believed it. Maybe now he was seeing the dad that Dean had known before their mom died. He liked him.

"Yeah, you can try, old man. But you'd have to hold me down to do it, and so far, no-one's managed to hold me down long enough for it to count. Not even the instructor at Boot camp." Sam retorted with a smirk, earning an admiring and proud look from his dad.

"I'm looking forward to you being back to full fitness then. I'm going to want to see some of your new moves, maybe you can teach Dean and me a few things." John told him, proving once again the huge change in him.

"Sounds good, dad." Sam agreed. "But right now, I'm going to get washed up, eat as much of that bacon as I can get away with before Bobby gets to nagging at me, and draw out some designs for the tattoos I'm going to have Amanda do for me when she gets here." Sam saw John's brow crease in disapproval. I guess some things haven't changed after all. Sam mused. "I'll explain about the tattoos over breakfast if you want?" He offered. John hesitated, then reluctantly nodded.

"Ok. I'll see in a few then." He said and wandered back to the kitchen to top up his coffee.

Sam made relatively quick work of washing up and dragging on his fatigues. I'm gonna need to do some shopping – get myself some appropriate civilian clothes for hunting. A suit or two too, for playing cop or Fed when I need too. He reminded himself. He slipped on both boots and was about to tie them despite the pain he knew it would cause in his hip and his burn scars, when it occurred to him that he didn't need to. He could ask John for help. Allowing his dad to help him would ease a little of the unintentional hurt from Sam not asking for his help with showering, but tying boots was impersonal enough that Sam wouldn't feel uncomfortable. He crutched his way to the kitchen with his laces swinging and dragging behind him.

He was right. John was clearly touched by Sam asking him for help with his boots, although he didn't say as much. He just quietly knelt by Sam's feet and efficiently laced them up, wrapping them once around the ankle before tying them perfectly, regulation tight. He'd always kept his and the boys' boots in proper Marine style Sam recalled.

"Thanks Dad" Sam said quietly as John finished John just patted Sam's knee and stood, going to grab him some coffee, bacon and pancakes. Putting the plate and cup down in front of Sam, he pulled up a chair and sat with his own coffee.

"You were going to tell me about these tattoos?" John asked.

"Yeah, Amanda discovered a long time ago that drawing the correct healing rune, symbol or glyph in the correct place can help healing even in the non-gifted. In the gifted it can be used as a catalyst or a focus to speed or direct healing abilities. The problem is that when they rub off, the help they offer stops. So, she offered tattoos of the same symbols to clients who wanted them. Using a type of devils' trap called a warding and internal manipulation we found we could kind of herd the demon blood, so we came up with a plan to isolate it. It took us years and years and a lot of work, but we managed it. But each time we moved the blood along a bit, we had to draw on a new warding to
hold it. And sharpie rubs off. I couldn't sign up covered in tats, so I suggested UV ink. It works. So, then I decided to add some other runes and symbols. Wardings, shields, protections, healing symbols – there are a lot of options. I'm so covered in wardings that no demon can ever possess me now. I've also got a shield rune which boosts my block, making it stronger, and preventing it from draining my energy and I had a healing symbol on my left hip, but unfortunately, I burned it off. It's slowing my healing, so Amanda's going to slap a new one on me." Sam took another few bites of his breakfast while his dad thought it through. "You, Dean and Bobby should think about getting yourselves some. They'd be invisible unless you're in black light but would work just the same. They can be a real advantage."

Sam knew better than to press it any more. John would either ask Amanda for a tattoo or he wouldn't. He looked at his watch. It was coming up on mid-day.

"They'll be here soon." He told his Dad. "We should let Dean and Bobby know, and I'll have Castiel get his feathery ass over here too. Might as well have as many of us here as possible." John snorted at Sam's irreverent reference to the angel and downed the rest of his lukewarm coffee.

"Ok. You do that then, and I'll have Bobby and Dean come in and wash up. They've been out tinkering with the Impala for a couple of hours now, so they're bound to be up to their elbows in grease." "Some things never change." Sam rolled his eyes. He pushed back his plate and sat back, praying aloud. "Oh Castiel, Angel of Thursday, I pray that you come to me." The tell-tale sound of the angel arriving came even faster this time.

"Hello, Sam. Are you improved today?" Castiel asked politely.

"Hi, Castiel. Yes, I am a little. Thanks for coming."

"You are welcome, Sam." Castiel replied. "It has occurred to me that formally praying is lengthier than might be practical. Perhaps next time you require my presence, you could try simply calling my name. I believe that would be enough to gain my attention, as long as it is directed with intent." Sam appreciated the thought.

"Thank you, that might prove to be very useful in an emergency." Sam agreed. "Would you like some coffee? Most of The Assembly will be here very shortly." Sam checked his watch again, 12:12, he should probably go outside to greet them as they pulled up.

"I have not tried coffee before, but I would like to. Thanks, you." Castiel accepted the offered cup and followed Sam outside.

The rest of Sam's family was already out on the porch. Sam crutched over to them and smiled.

"I'm actually a little nervous." He confided. "These are good people, but they'll be protective over me, Justin in particular." He didn't miss Dean's tensed shoulders and clenched jaw as he named his friend. Interesting. He noted.

"Protective?" Bobby asked.

"Yeah. Over the years we all shared a lot with each other about our old lives. Remember I didn't know then what I knew now, so their opinions on the other Winchesters are all based on what I thought I knew back then." John nodded tersely sadness and shame on his face.

"That's understandable I guess." He said quietly. Sam nudged his shoulder.

"They're open-minded, and I've told them that things are good with us now. They'll take you as they find you for the most part, just… bear in mind that they'll be wary at first." He checked his watch.
"12:16. They'll be here and opening the doors of the station wagon in two minutes – Mona, Fiona, Justin and Amanda." He informed the others. Dean looked sceptical.

"You can time it that close?" He said doubtfully.

"I can." Sam replied with confidence. "Want to make a bet?" Dean's eyes lit up.

"Ok. I'll bet you the dishes for a week that you're off by at least a minute."

"Done!" Sam said gleefully. "I can't wait to see your face when they climb out of the green station wagon at exactly 12:18, Mona from the back left, Amanda back right, Justin driving and Fiona front passenger seat." Dean looked a little less confident.

"Fiona? Isn't that the woman that SeerWitch, I mean you, had me take that Grimoire to?" Bobby recalled.

"Yeah. She's The Assembly's researcher and record keeper. She said you seemed very polite when you dropped off the book to her. I'd hoped you would keep in contact with The Assembly, but I guess that didn't pan out." Sam shrugged.

The smug expression on Sam's face as he held up his watch in Dean's face when his friends climbed out of the car in the exact order Sam had predicted was met with a thunderous scowl from his brother.

"Sucks to be you." Sam told him in a sing-song voice and crutched as fast as it was safe to do so over to the car. Each of the three women cooed, kissed, patted and hugged him, exclaiming over his injuries and almost disappearing in his arms as he hugged them back.

"Hey you." Justin said, just a little louder than necessary. "You not going to come and give your favourite man in the world a kiss?" Sam rolled his eyes and crutched over to him, lifting his chin and landing a mild kiss on his mouth.

"Tone it down a bit, Justin." He whispered as he pulled back. "Turns out things weren't quite as they seemed when I left. We're doing well."

"Hmm. Well neither of the older guys so much as flinched at that kiss, so I guess you might be right. We'll see. He turned his gaze a little, taking in Dean, who Sam noticed was trying to loosen his tightened jaw and his fists. "Holy hotties, Batman! Who is that and where can I get one?" Justin's voice came out a little louder than he'd intended, and he flushed as John and Bobby started chuckling.

"Oh, that's Dean." Sam said casually "My brother." Justin looked at Sam incredulously.

"Your family has the hottest gene pool ever! Hell, even your dad is a seriously handsome daddy bear. And is that your uncle Bobby? Yet another bear who’d do well in the clubs. Nice, Sam. Keeping all the pretty to yourself." He slapped Sam's shoulder in mock irritation. Sam just rolled his eyes. H could tell Justin was playing up his twink side just a little, like he did in Ely on occasion. 'Trying to rile up the rednecks' he called it.

"Oh, that's Dean." Sam said casually "My brother." Justin looked at Sam incredulously.

"Ok, man. Whatever you say." Sam replied calmly. "Oh, and that's Castiel." Sam introduce the angel casually.

"Why's he dressed like that?" Justin asked, eyeing the trench coat with distaste.

"He likes it. Says it's functional." Sam answered. "Look, Castiel is a good guy, you'll be surprised
when you find out just how good." Justin looked confused. "I'll fill you in in a bit." Sam promised.

"You can fill me anytime." Justin fired back, their normal teasing flirtiness jumping to the fore. "As long as I can return the favour." Sam chuckled and the women all rolled their eyes.

"Wow. Are you two at it already?" Mona complained, not aware of how her comment could be taken. Sam and Justin's chuckles only grew louder. Amanda walked up behind the pair and slapped each of them across the back of the head.

"Enough, boys. You can flirt to your hearts' content later. Right now, you, Sam have proper introductions to make, and you, Justin can make a start on getting everything out of the car.

"Sorry, Mona." The pair chorused to the amusement of their audience, and Sam led the way over to his family.

Introductions were made, and everything was fine until Mona turned to face Castiel for the first time. She instantly paled.

"Sam! Did you know that Castiel is… That he's…" She stammered, her face full of awe.

"An angel? Yes. I thought you'd realised. He's the angel that helped me after Cold Oak." Sam informed her.

"But you trapped that angel, Sam. Why would he want to be on friendly terms with you after that?"

"We had a good long conversation and I convinced him that I'm a good guy." Sam told her nonchalantly.

"You Winchestered an angel into being on your side?" Fiona broke in, staggered.

"Winchestered?" John asked, confused by the term.

"It's shorthand for Winchester stubborned, which in turn is shorthand for the way Sam can argue until the end of time or until he gets his way, whichever comes sooner." Fiona explained to the laughter of Sam's family.

"That's awesome!" Dean breathed. "Sammy's always been the most stubborn little bitch on the planet."

"No, that's you – jerk." Sam replied – knocking one of his crutches into the back of Dean's knees, making him wobble. Come on, let's get inside." He started up the steps, unaware of his Assembly friends' reaction to that little exchange.

The moment Dean has called him Sammy, the others had looked at Sam, waiting for the standard correction. But no 'Its Sam' came. The three women kept staring at Sam, waiting for it, however Justin's eyes narrowed, and he began looking back and forth between the two brothers with a considering look on his face. Well now. Wasn't that interesting? His cogs were turning fast. Grabbing up the tattoo gun and accepting the angel's – angel! – help with the groceries, He followed everyone into the scruffy but sturdy-looking house, plans forming as he walked.

Sam's family, Castiel and The Assembly merged together surprisingly well. It seemed like no time at all before Fiona, Mona and Bobby were all exchanging notes on various tomes and rituals, John was questioning Amanda – politely – about the use of tattoos for healing and protection and Justin was chatting with Castiel and Sam about human social rituals. Dean however was sitting, beer in hand, off to one side, pretending not to watch Sam interact with Justin. Sam carefully kept his smirk in
check. He had to walk a careful line here – first off, he didn't want to really hurt Dean. He felt bad about the minor hurt he'd already caused, but he wouldn't be able to fix this if Dean wasn't off balance, and the best way to achieve that was to act as if he'd forgotten all about Dean's rejection. Flirting with Justin would help.

Secondly, if he was too over the top with the flirting, Dean would assume Sam was trying to make him jealous, which he'd definitely see as Sam pushing the issue, and Dean's stubbornness would kick in.

In any case, seeing Dean isolating himself like that was painful to Sam. His older brother was such a social creature, normally the centre of everyone's attention. Not just because of his looks, but also because he was so full of life. It drew people to him. Sitting on the side-lines wasn't Dean. Patting Justin on the shoulder, Sam got up and crutched his way over to grab himself a fresh beer, then went to sit with Dean.

"You think you'll get yourself inked while Amanda's here to do it?" He asked, picking a neutral subject. Dean took a swig of his beer.

"Yeah I think I will. A devil's trap at least. It seems stupid to leave myself open to possession when there's an easy way to prevent it." Sam nodded.

"Exactly my thought. I'm pretty sure Bobby's already come to the same conclusion, I just hope dad sees sense too." He leaned back and sighed. "A healing symbol could help you out too. Even without gifts, it helps to speed healing – might even keep scars from developing. I know you've got plenty already." He said wryly. Dean grunted in agreement.

"I guess I'll give that some thought." Dean looked over at Justin. "So, are you and him a thing?" He asked casually. Sam wasn't fooled.

"Justin?" Sam asked, pretending to be surprised. "He's the first out gay man I'd ever met. He helped me work through how I felt about my sexuality, how to handle bigots when I encountered them. I guess it's a cliché that I developed a crush on him." From the corner of his eye, Sam saw as Dean gripped his bottle tighter. "But when I finally got brave enough to try making a move, he found a way to turn me down without hurting my fragile little ego." Sam snorted with wry amusement and took a swig himself. "Looking back on it now, I feel kind of bad for putting him in that position. A scrawny little jailbait kid, all emotionally broken and vulnerable, yet capable of beating the shit out of him if I lost my shit? He must've been crapping himself when I tried to kiss him." Dean ground his teeth loud enough for Sam to hear it.

"But you're interested now?" Dean asked, trying to sound disinterested. Really, if this was the height of Dean's acting and questioning skills, Sam was astonished he ever achieved anything out on the hunt. Sam didn't want to lie – didn't even want to suggest an untruth; it wasn't who he was, and it certainly wasn't any part of what he wanted with Dean. So, he was relieved that he was prevented from answering by Amanda calling over to him.

"Sam? Shall we go slap some new ink on you and get to work making you beautiful again?" John barked out a laugh.

"The disgusting part is, that even with the scars, he's still one of the prettiest things I ever saw." Justin smirked. Sam just flipped him off.

"One of?" Sam retorted sarcastically. "We all know I'm the prettiest." He lifted his chin and fluttered his eyelashes.
"Great, they're off again." Mona groaned. "You can't have those two in the same room together for two seconds without the flirting starting up,"

"I think it's hilarious." Amanda giggled. "And kind of hot too." She added thoughtfully. "Now. We need to get to work, Sam. Where can we get it done?" Sam thought about it.

"It depends. Can the new tat go on the scar tissue, or is it too fragile to take the ink?" He asked. Amanda looked thoughtful.

"Let's have a look at it and see?" She half asked, half told him. Sam looked around the room at all the curious faces. None of them would be so crass as to ask, but it was clear they all wanted to see the full extent of his injuries. He blew out a sigh. Fine. Let's just get it over and done with. It's not like they're permanent anyway – I'll have new skin there almost before I know it. He reminded himself. He put his hands on his belt, starting to loosen it.

"If anyone doesn't want to see this, now's the time to leave the room." No one moved, all eyes pinned on him. "Well alright then." He began peeling off his fatigues, shedding his top half first. Justin began humming "The Stripper", making everyone, even Dean start giggling like teenage girls. As his t-shirt came off gasps rang out around the room. He'd worked almost exclusively on his broken hip and the scars on his face so that he didn't appear so badly injured. The scars that weren't visible, he'd pretty much ignored until he could get Amanda's help. What everyone was seeing now was not a whole lot better than it had been after his debridement surgery. Every eye but those of two people were staring at the scars. One of those two pairs was staring avidly at Sam's upper body, drinking in the miles of skin and taut, toned muscle. Dean barely registered the burn scars at all. The other pair of eyes was busy watching Dean. Justin registered Dean's hungry look and understood it's meaning. That's half a mystery solved. He thought.

Sam swallowed and undid his pants, dropping them so they fell around his ankles, leaving him standing there in his boxer briefs, every burn on view, as well as the ugly swelling and bruising still evident around his broken hip.

"Sweet baby Jesus." Justin breathed out.

"Yes, it's really very extensive damage." Amanda murmured, attempting to keep her professional edge, but still choking back her tears."

"Huh?" Asked Justin "I was talking about his ass."

Once again laughter broke the tension in the room, everyone but Dean, Sam and Castiel cracking up. The angel, of course didn't register the joke. Dean was too busy giving Justin the evil eye to laugh – Justin pretended not to notice – and Sam was taking advantage of Dean's distraction to stare devotedly at his older brother. And that's the other half. Justin concluded.

"Justin! Roll your tongue back in." Fiona complained after she regained control over her laughter.

"Sorry, Fiona. I'll try very hard to behave, but until Sam covers up all that gorgeousness, I can make no promises." Justin said cheekily, giving one last little push at Dean. He turned deliberately to Castiel. "You were there when he did all this to himself?" He asked. Castiel nodded.

"Yes, Justin Fletcher. Although Sam did not execute all of the damage himself. I cut his fingers off for him and stamped on his hip to break it." The angel stated in a matter of fact tone, oblivious to the horrified expressions of his companions. They may have known logically that the angel had helped Sam create his wounds, but such a dry and unemotional description drove the fact home harder.
"Sam explained to me precisely what he needed me to do before he rolled over into the burning holy oil to break the trap and injure himself in one move," Castiel went on. Fiona choked on thin air.

"Sam!" She yelped. "I told you how hot the Holy Oil burns. You must've known that almost every burn would go to full thickness!" Sam sighed and bent with a groan and a wince to pull up his pants.

