Not All Good News

by trevelies

Summary

Michael is caged inside Dean's mind for now. But there's grace leaking from the cracks, banging on the doors, and Dean knows what happens at the end of this story. With borrowed (and confusing) Archangel abilities, a group of mistrustful Apocalypse Universe Hunters, and too many Michael Monsters to deal with, Team Free Will 2.0 is ready to clean up the mess that Michael's left behind and stop another apocalypse.

And at the end of it all, Dean needs to decide how far he'll go to get rid of Michael once and for all.
Dean stumbles a little on the kitchen doorframe, and Sam stares at him like Dean just tossed himself into a woodchipper.

“Dean? You good?”

“Lord’s fuckin’ name, Sam. I spilled some coffee on my arm this morning, you want to call an ambulance for that too?”

Sam dusts off a classic bitch face from his repertoire, and rolls his eyes. “Jesus. Someone’s testy.”

“Testy? What are you, a hundred years old?”

Sam’s mouth quirks at the corner, but slowly the humor drains from his eyes. Dean doesn’t know what Sam is seeing on his face, but he doesn’t like it. Dean takes a step around Sam, and opens a cabinet at random for something to do.

“Where are we on tracking the escaped Michael Monsters?” He asks, grabbing a box of cereal. It’s colorful and bright and looks like it’s 95% unhealthy sugar. Perfect.

Sam is silent for a moment, and when Dean turns to face him, he catches the tail end of an exasperated sigh. “Uh, nowhere, I guess.” Sam answers. “I mean, Monica and Jeremy are putting out the bat signal, but no other hunters are reporting any massive swarms of supernatural monsters, like, anywhere.”

Dean digs a hand into the box and tosses back a handful of cereal, considering. “You think they’re going underground?”

Sam shrugs. “I think that Michael didn’t leave backup instructions in the event of getting locked into a bar’s refrigerated walk-in.”

Dean chews in silence for a thoughtful moment. “Guess there might be a generational gap there. I’ve always planned to be locked in a bar refrigerator.”

That gets a huff of a laugh out of Sam, and Dean smiles to himself. He shakes the box in Sam’s direction, and after a moment, Sam takes a handful of the offered cereal. “Anyway,” Dean continues, “my guess is, with Michael on the outs with his monsters, we’ve bought ourselves a few inches of breathing room. Though can’t say I like the idea of – “

Bang.

Dean winces and his hand freezes halfway towards the box. It’s the sensation of a heart skipping a beat. The sensation of not knowing whose heart beats next.

Sam’s voice comes from underwater. “Dean?”

An inky silence fills Dean’s head, and it’s almost worse.

Almost.
“Toothache.” Dean lies easily, and shoves the box into Sam’s chest.

Sam catches it before it slides from his grip and his eyes scan the box mechanically. “Wait, isn’t this Cas’ cer – “

But Dean’s already out of ear shot, already trudging down the hallway. He’s exhausted suddenly, and his vision swims like it only does when he’s awake for over 48 hours.

Locking away an Archangel in his head was the closest to a full-time job that Dean’s ever had, and the dental plan sucks. Dean can’t close his eyes without sensing something wrong about the dark, and he worries at the bad feeling like a loose tooth in a mouth full of blood.

He can feel Michael prowling inside his cage at all times with no reprieve. Dean knows that it’s a mental game. The concept of Michael is trapped, just as Dean had been drowning for weeks his first go-around as an angel condom. It’s an abstraction. It’s a metaphor.

But when Dean closed his eyes last night, he could feel the physical sensations of muted footsteps pacing in a metal cage. He could feel beer kegs bouncing off shelving, and hear the roars and clamor reverberate off the walls like alarm klaxons.

Michael is going to shake the cage until the top blows off, and then he’s going to stick Dean so deep inside his own mind, they’ll be nothing left to find.

The Bunker is at half-capacity, and it still feels crowded to Dean. Sam sent off half the hunters to follow up on reports of Michael Monsters in the surrounding area, but it’s a half-hearted attempt. The Michael Monsters aren’t settling down – they’re spreading like a disease culture, going underground, and waiting for Michael to rise from Dean’s ashes.

God. He’s morbid when he’s sober.

Dean heads slowly towards the Bunker’s living quarters. The day is ticking towards nightfall, and the hallways become more crowded as hunters head to their bunks for an early night before an early morning. Andrea nods at Dean as she passes by, and he holds up a hand in a half-hearted greeting.

Dominic passes by, and glares at Dean like he wants to slip a blade between his ribs and leave him to bleed out somewhere dramatic, like an ocean shore, or a rainstorm. The old Dean would throw a wink in his direction, something outrageously saucy or recklessly inappropriate.

But he’s tired.

Bang.

Dean flinches.

He’s almost made it to his room unmolested, when Cas turns the corner. Dean sees the flat blue gaze cross his features, and Dean is suddenly very cognizant that he’s wearing yesterday’s clothes with yesterday’s shave, and the bags under his eyes are packed for a European vacation.

Cas’ mouth opens, and Dean can already hear what’s going to pour out: how are you Dean, Dean how are you sleeping, do you need to talk Dean, Dean are you okay, you don’t look so well Dean, Dean, Dean, Dean.

Dean slaps an interrupting hand on Cas’ shoulder without slowing down. “Sam is eating your cereal.” He says, and is two yards down the hallway by the time he senses Cas turn around.

Everyone knows that Cas is most effective six inches too deep in your personal space and rumbling gruffly with heavy eye contact. He’s missed his window, and Dean is around the bend in the corner
before Cas can decide whether or not to push the issue.

Two doors away from the relative safety of his own bunk, Dean pauses outside Jack’s room. The door is shut, and it’s like facing the expanse of a canyon. Dean’s hand raises hesitantly towards the smooth wood, but he can’t bring himself to knock. The kid’s hardly spoken three words to Dean since they locked Michael away in Dean’s head, and Dean doesn’t know what that means. Usually, Sam is the one with oppressive silences and broody looks. Dean’s always been shit at figuring it out. Dean raps a knuckle inaudibly against the door before his hand sinks to his side and clenches into a fist. Jack’s been through a literal soul-draining experience, all because of the beast thrashing around in Dean’s head. He doesn’t blame Jack for wanting to recharge by himself.

He just hopes that’s all it is.

Dean shuts and locks his door behind him. He toes his shoes off and drops heavily onto his stomach on the bed in the space of two seconds. His teeth feel mossy with cereal sugar, but he doesn’t feel motivated to grab a toothbrush and go through the motions. He shuts his eyes, but the darkness is oppressive.

He turns his head to the side and his eyes catch on the dresser shoved into the corner. Dean studies Billie’s book where it’s tucked under nudie mags and old coffee mugs. He wonders how he’s even going to pull this plan off. If he even has remotely the amount of time required to pull off the one plan out of a million other written possibilities that doesn’t end in Armageddon. He needs to keep it together. The cage has to hold.

The cage has to be real.

It’s real, because if it’s not real, then Dean is already lost.

Cas turns the corner into the kitchen and gives Sam a suspicious look. Sam’s nursing a cup of coffee, ready for a late night coordinating with the hunters positioned around the county, and is taken aback at the dark look.

“What’s up, Cas?”

Cas’ skeptical eyes leave Sam and flick to the closed cereal cabinet. “Nothing of import. But I did want to talk to you about…” The angel trails off as Dominic and Jeremy enter the kitchen and make a beeline to the freshly brewed pot of coffee.

Sam sees the apprehension in Cas’ eyes, and nods at the hallway. “I’m headed to the server room.”

Cas steps through the doorframe, and they walk together down the hallway. There’s a few moments of silence as they walk out of earshot of the caffeine-starved hunters. Finally, after a hot sip of milky coffee, Sam asks, “This about Dean?”

Cas’ eyes track to Sam. There’s dread darkening the blue eyes in the dim hallway lighting. But there’s also faith and conviction. “In the millennia of my existence, I’ve never heard of a human being able to suppress an Archangel.”

“Well… there’s only like… four of them, so…”

Cas’ expression cuts off Sam’s attempt to lighten the mood. To crack a joke. Channel his inner Dean. The angel continues, “Dean’s fortitude is impressive. The Mark of Cain altered him on a cellular level. Biologically. Dean is also the Michael Sword, born from a carefully culled bloodline crafted
through divine intervention. Physically, he should be strong enough to contain Michael for a while…”

“So far, I’m not hearing anything in the negative column here, Cas.” Sam adds, after Cas trails off.

“Think of it this way. We were able to overpower Michael in Dean’s mind.”

Sam slurps down another sip of coffee. “Right… all things being equal, Michael isn’t any more powerful in Dean’s mind than we are.”

Cas nods. “To a point, yes. But it’s a matter of perception. Michael is only as powerful as Dean allows him to be. He can only keep Michael caged as long as he believes that he can cage him. There is not a physical cage in Dean’s mind. It’s the… concept of a cage. It’s the intention behind the idea.”

“Dean’s already had Michael on lock-down for over 24 hours without second-guessing himself.” Sam points out uneasily. They’ve arrived at the server room, but neither makes a move to push open the door.

Cas looks uncomfortable, like he’s practicing an idea out on Sam before working his way up. “We cannot allow Michael to break out of the cage.”

“Yeah. Total agreement there, buddy.”

Cas holds up a hand to stop Sam from interrupting. “We need to keep distractions away from Dean. He can’t afford to let his attention slip. His resolve must not waver. He’s taken on a huge responsibility caging an archangel inside of himself, and we need to keep him as stable as possible.”

“You want to bench Dean.” Sam realizes, Cas’ point finally driving home.

“I want…” Cas picks his words carefully, “I want Dean to be able to concentrate on keeping himself safe without distractions.”

“Cas, you know he won’t go for that. He’s already…” Sam gestures vaguely with his mug, “he’s already talking about getting back out there to track down Michael’s army. You know he’s not going to hang out in mission control while everyone else is cleaning up Michael’s messes.”

Cas’ expression is regretful but resolute. “Sam, think about it. If Dean is injured, Michael could escape. If Dean is emotionally compromised, Michael could escape. Michael is lying in wait for the first opportunity he gets to take Dean’s body back. If he’s on a hunt with you, and you or Jack are injured, that could be all it takes for Michael to wriggle free.”

Sam doesn’t say anything, and he bites the inside of his cheek. When Cas puts it like that, Sam knows the angel has a point. Some hunts are milk runs, some aren’t. And with Michael’s graced up super-monsters out there, the fights are only going to get tougher and bloodier. Sam can’t send out the Apocalypse Universe hunters out into the world to fight and die on the front lines, if he isn’t willing to do the same. He still feels the twisting guilt in his gut about being teleported back to the relative safety of the Bunker while his team was out risking their lives. That’s not what a good leader does, and it’s not what Sam Winchester wants to do.

But on the other hand, how can he leave Dean behind? They’re a team. They have each other’s backs. They’ve been through it all together, every step of the way. Okay – most steps of the way. They’ve had their rough patches over the years, but Sam and Dean have never been broken apart for long, and they’ve always faced all the shit the world throws at them together. Sam can’t do this without Dean.
But he can’t watch an Archangel rip Dean apart from the inside either.

Sam scrubs a hand down his face, suddenly exhausted. Cas is still waiting patiently for his answer. But Sam doesn’t have one. Not yet.

“Think it over, Sam.” The angel says finally, and he raises a hand to squeeze Sam’s shoulder. Sam tries to smile in assurance, but it comes out as a mere twitch.

“Dean will be okay.” But Sam isn’t sure who he’s trying to convince.

Chapter End Notes

I told myself to take a break coming off the end of my nearly 55k word fic, but I couldn’t sleep last night, I had so many ideas for this fic. This isn’t going to be super speculation-y like my previous fics, but I’m still hoping to keep it realistic (in terms of what the show could have done). Really excited to dive back in!

This chapter is just kind of me sketching out how I’m addressing the “cage” in Dean’s head. More content/plot coming soon. I wanted to get out at least a chapter or two before next week’s episode breaks every idea I’ve had.

Hopefully this is clear from the summary - but you absolutely do not need to read my other SPN fics for this. This is 100% straight off the tail end of 14.10 Nihilism. That being said, the characterizations will be the same, especially with Michael in GLaS. Thank you for reading!
Dean is pulled from sleep by a thundering at the door, and it takes him a moment to realize it’s not his bedroom door.

He rolls onto his back and closes his eyes. He slept for at least 7 hours, but it wasn’t restful. Every time he started to drift off, Michael would slam against the cage, throw things around, have a rave… who knew what the archangel was doing in there. Whatever it was – if Michael’s plan was to take back over one sleepless night at a time, then his maniacal (and kind of lazy) plan was in full swing.

“You look like shit.” Sam tells him later, when he stumbles blearily into the kitchen.

“I bet you say that to all the pretty girls.” Dean says flatly, and holds his coffee cup under Sam’s nose. Sam’s eyes are on Dean’s as he obligingly tops off Dean’s mug.

Dean leans back against the counter, and burns his lips taking a sip of too-hot coffee. He looks around the kitchen. The Bunker hadn’t been their home for long, but long enough that the small changes following the arrival of the Apocalypse Universe hunters is jarring. Tables have been moved up from storage to accommodate the increased numbers. Dishes fill the sink, at least four knives are forgotten in various cupboards, and the novelty mugs that Monica collects from motel gift shops line the back of the counter. Not that he’ll admit it, but it makes Dean feel a little… uncomfortable. Unwelcome in his own home. Michael winged around the country in Dean’s body, and by the time that Dean got it back, the hunters were settled in and comfortable. And Dean was the odd one out.

“You want an omelet?” Sam asks suddenly, and Dean didn’t even notice that Sam was inches away, pulling open the fridge at Dean’s left.

Dean’s fist clenches on the mug, and he forces some good humor back into his tone. “An omelet – you want to make me an omelet? With your disgusting egg whites and kale and… corn…”

Sam throws his head back and laughs. “Are those seriously the only three healthy things you can think of?”

“Shaddup.” Dean grouses good-naturedly through a mouthful of coffee. “I’ll be the one making my own omelet, thank you very much.”

Sam throws his head back and laughs. “Are those seriously the only three healthy things you can think of?”

“Shaddup.” Dean grouses good-naturedly through a mouthful of coffee. “I’ll be the one making my own omelet, thank you very much.”

Sam’s face lights up with victory. “Well, if you’re offering…” And he pulls the carton of eggs from the fridge with a handful of other ingredients.

Dean rolls his eyes, knowing he’s been played. But he knocks back the dregs of his coffee and gets to work.

“You talked to Jack at all?” Dean asks, after a few minutes of cracking eggs and slicing up Sam’s favorite fancy cheese.

“Not really. I checked on him last night, but he was sleeping. Why?”

“I think he’s avoiding me.” Dean admits, and turns his back on his brother. Heart-to-heart conversations always make Dean feel uncomfortable.
He can hear the frown in Sam’s pause. “Avoiding you? Why?”

There’s a hiss of beaten eggs striking a hot pan, and Dean flattens the mixture smoothly with a spatula. “Forget it. Maybe it’s just me.”

Dean can feel the heaviness at his back as Sam works himself up into a *let’s talk about feelings* session, and already regrets asking about Jack. Dean should just go and bang on the kid’s door and make sure that they’re good. After the hurt and nonsense that Michael threw at Sam and Cas in his head, who knows what kind of fallout Dean has to recover from in other quarters.

Sam stays silent though, and Dean risks a glance behind him. Sam’s sitting at one of the tables, and his phone screen is inches from his face. The screen light catches in the furrows of his brow, and whatever Sam is reading, it’s not good news.

“What’s up?” Dean says, and his brother pulls himself away from his phone.

“Nothing.” Sam lies immediately, and Dean glares at him. “Omelet’s gonna burn.” He adds, and Dean turns back to the pan, irritated, but not willing to risk his professional reputation as a breakfast chef extraordinaire.

He slides the spatula around the edge of the omelet, ready to flip, when –

**Bang.**

Dean feels the spatula slip from his fingers and watches it clatter to the floor noiselessly. All the sounds of the room – the sizzling of the pan, the hum of the refrigerator, the sound of Sam’s fingers tapping at his phone – all fade to nothing.

Nothing except a guttural roar tearing Dean’s mind and the sounds of heavy fists pounding against the wall. His head feels hot and strained – like he’s been hanging upside down and all the blood’s rushing to his brain. Sensations light up Dean’s head like a switchboard and he feels dizzy, like a rug’s been swept out from under him, stealing away the floor and his sense of balance.

He feels a hand on his shoulder, and jumps until he sees it’s Sam. Just Sam. Not an archangel, not Michael.

Sam’s mouth opens and closes but Dean can’t hear anything except for echoes rebounding inside his mind like a bullet ricocheting in a closed room. Dean blinks once at the mute apparition of his brother, and then a flip switches, and suddenly all the noises are too loud – the lights are too bright, and the sensation overload crashes over Dean’s head like a physical blow.

“Whoa, Dean – “ He hears Sam say, but it’s like a train roaring past his ears. Dean flinches away from Sam, pulling himself from his grip. His back collides into the stove top, and he throws his arm backwards in a delayed attempt to correct his balance.

Then, everything is normal.

His blurry vision clears abruptly, and the sounds all return to an acceptable decibel level. There’s a sizzling at his back as the eggs burn in the pan. The wash of light that was Sam’s face sharpens into lines of fear and concern. “Jesus Christ, Dean!” He yells right into Dean’s ear, and tackles his brother away from the stove.

Dean’s hip clips the side of the fridge painfully, and he roughly shoves Sam off of him. “Jesus, Sam,” he tries, trying to feign a sense of normal, “I can make eggs without – “
But Sam is batting aside Dean’s protests and raised arm without listening. His fingers close on Dean’s other hand and wrenches the arm into the light. The bright shiny pink of burned flesh marks the palm on Dean’s hand. Dean stares at it incomprehensively. He remembers arresting his fall, but he must have stuck his hand straight against the blistering heat of the oiled omelet pan.

Sam’s eyes are wide and fearful as he looks back and forth from Dean’s face to his hand.

Dean flexes his hand, and watches as the seared skin wrinkles. “It’s okay, Sammy. I don’t even feel it.”

His words were meant to be reassuring, but the fear in Sam’s eyes only blooms.

“Jesus, Cas, it was like he didn’t even notice that his hand was in a pan full of oil!” Sam snaps under his breath. “I called his name like three times! He was totally checked out – it was like he didn’t even notice me.”

Cas is all crossed arms and stiff posture as he leans against the wall in Sam’s room. Sam sits heavily on his bed, and waits for the angel to give him some sort of reassurance that Dean isn’t going to disintegrate into a pile of ash or keel over dead.

“I don’t have all the answers, here, Sam.” Cas says slowly. “I healed Dean’s burn and he said he was going to shower. I don’t see what else we can do other than keep him safe, and keep an eye on him.”

Sam raises his arms and slaps them against his knees, frustrated. “We can’t – we can’t just keep an eye on him, and wait for something worse to happen, Cas! What if this happens on a hunt?”

Cas’ calm eyes don’t betray any offense at Sam’s vehemence. “Dean shouldn’t leave the Bunker, Sam. Not for a hunt, at least.”

“Yeah, try telling him that. And now I’ve got this situation in Joplin I need to check in on, Fatima and Devin are in over their heads, and now something’s going on with Dean and he won’t talk to me about it, and I – “

“What’s the situation in Joplin?”

Sam and Cas both start, and their heads swivel towards the door. Dean’s leaning with his shoulder against the doorframe, hair still dripping into the collar of the fresh shirt he’s put on. He looks better than he did this morning, with a fresh shave and clean clothes, but all Sam can see are dark circles under his brother’s eyes, and exhaustion and stress lining Dean’s face like new wrinkles.

Dean raises a suspicious brow when Cas and Sam remain silent. “If you’re trying to talk secretly, maybe don’t do it with an open door, right next door to my room.”

“It’s nothing, Dean – “ Sam tries, but Dean cuts him off.

“Right. Nothing. Just something that you need to check in on because two hunters are in over their heads. I know what you’re doing here, and it’s not going to fly. You’re not benching me.”

“Dean,” Cas starts soothingly, and Dean visibly bristles, “you’re caging the most dangerous enemy we’ve ever faced in your mind. And we don’t know the first thing about the consequences that will follow. If you’re on a hunt, and something goes wrong… we’re talking about Michael, here. He will not hesitate to do whatever it takes, take advantage of whatever distraction, to take back control.”

Cas throws a plaintive look at Sam, and his eyes widen meaningfully, wanting Sam to back him up.
Sam meets Cas’ gaze, but can’t seem to get any words past the lump in his throat.

Dean swallows down whatever angry words he was about to say next. Sam watches as Dean visibly tries to control his temper, worsened by hours without sleep and an unwelcome guest rattling around in his brain. “Listen.” Dean says, “I get where you fellas are coming from. I do. But we don’t have the luxury of fighting a man down here. And I… I need the distraction. It’s… it’s getting a little crowded up here.” Sam reads the hesitation in Dean’s eyes, sees just how much it cost Dean to admit Michael’s presence was weighing on him. “I need to do this.” Dean says, and there’s no pleading, no supplication. It’s a declaration.

Sam drums his fingers nervously against his leg, and meets Dean’s gaze. Unspoken questions are asked and unspoken answers are given. It’s internal dialogue based on trust and familiarity, and Dean’s eyes are steady and clear.

Sam sighs, and scrubs a hand down his face. “Fine. Wheels up in 15.”

Dean’s face cracks in a grin. “Ooh, it’s General Sammy today, is it? Yes sir.” And he snaps off a smart salute. Sam’s mouth twitches at the corner as Dean ducks back around the corner towards his room.

Cas turns solemn eyes back on Sam. “This is not a good idea.”

Sam scratches the underside of his chin, wishing he had the time for a quick shave. “Of course it’s not. But when are our ideas ever good ideas?”

There’s the sound of footsteps stomping back down the hallway, and Dean’s head reappears in the doorway. “We’re taking the Impala. Want to make sure Jeremy didn’t hurt the sweet lady driving her back from Kansas City.”

_I mean, what are you? You’re nothing._

Jack’s torn from sleep when a text crackles from the phone shoved under his pillow. Dean blew out the speakers a month ago showing him one too many classic rock hits at full volume, and the phone’s been busted since. _All part of the experience, Jack. You got a lot to catch up on._

A text on his phone from Maggie. “You ok?” Jack thumbs the text’s delete button and tosses the phone onto the desk across the room. His aim is off, and the phone smashes into a water glass, knocking it from the table. The piercing ring of shattering glass slams into Jack’s head, and he winces.

Jack holds his breath, trying to ignore the bubble of nausea he’d been fighting since tapping his soul to disintegrate the Michael Monsters. Jack can only hear his heartbeat, and the steady drum of water dripping off the table.

Then: the one sound Jack was hoping not to hear. Footsteps.

A door opens further down the hallway, and Jack listens as a man grunts, as if hefting something heavy. Footsteps head further down the hallway and pause. There’s a beat of silence, and then a heavy palm slamming into a closed door. “Sam!” Dean shouts. “Put the curling iron down and let’s hit the road!”

So, they’re leaving.
Jack doesn’t know if it’s relief or hurt that squeezes his chest.

There’s a muffled reply from Sam that Jack can’t quite make out, but Dean slaps one last hand on Sam’s door in response. Dean’s heavy footsteps continue down the hall, and Jack twists the sheet in his hands, hoping that Dean will just keep walking by.

No luck.

Dean’s steps halt outside Jack’s room, his feet two shadows in the crack of the door. There’s the muted sound of Dean adjusting his go-bag on his shoulder, but then silence. Finally, there’s a hesitant knock on Jack’s door.

Jack holds himself extremely still, not moving a muscle.

“Uh, hey kiddo. Don’t know if you’re awake… or… or, you know, busy, but…” Dean trails off and hides his awkwardness behind a cough. “I just want to check in and make sure that you’re good. Sam and Cas told me that you really went through the ringer back there, and I’m sorry that I… wasn’t there to back you up. But we got your back, Jack, okay? It won’t go down like that again. I promise. So… just… call me later, alright?”

There’s a long pause, followed by the soft sound of a knuckle rapping against the door. Finally, Jack releases a breath as he hears Dean’s footsteps disappear down the hallway. He doesn’t fully relax until Sam’s door opens and closes, and his own footsteps pad towards the garage. He hears Sam’s hesitation outside his door, but ultimately, the older hunter leaves Jack alone.

Jack pulls the sheet over his head, and hears another crackly text hit his phone from across the room. He doesn’t make a move to check it.

You don’t know anything about Dean.

I know everything. Like, I know how sad he was when you died… on the outside. On the inside, well… it’s not that he was happy… he just didn’t care.

Jack knows that he can’t trust everything that Michael says.

’Cause you’re not Sam. You’re not Cas. You’re a new burden he was handed.

But that doesn’t mean Michael is wrong.

If Sam was worried the drive to Joplin was going to be a mess of heavy silences and conversation attempts being brushed off, he would have only been half right.

Dean’s leaning against the Impala, a foot tapping impatiently against his duffel. “There you are. Get lost?”

Sam checks his watch. “I’m five minutes early, jerk.”

“Bitch.”

Dean tosses the keys at Sam, and Sam easily snatches them out of the air. “Seriously? You don’t want to drive? Maybe Michael’s taken back over after all.”

Dean barks out a laugh, always amused by gallows humor. “Yeah, sure. Well, let’s hope that Michael has better taste in music than you, because we’re not listening to **jazz**.”
“When have I ever listened to jazz?” Sam laughs, and he slings his bag into the backseat, adding Dean’s after a moment.

Dean’s already climbing into the passenger seat. Sam fiddles with the keys for a moment, before opening up the driver’s side. Dean’s tapping his fingers impatiently on his knee, and Sam slides the key into the ignition and the Impala thrums to life under his hands.

He pulls out of the garage and sneaks a glance at Dean. Dean’s chin rests in his hand, and he looks out the window. Sam looks back at the road, troubled. Dean hardly ever lets Sam drive, and usually only acquiesces if he’s down a pint or two of blood, or on hour 36 without sleep. Sam never takes first shift, and that’s just how it’s always been.

“I heard you talking to Jack.” Sam says after a few minutes of silence. He sees Dean look over, but keeps his own eyes steady on the tarmac.

“Uh, tried to. He must have been sleeping.”

“You said earlier that you think he’s ignoring you?”

Dean shrugs, but doesn’t reply.

“He’s a good kid, Dean – “

“I’m not saying he’s not a good kid,” Dean snaps impatiently. “I’m saying that – “

“Hey, let me finish. He’s a good kid. But that’s what he is. He’s a kid. Jesus, I mean… Jack’s like, what… two? I mean like properly, honestly two years old.”

Dean laughs, though it’s clear he doesn’t want to. “Two fuckin’ years, man. Feels like he’s been around forever. I think about all the times at the beginning, when I wasn’t… “ he waves a hand vaguely in the air, encompassing all the distrust and distance that marked his and Jack’s first few months, “I just want to make sure he’s okay.”

“Cas said he had a chat with him. Talked about the soul-thing.” Sam says after a moment, and signals to merge onto the highway – the first leg of their 6-hour drive to Joplin.

“Soul-thing.” Dean repeats, and shakes his head. “I thought raising a kid would be more about… teaching him to talk to girls, how to order a drink at a bar… now we have to worry about the kid putting up his soul at a craps table.”

“I mean… probably not that specifically, but – “

Dean smacks Sam’s arm, and Sam grins at the road. “Shut up, you know what I mean. God, you’re insufferable when you’re… chipper.”

Sam’s grin stretches wider. “I’m sorry, did you just use the word chipper in a sentence?”

“I’m going to take a nap.” Dean snaps without heat. He fishes one of Sam’s discarded sweatshirts from the backseat, and balls it up as a pillow. He settles, but must sense Sam’s amused gaze on him, because he flips Sam off without opening his eyes.

Dean drifts off with his brother’s laughter filling the car.

Rocky’s Bar – his bar.
Dean’s aware that he’s sleeping, but he also knows that this isn’t a dream.

Neon lights flicker reflections off clean bar tables, and the smooth twang of bluesy rock pumps into the room from the jukebox. It’s not a real place that Dean’s been to, but his eyes trace over the bottles of liquor lined behind the bar, the flyers and business cards pasted by the phone, and the discarded foamy beer glasses on the bar, and it’s hard to remember that this isn’t real.

It’s real to him.

He remembers framing the pictures behind the bar. He can remember the day that he and Pamela finally hung the Rocky’s sign, and the second one, after a bullet meant for a werewolf went off course and shattered the first one. He knows which bar stools squeak, and which ones wobble. He can tell you exactly how many different types of coasters are stacked underneath the bar, and knows down to the penny the first bar tab the place ever had.

And none of that even happened. He shuts his eyes, hears the background sounds of an empty bar melt into his brain, and mourns for the end of a bar that was never really his in the first place.

_Bang._

Dean jumps backwards, knocks his ankle painfully in a bar chair. The walk-in refrigerator rattles and shakes in its foundation as a pissed off archangel throws himself against the walls of his prison. Dean steels himself, and walks the few steps closer. He checks that the screwdriver is still secure in the lock, and he slides behind the bar to grab the machete that he keeps stashed there.

Not that he actually stashed a machete there, because none of this is real.

_Fuck, to go back to a time when up was up and down was somewhere secure below his feet._

The banging in the walk-in – so loud in his ears, so loud in his mind – ceases.

The crisp voice of Michael echoes around the room, like there aren’t four walls and ceiling containing him. “I know you’re there, Dean. You might as well as stop squirming like a child.”

“I thought you liked the squirming.” Dean gibes, and manages to keep the anger and fear from his voice.

“Cute. I’ll remember that sense of humor of yours when I take back control. We both know how… creative I can be when properly motivated.”

“This is starting to sound like a whole lotta foreplay, and not a lot of delivery. You nice and comfortable in there? Not a lot of reading materials, but maybe I can wriggle in some of the magazines we keep in the crapper – “

An explosive bang rattles the walk-in door, startling Dean into leaping a step back and nearly dropping the machete. His heart almost stops in his chest, but the door holds. It holds.

“You do _not_ want to make me angry, boy. I gave you a chance to do this the easy way. I tried to give you all of _this._” And the sentence is punctuated with the slamming of a hand against the door. “I gave you a peaceable end to your bloody story. And you threw it away when you threw me in here. You had Sam and Castiel to back you up before. What do you think is going to happen now that the odds are even, and I’ve got an eternity of practice whittling down insects like you?”

Dean swallows down the nerves that almost choke the air from his lungs. But he’s Dean-like-the-rifle-Winchester, and he comes from a long line of firebrands and shit-starters, and that doesn’t just
end when the walls close in and the going gets tough.

Dean walks steadily to the walk-in, and slams the handle of the machete against the walk-in. The strike dents the metal inwards, and the echo reverberates inside the cage like the beat of a drum. Dean doesn’t raise his voice, but he knows Michael can hear him. “You talk big game for someone currently sucking down freon.”

Michael laughs, and it’s as cold and biting as winter. “So, tell me, Dean. Has it started?”

Dean doesn’t answer. Doesn’t take the bait. Michael chuckles to himself, and Dean can hear the sound of a keg scratching along the floor. Presumably Michael is making himself comfortable.

“Oh, now we’re done talking? And you’re usually such a chatterbox those first few days.”

Dean grits his teeth together. “Has what started?”

Michael can’t escape the walk-in, but his smugness pours from the cracks like tear gas. “Let me answer your question with another question. What do you think happens when all that archangel grace is trapped inside a human with no where else to go? Does this universe also use the charming phrase blow a gasket?”

Dean doesn’t say anything, but his silence speaks volumes and Michael knows he’s hit his mark.

“Here’s another human phrase for you – Death by a thousand cuts. It doesn’t matter if you give in today, or tomorrow, or a week from now. It doesn’t matter if you can hold me for a year. You’re hardly a granule on the scale. No matter that you are my Sword, you do not have the fortitude or ability to contain my grace. Archangels were born to house that level of power, and for a human to have even held it in this long, you have already surpassed my expectations. Grace will overwhelm you, Dean Winchester, and whether it leaks out in agonizing gasps or clears out an entire city block in precipitous annihilation, I will take back control of my vessel. Because this body wasn’t born for you, Dean. It was made for me.”

And Dean can picture it so clearly – the Bunker imploding, a mushroom cloud of sacrosanct proportions, a page ripped straight out of Revelations. The end is nigh, and Dean is going with it – just like the thousands and thousands of destinies penned out in Billie’s books.

And Dean wants to reveal it all, then. The Plan. The slim book of one last alternative destiny, hidden under glossy magazines in his room, the instruction manual for averting the inevitable and ending Michael once and for all. Dean wants to throw it in Michael’s face and watch him choke on his own words.

But he doesn’t have a chance. The sound that explodes from the cage is more of a detonation than a bang, and Dean stumbles; his foot catches on the leg of a bar chair, and he trips backwards into nothingness.

Bang.

Chapter End Notes

I spent like an hour last night getting all the various plot points out for this fic. And just a warning, it’s going to be /long/. I think 4 sort of over-arching arcs. Apparently I just hate
myself. Anyway, the reason I'm saying this is because I gotta set up some stuff in the first few chapters - people that have read my previous fic know that I'm a little obsessive when it comes to making things "realistic" and supporting like everything - and I hope that you stick with me until I get into the more fun stuff.

Also I clearly have no idea how many AU hunters there actually are. Are there 5? Are there 30? Who knows? I don’t. And I know that Sam has been a little /goofy/ these last two chapters. I think he was getting kinda angsty towards the end of my last fic, and this is me trying to make it up to him.

Thank you for all your comments! And thank you for reading <3 (Also - It's 1:45 AM and I just deleted like three paragraphs by accident, so if there were any big gaps, I probably deleted something, so please let me know. For the couple of you commenting on my stamina/free time - lots of late nights with there fics, lmao)
Chapter 3

Sam keeps both hands on the wheel but only half his attention on the road.