"Yes, Fiona I knew. But I needed burns, there was a ready-made fire, and Castiel couldn't take me out of there and back to Yemen until the trap was broken or burned out. I didn't have time to wait for the second option; I'd already been MIA for too long and Dean would be running off to find a crossroads once he and dad were notified. I didn't have time to wait for the second option; I'd already been MIA for too long and Dean would be running off to find a crossroads once he and dad were notified. I had to just get on with it." He took his T-shirt gratefully from John who had retrieved it from the floor and pulled it back over his head. "What's done is done." He added a little tersely. "I'd like to get on with fixing it now, if that's ok with everyone?"

Mona reached out and gripped Sam's hand softly. "Sam, honey. You know we only sound angry because we care, and we were scared, right?" She asked gently. He nodded. "Now I know you've had a lot to deal with, and that showing us all of that damage must have been upsetting too, but on one in this room is to blame, so you don't need to be snapping at us, ok?"

Mona had always been able to reach Sam, even when he lost his temper. The only one other than Dean who'd ever been able to do that. He looked down at the floor, ashamed and embarrassed.

"I'm sorry." He said to his boots but meaning it for the room in general. "I'm going to go to my room, So Amanda and I can get to work. I know you all have a lot to discuss, and the way I'm letting my temper slip, maybe the best way to do things would be for all of you to talk about it while Amanda and I are getting me fixed up. I already know everything from both sides, and I'm sure Mona and Fiona will fill Amanda in later on if she'll come help me know?" Sam was working hard to be diplomatic but their reactions to his injuries had bothered him. He just wanted to get them fixed as quickly as possible to put a stop to the pity he believed he could feel coming from them. Amanda nodded happily, wanting nothing more than to get to work; unhealed wounds offended her sensibilities. She turned to Dean.

"Dean, would you mind carrying the tattoo gun and my inks to Sam's room for me please? I'm going to help Sam heal up the scaring on his left hip a bit, and then ink that healing symbol back where it belongs so it can help with his healing in general." Dean picked up her stuff and led the way to Sam's room.

"You mind if I stay and watch you work?" He asked both Amanda and Sam. "I'm planning on asking for one of these healing deals myself."

"It's fine with me." Sam said with a shrug. Dean was good at small talk and at distracting Sam, which he'd need while Amanda placed the new tattoo. He had to save his reserves for the actual healing, so he wouldn't be able to block the pain of the tattoo and even though Amanda was going to do a bit of healing on the area first, Sam knew it would still be very tender.

"Ok then, Dean. Just make sure not to distract me when I'm healing – when I'm tattooing it'll be fine to talk."

Sam laid himself down on the bed and once again eased his pants down a little so Amanda could work. They were going to be at it for a while.

The scarring on his left hip went very deep; the areas where the bones were closest to the skin had taken the brunt of the burning and so were all full thickness burns. While Sam had been able to do
some healing on his own, he'd struggled to direct his focus without the tattoo. Actually, Amanda was very impressed with the degree of healing he'd achieved on his face and broken hip by himself.

"We're not going to get much done beyond clearing a small area for the new tattoo and kick-starting the healing of the other burn scars, you know." She modified her earlier prediction once she'd been able to look inside Sam's tissues. "Growing new skin, even with psychic healing, is a slow process, and I hadn't realised how deep the scarring was. If we're going to accelerate the skin growing process far enough to tattoo over the new skin, even in a tiny area, then just doing that is going to wipe us both out. Once we've got the new ink on, things will go a lot easier on both of us, so I expect we'll make a lot more progress tomorrow." Amanda seemed to be thinking aloud as much as anything, so Sam didn't feel the need to more than grunt in agreement. Dean watched on in fascination.

"The healing tattoo can do the work for you?" He asked, not completely understanding.

"No." Amanda corrected. "It's more along the lines of a catalyst. Or kind of like a magnifying glass. It's difficult to explain. With the healing symbol placed on the skin, my abilities are magnified and more easily focused. I can work faster and more efficiently. Sam's healing skills aren't his strongest gift, and without the symbol he was struggling to focus properly. With it, he and I can kind of combine our efforts and help guide each other as we work." She tried to sum it up as neatly as she could.

"So, if I get a tattoo of the healing symbol?"

"Well it won't be as effective as Sam's because you can't actively heal psychically like he does, but it will speed and improve your natural healing, and if someone, like Sam, with healing abilities works on you, it will help them focus and improve the quality of their healing, so it would be very beneficial in the long run." She assured him. "Now, we're going to get to work here, so we're going to need quiet, so we can concentrate. If you want, there's a book Fiona's been putting together for us with all the different tattoos I've inked onto Sam, as well as some I've put on myself and the rest of The Assembly. They're broken down by category, with a description of what they do, how they work and where they should be placed for maximum effect. You can have a look through and see which ones you'd like me to do for you while I'm here." She gestured with her chin at a book sticking out the top of her bag as she laid her hands on either side of the area her and Sam were going to be working on.

Making eye contact with Sam, she nodded at him and received a weak smile in return as the two of them got to work. Dean sat quietly off to one side, leafing through the book.

About an hour later, Amanda sat back with a weary sigh and shrugged her shoulders, trying to roll out the tension that had built up there. Sam lay back on the bed, a thin sheen of sweat on his now pale brow, his breathing a little laboured.

"Fuck. That was so much harder than I remember it being." He groaned weakly. "I feel like I've run two back-to-back marathons." Amanda nodded in agreement.

"Yeah. But look, we've got just about enough new skin to slap on the tat. Then we can stuff our faces until we're fit to burst and get some sleep. It'll go so much easier tomorrow." Sam nodded.

Dragging herself out of her seat, Amanda set up the tattoo gun and the UV ink, and grabbed a sharpie to draw on the symbol before she got to work.

"It still ok if I stay and watch you inking him?" Dean asked quietly, startling her a little; she'd forgotten he was still in the room.
"Yeah that's fine." She agreed. "As long as you don't get into my light. You can distract Sam from the pain. Normally he can just switch off the nerve endings in the relevant area, but he's far too tired to do that right now and inking directly over bone like in this area is really not a fun experience." Sam grimaced.

"Shit. I'd forgotten about that. You're going to have to tell us some good stories to keep my mind off it, Dean." He told his brother. And so, Dean did.

He told them stories about hunts that had gone hilariously awry over the last few years, he told them about arguments John had gotten into with various people, including Bobby. When he ran out of recent history, he went right back into the archives and shared some of little Sammy's antics from his toddler years, making Amanda chuckle and Sam roll his eyes.

Finally, the tattoo was done, and Amanda pulled out a pen blacklight to run over the work, making sure all the lines we complete and joining correctly; the symbol would be completely ineffective if the lines didn't quite meet up. Finally, content with her work, she blew out a gusty sigh and sat back, making fists with both hands and then stretching out her fingers, then raising her arms right up to work out all the tension.

"Done!" She declared with satisfaction. "Now tomorrow will be like a walk in the park compared to this evening." He began packing up her equipment. "I didn't think anything would be as hard as working on Andy's head, but that came pretty close." She grumbled. Sam was suddenly overwhelmed with guilt; he'd completely forgotten to ask over his new friend.

"How's Andy doing? All fixed up now? Is he going to stay with The Assembly?" Now he'd remembered to ask, he wanted to know everything at once.

"Oh, his head's completely fine now." Amanda assured him. "Well as fine as that stoner is going to get anyway." She temporised with an affectionate shake of her head. "He's decided to stay with Lynne for a while, luckily she finds his appreciation for all things lesbian amusing. I don't know if he'll stay permanently, but for now he seems eager to learn what he can and find out what else he can do," Sam grinned.

"Yeah he's an irredeemable pot-head." He agreed "But behind that, he struck me as a really good guy. I think he'll be an asset, that is if Lynne doesn't get fed up with him and strangle him in his sleep." They both laughed, and Dean smiled, enjoying seeing his brother relaxing after his tough day.

"So, shall we go get you two fed?" He asked, standing and waving for both of them to precede him through the door. "By the smell of it, food's just about ready, and I know you both need to refuel." Having seen Sam gorging himself the day before, he knew that both of them would need to seriously pack away some calories after their session that evening.

Sam barely spoke a word during their meal; too busy shovelling the food in as if it was about to be stolen away from him, everyone (except for Amanda, who was matching him bite for bite) looked on with a mix of affectionate amusement and awe as he made plate after plate of food disappear. Finally, he sat back with a groan, his hands rubbing his over-stuffed stomach.

"Oh shit." He moaned. "I can't remember ever feeling this full before."

"That's what she said." Sniggered both Dean and Justin in unintentional unison, making one of them smirk and the other scowl. Justin clapped his hands together suddenly and stood, carrying a load of dishes over to the sink.
"Amanda, you should go get some sleep before you drop off at the table." He told his friend, who was wilting in her chair. He looked over at Sam, who wasn't doing much better. "You too, Baby Gay. I gather I'm bunking in with you this evening, so you should go get some sleep while you can." He gave Sam a leer and a theatrical wink. Sam chuckled, and Dean barely held back a growl.

"I need a shower first." Sam disagreed. "I couldn't manage this morning and put it off. You think you could come help me?" He asked Justin, aware that it would rile Dean, but quite pleased with the thought. He still didn't want to push too hard, but he wasn't about to pass up a golden opportunity to needle his brother when it presented itself. He deliberately didn't even glance over to see Dean's reaction, but he could hear the distinctive sound of grinding teeth from across the table.

"Well I can't turn down an offer like that, can I now." Justin all but purred. "Come on then, let's get your fine ass in the shower, and nurse Justin will scrub your back for you." He ushered Sam out of his seat and towards the bathroom without another word, Sam chuckling the whole way.

They'd barely shut and locked the door behind them when Justin fixed Sam with a more serious expression.

"What?" Sam asked confused. "You don't want to help me? If it's uncomfortable for you, I totally understand." He began.

"That's not what I'm glaring at you for, Sam. Strip your sexy self off and I'll help you into the shower and we can talk while you scrub. Maybe that'll keep my mind off the temptation of joining you." Sam gave a little eye roll, accompanied by a snort of laughter, and did as he was instructed. "Sweet Baby Jesus!" He heard Justin murmur as he dropped the last of his clothes on the floor. "It's just not fair for one person to be so beautiful." Sam blushed a little at the clearly honest compliment and allowed Justin to manhandle him into the tub, so he could shower.

"So, what did you want to talk to me about?" Sam asked as he adjusted the water temperature.

"How long have you had the hots for your brother?" Justin didn't bother beating about the bush. As usual for the man, he was direct and to the point. Sam froze.

"Are you on crack?" He asked in a strangled voice. "I've got no idea what you're going on about." He tried for confused innocence and failed.

"Sam, there's no point trying to deny it; my gaydar comes with an extra function, you know that. I can spot attraction from forty miles away, and what you've got for your brother, and him for you too I might add, well, that would be visible from space!" Sam hung his head, letting the shower water beat down on the back of his neck.

"You think anyone else can see it?" He asked resignedly.

"I think your Uncle Bobby isn't as oblivious as he's pretending to be, but I don't think anyone else is picking up on it." Justin stated bluntly. Sam's heart began to pound.

"Bobby's noticed?" He panicked. "Oh fuck no. this is disastrous.

"He doesn't seem to be fazed by it, interestingly enough." Justin said calmly, like he was narrating a documentary. "And just in case you're wondering, I'm not judging either." He assured his younger friend. "I've always been of the opinion that you love who you love and there's never anything wrong with that, as long as it's between two consenting adults. You and Dean are both grown-ups – so how you feel about each other is no one else's problem. And, Sam, I can tell that it's not just lust. From either of you. You're both completely in love with each other. It's kind of beautiful actually."
How Justin was this accepting and blasé about this, Sam couldn't begin to understand, but he was incredibly grateful for it nonetheless.

"I've been in love with him for as long as I've known what that sort of love was." Sam admitted quietly. "It's a part of why I left; I believed he'd found out that I was gay, and he hated me for it. That was bad enough, but I thought he'd be completely revolted by the idea of me being in love with him. It wasn't until yesterday that I learned that so much of what I thought I knew was wrong. I'd admitted I loved him in my last letter to him – it was given to him when they notified the family about my death. So, when I turned up here alive, it was kind of hanging over us like a threatening cloud. And then I come to find out that he's bi, that he was discovering that about himself just before I left and that's what he was ranting about that last day – about himself, not me – and that he's been in love with me for as long as I've felt the same about me. But he won't act on it because he thinks he's not good enough for me." Sam slapped the wet tiles in frustration. "Him not good enough for me?" He snorted. "He's the best man I've ever known. But the self-sacrificing asshole can't see that." Justin let out a snort of his own.

"Well aren't you two in a pickle." He said dryly. "OS I'm guessing by the continued flirting with me that you're beginning a campaign to win the day?" Sam chuckled.

"Yeah. I've thrown him off balance by not fighting it out head-on like he was expecting. I've pretended to accept his rejection and I'm acting like I've already forgotten all about it. Eventually it will drive him so mad that he'll have no defences left and then I'll try to spur him to make a move of his own. If it's his idea, then hopefully he'll bypass all the guilt and shit that he'd go through if I just continued pressing the point and he gave in." Sam looked around the shower curtain, fixing eye contact with his friend. "I'm not happy with having to be devious here – I'm not just chasing him down because I'm being stubborn. I mean, yeah, I am stubborn, but that's not why I'm determined about this. It's just right, him and me. For both of us. Neither of us will ever find anything even close with anyone else to what we can have together. Believe it or not, even Castiel says it's right for me and Dean. Apparently, we're honest to goodness soulmates – destined for each other." Sam rushed out, desperate for his friend to understand he wasn't just being a weird, incestuous stalker. Justin raised his hands, fending off Sam's vehemence.

"I believe you. Like I said I'm not judging. If it had been just you, I might've warned you off for both your sakes, but I can see that he feels it too, but he's trying to fight it. I hope for both of us. Neither of us will ever find anything even close with anyone else to what we can have together. Believe it or not, even Castiel says it's right for me and Dean. Apparently, we're honest to goodness soulmates – destined for each other." Sam rushed out, desperate for his friend to understand he wasn't just being a weird, incestuous stalker. Justin raised his hands, fending off Sam's vehemence.

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"You got it, Justin." He told his friend once he could catch his breath. "Anything else?" Justin's eyes brightened.

"Yeah! If you two ever film yourselves in bed, I want a copy! Holy flexing muscles, Batman. That would be the hottest porn ever!" He blurted enthusiastically. He clearly wasn't joking even a little bit. Sam lost it again, laughing until his sides hurt.

"Help me climb out of this fucking tub and you've got a deal, you perv." He'd never seen Justin grin so hard in his life.


"I'm telling you, Sammy, there's no reason why you can't!" Dean threw his hands up, exasperated. They'd been arguing this out for days now, and he was getting nowhere. Not ever going to either.
Sam thought to himself grimly.

"And I'm telling you that just because I can't, doesn't mean I'm ever going to do it." Sam spoke calmly and continued his pull-ups in the door frame without even a pause, not allowing his brother to get him as frustrated as he was. "College was a plan when I was a kid, but it was always more a means to an end than a dream for its own sake. I was looking for a safe exit from our life, yes, but it wasn't to get away from hunting." He left the real reason unspoken. They both knew what Sam had really been trying to escape and while they as a family were well on the way towards repairing the damage John's misguided behaviour had caused, the issue of the brothers' feelings for each other was still at the forefront of almost every interaction. Not that Dean was aware of the whole of it.

As far as he could tell, after he rejected Sam that first day his brother had given up on the whole thing without looking back. He was relieved; fighting his own desires had always been incredibly hard but having to fight against Sam's matching ones at the same time would've been a herculean task. He was good at working against resistance – in fact the tougher things got, the harder he pressed on – but he was still glad he wasn't going to have to. Or at least part of him was. The rest of him was hurt. Sam's determination and stubbornness were legendary, and he'd never give up, never, when he was denied something he really wanted. Then I guess I'm just not in that category Dean surmised.

That's why it hurt so much. When he'd thought Sam was dead, it had finally been safe for him to take his feelings out of the lockbox he'd shut them up into and have a really good look at them the way he'd never allowed himself to before. He'd always known that even if Sam had stayed back then there was no way Dean could ever tell him how he felt. There were so many reasons why. Firstly, Sam had been far too young, second, as far as Dean had known his brother had been straight. The third reason was, to Dean, the least important; it was both illegal and morally wrong according to society. That sort of thing had never really bothered Dean though – The Winchesters operated outside of the law for the most part, and societies morals meant even less to them. Lastly, and to Dean's mind by far the biggest reason, Sam was worth so much more than Dean was. His kid brother was such a good person, intelligent too - scarily so – he could do anything with his life, be anything. Being tied to Dean romantically would be a tragic waste.

When he'd thought Sam was dead, Dean finally allowed himself to brush all those reasons aside and imagine the things he'd desperately wanted in the quietest corners of his mind. He imagined the two of them hunting together, living as a couple as well as a hunting partnership on the road. He imagined Sam being happy with him, using his intelligence to improve their hunting capabilities and not feeling like it was being wasted. It was a beautiful dream to him. Beautiful and terrible because of the pain that ripped through him as he imagined it. He didn't stop turning it over in his head though. Maybe he was doing it to punish himself. For feeling the way he did, for having a brief burst of joy amongst the abject misery when he read Sam's letter and realised that Sam had loved him that way too, or for being alive when Sam no longer was. Whatever his subconscious was doing, Dean persisted in running the fantasy through his mind repeatedly.

And then Sam was alive. He was alive and there in front of Dean. Far too tall, the bastard, and cocky and self-assured, and wounded and horribly scarred and so fucking beautiful that Dean could scarcely breathe.

It had taken a while for Dean to spot the danger. He'd had his feelings out of their lockbox for a couple of weeks by then, feasting on them and flogging himself with them in equal measure, almost to the exclusion of anything else and when he'd finally accepted that Sam was indeed Sam, he'd reacted as if the fantasy was reality – rushing to put his arm around his brother and help him into the house, fluttering around him in concern once he'd had him sitting down, basically acting like an anxious husband. It was only when Sam had pulled the puppy dog eyes that Dean had seen Sam.
in the beautiful dream-come-reality and then realisation of what he'd been doing slammed home and he scrambled to get it all shoved back in the box. He'd almost been too late. Sam had reached out to him, had started to make a move that would have been all too easy for Dean to follow, trapping Sam forever in a life he didn't want – didn't deserve – with a man who wasn't worthy of him.

So, he'd shut Sam down. It had hurt like ripping himself in two, but he'd done it, fully expecting to be entering into the battle of his life as Sam dug in and fought for what he wanted. But Sam hadn't fought. He'd just shrugged it off like he was being told they were all out of the kind of gum he wanted and picked another flavour. It didn't make sense – threw Dean off balance. This was not how Sam reacted when denied something he truly wanted so the only logical conclusion was that Sam was over it. Dean's strength lay in having something to fight against. Sam wasn't fighting, and Dean was left with his feelings for his brother, strengthened by weeks of indulging them in his imagination and nothing to help him fight against them. He was in real trouble here. Fighting against himself to save his brother from wasting his life. So, there he was; relieved, hurt, confused and frustrated because Sam was refusing to see sense and do what Dean knew was the best thing for him, and trying very hard not to let his eyes wander over the now nearly completely smooth expanse of skin over tight defined muscles as Sam worked out wearing only a pair of cut-off jog suit pants. Sam's daily workouts were Deans favourite and most hated parts of every day at Bobby's. Both a visual treat and complete torture. He was very much regretting starting this conversation just before Sam normally started working out – he'd figured it would delay Sam's workout or maybe even prevent it for the day. He was wrong; Sam just multi-tasked, talking and unintentionally driving Dean insane with his body.

Catching himself watching a single bead of sweat running down Sam's beautifully developed right pec and past his nipple, Dean dragged his eyes away – again – and pulled his mind back to the task at hand. He'd been trying for days to convince Sam that he didn't have to stick around – with his brain and service record he could walk into all kinds of jobs or colleges. College was what Dean figured his best bet was. Sammy had wanted to go back when they were younger, so Dean was trying to get him to take his chance now. Get away from the hunt, or more precisely from Dean. Mostly for Sam's sake, but if he was honest with himself, there was a tiny part of him that would be relieved to have Sam out of reach. Ever since he'd shut his brother down, he'd been very strict with himself – not allowing any physical contact between them and avoiding too many occasions where they were alone together. But Sam wasn't cooperating. Every suggestion Dean made that would remove Sam from his presence was rejected out of hand calmly and reasonably, once again leaving Dean without much to fight against. He ground his teeth and tried again.

"Sammy, you spent days looking down the tracks for any hint of apocalypse related trouble, draining yourself and slowing your healing in the process. You saw nothing. Now I'm not saying that means every player had given up, but you took out the leading player on hell's side and Cas says that will leave them reeling for a while, and then there'll be in-fighting in hell while a successor fights their way to the top of the pile. That could take decades! You don't need to tie yourself to m... to hunting forever just to keep yourself on readiness. You can go and have a life, a career, a rel... a relationship with some guy who deserves you. And if or when the next player makes a move on re-starting the apocalypse, then you'll know what they're planning the moment they decide on it and we've got a good lot of very capable players ourselves, plus a gun that can kill anything evil, so we can nip any new trouble in the bud." Dean knew that was a drastic over-simplification, but he was using everything he had to try to get Sam to change his mind.

Sam dropped down from the doorframe his pull-ups complete and sat down to start his sit-ups. Dean swallowed hard and determinedly didn't look at his brothers' perfect abs. Sam's voice only held the slightest of strains as he replied.

"Dean. We keep having this same conversation and none of it ever changes. You're planning this
whole perfect apple-pie life for me and ignoring so many glaring holes in your plans because they don't fit it with what you want. The fact is that while you're right that it could be decades, the probability is that it won't be. Yes, you're right that we've got more players on our team now, but what you're deliberately disregarding is that I'm the best player we've got." Sam winced a little at a small twinge from his right hip. It very rarely gave him any problems now, but sit-ups put it at a weird angle, "I'm not trying to be big-headed here" he went on "I'm just pointing out the obvious. In the Marines I learned that every mission should have the best specialists available and that every position in the team should be covered by a redundancy – if you need a radio specialist then you have the best available and you also have another team member trained to cover that position if they have to. With all the gifts I have, I'm not only the specialist in many areas, but I'm also the redundancy for several other specialists. We just can't afford to have me not there from the outset. I will not sit on the side-lines. That's hole number one." Sam finished hit set of sit-ups and moved on to his push-ups.

"Hole number two is this theory that you have that I don't want to hunt." Sam went on. "I keep telling you that I didn't leave to escape hunting but either you've gone selectively deaf and don't hear it, or you don't believe me, which is weird because you know I've never lied to you. Ever. I'm going to tell you this one last time and I need for you to hear me, Dean. I. Want. To. Hunt. Even when I was completely out of the life and had a successful military career, I still kept my hand in the mix by looking ahead on your and dad's tracks and emailing Bobby to help you out. When I was sitting on the ground at Cold Oak, waiting for The Assembly to get there, I had to plan what injuries to create and decide if I wanted them to be bad enough to get a medical discharge. You realise that? That I had every opportunity to stay in the Marines if I'd made my wounds a little less severe. You know why I didn't?" Sam looked up from the floor where he was still doing push-ups and met Dean's eye. "Because as clear as it was after Cold Oak that hunting wasn't done with me, It was just as clear to me that I wasn't done with hunting either. That's when I made my choice. I decided I was coming back in to hunting."

Sam jumped up from the floor and started stretching out, his workout complete.

"The last hole in your master plan to get rid of me is the whole 'relationship with some guy who deserves me' thing. Have you even thought that through? Because I have. Let me tell you how it pans out." Sam held up a single finger. "One. I meet a great guy and from day one of the relationship I have to lie to him. About who I am, where I came from, what I used to do – both hunting and in the Marines – what I'm capable of psychically and even about the truth of the dark things out there in the world. I've lived my life as a lie before, Dean. Every moment of every day while I was a Marine I was lying about who I was. I hated that. Eventually it would've ruined me. So, I either lie forever or eventually tell him the truth which would almost certainly end with him leaving me for being mentally unstable." Sam counted off a second finger. "Two. I somehow manage to keep to the lying and this wonderful man and I move in together. Then one day I come home and find him on the ceiling, on fire with his stomach slashed open. That's what happened to the poor girl I'd duped into being my beard in college on my original track, Dean. You think I'd run that risk with anyone knowing there was even the tiniest chance it could happen?" Dean's horrified face was frozen. Sam's quiet, calm tone was making all of his predictions that much more chilling. Sam counted off one more finger.

"And lastly, three. I've successfully lied to this awesome guy, we're in a loving committed relationship, living together, maybe looking into adopting, and then the next player for hells team finally pops up. I can't have this great guy of mine in the line of fire, so one day I head out to but a loaf of bread and just never go home again. It's the best way to keep him safe if I'm away from him and he doesn't know where I've gone or why I left. That's how that part of you plan pans out Dean, and I'm sorry if it doesn't fit your agenda, but I'm not doing it." He walked off towards the bathroom to shower. "I'm not doing any of it."
Dean stood alone for a while, digesting everything that Sam had said. His shoulders sagged. His little brother, the stubbornest in a family of stubborn men, had made three very telling, very firm statements about what he would and wouldn't do. No one had ever succeeded in forcing Sam to do anything he didn't want to do. Likewise, no one had ever stopped Sam from doing anything he was truly determined to do. Dean could talk and push until the world stopped spinning and he'd never gain a single inch. He'd have to get better control over his emotions when it came to his feelings for his brother. Sam wasn't going anywhere.

"No." John didn't say any more than that, just went back to cleaning his handgun at the table in Bobby's kitchen. Sam stared at him with his mouth open.

"It wasn't a question, Dad. It was a statement of fact. I'm coming with you and Dean on this hunt." He insisted. "I'm almost at a hundred percent now and I'm going stir crazy just sitting around here all day."

"You're not coming, Sam." John spoke firmly, putting the gun down and looking his youngest in the eye. "You're out of practice and even when you were coming on hunts with us I always gave you the safest role I could come up with." He reasoned. Sam rolled his eyes.

"Dad, you are aware that I'm not only a fully grown adult now, but one who can take out you Bobby and Dean all at once? Not to mention the other things I can do. If it safe for you and Dean, to go hunting a werewolf then it's safe for me." John pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I know what you're capable of in the field, Sam. But hunting's not the same as being on a covert mission. In the Marines you only ever had to be prepared for anything a human can do. On the hunt you have to be prepared for all of that, and then absolutely anything else too. If you want to come back to hunting, that's fine. I'll be more than happy to have both my boys on the road with me. But you don't just decide you're back in and come along on the first hunt that crops up nearby. You train and study and then train some more until you can prove you're ready." Having said his piece, John picked his gun back up and went back to cleaning it, considering the matter closed.

"Prove it to who? To you?" Sam tried not to let himself get angry, but it was difficult not to fall into old patterns. "I'm sorry, dad but I've got no intention of jumping through hoops doing stuff I could do with my eyes shut, literally, until you decide to take me off the leading strings. There's pretty much nothing you can do to stop me from hunting right this very second if I chose to, so wouldn't it be much better, and more reassuring to you, if you take me along with you on this hunt where you can observe me and see for yourself that I'm safer out there than anyone?" John opened his mouth to snap a sharp refusal back at Sam but managed at the last second to catch himself before he started yelling.

"Sam. Psychic abilities and special forces training don't make you immortal or unbeatable. We've only just gotten you back after thinking you were dead. You want me to let you go back out there without knowing – knowing – that what you learned in the Marines and with The Assembly translates successfully into hunting?" That stopped Sam in his tracks. He'd not considered it from that perspective. It still wasn't going to stop him; if he let John keep him back this time, he'd end up trapped in a never-ending round of training and tests as John found excuse after excuse to keep Sam from returning to the hunt. While he understood and appreciated the love and care in the efforts, he couldn't allow it. He was an adult and wouldn't let his father slot him right back in the teenage son spot. He'd never get out.

Butting heads was never the way forward with John though. Once he'd decided he was right, that was it. Any plan he made had to be the best and only one. Sam sighed, letting John think he was
agreeing and walked away. He wasn't agreeing to anything, but if he could just search ahead on the tracks, he could see the best way to successfully complete the hunt, and maybe work out a solution to his dilemma.

Back in his room, Sam laid himself down on his bed and let out a huge gusting sigh. When he'd decided to reunite with his family he'd known it was going to be hard, frustrating and probably angering. But not like this. He'd expected hate and disgust, at least from John and that was something he knew how to deal with, but a huge part of the frustration he was suffering now was due to the fact that all of the interference he was facing was due to the love and care his family had for him. *So annoying. I can't even yell at them for it.* He punched his pillow. Dean's interference was basically handled, and Sam had a strategy in place for handling the issue of their relationship. John was a different matter. Just like with Dean, tackling him head on wasn't going to work; his dad would just dig in his heels. Persuasion was likewise impossible. Sam saw no other option – he'd have to just go around him and hand him a fait accompli. But first he'd need to go looking for the best way to find and take out the werewolf. That was the advantage he held over his family – John, Bobby and Dean would have to wait until the full moon, catch the werewolf on the prowl and either take it out in wolf form or track it until morning when it changed back to human form and then take it out.

Sam had no such limitations. He could go looking on his tracks, use his precog skills to find out the identity of the werewolf and where they would be at what time and simply take them out with a surgical strike without there being a single new victim. He only had two main problems; weapons and transport. In the very near future he'd need to source himself some good firearms. He had nothing against shotguns and hunting rifles; they had their place and purpose. But while he had extensive training with them, even beyond what John had taught him, Sam truly excelled with the M40 sniper rifle for long distance work, a Desert Eagle handgun for mid-range, and knives for close-up, and mid-range too if knife throwing was called for. His accuracy over distance as a sniper was unbeaten in the Marines, and even the men in his unit had referred to his knife skills as 'terrifying'. He truly regretted the loss of his favourite knife. Another thing the demon Bobo had taken from him. Maybe Bobby could find a replacement. Sam figured it would be simple enough to borrow a hunting rifle from one of his family for a little target practice, the same too for a knife. He'd have to 'borrow' some silver rounds, but as long as he replaced them later he wouldn't feel bad about that.

Long-term, Sam wanted to be out hunting with Dean, partners in every sense of the word. In which case he had no need for transport of his own – the Impala would take them everywhere they needed to go. But he did need some kind of transport. Aberdeen, South Dakota was a short drive – only three hours away – but hitching his way there was out of the question so he needed to come up with a solution. It had been years, but he still remembered how to steal a car. However as stealing Bobby's or John's trucks or – God forbid – the Impala would create a lot of bad feeling, he'd have to steal a car from Sioux Falls, which would mean walking around carrying a rifle until he found a suitable vehicle. That was just asking for trouble.

Sam sat back and gave the matter some real thought for several minutes before suddenly an idea struck him that made him laugh out loud. He'd only been back with his family for a few weeks, but already he was thinking like a Winchester – he'd completely forgotten one salient fact; he had a very healthy bank account after years in the Marines, few expenses and no extravagances. If he wanted to, he could walk into any gun store and legally purchase the exact weapons he needed. Of course, as he was going to be taking out a monster that would appear completely human, once he'd made his shot and investigation would then turn up evidence of him buying the exact firearm used and he'd immediately be wanted. Bobby had a good off the books arms dealer though. John too, but his was based out of Kentucky and that was too far for convenience. Bobby's contact was only an hours' drive away, and he'd have everything Sam could possibly need, including the silver ammo and probably a decent knife or two too. So, he could use legitimate money for an illegal purchase for now, and later on stock up an entire arsenal completely legally if he wanted. So that just left the
transport issue.

Now that he'd remembered the Winchester way wasn't the only way he could play it, Sam reasoned that he could just hitch to the nearest car hire place and hire a nondescript car for a few days. He couldn't believe that such a simple solution had evaded him. Once he was back to hunting properly, he'd have to go back to the Winchester way for the most part; his savings would be best left to gain interest in case of a rainy day. In fact, he could take advantage of his precog gift and make some investments – grow his nest egg for the future, maybe he and Dean could be the first hunters ever to retire with a decent pension. So, while he hunted it would be fake IDs and credit card scams like the old days, but there would always be something to fall back on if they needed it. He grinned, it felt good to know he'd be able to look after himself, Dean or his dad if any of them ever had need of it.

Closing his eyes, Sam found his blank space and started searching the stations on his track for the identity and whereabouts of the werewolf in Aberdeen. He was going to put a stop to his dad's interference and pull this hunt off in real style.

If you miss the train I'm on
You will know that I am gone
You can hear the whistle blow a hundred miles

Sam left at just after six the next morning. He'd called ahead to the car rental place in Sioux Falls and booked a nondescript sedan for his journey, and had made a call to Bobby's gun guy, so the rifle he wanted, along with the ammo and a silver knife would be waiting for him as he detoured there on his way to Aberdeen.

He left a note on Bobby's fridge saying he was out running some errands and would call if he'd be late back, so hopefully his family wouldn't freak out when they couldn't find him, although he was pretty sure they'd see through that easily and the freaking out would commence almost as soon as they noticed he wasn't just hanging around the junkyard working out. He figured that they'd start chasing him down within an hour of finding his note, so once he'd picked up his new M40, a dozen silver rounds, *Ha! One will do it. Two for safety* and his new knife, Sam stepped on the gas and relied on his foreknowledge of the journey to avoid getting picked up by the cops for speeding.

Including his detour for his weapons, Sam made the three-hour drive in just over two and a half hours and found a discrete parking spot for his hire car. While searching along the tracks he'd found the identity of the werewolf, a customer service rep called Francis Lentham, and had determined that his best chance was during his lunch break, which he always took at one o'clock sharp, and always at the same diner. Had Sam found any evidence of Francis not realising what he was doing, or of him realising and trying to stop it from happening, he might've tried a different approach – looked for a cure despite being almost positive there was none or tried to help the guy lock himself up safely during the full moon. But what Sam had seen along the tracks was a dangerous and cunning man who was only too happy with what he considered a special gift. The guy was actually searching for a woman to turn so that he could create himself a mate, and he had not a care for who he might kill in the process. Sam was used to taking out threats in the field, and this guy certainly counted as that, so he had no qualms about what he was about to do.