Dean sleeps fitfully in the passenger seat, arms crossed and brows narrowed over closed eyes. It doesn’t look restful, but if power naps are what it takes for Dean to catch up on much-needed sleep, then Sam is all for it.

Sam checks his phone to see if Jack’s replied to his earlier text, but no new message blinks up at him. Frowning, Sam pockets the phone and wonders if the bad feeling is just a result of Dean’s own suspicions regarding Jack. He makes a mental note to make Cas check in with the kid if he hasn’t heard from him by the time they roll into Joplin.

An hour rolls by relatively quickly, and Sam hums lowly along with the radio playing quietly in the car. It’s peaceful – no cloud in the sky, hardly any cars on the road. Just heading on another hunt with Dean – something that shouldn’t feel so mundane, but is, really.

Sam’s about to pull over to throw a few bucks of gas into the tank, when Dean’s eyes fly open and he wakes with a gasp like a diver breaking the surface. His eyes are wild and confused for a moment, darting around the Impala, before he seems to pull himself together.

He glances at Sam, and squints at the upcoming gas station. “Pull over, gotta take a leak.” He instructs, and Sam obligingly swings the Impala into the gas station. Dean yanks the door open before the car’s at a complete stop, and slides his legs out of the car. Sam pulls a 20 from his wallet and holds it out the window. Dean snags the bill as he walks by, well-practiced camaraderie, and heads into the station to pay for the gas and grab the bathroom key.

Sam eases himself slowly out of the car. They’re only an hour out from the Bunker. He isn’t pushing 40 like his brother, but even he has to pop the cricks from his joints and stretch his legs. The meter on the pump flicks to 17.84 – Dean must have bought something 99% processed sugar – and Sam starts filling the Impala’s tank. He leans against the car, and slides the phone from his pocket.

There’s a new text from Fatima, one of the hunters they’re on their way to meet outside of Joplin. Sam replies with an ETA. Still no texts from Jack or Cas, but there’s a new text from Mary saying that she and Bobby are on their way back from the cabin. Sam smiles, texts back a winky face, and drops the phone back into his pocket.

He’s sliding the gas nozzle back into its cradle, when Dean reappears in the parking lot. He pops the last bite of a candy bar into his mouth before trashing the wrapper, and crosses the lot towards Sam. There’s water in Dean’s hair, dribbling onto his shirt, and Sam knows that Dean splashed water on his face to wake himself up. Sam offers the keys, but Dean holds up a hand to pass. Still weird.

“You eaten any real food today?” Sam has to ask, as he swings the car out of the parking lot.

“Suddenly a Milky Way bar isn’t real food? There’s peanuts. That’s protein.”

“Yeah, that’s a Snickers bar.”

Dean rolls his eyes. “Whatever. Alright, now that I’m all napped up and 40 percent prettier, bring me up to speed on Joplin.”
“Right. Fatima and Devin were part of the teams that went out to check out anything weird in the 24 hours after Michael’s army disbanded. We focused on areas around Lebanon and around Kansas City, and Fatima said there was some police scanner activity in Joplin that sounded like it might be our kind of weird.”

“Our kind of weird because…?” Dean trails off, and he reaches into the back seat to drag his duffel closer. Sam hears the bag unzip and Dean leans back into the front seat now armed with his .45 and machete.

Sam flinches away from the blade as it swings his way. “Dude!” He protests. “Why is that in your bag and not the trunk?”

Dean gives Sam a look that says chill out. “Why do you think, smart ass? You’re the one that makes everyone check their weapons into the armory now. I had to go get them before we headed out. Super inconvenient, by the way.”

“Oh my god, are you still mad about this? It’s not checking them in, it’s just letting Dominic and Andrea check them over! We have enough to worry about out there without a gun jamming or a knife rusting.”

“All I’m saying is, I didn’t need a guy with a neckbeard checking over my guns before, and I don’t need it now. Now – come on. Joplin. Our kind of weird.” Dean fiddles with the handle of the machete, flicking off a small crust of blood. He inspects the blade in the light slanting through the window, before storing the gun and machete back in the bag.

“Anyway,” Sam continues, “a car reported stolen out of Lebanon apparently was seen crashing into an abandoned warehouse – “

“It’s always an abandoned warehouse.” Dean mutters under his breath. When Sam gives him a look, Dean raises his hands in surrender and gestures for Sam to continue.

“Joplin PD sent in a squad car, and two officers went in, but never came back out.”

“So how are Devin and Fatima on the ground level of this, and not swimming through a police investigation?”

Sam shrugs. “Flashed a badge, made up some nonsense about the stolen vehicle containing synthetic chemicals. The whole warehouse is on lockdown waiting for CDC.”

“Let me guess. We’re CDC.”

Sam digs into his back pocket and pulls out two freshly faked badges. He tosses both onto Dean’s lap, who flips them over in his hands. “Special FBI Liaison Dean Cain – nice – and CDC Epidemiologist Sam Jackson.” Dean pauses, and then throws Sam’s badge back at him. “Seriously? You get to be Samuel L. Jackson and you have a cooler job title?”

Sam laughs, and slides the badge back into his pocket. “Next time you make the badges.”

Dean shakes his head. “You wish. So, Fatima and Devin are on a holding pattern… why?”

“They cased the area before the police arrived on scene. Said it looked like at least four monsters were holed up in the building. I told them to wait for backup - we don’t need two dead hunters and four Michael Monsters on the loose.”

Dean doesn’t say anything for a while, and Sam risks a glance. Dean’s rubbing a hand against his
forehead like putting pressure on a headache. Sam frowns, “You good?”

Dean’s hand drops into his lap, but there’s a faraway look in his eyes. “Yeah.” He says simply, and that’s the last exchange they have for the next few hours.

Cas knocks on Jack’s door, and after hearing no response, pushes the door open. Light pours in from the hallway and gives the dark room a dingy appearance. Broken glass shines from a small puddle of water near the desk.

Jack sits on his bed, typing a message on his phone, but looks up when the angel enters. There are dark circles under the Nephilim’s eyes, and Cas studies the haunted look that lurks behind Jack’s expression.

“Hey, Jack. I was hoping we could talk.” Cas says gruffly, and flips the light switch. It flickers a few times before powering on, and Jack blinks uncomfortably at the light.

“Talk about what? My soul again?” Jack asks, and his face is carefully clean of all emotion. He turns back to his phone to tap a few last keys, before dropping his phone onto the bed spread.

“In a manner of speaking. Sam and Dean are worried about you. I’m also concerned. You’re hiding in your room. At first I thought it might just be a recovery period after burning off part of your soul, but now it seems like you’re avoiding us.”

Jack raises one shoulder in a listless shrug.

Cas sighs, and crosses the room to sit on edge of Jack’s bed. “Is this about something that Michael said to you? I know he upset you before I walked in the other day.”

Jack hesitates, then nods slowly. “Michael said that I was just a job. That I’m a new burden that you and Sam and Dean need to deal with.”

That takes a few seconds to fully sink in with Cas, but it resonates deep inside the small, broken part of himself that doesn’t believe he is worthy. Doesn’t deserve the second and third and tenth chances at life he’s received, the opportunities to try and fix his own mistakes and do better. “Michael said the same thing to Sam and myself, when we were inside Dean’s mind.”

That gets Jack’s attention, and he finally turns wide eyes to Cas. Cas continues, “He said that Dean said yes to Michael because deep down, he wanted to be rid of all of us. That we’ve let him down and left him behind.”

“But that’s not true!” Jack exclaims, and his voice is rough from disuse.

Cas claps his hand onto Jack’s shoulder. “You are important to Dean. You’re important to all of us. And not,” he adds, when Jack opens his mouth to protest, “and not because of your powers. Do you really think that Dean would have said yes to Michael in any other circumstances other than protecting his family?”

“But I’m not Dean’s family. Dean said yes to Michael to save Sam from my father.”

Cas shakes his head firmly. “Jack, you know that isn’t true. You know that Michael takes things out of context and stretches the truth so far that it’s hardly recognizable anymore. Sure, at the beginning, maybe Dean was a little hard on you. But you can’t tell me that you actually believe that he would rather have you out of his life, than in it.”
Cas can read the doubt sink into Jack’s young face. “Michael said I was a burden.”

And Cas actually rolls his eyes at that. “Jack, all the best parts of being human are burdens. Why do you think Dean clings so hard to the ones that he has?”

“Okay,” Dean says, as Sam hangs up the phone for the fourth time in fifteen minutes. “That’s how many times that Fatima’s clicked you into voicemail?”

Sam taps the phone nervously against the thigh of his pant suit. They’d stopped thirty minutes away from the warehouse to change into their fed threads, and Sam had tried to reach Fatima and Devin several times. Devin’s phone was dead or turned off, and Fatima’s was clicked to voicemail after two or three rings.

Dean’s behind the wheel of the Impala, and smoothly navigates the side streets in the industrial outskirts of the city. He peeks out the window at the dilapidated state of some of the older buildings and whistles through his teeth. “Looks like a tornado blew through town.” He comments, and leans back against the seat.


“No shit.” Dean mutters, and looks at the surroundings with renewed interest.

A text beeps on Sam’s phone, and he quickly thumbs it open. “Fatima.” He mutters when Dean shoots him a questioning glance.

“Woman of the hour. What’s she saying?”

Sam’s tapping out a response. There’s the tiny trill of a sent message, and he drops the phone into his lap. “She’s saying that it’s not a good time to talk.”

“Not a good time?” Dean repeats in disbelief. “We’re like ten minutes out, and she can’t be bothered to pick up the damn phone?”

Sam’s expression is troubled as he stares out the window. “Something isn’t right.”

The Impala rolls to a stop outside of the warehouse cordoned off with yellow crime tape. Two police cruisers and an ambulance are parked along the side of the road, lights flashing, but sirens off. There’s not a single person coming to greet them or shoo them away. There’s not a single person anywhere. Sam and Dean exchange glances, and climb out of the Impala.

Dean’s adjusting his M1911 colt in the waistband of his pants when another text hits Sam’s phone.

“‘Come inside.’” He reads aloud.

“Well. Fatima’s dead.” Dean gripes, and tosses the machete back and forth between his hands, squinting at the dark windows twenty feet off the ground of the warehouse. Sam gives him an aggrieved look, but Dean just shrugs.

They find the first body dragged around the side of the cruiser, and don’t bother to check for signs of life. Last Dean knew, humans don’t survive having their throat ripped out.

“What are we thinking here?” He mutters, and Sam shakes his head helplessly.
“Could be anything. Michael’s experiments are spewing out a whole lot of crazy these days.”

Dean groans under his breath. “Great. I always forget to appreciate the mystery of this job.”

“90 percent guesswork.” Sam agrees.

“10 percent style.” Dean finishes, and machetes in hand, they cross the dead grass leading up to the warehouse.

They find an unlocked side door on the west side of the building. Dean covers Sam’s back as the younger hunter uses the tips of fingers to slowly push open the door, machete raised in front of him at the ready. But if there is an ambush planned, this isn’t the place. Sam and Dean slowly make their way into the building.

Dean has no idea what this warehouse used to store. It’s all empty shelving and plastic wrapping. There’s a couple of cargo containers shoved into one corner. The Northeast end of the building is a mess of crumbled concrete and dilapidation, signs of the aftermath of the tornado 8 years earlier. “This place is just so typical.” Dean mutters under his breath. Sam waves a hand in his direction to silence him.

There are voices coming from the front of the building, and the Winchesters creep closer, hugging the side of a flipped and gutted forklift.

It’s dark, but Dean can make out four figures grouped together in the front, and another three lying prostrate on the ground. He can see the shine of blood pooling around corpses from yards away.

Sam tilts his head, listening, but Dean can hardly hear even scraps of a sentence. He picks out the words “Winchesters,” “car,” and “Michael.” He shoots Sam a questioning glance, but his brother shakes his head.

“Plan B.” Dean mouths, and he scoops up a chunk of concrete lying at his feet and hurls it towards the far corner of the warehouse floor. It strikes the side of metal shelving, and all four figures start. Rapid orders are given, and two of the Michael Monsters split from the group, off to check out the sound. Sam and Dean wait a moment for the gap to grow.

“Now.” Sam mutters, and the two take off at a sprint towards the remaining two monsters. They’re spotted immediately, but they’ve already gotten a head start on the separated group. Dean jumps over the cooling body of Fatima and plants his foot solidly into the chest of a male werewolf. The wolf’s eyes flash yellow in the dim lighting, and he growls savagely as he fights to recover his balance. Dean hears the sound of Sam meeting his own opponent, but he can’t afford to let his attention slip. The back foot of the werewolf slips in a slick of blood, and the wolf’s eyes widen as he realizes he can’t correct his footing in time. The blade of Dean’s machete meets the sweet spot of the man’s neck and slices cleanly through the vertebrae. The werewolf’s head drops wetly to the floor, and its dimming gaze rolls up to Dean for one last moment. Just as the life finally expires, a flash of blue archangel grace brightens in the depths of yellow eyes.

Bang.

Dean’s head feels like it’s been jabbed with a cattle prod, and he freezes at the end of his follow through. He squints his eyes shut as lights explode in front of his eyes, but the sensation is over almost as soon as it begins. Hell of a time for Michael to start throwing up a fuss.

“Dean?” A hand grazes his back, and Dean almost slices Sam’s hand off before he comes back to himself.
“Incoming.” He snaps, and spins Sam around with the sleeve of his jacket. Sam’s own machete drips with the dark blood of his own dead opponent, and he raises it as the two reinforcements arrive.

Sam’s opponent arrives first, and throws herself headlong at Sam. Sam, no amateur, neatly side steps the lunge, and introduces the sharp edge of his blade into the wolf’s abdomen. She screams in pain, and struggles to free herself, toughened up with Michael’s grace pulsing through her veins. Sam strains to hold her still, but Dean’s already raising his machete and swinging for the fences. The werewolf’s head rolls to a stop inches from her companion, who hesitates right outside of machete range. His lips come up in a silent growl, before he spins on his feet in a lightning retreat.

“Oh, no you don’t!” Dean exclaims, and is already chasing the Michael Monster down by the time Sam pries his machete from the fallen body.

“Dean, wait!” Sam calls, but Dean’s already yards away. He slides around a corner as the Michael Monster ducks into a dusty corridor, lined with rusted metal shelving and disintegrating cardboard boxes.

“I can do this all day, asshole!” Dean yells at the retreating monster’s back. And for the second time of the fight, luck is on Dean’s side. The wolf’s foot gets tangled in a roll of plastic tarp hanging off one of the shelves, and he hits the ground hard. By the time he’s turned to fend off Dean’s attack, Dean’s making sure that the Michael Monster never rises from the spot again. Blood splatter splashes on Dean’s suit and the plastic tarp. The werewolf’s headless corpse collapses to the floor.

Dean feels his lips split into a feral grin. That’s four Michael Monsters down in as many minutes, and there’s not a scratch on either of them. Chalk that up for a fuckin’ Winchester Win.

Dean jogs down the aisle and around the corner back towards his brother. Sam is almost vibrating with anxiety as he watches Dean emerge unharmed. “Come on, Dean. That was fucking stupid.” Sam chastises.

Dean opens his mouth to brush off Sam’s concerns, when a figure emerges from the shadows behind Sam. It’s Devin, but the moment of relief that Dean feels is quickly lost when Dean sees yellow wolf eyes flash electric blue in the dim lighting. Sam hasn’t noticed yet, is still pursing his lips at Dean prissily.

“Sam, look out!” Dean yells, and before his brother can fully turn around to save himself from danger, Dean has his machete raised high over his head. He sees the moment of hesitation in Devin’s face, before Dean launches his machete from the few feet away. The blade spins past a very surprised Sam, and buries itself nearly to the hilt in Devin’s gut. The turned hunter coughs, and blood splashes down his chin, but he doesn’t stumble as he tears his way towards Sam. Sam is prepared now, and there’s only regret in his eyes as he ends the life of one of the hunters he tried so hard to protect.

Dean’s recovering his breath from his earlier sprint, and drops his hands to his knees for a brief moment. A pervading silence fills the warehouse like gloom, and the only sound is the wet scraping of metal against bone as Sam tries to pull Dean’s machete from Devin’s stomach. Dean watches as the machete is freed inch by inch, when suddenly his vision fogs over.

“Fuck.” He mutters to himself and scrubs a bloody hand down his eyes. Colors slide out of place as Dean blinks rapidly, trying to get his sight back in order.

A sound of approaching steps breaks the silence behind Dean. “Dean!” He hears his brother yell, and Dean’s vision clears abruptly, like a blindfold’s been torn off his face. Dean spins on his heel, and sees the superhuman speed of a Michael Monster hurtling at him from the north corner of the
warehouse. He realizes with only moments left that he doesn’t have his machete, it’s still buried in Devin’s abdomen ten feet away.

Dean slips a hand under his jacket and yanks his .45 from the waistband at his back. He trains it steadily on the approaching creature, and waits one last heartbeat. The bullet won’t kill the monster, but a bullet to the brain or kneecap will certainly slow it down and give them enough time for Sam to dispatch it like a horror slasher flick. Dean shuts one eye to aim, and fires the pistol.

There’s the delicate *click* of a jammed gun. Dean stares with disbelief at the pearly white gun, his trusty M1911 Colt that was his father’s gun, the gun that’s never jammed, never been lost over its years of use. The gun that he repairs and maintains religiously himself. Until recently.

He hears his brother call his name before the Michael Monster sinks his claws into his flesh.

Chapter End Notes

I wasn't initially going to end this chapter here, but ya girl got dinner plans and if I don't post now, it won't be until late tomorrow. I'm definitely gonna plug away at this fic this week to make sure I can for sure get out my "Dean Plan Reveal" before the ep comes out.

Anyway - I made a new tumblr url for spn/fic happenings. So come find me at trevelies on tumblr and say hello <3
“This is fucking stupid.” Dean mutters darkly for the umpteenth time.

Sam frosts him with a look, and turns back to the road.

It didn’t seem so stupid when he was tackling a Michael Monster off Dean after the werewolf sunk claws two inches deep into Dean’s flesh. It didn’t seem stupid when he killed the wolf and found his brother basically holding his guts in with nothing more than pressure and prayer. And it definitely didn’t feel stupid remembering another time in another warehouse – another time watching Dean bleed out in front of him while Sam tries to remember it’s not the same, it’s not the same, it’s not the same.

He slows the Impala as they turn off the highway onto a dirt road, and flashes his high beams once. A car parked on the other side of the road flashes their lights back twice, and Sam feels a small pulse of relief flicker in all the stress and worry tight in his chest. He pulls the Impala off to the side of the road and cuts the engine.

Dean winces as he yanks the car door open and swings his legs out, the strain pulling at the field stitches Sam had sutured a few hours earlier. He slams the Impala door uncharacteristically rough and stomps across the gravel towards the other car.

Cas clambers out of the truck and meets them halfway. There’s not another headlight for miles on the dark stretch of dirt road or the highway.

“Dean, how are you?” He asks instantly and sincerely, and Sam watches the struggle on Dean’s face as his brother decides between irritation and begrudging appreciation.

In the end, his brain seems to combine the two, and he snaps out with, “I’m excellent, screw you very much.”

“Dean – “

“Come on, let’s get this over with.” Dean says biting. He sheds his suit jacket, and Sam catches it before it hits the dirt of the road – though it’s past saving. Scarlet has soaked deep into the white fabric of Dean’s suit shirt, and patches of clawed skin are visible through tears in the material. Sam helps Dean pull the shirt up after Dean winces raising his arms.

Four deep furrows stretch from Dean’s navel to wrap around his side. An additional angry puncture stabs deep into the flesh under his ribs nearly on his back. Hasty stitches pull most of the flesh together, but Dean’s abdomen is a mess of half-assed wiped blood and castigated flesh.

Cas’ expression doesn’t change as he scans the slices, but he does exchange a quick glance with Sam over Dean’s shoulder.

Dean deliberately doesn’t flinch as Cas presses his hand lightly against the wound, but the older hunter can’t hide the relief that blooms on his face as the pain disappears. Flesh knits itself back together under Cas’ hands, and a wash of silver light brightens the night like the small bubble of a lantern.
The light dies after a moment, and Dean’s side – though slathered liberally with dried blood – is healed.

Cas’ hand remains firmly pressed to Dean’s side, and his eyes are confused and concerned under narrowed brows. Dean takes a step back, and Cas’ hand hovers in space for a moment before falling limply to his side.

Dean runs a hand down his side, and some of the tension drains from his face. “Thanks, Cas.” He says, marginally more conciliatory now that he’s not a hairsbreadth from spilling his guts over the road.

Cas opens his mouth to reply, when the passenger side of his truck opens, and a dark figure slides out into the brush on the roadside. Sam and Dean both turn whom the fuck expressions on the angel until Jack steps out into the light of the headlights. His hands are shoved deep into the pockets of his jacket, and he looks uncertainly between the two Winchesters.

“Jack?” Dean says in surprise, before he turns to his brother, “Jesus, Sam, did you tell Cas I was on my deathbed?”

“Well, after minute three of unconsciousness…” Sam says, but it’s clear he wasn’t expecting to see Jack either.

“I asked him to come along in case I needed to rest after healing Dean.” Cas explains gravely, but the lie falls flat. Cas could have grabbed any of the hunters in the Bunker, and not the Nephilim with one driving lesson under his belt. Still, Sam can tell that Dean is gratified to see Jack, even if the kid stands awkwardly to the side.

“Hey, kid.” Dean says, as he straightens his bloody shirt. “How you holding up?”

“I’m fine. Are you okay?” There’s a new hesitancy behind Jack’s words, and when Sam meets Cas’ eyes, there’s a talk later set to Cas’ jaw.

Dean slaps the side of his stomach that had been ground beef only a minute before. “All sealed up and nowhere to go.”


Dean’s expression immediately hardens as a wall slams down behind his eyes. “I got Michael under control. Someone,” he says meaningfully, turning towards Sam, “fucked with my gun.”

Sam crosses his arms in exasperation but doesn’t say anything.

Cas narrows his eyes. “You didn’t say anything over the phone about that.” He says, and there’s only traces of accusation.

“I tried to take a shot at the bastard, and the gun jammed!” Dean says loudly, and Sam flinches even though there’s not a soul around to overhear.

“Could you have missed?” Cas asks delicately.

“Could I have – Cas, I didn’t miss. That guy was balls-to-the-walls rushing me and was like five feet away. The gun jammed. And my guns don’t jam. Not until Sam’s hunters started maintaining the weapons in the armory.”

A pulse throbs in Sam’s temple. They’d been over this over and over in the car during the last three
hours of driving, with Dean getting increasingly vehement as more blood oozed into the ruined sweatshirt that Dean was applying pressure with. Sam held it together when Dean was bleeding out, but he’s starting to hit his breaking point. “Dean, I’ll talk to the hunters about the guns, but you’re acting like… like they’re out to get you, or something. Shit happens.”

“Shit happens?” Dean repeats with disbelief. “Shit doesn’t just happen. Not to us.” Dean’s glare is sharp and steady, boring into Sam’s eyes. If Sam didn’t have eyes on Dean, he might have missed Dean’s abrupt flinch and the twitch of his hand about to rise towards his head. Dean’s eyes unfocus slightly and he blinks a few times before they clear.

“Dean, what - ” Sam tries, startled.

“Give me the keys.” Dean interrupts, and holds an impatient hand out. When Sam doesn’t immediately hand them over, Dean lunges and snags them out of Sam’s hand. “I’ll see you at the Bunker, General.”

“Dean!” Sam exclaims, shocked by how quickly the situation is deteriorating. “You’re not driving back to the Bunker after losing that much blood!” Sam specifically doesn’t add his worries about the archangel riding shotgun in his brother’s brain.

Dean pauses a few feet from the Impala. His fingers futz with the keys, and the set of his shoulders is tense and pissed. “Fine.” He agrees suddenly, and turns to toss the keys to Jack. Jack snatches them from the air, but his expression is surprised. A little nervous. “Come on, Jack. ‘Miles to go’ and all that crap.”

Jack takes a hesitant step towards the Impala, and Sam is about to intervene, but Cas puts a restraining hand on Sam’s shoulder. “It’s fine.” He says quietly. “They need to talk, anyway.” Sam isn’t happy. About any of this. But he heeds Cas’ advice and watches as Dean stomps around to the passenger side of the Impala, and Jack climbs into the driver’s seat.

The engine stutters under Jack’s hands, but he fires it up the next try. Jack slowly backs up along the dirt path, reversing onto the highway, and then the Impala is roaring down the highway and into the night.

Cas and Sam watch it go.

Then Sam says “Something is wrong,” at the same time Cas says, “Dean is getting worse.”

Sam freezes. “What?”

Cas looks down at his hands, and flexes the hand that healed Dean. “There’s grace building up in Dean’s body. I could feel it.”

“Building up? What does that even mean? I thought Michael was locked down.” Sam says quickly, fear hastening his words.

Cas meets Sam’s gaze, troubled. “Michael is imprisoned. But that doesn’t mean that his grace is. Michael doesn’t have control of Dean, but that doesn’t mean that he isn’t… in there, somewhere.”

Sam runs a hand through his hair. “Okay, so… so what does that mean, exactly? What’s going to happen? And I know –,” he adds, when Cas’ mouth opens to reply, an exasperated slant to his lips, “I know that you don’t know. But what do you think is going to happen?”

Cas exhales, and turns to watch the fading tail lights of the Impala disappear into darkness. “Best guess? Nothing good. Dean is a true vessel. But he’s not an angel. He doesn’t know how to properly
control and channel grace. It’s going to overwhelm and flood his body, and eventually…”

And Sam doesn’t need Cas to finish that particular sentence. “So… this isn’t anything that Michael is doing?”

Cas turns back to Sam, and his expression is hidden in the silhouette of his truck’s headlights. “We don’t know what Michael is doing. And it doesn’t look like Dean is going to tell anyone what Michael is putting him through.”

“Oh my god, Jack. You have no idea what Michael is putting me through. It’s like a fuckin’ kegger in there, man. And I mean,” Dean scrubs a hand down his face and slaps his cheeks to wake himself up, “And I mean like an actual kegger. He’s throwing kegs.”

Jack keeps his eyes on the road, but his attention wanders towards the bloody hunter. Even after his talk with Cas, he still had his doubts about his relationship with Dean. But Dean picked him to drive the Impala, and not Cas and Sam. And if there’s one thing that Jack knows for sure about Dean Winchester, it’s that Impala privileges are reserved for as many people as Dean can count on one hand.

Seriously. Only five. If one person is added on, one person is taken off. Dean told him that a while ago. On a warm day, fishing by a river. There was a feeling of emptiness inside of Jack back then, his impending death. But to be on Dean Winchester’s list of top five people… that’s… significant. That’s family.

Maybe Jack is being stupid after all.

Dean leans back and rests his head against the low bench seat. Jack watches him out of the corner of his eye, and his hands tighten on the wheel. It seems inappropriate to bring up his own issues when Dean is going through so much. Jack swallows down the words that stick in his throat, and nods, as if Dean had asked a question.

Dean pulls his phone from his pocket. He frowns at the blood that pebbles the screen and wipes at it with his thumb, irritated. He hits a button on his phone and Jack hears the phone ring. Dean’s face is impassive as he presses the phone against his ear. After seven rings, he seems to give up. He ends the call and jams the phone back into the pocket of his suit pants. “Witches.” He mutters under his breath, and his head rolls around to face Jack.

There’s a moment of silence as Dean studies the curve of Jack’s face. “So.” He says finally. Jack risks a glance at Dean, and sees an eyebrow arched over tired green eyes. “How much damage control do I need to do here?”

Jack turns his eyes back to the road. Rain begins to splatter the windshield, and he watches as droplets chase each other through a layer of dust. “What do you mean?”

Dean leans over Jack and flips the windshield wipers on. “I mean, I’ve heard the BS that Michael dropped on Sam and Cas. And since you can hardly look at me, I’m guessing we need to have an uncomfortable chick flick moment.”

Without noticing, Jack realized that he’s slowed the Impala to half the speed limit. He toes the gas, the Impala roars back to life. Dean’s still watching him steadily. The stretch of road is straight and empty, and Jack takes his eyes off of it to look at Dean. To really look at Dean.

The older hunter looks worse than Jack’s ever seen him. Jack didn’t realize how much humans really
needed to sleep until he became one himself. And Dean looks like he hasn’t shut his eyes or taken a rest in days. New wrinkles and stress lines crease Dean’s face as he raises both brows in response to Jack’s scrutiny. He’s covered in blood and sweat and grime, but underneath it, Jack sees a man just struggling to keep everything from flying apart.

All in all, Dean is a hunter with a bucket and a half of problems dumped on his head, and he’s still trying to make things right with Jack. And that tells Jack all he needs to know.

Jack’s eyes flick to the shredded and bloody half of Dean’s shirt, but he meets Dean’s worried eyes straight on. “I’m good, Dean. Really.”

Dean only looks half-convinced. “Yeah?”

And Jack smiles for the first time in three days. “Yeah.”

Dean leaves the kid to concentrate on the road and turns his focus inward.

Sam might not want to think ill of one of his hunters, but Dean hasn’t made it this far in life looking for the best in people, and he’s not about to start now. He reaches into the backseat and drags his duffel towards his side of the car. In the earlier haze of blood loss and pain, he remembers Sam tossing their machetes and Dean’s gun into the back seat.

“There you are…” he mutters to himself, flipping over a flap on the duffel and seeing the opalescent handle of his .45. The metal is cold under his fingers as they close around the barrel. He leans over a little further, digging out the waterproofed gun repair kit that Sam got him for his birthday last year.

Jack glances over to see what Dean’s up to as he leans back over the bench seat, but doesn’t comment as Dean unrolls the kit on his knees. Dean visually inspects his trademarked side arm, but doesn’t see anything immediately apparent. Frowning, he gets to work.

Less than two minutes later, he’s found the problem.

“What’s that?” Jack asks, as Dean holds up a small coil of metal to the light.

“That…” Dean says slowly, inspecting the part carefully, “is a clipped firing pin.” He angles the metal coil, and can see clearly the angle that wire cutters bit into the pin.

“What does that mean?”

Dean drops the firing pin onto the mat. “It means someone in the Bunker doesn’t like me much.”

Cas’ truck caught up to the Impala relatively quick, due to Jack’s cautious driving, and they swing into the Bunker’s garage together a few hours later. Sam’s already called ahead with the unfortunate news about their two fallen members, and isn’t looking forward to having to face the crew with a loss.

Dean’s the first one out of the car, and he snags both his and Sam’s duffels from the backseat, and Sam knows that their earlier fight has passed without significant backlash. Dean can be a mean son of a bitch, but he can get over a grievance without much fuss or lingering rancor. Cas doesn’t shut the truck off, and it idles in the garage as the pair watches Jack and Dean head into the Bunker interior.
Sam opens his car door and slides one long leg out, looking back at Cas. “You forget how to turn a car off, Cas?”

Cas’ hand raises to the ignition, but he pauses. “I think I should return to Heaven.”

“What?”

“No – not… not like that.” The angel says quickly, still pulling together a plan in his head. “I think it might be time to turn to the angels to seek answers.”

“About Dean? The grace?”

Cas nods. “I don’t know how to help Dean. And I don’t believe the angels do either, but I don’t want to leave any stone that could save Dean left unturned. I was a soldier of Heaven; I was not one of its scholars. Naomi ran the intelligence division of Heaven, perhaps she will have answers that I don’t.”

Sam’s other leg slides from the truck, and he turns to face Cas. “No, that’s… that’s smart. Thanks, Cas. I appreciate it. But are you sure you want to leave now?”

Cas doesn’t reply, but the emotions flickering behind his eyes say it all. *We’re running out of time.*

Sam catches up to Jack and Dean in the hallway.

“What, no Cas?” Dean asks, and hands Sam his duffel, who swings the heavy bag over his shoulder.

“He’s headed back out. Says he wanted to see if he could shake down any leads in Heaven.”

Dean’s expression is unreadable, but he nods. “Well, bust of a hunt today, but at least we took out some of Michael’s army. I wouldn’t call it a *win,* but I wouldn’t call it a flapjack either. I’m gonna hit the sack and try and grow some of this blood back.”

Sam rolls his eyes, falling into the banter that’s become easier again. “Dean, that’s not how blood – “

“Dean,” Jack says suddenly, interrupting the back-and-forth, “shouldn’t you tell Sam about – “ But Dean’s hand comes down hard on Jack’s shoulder and Jack is startled into silence.

“- about how you’re ready for your own fake driver’s license? Shoulda seen the way this kid handled the Impala tonight, Sammy. Classy stuff. Better driver than you.” Dean lies smoothly, but there’s no hiding the open confusion and puzzlement on Jack’s face. His eyebrows slant inward like a collapsed bridge.

Sam looks back and forth from Dean to Jack. Jack is trying to meet Dean’s eyes, but Dean is messing with the zipper on his bag, apparently oblivious. Apparently.

Sam struggles with the urge to shake Dean until the truth explodes out like a shaken soda can, but if Dean’s opening up to *someone* about Michael, then that’s better than the usual bull-headed macho silence crap. If it’s anything more than that, he just has to trust that Jack will let him know.

“You’ll let me know if anything is going on, right?” Sam asks, after Jack’s slipped into his room, and they’re feet away from their own berths.

“Of course,” Dean winks. “You’re my ride and die, Samantha.”
Dean doesn’t fully relax until he’s shut in his room and can hear Sam’s door close down the hall. Sometimes all it takes is two solid slabs of wood to feel safe from that eight-foot brother of his, and his somber, searching looks, and long, glossy hair.

He waits until he can hear Sam settle down for the night, and he sneaks out to shower off the sweat and blood. He watches red water swirl down the drain, and feels marginally better and more human. There’s a tightness at his core, like something is pulling an invisible muscle, but he always feels a little off after Cas lays down the healing mojo. Like there’s a little extra zip in his body.