Reaching into the back seat and grabbing his M40 and a half dozen rounds, Sam climbed out of the hire car and checked his belt to make sure his knife was secure. He'd pre-selected the building he was now parked behind as the perfect sniper position; The top four floors were vacant in preparation for renovations, the building was high enough to give him an excellent vantage point over the rout Francis would be taking to the diner, and there were even a couple of flags on nearby buildings to help inform Sam of the wind direction. The only disadvantage was the distance; It was closing in on two and a half thousand yards. Not the longest shot he'd ever taken successfully, but with the others he'd have a spotter, feeding him information such as wind speed and direction. Still, Sam had *seen* he'd make the shot, so he wasn't concerned, he just had a familiar focused energy buzzing through him – he always did when taking up a sniping position.

He checked to see that no one was watching and jogged to the back entrance of the building. Carrying the M40, he couldn't risk the elevator – it was only the top four floors that were empty – so with a sigh, Sam started a slow jog up the thirty floors of stairs to his position. He was just rounding the corner on the fourteenth floor when he caught sight through the window of a familiar black car pulling in around the back of the building. He grinned. He'd known they'd chase him down, but he was kind of impressed they'd found him so quickly. Still they were too far behind him to stop him. He'd have made the shot and be on his way back down by the time they got within shouting distance of him. He sped his ascent a little, just to give him a slightly bigger margin – not too fast; arriving at
his position out of breath would be no good. He needed his breathing slow and even to make a perfect shot. As he cleared the door to the twenty seventh floor he heard the fire door far below him bang closed. They were inside, but as he'd expected, they were too far behind to stop him. He slowed a little, allowing himself to regain his even breathing as he walked up the last three flights and pulled open the door to the top floor. Walking carefully through the dust and debris from the renovations so as not to leave behind any evidence of his being there, Sam crossed to the West side of the building and cracked open the window, seating himself on an upturned paint tub in as comfortable as shooting position as he could find. His left foot placed firmly on a raised ledge before the window and his left elbow resting carefully on his knee, Sam looked carefully down his scope and adjusted it for the distance. He focused it in on the position he'd seen and then sat back and observed the flags on the buildings opposite. There was a gentle breeze blowing from his right, not much to adjust for. He looked through his scope at the trees in the square below and noted the lightly swaying branches – the wind was a little stronger at street level. Sam checked his watch – Francis would be walking by in less than a minute. He listened intently, hearing the tell-tale sounds of several pairs of boots running up the stairs. By the sounds of it they were only on the twelfth floor or so. There was no pressure. He adjusted his shot according to the stronger street level breeze, chambered a round, and again raised his M40, pouring all his concentration down the scope. Calm breaths in and out. His finger rested on the trigger. Calm breaths in and out. He checked the flags. Calm breaths in and out. Francis Lentham came around the corner, talking on his cell phone. Calm breaths in and out. Sam gently started squeezing the trigger. Calm breaths in and out. Francis Lentham, a werewolf, passed between the passers-by and into an open space on the sidewalk. Calm breaths in and out. Sam applied the last half-ounce of pressure to his trigger. Calm breaths in and out. Francis Lentham, a vicious werewolf dropped to his knees between two steps, a bright red stain appearing over his heart on his crisp white shirt. Calm breaths in and out. Sam chambered another round and squeezed the trigger. Calm breaths in and out. Francis Lentham, a vicious and murderous werewolf collapsed sideways to the ground from his knees, the back of his head spread across a three-foot radius of side walk.

Sam sat back and blew out his last breath. Job done. He collected his casings and retraced his steps back to the stair exit, careful to place his feet precisely where he had before and scuff any boot prints up, so they were unrecognisable. He rubbed any prints from both side of the door with his sleeve and turned to go down the stairs.

In front of him was a panting and furious-looking Dean. A couple of flights down, he could hear more boots running – John must be there too. Sam grinned brightly at his brother.

"Hey Dean! Out for a run?" Dean's face, already furious, grew red and apoplectic.

"Don't try and smirk your way out of this, you stupid, reckless dick." He ground out, his anger all the more chilling for the quietness of his voice. "You're a smart guy. Surely you must see the trouble you've gotten yourself in. Now I thought I heard two shots. Please tell me that you didn't open fire in broad daylight on a random innocent on the off-chance that they might be the werewolf." Sam rolled his eyes, refusing to be cowed by Dean's fury.

"Of course I didn't." He retorted, insulted by the suggestion. Dean's shoulders relaxed a little. "I fired two controlled shots and took out the man I knew damn well was the werewolf." He gestured vaguely at the stairs behind Dean, where John could be heard just a flight below now. "So, it would probably be a good idea if we got out of here before some bright spark works out where the shots came from and comes to investigate.

Dean's fury hadn't abated in the slightest, but even through his anger he was able to see the sense of that last. It wouldn't be very long until police were swarming the high buildings in the area, looking for the gunman responsible and it would be a very bad thing if the Winchesters were found in the
vicinity with a sniper rifle. He growled at Sam and licked the wall.

"Fine. Get your ass down those stairs and to the piece of shit car you hired, and if you've got any sense, you won't even make eye contact with dad on your way down, let alone shoot off some smart-ass remark; On top of everything else, he's going to be livid that he's just hauled ass up all these stairs just to turn back around and run back down them. Meet us at the first diner off the highway, and if you're lucky I will have calmed dad enough on the way there that he doesn't greet you with a right hook when we get there." He gave the wall another couple of kicks for good luck and Sam made good on his suggestion, starting at a jog back down to the exit. As he passed John, he had to quickly dodge the outstretched arm that attempted to grab him and bring him to a halt; on this much, Dean was correct. Attempting to reason with his dad just then would be a very bad idea.

As he trotted down the flights of stairs, Sam grumbled silently to himself. *Do an exemplary job, taking out a monster before he can increase his body count, and all I get is shit.* He snorted with irritation. His silent complaints continued running through his head, punctuated by the not so silent bitching descending slightly slower a few flights behind him. John was making it very clear exactly how pissed he was, and Dean didn't appear to be disagreeing with their dad.

Once he reached his hire car, Sam resisted the urge to throw his M40 into the trunk in anger. Instead, he carefully removed the sight and clip, and secured everything in the case he had stashed there. He made sure he drove calmly and unhurriedly away from the building, yielding when necessary for the increasing number of police cars that were converging on the area like flies around an open jelly jar.

The news reports on the radio were full of confusion and conflicting reports – theories about a sniper, a mugger and a jilted lover were flying across the new desks, making Sam grin. He'd be well clear, and Dean and their dad too, before the cops even thought about setting up roadblocks. With any luck at all, they'd all be safely back at Bobby's before the police even put out a statement saying they were looking for a sniper.

He had to wait nearly fifteen minutes in the parking lot at the diner before the familiar rumble of the Impala's engine caught his ears. Sam straightened up from his slouch against the trunk of his hire car, reminding himself to keep his cool and not let the others spark his temper. His actions were completely defensible, but he'd have to maintain his calm in order to get that point across to them. John in particular would have a hard time accepting that a way other than his own was also valid, and in this case, actually better.

As expected, John's body language was screaming his barely controlled rage as he climbed out of the car and stalked over to his youngest son. Dean appeared to have calmed himself a little on the drive – he looked more resigned than furious.

"Explain yourself." John ground out through clenched teeth. Sam was actually impressed – back in the day, John wouldn't have even given him that chance. He would've launched immediately into a tirade about how stupid Sam had been and started listing all the things he'd one wrong.

"I did what I do best." Sam explained calmly and concisely. "I acted on intel and took out a threat with minimal loss of life and minimal danger to myself." His cool response caused his dad to falter in his hostility. "It was a clean kill – one to the heart and one to the head just in case, no one saw me or even caught the tiniest glimpse, I left no fingerprints or footprints and I picked up my spent casings. I used a fake ID to rent the car, the rifle is untraceable, and because I didn't have to wait until the next full moon, there's a certain brunette out there who doesn't need to die because old Francis never got the chance to attack and turn her like he was planning. I really don't see what the problem is here, dad." Sam replied reasonably.

John's ire deflated with each point that Sam ticked off.
"You're certain of your target?" He asked tensely. "There's no way you could've made a mistake?"

Sam looked insulted.

"No chance at all. It was definitely him. Hell, if you want, you and Dean can sneak into the morgue tonight and test his corpse for a reaction to silver. I promise you there will be a reaction though." John blew out a long breath.

"It's just not how we've always done things, Sam. You know that." He raised his hands to keep Sam from arguing. "I'm not saying it's a bad way to do it, but you know I'm not good with change. You've got to give me a while to get my head around this." It was entirely reasonable. Sam was honestly amazed at how well his dad was taking Sam's actions. From the look of Dean, he was a little less surprised. Sam suspected his brother had been doing some fast talking on the drive to the diner to get their dad to this point. Sam owed him.

"Let's go in and get something to eat; I'm starving." Dean jumped into the pause in conversation. To his mind that had gone far better than he'd expected, and he wanted to put an end to the conversation before one of his stubborn relatives said something to set the other off. "Sam can fill us in on the rest later on, but I'm seriously craving a cheeseburger right now." He turned and walked in to the diner, leaving his dad and brother little choice but to follow.

The diner was almost completely empty – just a couple of obvious trucker-types sitting at the counter nursing bottomless coffees – so the Winchesters chose themselves a booth in the back corner of the place, all three of them trying to get to the bench with its back to the wall ahead of the others. Sam snickered.

"That's going to be awkward; we've all got the same instincts to have our backs covered. What are we going to do? Draw straws every time we eat together?" John snorted.

"Screw that. I've got seniority. I get the first choice." Sam reminded his dad with a wink to take the edge off the comment.

"Bullshit." John responded with a cocky grin as he shoved Sam to one side and sat with his back to the wall. "That only counts in the Corps. Dad outranks son every time out here in civi-land." Dean snickered and sat on the other side of the booth, at least allowing Sam the outer position on the bench. Sam sighed.

"Maybe we should just make sure we get a table next time. Then at least the seats can be moved." He murmured, picking up the menu. In the background the tv was showing the local news. "Hey, can you turn that up, please?" He called out to the tired looking waitress. She grumbled but did as he asked.

"...on the streets of Aberdeen, South Dakota today, as a local businessman was gunned down apparently without motive on a crowded street. A CCTV camera outside the nearby bank caught the action. What you are about to see contains disturbing images, if you're of a nervous disposition, please look away now." The scene cut to a slightly pixelated shot of a crowd walking along past the shops and then suddenly a man in a crisp suit dropped to his knees and then a couple of seconds later slumped to the floor with the back of his head missing. Sam grunted with satisfaction at the clip and turned back to his menu, not noticing at first the astonished, awed and flatteringly impressed looks his brother and dad were giving him. After a moment of silence, he glanced up, finding them still staring, expressions unchanged.

"What?" He asked concerned, his hand going up to his nose instinctively to check for boogers.
"We didn't see the shots, only heard them." Dean murmured quietly, not wanting to draw any attention. "How far was the range?" Sam shrugged casually, not used to the admiration he seemed to be getting, certainly from his dad at any rate.

"I can't tell exactly. Not quite two and a half thousand yards, is the ballpark though." Both John and Dean's jaws dropped even further.

"And you just tapped him with one to the heart and one to the head? From that distance?" John whisper-yelled in a strangled tone. He didn't sound angry – just stunned.

"Well yes." Sam replied, starting to blush. "I've made longer shots – a little longer anyway – but I always had a spotter then to track the wind and stuff like that."

"Fuck me!" Dean and John whispered in unison, pride and admiration clear in their tones. Sam dropped his eyes to his menu once again, not sure of how to deal with their admiration, John's in particular. He'd always craved it as a child, but now he had it, he felt uncomfortable and didn't know what to do with it.

"I think I'll join Dean and go with a cheeseburger, maybe get some chilli fries too. How about you, dad?" He tried to change the subject. John looked thoughtful. I don't know what he's looking so pensive about; he always gets the same thing in these places – Burger for lunch, meatloaf for dinner. Sam thought to himself. His answer was quick in coming.

"You know, Sam, we might have a problem after all; There can't be more than five people in the country, maybe the world who could make that shot. Your name is bound to be on a list somewhere. What happens when they realise that you're in the country and living only a couple of hours' drive away from this shooting?" John asked in an urgent whisper, leaning across the table. Sam's reply was put on hold by the arrival of their waitress. Once they'd all ordered, without the standard Winchester flirting for once, Sam sat back on the bench and spoke quietly.

"Yeah I thought about that too. Thing is though, dad, as far as the Marine Corps is concerned, I'm half crippled, one hip shattered, missing fingers on one hand, scarred up to hell with barely healed burns over half my body and tied to my crutches. If anyone thinks of me after looking at that list, they're going to be told in no uncertain terms that I'm too disabled to have pulled it off. And on the outside chance that someone does come out to Bobby's to check on me, well I'll just put up a glamour like Justin taught me to years ago, and all they'll see is exactly what I just described – a crippled and retired Marine, not capable of even driving to Aberdeen, let alone climbing all those stairs and making those shots." He gave a self-satisfied smirk. John glowered.

"Those fucking stairs nearly killed me, and I'm certainly not on the disabled list. Yeah I can see that they'd write you off in that case." John gave a decisive nod. "Well ok then. I guess I've got nothing else to add to that. It was a clean kill and you did a good job of it. Well done, Sam." He reached across the table and gave his stunned youngest a firm handshake.

"So, you you'll get off my back about coming back to hunting?" Sam asked once he'd cleared his suddenly tight throat a few times and recovered his voice. Dean tensed beside him.

"I'll want to see you sparring a bit with your brother, just to set my mind at ease that you're back on form there, and I'd prefer it if you took a backseat for a few hunts until you've got your eye in, but yeah, I guess I'll get off your back about it." John confirmed cautiously. Dean gave a heavy sigh and painted on a fake grin which only fooled himself and John – Sam didn't buy it for a second.

"Excellent!" Dean blurted out, his enthusiasm ringing as fake in Sam's ears as the grin straining his brother's face. "All three Winchesters back in the hunting game together again."

He raised his beer,
which the waitress had delivered just a moment earlier, in a toast which the others returned.

"Together again." They all toasted quietly.

To Sam's surprise, a pair of FBI agents appeared at Bobby's yard only two days later, eye's snapping around and clearly on edge as they approached the house from their standard issue government issue black SUV. Luckily, Sam had been inside, working on a stack of brand new fake IDs, ironically a couple of FBI credentials amongst them, so Bobby was able to quietly call out a warning to him before he even heard the doors on the vehicle outside slamming closed.

"Sam, there's a black SUV pulling up outside." Bobby's voice was tense but relatively calm.

"Feds?"

"Yeah, looks like. Nervous too. Scouting around for gunman and trying hard not to look like they are." Sam snorted softly under his breath and stood up, dodging into his room for the crutches he'd not needed for a while. Muttering a glamour spell under his breath, Sam slouched a little, leaning heavily on his crutches to add to the effect his spell had cast over his appearance. To anyone looking at him, he looked just as he had when he'd crutched his way out of the hospital – scarred and broken, pretty much crippled, and certainly not capable of carrying out a long-distance assassination. As he approached the door, he heard Joh's terse reply to what must have been a request from the agents to see his younger son.

"…if you really must, but don't you go upsetting him. My boy's a true American hero, and he deserves your respect and gratitude, not accusations and suspicions just because you agents' the sneer in John's voice was clear on that word "have somehow gotten it into your heads that he's a dangerous gun-toting madman." Sam allowed a small smirk to cross his face as his head was down, looking at the floor as he limped his way over.

"We're not accusing Lieutenant Winchester of anything, sir." One of the agents replied, his tone making it clear that he was lying – they'd already concluded that the co-incidence was far too great that one of the tiny number of people capable of making the shot that had killed Francis Lenthal was currently living only a couple of hours' drive away. "We simply need to talk to him to see if he can shed any light on the incident in Aberdeen two days ago." Sam suspected they'd either not read far enough into his file to see that he'd been medically discharged, or if they had, they'd not properly checked the extent of his injuries.

"Sounds like a standard regulation bullshit answer to me." John grumbled. "You can wait out here on the porch and I'll have him come out to you. It's a little hard for him to manoeuvre inside." John's belligerence nearly made Sam laugh out loud. As he limped forward, he caught the eyes of both Dean and Bobby who were also struggling to keep their amusement at bay; John was really making the most of his chance to put the feds in their place. It was quite touching too, the honest pride he'd heard in his dad's voice as he described his youngest as 'a true American hero'. John came back inside, leaving the pair of agents grumbling away to each other.

"They're really not happy being left out there." John whispered gleefully to Sam as he passed him. "They're half expecting a sniper to pick them off from somewhere in the pile of junkers." Sam was surprised at how well his dad was taking the event – he would've expected at least irritation, and probably later a long round of 'I told you so', but it seemed that John had finally found the ability to have faith in Sam's abilities, and he nodded at his son as he cast a quick eye over the glamour he'd cast over himself. "Feel free to play up the cripple front – really make the bastards feel bad for all but judging you guilty before they even got here. Maybe that'll teach the idiots to actually read through a
file before jumping to conclusions." It seemed John had come to the same conclusions Sam had. With a smirk and eyes twinkling with mischief, Sam nodded at his dad and crutched his way to the door. Dean pushed it open for him and walked through ahead, unwilling to miss the show.

The expression on the agents' faces as they took in Sam's appearance was truly epic. Jaws dropped in stereo, and hands that had been tense and twitching as if eager to reach for guns relaxed suddenly like puppets with their strings cut.

"L-Lieutenant Winchester?" One of the agents managed to force out after a few seconds, disbelief colouring his tone. He leaned to one side, unconsciously looking around Sam for an alternative candidate for their lethal crazed sniper.

"Yes?" Sam replied politely, his face a perfect mask of irritated curiosity. The agents just stood and stared, completely at a loss.

"You know, it's rude to stare." Dean pointed out blandly. The agents seemed to jerk back to themselves at the rebuke. They both broke into blushes and immediately averted their gazes.

"Sorry, sir." One of them stammered. "We didn't intend any insult." Sam just grunted and carefully lowered himself onto the bench on the porch, Dean playing his part beautifully and offering a lot more assistance than Sam would've needed even if his injuries were still as bad as they appeared.

"So, what can I do for you then, agents?" Sam could hear Bobby and John fighting back their giggles behind the door. Apparently, all it took to turn them into a pair of naughty eight-year-old school boys was a bit of casual fed-taunting. The next fifteen minutes was, for the two agents a horrendous minefield of potential insults against a decorated and horrifically injured veteran, littered with transparent excuses for coming out to question him. For Bobby and the Winchesters, it was a quarter hour of pure entertainment, watching the feds twist and spin in the tornado of politely phrased, but deadly accurate accusations of harassing Sam and a failure to do due diligence before haring off to question or possibly arrest a suspect. By the time the hapless pair left, they were cursing their luck and seriously re-thinking their careers, and Sam and Dean, the latter of whom was clutching a piece of paper with each agents name and badge number, which he fully intended on using in a call to complain to their superiors, were biting the inside of their mouths in an attempt not to join Bobby and John who were still inside the house, now giggling and snorting like a pair of pre-teens at a slumber party. The brothers managed to hold in their laughter until the SUV was pulling through the gate and then it was all just too much, and they let it go in a loud gale of laughter. Sam waited until the feds were completely out of sight before grabbing up his crutches and sauntering inside, dropping the glamour as he went so that his appearance was back to normal by the time he passed through the door. John and Bobby seemed to finally be getting control of themselves.

"Well that was entertaining." Sam grinned cheekily at his family.

"Yeah. I don't know quite why we found that so funny, but for some reason the whole thing just set us off." John replied, rubbing a hand over his face and rubbing the soreness out of his cheeks muscles. "I haven't laughed that hard in years!" Sam didn't get why they'd all been so struck by the hilarity either, but he was just happy to see a lightness and humour to his dad that he couldn't remember ever seeing before.

"I can teach you all that glamour spell. It's not so easy to make big changes like I did if you don't have some psychic power to boost it, but it's enough to make a few small changes to your appearance – make it easier to get around and not get busted by suspicious cops when you're out hunting." He offered, not sure how it would be taken. John had never been too fond of any kind of magic, only begrudgingly using rituals when it was the only way to get a job done. John looked thoughtful.
"You know, I might just take you up on that. Maybe it's about time this old dog learned some new tricks." Dean's eyes boggled at his dad being willing to try something new, and magic no less, but then looked less than eager when Sam looked his way, making it clear the offer extended to him too.

"You want me to learn how to make myself look less stunningly handsome?" He choked with mock indignation. "Dude, why would I want to cheat the world of the opportunity to look on my natural perfection, even temporarily?" The whole family rolled their eyes.

"You could make yourself look taller." Sam said teasingly, making sure to loom over his brother as he spoke. "I thought you might enjoy not looking like a munchkin once in a while." He raised a mocking eyebrow. "Even though in reality you'd still be a shrimp." The strangled, outraged sound from Dean's throat made Sam grin evilly, and had John a Bobby snorting in amusement.

"Not everyone wants to look like a freak of nature, Gigantor." Dean grumbled and shoved Sam with his shoulder as he stalked past him. "You're just jealous that I got all the handsome genes, and you just got a couple of extra inches in height in compensation." Sam resisted the urge to childishly stick out his tongue at his brother… just.

As it turned out in the end, they didn't all go hunting together. For a week after the FBI agents came by, John and Bobby eagerly, and Dean somewhat less so, learned the glamour spell that Sam had used to alter his appearance, Bobby made calls and trips to fill out Sam's personal weapons cache, and John had Sam and Dean sparring out in the yard, watching carefully in part to ensure Sam was back on form, but also eager to see what new tricks and moves his youngest had picked up. He couldn't believe the speed of his younger son now, how fast he was able to move his body to avoid a hit and land one of his own in return.

"You sure you're not using teleportation?" He'd asked semi-seriously one day, after Dean had tried and failed to land a hit for nearly half an hour. Sam had just laughed from the ground where he had Dean in yet another submission hold. Dean didn't look like he found it anywhere near as amusing. Having never managed to get his older brother in a hold even once when they were kids, in Dean's opinion, Sam was enjoying the payback way too much.

But Dean was learning quickly. Having had the same background training as Sam from an early age, he also had the same knack for picking up new moves, and it wasn't even a whole day before he was throwing some of Sam's own new moves back at his younger brother. Not quite with the same level of success yet, but they all knew that eventually he'd level the playing field. The Winchesters were already formidable opponents in hand-to-hand combat, with Sam's input they'd be almost untouchable.

Just as the week was coming to an end though, and John was beginning to scour the papers for a likely looking job for them, a call came in to Bobby's from an old hunter in Idaho. He'd decided to retire, but his son wanted to start hunting and he wanted John and Bobby to handle his training. Both of the older men were flattered but unsure if they wanted to be saddled by a green young man, full of piss and vinegar, and one who wasn't even related to either of them for that matter. But they owed the old guy a big favour after he'd pulled their asses out of a hunt gone very wrong a few years back, so they didn't see how they could turn him down.

"You know, maybe this is the way things should go." Sam mused as they sat around with a few beers the evening of the request. "We've always said that old hunters never get to retire – they just keep on hunting until finally they're not fast enough and the thing they're hunting gets them. But
maybe it would help turn hunters into more of a community, and increase our general skills and effectiveness if we kind of formalised things?” The others looked at him a little blankly, not following his drift.

"Formalise things?” Bobby asked.

"Yeah. I mean none of us are immortal, none of us can avoid the fact that as we age we're all going to slow down and find the general everyday tasks involved in hunting tougher and tougher on a physical level. If we were back in the old days, working a job like, say blacksmithing, it would be the norm to take on an apprentice when we got to that point; a younger set of muscles to take on the grunt work, who in return learns all the tricks and skills they'll need later on when they're out on their own, you know?” Sam took a big swig of his beer and set it down, leaning back into his chair.

"Actually, that's a pretty good idea!” Dean jumped in, seeing immediately the future that Sam was envisioning. "It'd be like semi-retirement. Training up the next generation of hunters so that no skills or knowledge is lost, then turning them out into the world to keep up the fight, while you either take on the next newbie, or set up a home somewhere and take on a research and support role.” He was excited by the idea; finally seeing a way that older hunters like their dad and Bobby could survive into old age without loosing face by retiring. John and Bobby looked thoughtful.

"There's another huge advantage that we've missed here too.” Bobby added in a considering tone. "Now, I mean no offense here, so don't jump down my throat, but I know all of you have thought about how you boys were brought up. Every year another family is ripped to shreds by some evil or another, sending the remnants out into the world with a fire in their bellies for revenge against the monsters. That's how almost all of us got started in this life. But the ones with kids like yours, they're the ones that face the hardest future. Either the kids get carted around the country like you boys were, always in danger and never being able to be proper kids, or they end up dropped off with a distant relative, or in foster care while the adults run around the country looking for monsters to kill.” He looked around to find the others nodding sadly in agreement.

"True, but I don't see how Sam's suggestion helps with any of that.” John said quietly.

"Well now it's not so much his 'apprenticeship' idea that struck me, although that could play into it too. It's more what struck me when he mentioned a community. Fact is, outside of Ellen's roadhouse and me here at the junkyard, us hunters don't have any kind of network of support apart from our own hard-won contacts. None of us have a clue how many others are out there, what kind of expertise they might have, who might specialise in what, how many have kids they're dragging around with them, how many might need help right now – this second. If we could somehow start to build a network – a community out of our rag-tag little group, maybe things would go easier and better for all of us. We could share ideas and skills, back each other up when needed, and most importantly, set up some kind of arrangement where the kids could be looked after, safe when their parents are hunting, looked after if the worst happens and they're suddenly alone in the world.” The idea resonated with all of them.

They all knew that had something terrible happened to John, Bobby would've stepped in and taken care of the boys – he long been considered a part of the Winchester family in all but name - but even with that loose agreement, something could have easily gone wrong, and the Winchester boys could've ended up lost in the foster system. How many more kids were out there that didn't even have the fragile back-up system Dean and Sam had grown up with?

"I bet Pastor Jim would be more than happy to help us start setting something up." John mused. "He was always after me to leave you boys with him while I hunted. Sometimes I wonder if it might've been better for you both if I had. But we can't go back and change it now. Maybe though we can
help make it better for others in the future."

Over the next few days, they all began thrashing out a loose framework for formalising a proper hunting community. Pastor Jim was indeed very interested, the phone almost constantly ringing as he had another thought to share with John and Bobby about setting up a kind of sanctuary for hunters and their families somewhere.

Throughout the years, Bobby had amassed a huge portfolio of backwoods properties, courtesy of hunters dying and having no one else to leave their property to. There was bound to be something amongst it all that would serve as a decent home base for their new community. Somewhere easily defensible and remote enough not to draw much attention from civilians, while still being close enough to civilisation that families could be safely homed there, either temporarily or permanently, and still have the kids go to school. Contacts were reached out to, encouraging them to do the same with their contacts and so on, in the hopes of spreading the word and also of building a decent network for communication.

Among all this activity, John and Bobby agreed to train their friend's son, on the condition that the old hunter would help them setting up their hunter community as much as he could. Amazingly quickly, things were coming together.

Dean and Sam put in more than their share of work at Bobby's fielding phone calls and in Sam's case, building a website (with online help from Justin) for the hunter community, sharing knowledge, contacts and help. Ellen was contacting other hunter-friendly bar owners, getting their agreement to have someone come to their places and throw up some protections, to place a discrete rune on their signage, indicating to hunters that they could get help there, and to keep a comprehensive hunter contact list behind their bars so that they could offer that help when needed.

The Assembly were delighted to take a big role in helping out, and even Castiel was content to offer what support he could when Sam asked him, seemingly pleased by the idea of there being a much bigger and more organised network of help available should the next big player from hell pop back out of the woodwork wanting to get the Apocalypse back on track. But eventually they got to a point where they'd run out of phone calls to make, and only getting out on the road and spreading the word with hunters they'd meet along the way would get them any further.

Having committed himself, John couldn't go out on the road, and neither could Bobby. So, it was down to Dean and Sam to take the word out and spread it, hunting as they went and keeping their ears and eyes to the ground for any sign of apocalyptic rumblings.

It had to be noted that Sam was distinctly more excited by the idea than Dean was. Dean seemed more resigned to the fact; he'd already been finding it difficult to keep his resolve and keep his hands off Sam (keeping his mind off him was beyond his abilities) even with their dad and Bobby around all the time. When it was just the two of them alone, sharing the confines of the Impala by day and a motel room at night, he really didn't know how he was supposed to manage.

Dean was clinging on to his resolve by a thread as it was; one by one, Sam had eliminated his well-reasoned arguments as to why they shouldn't be together. Firstly, he'd pointed out to Dean the futility of finding himself a good man outside of hunting, next he'd pointed out that he wouldn't and/or couldn't leave hunting behind and go off to build his own life in the normal world. The only thing Dean had left to cling to was his insistence that a sexual and romantic relationship between brothers was wrong on a moral level – a shaky argument from someone who'd always shunned the social norms – and his belief that he just wasn't good enough for Sam. Dean had a terrible feeling that it wouldn't be long at all before his desire and need for his brother overcame that guilty feeling of not being good enough.
Except... Well, except for the fact that Sam still wasn't fighting for what he'd seemed to want on that first day they'd reunited. At first, Dean had thought maybe Sam was trying to make him jealous with his flirting with Justin. Fucking hate that guy! But he'd never once caught his younger brother looking over at him to see what effect his flirting was having. The laughter from the bathroom the first evening Justin had helped Sam in the shower, and then the low voices and chuckles from Sam's room that night had almost spurred Dean into bursting through the door and pulling Justin away from his brother in a fit of jealous rage – only the presence of their dad and Bobby, along with the other Assembly members had kept Dean in check. But Sam didn't seem to be watching for the effects of his behaviour. He was oblivious to how it was affecting Dean, like he'd just accepted Dean's rejection at face value and moved on. That still stung, and it still had Dean off balance. He'd have found it so much easier to fight against his own desires if Sam had been pushing too – something to fight against always made being stubborn easier for Dean. But with no push back from Sam, dean was struggling to keep his own wants at bay. Once they were alone for weeks at a time, he didn't know how he'd manage.

I'll just have to pick up a new fuck buddy at every bar we go to – burn off my urges that way. He told himself, even knowing it probably wouldn't work. Even though Sam didn't seem upset by Dean's rejection, he figured that picking up men in front of his younger brother was probably twisting the knife. So, he'd be limiting himself to women which, while he enjoyed women as much as he did men, he was definitely in need of harder, cleaner lines, taut muscles and strong grips, more than he wanted soft and yielding curves and gentleness these days.

As day by day the brothers readied themselves for leaving – creating collections of fake IDs, building up a decent arsenal of weapons for Sam, stocking up on lighter fluid, salt, holy water and a fuck-load of herbs that Sam declared they wouldn't be leaving without, Sam's expressions became lighter and lighter, and Dean's became grimmer and grimmer – a complete reversal from how things went when they were kids. Dean's mood wasn't improved by the constant itching from his new tattoos. He'd opted for three; a healing tattoo on his left hip, a warding-type devil's trap over his heart, and a blocking rune on the back on his neck to keep anyone or anything from getting into his mind. They all itched like motherfuckers as they healed, and anytime Dean went to scratch at them, Sam was always there to nag at him about ruining the protection if he scratched off the scabs. The combination of itching and nagging was enough to send Dean mad. Flipping his brother off each and every time was only a little relief, but it was all he had, so he made a point of keeping it up, even when Sam's back was turned.

By the time the brothers were stood in the yard, saying goodbye to their dad and Bobby, Dean couldn't ever recall having his head less in the game. He was a twisted mess of resignation, anticipation, irritation, frustration and any other 'ation' he could think of. Fucking Sam just looked happy to be off – calm and relaxed, his eyes bright and a grin on his face. The facial scarring was almost completely gone, so the grin was no longer pulling in an ugly way at the burn marks. He looked more like the Sammy that Dean remembered than ever, just in case Dean needed something else to screw with his head.

"Man, I can't believe how much I missed this car over the years!" Sam marvelled as he folded himself into the passenger seat, grinning at the well-remembered creak of the door hinges when he pulled the door shut. The comment even managed to lift Dean's spirits a little and he reached out a hand to pat the dashboard lovingly.

"Yeah she's a member of the family, my baby is." He agreed. "I hope you remember the rules about the music, Sammy. He raised a condescending eyebrow at his brother. Sam just rolled his eyes with a sardonic grin.

"Yeah yeah." He replied. "Driver picks the music, shotgun shuts his cake-hole." Sam recited The
Rule Dean had drilled into his head so long ago. "Not like the music will bother me all that much anyway; I've grown to appreciate Metallica as I've aged." Dean's face lit up

"Dude! It's about time. I knew with your brains you'd eventually get it." He shoved in a tape and twisted the volume knob, setting the speaker thrumming with overly loud rock music as he pulled away with a flashy spin of the rear wheels that probably had John and Bobby shaking their heads at him. Not that either brother could see it in the mirrors through the dust they'd kicked up.

They were heading to Sugar City, Idaho where one of the many phone calls they'd all been fielding all week had clued them into a nasty haunting which seemed to be the ghost of a victim of the Teton Dam collapse nearly 40 years before. There had been reported sightings for years of a man in fishing gear popping up all around town, but the spirit had always seemed pretty benign – not doing much more than giving people a scare until they convinced themselves they'd been seeing things. But in the last few weeks, something had changed, and the scares had become pushes, pinches, falls down stairs, and then just a couple of days before, a woman had been shoved by invisible hands into eh path of an oncoming car. She'd been lucky and had gotten away with just a few broken bones, but the haunting was clearly escalating, and it only seemed a matter of time before there was a death to lay at the feet of the spirit. Sam was reading up on the Teton Dam collapse as they drove along, the loud music not even putting a tiny dent in his concentration.

"Well the good news is, despite how bad the disaster was, and how little warning most people had, there were only eleven deaths when the dam burst and only eight of those were adult males, like witnessed are reporting the spirit to be." He told Dean, chewing absently on a pen as he spoke. "So even if we struggle to identify the spirit, the worst-case scenario is eight graves to dig up. Granted, that's not a fun time, and we'd have to get it done over just a couple of days or get caught in the act, but it's better than having a suspect list as long as my arm."

"Well let's just hope we can narrow it down even further, Sammy. I don't much like the idea of trying to dig up four graves a night, two nights in a row. Even with you giving us a psychic shove to help out, we'd be dead on our feet by the end of the second night." Dean's voice was a little strained. Not because of the thought of all that digging, but due to his inability to drag his eyes away from the pen in Sam's mouth for more than a few seconds at a time. His world had narrowed down to that fucking pen, dragging back and forth across Sam's lower lip, sliding into his mouth a few inches and then sliding, glistening with saliva back out again, only for the tip of Sam's tongue to peek out and tease at the divot in the very end. Dean's jeans were uncomfortably tight, his skin was clammy and tingling, his pulse and breathing were rapid and choppy, and his eyes just wouldn't stick to the road. Dean swallowed the gallons of saliva that had suddenly filled his mouth and shifted in his seat, trying to make a little room in his jeans. Seemingly oblivious, Sam continued with his eyes glued to his research.