He towels off, and his eyes catch on the unmarked stretch of skin that was nothing but bloody ribbons a few hours earlier. His hand slides down the skin, and he remembers a time when they didn’t have an angel on speed dial. When an injury like that would mean weeks of recovery and a dicey trip to the ER with fake names, fake insurance, fakes stories. The tightness in Dean’s chest seizes for a moment, and he swears that he sees something pulse like light under his ribs. But the pain fades immediately, and Dean is left holding a towel around his waist, wondering if he really felt anything at all.

He’s exhausted, but it takes him an hour to wind down enough to finally crawl into bed. His mind is an uproar, and he can’t turn it off, no matter how his body is begging him.

He’s gotten used to the foreign presence inside the corner of his mind, and Michael’s banging around is slowly becoming the norm. The archangel’s been a little quieter the last few hours, and Dean tries to see that as an improvement, instead of a sign of something worse to come.

Dean drifts off, and tries not to think about how there’s always something worse to come.

And the “something worse” comes a little sooner than Dean expected.

Dean doesn’t know if minutes or hours have passed since he finally closed his eyes, but they slam open in the dark, and Dean feels something wrong, feels that something isn’t right.

His chest is tight, and his skin feels like thin lead wrapping over a nuclear bomb. Dean’s hand flies up to his throat as he fights the frozen muscles to pull air into his lungs. His body feels like it’s squirming, like there’s something alive crawling through his veins, his marrow. A thin whisper of air wheezes into his lungs and he gratefully sucks in a gasp. Dean feels his hands shake and he rips the blanket off and surges drunkenly to his feet. It’s like nausea meets a heart attack, and his whole body is thrown into electrical disarray.

Dean cracks his knee on the edge of the bed, and in the moment before he blacks out, he swears that he can see the bones in his arms and hands light up like Christmas lights.

Rocky’s Bar. His bar.

Dean opens his eyes and finds himself staring blearily at the empty end of a booth. He’s alone, but there’s a murmur of air, like someone had just stepped out of the room moments before. Rain splatters on the window outside, and a flash of lightning electrocutes the air.

Dean is shaky as he pulls himself from the booth. The juke box crackles out a soft rock song about letting things go. Dean’s eyes scan the empty room and land on the walk-in. The screwdriver is
untouched. The door holds.

Dean crosses the room towards Michael’s prison. He’s here for a reason. Probably.

Not a sound escapes from the walk-in, not even a scuffle of feet or a fist against the metal.

*My mind, my rules.*

Dean slaps a palm against the chilled metal and closes his eyes. His mouth tugs down at the corners as he concentrates, and when he opens his eyes again, there’s the smooth glass pane of a freezer window, and a passive archangel watching him.

Dean’s own face studies him without changing expression.

“You could show a little appreciation. This is probably going to wreak havoc on my electric bill.”

Michael gives him a sardonic look. “Always with the quips. Even at the end of it all. Are you here to submit?”

Dean rolls his eyes. “You act like I’m here to hand over a tax form. I got news for you, buddy. I don’t pay my income taxes.”

Michael doesn’t respond for a moment, and continues to study Dean through the glass. “So why are you here? Hoping I’ll let slip how to treat grace poisoning?”

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ, now you’re *naming* this shit?”

Michael teases his lips into his close-lipped smile. “You’re not my first vessel that's suffered ill-effects from leftover grace.” His smile grows. “Though you’ll be the last.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Dean snaps, and waves an arm irritatedly through the air. “Flex your muscles, Hulk Hogan. Grace poisoning - go.”

Michael arches an eyebrow under the brim of his hat. “We’ve already had this discussion, and I don’t enjoy repeating myself. You’re a bomb, boy. Time to go nuclear.”

“If I go, you go with me. I know how this angel stuff works. There ain’t no you if there ain’t no me. And I’m guessing that you’ll be caught up in the blast this time around, and then we’re both fried.”

There’s no shift in Michael’s expression. “Care to bet?”

Dean feels a pulse of bright pain in his chest, like the slice of a razor. An echo carried over into his mind. Thunder rumbles outside, overwhelming the plinky rhythm of the jukebox, and Dean tries to find any change in Michael’s inscrutable expression.

Seems like he’s living in an impasse these days.

Dean shakes his head, and turns his back on the trapped archangel.

Michael calls after him, “You can’t escape this, Dean. You can’t escape your fate for long.”

Dean doesn’t bother to turn around. “Who’s escaping? Pretty sure I can just open this door and walk right out.”

And he does.
He comes back to himself on the floor of his room. A sheet is twisted around his right leg where it tangled during his lunge off the bed, and his heart thunders in his chest. But he can feel the pressure leaking out of his chest like the turn of a release valve. He shuts his eyes and gets his breathing under control.

The room is dark when he opens his eyes, but there’s a soft blue flickering. Dean pulls himself to his feet unsteadily, and looks down at his hands. There’s no pain, no feeling other than a sense of low vibration, but he watches as blue grace flickers under the skin like electrical impulses. It looks like an x-ray, in a detached sort of way, and he clenches his fists as lights flicker like subdermal implants. As the weakness in his chest fades, the lights slowly die until Dean is standing alone in the dark.

“Fuck.” He mutters to himself. What else can he say? What else can he do?

He crosses to the small mirror near the door and studies his face. He looks tired, but he doesn’t look… deathly. Blue lights flicker ethereally in the depths of his eyes, and he revises that thought to not yet.

Dean’s phone sits on the desk where he threw it down with his wallet, and he thumbs the lock button. It’s 2:17 in the morning, and no new notifications blink up at him. Dean scrolls through his contacts and selects Rowena’s number for the 20th time in two days. He listens through the rings., holding his breath. It clicks to a generic answering machine message after a while, and Dean curses low and vehemently. He slams the phone down against the table. Grace twitches achingly in his fingers.

He pushes aside the stack of nudie mags in the corner of the desk, and the dark cover of Billie’s book is nearly invisible in the room. Dean takes it back to his bed and flicks the small desk light on. He blinks through the warm orange light, fingers tense on the book, slick like teeth, glossy like glass.

D. Winchester, the spine reads. He flips open the cover.


What am I supposed to do with this?

That’s up to you.

Chapter End Notes

It has to be the cage, right?? It HAS to. Guess we’ll see tomorrow...

Also, I'm sorry I kind of half-assed this Dean-Jack making up drama. I thought it was dumb in the episode, and I didn't really want to address it, but I felt like the show kind of boxed me in. Also, me to me writing Dean's dialogue in Rocky's bar: Stop. It is enough. We get it. You like Dean snark. Stop.

I've had 3 people tell me they've had issues finding me on tumblr, so if you would LIKE to follow me (no pressure lmao) and you can't find me, just put your url in the comments.
and I'll find you. #buds
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sam is up early, making arrangements for two hunters to drive to Joplin to ensure that Fatima and Devin’s bodies are properly disposed of. Hunter’s funeral. Cleaning up the evidence, if it’s not already being swarmed by police and investigators. Hopefully the puddle of Dean’s blood pulls up an error message and not a hit in the FBI database. That’d be the icing on the cake at this point.

Sam wants to go himself. It’s his responsibility. They brought the Apocalypse Universe hunters to their world to keep them safe, give them a chance to regroup and recharge. Not let them die a whole universe away from home. They didn’t even get to die on their own soil, and their bodies will burn on a different earth. It’s… It’s not the way Sam wanted this to go, and he at least owes them the respect of overseeing the ends of their stories.

But he can’t afford to spend the entire day driving back to Joplin. Not when Dean is in and out of focus, and especially not when Cas isn’t around to help Sam solve any grace or Michael problems. Sam understands why Cas had to be the one to follow up with Heaven, but it doesn’t make it any easier.

Besides – he tells himself – there’s more that Sam needs to take care of around the Bunker. There are Hunters out in the field that he needs to check in with, leads to follow up with regarding the dispersal of Michael’s army. And he’s pretty sure that no one has checked on Garth since they locked him in one of the cells on the prison floor.

*And* Sam stumbled into the kitchen this morning to find out they were all out of coffee. And that is non-negotiable in Sam’s book.

So – a grocery store run. And *then* the garbage fire that will be the rest of Sam’s day.

Sam’s grabbing his jacket from his room when a text comes in on his phone. It’s a message from Cas.

*At Heaven’s gate. STFU.*

Sam sighs and pockets his phone. He’s corrected Cas’ chat speak so many times, that it’s not even worth reminding him that STFU doesn’t mean Stay Tuned For Update. It already took Sam three months to convince the angel that FML didn’t mean Follow My Lead.

Sam heads into the hallway, and takes a step towards the direction of the garage when Jack’s door opens. The Nephilim sticks his head out and sees that Sam’s dressed to go out. “Are you going somewhere?” He asks. He’s still in pajamas, and his hair is a disaster.

“Just a trip to the store. Back soon.”

“Can I come?”

Sam’s taken aback. “To the store? Uh… sure.”

Jack gives Sam a quick smile and ducks back into his room to get ready. Sam leans on the wall outside of his door, and hears the opening and slamming of dresser drawers. He isn’t sure whether to laugh at the kid’s enthusiasm or worry that there’s something bigger at play.
Speaking of worry… Sam thinks, and his eyes slide further down the hallway to his brother’s door. It’s still early in the morning – no reason for Dean to be awake right now, but Sam is still nervous. At least when they lived on the road and shared motel rooms, Sam could keep an eye on his brother. He could tell when Dean was having a difficult time sleeping, or if Dean was having nightmares. He enjoys having his privacy in the Bunker, but he misses the old days, too. Sharing beers over research on crappy motel wifi, taking turns in the showers that coughed out maybe 30 seconds of hot water. The Bunker makes their job easier in countless ways, but somewhere along the way, a significant era of their life had ended. Sam’s not sure how he feels about that.

Quietly, using the slamming sounds in Jack’s room as cover, Sam pads quietly towards Dean’s door. He lingers outside, and strains to hear any signs of sleep. Or life. His hand finds the curve of the knob, and he twists it quietly. The door swings in slowly, and Sam sticks his head in the gap.

Dean’s awake on his bed. There’s a thousand-yard stare in his eyes, but he snaps out of it when he sees Sam. There’s an awkward moment as Sam tries to think of an excuse to be in Dean’s room at 6 in the morning.

“We’re headed to the store.” He says lamely.

“Good for you.” Dean replies, and yawns atrociously. “Where does the sneaking into my room come in?”

Sam’s face twists into what Dean would call a half-bitch face. “Jack wants to come. Cool if we take the Impala?” He finds the right excuse, and he sees some of the suspicion drain from Dean’s face.

“Keys are on the table.” Dean says, and settles back against the headboard. Then, to Sam’s surprise, Dean suddenly throws back the sheets and lurches off the bed. “Actually, I’ll grab them.” Dean angles himself between Sam and the table, and Sam swears that he hears the rustling of glossy paper being shuffled around, but then Dean is there, handing him the keys.

Sam’s eyes sneak a glance over Dean at the corner table, but if there’s anything Dean’s hiding, he can’t see it from the doorway. “Uh, thanks. You want anything? We’re just going to Joe’s.”

Dean starts to shake his head, when he pauses. “Yeah, actually, can you grab me a breakfast burrito from that place off 281?”

This time, Sam really does pull a bitch face. “That’s like an extra 20 minutes.”

Dean feigns disappointment and hurt. “It’s just… you know, keeping Michael all locked away… it’s hungry work, Sammy. But if you don’t want to give me the sustenance I need, then –“

Sam rolls his eyes. “Alright, Denzel, you already got your Oscar, you can stop. Fine, we’ll grab your disgusting –“

“Heavenly, some might say –“

“. breakfast burrito.” Sam finishes firmly. He tosses the keys in the air and catches them absently. Dean puts a hand on the door, clearly waiting for Sam to clear out. “How did you sleep?” Sam finally asks. It’s the most innocent of questions he could think to get Dean to say anything about how he’s feeling.

A shadow passes behind Dean’s eyes. “Like a hooker on her day off. We good? Or would you like to cry a little on my shoulder?”

Sam groans, but lets his brother push him out of his room. The door closes like a punctuation mark,
and Sam is left standing in the hallway alone. He turns to leave when Dean’s door cracks open a few inches. “Make sure Jack parks at least three spaces from the nearest car. I mean it.” And then door closes again.

Sam huffs a laugh, but is oddly touched that Dean assumes Jack will drive the Impala by default. It’s almost cute. Fatherhood is a good color on Dean.

Jack steps out of his room a few moments later, dressed and hair looking decidedly less like a bird’s nest.

Sam ends up driving, and they swing the Impala out of the Bunker before the sun is up. The stretch of road leading into Lebanon is empty of commuters, and it’s a pleasant morning.

Sam can feel Jack working himself up to say something, and after a few minutes, Sam gives him a nudge. “Jack, I don’t want you to feel like you have to… pick between us here, but if there’s anything going on with Dean… Cas and I are just trying to help. I think it’s great that Dean is opening up to you about what’s going on in his head, but if there’s anything more, anything that seems… like he’s off or something… I need to know.”

Sam watches as Jack’s eyes narrow in consternation. The battle of two opposing loyalties pulling at each other. Finally, Jack admits “I think he was trying to call a witch yesterday. Rowena.”

Sam’s forehead creases as he frowns. “Rowena? Why?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t answer, and he didn’t leave a message. But it didn’t seem like the first time he was trying to reach her.”

Sam nods slowly, thinking, and drums his fingers against his thigh. He can’t think of a reason that Dean would be trying to reach Rowena, unless it was Michael-related. And if it’s going on behind Sam’s back, then it could only mean one thing: Sam isn’t going to like whatever Dean is planning.

Sam’s hand tightens on the wheel, and he has to physically fight the urge to turn the car around and confront Dean. But if what Jack said was actually true, then Dean hadn’t gotten ahold of Rowena yet, and who knew how long it would take Rowena and Charlie to return from their road trip. He has some time. He just hopes that Dean does too.

Dean waits until he hears Sam and Jack’s voices disappear towards the direction of the garage and begins dressing in a hurry. He guesses he has maybe an hour before the dynamic duo return. He pulls one leg completely through his jeans before he realizes that they’re inside out and he pulls them off with a low curse.

It’s still early in the Bunker, but there’s always at least a few hunters wandering the halls – coming back from hunts or on different watch rotations. He heads into the main room, and catches sight of someone slipping into the kitchen.

“Hey!” He calls, and pads across the cold tiles towards the figure.

He steps into the kitchen, and sees one of the Apocalypse Universe hunters holding the empty coffee container forlornly in her hands. “Hey, uh…” He clenches a fist in the air and points out a flimsy finger, “…you.” He finishes lamely.

The woman drops the bag with an exasperated sigh and turns to face Dean. “Seriously? It’s Dani. Dan-i. There is literally one letter difference in our names.”
“Yeah – okay, Dani. Sorry. Whatever. Where’s the list for the Bunker rotation?”

“The Bunker rotat – it’s in the server room. Big ass color coded calendar. Literally cannot miss it.” She turns back, and her hand fumbles into the box with the teas, a disappointed slant to her shoulders.

Dean turns without another word, wondering at what point he had tipped into being the bumbling old guy.

The server room is empty, but Dean finds the calendar pasted to the cinderblocks. He runs his finger across the cool paper and finds the information he was looking for.

Andrea pulled the shift in the armory the day he had checked his .45. Dean stares at the name written in neat handwriting until the whole world blurs around it. He knew someone in the Bunker was hoping to get him killed, or at least ensure that he was in a very tricky spot. But to see the name in bright pink writing, and picture a face to go along with it… it’s different. It’s personal.

Andrea was one of the few Apocalypse Universe hunters that Dean got along with, and he feels the weight of that betrayal sink in his stomach like a stone. The lingering sense of rapport is the only reason that Dean doesn’t snag a gun on his way to confront the hunter. Dani’s staring glumly into a mug of weak tea in the kitchen when he pokes his head back in, but she tells him Andrea’s room number without much fuss.

He’s only halfway through the main room of the Bunker when he feels that tight burning sensation deep in his core, and he stumbles against the conference table.

A sweat breaks out on his forehead, and he feels a sensation like a balloon inflating inside his chest, like grace is physically bubbling up at his center, and pushing aside all the anatomy that gets in its way.

It’s like being poisoned, and knowing your body is trying to split at the seams.

Air heaves in and out of his lungs, and Dean smashes a fist against the conference table, hoping to get the sensations back under control. It’s too early – he hasn’t figured out a plan. He needs to keep everything together – keep his body from failing – until he can put Michael where he belongs: Lucifer’s Cage. It’s the only thing that matters. The only thing that keeps the world from burning to the ground.

Slowly, the pressure leaks from his chest. It doesn’t disappear completely, and lingers like a cramp, but it’s manageable. He can hold it together.

It’s less noticeable under actual lighting, but Dean can see subdermal flickering of grace. Dean straightens his bruised fist on the table, and watches the fitful shifting of light play beneath his knuckles. Dean has an archangel currently throwing limes at a wall in his mind, and Dean’s turning into a freaking glow stick. Absolutely fucking typical.

Dean waits a few minutes for the pulsing light to dim to nothing, and he makes his way slowly towards the living sector of the Bunker. He slips past his own room, wanting nothing more than to collapse into bed and force a few more hours of sleep into his brain. But he walks past, and the thought is soon forgotten.

Andrea bunks with another hunter in room 23, and Dean pauses with his hand hovering inches from the door, poised to knock. Maybe he shouldn’t be doing with without Sam.
You’re acting like… like they’re out to get you, or something. Shit happens.

Yeah, maybe not.

Dean bangs his fist on the door. He hears the rustling of sheets being pulled back and a phone being slapped down against a table after someone checked the time. Finally, the steady fall of feet, and the door is yanked open.

Andrea squints into the light, her hair a riot after falling asleep with wet hair. “Dean?” She pokes her head further into the hallway and blinks sleep from her eyes. “Are you drunk again? Your room is like… ten doors that way.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Dean says shortly. His arms cross over his thin t-shirt in the coolness of the hallway, and goosebumps pebble his skin as the Bunker’s central air circulates the air in the hallway. “But I’m here about my .45.”

Andrea gives him a blank stare. “Your M1911?”

“Yeah, my M1911. Maybe you remember clipping the firing pin? My gun, Andrea.”

Andrea continues to stare at Dean like he vomited pea soup all over her. “Let me get this straight. Your .45 has a broken firing pin, but it’s my fault, because?”

“Seriously?” And Dean is actually blown away. Do people want him dead so bad that he has to remind them why? “I looked at the shift rotation. You were on the calendar the day that I checked my .45 into the armory. I’m not great at math, Andrea, but I know that sometimes 2 and 2 do make 4.”

The fog clears from Andrea’s eyes and something much more ominous clicks into place. “Wait – what day was this? Was this last Tuesday?”

Dean’s mouth hangs open like he’s trying to catch flies. He thought he’d have a gun pointed in his face by now, or would be hearing some kind of maniacal monologue touting Dean’s misdeeds.

“I didn’t pull the Tuesday shift in the armory. I was scheduled, but Dominic asked if we could trade days.”

“Dominic? Why?” Dean asks, and rubs at his chest as he feels a small pocket of tension building. But even as the words leaves his mouth, the details click into place. Dominic’s dirty looks, his heavy silences. Not all the Apocalypse Universe hunters liked Dean, but Dominic seemed to nurse a special kind of hate for the older Winchester.

Andrea’s eyes widen as she draws the same conclusion. “He said he needed the equipment for a project…. I thought he meant he was tuning up one of his rifles – Jesus, Dean, are you okay?”

The pressure in Dean’s chest had flared up again, and Dean struggles to keep his body vertical. *Buckle it down, Winchester.* “Yeah. Fine.” He bites out. Andrea’s frowning at him, and Dean hopes that he just looks like a freak and not a glowing freak. “So… Dominic. Guess I’m gonna have a nice chat with Douchebag Dom. Is he here?”

Andrea doesn’t look convinced that Dean isn’t about to drop dead on her doorway, but she nods hesitantly. “He has an armory shift at 9. He’s probably sleeping.”

“Thanks.” Dean mutters, and turns to leave. Maybe he has enough time to dry heave into a pillow for a few minutes before waving a gun in Dominic’s asshole face. He takes a step away, but a hand snakes out and catches him by the forearm.
“Dean, listen… yeah, I think you’re kind of… a dick sometimes. But don’t forget that this,” and she gestures around vaguely, “this is not our universe. We had to fight for every scrap back there, and there’s no going back to what we were before. I know the impact that you and your brother have on the world, because I – and the rest of us – can see what happens to a world where with Winchesters aren’t born.” There’s something like entreaty in her dark eyes, “There’s not a single one of us that doesn’t see that. What you did – with Michael – that was really goddamn stupid. But I have to believe that everything that you and Sam do ends up clocking in more good than bad. But still…” And she starts to close the door in Dean’s face. “stupid. Real fuckin’ stupid.” The door closes with a quiet click, and Dean is left standing alone in the hallway with a belly full of dread and a body full of leaking grace.

Vindication is sour in Dean’s stomach.

He heads up the hallway towards Dominic’s room, and feels a creaking heaviness settle on his bones. It’s harder to pull air into his lungs, and the air that does filter in tastes like electricity and ash.

He stumbles once, and his hand catches on the wall to prevent him from pitching onto his face. His hand clenches and blue grace warps under the skin like a living creature. Like tendrils of Michael are licking up his spine and digging claws into his marrow.

Fuck.

Sam was wrong about his hunters. One of them wants Dean dead. Dean blinks, and he’s back in the Joplin warehouse, holding the opalescent handle of his .45. A Michael Monster bears down on him, and Dean aims the gun, and fires. The empty click echoes in his brain like slap.

Sam was wrong.

Dean’s knees hit the floor, and the pain is a dull thrum under all the crackle of untapped, unusable power that floods his cells and explodes like a fusillade against his nerve endings.

The last thing that Dean sees is an explosion of light and sparks before he passes out.

And the last thing that he thinks is that he’s sorry he couldn’t hold on longer.

Jack drives back from the store, and Sam fiddles with the Impala’s broken tape deck. There’s a warm breakfast burrito cooling on Sam’s lap, and the car smells like an infusion of fresh ground coffee and old leather. The sun is starting to crest over the flat Lebanon grass fields, and Sam breathes in the dawn.

He has a mess of a day to look forward to, but right now, it’s just the sun and the road. Even Jack’s spirits look marginally brighter. Sam doesn’t know what exactly had been wrong with Jack over the last few days, and he doesn’t know what Dean had to do with it. But it’s one less thing on Sam’s plate, and he’ll take any scratch in the win column he can get these days.

Sam’s phone buzzes in his pocket. He reaches in and checks the number. “Hey, Andrea.” He greets, and adjusts the burrito burning a hole into his leg. He listens to the hunter’s frantic phone call in stunned silence, not comprehending. Jack shoots him a concerned glance.

“Just – just keep everyone away from him, okay? I’ll be there in five minutes.” Sam says shakily, and ends the call.
“What happened?” Jack asks, eyes wide as he looks back at the road. His foot stomps harder on the gas.

Sam throws his phone roughly onto the dash. “Nothing good.”

The burrito and coffee are left forgotten in the Impala.

Sam sprints through the hallways. As he gets closer to the living quarters, he can hear raised voices and the sounds of doors opening and closing. He hurries past shocked faces peering out of rooms, and smells the lingering sharpness of ozone.

There’s a small crowd of five or six hunters blocking the hallway, and when Andrea sees Sam round the corner, her eyes are relieved. “Alright, everyone, Sam’s here, let’s go.” And she ushers the resisting hunters further down the hallway. They step behind Sam’s eyeline as he pushes past them and sees the damage.

Dean is collapsed in the hallway, using the wall to prop himself up. His eyes are closed but narrowed in pain, and there’s a conscious set to his shoulders. His right hand is fisted in his shirt, right over his heart, and his muscles are strained and taut with tension. But that’s where the normality of the situation ends.

It looks like a bomb went off in the hallway, and Dean is sitting in ground zero. Floor and wall tiles are shattered and cracked, and concrete powder and plaster are still settling thickly in the air. Smoking burn marks raze the walls from floor to ceiling, still smoldering in places. The vents against the ceiling struggle to pull the hazy smoke out of the air. All the light bulbs have shattered, dimming the hallway, but it only makes it easier to see the final piece that nearly makes Sam’s heart shudder to a stop.

Dean is glowing. Diseased light flickers behind closed eyelids, in the creases of his fingers, along his arms and neck like capillaries filled with liquid voltage instead of blood. Dean senses Sam standing there, and his eyes open, dizzy with pain and disorientation. Dean’s eyes dim to green and then flash archangel bright – and Sam can feel himself take a half a step back.

“Sammy?” Dean asks, and blinks hard. Life and awareness creep back into his eyes, and Sam can see his brother making a visible and conscious effort to roll back the outpour of angelic grace. It doesn’t fade completely, but Sam watches the current of grace in his brother’s body fade until it was hardly noticeable, even in the dim light of the hallway. Dean frowns at Sam. “What happened?”

Sam calls Cas four times, and all four click straight to voicemail. He leaves a detailed message on his mom’s phone, and sends a text to Bobby. He even calls Rowena, but the phone rings and rings and finally Sam gives up.

He made the calls in the hallway outside Dean’s door, and after he ends the final attempt, he slides the phone into his pocket and pushes open Dean’s door.

Dean sits against the headboard, looking exhausted but choleric. He holds one arm unconsciously around his chest like he’s trying to keep his body from flying apart. “Cas still flapping around up there?”

Sam nods, and sits on the end of Dean’s bed. “Yeah. Straight to voicemail.” Sam scrubs a hand down his face, and tries not to look too closely at his brother’s bare arms, where light still pulsates in
the curves of muscles and sinew. “What’s happening, Dean? No way this came out of nowhere.”

Dean frowns and leans back further against the headboard. Finally, he admits “Michael said it was grace poisoning.”

“Michael – wait, you’ve talked to him?”

Dean raises in arm in a shrugging motion. “Kinda.”

“Don’t kinda me, Dean, how could you… you shouldn’t be poking around in there at all!”

Dean raises his brows sardonically. “Shouldn’t be poking around in my own head?”

Sam’s hands clench on his lap. “Dean, you have an archangel – like a freaking archangel – in your head. And you know what’s keeping him locked down in there? A screwdriver, Dean.”

“Michael doesn’t know what’s going on, man. He’s just pacing a hole into the floor. He said something…” Dean squints, trying to remember, “he said something about grace building up with nowhere to go.”

Sam rubs his eyes, “Yeah, Cas said the same thing.”

“Oh, that’s – that’s just stupendous, Sam, so you two knew about this all along, and just let me sit here like a spare dick at a wedding?”

Sam gives Dean an incredulous look, wishes that he could throw something. “Pot - kettle, Dean!”

Dean rolls his eyes, and Sam feels a low pulse of anger that Dean doesn’t seem to be taking this as serious as he should be. Dean breaks the awkward silence with an admission. “Alright – we opening the honesty book here? I talked to Andrea.”

Sam feels he was spun around a few times and is now being shoved in a different direction. He blinks stupidly at Dean. “You talked to Andrea about grace poisoning?”

“What? No. I talked to Andrea about my gun.”

This time, Sam does throw something, and Dean’s face is sincerely shocked when the pillow thuds off his shoulder. “You’re still going on about this gun thing? You just combusted 15 minutes ago in the hallway, and you’re still mad that your gun jammed?”

“Dominic clipped the firing pin.”

“Dominic… what?”

Dean’s eyes are solemn, underlined with exhaustion and tainted with malaise. “Dominic switched weapon maintenance shifts with Andrea the same day I checked my .45 into the armory. I took the gun apart. Someone took a pair of wire cutters to the firing pin. I was about to confront the son of a bitch, when…” he waves an arm indistinctly in the air.

Sam stares at Dean like he just found him in the smoldering crater in the hallway all over again. His brain struggles to connect all the dots and disentangle them from the other Michael-grace mess they’re currently dealing with. “You found out your gun was sabotaged, and you didn’t tell me?”

Dean slaps his hands down on the bed on either side of his thighs. “Really, Sam? That’s your takeaway here?”
Sam’s head is still moving in circles, trying to process. Dominic was... a good hunter, an asshole who could strip a rifle to parts in less than 15 seconds, and was more gruff than fluff, but to sabotage another hunter’s gun? “But why?” Sam hears himself ask.

Dean shrugs. “Beats me. Was about to ask him myself. Who knew trapping an archangel in your head would make it harder to keep appointments?”

In any other circumstances, Sam would roll his eyes at Dean’s typical blasé attitude, but this is serious. If a hunter wants Dean dead, then that jumps to the top of the problem queue. Sam doesn’t know how to deal with... grace poisoning, but he can absolutely kick the snot out of a hunter trying to tear his family apart.

Sam stands from the bed, and Dean blinks up at him owlishly. A flash of grace snaps in the depths of his eyes, and Sam tries not to see Michael looking back at him in his brother’s face.

“Where are you going?” Dean asks, and is already moving to push the tangled sheets aside to follow.

Sam holds up a hand to stop him. “Dean. Stop. I will handle this.”

Dean pauses, and his face is a wash of incredulity. “What? Guy tries to punch my ticket, and I can’t even kick him around a little?”

Sam’s face doesn’t twitch, and Dean searches his expression for any sort of give. Maybe he sees a brother-instinct that he can relate to, or maybe he’s just too tired and beat up to argue. But he sinks back against the bed with a resigned air. “Fine.”

Sam leaves the door open behind him as he storms out of the room.

Dean calls after him: “Tell him he’s a dick!”

Dominic doesn’t seem particularly startled when Sam slams open the door to the bunk room he shares with Bertie. The hunter is cleaning oily blood stains off the end of a wooden baseball bat, and hardly spares Sam a glance as he spits on the wooden handle and scrubs at it with a rag.

“Well, hiya Sam. How’s your brother? Heard he isn’t doing so well.”

“Did you sabotage Dean’s gun while it was in the armory?”

The false pleasantness drips from Dominic’s face, replaced by a cold flatness. He studies Sam’s face and hefts the bat in his hands. Sam’s eyes track to the weapon clenched in the hunter’s grip, but the hunter rolls it between his palms for a moment before dropping it to the bed. “Is that what he told you?”

“I saw the firing pin spring for myself.” Sam lies flatly. Of course he hadn’t, but Dean knows the intricacies of his weapons like the back of his hand. “And I know that you switched rotations with Andrea on the exact day I made Dean turn his weapons over. Now do you really want to pretend like you have no idea what we’re talking about, or can we get to the part about why you’re trying to get Dean killed.”

Dominic chews a wad of gum with his mouth slightly open, and the sound of gum smacking almost tips Sam over the edge. “I switched shifts with Andrea, sure.” Dominic says finally, and stands up from the desk chair. “But it wasn’t to screw with no gun. I was fixing up my old Model 336. Don’t believe me? It’s in parts right there.” And he nods with his chin to the desk behind Sam, continuing
the infuriating smacking of his gum.

Sam turns to glance at the old deer rifle, but sees it definitively not in pieces and fully assembled. “What are you – “ he looks back at Dominic, and the last thing he sees for a long few minutes is the handle of a dirty baseball bat blurring towards his face.

Sam blacks out for probably only a handful of minutes, but he’s groggy when he finally peels open his eyes. His brain feels like it’s grown twice its size and is pushing at the sides of his skull like it’s trying to find a crack to squeeze out of. Sam groans and the sound is muffled through the ringing in his head.

He rises to his knees and tries to remember what happened. Why he’s waking up alone on the floor of one of the hunters' bunk rooms. He swings his arm out and his fingers stub painfully against a bludgeon. No – he squints at the wooden object and watches it come into focus. It’s a baseball bat, with fresh blood bruising the handle. Sam frowns at it, and then his brain lurches sideways and the past few minutes of memories finally click back into their proper places.

Dean.

Sam surges drunkenly to his feet, and arrests his stumble on the desk pushed near the front door. His eyes land on the empty table under his hands. Dominic is gone. And he’s taken his hunting rifle with him.

Panic nearly chokes Sam, as he scoops the baseball bat off the floor and tears off down the hall. He doesn’t know how long he had been senseless, but it was more than enough time for Dominic to get a head start out of the bunker.

Or a head start to Dean’s room.

The dizziness in Sam’s head slowly fades, and he picks up the speed, tearing around corners and nearly tripping over his own feet.

He’s ten feet away from the open door of Dean’s room when the loud retort of a hunting rifle echoes off the walls like thunder.

Chapter End Notes

fml I'm gonna be ass deep in work tomorrow. Maybe I shouldn't blow off my actual job to write fan fiction in the middle of the day. I just couldn't stop once I got going this morning.

Anyway - pacing is a little weird in this chapter, it's a little rushed. But who reads fan fic for filler bits, right? No seriously - do I need more filler bits? Is this a weird pace?

Also - I know that Jack just kinda weirdly disappeared from the last half of this chapter, but I didn't really see a way of working him in without taking away from #Sam'sStarringRole. Just pretend he's outside trying to call Cas or something. Maybe there’s better cell reception. Anyway, can't wait to find a friggin billion typos in this when I read it later. Sorry - I'm just bad.
Thanks for reading/commenting <3
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Dean already regrets letting Sam leave to confront Dominic without him, but he also has to admit to himself that the feud with the hunter seems less important after his grace burnout. There’s a trace of guilt lingering in his gut that he’s put Sam in an uncomfortable position challenging one of his hunters, but Dean’s never liked the guy, and doesn’t have any pity for a douche bag that lays hands on another man’s weapon.

Dean checks his phone. There’s a text from their mom, saying she and Bobby got held up with a hunt outside of Des Moines. The text came in before the grace eruption in the hallway, but Dean hopes they stick with the hunt. No reason for people to die just so his mom can watch Dean piss in the dark without needing to turn on a light.

Well. Probably not that specifically.

There’s a sound of rapid footsteps approaching in the hallway, and Dean straightens against the headboard. That was fast. Hopefully Sam didn’t just shoot the guy.