"I guess we should start with trying to nail down exactly where the spirit had been appearing, and who it's been targeting; 'popping up all over town' doesn't sound like any kind of haunting I've ever heard about. There must be some link between either the places, the targets or both. Ghosts just don't act out randomly. Maybe once we establish what the link is, it'll tell us who the spirit is."

"Makes sense." Dean agreed. "So, you think going in as journalists?"

"Yeah. The local cops are barely looking into the events. If we go in as state cops or FBI it'd really raise some eyebrows." Sam finally took the pen out of his mouth and threw it, and his notes into his open duffle bag on the back seat. Dean couldn't decide if he was relieved or disappointed. At least we're in less danger of crashing. He figured. I seriously need to clean out the pipes tonight.
"So, we'll get set up at the motel and find a diner. See if we can combine getting dinner and pumping the locals for gossip?" Sam nodded.

"Sure. I could go for some dinner. Maybe we can find a bar later and see if we can get a few of the regulars talking too." Dean was relieved that Sam had made the suggestion. He'd been wondering how his brother would take it if he came up with the idea to hit the bars. When it came down to it, he still didn't really know this adult version of Sam. Little Sammy had been too young to go out for the night with his brother, although he'd managed to make his opinion clear on Dean's habit of going out cruising. Nothing overt, but his disdainful looks and pointed sniffs whenever Dean returned in the early hours of the morning, reeking of booze, stale cigarettes and cheap perfume had made his scorn more than obvious.

Dean had absolutely no clue how an adult version of his brother behaved when at liberty – was he prone to staying in with a book? Did he go out to the nearest bar and have a quiet drink with friends, returning on the right side of drunk at a sensible time of night? Did he find a good rowdy bar and play darts and pool until he was too drunk to do either? Was he fond of hitting the clubs, drinking and cruising for one-night stands? Dean just didn't know. Probably the first option. He smirked mentally. No matter how much Sammy's grown up, he's always been too sensible for his own good, and a real bookworm – reading for fun!

Bearing in mind his plans for the evening, Dean figured it would be best to get two rooms at the motel. More expensive, sure, but firstly, he really didn't want to deal with the hassle of finding somewhere to take whichever lucky woman he picked up that evening, and secondly, sharing a room with Sam, being right there when he wandered out of the bathroom after his shower, trying to make himself avert his eyes while Sam got changed, lying in a bed only a few feet away from Sam's bed, listening to each sleeping breath and forcing himself not to cross those few feet, and every boundary he'd given himself, seemed like an obviously bad plan.

Of course, he probably should've let Sam in on at least the first half of his reasoning; when they pulled up in the parking lot of the motel, Sam climbed out and was inside the office, asking for a room with two queens before Dean had even finished stretching the driving kinks out of his back and legs. He ground his teeth in frustration; Sam wasn't likely to accept 'just because' as a reason if Dean asked him to get a second room, so he was stuck with sharing – for this hunt anyway.

"You planning on just standing in the parking lot with that blank look on your face the whole time, or are you gonna grab your shit and bring it in the room?" Sam jolted Dean out of his musing.

"Was not." It was childish and definitely not Dean's best work as far as witty comebacks went, but sometimes the classics needed a dust off he reasoned to himself as he grabbed his duffle and went inside.

Sam had dropped his bag on the bed furthest from the door, making Dean grin to himself; whatever else was different, some things never changed. Sam knew full well that Dean wouldn't sleep if he wasn't between the door and his younger brother. The fact that these days Sam was actually the more capable of the two of them was something Dean wasn't going to look at too hard. Denial was a useful tool sometimes.

They headed straight back out to the nearest diner and sat at a quiet table in the corner where both of them could have their backs to the wall, but they could still hear the quiet conversations of the other customers.

"What can I get you boys?" The waitress was pretty in a cornfed, wholesome kind of way, and Dean turned on the charm without really thinking about it.
"Well now… Chessie" Dean made a show of leaning in to read her name tag and appreciate the rest of the view on the process. "I'll have a double cheeseburger, extra onions, extra cheese, chilli cheese fries and a side of onion rings." He switched on his tried and tested flirting grin, all warmth and suggestive undertones and was rewarded as usual with a blush, fluttering eyelashes and a returning warm grin.

"Is that everything?" Chessie asked, a suggestive edge to her tone.

"For now." Dean's smirk left very little to the imagination. Subtlety was wasted on encounters like this. A clearing throat distracted them from their borderline leering at each other.

"You do realise I'm the one who's going to have to put up with the results of your extra onions and chilli fries tonight in our room, right?" Sam asked with a slightly pissy attitude. Dean shot him a furious and astonished glare. However innocent and natural Sam's complaint was, his timing was appalling – there was only one way the woman was going to take that statement. Sure enough, Chessie's flirtatious smile froze on her face, replaced by shock and then quickly followed with anger. She narrowed her eyes at Dean and turned her glare on Sam. It softened a little as she took in the smile he directed at her. Somehow, he managed to edge it with a combination of friendliness, understanding and weary, put upon sympathy.

"Can I have the chicken salad please?" He asked politely. She gave him a weak smile and noted his order down, glaring once more at Dean as she turned on her heel and swished away angrily.

"Dude!" Dean yelp-whispered as Chessie stalked off. "You couldn't have waited a couple of minutes before you said that? You do know what it sounded like, right?" Sam's eye widened innocently, something Dean had always been suspicious of in his brother when they were younger.

"Sorry, Dean. Were you trying to pick her up? I wasn't really paying attention." Dean was almost sure Sam had done it on purpose, but not quite certain enough to pick a fight over it. He snorted in frustration.

"Sure you weren't. I was hoping to pump her… for information." He smirked. "But you totally blew that for me. Bitch."

"Jerk." Sam replied on reflex, a small smile curling the corners of his mouth. "Guess it's been so long since I saw you in action that I didn't recognise your moves."

"I'll be lucky if she doesn't spit in my burger now." Dean grumbled. "You better keep your ears open while you munch your way through that bowl of rabbit food you ordered. I'll be too busy working my way through my delicious proper food to listen in on the locals and their gossip."

"Yeah, your delicious proper burger with extra cheese, onions and spit." Sam taunted. Earning a scowl from his brother. "There's nothing wrong with eating vegetables once in a while you know, Dean. Your arteries and digestive system might actually thank you for the relief."

"Whatever, dude. I'm a growing boy and I need my fuel." He gave Sam a curious look. "The salad though – that seems more like something you used to go for in the old days. I thought I'd gotten used to your new eating habits. At Bobby's you were packing it away like your average hunter, now you're back on the health food crap?" Sam rolled his eyes.

"It's not crap, Dean. It might be healthy, but that doesn't mean it doesn't taste good. I was using my abilities a hell of a lot while we were at Bobby's, and I have to really fuel up after that to replace all the lost calories. When I'm not using them so much, I try to keep it as healthy as I can to balance things out."
Their food arrived before Dean could come up with a response, Sam's placed in front of him with a slight shy smile, and Dean's slammed down so hard it nearly slid right of the plate and into his lap. With a little glare at Sam, who was finding the whole situation far too funny for Dean's tastes, Dean lifted the lid of his burger and peered cautiously inside, relieved when he couldn't see anything disgusting inside. He threw a triumphant grin at his brother and picked up his burger with two hands. Sam waited until he'd take a huge bite before he spoke up.

"If she spat on it, she would've done it on the bottom layer not the top." Dean froze mid-chew, eyes wide in alarm. Sam couldn't hold back his laugh at the scowl that was coming his way. After a few moments, Dean shrugged and slowly began to chew again.

"I've eaten grosser things." He mumbled out around the huge mouthful. Sam just rolled his eyes and started picking his way through his salad.

As they'd hoped, during their meal, there was plenty of gossip floating around in the diner. With Sugar City being such a small town, not much of interest ever happened, so the appearance of a violent ghost was pretty much all anyone could talk about. As Sam had suspected, the phrase 'popping up all over town' wasn't at all accurate. In fact, from what the boys had overheard, it wasn't the town that was being haunted, it was one specific family. Every sighting of the ghost had been accompanied by the presence of one or more members of the Martin family. Sam was actually amazed that none of the locals seemed to have made the link themselves yet.

Once they left the diner, it was too late for them to hit the library, but first thing in the morning, they planned to go and look through old records and microfiche of the local paper, looking for possible grudges against the family. For the mean time though, Sam was hoping to spend the evening hanging out with his brother, maybe having a few beers and watching a cheesy old horror flick or two like they used to in the old days. As much as it had stung watching Dean hitting on the waitress in the diner, being only moments away from a sure thing with a total stranger he felt nothing for, when he was refusing to give in to his desire for the person he'd admitted he loved and wanted, he'd gotten a real kick out of playing innocent while thoroughly ruining the pick-up. The look on Dean's face had almost been worth the pain of seeing his so carelessly throw himself at a random woman.

Sam couldn't work out if Dean was trying to prove a point by picking up a woman right in front of him, if he was just trying to relieve some of the sexual tension Sam knew he'd caused in the car by damn near fellating that pen, or if he had bought Sam's pretence of giving up on his hopes for a relationship between them so much that he himself had given up on it too. That of course, was the last thing Sam wanted, so he was hoping that an evening in the motel room, with the excuse of a few beers too many would give him the opportunity to get thing back on track before it was too late.

Unfortunately for Sam, Dean was determined to go out and hit a bar or two and try to find another woman to pick up. Sam's work was going to be cut out for him – sabotaging Dean's prospects while appearing not to be doing anything of the kind would be simple enough if he could just make discrete use of one or two of his gifts to help him out, but it just felt wrong to do so; he was barely comfortable with the fine line he was walking in trying not to emotionally manipulate his brother – adding in telekinetically nudging women away from Dean, or using his healing gift to make someone feel queasy or feverish would be just totally unacceptable.

No, he'd have to go with a combination of subtle glares and comments and carefully crafted body language, all kept out of Dean's notice to keep the women from jumping his brother. *Gonna be nearly as exhausting as actually using my abilities would've been.* Sam mused as he waited for Dean to finish primping in the bathroom.
"I swear to God, Dean, if you're not out of there and ready to go in the next five minutes, I'm going without you, and I'm taking the car too." Sam finally burst out in frustration. If he was going to have to suffer through this evening, he just wanted it over and done with.

The bathroom door burst open and Dean stormed out angrily, wearing nothing but a thin motel-quality towel around his waist and the amulet Sam had given him when he was eight. Sam's eyes nearly bugged out of his head and he licked his lips before he could stop himself. Shit! I hope Dean didn't see that, but Holy fucking Shit he's hot! It had been years since he'd seen his older brother wearing do little and time had definitely not been the man's enemy. Impossibly, he was even more perfect now than he was in the glimpses Sam had burned into his memories years before. He was so busy trying to collect himself and regain his cool that he didn't spot the split second where Dean's angry scowl slipped into surprise and then a brief self-satisfied smirk before he dragged the scowl back onto his face again.

"Sammy, you touch my car, and I'll smear your new rifle scope with peanut butter when you least expect it." He threatened with a growl. I'm nearly ready, so just keep your panties on, bitch."

"Jerk. Touch my rifle and I'll pull you out of bed ever morning and have you on the floor in a submission hold before you're even awake every day for a week." Sam threatened right back as Dean sauntered back to the bathroom. Dean couldn't quite shake off the arousal he felt from the mental image that gave him.

"Whatever." Once again, not one of Dean's best comebacks, but his mind was busy whirling through thoughts of being wrestled out of bed every morning by a sleep-warm and rumpled Sam, along with the knowledge that even though his brother seemed to have given up on his hopes for a romantic relationship, he clearly still found Dean very attractive – it had been written all over his face when Dean stormed out of the bathroom. "Now just give me a few more minutes – the perfection that is me shouldn't be rushed you know." Somehow, just that brief glimpse of Sam's attraction to him had lifted the sour mood Dean had been carrying around with him since before they'd even left Bobby's yard. He grinned to himself and quickly began pulling on his clothes.

Back in the other room Sam rolled his eyes, threw up his arms in exasperation and flopped down on his back onto the lumpy bed behind him. He'd barely hit the mattress when Dean re-emerged from the bathroom dressed in tight faded blue jeans and an even tighter black t-shirt. He strode past Sam briskly, smacking one of Sam's booted feet as he went by.

"Come on, Sammy. I want to get going and I'm not waiting around for you." He called over his shoulder cheerily. Sam bit the inside of his mouth to hold back a very bitchy reply and dragged himself reluctantly out of the door behind his brother.

The first bar they tried was a complete failure for the second they walked in the door. The place was making an attempt at being more of a club, but it wasn't the heavy booming beat of club music or the sweaty crowd that had Dean ushering Sam back out the door before they'd taken more than five steps inside – it was the lighting. In a tragic flashback to the sixties, the management had gone for an overwhelming amount of black light in the place and the moment Sam stepped in, the hundreds of devil's traps and other wardings that littered Sam's skin popped into view. The only parts of him not decorated were the areas of new skin which now replaced the scarring. A brief thought flashed through Dean's mind that Sam looked a little like a djinn, before he caught sight of the shocked expressions on the people nearby. Without a word he grabbed Sam's shoulders, spun him around and marched him back outside.

"Dean! What the fuck?" Sam burst out, one hand reaching for what Dean knew was almost certainly
a concealed knife in the back of his jeans.

"Black light." Dean explained shortly. He didn't need to say more – realisation dawned on Sam's face immediately.

"Oh. Yeah that can be an issue once in a while. So, another bar then?" Dean nodded tightly. He'd not really quite grasped the sheer amount of work Sam must have gone through to rid himself of the demon blood until he saw the physical evidence. He was in awe of his younger brother's determination and also couldn't deny to himself that there was something strangely beautiful about the hundreds of little tattoos.

The next bar was a lot better. The background music was quiet enough to allow for conversation, which would hopefully be a help in the hunt for information on their ghost, and Dean knew he'd find it pretty easy to chat up the women if he wasn't having to yell over the music. The total absence of black light was a definite plus too.

They'd barely leaned back against the bar with their first beers when they were approached by the first pair of women. Dean had always appreciated women who knew what they wanted and went out to get it, so his welcoming grin was warm and suggestive as the blonde began talking with him, leaning ever so slightly too close and 'accidentally' brushing her breasts against his arm. Her brunette friend made an attempt to chat Sam up at the same time, totally oblivious to the complete absence of attraction Sam was displaying, much to Dean's amusement if the evil smirks he kept sending Sam's way were any clue. Eventually, the brunette who was still trying to tempt Sam with glimpses down her ample cleavage and repeated touches to his arms to marvel at his muscles noticed Dean's smirks.

"What's he finding so amusing?" She snapped at Sam. Sam rolled his eyes and looked at her sympathetically.

"He's wondering when either your or your friend's gaydar is finally going to go off." He replied, not without sympathy. He'd worded it very carefully so if Dean overheard he couldn't accuse him of telling her Dean was gay. The look of shock, then horror, then indignation that flashed across the brunette's face was almost comical, but Sam very carefully didn't smirk. Instead, he casually leaned back against the bar and looked around the room, wondering who would be the next contestant in the never-ending gameshow 'Who wants to bang a Winchester?' To his surprise his eye was caught by a tall blonde guy over by the pool tables who was clearly checking Sam and Dean out. The man's mouth curled up in a slow sensual smile.

Huh. If I wasn't completely determined to finally get things going with Dean I'd be all over him like white on rice. He thought to himself, offering the guy a small smile in return.

To his left he heard the brunette, who'd finally given up her hopes for Sam, tensely asking her friend to go join her in the bathroom. Sam carefully held back a smirk. She wouldn't be coming back to hit on Dean again, so that was two contestants struck off the list. The blonde guy stared to walk over, his eyes flicking between the two brothers as if trying to decide which one to hit on. Knowing that as hard as he was finding it to deal with women draping themselves all over his brother, he'd never be able to tolerate another man doing something similar, Sam decided the best option was to make the choice for the guy, so he pushed off the bar and sauntered over towards the blonde man to cut him off before he even reached them. Allowing his smile to turn a little suggestive, dragged his eyes up and down the man from head to toe and back, smirking a little at the widened eyes and the bitten lower lip he got in return. The clasped the hand the guy held out firmly and let his fingertips lightly brush the inside of the other man's wrist, clearly demonstrating the sheer size of his hands in comparison. This close, he could see the guy's pupils widening and he bob of his Adam's apple as he swallowed unconsciously. Really, it was kind of a shame Sam wasn't really intending on taking the guy home – he could pretty much guarantee both of them a really good night. Instead, he'd have to
be careful not to lead the man on too much, being a cock-tease was never ok, no matter how good the cause.

"Darryl." The man introduced himself with a warm smile. Sam's mouth lifted a little further at the corners in a sensual smile, almost unconsciously reverting to the persona he'd always adopted when on leave in the Marines. He'd spent so many years of his life hiding such a large part of who he really was, that even now he was finally able to completely let go of all the disguise, situations that felt familiar, like being hit on in a bar without any of his squad around had his old disguised jumping back up into place.

"Sam" he introduced himself, his voice low and husky, forcing Darryl to lean in to hear properly.

"Can I buy you a drink, Sam?" Darryl asked, gesturing over to the bar, Sam caught a glimpse of Dean still leaning against the bar, beer clenched in his hand. As Sam had assumed, the two women they'd been talking with hadn't returned to Dean after the bathroom, but in their place, there was a very pretty young woman with short brown hair talking away at Dean with a dreamy expression on her face. Dean was, rather unusually for him, completely ignoring the girl, his attention completely focussed on Sam and Daryl. The jealousy on his face as he saw Sam truly flirting, rather than the half-assed version he'd witnessed back at Bobby's with Justin was more than clear to Sam and he realised that if he played this right, he might finally, finally manage to get Dean to overcome his misgivings and take what he wanted. What they both wanted. He didn't want Darryl to get the wrong idea – he knew only too well from his own past experience just how difficult it was to be openly gay in small town America, and how much harder it could be to actually hook up in a small town like this. As attractive as he found Darryl, he wasn't looking to actually sleep with the guy, and he didn't want him to waste his time if he had better options open to him. Looking away from Dean before he noticed Sam was looking, he leaned down slightly to speak in Darryl's ear.

"Look, Darryl, I'd be more than happy to have a drink with you and I have to say you're seriously hot. But I'm not looking for a hook up tonight – I'm kind of trying to get something long-term going with that guy I came in here with… if he can ever pull his head out of his ass long enough to take what he wants - and I don't want you to miss out on a sure thing you might have going on with some other guy just because you're unknowingly helping me make Dean jealous." Sam straightened up again, looking down into Darryl's eyes to gauge his response. The blonde gave him a gentle, regretful smile.

"Ah isn't that always the way? The good ones are always taken – or trying to be." He grinned at Sam. "Thanks for being honest – you could've just led me on all night and then blown me off later.” They both smirked a little at the double entendre. "I've got to say you've got good taste. That guy – Dean was it? He's as hot as you are. If you guys do get together, and you're looking to add to the fun sometime, you should definitely give me a call." He winked and the both chuckled. "In the meantime, I've got nothing going on with anyone right now, and if I can spend an evening flirting with someone as hot as you, even if I don't actually get into your pants at the end of it, at least it'll give me some good fuel for the spank bank." Sam laughed outright at that.

"You're a good guy, Darryl. Wish I'd met you a few years ago; I've got a feeling we could've had some real fun." Sam leaned back in a little now that he knew the blonde wasn't going to expect anything he had no intention of giving he let himself fall back into his old flirty persona. He let his voice drop a little lower, just the right side of a growl, and lightly grazed his nose up the side of his neck and jaw line, stopping by his ear. "I'm going to really enjoy having a few drinks with you." He felt Darryl shiver and smiled, leaning back to see the other man's eyes half-lidded and his pupils once again dilated.

They wandered back over to the bar, Sam unconsciously prowling rather than walking, one hand
lightly placed in the small of Darryl's back to guide him through the crowd. Before the blonde could order, Sam jumped in and bought them a beer each, not wanting the guy to spend his money as well as his time on him. They sat together by the bar, talking and laughing quietly, heads close together. Sam even managed to pick up some solid intel on their ghost without the conversation seeming weird to Darryl. Sam genuinely liked the guy and, in another world, would've really enjoyed getting him into bed.

"You know, I think us flirting together is actually going to work out for you and that Dean guy." His eyes flicked up to glance over Sam's shoulder. He's steadily been looking more and more pissed the longer we talk, and the flow of women coming over to try their luck has slowed almost to a complete stop since he wasn't even noticing most of them standing right there." Sam fought the urge to look back and see if the guy was right.

"Really? He was completely ignoring them?" Sam asked, astonished.

"Completely. You've got it real bad for the guy, huh?" Darryl asked sympathetically.

"Only since I was about fourteen or fifteen." Sam said wryly. "I didn't think he'd ever be interested in guys at all, let alone me in particular, but not long ago he admitted he felt the same for me, but he's got some stupid idea in his head that I deserve better than him and he refuses to step up and move our relationship along. But we work together, and our work means we travel everywhere together and I'm pretty sure it's killing him to keep telling himself not to make a move… It's definitely killing me…" Sam broke off, looking at Darryl's widening eyes as he stared over Sam's shoulder. No longer able to help himself, Sam turned in his seat to look at Dean, only to find him stalking towards them, fists and jaws clenched.

"Looks like you've got a reaction, Sam. Now I hope for your sake you can direct it where the two of you clearly want it to go." Darryl leaned over and just before their lips made contact he murmured "See you around, Sam. Don't forget to look me up if you two are ever looking to add a third." He grinned and then planted a warm kiss on Sam's lips before they, and the man they were attached to were suddenly pulled out of his reach by an irate Dean.

"Sammy. We're leaving. Now." Dean growled through clenched teeth, glaring harshly at Darryl. Sensing that even attempting to argue with his brother just then was going to result in a very ugly scene, Sam stood and glanced over apologetically at the blonde man he'd been talking and flirting with – a really good guy all in all.

"Sorry, Darryl. Thanks for tonight. I'll see you around maybe." He didn't have a chance to say more, as Dean was steering him away with a firm grip to the back of his neck. Ordinarily a dangerous move that Dean would know better than to try on Sam – they both knew that Sam could take Dean out without much difficulty, but Dean evidently wasn't thinking clearly just then, and in fact, Sam found Dean's caveman display kind of hot. Ok, not just kind of hot – searingly, blindingly hot.

In all his years as a sexually active gay man, Sam had never once been interested in bottoming, with any of his hook-ups. He'd always figured he was an out and out top, just not into bottoming. But with Dean's manhandling and the images that popped into Sam's imagination as a result, something was suddenly made very clear; it wasn't that he wasn't interested in bottoming. It was that he wasn't interested in bottoming for anyone but Dean. It made sense; he'd never been able to trust anyone else like that – the way he instinctively trusted his brother. How would he have been able to let anyone else make his so vulnerable as bottoming would make him when he couldn't even stand sitting or standing with his back to a room in case someone walked up behind him? He could definitely do with out the authoritarian manner Dean was exhibiting just then as he was marching them both towards the car, but suddenly Sam was realising that he wanted Dean to fuck him so much right then
that it practically made his eyes cross with the intensity of the need.

As they arrived at the car, Dean attempted to shove Sam towards the passenger side and let go to storm around to the driver's door, but Sam's hand flashed up and grabbed his brother's wrist before he could complete the shove. His control frayed beyond all recognition, Dean finally snapped a lunged into Sam, using his whole body to slam the pair of them up against the Impala and crashing their mouths together so hard it was amazing that neither of them lost any teeth. Sam's answering kiss was just as ferocious. *Finally!* Was the only thought that had time to sprint through his brain before all thinking came to a complete halt. Hands and tongues tangled together in an almost vicious battle between the two as they fought to get what they had each so desperately wanted for so many years. Dean had a fistful of the longer hair on the top of Sam's head, pulling it painfully as he dragged Sam's head to a better angle for him to slide their mouths together and Sam made no effort to fight against it, instead grabbing a fistful of the front of Dean's t-shirt and ripping it a little as he pulled his brother closer to him against the car.

Neither of them knew just how long they stood there in the parking lot, grappling and making out before they were startled to awareness by a loud wolf-whistle from the door of the bar. Jolted out of their frenzy, Sam pulled his head back, chest heaving as he fought to catch his breath and stared blearily over at the door. Darryl stood there, a broad grin painted across his face as he pumped one fist in victory for Sam. Sam sent him a wobbly smile back and raised one hand before turning back to look at Dean, wondering how his brother was going to react to breaking and giving in to his feelings. There were no clues on Dean's face. With a blank expression, Dean strode around to the driver's side and climbed in with only the barest pause to adjust the probably painful erection in his tight jeans. Hoping for the best, Sam too got into the Impala and he'd barely closed the door before Dean was peeling out of the parking lot in a spurt of gravel and dust.

The short drive back to the motel was silent and tense, the air practically thrumming between the two and Dean didn't even pause for a second as they pulled up outside their motel room, simply jumping out of the car and stalking up to their door, keys in hand. Sam took a deep steadying breath before following, hoping to all the gods he could think of that Dean wouldn't freak out and put a stop to what they'd just started. He walked through the door and quietly closed it behind him, finding himself standing almost nose to nose with his brother.

"Sam I can't…" Sam's heart sank, and he opened his mouth ready to argue with his stupid, stubborn, self-sacrificing idiot of a brother, but Dean held his hand up, stopping him and continued to speak. "I can't start this with you and it just be a one-time thing. We do this and that's it. It's you and me for good. No one else for either of us for good. Forever." His voice was cracked and raw. "I've tried, God knows I've tried to hold myself back, to give you a chance to move on with someone better, but even though I knew you'd given up on me and were trying to at least get a little action with someone else, when I could see it happening right in front of me, I just couldn't do it. It was destroying me to see you with that guy and I can't let it happen. I just can't." He dragged in a huge breath, raking one hand through his hair. "But if we do this then you're stuck with me for good because I won't be able to let go, so if you're over me like you seemed to be, then you should tell me, and I'll grab my shit and head out. I'll have Bobby or Dad come to collect you and I'll stay gone for a while until I can get a little control over this." Dean sank down on the edge of the bed, head in his hands as he waited to hear his sentence passed.

Sam stood for a second completely frozen in shock and then dropped to his knees in front of Dean, grabbing and holding the back of his neck, just like Dean had to him earlier and pressing his forehead against his brothers.

"You and me for good. No one else for either of us for good. Forever." He repeated Dean's words calmly and resolutely, with all the finality of a wedding vow. "That's all I've ever wanted Dean. I
don't want to move on. There is no one better for me than you. This – you and me – is what I want.” He leaned in and pressed a firm kiss against his brother's mouth, waiting for a few seconds until Dean got with the program and kissed him back. None of the frantic viciousness of their last kiss remained. The passion and the desire were still there, the urgency, but the harsh and painful edges had been filed down. A low groan escaped Sam, reverberating from somewhere deep in his chest and he was thrilled to hear an answering moan coming from Dean, the sound making Sam impossibly harder in his pants.

"Mine!" Dean growled, pulling Sam up off his knees and onto the bed beside him. They allowed themselves to fall back, lying entangled on the mattress without breaking their kiss again.

"Mine!" Sam replied without letting up from Dean's lips. They kissed for hours or minutes, days or seconds. Neither of them knew or cared as long as the other was right there with them. Sam reached down and slid his right hand under the hem of Dean's ripped t-shirt, letting the material ride up with his movements and he dragged his hand along sweat dampened skin covering tight defined muscle. Feeling for the first time as a lover the perfect abs and pecs he'd admired for years in his dreams and again that evening when Dean had stormed out of the bathroom in just his towel, Sam marvelled at the contradiction of smoothness overlying hardness.

Dean tore his mouth away finally to catch his breath, and let out another loud groan, letting his head fall back, exposing the column of his neck which Sam wasted no time in latching on to. He left a trail of small red bite marks as he worked his way down towards his brother's chest, causing Dean to whimper as he pauses to suck a dark hickey into the skin over his shoulder blade. The back part of Sam's brain busily filed and catalogued all of his brother responses away for future reference, but the rest of his mind was completely focussed on the here and now, delighting in the feel, sound, taste and even smell of Dean. Finally, his hand rising up under Dean's shirt and his mouth, edging down towards his chest reached the territory they'd been seeking. Dean's chest had always been a thing of beauty to Sam. He'd spent hours over the years picturing it and wondering how the dusting of blond hair would feel against his hand, or his lips. Now here he finally was, only the slightly torn t-shirt hampering Sam's access. He gave a small frown and, sitting up slightly, the grabbed the shirt in both hands – one either side of the tear and pulled hard, ripping the shirt all the way down until it fell away from Dean's body. Sam looked up and kind of smirked at Dean's wide-eyed expression.

"It was in my way." He tried to keep his voice light and reasonable, but despite his attempts, what came out was dark and rough with lust, wet velvet dragged over gravel. Sam watched as Dean's pupils widened even further, almost completely absorbing the green iris.

"You do what you gotta do, Sammy" Dean murmured back, licking his lips and swallowing. Tearing his eyes away from the enticing sight of Dean's kiss-swollen mouth, Sam's hands fell from the pieces of his brother's shirt land on his chest, taking in the scratch of chest hair and the warmth of skin, he shifted one palm across to centre it over Dean's heart. The thump of Dean's pulse picked up, his chest rising and falling as he breathed. Stretching his palm wide, the tip of one finger brushed against Dean's left nipple, drawing a light gasp from his brother. Emboldened, Sam moved his hand to capture the nipple between his thumb and index finger, tugging a little. The panting and involuntary thrusting of Dean's hips told Sam he'd found a real hot spot, so he dropped forward and ran his flattened tongue over the pebbled flesh, catching it in his teeth and giving it a sharp nip. The resulting arching of his back and bucking of his hips nearly knocked Sam from the bed and onto the floor. He chuckled lowly and went to work, alternately licking sucking and nipping to drive his brother wild.

"Sammy!" The part plea and part want in that single word spurred Sam into action, crossing to the other nipple to give it the same treatment as he pulled himself to his knees and climbed over Dean,
fitting himself between his splayed legs and gave into temptation a little, grinding his erection against
Dean's, both relieving the ache a little and stoking the fire even higher. The boys let out twin groans
at the contact.

"Oh God, Dean!" Sam gasped out, shutting his eyes tightly as he tried to cool himself down a little.
"I wanted this to go slower, at least the first time but I…" He shuddered as another wave of desire
crashed through him. "I don't think I can go slow. I want – I want…" He huffed out a desperate little
laugh "I want everything, all of it and all at once."

"Fuck, Sammy me too." Dean moaned, rocking his hips to try and get some friction against his
painful hard-on. "We can go slow next time. What do you want the most right now?" Sam really
didn't think he'd be able to answer. Even the thought of it had him fighting back from the edge of
coming in his pants like a teenage boy his first time making out. Actually verbalising it might send
him right over the edge. He dove back up to Dean's face, fusing their mouths together in an almost
desperate kiss.

"I want… want you to fuck me." He growled out against his brother's mouth. Dean froze beneath
him.

"Fuck yes!" The elder Winchester suddenly burst into action, grabbing Sam's shoulders and hooking
one leg over his hip before flipping them over on the bed. "God, Sammy wanna be in you so bad.
I've dreamed about it for years. Never thought I'd ever get to though. Fuck!" Dean leaned down and
laid an open-mouthed kiss against Sam's neck, dragging his tongue upwards until he reached a spot
under the corner of his jaw that had him gasping and panting, fingers digging cruelly into his
brother's shoulders.

"My bag." Sam managed to gasp out. "We're gonna need something…" he broke off as Dean leaped
up, sprinting over to Sam's duffle and scrabbling through it in his desperate search. Later, Sam would
remember the frantic expression on his brother's face and laugh. Right at that moment though I felt
pretty much like Dean's face looked. After a few more moments' search, Dean made a frustrated
strangled noise and snatched up the entire bags, shaking it upside down and then when the tube of
lube dropped heavily to the ground, pouncing on it with a cry of triumph and also snagging the loose
condoms lying beside it on the floor.

"Been busy, Sammy?" Dean asked with a scowl as he looked at the more than half empty tube in his
hand. Sam was so focussed on getting back to it with his brother that he almost missed the danger in
the question. Almost.

"Not the way you're thinking, Jerk." Sam replied a little exasperated. Dean never wanted to talk, but
he suddenly decided that this was the moment to begin a conversation? "I've not been a monk over
the years, true, but with Don't Ask, Don't Tell I had to keep on the down-low and restrict my pick-
ups to whenever I was on leave. That tube there was for… let's call it me time." He raised a brow at
his brother. "I've topped plenty of times over the years." Sam went on, deliberately ignoring Dean's
you, Dean. I want to do this with you, something I've never done with anyone else." The expression
on Dean's face softened.

"Sammy." He almost whispered, crossing quickly back to the bed dropping the lube on the mattress
and the condoms on the nightstand.

"So, you want to kill the mood a little more, ask a few more questions about my sexual history like
you're all virginal yourself, or shall we get this back on track?" For an answer, Dean just leaned in
and kissed him slowly. The love and desire clear in the gesture. Swallowing back a moan, Sam
kissed back, grabbing on to Dean's shoulders as the kiss deepened and began to approach the level of
passion they'd had before Dean got up to fetch the lube. It seemed they could barely last seconds of lip-to-lip contact before their hunger for each other overrode everything else. Despite knowing full well that it was due to both of their long pent up desires, Sam was still tempted to blame Dean for that; the way Dean kissed…like he was proving a point, answering a question Sam hadn't even asked. Like it was his job, and Sam felt it all the way to his toes.

He kissed Dean back with equal hunger, one leg coming up to slide around his thighs and pull Dean flush against him. It was getting seriously uncomfortable in his jeans and he knew Dean couldn't be feeling any better bearing in mind how tight his brother's jeans were.

Sam pushed a hand between them, undoing first his belt and jeans and then Deans. Getting with the program immediately, Dean toed off his boots and wriggled his pants and boxer briefs down his legs all in one go, before reaching over and helping Sam do the same. Now there's a useful skill! Sam found himself thinking as he realised that even with all that manoeuvring, they hadn't broken their kiss once. Dean's ripped shirt had fallen to the floor when he'd jumped up for the lube, so all that was now between them was Sam's shirts. There was no way he was going to let Dean show off and rip his favourite new t-shirt off him, and he knew without a doubt that his brother would – there was no way he'd let his younger brother outdo him or upstage him. Not willing to risk it, Sam quickly sat up and heaved his shirts over his head, dropping back down and resuming their kiss before Dean even had time to voice his complaint.