“Jesus, did you – ” Dean starts when a figure swings into the room, but he cuts off when he sees that it’s Dominic, and not the sad puppy eyes of Sam. Dean’s hand clenches around his phone for a moment before he tosses it onto the bed. “That was quick. Did Sam at least get a chance to tell you that you’re a dick?” He gibes, but there’s a knot of real fear in Dean’s heart. There’s a wild look in Dominic’s eyes, and there’s no way he got past Sam without violence.

Dean’s hand snakes behind his back towards his pillow, but Dominic steps further into the light, wielding his Model 336. The barrel of the deer hunting rifle gleams in the light, and its sights are trained on Dean’s chest. “Hands where I can see them, Winchester.” Dominic orders in a low tone, trying to not bring attention to the foot and a half of burnished death in his hands.

Dean raises his hands slowly in front of him, and the knife he was going for under his pillow lays unclaimed.

Dominic’s mouth works open and closed a few times, and he’s staring hard at Dean. The rifle doesn’t waver.

Dean waits for the other shoe to drop. Finally, he breaks the silence, “This some kind of weird foreplay, or – “

“What the hell is going on with you?” Dominic spits out, cutting right over Dean.

Dean frowns, and then looks down at himself. There’s grace flickering under his skin, agitated and erratic. He feels his eyes snap hot with a burst behind the green, and Dominic takes a step back.

“Oh, whoa – “ Dean tries, as the small attempt at humor backfires. “I know what you’re thinking – “

“Highly fuckin’ doubtful.”

“ – but hear me out. Michael is trapped, okay? This,” and he turns his hands over and back, “is all just… a side effect. No reason to start slinging bullets around, Wyatt Earp.”
At Michael’s name, Dominic’s face twists into a nearly inhuman mask of hatred and betrayal. He takes a furious step forward, and Dean hears the safety click off the gun.

“Whoa – “ Dean tries, but Dominic is already talking.

“You think you are such hot fuckin’ shit, Winchester. Like you can do whatever you want and it just don’t matter. Do you have any idea what our world was like? You were over there... like a drop in the bucket – you cannot imagine.” He pauses, and when he starts again, there is an exquisite pain in his eyes, “I watched a pack of rabid vamps tear my family apart and eat their flesh. Even the monsters were starving, Dean, that’s the world that we lived in. You make your fucking jokes and act like you saved us, like you brought us to a better world. And you think that we owe you because in his world – “ and he raps the barrel of the gun so hard against the frame of Dean’s bed, that Dean nearly goes for the knife anyway, “– in this world you exist, and that’s what saved your world. A pair of high and mighty hunters that ain’t any better at this than the rest of us, ‘cept cleaning up their own messes.” Dominic is red in the face, and vein in his neck looks fit to burst. Dean watches as Dominic attempts to get his breathing under control, to lower his voice before he calls attention to the room. “And your brother – he’s okay. He’s alright. I’ll have to put a bullet in his brain when I’m done with you because I know what he’s like. He won’t just let me walk after I’ve smoked his brother.”

“Gotta be honest with you, Dom.” Dean says, weighing the risks of interrupting his insane guest, “I know I got a tendency to rub people the wrong way, but you’re going zero to a hundred, and I can’t think of more than five words we’ve said to each other.”

Dominic actually laughs, and his gun tips down towards the floor a few inches. “Rub people the wrong way?” He repeats incredulously. “You think I’m gonna shoot you dead because you’re an irritating sonovabitch?”

“Well,” Dean gripes, “you do happen to be swinging a loaded rifle in my face.”

Dominic laughs again, but it’s darker now. The gun tilts closer to the floor, and Dean slides closer to the edge of the bed.

“Oh, Dean. Dean, I don’t hate you because you’re pretty, or because you’re goddamn aggravating.” His eyes focus on Dean, and the laughter fades into the darkness behind his eyes. Dean pauses in his slow edge towards the side. “I hate you, Dean Winchester, because you said yes to the son of a bitch that already took one world away from me. You coulda killed Michael with a rusty spoon all the months ago after your boy Jack tore Michael a new asshole. And what did you do?” Dominic pauses like he’s actually waiting for Dean to answer, as if Dean could ever answer a question like that. “You let him in!” Dominic finishes, and his face twists with disbelief, “You threw the doors open wide and you started this whole mess all over again!” Dominic is yelling again, and the rifle barrel sinks lower and lower to the floor. Dean waits until the grizzled hunter takes one hand off the rifle to wipe at the sweat dripping into his eye, and lurches off the bed.

His body is still off kilter after Sam had helped him back to his room, but adrenaline is pumping now, counting down seconds before death like heartbeats. Dean reaches for the rifle, but Dominic is still too far out of reach, and he jerks the gun away before Dean can fully wrap his fingers around the barrel. Dean’s vision winks out like blood draining from his head, and he blinks his eyes a few times, trying to pull light back in. There’s the whoosh of air, and Dean staggers back as the butt of a gun is driven painfully against the side of his head. Dean stumbles back a few paces, and catches himself on the wall with one hand, the other coming up to wipe the blood trickling down the side of his face.

Dominic is incensed, past the point of reason and humanity, but his voice is quiet and murderous. And it’s so much worse than screams and accusations. “When I look you in the eyes, Dean, I don’t
I don’t see a man worthy of respect. When I see you, do you know what I see?” Dominic’s gun is pointed at the floor, but he’s knocked Dean far enough away that Dean would never get another chance. “I see the monster responsible for taking everything away from me. I see my husband getting torn apart by fangs and claws, and I see my son trying to stop his jugular from spewing his lifeblood with his hands. You saw Michael, and you saw a chance to save your family. But I look at you… and all I see is the end of mine.”

Dominic’s rifle swings up like it’s cutting through a current, and Dean doesn’t even hear the shot until the bullet tears out his back.

Sam hooks his hand into the doorframe and propels himself into Dean’s room, the sound of a gunshot still echoing in his ears.

The scene in front of him is paused like a glossy photograph, a frozen snapshot. Dominic is still recovering from the recoil, and the smell of a fired gun and the metal tang of blood hits the back of Sam’s throat like bile. Dean’s face is almost comically blank, like he’s still waiting for the gun to go off, like he’s still seconds ahead of the end. Sam can’t see the pulverized mess that has to be Dean’s entire stomach cavity because Dominic stands between them, but the wall behind Dean is painted with blood and viscera like a Pollock painting.

Sam hears himself shout something like he’s screaming down a tunnel, but all he hears is a roaring echo in his ears. He isn’t even aware that he’s swinging the bat until Dominic hits the ground like his strings were sliced.

Dean has slid down the wall, one hand pressed at the ruined mess of his stomach like it can actually hold everything in. Blood squeezes in the gaps between fingers, and Dean collapses onto the ground, his head falling back against the wall.

Sam’s already dropped the bat from numb fingers, and he slides through the syrupy pool of blood to kneel at Dean’s side. Dean’s hands only lightly cover the gut shot, and Sam’s hands replace his brother’s.

“Sammy?” Dean asks, almost surprisingly aware, though his voice is thick. He coughs around something in his throat, and his arm raises weakly to wipe the blood that bubbled onto his lips. He only smears it in a thick streak towards his jaw line, and Sam can hardly breathe.

“You… okay?” Dean coughs, and Sam almost lets out a sob.

“Shut up, Dean, I’m fine. Just… shit, just hold on…”

Sam puts more pressure onto his brother’s abdomen, but he can feel he’s fighting a losing battle.

“Sam?” He hears a scared and quiet voice from the doorway.

Sam only turns for the briefest of moments, sees the fear in Jack’s eyes like the rush of a train going by, and is already back to Dean. “Jack, call Cas!” He shouts over his shoulder. He grits his teeth and watches Dean’s face blanch. There’s nothing Cas can do, even if he did get the call, and they all know it. There’s no way he could get back in time. “Goddammit.” Sam curses vehemently. “Jack, fuck – Jack, go get Monica now.” And he hears footsteps tearing down the hallway as the Nephilim runs to retrieve their ER-nurse-turned-hunter.

“Sam, it’s… there’s nothing…” Dean tries to say, and his hand comes up to fist in Sam’s jacket. Sam’s hands are washed in Dean’s blood, but there’s a silvery blue slickness to the liquid, like
gasoline in a puddle, greasy light reflecting off water.

“Dean, you’re going to be fine, okay? Just…”

And a gurgle of a laugh bubbles up from Dean’s throat. “Sammy, I’m… ‘bout three organs… short of fine. Listen…” And Sam can feel the monumental surge of effort that Dean summons to be able to even talk, “You need to… finish it.”

And Sam’s fingers stutter against his brother’s chest. “What?” He hears himself ask with more air than words.

“Sam… this is… bad, man… it’s…” He coughs again, and flecks of blood pepper Sam’s sleeve. “Sam, listen.” And Sam’s eyes are torn from Dean’s chest to his face. Dean seems to find an inner strength, or maybe his body admits there’s no chance of coming back from this. “Michael is gonna get out, Sam, you can’t let him get out. He’s getting close, Sam, I can feel - ”

“Dean, I’m not going to kill you!” Sam shouts, even though Dean is inches away. “We’ll – “

“If you say… say you’re gonna find a way… I will vomit blood on you.”

“Dean – “

But Dean is fading, his eyes beginning to slide shut. The grace still leaking out from the archangel imprisoned in Dean’s body is worse than ever, increasing in intensity until Sam can hardly look at Dean without squinting. “Sam… please.” Dean manages to say, and a last pulse of grace echoes in green eyes, and then the pain and tension in Dean relaxes and he slumps, eyes closed, against the wall.

“Dean!”

Bang.

Rocky’s bar. His bar.

Dean wakes up slumped at the bar, like a drunk with nowhere else to go. He lifts his head sluggishly from the clean wood, smelling disinfectant and peanuts and the familiar tang of beer and smoke.

The jukebox doesn’t play, just sits cold and silent in the corner. Half the lights aren’t on, and the backside of the bar is shrouded in shadow. Dean runs a hand absently down his uninjured chest, feeling nothing but smooth skin and the flex of muscles.

Bang.

Dean freezes, and his eyes slide to the walk-in. The screwdriver jostles in place, but doesn’t slip loose from the metal. Dean exhales in relief, as much as he knows it will be short lived. Sometimes the only thing that you can ask for in this world is a few extra minutes and a shot of tequila.

Dean leans over the bar and his fingers close on the neck of his favorite brand of tequila – the kind that Pamela says tastes like paint stripper, but Dean maintains that it tastes like fireworks and retirement. He snags a glass on his way to the freezer, but abandons it on the bar after a step. No need for moderation. Not now, away.
Michael is waiting for him at the window, and the smugness in his face is only tempered by the tequila shot that Dean pours down his own throat.

He holds the bottle up to the window and pours out a libation. “Your health.” He toasts, and his lips twist in a patented Dean Winchester smirk.

Michael shakes his head, but the humor doesn’t disappear from his borrowed face. “Three days, Dean? I can’t say I had high hopes, but… really… even for you, that’s a little… pessimistic.”

Dean tilts the bottle back to his lips and swallows down the amber liquid. “What can I say; I’m a people person. You got anything else to say other than the usual fire and brimstone? Seeing as we’re about to roll credits here.”

Michael laughs, and Dean winces as he hears his own voice raised in mirth. “Come on, Dean. You’re stupid, but you’re not that…” He pauses and considers Dean through the glass, “Well. Maybe you are. But do you really think that I’m not going to break through these crumbling walls? Do you think I’ll just accept the Empty, like you seem content to do?”

Dean shakes his head, and pulls the bottle from his lips. “You’re not getting out, Michael. My head, my rules. And I’m going to personally spend my last few minutes on this earth making sure that the last light that turns off in my head, is the light in that freezer.”

_Bang._

Michael’s fists smash against the glass, and Dean swears that the whole bar shakes in response. He catches himself as the bar floor roils under his feet, and the first beam of uncertainty finally shimmers over the horizon. Michael smirks at Dean’s reaction, and Dean quickly schools his features back into place.

The lights flicker in the bar, and a few more overhead lights wink out. Dean can’t even see the far side of the bar anymore, as if half the room’s been literally sliced off into nothing. Dean’s grip tightens on the neck of the bottle, but he doesn’t raise it to his mouth.

Michael takes a step closer to the window and watches Dean steadily. “You’re piercing the veil, Dean. But I won’t let you drag us to the other side just yet. You’re going to slip, even if it’s the half second before your body expires, and in that breath, I’ll break through. And then we’ll be right back on schedule.”

Dean scowls at the glass, but knows that anything he says will just be twisted around in circles until he’s all trussed up. More lights sputter and fade to nothing, and Dean is left with half a bar and half a handle of tequila. He takes another swig, but the feeling of victory and relief are gone. A light behind Dean turns off, and Dean realizes that it’s not just the lights that are dying. It’s him.

And he’s almost gone.

There’s a fluttering in Dean’s chest, and he rubs absently at his heart. The bar is dim, the last bastion of light silhouetting the patient archangel watching him through a few inches of glass. His heart skips a wild beat, and Dean feels the tequila slip from his grasp. He sees the glass shatter at his feet, but the only sound he hears is a dull roar, and –

_Bang._

Dean’s knees hit the ground, shards of glass digging through the jeans. His eyes catch on the familiar green of his own, and it takes him too long to remember that it’s not him, it’s not a reflection. He doesn’t hear the thudding on the window, but he feels it echo in his bones.
Bang.

A crack splits the glass, and Dean sees the flash of teeth.

Bang.

The screwdriver rattles in the lock.

Bang.

Dean’s lungs stop pulling in air, but his heart beats wildly, desperate to soothe oxygen back into his blood.

Bang.

Dean’s heart thuds once, and he knows this time… this time it’s the last one. And he’s sorry he couldn’t do better goodbyes.

Bang.

Warmth comes, and it has to be the relief of death. The final turn of a page, the closing of a book. There’s fear, but there’s also relief at knowing that you’ve done all you can do, and your role in the story is done. Warmth floods Dean from the tips of his fingers to the core of his body, and he waits for some kind of dimming of awareness. Some kind of transition.

But warmth starts to burn, slowly at first, and then all at once. It sears Dean from the inside like he’s splitting atoms, a nuclear war inside his own chest. His mind doesn’t fade into nothing, it isn’t tugged into the veil. Instead, Dean feels like a lightning bolt has sliced through his brain, firing up the synapses like an electric current wired into his head.

His mind blows outward, out of his body, out of the bar, and electric blue light chases after it like the impact of an explosion, the ripple that starts a tsunami. Dean feels his consciousness explode out of Rocky’s bar, smashing past the archangel still imprisoned in a cage, shredding through memories and rebuilding them.

In his last heartbeat, in that split second straddling the edge of the veil and life, Dean Winchester lives every single moment over again.

And it’s bad. There’s Mary’s death, stapled to the ceiling with fire and blood. There’s Sam walking away on a dark road, turning his back on family and walking towards a new life. There’s finding John’s body on the hospital floor, and holding Sam as his body cools after his spine was severed by twisted competition. There’s forty long years in hell, listening to screams and suffering, and not really remembering what they mean. There’s a red brand of a Mark on his arm, sinking tendrils into his soul and rotting him from the inside. There’s pain, there’s death, there’s tears.

But there’s good, too. There’s Winchester Surprise, burnt at the edges. There’s learning to drive behind the wheel of the Impala, while his father laughs at something stupid on the radio. There’s fireworks with Sam in a field and running underneath ash and light as it paints the field around them. There’s sitting with Cas at a bar, ordering increasingly ridiculous and disgusting drinks, waiting to see when the angel catches on. There’s campfires and watch rotations with Benny, and the vampire slaps Dean’s back after a fight, a fanged shit-eating grin on his face. There’s fishing with Jack, watching TV at Bobby’s, eating pie on the hood of the Impala with Sam.

And it’s a hard life. It’s a struggle, fighting every day and sometimes forgetting what it is you’re reaching for. But it’s a good life. And the good is always worth fighting for.
Dean hears the furious roar of an archangel denied, but all he can see is the brilliance of light.

Dean’s eyes slip closed, and none of Sam’s curses or pleas or threats open them again.

Sam can hear the doorway behind him filling with hunters, he can hear the loud exhalas of Dominic’s unconscious body somewhere to his left. He can hear Dean’s phone buzzing somewhere on the bed, can hear the wheeze in Dean’s chest as his lungs begin to fail and his heart skips one beat, then two.

The blood surrounding the brothers is already cooling, chilled by cold air pumping through vents. Dean is warm under Sam’s hands, still on this side of life.

There’s the sound of shuffling, and the shutting of a door. A hand comes down soft but firm on Sam’s shoulder, and he looks up to see that Jack has returned with Monica. Monica’s clutching her medical bag, but the look on her face says it all.

Sam turns his numb face back to his brother, and wishes that Dean would open his eyes, that he could give Sam one last chance to say goodbye, to do it right, give Sam a chance to say he’s sorry.

Dean’s heart stops under Sam’s hands, and his last breath shudders from his lungs.

Three seconds of nothing, so solid it hits him like a wall.

And the room erupts. Piercing light explodes out of Dean. Light shines like scars along his bare skin, and pools in the ruins of Dean’s chest cavity. Sam squints against the light, sees the slits of eyes under closed lids fill with an outpour of grace and luminance.

Sam’s first thought is Dean.

Sam’s second thought is Michael.

Sam scrambles back from his brother’s body, dragging Dean’s blood behind him like an oil slick. The blinding light slowly fades from a bright white to a dim blue to nothing at all. Sam blinks the seared images from his retinas, but he can’t take his eyes off his brother.

Dean’s shirt is a mess of blood and viscera, but underneath the tattered layers, Dean’s chest is smooth and unscarred. His eyes move under the lids rapidly, and Sam watches as Dean’s healed chest rises and falls as air is pulled into restored lungs.

Sam is half relief, half terror. Who made it back? Dean? Or Michael?

The revived body at their feet shivers, and slowly, green eyes open to the room. Sam’s breath catches.

Michael? Dean?

Words tumble out thickly from the figure lying in blood: “Dominic is a dick.”

Chapter End Notes
I don't really love this chapter - I thought it was like... drama piled on more drama, and I like to have like 50% drama and 50% humor/lightheartedness/#BrotherMoments. Plus I also don't super like chapters that don't have interactions between the main cast, and this chapter largely separated everyone. BUT it had to happen to kick off the rest of the fic, and I'm really excited to start working in some ~archangel abilities~. So don't worry, fun times ahead! Also I know I'm super mean about cliffhangers, and it took my entire force of will to not cut the chapter at Dean's "Death."

Anyway, this entire fic was actually built off this one idea - that the AU hunters probably HATE Dean. Why wouldn't they? Dude said yes to Michael like a DAY after they escape to a world without him. My other motivation for Dominic was that he probably figures that if he kills Dean, Michael will go too, and that's a good trade in his book. Buuut I felt like Domi-Dick had monologued for too much though, and I didn't want to keep adding.

EDIT: lmao, I'm rereading to look for errors, and let it be known that I was willing to let some of Dean's last words to Sam be "I will vomit blood on you." I am a blight on this fandom.
Dean looks better than Sam has seen him in *years*.

Sam’s head is still ringing from the earlier blow to his head, and dried blood is beginning to paste tangled hair to his scalp. His knees hurt from kneeling at Dean’s side, his shoulders are sore from the pressure he applied to Dean’s lethal – literally, *lethal* – gut shot. He might have pulled something in his back leaping away from Dean’s body after it exploded with ethereal light, or maybe that’s from his earlier spill on Dominic’s floor.

All in all, Sam’s feeling a little rough.

And Dean looks like he just woke up from a nap.

Sam’s brother blinks his eyes a few times, and there’s a shade of confusion there, like he remembers but can’t believe the events of the past few minutes.

“Dean?” Sam asks, and his voice is rough and pained.

Dean pulls himself up against the wall, and his eyes are wide when they pan up to Sam. But there’s no sign of blood loss in his flushed face, no circles of exhaustion under his eyes. Dean looks… healthy. He looks rested.

And most importantly, he looks alive.

“What happened?” Dean asks, and his hand comes to rest on his stomach almost absently.

Sam doesn’t have an answer. Sam can’t even get words past his throat.

Suddenly, there’s an explosion of sound, and Sam’s heart nearly needs a defibrillator to get it pumping again.

Monica’s dropped her metal medical bag, and all her tools and equipment have scattered like jacks. Her eyes are frightened in a pale face, and she wraps her shaking arms around her rib cage like the facsimile of an embrace. She flinches when Jack reaches out a comforting hand. Jack’s face is the picture of relief, and Sam wishes that he could feel as confident. Sam nods at Jack, and Jack slowly leads Monica to the closed door.

“I hate this place.” She whispers, but there’s an underlying current of relief in her tone, and Sam hopes there’s at least one other hunter in the Bunker that doesn’t want to shoot Dean with a hunting rifle.

By the time Sam turns back, Dean’s already pulling himself lightly to his feet. Blood and innards still paint the wall behind Dean – the result of a .30-30 tearing through flesh and taking most of Dean with it. Sam’s vision slides sideways, and for a moment, Sam sees Dean wreathed in bloody wings.

He shudders and blinks, and the image is gone.

A thousand emotions compete for Sam’s attention, and he isn’t sure which one is going to win as he takes a halting step forward. Dean stares distastefully at Dominic’s unconscious form, but he looks
up as Sam gets close. Nothing in Dean’s face even remotely suggests that he was ground chuck on the floor a few minutes ago, only minor puzzlement draws his lips down.

Dean is alive.

Sam punches him.

“Um, ow?” Dean snaps, taking a step back away from his brother as if Sam is about to start beating him to death with the baseball bat at their feet.

“Your last words to me were going to be ‘I will vomit blood on you?’” Sam demands, and the planned follow-up punch is subverted when he throws his arms around Dean.

He feels the hesitation in Dean’s posture as Sam hugs him. The shreds of Dean’s shirt leave bloody stripes on his own jacket, but Sam doesn’t care. “Jesus Christ, Dean.” And it’s all he can say before his throat closes up. Sam is only inches from the bloody wall, and he has to squeeze his eyes shut to keep from dragging Dean bodily out of the room.

Dean raises his own arms to return Sam’s hug, and he thumps the younger Winchester once on the back. Sam eventually eases back, but keeps both hands clasped on Dean’s shoulders, like Dean is going to disappear once he lets go.

“Before you ask,” Dean says into the silence, “no, I don’t know what happened.”

“Did Michael…?”

Dean shrugs. “Michael was banging away in there. He was close, but he’s still huffing freon in the walk-in.”

Jack reappears over Sam’s shoulder. “It has to be Michael’s grace, right?”

Dean gently pries Sam’s hands from his shoulders. “It definitely wasn’t my morning coffee. At least we finally get one scratch in the win column with this grace mess.”

“Do you… feel okay?” Sam asks carefully.

Dean gives him a sardonic look and crosses his arms. It probably would have had more of the impact he was going for if he wasn’t wearing most of his innards on his shirt. “As in, do I feel like me?”

Sam lets the question hang in the air.

Dean drops his eyes to his hands. There’s no flicker of light under the skin; Dean looks like Dean. “I… I don’t know. I feel… good.”

Sam feels his brows raise towards his hairline, pulling at the cut on his scalp. “You just redecorated your room – “

“I mean, not on purpose – “

“– with your insides, and you’re telling me that you feel good?” Sam finishes. He wants it to be true, he really does, but when does a pound of good ever land on their laps without ten pounds of bad tumbling right behind?

“Sammy, I can only tell you what I feel. And I feel fine.” Dean insists, and he crouches down by Dominic, angling the hunter’s head to the side to better see the injury that knocked him unconscious. He whistles low through his teeth. “What do you want to do with my secret admirer here?”
Sam’s mouth works open and closed for a second, thrown by the subject change. Dean’s face turns upwards when Sam doesn’t say anything. The man just shot Dean in cold blood less than ten minutes ago, and Dean is still deferring to Sam’s role as the de facto leader of the hunters. It’s not the time to unpack the implications, but it means a lot to Sam.

Sam’s eyes drop to the hunter. Dominic is still out cold, and the cut at his temple slowly oozes blood. He’s going to have a wicked bruise in a few hours, and it’s less than he deserves. Sam runs fingers through his hair and winces when he scratches his own tender flesh. “Let’s lock him down on the prison floor for now. I don’t even want to think about Dominic for a few hours.” His hands twitch with violence, but he shelves the urge.

Sam doesn’t know what Jack said to the hunters to get them to clear out, but as he and Dean haul Dominic’s dead weight through the hallways, there isn’t so much as a cracked door or a shadow disappearing around the corner. It’s slow-going – Dominic is heavy – and Sam glances at his brother every few seconds to reassure himself. They don’t often get a no-loss win, and Sam is still waiting for the fallout.

They drop Dominic bonelessly to the floor in one of the cells, and lock the door without so much as a backwards glance. “And if they forgot to turn on a light for the bastard, well… sometimes, mistakes happen.

Dean is picking distastefully at the remains of his shirt, when he pauses in the hallway.

“Dean?”

But Dean isn’t looking at him, he’s looking at one of the cells. “Is Garth in here?” He asks.

Sam nods, even though Dean can’t see him. “Yeah. After we locked Michael down, he seemed to snap out of it, but he didn’t want to leave the cell.”

Dean turns and gives Sam a skeptical look. “He doesn’t want to leave the cell.” He repeats, as if Sam is lying.

Sam feels a little guilty that he hasn’t been in to check on Garth for a few days, but Garth told him his decision himself. “Yeah, he said he doesn’t want to go home with Michael’s experimental super shot in his system. Doesn’t want to risk his family, I guess.”

Dean’s eyes turn back to the cell door, and Sam swears he hears his brother mutter something about how ‘experimental super shot’ would have been a great happy hour special, but he says louder, “I’ll check on him after I change my shirt.”

“Uh, yeah, Dean… maybe you shouldn’t.” Dean turns offended eyes on his brother, but Sam is already explaining, “We don’t know what’s going on with Michael’s grace. I don’t want to trigger anything with Garth, or with you.”

Dean rolls his eyes, “I didn’t turn into a magnet, Sam. Pretty sure that’s not how grace works.”

“Oh, suddenly you understand how grace works?”

“Shaddup. Let’s go, I feel like a porn star in this shirt.” Dean takes off down the hallway. “Next time I get shot, I’m wearing one of your shirts.” He calls over his shoulder. “Sick of ruining all of mine.”

Sam smiles at Dean’s back, still slowly easing all the tension and fear and worry out of his chest. Dean’s shirt is even worse from the back, but already it’s starting to look fake, and not like a casualty. Sam starts to follow, when something occurs to him. “Wait, Dean,” he calls, and Dean
pauses up the hallway. “How did you know Garth was in this cell?”

Dean looks at Sam like he’s already forgotten about what he’s talking about. “Uh… yeah, I don’t know, must have seen a light in the crack of the door or something.” And he continues up the hallway without another backwards glance.

Sam watches Dean turn the corner into the living quarters, and then turns towards the cell. There’s not so much as a hint of light escaping under the door.

A few days go by.

They clean Dean’s room. Dean digs the grisly bullet fragment out of the wall and drops it straight into the trash without looking at it twice. No word from Cas, but Sam hopes that’s a good sign. A sign of progress. Mary and Bobby return from the Des Moines hunt, and Mary seems surprised that Dean seems… good. Fine. Normal.

Except, sometimes Sam walks into the kitchen and sees Dean wincing at a sound that only he can hear. Dean still checks his phone for missed calls like a doctor on call, and Sam catches him shoving the phone back into his pocket with growing irritation. Sam is still trying to figure out how to ask about the calls without disrupting the fragile peace of the Bunker, but he can’t get Rowena or Charlie on the phone, and he chooses to see that as a sign that some things can be put off.

Sam falls back into the flow of the Bunker. He checks on Garth, and Dominic. He rewrites the armory rotation, and makes it optional for the hunters to check their gear in, and not a requirement. He’s busy – more Michael Monsters are getting restless without a leader, and bubbling up from underground. There are less hunters in the Bunker these days, but it’s better that way. Easier.

Sam’s been on the phone all morning, coordinating with three different hunter pairs in two states, and he drops the phone on the table next to the half-eaten granola bar he’d been nibbling on. He scrubs a hand down his face, and when his hands fall back onto the table, Dean is standing across from him, holding a sizzling plate.

“A granola bar? Really?” Dean drops the plate in front of Sam gruffly, as if someone put a gun to his head and told him to cook up a heaping plate of eggs and bacon and grilled tomato slices.

Sam’s tired, but his face splits into a grin. “Tomatoes? Who are you?”

Dean takes a seat across from Sam, and flips his brother off. “Tomatoes are a burger garnish and nothing else.” But he snakes one of the grilled slices from Sam’s plate and pops it into his mouth.

“Well, thank you for breakfast. And the garnish.”

“You’re fucking welcome. And this time, I didn’t even stick my hand in burning oil to get that sear.”

Sam pauses chewing his first bite, and covers his mouth with his hand to avoid spewing egg on the table. “Ew.”

Dean laughs, and his fingers drum on the table. He watches Sam eat for a few minutes, and then leans back in the seat. Dean’s wearing the same clothes as yesterday, and they don’t look wrinkled or slept in. Sam doesn’t remember seeing Dean go to bed at all last night, but he looks rested, so he must be catching some sleep. Still.

Dean winces, and tries to cover it up with a cough, but he knows he’s caught when Sam lowers his
“Michael?” Sam asks quietly.

Dean gives Sam an exasperated look, but nods. “Yeah.”

“He still locked down?”

Dean looks Sam straight in the eyes, and Sam sees his brother pick up an answer and turn it over in his hands. “It’s fine, Sammy. The cage will hold as long as it takes.”

Sam drops the fork to the plate, and it clatters against the porcelain. “As long as what takes?”

Dean frowns at Sam, but there’s a solid wall behind his eyes that Sam can’t see through. “Until we can get rid of him.”

“Thought much about that?”

“It’s pretty much all I’ve been thinking about, Sam. You’re not the one with an archangel yelling his head off at 4 in the morning. He’s going to bend all the shelving in there, and it took Pamela and I like two days to get that all organized in there.”

There’s a faraway look in Dean’s eyes, and Sam sees a crackle of grace twist underneath Dean’s clenched hand. Sam reaches a tentative hand towards Dean and grips his brother’s sleeve. “Dean.” Dean frowns, but he doesn’t take his eyes off the point he’s staring at on the table. “Dean, the bar… it’s not real, Dean. You and Pamela didn’t actually – “

“Fuck me, Sam.” Dean curses vehemently. “Yeah, I know the bar isn’t real. I’m not stupid. But I…” And there’s a shimmer of real vulnerability glowing in that cloud of enmity. “But I can remember it all, Sam. I remember signing the papers for it,” and he gestures to a stack of invisible paperwork on the table, “I remember filling out produce orders and hooking kegs up to the taps. I just…” Dean struggles to find the words to explain what the bar really stood for: a peaceful end, a gathering of family, a sense of completion. “I know it’s not real. But I need it to feel real, okay?”

“Okay, Dean. I get it. Sorry.” Sam says, and watches as agitation slowly fades from Dean’s eyes, and resignation settles in.

There are a few moments of heavy silence. Sam’s phone buzzes on the table, but they both ignore it. Dean flexes the fingers on his right hand, and veins of light pulse dimly under the skin.

“Does that… hurt?” Sam asks. He remembers the small bit of grace that Gadreel had left behind, that Cas had extracted for the tracking spell. Sam hadn’t even felt the grace until he suffered the pain of having it removed, but a small fingerprint of angelic distillate isn’t the same as having it continuously pumped into your body by a locked down Archangel.

“Doesn’t hurt right now.” Dean answers vaguely, but Sam’s attention catches on the last word. “Feels like… fizzy.”

“Fizzy.” Sam repeats dryly, trying not to sound too incredulous.

“Yeah, fizzy. Like that nonsense drink.”

“Champagne.”

“Yeah.”
Sam shakes his head, and drags his phone closer to check whatever notification came in. “Junction City…” he mutters to himself, scanning the contents of the alert.

“Junction City? You caught a case?” Dean’s already pushing the chair back. “Junction City… that’s like two hours away. Milk run.”

“Dean, wait – ” Sam says quickly, startled at Dean’s enthusiasm. “I got like… ten groups out in the field right now, someone else will handle the hunt.”

“Fine, I’ll grab Mom… or, wait, no, she and Dani were going to check out that thing in Nebraska. Jack can come.”

Sam grinds his teeth together. He knew the plan to keep Dean in the Bunker was going too smoothly to last. “Dean, if you have another… grace outburst…”

Dean pauses in the doorframe, and his eyes are closed off and irritated when he turns back to Sam. “Sam, I feel fine. But if I’m about to blow my angelic wad, you’ll be the first to know.” And he ducks around the corner towards his room.

Sam curses, and shoves the abandoned breakfast plate across the table. “Fine!” He yells. “Thirty minutes!”

Dean’s cheery voice echoes down the hall. “Twenty!” He yells, “And I’m driving!”

Dean is an enormously good mood as he swings the Impala out of the Bunker’s garage. It’s his first time behind the wheel since driving to Kansas City, and that had been pedal-to-the-medal, need-to-rescue-a-kidnapped-Nephilim drive. This one is… simple. Checking out a possible ghoul hunt a few hours away. Dean’s fixed the tape deck in the Impala, he’s washed her windows, cleaned out the parking tickets and gum wrappers that tend to get stuffed into the cupholders and forgotten about.

Sam’s tapping away on his phone already, and Dean remembers a time when hunting was 30% chasing rumors, 50% shitty motel wifi connections and 20% guesswork. Now Sam just has to log into the Bunker’s remote server and hey, bada-bing.

Sam’s rattling off details about the hunt – a recently deceased tax accountant allegedly seen outside a funeral home in Junction City a day before a body is reported missing. Mixed in with reports about recent grave disturbances at the local cemetery, and that’s all it takes for Sam’s new algorithm to pick it up. Some kids used to watch cartoons on Saturday mornings, but Sam used to tear through newspapers looking for cases, and he’s good at recognizing patterns. Dean feels a fifteen-year-old echo of guilt at taking Sam away from some kind of real career where he could put those brains to use, and not spend his days getting sliced and diced and knocked out with baseball bats.

But, in the end, there’s no one that Dean would rather be fighting the good fight with than his younger brother. He smiles out the window and leaves the guilt behind on the tarmac fifty feet behind.

Bang.

Dean’s getting better at hiding the outward signs of Michael’s never-ending struggle. But his stomach flip flops with nerves as he merges onto the freeway. He hasn’t been back inside the bar in his mind, and is too afraid to see the cracks in the cage. It’s better to not think too hard about it.

He’s feeling better than he’s felt in a long time, but he doesn’t want to talk about it with Sam. He
doesn’t want to mention that he hasn’t slept more than four hours total in three days, and how he’s pretty sure he forgot to eat food like… at all the day before. His senses feel alternatively sharpened or dulled within the span of minutes. And none of that can be a good sign. But there aren’t bags under his eyes, he doesn’t feel like he needs to drink a pot and a half of coffee just to stay awake. He feels… energized. Like he needs to keep moving and moving and moving, and the moment he stops, he’ll shatter.

So, a hunt. If all goes well, they’ll be back tomorrow, and maybe Dean can get around to finally fixing up that old clunker car in the garage for Jack. He still needs to tune up the engine on the –

Sam’s hand raises casually to the stereo and flicks it on. The speakers explode with sound – music so loud that Dean can’t hear anything except for a hail of noise. He almost sideswipes the minivan in the slow lane when his hands jerk on the wheel, and he slaps a hand onto the stereo and cuts the sound. “Lord’s fuckin’ name, Sam! Are you trying to blow the speakers?”

Sam is looking at Dean like he’s speaking in tongues. “What the hell was that?”

Dean checks the road before frosting his brother with a look. “Oh, I’m the bad guy here? What’s with all that shit you always said about protecting our ears, turn the music down, Dean, it’s too loud! Jesus.”

“Dean…” Sam says slowly, like Dean is about to throw himself out of the car if Sam makes a sudden move. “The volume is at like… 5.”

Dean gives Sam another look before checking the dash for himself. Sure enough, the volume control is closer to mute than its normal level. Dean frowns at radio, and then carefully taps the power button. Robert Plant’s voice croons quietly through the speakers. Dean turns the volume up carefully, and exchanges glances with Sam.

“ Weird.” Dean comments, and is already moving on. Sam has other plans.

“You’ve been doing that a lot recently.”

Dean knows for absolutely sure that he has never thought the radio in the Impala was louder than it actually was, which means this is going to be a whole mess of another conversation. “Alright, Sam.” He adjusts the rearview mirror slightly, for something to do other than look at Sam. “I’ll bite, but I’m not hungry.”

“You’ve been… weird.”

“Thanks.”

“Dean, come on. You cannot seriously tell me that nothing weird has happened in the last few days. You’ve hardly slept – “

“I’ve slept!” Dean protests loudly.

“- you’ve hardly eaten anything – “

“I eat! I’ve eaten! When do I not eat?”

Sam gives Dean a look that somehow says both keep talking and shut the hell up. “Really Dean? Name one thing you’ve eaten in the last 24 hours that was not a burger garnish.”

Dean opens his mouth to list off all the meals he’s had – because that knowledge is always usually at
the top of his mind. His mouth closes slowly as he realizes that he doesn’t remember the last actual meal he’s eaten. Or for that matter – the last time he’s actually had anything to drink, even alcohol.

Sam senses that he’s struck a chord, and pushes in for the kill. “Dean, I timed your breathing.”

“Okay, Annie Wilkes, you did what?”

“I timed your breathing.” Sam repeats determinedly. “Last night, when we were talking to Mom in the War Room. You didn’t take a breath for seven minutes.”

Dean scoffs, now sure that Sam is trying to make fun of him. “What, and you didn’t think to remind me after the first minute - ”

“Dean!” Sam snaps, and slams his fists onto his thighs. “There is something wrong with you, and you’re acting like there’s nothing going on!”

Dean’s phone buzzes in his jacket and he ignores it, and turns a strained expression towards the passenger side. “Sam,” He tries placidly, “I’m not saying there’s nothing going on… but I feel fine. I feel good, man.”

Sam takes a breath, and when he speaks again, the words are a little calmer but still laced with irritated concern. “Look, I know there’s extenuating circumstances here, Dean, I get it. We’re not exactly pulling a page out of last year’s crisis manual. I’m glad that you feel okay, man, I do, but we don’t know that this isn’t just – are you on your goddamn phone right now, Dean –”

“I gotta take a leak.”

“You… what?”

Dean slides his phone back into his jacket pocket. “Let’s just top off the tank, I’ll take a whiz, and then you can tell me all your theories in five minutes, okay?” He pulls into the gas station whose proximity is an actual godsend. Sam is gaping at him as if Dean just confessed that he’s always secretly suspected that vampires don’t actually exist.

Dean smoothly pulls alongside the pump, and cuts the engine. He tosses the keys on his brother’s lap, and the air is split with screeching as he opens the door on rusty hinges.

“Two shakes, Sammy.” He promises, and attempts to take a step out of the car when Sam fists his hand into Dean’s sleeve and stops him.

Sam’s eyes are resolute and foreboding. “Do you know what else doesn’t sleep, doesn’t eat and doesn’t breathe, Dean? I’ll give you three guesses, and the first two don’t count.”

Dean gives Sam a long look, and jerks his sleeve out of his brother’s grip. Sam doesn’t stop him as he stomps off towards the gas station.

The door bangs against an old-fashioned bell as he pushes into the store, and a figure steps out from the back room.

“Heya, Dean.”

“Hey, Earl.” Dean greets the store’s aging owner. Earl’s Gas is a common stop for the Winchesters when they head east on a hunt, and Dean’s built up a rapport with the old man over the years. “Give me twenty bucks on 4.” He drops a bill on the counter, and is already heading for the back exit. “I’m gonna take a leak.” He calls over his shoulder.
“You want the bathroom key, or –“ But Dean’s already shoving through the exit, and steps back into the loading area by the dumpster. He waits a moment to make sure that Sam hasn’t followed him into the store, and pulls his phone out. He goes to his missed calls and hits the first number. The phone takes a moment to connect, but then Dean’s listening to the steady dial tone.

Dean’s heart nearly stops when someone finally picks up on the other end.

“Hello, Dean.”

“‘Hello, Dean?’” Dean repeats stupidly. After hitting a voice mailbox close to 50 times, Dean wasn’t expecting such a cavalier greeting.

“Oh! Are we calling ourselves something different today, then?” The voice on the other end asks brightly.

Dean closes his eyes and pulls the phone towards his chest for a moment. “Rowena, I have been calling you for days.”

Rowena laughs on the other end. The signal isn’t very clear, and the sound comes out crackly and sharp. “So I’ve seen. A few missed calls from Samuel, as well. What are you boys calling about now?”

Sam?

“Is this about the archangel trapped in your napper?”

“How do you –“ He demands loudly before remembering where he is. He continues quieter, “How do you know about Michael?”

“Sam actually leaves voicemails. Not just fifty missed call notifications.”

Well, as much as Dean wants to pound Sam into paste for feeling the need to update the What’s Wrong with Dean This Week newsletter, it does cut the explanation time in half. “Listen, I can’t talk long, but I need your help.”

“Obviously.”

“I can’t get into details right now, but –“ Dean crosses to the side of the building, and leans around the dumpster to peer into the parking lot. Sam is clear across the way, filling the gas tank, and shooting worried glances at the store entrance every few seconds. “I need to track down a couple Horsemen of the Apocalypse. And I hear you’re the woman for the job.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is kind of rough. I thought I was going to cut it further into the plot, but I thought it might be kind of mean to have a time skip between this chapter and the last one, and it was getting too long to keep going... Anyway, I guess the "big reveal" at the end here isn't that exciting since I literally have the Four Horsemen tagged as characters, but oh well. Minor ghoul hunt, more grace probs ahead!

Thanks for reading/commenting! <3
EDIT: omg I’m an idiot. I literally had Dean drive the impala for like 30 min in ch.3 so that whole bit about “the last time dean drove” in this chapter is a bald-faced LIE. Oh well I’m not changing it...
Dean climbs into the driver’s seat, and Sam tries his hardest not to look bitchy. His brother shoots him a withering glance, and Sam knows he didn’t succeed.

“We gonna pretend like that was normal?” Sam asks pissily.

Dean brings the engine to a roar and backs up towards the highway. “Everybody poops, Sammy.”

Sam sighs at Dean’s deliberate misunderstanding, but he can tell that Dean’s shut the door on honesty hour, despite what he promised earlier. Sam studies Dean’s face from the side, and sees tension tight in his jaw. His eyes are on the road, but they’re distracted. Contemplative.

As per fucking usual, Dean’s hiding something.

Sam waits a few minutes for the mood to settle. He reaches behind and grabs a plastic water bottle from the pallet behind his seat. He offers one to Dean who declines with a shake of his head. Of course.

Taking a sip of water, Sam slides his phone from his pocket and scrolls through his contacts until he finds his mom’s number. He taps out a text.

*You still in the Bunker?*

Mary’s response trills in a few minutes later. Dean doesn’t even glance in his direction – probably assumes it’s one of a dozen hunters checking in.

Sam lowers the brightness on his screen just in case, and opens the message.

*For a few min. what’s up?*

*Something’s up with dean. Can you check his room out? Thought he was hiding something at the desk. Rowena-related.*

Sam sees the typing dots blip up on the phone, and disappear. Then more typing, then more erasing. Mary’s next text comes in a full minute later.

*Ok.*

Jack thinks that sleeping is probably the biggest waste of time he’s experienced with his newfound humanity. He remembers sitting around motel rooms, waiting for the Winchesters to catch their six hours, and thinking that he must not understand – there must be something enjoyable about lying in a bed with your eyes closed to spend literally half your life doing it. Surely there was something that, as a Nephilim, he must not have understood or grasped. Something that he could only appreciate as a human.

Yeah, there’s not.

Jack’s had a difficult time adjusting to sleeping, even months after losing the majority of his grace.
He usually wakes up every three hours, antsy and jittery, and needs to leave his bed, walk around, do jumping jacks – do something. It’s not conducive to a good night’s rest, however, and means that Jack’s sleeping schedule has devolved into multiple short naps throughout the night and day.

He’s lying on his bed, wide awake, when he hears the quiet but unmistakable sounds of a lock being picked in the hallway. And it sounds like it’s coming from the direction of the Winchesters’ rooms.

Jack’s heart speeds up in his chest, and he throws off the covers before silently padding barefoot across the cold floor of his room. He cracks open the door noiselessly and tries to peer outside. The quiet scratching metal sound is louder, but he can’t see anything.

Who would be trying to break into Sam or Dean’s room? A hunter trying to catch them off guard, finish the job that Dominic couldn’t? Jack knows that neither Sam or Dean are currently in the Bunker, but that doesn’t mean that a revenge-seeking hunter doesn’t.

He holds his breath, and pushes open the door further. The door slides open a few more inches, but then hits a rusty hinge and a metal screech gives the game away.

There’s movement down the hall as someone leaps back from Dean’s door, and it takes Jack a full two seconds to recognize the would-be assassin as Mary Winchester.

Her eyes are wide, almost embarrassed, as she sees Jack looming in the doorway of his own room. She’s dressed in traveling clothes, and there’s a duffel bag shoved against the other wall. It looks like Mary was on her way out of the Bunker, when she decided to casually break into her oldest son’s room.

“What are you doing?” Jack asks, and the concern he felt is replaced by genuine bewilderment. He leaves the shadows of the doorway and approaches the chagrined older hunter by Dean’s door. Mary’s arms are hidden behind her back.

“Hey, Jack. I thought you were still asleep.” She says, feigning casual flippancy.

Jack’s narrowed eyes don’t twitch.

Mary meets his gaze for a few more seconds, before rolling her eyes. “I feel like I’m about to be grounded by my mom.”

“Why are you trying to break into Dean’s room?” Jack asks again.

Mary bites the inside of her cheek for a moment, and considers the Nephilim. She seems to decide whatever she was doing isn’t worth lying about. She brings her hands out from her behind her back and Jack sees the glint of lock-picking tools. “Sam asked me to dig around a little. He thinks Dean’s hiding something in his room. Something Michael-related.”

The fog in Jack’s mind clears. “Is this about the Rowena calls?” He asks. “I’m the one that told Sam about them.” He adds, after Mary’s surprised expression. “Dean tried to call a witch – Rowena – when I was driving him back to the Bunker.”

“Well,” Mary says, holding out the tools to Jack, “if you know that much already, help me get the damn door open and let’s poke around. Dani’s waiting for me in the truck, and if I leave her alone too much longer, she’s going to change all my radio pre-sets.”

Jack doesn’t know what any of that means, but he takes the lock picks and gets to work. The tools slide into the lock smoothly, and he remembers the last time he picked a lock – minutes before he was kidnapped and dragged off to Michael. He shivers, remembering the panic and fear he felt being
shoved into Michael’s office, and he misses one of the lock tumblers. He takes a fortifying breath, and tries again.

Dean’s door swings open.

Mary whistles lowly, and claps Jack on the back as she moves past him into the room. “You sure I’m not your mom? My kids all seem to be good at breaking into things. And breaking things in general, I guess.”

It’s an off-the-cuff remark, and Jack knows that Mary meant it kindly, but he feels the dull ache under his ribs that he gets when he thinks about his own mother. Luckily, Mary’s back is to him as she flips the light switch and she doesn’t see the pain cloud his features.

Dean’s room is relatively clean. He’s never been one for knick-knacks and useless junk, and a life on the road means less room for the usual accumulation of assorted crap.

Still, there’s traces of Dean’s personality around the room, if you know what to look for. Books from late night research are stacked haphazardly on a cabinet, never reshelved in the Bunker’s library, but boxes of ammo are fastidiously organized and color-coded. There are hooks along the wall where it appears Dean used to store weapons, but have since been taken down and moved elsewhere in the Bunker. The only weapon that still hangs is a grisly-looking weapon that Dean says he brought back from Purgatory. Wrapped around the handle is a bit of cheap plastic twine, with a wooden carving of what looks like a ram’s head, or maybe some kind of relic. Jack asked about it once, but Dean just smiled and said someone had given it to him as a reminder.

When Jack asked what it was supposed to remind him of, Dean rolled his eyes and said *that musicals are worse than procedural cop shows*, but there was a ruminative glint in his eyes, and Jack knew that whatever the crude amulet was a reminder of, it was obviously important to Dean.

Mary looks around the room with her hands on her hips. “Alright, you take the desk. I’ll check out the cabinets.”

Jack tears his eyes away from the weapon and amulet, and focuses in on the desk. It’s the messiest part of the room, but at least he doesn’t have to dig through the dirty laundry thrown lazily in the corner, or the duffel that he swears has moved a foot to the left since they walked in.

Jack approaches the desk, and starts moving coffee cups and old news print-outs around. There are old FBI badges, bar coasters, labels peeled off whiskey bottles. There’s even a library card, but the signature scrawled on the back is illegible.

“What are we looking for?” He asks a few minutes later, throwing down the third toothbrush he’s found.

When Mary doesn’t immediately respond, Jack turns to see what’s distracted her.

Mary stands facing the wall to the left of Dean’s bed. Her face is hidden in shadow, but her fingers trace lightly over the bullet hole left behind after Dominic shot Dean in the very spot. There’s still a stain on the wall, despite Sam’s best efforts to bleach it out of the concrete, but it’s still visible even where Jack is standing across the room.

“Mary?” He asks cautiously.

Mary’s fingers curve into her fist, and she pulls her hand back from the wall. “What?” She says, looking over her shoulder at him. Her eyes are clouded, but her voice doesn’t waver.
“Do you know what we’re looking for?” He repeats kindly.

“Oh, uh, no. Though if you see any scraps of a spell or something witchy, that’s probably what Sam is talking about.” Mary says, and turns back to looking around at the paraphernalia scattered on the shelf over the bed.

Jack returns to his methodical search, making his way slowly from right to left. So far, he hasn’t found anything like what Mary’s described. He drags over the stack of porn in the corner and starts flipping through it clinically. There’s nothing stuffed inside the pages or written in the margins. Jack tosses them to the side, and finally sees something that catches his eye.

There’s a thin black book at the very bottom of the stack of magazines. Jack picks it up and inspects in in the dim light. The cover is glossy and blank. Jack frowns and turns it over in his hands. The spine has odd symbols or sigils in thin white writing, and towards the bottom it reads “D. Winchester.”

Jack’s eyebrows dip downwards as he flips open the cover, intrigued.

“What is that?” Mary asks, as Jack flips through the first few pages.

“Nothing.” Jack replies after a moment. Every single crisp page in the book is blank. There’s not even an indentation of writing, or any indication that there’s a secret message hidden in the pages. “I think it’s a journal, but there’s nothing written in it.”

“Huh.” Mary grunts, already moving on. “Well, I’ve checked the rest of the place out. If you haven’t found anything over on the desk, then whatever Dean is hiding, it’s not in here.” Mary yawns behind her hand and stretches. “I’ll text Sam from the road. Let him know we didn’t find anything. I’ll see you in a few days, okay? Text me if anything comes up.”

Jack turns the book back over in his hands, taking a last look at the spine with Dean’s name on it, before dropping it back onto the desk. He replaces the magazines on top, and no one would even notice that anyone had rifled through the desk.

Mary shuts the door behind him, and relocks the room from the outside. She pockets the pick set, and her warm eyes settle on him. “You okay, Jack?”

“Yes. Everything’s fine.” He replies, but a bad feeling is settling in his stomach.

Dean’s shovel thuds into the dirt, and he gives Sam a dirty look. “I hate digging up graves in broad daylight.”

Sam smirks at his brother and takes another sip of water. “Because it’s more fun at night?” He’s already done his share of the digging, and leans against a gravestone, enjoying a cold water dug out of the ice chest. Dean declined Sam’s earlier offer of water, but after he caught Sam’s look, he downed half a bottle before tossing it back to Sam with a roll of his eyes.

Dean buries the shovel deep into the earth, and leans on it heavily. He glares up at Sam’s reclined position, and wipes sweat from his brow. “At least there’s less people at night. God, I’m getting too old for this. We need to hire interns or something.”

Sam had been pensive and huffy since getting the disappointing text from his mom a few hours before, but Dean’s light bitchiness is easing some of the tension and irritation in his chest. Sam laughs at Dean’s dour expression. “Interns?” He repeats.
“Or something.” Dean reiterates, and brings a foot down hard onto the lip of the shovel to sink it a few inches further into the earth. He pauses mid-dig, and Sam sees him flex and shake his hand out, as if stretching out a cramp.

“You’ve been doing that.” Sam points out cautiously.

Dean looks up from the soil, his face blank. “Digging up tax accountants?”

“Shaking your hand out.”

“Oh.” Dean looks down at his hand like he hadn’t even realized he was doing it. “Didn’t mean to.” His hand is smeared with mud and dirt, but Sam can see the glide of crackly grace under the skin. It’s less noticeable in the sunny day light, but if Sam looks closely, he can see a play of blue in the shadows of Dean’s face, in the hollow of his throat.

“Can you feel it?” Sam asks. Dean knows what he’s talking about.

He sees the careful blankness in Dean as he decides whether to lie or actually be honest. He throws another shovelful of dirt onto the pile. “A little.” He admits. And it’s Dean-Winchester-code for a lot.

“What does it feel like?” He never felt the small dollop of grace Gadreel left behind.

Dean’s face is hidden as he focuses on the ground. “I don’t know how to describe it, Sammy. And it’s not like we can take turns passing it back and forth.” He sighs. “I don’t know. Like pressure.”

Weirdly, that makes sense. But where there’s pressure, there’s a breaking point. And when there’s a breaking point, there’s another crater in the Bunker hallway, and an exhausted brother that can’t keep doing this for much longer.

“I don’t suppose I could convince you to stay in the Bunker – “

“Yeah, fat chance -“

“ – just until we can find a way to get rid of Michael?”

Dean viciously buries the shovel in the dirt and leaves it. His eyes, when they snap up to Sam, have that awful light winking from the depths. “Sam, if we knew how to do it, we would’ve done it. If we had a plan to get rid of Michael, we wouldn’t be digging up corpses in Junction City.”

Dean’s rancor gets Sam’s back up. “That’s real helpful, Dean. So what, then. Just leave Michael in your head until he boils you from the inside out?”

Dean shivers and he flexes his hand unconsciously again, but doesn’t drop his glare. “I’m saying that we need to look at all solutions here. And I don’t think you’re willing to do that.”

Sam straightens from the gravestone. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Dean turns his back to Sam, and climbs out of the nearly finished grave. He doesn’t turn around, and all Sam can see is the resolute line of Dean’s shoulders, the set of a jaw that’s locked its teeth into something and won’t give it up. “It means what it means every time, Sam.” He snaps cryptically, and light ripples angrily underneath his skin. “I’m gonna grab a water from the car.” He says, walking past the ice chest filled with water.

Sam watches him go, and isn’t sure if it’s dread or frustration that squeezes his chest. Dean turns around the corner of the hedge, out of view. Sam sighs, and jumps down into the grave to finish
digging.

Dean figured it was irritation making his heart beat in his chest like popcorn, but as his ire burns off like vapor, his heart seems to speed up.

The squirmly tight quality of grace overflowing under his skin is back, and Dean doesn’t know what to do about it. Doesn’t know what he can do about it. He stomps past the Impala and into the sparsely wooded area that runs alongside the empty church. Now that Sam’s pointed it out, Dean is hyper-conscious of the jitteriness of his limbs, how he stomps out his legs and shakes out his arms. It’s worse to be still.

Dean feels like he’s going to throw up, but there’s nothing in his stomach. For a frenetic moment, he pictures himself in a bar bathroom, puking, and watching grace flush out of him. Like grace poisoning is really just a bad hangover, and not being seeped in magical nonsense that Dean’s body doesn’t seem to know what to do with.

Dean’s walked far enough into the woods that he can only see the Impala if he looks for it. His hand starts to burn, but when he glances down at it, a flash of grace ripples to the surface and nearly singes his retinas.

“Fuck.” He mutters, and rubs at his eyes with his other hand. He stumbles against a tree root, and before he can trip over like a total asshole, he swings an arm out and catches himself on a tree.

A tree that promptly explodes.

“Fuck.” Dean repeats more vehemently, and staggers back. There’s a blessed coolness settling into his arm, like a plunge into cool water, but it’s not relief that Dean feels.

The tree – a good-sized sapling – now looks like someone lit it on fire from the inside out. Molten light glows like hellfire between the coarse lines in the bark, almost like magma has settled in its core and is consuming itself in the hollow of the tree. There’s not even a tendril of smoke whispering out of the cracks, as if the tree is a self-contained explosion, devouring itself entirely.

Dean takes another step back and sees a precise handprint, untouched by flames. A perfect stencil in the blackened crust of the tree.

And it says a lot about Dean’s life leading up to this moment that his first thought is thank God I wasn't taking a leak.

A shadow falls over the grave, and Sam pauses, squinting up at the sun to see the outline of his brother. He looks… nervous, and slightly more conciliatory. His hands are calm at his side, no longer flexing with building up grace. Sam finds some relief in that.

“Thought you were getting water.” Sam says dryly, deciding that he’s still a little annoyed.

Dean looks like he has something to say but doesn’t know how to access the part of his brain where words are. Sam sighs, and tosses the shovel onto the pile. “Well, I finished up.” He holds a hand out to Dean to give him a boost out. Dean raises his hand but aborts the move at the last second and stuffs his hands into his pockets. “Better not.” He mutters vaguely. Sam gives him a searching look, but clambers out of the grave without comment.
“You want to do the honors?” Sam asks, and scoops the shovel off the dirt and offers it to Dean.

Dean takes the handle gingerly, and bends over the grave. He digs the shovel under the lip of the coffin and pries it open. It swings open easily on smooth hinges.

“Oh… Jesus…” Dean complains, and rolls his eyes to the sky and slaps a hand over his nose.

Sam grimaces distastefully. “Well, I think we know why Andreas Boehner was seen running around after dying from a heart attack.”

The tax accountant lies decomposing in his coffin. The smell is awful, but so are the maggots wriggling around in the stump where an arm was torn off.

“Seems like a waste of food.” Dean comments dryly, and Sam throws him a bitch face for his trouble. Dean uses the end of the shovel to close the coffin again, and the smell instantly lessens. “So what are we thinking?” He asks as he straightens, dropping the shovel at his feet. “Ghoul breaks off a piece of Mr. Kit Kat Bar for a snack, runs around town with his face, steals and eats other stiffs from the funeral home?”

Sam nods, and wipes his muddy hands on the towel he’d left on the ice chest. “I think we can definitely say this is our kind of weird.”

Dean glances at the mound of dirt and huffs out a groan. “I wish our kind of weird involved less manual labor.”

As far as open and shut cases go, this hunt is basically textbook. They waste a few hours in a shitty diner, and Sam watches as Dean pushes fries around a plate and winces every now and again at some silent battle waged in his mind. The sign on the front says the funeral home closes at 6, but the Winchesters pick the lock and settle in around 5:30 when the joint’s only employee decided to start her weekend early.

They kill time. Sam checks in with hunters, Dean raps his knuckles on the wood of the desk he’s sitting at and absentmindedly watches grace curl under his tanned skin.

Finally, as the clock rolls towards 8 pm, they hear the sounds of a door in the back being jimmied open. The brothers silently unsheathe their machetes and creep towards the hallway. They post up on either side of the doorway, and wait for the unsuspecting ghoul to walk through the door.

Dean catches Sam’s eye and admits under his breath, “It almost feels mean.”

Sam doesn’t roll his eyes, exactly – he’s on the job – but he does shake his head. “What, you want to give the ghoul a free swing?”

Dean mimes swinging his machete through the air. “Oh, I’ll give him a free swing.”

“Shut up, Dean.”

“Hunters are always so loud.” A new voice says, and the ghoul charges from the darkness of the hallway. Sam jukes backwards, and the sharp blade of a knife sinks into the wall where he was standing a half second before.

“This a little more your speed, Dean?” Sam asks ironically, taking another leap back as the ghoul follows up the first swing with a second knife in his other hand.
Dean edges around the table that’s gotten between him and the ghoul, and his machete catches the dim light. “I’m just saying, it almost makes me feel a little guilty when they don’t get a chance to fight back.”

“Usually I don’t like playing with my food.” The ghoul in the guise of Andreas Boehner threatens darkly, “But I’ll make an exception for a pair of idiot hunters.” The ghoul senses Dean’s approach from behind, and with super human speed, dives over an exam table to put some distance between himself and the two Winchesters. Sam hefts his blade, and the first glimmer of fear makes its appearance in the ghoul’s stolen expression.

“See, Sam, this is what I miss about hunting.” Dean says, and pauses casually halfway around the table. “I mean, this guy doesn’t even know who we are - we can throw in some light banter, run around a funeral home after dark. We just don’t get to do this anymore. It’s apocalypse this, end of the world that. Sometimes we just need a low pitch.”

The ghoul launches a heavy metal bowl at Sam, who nearly dodges it. It clips his shoulder and bangs into the wall behind him, clattering noisily to the floor. Even Sam has to smother a smile.

“Winchesters.” The ghoul realizes, and the blood drains from his face.

There’s a rejoinder on Dean’s lips, but he’s within range of the ghoul now. And sometimes – Dean does put business before pleasure. The ghoul is trapped between two exam tables, and nothing but the corner of the room at his back. Dean feigns a slash to the head, but swerves it at the last second to slice the ghoul across the ribs as it jerks back to protect its neck. It hisses in pain and staggers back a step.

“Dean – “ Sam tries to warn, but he’s just a second too late. The ghoul lunges forward with a knife. It may just be a monster of the week – but ghouls are damn fast. Dean raises his arm just in time to catch the blade painfully on his forearm. Sam winces, but the alternative could have been worse.

There’s the light sound of metal shards falling to the floor, but Sam doesn’t have a spare moment to see what broke. Dean roughly shoves the ghoul backwards, and the frumpy form of Andreas stumbles back against the edge of one of the exam tables. Sam is already behind and waiting, and he wastes no time in swinging for the fences. The ghoul’s headless body twitches long after the head’s rolled across the floor, a grisly trail of red marking the path.

Dean sighs, but catches Sam’s expression and wisely doesn’t mention that he wanted to take the kill shot. Sam bends over and wipes his dripping blade on the ghoul’s dress shirt.

“How’s your arm?” He asks, and rolls the ghoul’s corpse towards a stretcher leaning against the wall.

When Dean doesn’t answer, Sam turns and looks up. Dean is already inspecting the arm, but his face is wrinkled with confusion. Sam abandons his attempt to maneuver the body, and is at Dean’s side in a second.

“I think he missed?” Dean says, his voice disbelieving.

Sam frowns, and grabs Dean’s arm. It’s a funeral home and not a morgue, but he’s sure he can find a suture kit to patch Dean up here, and not back in the car. He turns Dean’s arm over, looking for blood. He doesn’t find any.

Dean’s other hand comes up, and pokes a finger through the slice in the jacket material, but his finger comes back clean. They exchange looks, and Dean pulls his arm out of Sam’s grip. Sam watches in
silence as Dean shoves the jacket and flannel sleeve back to reveal an unmarked patch of skin.

“That’s not possible.” Sam mutters, and then louder, “You caught the knife on your arm, how did it not even – “ He pauses when he steps forward into something crunchy. His foot kicks something, and the object slides further into the dark room.

Sam grabs the portable flashlight from his pocket and clicks it on, illuminating the linoleum floor. Shards of something metal litter the ground by Dean’s feet. Sam stares at the metal without comprehending for a moment – there wasn’t any glass in the room to break – and then the beam of his light travels towards the kicked object.

It’s a knife handle.

Sam’s flashlight beam angles back toward the shards on the floor, and Sam’s mind finally clicks the pieces together.

In his head, he can almost see it. The blade of the knife coming down towards his brother, Dean’s arm swinging up defensively to protect his body. The knife, wielded by a supernaturally strengthened monster, swung hard enough to slice through the tough canvas of Dean’s jacket, but before it can gouge a chunk of Dean’s arm – the blade shatters.

On Dean’s arm.

Dean insists he has no idea what happened, and for once, Sam believes him. Dean’s arm apparently smashed a knife to smithereens, but his brother’s hands are still dotted with blisters from the earlier digging. If Dean suddenly developed magic healing powers, it’s definitely not consistent.

Sam wants to talk about it. This is significant. This is up there with you died and came back to life under my hands, but Dean only looks… nervous. Pained. Closed off.

Sam remembers a time when a knife could have broken on Dean’s arm, and Sam never would have heard the end of it. It would have been superhero jokes and knife puns for entire days. Now Dean just leans against the wall by the door and brushes off any of Sam’s questions. Dean’s arm – the one that broke the knife – is hung across his chest unconsciously, Dean’s hand fisted into his jacket.

Sam rolls the ghoul’s corpse onto the stretcher and throws its head between its knees. Finally, Dean comes over to help him raise the stretcher, so they can slide the corpse into one of the body freezers and hopefully buy themselves a few extra hours.

They lift the stretcher easily between the two of them, but before they can drop it onto the extended freezer bed, something goes wrong.

Sam wouldn’t have seen it if he wasn’t already watching Dean. Dean’s halfway through a step when it looks as though his arm seizes. His hand is mostly hidden around the handle, but Sam can see blue electric light illuminate the floor like a strobe, can see the pierce of light shine through the hole in Dean’s jacket.

The stretcher tumbles to the ground as Dean’s right hand drops its load, and the ghoul slides to the floor with a wet thud. Sam is distracted for a half second as the corpse’s head rolls right between his legs like a cheap soccer goal, and by the time he’s looking up again, his brother is holding his arm tight against his chest and is turning to leave the room.

“Dean, wait – “ He tries, but Dean’s already rounding the corner, muttering something about needing
some air.

Sam leaves the corpse without a second thought, and hurries after his brother outside. Dean’s already pushing through the wide double doors and disappearing into the night. Sam picks up the pace, trying to catch up. His hand comes up to push open the door, when pain suddenly sears across the heel of his palm in contact with the door.

He leaps back with half a curse on his lips, and opens his hand under the dim light of the emergency exit sign. The shiny pink of a burn mark smooths the lower half of his palm. He hears thin sizzling, and for a panicked moment, he thinks it’s coming from his hand.

But it’s not. It’s coming from the door.

A small section of the door has warped under intense heat – Sam can see individual ripples in the edge of the door as if someone grabbed it and shoved it open, leaving behind the melted imprints of their fingers.

Panic blossoms in Sam’s throat. He feels the pain in his hand clinically, almost detached, and uses his shoulder to bang open the door currently not sizzling.

It’s dark outside, but not so dark that Sam doesn’t find his brother almost immediately. Dean’s hunched by the Impala trunk, one hand on her smooth bumper to steady himself, the other resting his weight on his knee.

“Dean?” Sam tries, and cautiously approaches his brother from behind. “Dean, what’s going – “ He comes around the side to get a better look at his brother. Dean’s eyes are squeezed shut – there’s no sign that he’s even aware of Sam’s presence – and he looks like he’s trying to hold himself together with pure Winchester grit. Every bare patch of skin is lit up with crisscrossed veins of grace. It looks less like the slow pull of waves, and more like… a disease. Like tendrils worming their way through Dean’s body like a bioluminescent parasite.

“Sam, go.” Dean says through his teeth, eyes still clenched shut.

“Dean, I’m not – “

Dean staggers away from the Impala, but his knees hit the dirt before he’s gotten very far. His back is to Sam now, but Sam can see the leach of light over the collar of his shirt intensify, almost more white than blue. Dean shakes his hand out in front of him like he’s been doing for days, but something in him gives, and he falls forward. His hand shoots out to arrest his fall.