Their need for each other was approaching frenzied once more - there was nothing sweet or romantic about the way they were devouring each other's mouths. Sam broke away and slid quickly downward, a dirty smirk the only response Dean got for his squawk of complaint. Dean instantly translated that smirk correctly and shut his mouth like it was spring-loaded; he wasn't about to mess up his chances of getting his cock sucked. Something else he'd fantasised over for years, despite hating himself for it every time he was weak enough to let the thoughts in, he always came seriously hard when he beat off to that fantasy. And now he was going to get it.

Sam paused on his way down to torment Dean a little more by lavishing attention on his nipples again so that by the time he'd shimmied down enough and was at eye level with Dean's honestly beautiful, there's no other word for it) cock, it was red and angry looking, weeping a steady stream of precum from the top. Sam's mouth filled with saliva at the sight and he had to quickly swallow before grasping it by the base and running the flat of his tongue up from base to tip in a broad stripe.

"Fuck!" For the second time, Dean almost bucked Sam right off the bed. "Holy shit, Sammy. That feels so fucking good. More please…please!" Dean babbled and only the fact that his lust had frozen his features kept a self-satisfied smirk off the younger Winchester's face. Instead, he repeated his action, licking a broad stripe up Dean's cock, and then when he reached the tip, dropping his jaw wide and plunging straight down, taking the entire, definitely well above average, length in the whole way, until at least two inches of his older brother's cock was buried in his throat.

Luckily, Sam had had the foresight to drop his grip on Dean's cock, and take a firm hold with both hands on his hips instead, or the completely unconscious flex of Dean's hips as he found his entire length (and considerable girth) swallowed by his baby brother would have probably broken his nose. As it was, Dean wasn't able to rise more than an inch off the mattress as he let out the bastard child of a scream and a roar.

"Holy fucking Christ!" Dean yelled, his voice cracking. "Sammy I can't believe you did that, but oh God don't stop. That feels so fucking good. Oh shit, oh fuck, your mouth, Sammy. Your fucking mouth!" Dean's babbling cranked up a gear, and before long he was reaching down, scrubbling at the longer hair on top of Sam's head and trying to simultaneously push his brother's head down further and frantically pull him back off his cock before he came and ruined the main event of the
night.

Sam was lost in the taste, the feel, the smell of his brother. Every dream he'd had paling in the face of the reality he'd been gifted with. When Dean finally managed to pull his head away, he looked up with a furious glare, having forgotten everything else in the self-indulgent pleasure of deep-throating Dean. His glare was met with a chocked off laugh/gasp/groan as His brother was torn between amusement at Sam's irritation, relief that he'd managed to keep himself from coming down Sam's throat, and burning lust at seeing just how much Sam had truly been enjoying sucking him off. Dean panted for a few minutes to catch his breath before managing to murmur huskily.

"Come back up here, Sammy. I promise you can do that again another time – fuck, you can do that pretty much anytime you want, but right now you gotta stop or I'm gonna come before I get to fuck you.

Reluctantly, Sam allowed himself to be tugged away from his prize and back to dean's mouth, where his brother eagerly licked the combined flavour of his own precum and the distinctive taste that could only be labelled as Sammy in his mind. His mind whirled with the joy of it all.

Rolling Sam gently onto his back, Dean reached blindly for the lube without breaking their kiss and sighed with relief when he finally found it. He trailed kisses down Sam's incredibly toned chest and abs before settling himself comfortably between his legs, thumbing off the cap of the tube and squirting a generous puddle of the stuff into the deep cut between the muscles leading down towards Sam's groin. Cum gutters Dean's mind helpfully supplied as he ran admiring eyes over his brother's body. Dean had been hopelessly attracted to him even when he'd been a somewhat scrawny teenager, but now... well the man was a real work of art. No matter how much Justin had pissed him off, the guy hadn't been wrong when he'd practically drooled over Sam. Neither had that guy earlier at the bar. Dean had been almost blind with rage and jealousy watching his Sam flirting with a man that evening. The naked desire painted on the stranger's face had been obvious, and Dean could completely understand the feeling; the way Sam had held himself, the sensual smirks, the way he'd seemed to suddenly become boneless and fluid as he stalked like a leopard across the bar. It was easily the sexiest thing Dean had ever seen in a bar.

Shaking off those thoughts, Dean focussed in on Sam's cock. A little longer than Dean's but not quite as wide, it was just as gorgeous as the rest of his brother. Not normally a big fan of sucking dick, Dean could feel his mouth water at the sight. Making a quick change to his mental plans Dean hunkered down and laid a wet kiss to the side of Sam's cock as he simultaneously dipped two fingers into the puddle of lube by his hip. He ran his tongue around the head of his younger brother's cock, drawing a strangled gasp and a tensing of all his muscles as he struggled not to thrust upwards like Dean had done. Dean grinned a little – well as well as he could with a sizable dick in his mouth – and lowered his lube-slick fingers to Sam's crack, lightly stroking the slick across the tight hole and pulling another moan from Sam.

"Oh Jesus, yeah. More, Dean." Sam encouraged him. He was trying to hold back the high, needy noises threatening to escape the back of his throat, and not managing with more than half of them, but Dean didn't mind in the least; he really loved hearing just how hot he was getting his brother. He shifted his position, so he could surreptitiously rub his erection into the mattress.

Sam threw one arm over his eyes and closed them, focusing on the press of Dean's slick finger against his hole, tilting his hips up a little to help and breathing through the stretch. He wasn't a stranger to a finger or two, or even three a few times, up his ass during a blowjob, and every once in a while, he used a couple of fingers on himself when beating off in the shower, but it wasn't something he did all that much, mostly because it usually wasn't worth the fight, so it took a moment for him to relax around Dean's thick finger. Suddenly Dean's mouth left his cock and Sam looked
down ready to complain and also to tell Dean that he didn't need to be so gentle, but at the sight of his older brother, his eyes glued to his hand watching his finger slide in and out of Sam, bottom lip caught between his teeth and his free hand gripping the base of his cock like he was trying not to come, Sam let out a loud groan and lost his train of thought. From the expression on Dean's face, he was clearly finding the view of his finger sliding in and out of Sam a huge turn-on, and when Sam saw the look on Dean's face he let out a moan and pushed down against him.

Dean's eyes snapped up to his face at the sound and smirked a little before dropping his head back down and sucking Sam's cock into his mouth once again, his tongue doing a little dance on the underside of the head, teasing the little bundle of nerves there and driving Sam crazy. With Sam so distracted, Dean carefully pushed a second finger in to join the first, and Sam focused on relaxing and on the intense feeling from the pretty amazing blowjob he was getting.

Before long, Dean had worked up to three fingers and was brushing firmly over Sam's prostate every so often, setting off a shower of sparks in his brain every time. With fingers as thick as Dean's Sam was pretty sure he was stretched enough to take his brother's cock several minute ago, but just like Sam had been earlier, Dean appeared to be completely caught up in what he was doing, enjoying it almost as much as Sam was himself. He reached down and gently pushed his thumb into Dean's mouth beside his cock, breaking the seal and Dean's concentration.

"Dude, I'm pretty sure I'm good. You waiting for an invite or something? Cos this is definitely me inviting you." Sam groaned out, shuddering as Dean's fingers brushed one last time against his prostate on the way out. Nodding and massaging his sore jaw, Dean sat up, reaching over to the nightstand for one of the condoms he'd thrown up there.

"How do you want this, Sammy?" He asked quietly and seriously. This was a first for his younger brother, and he wanted it to be exactly what he'd imagined it to be.

"I… I really don't know, man. I never really let myself think this far into it if I'm honest. Have you got a preference?" Dean laughed a little, nudging Sam's legs further apart and surging up to cover his body with his own.

"Like this." He replied, his voice like gravel. "I wanna see you while I fuck you. Wanna watch you come for me"

Sam clamped down hard on his need to come at Dean's words and just nodded at his brother. He knew what he meant – he definitely wanted to see Dean's face as he came and the thought of staring into Dean's eyes while Dean fucked him made his heart beat so hard he thought it might burst right through his ribcage.

The steady slow pressure of Dean's cock as he carefully pushed inside Sam's ass was right on the edge between uncomfortable and painful, but Sam forced his body to relax, to accept the intrusion, and after pausing to allow Sam to adjust to the head of his cock once he'd passed the outer ring of muscle, Dean pushed deep into Sam on one long slow stroke, dragging a litany of cursing and deep satisfied groans from the younger Winchester. Finally bottoming out, Dean leaned in and pressed a hot, open-mouthed kiss to the side of Sam's neck. Mumbling and murmuring to his brother as he did so.

"Oh God, so hot, so tight. So fucking perfect for me, Sam. Never felt anything this good, never knew how this could be before now. Oh fuck, Sammy. You're mine, Baby Boy. Mine!" Dean's babble was back, and Sam loved every bit of it. The lust and desperation as well as the love and devotion he could hear. He felt precisely the same. He turned his head to join their mouths together again in a long, tongue-tangling kiss as they waited for his body to adjust properly to Dean's presence inside. He felt his body start to relax, the edge of pain disappearing into discomfort and
finally into a need for… something. He flexed his hips a little, pulling a deep desperate groan from Dean who was right at the very edge of his control. He had just a fingernail's grip on his need to thrust, a fingernail's grip on a greasy mirror and it was slipping fast. Sam turned and pressed a kiss to his brother's clenched jaw and murmured quietly to him.

"I'm good, Dean. You can move. Just… go easy, will you?" Dean nodded minutely and took a new, tighter grip on his control, slowly withdrawing and then pushing back deeply into Sam, a deep and loud groan coming from both of them.

"Oh my fuck, yes!" Sam wasn't even sure which one of them had said it, but whichever one of them it was, the voice sounded like broken glass.

Dean sucked hard on Sam's skin while they moved together, Sam's hips snapping up to meet each slow thrust, trying to drag Dean further inside with every stroke and changing the angle when he could, trying to get Dean to hit just the right spot inside him. Realising what Sam was trying to do, Dean changed the angle himself, grabbing a loose pillow and tucking it under Sam's hips, tilting them just so and making it easier for him to nail Sam's prostate on every thrust. The first time Dean nudged the bundle of nerves, His Brother let out an ear-splitting yell that must have been heard by the people in the next room. For a moment Dean froze, afraid that he'd hurt his younger brother, but the blissed out expression on his face, along with the leg hooked behind his back, hauling Dean back into his thrusting tempo reassured him, and he fell back into his rhythm of driving forward and withdrawing, galloping ever faster towards his own orgasm while trying desperately to keep his grip on the reins long enough to let Sam reach his climax first. Both brothers were overwhelmed by the profundity of the experience it had never been like this before for either of them. It had never been so…intimate, so loving, so… everything.

Knowing he has only a handful of thrusts away from coming, Dean shoved his hand between them to close around Sam's cock, his thumb sliding across the tip and dragging strangled moans out of Sam with each upstroke. His rhythm became erratic, wild lunges as deep as he could get, striking Sam's prostate only by sheer luck on and off. Fortunately, it was enough and with one last nudge against the right spot, Sam let out a roar, arching his back so far that Dean was almost certain he'd hear his brother's spine snap at any second, and spurted great white gouts of come across Dean's fist and both their stomachs.

"Oh fuck! Sammy!" The clenching and clamping of Sam's internal muscles around Dean's cock triggered his own orgasm and with a yell, he followed behind his brother, his vision actually blacked out a little for a moment, the climax harder, longer and more profound than any he'd ever experienced. Beneath him, Sam barely seemed conscious, every muscle and joint that had been so tense moments before, now completely limp.

Sam wasn't sure how long they stayed like that, sweat and come making their skin slide together and Sam's arms locked tight around Dean's back. Dean's hands slid up and down Sam's sides, his mouth moving on Sam's neck, but he wasn't sucking marks into Sam's skin anymore. In fact, Sam was fairly sure that he was talking, and his heart pounded against his ribcage as he made out the quiet words.

"Love you, Sam. Love you so fucking much. You and me for good. God, I love you." Forcing his exhausted muscles to cooperate, Sam turned and gently kissed Dean on the mouth, rubbing their noses and foreheads together.

"I love you too. More than you'll ever know." He murmured. He winced as Dean carefully pulled out, pinching and tying off the condom before weakly throwing it in the general direction of the trash. It barely even cleared the edge of the bed, but Dean could hardly even find the energy to drag the covers up over them both, let alone tidy up after them. He reached a floppy arm out of bed and
caught the edge of his ripped and ruined shirt, using it to clean then both up a bit and then gave in to sleep, curling around Sam's body and hearing the slowing heartbeat on his younger brother indicating that Sam was well on his way to being fast asleep himself.

The sun was high in the sky by the time the pair stirred the next morning. Sam couldn't remember ever feeling so well rested, so content, so complete. His muscles and joints felt sore but loose and his mind, usually busy flitting through a million thoughts at once from the moment he woke each day until well after he fell asleep, was finally still. He turned and looked at his brother who was just beginning to rouse from his own sleep. The damp patch on his pillow from drooling was evidence that he'd slept as well as Sam had, but it was yet to be seen if the acceptance of the night before (which had led eventually to the deep and peaceful sleep he was just waking from) was going to hold, or if Dean was going to have a morning after freak-out.

Deciding to risk it, Sam leaned in and, ignoring both of their morning breath, gently kissed his brother, brushing the dark blonde hair back from his forehead and waiting to see what would greet him behind the green eyes when they opened.

"You know, watching people sleep is actually kind of creepy." Dean spoke without opening his eyes, but the curling corners of his mouth hinted that maybe a freak-out wasn't on the horizon.

"Aww you know you love it, Bella." Sam retorted, happy enough to just play along for the moment – maybe until after breakfast because he for one was completely starving. Dean snorted in amusement.

"So now you're a mind-reading vampire?"

"Hah! I knew you'd seen Twilight!" Sam crowed, bouncing the bad with his glee. "All that shit you were spouting at Bobby's last week about how you'd never watch those movies or read the books, even if it were a matter of life or death was just a whitewash, but I knew you were talking out your ass – you kept pulling at your left earlobe – that's your tell." Dean's brow creased, but he didn't look all that pissed, so Sam wasn't overly concerned.

"Ah bite me, Cullen." The response surprised a loud laugh out of Sam and Dean opened his eyes to witness the full-on Sammy smile; twinkling eyes, deep dimples and a flash of white teeth. "Morning, Sammy." Dean greeted his brother with a gentle smile, knowing all too well that Sam, not unfairly if Dean was honest, would be at least a little concerned that Dean might freak the morning after. Sam's laughter faded into a soft but genuine smile, his eyes warm and loving.

"Morning." He replied, laying a hand gently against his brother's cheek. Dean leaned across and pressed a kiss of his own to Sam's lips. "Shower and then find somewhere other than that diner from yesterday for breakfast?" Sam chuckled and nodded.

"Sounds good." He sat up, the covers pooling around his waist and tugging back away from Dean. "You wanna join me?" He asked a little shyly, making Dean smile.

"Sure. Just go brush your teeth and take a leak before I follow you in there. I love you, but there's no way we're going to be one of those couples that goes to the toilet with the door open." Suddenly he found himself flattened by half a ton of little brother, kissing him deeply regardless of both their morning breath. "Oof! Careful, man, What was that for?" He asked when Sam finally let him up.

"Nothing. Everything. I love you too." Sam replied, a cheek-cracking smile plastered across his face. Dean grasped his brother's hands in his and looked hi in the eye seriously.
"You and me. For good." He reminded him.

"You and me. For good." Sam agreed, then got up and, unembarrassed by his nakedness, walked over to the bathroom. Dean watched him go, his cock twitching and filling as he took in his brother's fantastic ass and the fingertip bruises he'd left on the younger man's hips. He liked seeing his marks there and knew that once he could look in a mirror he'd see marks on his own skin, courtesy of Sam. Something about that, the ownership perhaps, warmed his heart and stirred his lust.

Dean knew that it wouldn't be all perfect, cloudless days in their future; they still had a lot to sort out between themselves – what had been going on between them for the last couple of weeks before Dean just gave in and took what he wanted, how their relationship would work going forward and how they'd keep it from destroying their relationship with Dad and Bobby the first items on that list. They had a lot of work ahead of them getting the new hunter community running smoothly and finding their own place within it. The death of the demon Bobo had only delayed hell's plans for kick-starting the apocalypse, not ended them entirely, so they had to remain vigilant and Sam would have to frequently check the tracks for trouble in the future while Castiel did some investigating of his own.

But despite all of this, Dean could feel nothing but joy that morning. After years of self-hatred and self-disgust – after denying himself what he wanted most in the world – after thinking his brother was dead and being desperate to either follow him into death or to make a deal with a demon to bring Sam back, finally, finally he was filled with peace and happiness and had what he most wanted in the world. Hearing the toilet flush, he climbed out of bed and wandered over to the bathroom, opening the door and then leaning against the frame, arms crossed and cock rapidly filling as he watched his brother climbing in to the shower, more than half hard himself.

Dean followed his brother into the shower, pulling the curtain closed behind them. No, life wouldn't be perfect, but he still couldn't think of a single thing that could make him happier.

End

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