Later, when he’s driving the Impala 20 miles over the speed limit towards the Bunker, Sam will replay the scene over and over in his mind.

Dean’s hand brushes the ground, and there’s no other way to describe it – it splits the ground like an earthquake. Sam is blown back a few feet, and lands heavily on his side, but pulls himself up immediately.

Thick rifts in the earth have rippled out from Dean’s hand. Narrowly missing one of the Impala’s wheels, several fissures crack the earth as far as ten feet away, but the worst part is the light.

Blue crackling energy ignites in the cracks, as if the earth has been electrocuted. Sparks alternatively blue and white snap in the empty air of the rifts, like the end of a live wire. There’s a gentle hum thrumming under the earth. It sounds somehow like the snapping of electricity and the high tenor of angels.
Sam isn’t sure if the ground is stable to walk on, but takes a few cautious steps towards his brother. Dean hasn’t stood, but his shoulders sag with relief. Sam’s hand hovers over Dean’s shoulder, not wanting to accidentally graze him and turn into paste.

Dean senses him and looks up. Neither brother says a word, but they both know that they’re running out of time.

The Impala devours the asphalt as Sam tears down the highway towards Lebanon.

“Did you get a hold of Cas?” Sam asks for the tenth time.

“No, dumbass.” Dean replies for the tenth time. “There’s no service in heaven. At least not with our cell plan.” Dean’s stretched out in the backseat, and would almost look relaxed if it wasn’t for the tightness in his posture, or the way his arms are crossed stiffly across his chest, as if he’s afraid to inadvertently touch something and blow it up.

Which, a few days ago, would have sounded like an insane sentence.

Sam glances in the rearview mirror every thirty seconds. The light under Dean’s skin has improved since he expelled some of the grace back in Junction City, but it’s still visible in the dark. Dean looks up from his phone and catches Sam’s eyes in the mirror. He must see something in Sam’s expression, because he rolls his eyes and drops his phone over the bench seat.

“What – “

But then all 6-plus-feet of Dean Winchester is climbing over the seat into the front. Sam sputters when Dean purposely drags his ass against Sam’s head, and Sam forgets the 99 problems they’ve got on their plate, and shoves Dean off him, yelling, “Dude!”

Dean finally drags himself through the narrow space and settles in the passenger seat. Sam is still half-glaring at him. “What?” The older hunter says, and treats Sam to a patented Dean wink. “You looked too serious up here alone. And you’re going to crash my girl if you keep making cow eyes at me in the mirror.”

Sam groans, and turns his attention back to his mad sprint up the fast lane. He does feel an ounce of stress alleviated with Dean back in the front seat. The back seat is reserved for guests or injuries, and the situation feels less dire with his brother at his side again.

“Who are you texting?” Sam asks, trying to glance at Dean’s phone.

He assumed it was Rowena, but Dean answers without hesitation and without an attempt to hide his screen. “Bobby.”

“You’re texting Bobby? About what?”

Dean taps his phone against his chin thoughtfully, but there’s a resigned look in his eyes as he stares out over the empty highway. “I don’t know. Maybe he can rig something up.”

Sam pulls a face. “What, like a panic room?”

Dean shoots Sam a look that is equal parts withering and exasperated. “No, not a panic room.” He sighs. “I don’t know. The old man – well, our old man – always had a thousand plans for everything. Maybe he can do something with the cuffs.”
Sam has to think about that one for a moment. “The cuffs… the cuffs we made to trap Michael? You think those will work?”

Dean doesn’t say anything, and when Sam sneaks another look, Dean is scrubbing his hand down his face. After the last few days of looking fresh and healthy, the exhausted and strained Dean is back. “I don’t know what will work, Sammy. But I don’t feel like combusting every three days. Fuck, I only own like four things. I don’t want to blow any of my shit up.”

His lame attempt to lighten the mood falls flat. There’re no sounds but the roar of the Impala, and a water bottle rolling around the backseat.

Finally, Sam says it. “We might have to consider a panic room.”

“Fuck off.”

“Dean, I’m serious.”

“Yeah, so am I. I can’t sit with my thumb up my ass in some warded-up prison cell. There’s things I got to do.”

“What things?” Sam snaps, and the Impala drifts a little into the shoulder before Sam can correct course. When Dean doesn’t elaborate, Sam is almost tempted to pull over on the side of the highway and take a swing at his brother. “God dammit, Dean. If you have an idea, or a plan, or whatever – if you know something, and you’re not telling me – “

“Sam,” Dean interrupts flatly. “There’s nothing for you to know right now. And that’s the honest truth.”

They don’t talk for the rest of the drive. Dean pretends to sleep, but Sam sees the busy twitch of his eyes moving under the lids, and sees the painful clench of Dean’s fist against his side.

*Like pressure,* Dean described it. But how much more pressure can Dean take?

Sam swerves the Impala into the garage too fast and almost clips the Impala’s grill on another car. Dean doesn’t even notice, or is too wrapped up in his own thoughts to say anything, and in Dean language, that speaks volumes.

Now that they’re in the lit garage, Dean almost looks worse than when he was shot dead. There’s a gray quality to his skin, like the grace is physically poisoning him now, and not just lurking under the skin. It’s an astonishing change from the Dean that made him breakfast earlier that same day.

“Dean?” Sam says under his breath, and feels some of his anger at his brother melt away as he sees how hard Dean is trying to hold himself together. “Are you okay?”

“I’m not dead.” Dean grunts unhelpfully, and his hand struggles against the door’s latch. Finally, his fingers catch on the handle and he shakily pulls himself out of the car.

Sam yanks open his own door, and jogs around the car to help his brother into the Bunker. Dean shrugs off Sam’s help. The door to the Bunker interior opens, and Jack appears in the crack. When he sees Dean, his eyes widen, and he throws the door open wide.

“Bobby said to go to the War Room.” He instructs softly, like a loud word could detonate the bomb inside Dean.
It’s not a far walk, but Dean still stumbles once. He catches himself on the wall, and Sam feels his heart seize in his chest as he waits for an explosion to follow. But Dean pushes off the wall without incident and stalks ahead of them into the War Room.

Bobby’s waiting for them. He’s surrounded by stacks and stacks of books, and it takes Sam a second to wipe away an image of their Bobby sitting in his study in Sioux Falls, pouring over the details of a hunt.

Bobby’s brows raise under the brim of his hat, and he pushes back from the table easily. “You look like shit on a cracker, boy.”

Dean makes an attempt at a scowl, but it warps into a grimace.

“What have you got, Bobby?” Sam intervenes, and grabs his brother’s shoulder to guide him into a chair. Dean doesn’t argue, and that’s never a good sign for someone who would argue with the sun if it looked at him funny.

Bobby scratches the side of his beard, and Sam can see the answer in the lines of his face. “Honestly, not much. I’ve never heard of grace poisoning, and it’s not in any of the lore.” He lays a hand on the set of angel cuffs they’d used on Michael only days earlier. “And other than for beating your brother to death, these cuffs are worthless.”

Sam can’t even speak for a solid ten seconds. “Worthless? How can they be – they contained Michael long enough for us to get him back to the Bunker, and – “

Bobby frosts him with a look. “Yeah, that’s the problem, genius. They contain the grace. You really wanna slap another layer of lead on your brother and watch him liquify, you go right ahead. I’ll head up to my bunk.”

“Goddammit, Bobby.” Sam says through his teeth, and at the moment, if he could sacrifice the Apocalypse Universe Bobby Singer to get their own Bobby back – the one that actually gave a shit about them, he would do it in a heartbeat. Never mind that Bobby just spent two hours pouring over the lore, trying to come up with a solution. “Do you have anything?” He asks desperately.

Bobby’s eyes meet his, and slowly the rancor drains from the old man’s face. He shakes his head.

“Dean!” Jack cries suddenly, and Sam and Bobby both whip around to face Dean.

Dean is hunched over in the chair, past the point of words or relief. Sam can’t see his face – he can’t see much of anything, grace pours through cracks in Dean’s skin like magma tearing through the earth’s crust. There’s a sudden pressure as if the air’s been electrocuted or they’re seconds away from a lightning bolt crashing into the room. The pressure is followed by an intense high-pitched whine that intensifies until it’s like the sound of a fork dragging across a plate. Sam’s hands snap up to cover his ears, but he feels the sound vibrate in his skull like he’s on the same frequency as angel radio. The pitch sharpens, and Sam’s ears pop as the pressure in the room increases.

He hears Bobby yell his name over the tenor, but he can’t hear anything else other than the strident clamor, and Sam feels the crushing sensation like a heaviness settling in his bones. His knees hit the floor, the piercing uproar of angels tearing holes in Sam’s head.

Sam’s eyes have long since shut to ineffectively block out the light radiating off Dean. Already past the point of what’s physically bearable, the light intensifies, and then –

The room calms.
Sam sucks a breath into frozen lungs, and finds himself on his hands and knees on the floor of the Bunker. He hears the gasping on either side of him from Jack and Bobby, and finally raises his head.

His vision is a wash of orange afterimages, and he blinks stars from his eyes. “Dean?” He asks, and can barely hear himself through the ringing in his ears. He coughs and tries again louder, “Dean?”

His retinas clear away the worst of the sear, and he squints towards the table.

Dean is gone.

Sam feels his heart stutter in his chest, and he pulls himself up groggily to his knees, and then finally to his feet. He turns in a shaky circle, but there’s no sign of his brother.

He yells Dean’s name again, but there’s no response. Sam turns frantic eyes towards Jack, then Bobby.

And if his heart stuttered before, now it stops dead in his chest.

Bobby is prone on his hands and knees at Sam’s side. He looks like shit, and there’s blood dripping from somewhere on the grizzled hunter’s face. But that’s not what causes Sam’s insides to freeze. Bobby’s hand is sliced open with a pocket knife, and syrupy blood splatters smear thickly against the floor.

Bobby’s other hand is slapped bloody onto an angel-banishing sigil.

Chapter End Notes

I never want to reread this chapter again lmao. It's literally twice as long as what I normally churn out, but god, there was no good stopping point until the end.

Also - yes, I know that Jack would never hear Mary picking the lock like two doors away. But I also made a wildly inappropriate dick joke in the middle of a very serious situation, so clearly I don't have the best of judgement. EDIT: Dick joke now gone... congrats to the 35 people that got to read it before I took it out...
Chapter 9

Sam refuses to believe it.

Dean can’t be gone. He’s not an angel. Angel-banishing sigils don’t work on humans. They don’t even work on Jack, and he’s the better part of an angel.

“Dean!” Sam shouts down the hallway, and hears the name echo down empty corridors and bounce back like a slap in the face.

He checks under the table, like Dean’s started an impromptu game of Sardines, and Sam is so desperate to lay eyes on Dean, that he would climb under the table and join his brother in any childish hide-and-seek game Dean wanted to play.

Sam calls Dean’s phone three times, and gets an out of service message. After the third call, he throws his phone viciously at the table, and it bounces off a stack of books and cracks onto the floor.

“Where is he?” Jack asks. His voice is flat, but his face is all distressed edges.

Sam thinks Jack’s talking to him, but it’s Bobby who answers. “Who knows? Wherever angels fuck off to after getting blasted.”

Sam has no recollection of crossing the room, but he suddenly finds himself with hands fisted in the old man’s jacket, and slams him bodily against the wall.

“Jesus, boy, what do you think you’re – “

“What did you do?” He demands, and his ears are still ringing, his eyes are still seeing stars, but his hands are steady and his voice is nitrogen cold.

Bobby seems genuinely shocked that Sam’s resorted to physical violence, and there’s a flicker of discomposure behind the hunter’s face. Sam glares into the hard blue eyes of Bobby Singer, and wants to shatter him like glass, shatter him into a million pieces of Bobby Singer, so he can maybe find their Bobby lying among the wreckage.

“Get your hands off me, Sam.” Bobby says in a low voice, and the fact that he doesn’t move a single muscle is more threatening than a knife at the throat.

Sam’s hands unclench stiffly from Bobby’s jacket, and the older hunter falls back on his heels. Sam stays facing the wall, numb and dizzy, as Bobby steps pointedly around him. “What did you do to him?” He repeats flatly.

“A drip of blood slides from his finger tip and splashes next to the sigil, mixing in with the rest of the blood splatter.

“You know what I did. You’ve probably done it a thousand times.”

Sam turns and sees that Bobby’s moved to stand over the bloody markings. A drip of blood slides from his finger tip and splashes next to the sigil, mixing in with the rest of the blood splatter.

“Dean’s not an angel. And Michael is locked away.”

Bobby turns towards Sam, and his face is a snapshot of disbelief. “Tell me you’re not that stupid.”
Sam’s teeth clench shut with an audible click.

Bobby takes a breath, and wipes at the blood that’s collected under his ear. “After everything that you’ve seen that fool brother of yours do in the last few days, you think he can still pull the human card?”

“That doesn’t make him an angel.”

“Don’t make him human, either.” Bobby glances away from Sam towards Jack, and something like the old Bobby’s empathy passes behind his expression. “Listen,” he says after a long, tense moment. “I got a soft spot for you boys, I do. Maybe not like this world’s Singer had, but you two… you did all right by me and mine. You kept your promise to us. But let me tell you – I ain’t about to get blown to all hell because you’re not willing to see the situation for what it is. If you don’t get a lid on that brother of yours, he’s going to nuke us all.”

Sam doesn’t reply, but his anger drains out of him slowly, replaced by a slow thrum of fear for Dean, and exhaustion for himself.

Bobby seems to see the rigid acceptance in Sam’s posture, because he nods to himself. He glances down at the blood sigil, and then turns towards the hallway with a heavy step. He claps a hand on Jack’s stiff shoulder as he pushes past the Nephilim, and pauses before he disappears into the hallway. His head turns halfway, so Sam can see his face but not his eyes.

“I’ve been here long enough to know that this universe always puts Winchesters first. Eventually, you gotta consider the consequences of that.” And Bobby takes a step around the corner and is gone.

There’s no one left to argue with, but Sam wouldn’t even know what to say if there were. He knows logically that Dean’s life isn’t more important than another’s. That there’s no reason to doom all the inhabitants of the Bunker – and possibly the world – to death by liquification just because Sam doesn’t want to lose his older brother. It’s a ridiculous concept to consider, even harder to put into words. And yet.

And yet, the Winchesters have always chosen family. In this universe, Mary chose John, John chose Dean, Dean chose Sam. And after daytripping to a universe where Winchesters weren’t around to take on the big bads… Sam can’t reconcile the idea that they have a completely negative influence on the world. And sure – they always pay the price. God, they’d all been to hell. They’d all suffered for their mistakes, their selfish decisions. They’d lost a lot along the way – their souls, at times, their lives, their friends. But every decision, every difficult choice they’d made had led them here – to a world where good still had the edge over the dark, and they were still a family, if a little cracked and bruised. So – sure. Sam knows that he can’t chose Dean over the rest of the planet. But if it comes down to it, he knows the choice he’ll make. And they’ll figure it out, like they’ve always done, and always will.

“What are we going to do?” Jack asks softly, like he’s a little afraid to interrupt Sam’s reverie, but also is anxious to do something.

Sam rubs at the ache in his forehead with the palm of his uninjured hand, tries to soothe the fear away, tries to hone in on that calm center that all hunters find. Worrying about what happened to Dean won’t get him back any sooner.

“I guess… we try and figure out where Dean went. Angel-banishing sigils don’t kill angels, unless they’re already close to death.” Sam doesn’t want to voice or consider the possibility that Dean was barely holding himself together, and isn’t technically an angel – no matter how the sigil worked – and that he doesn’t know what the consequences of that will be.
Jack opens his mouth to ask something, but the sound of a phone ringing interrupts. They both turn as one towards Sam’s phone vibrating on the floor. Sam nearly dives to the floor to pick it up. The screen is shattered but the call connects.

“Dean!”

“What happened.” A gravely voice demands. There’s the distant sound of a car horn blaring, and the sound of an engine accelerating.

“Cas?” Sam stammers, and turns wide eyes to Jack.

“Heaven is in an uproar. Is Dean okay?” Cas’ voice sounds exhausted and flat, but Sam’s known the angel long enough to hear the panic settling underneath the gravel. “Michael, did he –“

“Michael is still locked away.” Sam interrupts. He doesn’t have an answer for the other question. “It’s bad, Cas, Michael’s grace is poisoning Dean, and I don’t… we don’t know what to do, and –“

and God, how can he even explain the absolute hell of the last few days? Dean literally tripping backwards out of the veil after getting shot in the gut by one of their own? The poisonous light flaring up under Dean’s skin like the goddamn aurora borealis? The ten-foot crater smoking with electric fire outside a funeral home in Junction City?

Cas curses lowly in a language Sam doesn’t know. “Where is Dean now?”

“He –“ and Sam gestures vaguely around the Bunker, even know Cas can’t see him. “Bobby banished him with an angel sigil."

Instead of the rapid-fire accusations and disbelief he expected to pour from the phone speakers, there’s a weighty silence. Then: “That would explain a lot.”

Sam turns pyretic eyes to Jack, and if he could reach through the phone and shake Cas right now, he would.

“Where. Is. Dean.”

“Somewhere in the Grand Staircase Escalante National Park, we believe.”

Sam pulls the phone to his chest for a painful moment, before exclaiming into the phone, “Dean is in Utah?”

“We believe so. The carvings on Dean’s ribs still block our ability to locate him, but we felt Michael’s grace tear across the sky.”

“What does that even mean, Cas? Angels can sense other angels flying? Since when?”

“It’s more complicated than that. There are so few of us left that any angelic activity leaves ripples behind. And Michael was better about hiding his grace – it’s why it took us a significant length of time to track him to Kansas City.”

Sam runs his hand through unbrushed hair, and thinks about next steps. Hopping on the next plane to Utah sounds like the best plan, but Sam can’t scour the entire National Park. Their best bet is either to wait for Dean to contact them – if he can – or come up with some kind of tracking spell that would bypass the sigils carved into Dean’s bones.

“Where are you now?” Sam asks, as he hears the deep thrum of the engine in Cas’ truck.
“I’m four hours away from Utah. With any luck, I’ll have a better chance of sensing Michael’s grace as I get closer.”

“Can we… not call it that? Please.” Sam asks in a strained voice.

There’s a moment of silence on the other end. “Of course,” agrees Cas kindly.

Sam sighs, and feels a current of relief batter against the wave of stress rattling around in his chest. “Thanks, Cas. Sorry. I know you’re doing what you can. It’s just been… a stressful couple of days.”

“I understand, Sam. I’m sorry as well – I didn’t intend to be gone as long as I have been. The portal to Heaven isn’t at full power, and it took me longer to reach Heaven than I had anticipated.”

“How much longer?”

There’s a sigh on the other end, and Sam hears the gentle ticking of a turn signal. “Several days.”

“What?” Sam had taken Cas’ delay as a good sign – a sign that he had been successful in Heaven in uncovering a solution to help Dean. “But if Dean only disappeared a few minutes ago, and the portal took you days, how are we even talking on the phone right now?”

Cas sounds regretful when he finally answers. “We had to consolidate.”

“Consolidate… Heaven?”

“Let’s just say that some souls are doubling up, and that I owe Naomi about a hundred favors. Now, bring me up to speed.”

Sam runs through the events that Cas has missed as quickly as he can, but he stumbles over the shooting, remembering the last thud of Dean’s heart under his hands, his last plea for Sam to kill him. Cas listens with a silence that ripples with intensity even over the phone, but Sam appreciates that Cas doesn’t interject. Finally, Sam explains Dean’s grace overload, and Bobby’s angel banishing sigil. “It’s getting bad, Cas. Bobby said that Dean is close to nuking the entire Bunker, and as much as I hate to agree with him, he’s right. If he hadn’t banished Dean in time, I don’t know what would have happened.”

Cas is silent for a few moments, and if Sam didn’t hear sounds in the background, he might have assumed that Cas had hung up. “I wish I had better news for you. Naomi has a theory, but stresses that nothing like this has ever happened before. A human shouldn’t be able to hold back the sheer amount of grace that an Archangel possesses – any other human would have died instantly. But Dean is Michael’s true vessel, and he is strong.”

“Okay, so what is Naomi’s theory?”

Cas answers hesitantly, like he doesn’t want to give Sam even a sliver of false hope. “Naomi believes that Michael’s power is overwhelming Dean, and his grace is deteriorating Dean’s body on a molecular level. Unless we are able to find a way to control the grace, Dean will either expire, or weaken to the extent that he will no longer be able to cage Michael. Naomi thinks that if Dean is able to… burn off some of the grace, then it’ll be within a tolerable range for him to suppress the rest.”

Sam and Jack exchange glances. “Burn off… as in – “

“As in, Dean needs to learn to harness Michael’s grace and redirect it. He’s done it before.”
“At the church… fighting Lucifer…” Sam realizes, remembering the splash of wings on a church wall, the strength, the flying. “Oh my god.” Sam breathes, and Jack’s eyes are narrowed and pensive.

“Sam…” Cas interjects cautiously. “I don’t want to give you the wrong idea. Dean can’t flip a switch and learn how to become an angel, especially not one with as powerful as an archangel.”

“He can do it, Cas.” Sam promises, “He’s done it before.”

“I hope you’re right, Sam. But nothing about this is going to be easy.”

Rocky’s Bar. His Bar.

Dean wakes up on the floor of Rocky’s, and his first thought is that he way overpays his once-a-week cleaning crew. The floor is disgusting, and he’s pretty sure he’s sucked four cigarettes of ash into his lungs.

Pamela hired the crew – and despite her well-deserved status as the bar’s number-one bad ass, the psychic is a sucker for a sad story or a pretty face.

Dean scrubs a hand down his face, feeling the beginning of a migraine form between his eyes. Maybe Pamela can –

Pamela, I’m so sorry. You don’t deserve this.

Yeah. I don’t. I told you I didn’t want anything to do with this. Do me a favor? Tell that bastard Bobby Singer to go to hell for ever introducing me to you two in the first place.

Bang.

Dean sits up from the floor so fast he can feel the blood drain from his head. Which – as the headache starts to fade – he knows is impossible. Because he’s already in his head.

“I was wondering when you’d drop in again.” Michael’s smooth voice gibes from behind him, slightly distorted through the freezer walls.

“You know me.” Dean says, and rubs a palm against the fading tightness in his chest. “Give me a pillow and a bar floor and I’m home.”

He pulls himself to his feet slowly, his back still to the walk-in. He’d avoided the manifestation of the bar since his accident with Dominic, too afraid to come back and see the walls of the bar breaking off into emptiness, see the lights turning off one-by-one. Locking Michael away was always just a finger in the dike, and Dean’s too afraid to see the flood on the other side.

But the bar seems fine. He was worried for nothing. Dean turns to face Michael, and freezes.

There’s a long crack stretching from the hinge on the freezer walk-in to midway in the window. It crackles slightly in the edge, blue sparks flitting in and out. It’s not big. And it’s not wide. But it’s a crack in the cage of the most dangerous being in two universes.

Michael steps up to the window, and the crack distorts his image, splitting his face into uneven halves. His bifurcated smile looks jagged and feral. “Nothing to say? Disappointing.”
Dean’s jaw might as well be wired shut. He takes a few cautious steps closer. He doesn’t want to ask Michael anything. He doesn’t trust the lies that drip from the Archangel’s mouth like venom.

Dean forces in a steadying breath. Okay. So, there’s a crack. A crack is nothing. The cage holds, Michael can’t wriggle through. Dean can handle that.

Michael seems to read the thread of his thoughts. “You can’t just pull out the scotch tape here, Dean. You know what a crack is?” He pauses to see if he can pull an answer out of the silent hunter. “A crack is a sign of something broken.”

“That’s the best you could come up with after I leave you to stew for a few days? Did you at least do something useful, like clean the keg lines?” Dean pushes out some Winchester snark, but he’s not fooling either of them.

“You’ve been too afraid to come back. Too afraid of what you might see.” Michael continues, like Dean never spoke. “But you know what they say about cracks…” and he raises his fist towards the glass. Dean almost expects him to beat his fist bloody against the window, but all Michael does is tap the crack lightly with the tip of his finger. A small puff of electric blue exhales from the crack, like blowing dust off a surface. Michael smiles. “Things always tend to slip out of them.”

Dean wakes up dusty, and almost thinks he’s back inside the bar. But it’s darker, and he can smell the musty cold of wet rocks, and feel sharp edges jabbing into his back.

His eyes are dry and unfocused when they open, and all he can see is a hollowed-out patch of the dawn sky. He squints, and slowly the edges come in clearer. Dean’s lying in a hole. His hands scrape against stone like sandpaper, and he pulls himself unsteadily to his feet.

There’s a soft illumination in the small crater Dean’s lying in, and he doesn’t need to look at his hands to know that there’s still some grace lurking under his skin. But he does feel a lot better than he did in Junction City, or the Bunker, which is the last place he remembers being. He doesn’t remember much, other than a long drive spent trying to physically hold the pieces of himself from vibrating off the shelf. He remembers splitting open in the Bunker, before a feeling like getting donkey punched in the chest, and the long moments of earthly freefall.

Dean reaches for the edge of the crater a few inches over his head and yanks himself out. He dusts powder off his knees as he straightens, and when he finally sees where he is, he freezes.

He’s on Mars.

The easy trickling of water quickly ends that insane theory, but Dean is still struck dumb.

Tall, rippling sandstone cliffs rise up on either side of Dean, like he woke up in a crater, inside of a crater. It’s still dark, but with the slow edge of the sun brightening the sky, the grays of the cliffsides tinge towards spectrums of tans and reds. Dean swallows thickly past the dust coating his throat. A good-sized creek runs through the center of the gorge Dean stands in, but he can see the carved river bed that a more powerful force has left behind. He is definitely not in Kansas.

So how did he get here?

Dean pulls his cell phone out of his pocket. The screen is cracked, and it’s lined with dust, but it’s still usable. He thumbs his brother’s name and holds the phone to his ear. It clicks a few times, before giving him a call failed message. Dean curses and jams the worthless thing back into his pocket.
“Not a lot of cell service in these canyons.” A dry voice says from behind him, and Dean nearly falls head first into his crater.

Billie lounges comfortably on one of the many slabs that’s fallen from the porous cliffside, and she watches him without a change in expression. There’s the long handle of her scythe in one hand, though the blade is hidden behind the boulder, and her other hand holds a whetstone.

Dean recovers quickly. “You actually need to sharpen that mother, or are you just doing it for the drama?”

Billie’s expression doesn’t twitch. Dean blinks and suddenly the scythe and tool have disappeared. Billie steps lightly from the sandstone boulder, and walks past Dean towards the small creek.

“Death, he always liked _people_. He liked cities, busy places.” Billie spots something on the ground, and bends over to scoop it up. Dean can’t see well in the dark, but it looks like she’s plucked a crushed beer can from the dried river bed. She holds it in her hand without expression, and then balances the can on another fallen boulder. “My whole existence as a reaper, people were always just a job. I’d come to places like this, empty and desolate, to see something without humanity. Without that need of purpose that humans always need to imbue into everything.”

Dean feels a twinge in his back as he takes a step closer to see the curve of Billie’s face in the dawn light. “If you hate humans so much, why are you trying to help me save them?”

Billie doesn’t look at Dean, but her smile is blinding in the dim light. “I like my job.” She says cryptically, and Dean suddenly remembers pizza and iced tea with the previous incarnation of Death.

Billie kicks a rock, and it skitters over the stones to land in the creek with a muted plunk. “In one of the early expeditions, Jacob Hamblin stumbled across the Escalante River – this river, Dean –” she adds, though there’s no way she saw Dean’s confused expression from where she’s standing, “– and thought that he was at the Dirty Devil River.” Now she does turn, and settles her dark, ageless eyes on the hunter. “Can you imagine a world so vast, that you can mistake two powerful rivers 200 miles away from each other?” Dean gives the creek a skeptical glance, but wisely chooses to keep his mouth shut. “I’m not helping you just for humanity, Winchester. There’s life and death in everything – in a river, in a stone. And what Michael wants to accomplish… it’s worse than death. It’s nonexistence.”

“Thanks for the hallmark speech, Billie, but so far, all you’ve given me is a book written mostly in gibberish, and a lead on a witch that says she has no clue how to track down the Four Horsemen.”

“Tell Rowena to return to the Bunker. She’ll understand what to do once she has the book.”

Dean sighs. “Rowena and spell books. That’s never gone wrong for us before.”

“Don’t be stupid, Dean. It’s not a spell book. It’s a tracking spell. To find the other Horsemen.”

“Can’t you just tell me where they are? You…. you’re a Horseman. You’re Death. You telling me that you don’t know where the rest of your equestrian club is?”

There’s a twitch of irritation in Billie’s expression. “I can’t directly give you their locations, Dean. It’s against the rules. That book you have stashed away like a dirty little secret under your vintage porn collection is a small piece of me – of Death. With a powerful enough source, Rowena will be able to use it to find the others.”

“What do you mean, _source_? You didn’t mention anything like that, just that I needed to get Rowena.”
Billie gives Dean a withering look. “Do you think the reincarnations of the Horsemen are as stupid as the last boy’s club? They’re warded up to the nines, Dean. Michael is even more powerful than Lucifer was the first go-around, and Lucifer wasn’t even wearing his lucky tux to prom, like Michael is now.”

Dean pulls a face. He almost prefers angel condom, thank you very much. “So, what, then?”

“You’ll need something extremely potent to power the spell. Something that can break through all the warding. Kinda like all that archangel grace zipping around in that sack of cells of yours.”

Finally, some good news. “You’re telling me that I can power the spell with Michael’s grace?”

“You could,” Billie agrees, “if you wanted to widen the crack in Michael’s cage. Oh yeah.” She adds, seeing Dean’s shocked expression. “I may have taken a little peek. Nice digs, by the way.”

Dean almost thanks her for the compliment. What a weird fucking day. “So, let me get this straight. We have one chance to end this story right. And you’re on board for that. Pop Michael into Lucifer’s Cage. And we need Rowena, a tracking spell, the rings of the Four Horsemen. And now we need Archangel grace to power the spell, but I can’t use the grace of the only archangel that’s currently still alive? Maybe I’m missing something in translation here, Billie, because that sounds like a stupid fucking plan.”

“You’ll figure it out. Can’t give away too much of the story.” Billie replies, with that infuriating blank expression of hers.

Dean rubs his palm against his sternum, trying to ease the aching tightness that seems to have settled in his chest to stay. “Well, then thanks for spinning me around in a circle on square fuckin’ one. Can you at least give me a boost back to the Bunker?”

Billie smiles, as if she’s taking a perverse pleasure from the situation. “Sorry, Dean. My pale horse only seats one. There’s a Ranger Station about two miles that way – guess I can give you a little preview of the story.”

Dean glances over his shoulder at the direction Billie has pointed towards. “Oh, very funny. We’re doing that now, are we – “ But when he looks back over his shoulder, Billie is gone. “Absolutely fuckin’ typical.” Dean mutters under his breath. He pulls his phone out of his pocket one more time, and sees he still doesn’t have service.

“Guess I’ll just walk then!” Dean yells, even though there’s no one around.

Jamming his cold fingers into his pockets, he takes a few steps towards where Billie indicated the Ranger Station was. He pauses, and takes a second to watch the early morning sun breathe her light into the canyon. He groans in the back of his throat, and takes a few steps back towards the crater. He pockets the crushed beer can and finally, begins to make his way out of the gorge.

Sam’s phone vibrates against the table, and he picks it up before the first ring is finished.

“Dean?”

“Hey Sam.”

“Jesus Christ, Dean, are you okay?” Sam pushes off the table, and stands from his chair. As if Dean is really just in the next room.
“Yeah, I’m okay. Got seven pounds of dirt in my ass crack and probably have friction burn from skidding across state lines, but I’m good, Sam.” There’s the sound of a corded phone being dragged across a desk. “Any chance you’ll be swinging into Utah any time soon? Asking for a friend.”

“Cas is already on his way. Apparently, you getting angel-sigil blasted pings on angel radar.”

“Cas is back?” And Sam has to smile at the hope in his brother’s voice.

“Yeah, Cas is back. And apparently he has a plan.”

Sam can’t see Dean, but can feel the weight of relief in his silence, in his slow exhale. “That’s… really good to hear, Sammy. I gotta go, the rangers are on my six. Think they’re curious why an attractive devil like myself is pulling himself out of a canyon at six in the morning. You got a pen? Text Cas my 20.”

It’s mid-morning by the time Cas’ trucks rolls into the rangers’ parking lot. Dean’s leaning against the outside wall nursing a cup of coffee one of the rangers shoved into his hands, but the warm liquid splashes uncomfortably in his empty stomach.

Cas shuts the engine off, but Dean’s already dumping the rest of the coffee on the gravel. He just wants to get out of here and get back to the Bunker.

One of the rangers must have heard the truck pull up, because the storm door bangs open behind him.

“This your ride?” Ranger Williams asks, and holds his hand out for the empty mug.

“Sure is.” Dean answers shortly. Cas yanks open his door, and meets them halfway. His eyes are pensive and concerned as they scan Dean. Dean’s shoved his hands into his pockets, but he knows that the flicker of grace is visible to anyone looking for it.

“Ranger Williams.” The ranger greets Cas, and extends out a hand. Cas studies it for a moment, before returning the introduction. “Weird day out there, eh? I’ve seen some weird’uns in the park – but it was like an entire light show in the sky last night.”

“Really.” Cas says, clearly not wanting to engage with the Ranger. Dean is equally anxious to leave.

“Yeah sir. Tried to get it on camera, but I left my phone in the lodge. My wife and I went to Alaska a few years ago, and those Northern Lights… there ain’t nothing like them. But this looked more like… sideways lightning… just amazing. Surprised you didn’t see it camping out there, Mr. DeYoung.”

Dean doesn’t reply to the comment, but pats the ranger on the shoulder with an air of departure. “Well, thanks for lending me your phone, Ranger. Gotta get going.”

Ranger Williams nods, but seems distracted still. “Like an act of God.” He mutters, peering up into the sky. He pulls himself out of his reverie as Dean and Cas cross back towards the truck. “You take care!”

Dean holds a hand up in good bye and clammers heavily into the truck. The moment that Cas fires up the engine and swings the truck out of the empty parking lot, Dean sags boneless against the seat.

“Fuck me, it’s been a long couple of days. How’ve you been? Sam told me Heaven is all slow lane
these days.” Dean pauses and knuckles his brow. “He also said the angels might be able to solve this grace poisoning schtick. He explained a little of it, but I guess I’m not entirely following.”

Cas glances at Dean as he angles his car off the dirt path and onto the paved road. There’s a beat of silence, and Dean reflects on how far he and Cas have come in terms of transportation. There used to be a time when Cas could fly Dean halfway around the world with a brush of fingers. Now the grounded angel has to fill up gas tanks and use turn signals.

“Naomi believes that if you learn to better control the grace, you’ll be able to burn enough of it off to the point that your body will no longer be ill-effected by the grace.”

Dean thinks about that. “Kinda sounds like you’re giving me my Hogwarts letter, here, Cas.”

“I know for a fact you’ve never seen those movies.”

“It seemed like the thing to say.” Dean replies slowly, thinking. “That’s what you’re saying though, right?”

“That’s what I’m saying.”

“I’m not an angel, Cas.”

“I know that.”

“I don’t know how to control grace.”

“I know.”

Dean sits in silence, and watches the landscape slip by through the window.

“Sam indicated that you seemed to have a grasp on Michael’s abilities when you were rescuing Jack and himself from the church. And I saw you fly away myself.”

Dean drums his fingers against his knee. “I don’t like giving the guy credit, but Michael did help jumpstart a lot of that.”

“But you still did it. You’ve done it before. Sam and I believe that you can do this, Dean. And Jack and I – we can help you.”

Dean nods slowly at his reflection in the glass. “This still doesn’t… solve the Michael problem.”

“No.” Cas agrees, and glances at Dean’s profile. “But it’s what we need to focus on right now.”

For right now. And Dean almost wants to reveal the plan to Cas. Wants to tell him all about the Cage, about Billie, and Rowena, and the Four Horsemen. Cas has thrown his chips in with Dean’s for years, has gone along with any number of Hail Mary plans. But Dean needs a little more time to think about all the rest. He can’t do this alone, but maybe it needs to start that way.

“Cas, let’s say this doesn’t work, and the grace keeps spilling out. Can we… take it out? Can we drain it some other way?”

“What, physically?”

“Yeah. I’ve seen you and plenty of other angels get your grace sliced out of you. Uh, no offense.” He adds, seeing the expression Cas tosses his way. “Can we just… drain it out of me?” He knows what Billie said, but doesn’t see how else they’re going to find archangel grace if not from him.
“Dean,” Cas exclaims, visibly agitated, “it’s not a pressure valve. Doing that could kill you. And I’m not just saying that because it’s dangerous. I mean it will actually, properly, kill you.”

“Alright, Cas.” Dean says, trying to sound agreeable. Cas shoots him another worried look, but Dean keeps his expression mild. It’s a good thing they have a long car ride ahead of them. Because Dean has a lot to think about.

Chapter End Notes

Not a ton of action in the chapter, but it's kind of the transition into the next part of the fic, and you know me - I always like to beat you over the head with establishing groundwork. Also full disclosure - I wrote the beginning of this fic while decently intoxicated so it's a little rough, but close enough to what I wanted that I didn't see how to rewrite it. (finger guns)

Thanks for reading <3
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I don't get it. Why can't we use the same toothbrush? We use the same soap.

That's different. The toothbrush has been in my mouth.

Okay… but next time you're in the shower, think of the first place you're washing, and the last place I washed.

Garth laughs so hard, he nearly slaps the laptop off its precarious perch on the nightstand. He’s still laughing - missing the entire next scene of the show - as the cell door screeches open slowly.

Sam walks into the room, balancing a tray and looking a little harried. Garth taps a finger on the space bar, and the campy guffaws of a laugh track pause mid-hysteria.

Sam lowers the tray with Garth’s meal onto the end of the bed, and peers over the werewolf’s shoulder at the screen. “Are you watching Friends?” He asks.

“Damn tootin’. I love this show, man. I am such a Joey.” Garth pauses, and squints up at the tall hunter looming over him. “You’re a Monica.”

Sam’s face creases into a bitch face, but he doesn’t argue, and Garth takes that as reluctant agreement.

Sam shakes his head. “How are you feeling? You know you don’t need to stay down here, right?”

Garth nods, sobering up. “I know, Sam. I was feelin’ better a few days ago, but yesterday… I don’t know. It felt… hot.”

Sam’s brows pull together. “What felt hot? Michael’s grace?”

“I mean, I guess so.” Garth rubs at his chest. “If I focus, I can feel it zippin’ around in there. It’s like a pep in my step. But sometimes, it feels like someone turned up the volume or something…”

Sam’s still frowning. “And this happened yesterday, specifically?”

“And a few days ago.” Garth admits. “I didn’t want to worry anyone, seeing’s as how’s I’m already in the slammer.”

But Sam’s stopped listening, and Garth thinks he looks just like his Aunt Gemma when she’s putting together the last pieces of a puzzle. “How’s Dean? He still bunking down with Michael?”

Sam pulls himself from his thoughts. “Uh, yeah. Yeah, we haven’t really… figured out what to do about that yet.”

“Well, if I can help, just give me a holler. I’m enjoying the free Netflix, but I was a hunter, too, Sam. I can pound books as well as the next guy. Even better, if you can get me an espresso machine down here.”

Sam actually laughs, and scrubs a hand down his face. “Thanks, Garth. I’ll keep that in mind.” He taps his fingers against his thigh for a moment, contemplative. “Well, I’ll let you get back to it.” Sam
says finally.

“See you later, Monica.”

Sam’s answering groan follows him out the door.

Sam takes the steps slowly back to the War Room. He caught a couple of hours of sleep last night, when Cas and Dean were finishing their drive back to the Bunker, but they weren’t restful. He needs to sleep – really sleep, and find a way to actually turn his brain off. It just seems that every time he closes his eyes, a new problem springs up.

It’s been easier since Bobby’s return from Hibbing – he’s taken over the bulk of managing and coordinating the hunters. They were always his people first, and Sam’s a little relieved to have scraped off a little of the mess on his plate. He can’t split his time evenly between his brother and the hunters, and it’s not fair to either party.

He hears his brother’s voice as he approaches the entry of the Bunker, “- swear to God, if you use a color to describe this again, I’m gonna put my head through a wall.”

Sam turns the corner, and sees his brother with Cas and Jack, all of whom are fighting varying levels of frustration. Dean’s seemed a little better since returning from Utah, but Sam can tell that Dean is trying to juggle too many problems, and is struggling to keep them all in the air.

“Dean,” Cas tries, and his low voice is equal parts patience and strain, “you won’t be able to conceptualize these abstractions unless you start thinking like an angel.”

Dean’s hands clench on the table, and a pulse of frustration tightens his jaw. “Oh, great advice, Mr. Feeny, your teaching skills are just A1. Any other Angel 101 tips you got for me?”

Cas’ face tightens, and he answers acerbically, “Yes, how is your Enochian?”

Dean opens his mouth to say something most likely bitchy, when his phone rings in his pocket. He doesn’t take his eyes off Cas as he pulls the phone out of his pocket. His face smooths into an impassive mask as he checks the number. “One sec.” He says, and pushes away from the table.

Sam watches as Dean crosses from the War Room into the Archives, far enough away that they can’t hear him, but still within sight, so they can’t sneak into hearing range. Sam takes a heavy seat next to Cas.

“You know it’s not you he’s frustrated with, right?” Sam asks in a low voice, eyes still on his brother. Dean’s posture is falsely relaxed as he talks quietly into the phone.

Cas sighs. “Yes, I’m aware. I didn’t consider how difficult it would be to explain some of the more discursive and Gordian concepts of grace.”

Dean’s back turns towards them as he paces in the other room. “Come on, Cas, you remember what it was like to be human. You can’t compare the two experiences.”

When Cas replies, his voice is tilting towards discouraged. “If Dean doesn’t understand the basic concepts and experiences of what it is to be an angel, then he won’t be able to internalize the processes that – “

“But why does he?” Jack asks suddenly, and both Sam and Cas turn towards the Nephilim. “When I
lost all my abilities, there wasn’t a handbook for being human. I just… had to figure it out. Bobby trained me, and I learned how to fight. Maybe we don’t need to teach Dean the concepts of being an angel. Maybe he just needs to do it.”

Cas doesn’t say anything, but his brows narrow thoughtfully as he stares past Jack. “Dean’s always been a hands-on learner.”

“We learned most of what there is to learn about hunting while on-the-job.” Sam agrees. “Maybe it’s worth a shot, Cas.”

Cas nods contemplatively.

“You fellas look like you finally realized that Inception is actually a terrible movie.” Dean suddenly says from behind them, and Sam hadn’t even realized that Dean had reentered the room.

“Who was that?” Sam asks, trying to not let irritation at his brother’s poorly kept secrets slip into his tone.

Dean meets Sam’s gaze steadily. “Charlie.”

“Charlie.” Sam repeats.

“Yep. I told her if she ever made it to Northern Washington to let me know. I know a couple of good bars up there.”

Sam almost shakes his head. Dean’s a good liar, but Sam isn’t stupid. Dean wouldn’t need to keep his bar preferences a secret on the other side of the room.

Dean seems to sense something in Sam’s mood, because he gives him an almost nervous look, and then turns back to Cas too casually. “Alright, Cas. Back to… I don’t know, how the soul is puce colored or something.”

“Actually,” Cas says, ignoring Dean’s dig, “Jack made a point about how maybe we don’t need to get into the theoretical side of things.”

“Oh, really.” Dean says flatly, and turns his gaze onto the younger man. “And where were you in my 10th grade physics classes?”

“Maybe we should start with having you simply…” Cas struggles to find the right words, “sense the grace inside of you.”

Dean gives them a skeptical look. “If that’s all I have to do, then this is going to be a cake walk. I can’t not feel that stuff swimming around in there.”

Cas drums his fingers on the table and stares at Dean like he’s trying to put himself into Dean’s circumstances. Sam appreciates Cas’ efforts, and knows it can’t be easy for the angel to have to picture the situation in reverse of what he had to deal with a few short years ago.

“Maybe…” Jack says hesitantly, “maybe don’t focus on the grace. Maybe try and separate it.”

“Separate it.” Dean repeats, but not unkindly.

“Yeah.” Jack adds, as his idea seems to settle, “Don’t just feel the grace. Try and separate it from… from everything else.”
“Like isolate it?” Sam asks, and starts to see where Jack is going with this.

“Yeah, isolate – that’s good.” Jack agrees. “Now that I don’t have most of my grace, I can… feel the spaces where it used to be. Maybe you just need to focus on what’s new. Try and separate it from the rest of yourself. Does that make sense?”

Dean is watching Jack thoughtfully. “Yeah. Actually it does. Okay… focus on what’s new…”

Dean slaps his hands on his thighs like he’s knocking excess energy out of his body, and he closes his eyes self-consciously. Cas and Sam exchange glances, and watch as Dean concentrates.

A few minutes go by. Dean squirms in his chair for the first few moments, but seems to find his center, and steadies himself. His face is pinched together, like he’s concentrating deeply on something. Sam watches Cas and Jack as much as he watches his brother. He can tell that Cas wants to say something, but doesn’t want to interrupt Dean’s concentration. Sam appreciates that he doesn’t interject, understanding that Cas knows Dean well enough by now to know that sometimes, Dean knows how his own mind works better than anyone else.

A few minutes into his self-reverie, Dean suddenly jerks, and his right-hand curls into a fist so tight that Dean must have drawn bloody crescents into his fist. Sam’s about to intervene, when Dean relaxes, and Sam leans hesitantly back into his chair.

Another minute goes by, and suddenly Jack and Cas start from the table like they were shocked with a Taser. Dean’s eyes fly open and there’s a flash of blue in the depths of his eyes before they settle back to green. It startles Sam, but a smile slowly splits Dean’s face. “I think we’re in business, boys.”

“Okay… focus on what’s new…” Dean says slowly, and shuts his eyes.

It takes a few moments for him to settle, and not feel especially ridiculous. For a breathless moment, Dean almost expects one of them to push him over in the chair. But he hears nothing but silence and the sound of his own steady breathing.

For days now, he’s felt that tightness in his chest. It’s something new, and he’s always pictured the grace as something like… a blockage. Something physical. But if any of Cas’ nonsense angel lessons have actually taught him anything, he knows that grace isn’t just a physical power. It’s drawn from some internal well, like a soul.

Dean’s never had much experience with his own soul. Sam’s lost his, Jack’s tapped his like a keg. But Dean’s soul has always been largely left alone. But if grace is anything like a soul, then Dean knows it’s not just a physical phenomenon.

Dean turns his focus inward, and the ambient sounds of the Bunker fade to nothing. He opens his eyes, and finds himself in nothingness. But he doesn’t panic – not yet. He’s made enough day trips into that cordoned off center of his mind in the guise of Rocky’s Bar to feel that same sense of detachment, and he knows that he’s successfully visualized his own mind space. Maybe Cas was onto something with all that “conceptualization” nonsense he was going on about. Dean just needed a way to experience it for himself.

Dean turns in a circle, but it’s as if he hasn’t moved at all – everything is empty darkness. Find what’s new, he directs himself.

And it’s hard. It’s really, really fucking hard. He’s tried so hard to push away the sensations of grace boiling over in his cells - like a sponge soaking up too much water. He’s rubbed at the grace piling
up in his chest like it’s a physical pain – which it is, but only because he lets it be. Now he needs to not only acknowledge it, but find it.

Dean… leans into it. He feels two halves of himself, one sitting at the table in the Bunker, and the other version of himself awake in his mind. He feels the physical and mental versions of himself connected, but also feels them as distinct. The physical version of himself pulses with a sick energy, like a pipe not fully connected, and spewing out an overflow of electric blue voltage.

He follows it back to the source, and feels the slow tug of it from the depths of himself, like another pocket of space next to his soul. A room at the center. He blinks, and he’s there. In that dark place inside of him, golden and blue waves rope over his head, under his feet, all around him. He looks, sees the thundering power in each twisting column.

It’s pieces of himself, in a way that makes sense to him. Sources of self, founts of psyche. He sees the twisting gold of his own soul, and it roils in on itself like contained combustion – energy and explosions in the heart of a star. And then the azure slow-moving, but steady and vast power of grace – something that doesn’t belong to him, but is still winding alongside the gold, slow currents of Michael’s power – pinched off from the trapped archangel.

If he looks closely, he can see dead connections. Foggy, dull red pillars – so dark they’re almost brittle black. Curious, Dean reaches out a hand to the closest one to drag his fingers across the cold exterior, watching wisps of it break apart and float away. The moment that his fingers connect, it feels like his arm has been stabbed, and his brain’s been dunked in acid.

Bloodlust erupts in his head like a contact high, like all his restraint and inhibitions have been ripped out of him like a snapped tendon. His right arm burns hot like seared flesh, and he opens black eyes to see the bright pulse of addictive pain light up under his skin, and he sees the Mark of Cain – his Mark – flare with bloody reprisal. And part of the thing that’s left of Dean finds a sick sense of peace with that – sees a path where he can let go and not worry about anything except for himself and baser instincts.

No.

Dean’s thrown back from the deadened pillar as a sudden golden force smashes him away. He stumble to a gasping halt, and even though he can’t really feel anything physical – he feels like he’s just fought a long and exhausting battle. “Shit.” He mutters quietly, but when he looks back down at this arm, the skin is smooth and unscarred. He doesn’t know which deadened pillar he’s touched, all the columns of power shift around like they’re caught in a current. He shivers, but finally, the scars that the Mark of Cain has left in him fade back into background noise.

There are others, though. He approaches another faded pillar, but doesn’t make a move to touch the desaturated purple murk. Muted words whisper past his ears, and he hears the lilting tones of a red-headed witch: \textit{You won’t carry the bomb. You’ll be the bomb.} And he can remember the sensation of being charged up with hundreds and thousands of souls, suffocating and dimming the light of his own.

He watches the sluggish pillar blow away into the darkness, just one more scar he has to carry.

But he’s here for a different reason.

The bright golds and blues twist away into the emptiness, like he’s standing in the center of a nebula, watching as cosmic dust flies off into infinity. From the gold of his soul, he senses… a familiar chaos. From the outside, it looks like a membrane barely suppressing a continuing explosion, but he feels the familiarity of recognizing a part of yourself for what it is – unchangeable and present.
Michael’s blue is steadier, and slower. It shivers with an iridescence that’s more muted than the
blinding gold of Dean’s soul, but still ripples with power that Dean knows he’ll never be able to
control or suppress for long. Seeing it threaded through his own self is almost sickening, like another
part of himself has been corrupted.

But Dean pictures the smug son of a bitch currently squatting rent-free in his second-hand freezer
walk-in, and knows that sometimes you have to accept the bad to fight off the worst.

And it’s ridiculous, and Cas won’t have any idea what he’s talking about, if he has to explain it. But
Dean pictures himself as the carburetor in the Impala – the conduit that mixes fuel and air in the
engine into the perfect ratio for internal combustion. He doesn’t need to control the fuel - the grace -
he just needs to find the right balance to keep one from overwhelming the other.

It’s partly a visual experience for Dean, and it’s why all of Cas’ deep introspective conceptualizations
would never have worked for him. Dean’s head tilts up and he watches as pillars of blue and gold
twist around each other – never touching, but moving together in tandem.

Something clicks, and Dean feels the grace in his chest break down. It doesn’t disappear, it doesn’t
go away. But now it feels more evenly distributed, more under control.

Dean opens his eyes.

He feels the warmth of grace snap behind his eyes, but he doesn’t feel the flicker of fear or
annoyance that usually comes from the involuntary waver of grace under his skin.

Jack and Cas both have startled expressions, and Dean wonders if they can sense some change in
him that he can’t. Sam looks more concerned, but Dean feels an easy smile split his face. “I think
we’re in business, boys.”

There’s a small bubble of pain in his fist, and Dean unclenches his hand on the table. Thin slices in
the skin look red and angry, but before their collective gaze, the bloody crescents in Dean’s palm
smooth over, like they were never there to begin with.

Dean whistles through his teeth lowly, and Sam grabs Dean’s hand and pulls it inches in front of his
own eyes. “Did you do that on purpose?” He demands.

Dean yanks his arm back. “No.” He flexes his hand, and watches the play of grace under the skin.
He pulls one of the threads inside himself, feels the grace coil in that deep pocket of himself instead
of splashing through the cracks. The subdermal sickly light dims until it fades completely, and Dean
is left staring at an entirely normal-looking hand.

“Holy shit.” Sam breathes, and is staring at Dean like he hasn’t taken a good look at his brother in a
long time. “Is that… is that it?”

Cas answers Sam’s question instead of Dean. “No. Somehow Dean’s gotten a better handle on
suppressing Michael’s grace, but the threat remains.”

“So…” Sam asks, and looks like he’s going to regret asking his next question out loud. “Can you…
do angel stuff?” Cas almost looks offended.

“No, Sammy, I can’t do angel stuff.” He glances down at his healed hand. “At least not on purpose.
But I got a lid on the grace for now.” Just wait until he throws that in Michael’s face. “I’m like my
own carburetor.”
“You’re like… oh my God.” Sam says, and has to rest his head in his hands for a moment.

Dean flexes his hand for a few seconds, and it feels almost numb without the almost constant buzz under the skin. There’s a tickling sensation in the back of Dean’s mind, like a feather brushing against the back of skull. He turns in his chair and squints in the direction of the empty hallway.

“Dean?” Sam asks, but Dean hardly hears him.

Dean frowns, and feels something like a vibration in that newfound center of himself. Like there’s a piece of that power echoing from outside of him, like ripples colliding into each other.

Dean shivers, and pushes the chair back from the table. “Dean.” Sam repeats, louder this time, and Dean finally looks up.

“What?”

Sam gives him a look like Dean’s about to walk off the edge of a cliff. “What are you doing?”

Dean’s already taken a few steps towards the hallway. “I just want to check something out.”

He can almost see the looks being exchanged behind his back, but he’s already stepping around the corner. He hears Sam say something in a quiet voice to Jack and Cas, and then hears a solitary beat of footsteps following him down the hallway.

Sam catches up quickly. “You’re kinda freaking me out here, Dean.”

Dean suppresses the urge to groan out \textit{braaains}, but he’s too wired to make jokes right now. “I just feel something.”

“Feel \textit{what}?”

“I don’t know yet.”

Sam exhales heavily. “What could go wrong?” He mutters under his breath, but dutifully follows his older brother.

Sam is beginning to regret asking Jack and Cas to stay behind, because if Dean is about to go supernova, Sam has no idea what’s coming. Watching Dean wrangle control over the grace bubbling inside of him was a relief. But… if it wasn’t for the fact that Sam was still breathing, he would almost be inclined to believe that Michael had broken free. And was just playing the part.

Sam’s eyes slide sideways, and he sees the rigid set of Dean’s jaw, the curiosity and confusion blended in his eyes, and \textit{knows} that it’s not Michael. But still. Sam doesn’t like the idea of Dean poking around in his head when there’s an archangel under lock and… well, lock and screwdriver.

“Can you at least tell me what you \textit{think} you’re feeling?” Sam asks cautiously.

Dean finally looks at Sam. “Oh my God, Mr. Twenty Questions. I don’t know. It feels like… Michael.”

“Wait, I’m sorry, \textit{what}?” Sam sputters, and finally grabs Dean by the shoulder and swings him around.

Dean gives Sam an irritated look, and bucks Sam’s hand off his shoulder. But he doesn’t make an
attempt to continue down the passageway. “It feels like whatever part of Michael is inside of me, is also down there.” And he hooks a thumb over his shoulder at the empty hallway.

Sam is in no way following this conversation. “Like… grace?” He finally asks.

“Sure, whatever, maybe.” Dean acknowledges, and starts padding down the hallway again. Sam shakes his head and follows.

They pass the back-up Archives, the living quarters where the hunters bunk down. They walk right past the server room, the armory, and a couple of storage areas. Sam’s brows furrow the deeper into the Bunker they go.

Finally, they arrive at the prison cells, and Sam finally senses some kind of understanding that he can’t quite put into words. Like the completion of a thought that he formed days ago.

Dean walks up to a cell, and stops in front of it. He turns to Sam with a by your leave expression.

“That’s Garth’s cell.” Sam says, not moving.

“Cool.” Dean replies dryly. “Open it.”

“Dean, I already told you that I don’t feel comfortable with this. We don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“Well, usually, you open a door, and it – you know – opens. Listen,” he adds, seeing the wealth of emotions flicker over Sam’s face, “I know you’re worried about Michael. I am, too. But he’s locked down, man. And we fought Michael Monsters in Joplin, and I was up and personal with them, and nothing happened. At least Garth isn’t trying to sink claws into my pretty neck.”

And Sam is deeply uncomfortable. And he knows his worry is coming from a place of wanting to make sure that Dean is okay, and that’s not always possible in the lives they lead. Sometimes, he just has to trust that Dean knows what’s best for himself. He sticks his hand into his jacket and pulls out the keys he pocketed after dropping food off for Garth. Dean steps to the side so Sam can unlock the door, and Sam swings the door open with a heavy feeling.

Garth looks up when they enter. He’s lounging on the bed where Sam had left him only a little earlier. He pops the spoon out of his mouth, and some of the pig’s heart he’d been snacking on slops back into the bowl he was holding up to his face.

“Hey fellas.” He greets warmly, and pauses the newest episode of Friends.

“Hey, Garth.” Dean replies, but his eyes trace over Garth like he’s looking for some hidden sign. “You eating all your veggies too, or just red meat these days?”

Garth laughs, and puts the bowl to the side. “Well, you guys want to watch a few episodes with me? Always room for more on the Garth Bed.”

“Oh, god, yeah, you can take that with you when you go.” Dean says, only half joking. Sam watches cautiously from the doorway as Dean takes a few steps closer to Garth. Garth gives Sam a nervous look as Dean approaches. Sam nods his head to comfort him, and hopes that he’s not making a very, very big mistake.

Dean takes a seat on the edge of the bed, and stares at Garth intently. Garth, always chipper and noncombative, starts to look a little cagey.
“Dean –” Sam tries, sensing that they’re on the brink of something, but Dean cuts over him.

“Garth, I wanted to say that I’m real sorry how things went down in Hitomi Plaza.” Dean starts, and Sam feels an ounce of hope that maybe Dean is only here to apologize. “We told you that we’d keep you safe, and we didn’t do that. I’m sorry about what Michael did to you, I really am. We were supposed to yank you out before it got dicey.”

Garth looks back and forth between the brothers before answering, “I know all that, Dean. I’m not mad. I just wanted to help.”

Dean heaves out a sigh, and rubs at the back of his neck. “You’re a good guy, Garth. You should get back to your family instead of binging out on tv shows.”

There’s a worried flicker of something behind Garth’s eyes. “I told Sam that I didn’t want to go home with all that Michael juice inside me.”

Dean closes his eyes for a moment. “First off, please never call it that again. Please. Second… I’m gonna do something and I’m gonna need you to not… wolf out on me, okay?”

“Dean!” Sam exclaims, and walks rapidly towards his brother’s side.

“Sam, just – “ He holds a hand between them and gestures at his brother to take a step back, “just, wait, okay?” He turns back to Garth, “Okay?” He asks seriously.

Garth looks back and forth between the brothers, and then at the frozen image of Rachel Green on his monitor. He seems to find a sense of strength, because he nods at the screen. “It’s what Rachel would do.” He says solemnly.

“Oh my God.” Dean mutters under his breath, but he scoots closer on the bed. Sam is nearly vibrating through the floor.

Dean holds his hand up hesitantly, like he feels like he’s being a little ridiculous, but has gone too far to stop now. Garth looks cross-eyed at the hand descending towards him, and flinches when the palm of Dean’s hand presses against his forehead. Nothing happens for a few long seconds.

And then so, so much does.

Garth suddenly flinches back from Dean, but Dean follows him back, keeping his hand pressed firmly to the werewolf’s forehead. Garth grits his teeth and groans low in his throat, tilting heavily towards a howl. He blinks his eyes closed for a moment, and when his eyes open again, the wolf-yellow almost smacks into Sam like a physical blow.

And then so, so much does.

Grace stirs under Dean’s hand, and Sam takes a step around to see his brother’s face, to see at what point he needs to intervene and tear the pair away from each other. Dean’s eyes are shut tightly, like he’s concentrating intently on something. Claws extend out of Garth’s finger tips, and they fly to his stomach like he’s trying to hold himself together.

Garth’s eyes meet Dean’s and the yellow slips behind matching blue irises. A smothered grunt escapes thickly from Garth’s stiff form, and Sam thinks that Dean must be killing Garth, that he let Dean or Michael or whoever into Garth’s room and is letting him kill him right in front of him. Sam
grabs Dean’s arm before he’s even thought through whether that’s entirely safe or not, but Dean’s arm yanks backwards before Sam can fully grip his brother’s forearm.

A flash of light sears Sam’s retinas, and he squints through the light. Garth sags slightly against the headboard, but doesn’t crumple. He looks exhausted, but safe. The blue is gone from his eyes, and slowly, the yellow fades too.

Sam turns disbelieving eyes from the werewolf to Dean. Dean’s hand is clenched tight around something, and when he opens his hands, Sam has to squint through the light.

In Dean’s hand is a small, blinding pool of grace. Michael’s grace. Dean turns his face up towards Sam’s, and his green eyes are bright and glazed, almost like he’s drunk.

“Dean, how did you do that?” Sam breathes, and bends to take a closer look at the grace that Dean extracted from Garth.

The grace ripples in Dean’s cupped hand, and they both stare at it like Dean just picked up a dead frog and named it Big Eddie. Then – like quicksilver melting into itself, the grace suddenly sinks into Dean’s hand like he’s absorbed it. Dean grimaces in pain as the grace soaks into his skin before they can stop it, and Sam can see the grace travel through his arm like blood moving through veins before it disperses and fades. Dean shoots up from the bed and shakes his arm out as if something bit him. “Mother f**ker.” He snaps, and his eyes flash sickly blue.

He stomps to the side of the cell, and leans his hand heavily on the wall for a moment. Sam stands with mouth hanging open unhelpfully. So much has happened in the last thirty minutes that Sam feels like he needs to take a nap and try this whole day over again.

Eventually Dean flexes his hand a few times, and turns around. He and Sam stare at each other, both with more questions than answers. Neither of them can speak.

They both jump when Garth suddenly moans, “Man, Dean, you couldn’t have waited to do that until after I finished this season?”

Chapter End Notes

I stopped this chapter way earlier than I thought. Dean’s weird internal grace/soul thing wasn’t planned in my initial chapter outline, and it ate up a lot of what I was gonna do with this chapter. Sooooo i kinda cut it before the promised /archangel power/ scene (don't get too excited...) But I really felt like I needed to first let Dean get a better grasp on understanding and visualizing the grace first, before he starts actually using it. Does that make sense?? It would have felt weird to me if suddenly Dean was like "Oh I can fly? Dope, let's do that."

One other thing that was kind of intentional, but ended up seeming like sloppy writing to me when I was rereading this - Jack and Cas tell Dean to /isolate/ the grace from the rest of himself, and then Dean kind of does something different in his head. When I was writing it, I was trying to highlight that Dean has a different way of understanding the grace than Jack and Cas - he doesn't really understand how to isolate it and use it as a separate source of power. His whole soul is kind of carved up with old scars - the Mark of Cain, the souls that were shoved into him in the Amara season, Michael's grace, etc. I think what I was trying to say, is that Dean sees these holistically - and separating
Michael's grace (isolating it) from the rest doesn't really click for him. Anyway - that's what I was trying to say, but when I reread it, it just kinda seemed like I forgot what I was doing halfway through. #It'sBadWriting

God this chapter took up my entire Sunday. So much for relaxing weekends...

Thank you for all your comments! I'm always VERY excited when I get the email notifications. And I reread comments all the time. SUPER appreciative <3
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

I cannot emphasize enough how un-beta'ed this is. There's probably a ton of typos, but I'm running late for work. Sorry about mistakes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Two calls in one day, Dean? You’re making a lady blush.”

“Yeah, yeah. Listen, I got an answer to the archangel grace problem.”

“Are you referring to the dire emergency you called me about less than half an hour ago? Where you said it would take weeks to figure out how to get your hands on enough power for the book?”

Dean leans around the corner, making sure that Sam hasn’t returned from sending Garth off. “Yeah, that one. Turns out, the answer is a little closer to home than I thought.”

“Alright, I’ll admit I’m curious. How did you get your hands on it?”

“Well… I don’t have it. Yet. But I know where I can get it.”

“Well, don’t leave me in suspense.” Rowena says dryly, “You don’t pay my mobile bill, Dean, so out with it.”

“The Michael Monsters. I was able to… I don’t know, take the grace out of Garth.”

“Garth was your wee pal that was infected with Michael’s -” Rowena’s voice cuts out for a moment as they lose connection.

“Yeah. Just have to get enough to power up the tracking spell in Billie’s book. We’ll talk when you get back – are you headed to the Bunker?”

Dean can hear the eye roll across state lines. “Dinnae worry about me, Dean. Though I do enjoy taking the scenic routes…”

Dean sighs and ends the call.

He turns back towards the direction of the War Room and nearly smacks straight into his brother. “Jesus, Sam. Put up a caution sign or something next time.” But his heart thuds in his chest. How much did Sam hear?

Sam’s expression is flat and pissed. “Lots of secret phone calls these days, Dean.”

“I wouldn’t call it a secret since I’m standing in the middle of the hallway.” Dean gibes, but his mind stutters to think of another excuse he can use. He already pulled the Charlie card, and there’s no reason for him to be on the phone with one of Sam’s hunters.

“I know you’re calling Rowena. I know you’re up to something that you’re not telling me about. No, Dean – “ He interjects, as Dean opens his mouth to respond. Sam’s hand hovers in the air like he can
physically keep words from spewing out of his brother. “Stop. Rowena – go.”

Dean hesitates, as Sam’s hazel eyes rake over all the lies Dean tries to surround himself with. He and Sam are in a good place. They’re brothers again, better than they’ve been in years. And Dean knows that he has a lot to do with the rift that had opened between them, and that all he’s doing right now is hastening its return.

But he knows that if the situation was reversed, he would never let his brother jump into Lucifer’s Cage. Not again. Not ever again. And he knows that’s unfair of him, and he knows it’s hypocritical. But Billie said it all – it all ends with Dean’s death, but there’s only one death where they come out ahead.

Dean slides his tongue between his teeth. Dean can’t do this without Sam, or Cas and Jack. But he needs a little more time. They’ll see that it’s the only way, eventually, and he just needs to drag the horse far enough to the water before shoving it in.

“Oh, okay.” Dean says finally, before Sam can spontaneously combust. “Yeah, I was talking to Rowena. I thought maybe she could do something about the grace poisoning. Whip up a hex bag or something with angel warding. But now that we’ve got a handle on this, I told her to stand down. That’s all, Sam.”

Sam only looks partially convinced. “Then why all the secrecy? That’s a call we could have made together.”

Dean heaves a breath out, and slaps his arms against his sides. “Come on, Sam, you’re full up the ass with problems right now. I didn’t want you to get… I don’t know, false hope that Rowena could come up with something.”

Sam shakes his head, and looks away from Dean, visibly upset. “Dean, we’ve only made it to where we are today because we work together. That’s the point of family. To lean on each other. If you’re keeping me in the dark – “

Dean claps a hand down on Sam’s shoulder, and Sam finally drags his eyes back to his brother. “I know, Sam. If I come up with anything solid, I’ll loop you in.” And he will. Eventually.

Sam raises the corner of his mouth half-heartedly, but his eyes are still guarded. “Okay.” He agrees. “Okay.”

“Alright.” Dean says, and nods down the hallway towards the War Room. “Let’s find out how mad Cas is at me.”

It turns out, Cas is pretty mad.

“You shouldn’t try to use Michael’s grace unless I’m there, Dean.” He lectures. “We’re trying to help you. You shouldn’t be experimenting on your own.”

Sam hears Dean mutter something about not wanting to look stupid if nothing happened after he slapped his hand on Garth’s head, but he says louder, “I get it, Cas. Half credit for not showing my work.”

“You’re really leaning into these school metaphors.” Sam comments, and Dean smacks his brother on the arm. Sam hides his grin behind his hand, and Cas glares both of them into silence. It really is like being in school again.
“What made you try and remove the grace from Garth?” Cas asks, after the two brothers have settled.

“Uh, I don’t know.” Dean replies after a moment, scratching the back of his head. “It was like I felt… an echo. Of Michael. Or, I guess, Michael’s grace.”

Cas nods seriously. “Like a resonance.”

“Sure.” Dean agrees. “But you know what this means, right?” And he looks at each of their blank expressions in turn. “It means we can track down the rest of Michael’s army. If I can… sense them – God, this feels so lame – then that means we can track them, pull the grace out of them, and kill them.”

That’s actually not a bad idea. “Is that possible?” Sam begins to ask Cas, but then Dean’s comment sinks in fully, and he turns back to his brother. “Wait, why do we have to remove the grace? Can’t we just track them and kill them?”

“Oh.” Dean says, and he actually looks taken aback. “I just thought… uh, yeah, I guess you’re right.” Sam exchanges glances with Jack from across the table.

“Dean, when you sucked up the grace inside Garth, it looked like it… hurt. And aren’t we trying to get rid of the grace? Why would you want to reabsorb it?”

“No, I don’t want to do that.” Dean says hurriedly. “But it’s powerful mojo. Might be good to hang on to it. Back up supply. Never know.”

Sam frowns at Dean, but Dean doesn’t meet his eyes. “I don’t know if it’s a good idea to have something like archangel grace laying around, Dean. We already have a crater in the Bunker hallways. Maybe some things are better left alone.”

“Sure.” Dean agrees quickly. Sam has no idea what’s going on with Dean, and it’s starting to worry him.

Dean seems to sense the weird shift in the room’s mood and slaps his hands down against the table. “Okay, lesson one aced. What’s round two, Cas?”

“I think we should maybe try and focus in on your ability to sense the grace in Michael Monsters. Since you’ve already done it, maybe it’ll make it easier for you to access other abilities.”

“Crawl before I can run, huh.” Dean says. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

Cas begins suggesting different methods for Dean to focus on tracking the grace. In all honesty, it goes over Sam’s head, and he’s getting kind of bored, but Dean seems to be understanding it. Sam’s brought his laptop to the War Room, and spends a few minutes replying to emails, checking his algorithm queries for possible case hits, and even tries to find a new meal prep recipe for all that damn kale that Dean bought him as a joke a few days ago. It’s not entirely necessary for him to be a part of Angel Lessons 101, but he wants to be there for Dean. And maybe he can try and decipher Castiel Language when the angel gets caught up in the finer points of the consistency of grace or angel radio frequencies, or why it’s important to keep your wings inside the vehicle at all times.

Okay – so maybe Sam isn’t really listening. But it’s nice to be surrounded by his small family.

He bookmarks a Kale and Sweet Potato recipe and looks up from his computer.

Dean looks visibly frustrated with his lack of progress, as if ten minutes into angel lessons he should
be pushing pins into a map, laying out all the current positions of Michael’s army.

“Maybe it’s a proximity thing?” Sam suggests, falling back into the flow immediately.

But Cas shakes his head. “Grace exists on a plane mostly inaccessible on a physical level. The distance between sources should have no pertinent bearing.”

Jesus, no wonder Dean’s having trouble with this. Sam has no idea what Cas is even talking about, and he spent the last five days pouring over every grace entry in the archives.

“What were you thinking about when you sensed Garth’s grace?” Jack asks suddenly.

Dean frowns at the Nephilim. “Uh, I don’t know. I wasn’t thinking about Garth. I don’t think I was really thinking about anything. I just felt a weird… tickle. Or vibration, actually. Like I felt whatever bit of grace inside of me was reacting to something outside of me.” He looks embarrassed as he finishes his thought, like he just admitted something personal and private.

“So maybe don’t focus on finding grace outside of you.” Sam suggests. “Maybe focus on that part of Michael’s grace that you already have a handle on, and see if you can… I don’t know, feel a vibration or something.”

Dean seems a little annoyed at everyone’s suggestions, and Sam can kind of understand that. Not a single one of them has ever been in Dean’s current position. And according to Heaven, no one in the history of the universe has been. And now Dean has three people lobbing simplified suggestions at him as if that’s all this really is – simple.

Dean’s hand flexes on the table, and there’s an unconscious shimmer of grace underneath the skin. Dean doesn’t seem to notice, and Sam doesn’t feel the need to point it out.

Dean frowns at the table, and says, “I think I feel something.”

“Really?” Sam asks, though he should be quiet to let Dean concentrate.

But Dean answers anyway, “Yeah. It feels like it’s… close.” He looks to his left, like there could be a Michael Monster just coming out of the Archives with a plate of sandwiches to share.

“Remember, Dean – “ Cas intones, “just because it feels close doesn’t mean it actually is. Grace – “

“No, seriously.” Dean flexes his back like there’s some an uncomfortable itch he can’t be bothered to actually scratch. “It feels really fuckin’ close.” He repeats, and turns confused eyes to the rest of the table. Dean’s eyes flash blue for half an instant. “Like it feels like I can just – ” And the rest of Dean’s thought is cut off by the breathy slice of something substantial unfurling in the air.

Sam blinks.

And Dean is gone.

Dean feels weightless for approximately half a second, before he crashes painfully into what could only be described as solid oak wrapped in metal plating wrapped in spikes wrapped in tungsten.

Okay – so he falls through a barn rafter, but it still hurts like a sonofabitch.

The air’s been knocked from his chest, and he struggles to pull breath into bruised lungs. He feels dirt and straw and other disgusting smelly things scratch against the back of his neck and hands as he
palms the ground. Not one of his most impressive and imposing moments.

Finally he manages to suck in a breath, and pulls himself painfully into a sitting position.

What the fuck.

*Did I just* – but he finds that he can’t even *think* it to himself. And of all the f-words Dean had never had problems saying, he never thought the angel f-word *fly* would be the one he’d have the most trouble admitting to himself. *Fly*. Dean Winchester can fly.

And not just fly, he realizes, as he takes in his surroundings. But *angel-fly*. Literally teleport anywhere. Shit. That means he could actually *be* anywhere right now.

He knows he’s in a barn – light sears in through the hole he smashed into the roof, and one of the of rafters is now missing the entire middle section of its wooden beam. He’s covered in dust and dirt, but he’s uninjured, even considering he just fell probably 25 feet and took down part of a roof with him. Still – remembering that he was in the Bunker less than a minute ago, maybe now isn’t the time to start celebrating the avoidance of a 911 call. He rubs dirt out of his eyes, and smacks at his jacket until he finds his phone. He pulls it out, but the screen is smashed beyond repair, and Dean shoves it back into his pocket with a loud curse.

Dean turns in a circle, and spots the sun-lit outline of barn doors on the far wall. Maybe he can find a house or a road. He hasn’t felt this disoriented since Bobby blasted him with an angel sigil. And before that… returning from Purgatory. Or ten years ago, when Chuck tossed them onto a moving plane.

So on second thought, maybe this isn’t that out of the ordinary.

Dean had started walking towards the door, but stops mid-step. Why is he here, specifically? Last thing he remembered, he was focusing on that twisting power inside of him, feeling the resonation of a lesser echo of that source…

And he could *feel* it. He felt the bright pulse of grace, and he felt the tug of it like a magnet. So maybe he didn’t fly off into space randomly – maybe he flew right to –

And then he hears voices. Dean turns in a tight circle, but he can’t tell where the voices are coming from. And if he’s right about who the voices belong to, and he’s caught without a weapon, then this is going to go very south, very fast.

He spies an old wine barrel-turned-work-surface, and he crouches behind it. The second he does, the barn doors creak open, and the early afternoon light floods the interior of the barn.

“I fuckin’ told you. I heard it.” An irritated voice snaps.

Dean peers around the side of the barrel, and sees two figures walk in. Two men, one bald, one not, walk in. Their features are smudged with the light pouring in behind them, but Dean can feel the grace pulse inside of them almost like he can physically see it.

Which means he’s in a room with two Michael Monsters and nothing to fight them off with.

He can see the handle of something across the room, something that looks like it could be an ax or a long-handled hammer, but he’d have to dart in front of the Michael Monsters to get it, and they’re quickly walking towards the center of the room. The bald one stares up at the ceiling like someone could be hanging from the rafters, but his companion looks around suspiciously.
“You think they found us?” The bald one says, finally giving up on his scan of the ceiling.

“How would they? We’ve been watching their Bunker for days.”

Bunker. They must be in or near Lebanon, no matter what Cas had said about the proximity of grace not being a factor. Michael must have left instructions for a couple of his goons to keep an eye over the Bunker, in the event he was captured. Maybe the guy wasn’t so self-assured after all.

Dean spots the handle of a hammer sticking out of a near-by rusted tool box, close enough that he can get it before the Michael Monsters see him, and hopefully before they can rip his head off. He waits until the bald one’s turned his head and skids across the dirt floor, but the other one spots him immediately.

“Rob!” He snaps, and smacks his compatriot on the back. Dean’s hand closes on the hammer and he straightens to see the bared fangs of two juiced-up vamps darting towards him.

Dean takes a step forward into the light, briefly blinded by sun pouring in from the door, but raises the hammer. It won’t kill a vamp, but a few broken bones will slow down anything.

But the moment that the sunlight slices over Dean’s face, the bald vampire’s eyes widen, and he grabs the shoulder of his companion to pull him to a stop. The other vamp nearly brushes off the restraint, but pauses, gnashing his teeth at Dean.

“Michael.” The bald one says breathlessly. His eyes rake over Dean almost reverently, but a crease forms between his brows when he sees Dean’s unkempt appearance, his patented Winchester canvas, and the hammer clenched offensively in his grasp.

Dean feels himself on the precipice of something. And for a moment, he stands in Rocky’s Bar, inches away from the cracked freezer window, and Michael is there, and Michael is smiling, and there’s grace leaking from the cracks, and he can feel it soak into his bones like poison in the marrow and he –

“But ain’t him.” The other one says, and takes a step forward towards Dean. The bald vamp still looks hesitant but doesn’t stop his fellow monster from resuming his stalk towards Dean.

Dean hefts the hammer in his hand, and his insides bleed steel as battle-hardened calm settles over him. It’s just another hunt. The odds have been worse before. He blinks – and he’s in Hitomi Plaza. He blinks – and he’s back in the barn. The odds have been worse.

Dean looks back and forth from the vamp to his weapon. “Wanna trade?” He grunts, but is forced to leap a step back as the vampire takes another charged swing. Dean’s foot bangs into the toolbox he’d retrieved the hammer from, and he stumbles slightly. The vampire – already supernaturally faster than Dean, but now charged up with archangel mojo – sweeps the knife in an arc in front of him. The tip of the knife carves a bloody furrow into Dean’s arm – painful, but he doesn’t drop the hammer. He corrects his balance, teeth bared in a grimace.

Warmth blossoms in his eyes, and he sees the vampire’s eyes widen as he sees the tell-tale flash of blue grace smother the green in Dean’s irises. Dean doesn’t take his eyes off his opponent, but sees a
muted flash of light from the hole torn in his jacket sleeve, and feels the skin knit back together. His grimace stretches into a feral grin, and he sees a genuine flash of fear in the vampire’s eyes.

“Try again.” Dean jeers, and steps into the vamp’s space before he can get another easy swing in. Dean bashes the hammer up into the vampire’s jaw and hears something snap. The hammer is heavy and has a wicked follow-through, so Dean’s forced to shove the vamp backwards instead of the planned second hammer swing. The vamp stumbles back, but stays on his feet. When he refocuses on Dean, a trickle of venous blood now drips down the left side of his chin, black like leviathan sludge. Though injured, his eyes are sharp and furious.

The bald vampire still seems uncertain about which side of the fight he’s supposed to be on, and hesitates at the edge of the scuffle. Dean eyes the bowie knife in his opponent’s hand, and knows that unless he can somehow take the fight clear across the room towards the ax, that knife is his only shot at getting out of here in chunks larger than a bowling ball bag. God, if only Cas had skipped straight to the smiting part of angel lessons, this could have been a lot easier.

The vampire raises the fist clenched with the knife and uses it to pop his dislocated jaw back into place. He works his jaw a few times, before his fangs extend almost like the villiform teeth of a deep-sea monster.

Dean only has a small window before the second vamp decides to back his buddy up, and Dean doesn’t need a two-on-one fight. He’s fairly sure that he can’t be turned into a vamp while possessed by an angel, and he hopes that he can recover from anything but a severe injury. Because there’s no way this goes down without going down bloody.

Dean raises the hammer with both hands over his head, and hurls it as hard as he can at the unsuspecting vampire. He doesn’t wait to see the damage as he launches himself bodily at the off-balance vampire. They both go down to the straw-strewn floor, and Dean sees that the hammer’s smacked into the vampire’s face, crushing his nose into something unrecognizable. The vampire is making horrible sucking sounds as Dean attempts to pry the knife from the vampire. The vampire is injured and off-kilter, but he’s still powered up with Michael’s grace, and Dean nicks his hand a few times in the tussle. He brings his elbow down as hard as he can into the vampire’s already ruined face, and when the vampire flinches back, Dean finally is able to wrestle the knife away.

Dean hacking most of the monster’s neck before the slices on his hands have ever finished healing.

The bald vampire stands frozen over the bloody corpse of his former partner, and Dean has to appreciate that the vampire waits for the involuntary tap-in. Deans scrambles back from the twitching corpse and gets back onto his feet before Baldie realizes that his hesitation has just cost him his friend’s life.

Dean sees the moment when the realization hits, and the earlier uncertainty and unease melts into that special brand of bloodlust.

The vampire charges at Dean, and Dean manages to avoid the first barrage. But this vamp is definitely faster – and more motivated – and Dean knows he’s maxed out his dance card with this one. The bowie knife is slick and difficult to maintain a grip on, but he holds it up in a hopeful deterrent. The vampire had overshot his mark when he skidded past Dean, and now Dean is in the center of the barn, and the vampire is near the wine barrel that Dean had hidden behind earlier.

The vampire sees Dean’s glance, and he pivots towards the barrel. Before Dean’s even realized what’s happening, the vampire’s hefted up the 120 pounds of solid wood and launched it at Dean. The hunter jukes to the side, but the wooden edge clips his shoulder and Dean does down. His fingers clench as tight as they can around the hilt of the knife. His back smacks into the ground
painfully, but before he can recover his sense of awareness, the Michael Monster is standing over him.

“Dean Winchester.” The vampire says, and all the earlier respect and fear he’d been frightened into revealing is gone. He plants his foot into Dean’s chest hard, and Dean feels his ribs creak as a size twelve boot digs against the bones. Dean raises the knife to try and get a slash at the vamp’s leg in, but the vampire raises his foot and slams his foot back into Dean’s chest with all the force he can muster – and he can muster quite a lot. The knife is jarred from Dean’s hand, and he feels something give in his ribs, and a stabbing pain pulses like a second heart beat in his side.

“I thought you’d be tougher.” The vampire says, and his fangs retract back into the flesh above his gums. “Weren’t you supposed to be the Vessel?” The vamp puts his full weight onto Dean’s cracked chest, and with his other leg, kicks away the bloody hammer so it’s far out of Dean’s reach. “I only had like…” and he actually seems to be considering, “like maybe a shot glass full of Michael’s grace, and I feel like a goddamn superhero. And you can’t even get kicked around a little without breaking like a toothpick.”

Dean coughs out something unintelligible around the thick coating of blood. He must have bitten his tongue when he went down.

The Michael Monster leans down and cups a hand behind his ear in a parody of concern. “What was that?”

Dean spits a wad of blood to the side, and smiles like the devil, “I said, tell that to your friend.”

He watches as the battle high and blood lust slowly melt into transparent hatred, and Dean feels relief chill the pressure in his chest as the vamp’s foot releases him from the pin. Dean struggles to pull himself up to his feet, but the vampire has other plans.

Fists clench into Dean’s jacket and he feels a moment of weightlessness as he’s dragged into the air for a moment before being thrown back. There’s a sick, dizzying feeling as Dean’s feet are lifted off the ground, but his fall is arrested as he smashes against a pile of rotted fence posts. He gasps as air returns to his lungs, and he sees the handle of the ax he was aiming for nearly within reaching distance. There’s the quiet scratch of a foot scraping through gravel, and Dean knows that the vampire is only a heartbeat away from ripping him apart, minor and sporadic angelic healing powers aside. Dean stumbles on one of the rotting posts in his lurch towards the ax, and feels himself start to go down. He manages to grab the edge of the ax handle.

Immediately he realizes that he’s guessed wrong – the weapon can’t be an ax. There’s no weight or heft as the drags the handle down with him, and in the moment before the Michael Monster rears down on Dean, he sees the jagged wooden point of a now-broken ax.

Unfortunately for the charging vampire, he doesn’t see it. Through sheer dumb luck, and only a few inches of maneuvering on Dean’s part, he manages to twist the jagged edge towards the fast-moving vamp and watches with almost-sympathy as the vampire collides hard enough to impale himself on the spike. The vamp’s eyes nearly bug out of his skull as he trips over Dean and lands on his back. He’d driven himself with enough force that the tip of the spike pokes out his back like a butterfly pinned to a cork board.

But he’s charged up with Michael’s grace, and nothing less than a head shot is going to take down this mother. The vampire’s hands scrabble ineffectively against the smooth handle of the wood, but he doesn’t have the angle to free himself. Dean pulls himself painfully to his feet, but he feels the tickling sensation of his ribs healing under skin. He stands over the vampire and watches as wild eyes turn up at him.
Dean places his hands on the butt of the ax handle and sees the vamp’s eyes widen in confusion, as if Dean is about to free him and start round two.

Instead, Dean throws his entire weight against the handle. The vampire roars in pain as the wooden shaft sinks down another foot and a half into the ground, much further than any human should have been able to accomplish with the hard-packed floor. Dean glances at his hands as the vampire writhes below him, and feels the untapped power, the real potential of Michael’s grace under all those layers of hesitation and unfamiliarity.

He doesn’t know how to use Michael’s abilities. But he can see how easily all that power can make someone feel invincible.

The vampire seems to sense a change in Dean, because he tries even harder to free himself. He raises himself a measly couple of inches before falling back.

“Jesus.” Dean mutters to himself, feeling the temporary battle calm fade and the true what the fuck is happening to me feeling start to sink in. He takes a step back from the thrashing Michael Monster, and runs a hand along his ribs, but nothing so much as twinges. The bleeding cut in his mouth has long since healed over, and Dean spits another wad of residual blood out on the ground by the vampire’s leg.

“You look absolutely stupid right now.” Dean informs the vampire, as the monster redoubles his efforts to escape. “So much for being a superhero, huh?”

“Michael will – Michael…” The vampire wheezes at him, the oozy black blood bubbling at his wound. It takes a lot more than a stake to the chest to kill a charged-up vampire, but an ax handle plum in one of your lungs sure does make it more difficult to lob threats around. The vampire’s rabid eyes flash blue for a moment, and Dean feels the responding tug in the center of himself.

Well, at least he got to practice this the first time with a more willing and less psychotic participant.

Dean takes a careful step around the thrashing limbs, and crouches down by the vampire’s head. The monster glances at the knife that’s several yards away and looks back at Dean, a trace of confusion in his eye.

Dean feels one side of his mouth quirk up. “This will probably hurt.” He informs the squirming bastard, and slaps his palm on the vampire’s forehead.

The vampire struggles to pull his forehead out from Dean’s grip, but Dean keeps the vampire steady.

Dean’s only done this once before, and it already feels familiar. He closes his eyes for a moment, and the spitting, gnashing sounds from the vampire fade to nothing as Dean pushes aside all unnecessary sensory details. He feels the small slivers of Michael’s grace like stiff metal staples scattered throughout the monster’s body. Slowly at first, and then faster, they begin to concentrate in the vampire’s center, like drops of mercury sliding into each other, or magnetized metal shards sliding home. The vampire twists in Dean’s grip, but is already losing the fight. The shards of grace collect and pool together into a tight pocket of energy, and Dean yanks it up through the monster in one jerk of his hand.

His eyes open, and he sees the blue light reflected in the dimming gaze of the monster, who’s sunk prone, but alive, to the ground. Dean sits back on his haunches and opens his palm. The bright spark of Michael’s grace glows in his hand like a sliver of a soul in hell, and Dean almost wants to throw up.
He feels the magnetized pull of the grace wanting to absorb into the rest of that swirling pool of power inside of him, and he quickly scans the work bench for a receptacle.

And it may not be orthodox, and it may not be respectful – but Dean finds it very satisfying to dump that son of a bitch archangel’s grace into a greasy ass mason jar.

Jack jumps when Sam’s phone starts to vibrate on the table.

Sam’s fingers practically fly across the keyboard as he tries to hack into Dean’s GPS on his beat-up laptop. Cas has already left to track down Bobby. It seems ridiculous on its face that an angel has to seek answers regarding unorthodox methods of tracking angels from a hunter – but Bobby is nothing if not a man with out-of-the-box solutions. Cas hadn’t reemerged from his hurry down the hallway, and Jack hopes that it’s a good sign.

“Sam.” Jack says, staring at the phone as it continues to vibrate. An unlisted number flashes on the caller ID.

Sam grunts an acknowledgement distractedly, still typing away on his computer.

“Sam, your phone.” Jack starts, but before he’s even finished, Sam’s come up for enough air that he’s seen the phone. He thumbs the connect button and holds it to his face before Jack’s finished speaking.

“Dean?” Sam grills the unknown caller, and his eyes dart along unseen points on the table. His posture relaxes as the other person responds.

Jack raises his eyebrows at the older hunter, and is relieved when Sam nods back with a tight smile. *Thanks*, he mouths in Jack’s direction.

“Wait – what? Where are you?” Sam asks into the phone, and whatever answer Dean seems to give him, Sam is shocked.

“You sure it’s the Leary farm? That’s only a couple of miles away. They’ve been watching – “ Sam cuts his interrogation short as Dean interrupts, and Jack hears the comforting but inaudible rumble of Dean’s voice on the other end.

Sam shakes his head in disbelief. “Well, I’m glad you’re safe, but let’s maybe hit the pause on flying lessons for now.”

Dean says something and Sam’s face sags into minor indignance. “No, that’s not a Harry Potter reference. You – “

Dean says something else, and Sam smiles at the phone clearly against his will. “Well, now I’m definitely not picking your ass up. Enjoy the walk back.” But Sam is already pushing his chair back, and checking his pockets for car keys. “Oh – you are?” He pauses in his search, “You sure? Well… okay, then. See you soon.”

Dean cuts the call and Sam sits back down against the chair. “Dean’s fine.” He says to Jack, “Or pretending to be fine, I guess.” He taps his cracked phone against the table, like he’s trying to put something together in his head.

“Where is he?” Jack’s never heard of the Leary Farm, but if Sam is familiar with it, it can’t be too far away.
Sam pulls himself out of his thoughts, though some of his special brand of confused concern clings to his features. “He’s in the field next to the Bunker. Maybe a mile and a half tops. He had to deal with two Michael Monsters – they were watching the place. Probably under standing orders from Michael.”

“So, Dean sensed their grace and flew over?” Jack says, and a small part of him is startled that Dean seems to be getting the hang of his new abilities so much faster than Jack did after losing his own.

Some of that discouragement must show on Jack’s face, because Sam offers him a kind smile. “Jack, what you and Dean are going through are entirely different situations. You can’t compare them.”

Jack nods slowly, but feels uncomfortable with the change in conversation. “I know.” He replies vaguely.

Sam studies him from across the table. Jack almost wants to make up an excuse – tell Cas the news about Dean – to escape from the scrutiny. “If you ever want to talk about it, you know we’re all here for you. Don’t forget that Cas lost all his grace a few years ago, too. He had to get used to human… stuff.”

“Sometimes it’s hard to talk about it.” Jack admits. “It’s easier to not think about it, and just do. Does that make sense?”

Sam nods slowly at Jack, and stands from the table. “It does. Just know – door’s always open. Got lots of experience prying Dean’s secrets out of him.”

Jack laughs. “I think Dean’s handling it his own way.”

Sam rolls his eyes and shakes his head. “He always does.” Sam takes a few steps towards the hallway with Jack right behind, off to tell Cas about their fledgling archangel’s eminent return. Something crosses over Sam’s face, like what Jack’s said has only now fully sunk in. “Wait. What do you mean, handling it his own way?”

Jack shrugs uncomfortably, feeling put on the spot. It’s not any of his business how Dean deals with the craziness in his life. Being possessed like an Archangel isn’t exactly something that pulls up a lot of helpful advice in the top five google search results. “I mean, I think he’s processing it. He has that journal in his room – maybe he’s planning on working through his issues like that. Cas told me that sometimes writing – “

“Journal?” Sam asks, face blank like he’s never even heard the words ‘Dean’ and ‘journal’ in the same sentence before. “What journal?”

“Oh, I found a journal in his room when you had Mary and I look through Dean’s room. There was a black book with his name on it hidden under some magazines on his – “

He cuts off when he sees the older hunter’s expression.

Jack’s never before seen fear like that on Sam’s face.

Dean shoves open the Bunker’s iron door with his shoulder, and the door swings open noiselessly.

He can skip the slicing and breaking bones next hunt, but he feels like the small amount of grace that burned off healing his injuries has lightened the load in his chest. Maybe something was getting lost in translation with the angels, because Dean doesn’t entirely understand how ‘burning grace off’
actually works. It’s a replenishing source – so doesn’t it just leak back into his system after a while? Maybe it’s not so much that it’s burning off, as just becoming more attuned with his body.

God, next time he walks a couple miles, he needs to bring an audio book or something. Alone with his thoughts for a few minutes and he’s already getting into speculative nonsense like his brother.

Dean wipes mud on his jeans and takes the steps down two at a time easily. He buried the mason jar filled with grace outside the Bunker, not knowing how to explain a vial of grace to the Bunker’s inhabitants. For now, it’s probably easier if there were less pieces of the plan lying around for a hunter to stumble upon.

Dean is surprised to find only Sam sitting in the War Room. Jack and Cas are nowhere to be seen, and Dean doesn’t hear any background noises of a hunter washing dishes or walking down the hallway.

He gives Sam a weird look. “I mean, I wasn’t expecting the welcome mat per se, but – “

Sam’s expression is stone cold as he sizes up his filthy brother. Dean’s covered in sludge and blood and straw and dirt, but Sam’s gaze skips over all that and settles volatilely on Dean’s face. Dean almost thinks he can see the vein pop out in Sam’s neck.

“What’s going on, Sammy?”

“You tell me, Dean.”

Dean looks around the room, like someone else is going to pop their head in and fill Dean in on why he’s being slapped with open hostility. “I told you everything over the phone. Unless you want a play-by-play of the fields around the Bunker, I don’t really – “

Sam’s head jerks to the side, visibly upset. When he finally looks back at Dean, his eyes are wounded and irascible. Sam pushes his chair back from the table roughly and stands, throwing something down heavily on the table. Dean’s heart skips a beat in his chest as he sees the glossy cover of Billie’s book wink up at him in the dim lighting.

Sam crosses his arms, like he is physically restraining himself from decking Dean. “You’re going to tell me everything. Now.”

Chapter End Notes

Oof okay I have enough time for an A/N but not enough to do another proofread. Honestly not much to say about this chapter other than I’m not very good at writing fight scenes, but hopefully my usual cliffhanger ending makes up for it 😊 the hardest part about drafting the outline for this fic was figuring out at what point I wanted Sam to find out about the plan. There’s kind a “too late” “too early” dilemma. Anyway, thanks for reading! And commenting <3
“Start talking.”

Dean takes a slow step towards the table, and his hand hovers over Billie’s book. Sam can see the rapid flicker of thoughts behind his brother’s eyes, a cocktail of anxiety and lies and betrayal shaken together and poured over ice.

“That’s one of Billie’s books.” Sam prompts coldly. Dean shuts his eyes for a moment before he refocuses his attention on Sam. “You met with Billie and you didn’t tell me.”

“I… well, Billie technically met with me.”

“Don’t technically me, Dean. I don’t care if you guys scheduled a coffee date. You met with Death and you didn’t think it was important to tell me? And now we find one of her books just laying around in your room? What does it say, Dean?”

The nerves melt from Dean’s face, replaced by blank confusion. “You didn’t open it?”

Sam uncrosses his arms and runs an angry hand through his hair. “Of course I opened it. It’s blank.”

Dean still looks confused, but he drags the book across the table, and flips open the cover. Sam watches heatedly as Dean’s eyes skim over lines of text that Sam can’t see. Dean glances back up, “You don’t see any of this?” He clarifies.

Sam shakes his head. “No. And if you even think about lying to me, I’ll summon Billie right here, right now, and make her give me a freaking power point presentation. What does the book say.”

Dean exhales heavily, and his eyes fall back to the open book. He raps a knuckle against the crisp first page. Sam lets the silence hang heavily between them until the dead air saturates the room.

Finally, Dean’s shoulders sag. His glance back at Sam is loaded with resignation. “Alright, Sam. Okay.” He pulls a chair out, and sits heavily at the head of the table.

Sam doesn’t move for a charged second. He looks down at his brother – dirty, bloody, burdened – and sees the man that’s his best friend and big brother. But he blinks and Dean is a stranger, a mirror-flipped version of himself, and Sam has to remind himself it’s still Dean, it’s still his brother. Dean tries so hard to keep everyone else going, that he hardly notices when he’s ground himself to a halt. Dean Winchester will throw punches to his last breath to save others, but won’t so much as dodge a bullet meant for him.

Dean looks up, and his green eyes blink up at Sam, and Sam sees the four-year-old carrying him out of Azazel’s flames. “You gonna sit, or just make me look like an asshole?” Dean finally says, his face creasing with concern as if Sam is the one they should be worried about.

Sam pulls a chair out woodenly and sits next to his brother, the cream pages of Billie’s book stretched out between them. Dean pulls the book a few inches closer to himself, and Sam watches his brother’s face as his eyes skim over the page.

“After we locked Michael away, Billie showed up in my room.” Dean starts slowly. “She said that
all my books – the books in Death’s Reading Room – have changed, and they all end one way.”

Sam swallows past the lump in his throat. “Michael.” He hears a pained voice admit, and it takes him a second to realize that he’s the one that spoke.

Dean nods. “Billie said that every version of the future ends with Michael breaking out of the cage and glassing the planet.” And he doesn’t need to add in my body. “All the books lead down the same road. All except one.” And Dean flips the book around to face Sam as if the letters will ink themselves in before his eyes. Sam is silent. “There’s one way that this ends right, Sammy. And you’re – “

“I’m not gonna like it.” Sam finishes, and his hands clench under the table. “What is it? What could possibly be the one right ending?”

Dean studies Sam, and Sam almost wants to scoot his chair back to avoid the close scrutiny. “It’s the cage.”

Sam’s brows pull together, and for a moment he doesn’t understand what they’re talking about. “The cage? The freezer walk-in?”

Dean’s gaze is steady, like he’s waiting for the bomb to detonate. “No, Sam. The cage.”

Sam stares blankly at Dean for a moment, and then it hits. “The ca- Lucifer’s Cage?” His mouth opens and closes a few times, and Dean stays silent. “You’re going to – you want to jump into Lucifer’s Cage?” He realizes he’s yelling now, and he’s shoved himself up and out of the chair. He stands over Dean with his hands hovering between them like he’s not sure if he wants to shove Dean away or fist his hands in his collar and shake him.

“Sam,” Dean says – slowly and reasonably. “You know I don’t want to.”

“But you’re going to, is that it? That is what you’re saying, right?” Sam demands roughly, and his face grows warm as the fear-induced adrenaline kicks through his system, as if he’s going to turn around and see a portal to hell waiting, ready to swallow his brother up. “Were you ever going to tell me? Or were you just going to… disappear one day?”

Dean doesn’t entreat Sam to take a seat, or to calm down. He watches with unhappy eyes as Sam grows more agitated. “C’mon, Sam.” He says finally. “Give me some credit.”

“Give you credit?” Sam repeats incredulously. “I had to find out about this from Jack, who thought you were writing in a fucking journal, by the way. I know what your plan was here, Dean. You were going to wait until the last goddamn minute, when it’s too late for anyone to convince you that your plan is wrong and selfish, and then you would just leave.” Sam realizes he’s shouting now, but doesn’t know how to reign it in.

“Sam, I’m leaving no matter what happens.” Dean says softly, but it’s a rip of the fucking Band-Aid. “But this way – “ and he raps a knuckle on the book, “This way I’m not taking the world with me.”

“Oh my god, it’s always the same with you, Dean! You’re always so quick to believe others when they tell you that there’s no other option, and when someone who cares about you has anything to say, it’s like you’re deaf.”

Now Dean’s face twitches in irritation. “This isn’t some random person on the street, Sam. This is Billie. You know – Death? A freaking Horseman of the Apocalypse? Ring any bells for you?”

Sam exhales a sharp laugh and snaps, “Oh, right, because you and Billie are on such good terms.
There’s no way she would deliberately mislead you into killing yourself.”

The words hit Dean like a visible blow, and Sam can see the rancor dull the light in Dean’s eyes. He opens his mouth to snap back at Sam, and Sam almost tells Dean to stop – that they’ve had this fight so many times before that he doesn’t need to hear the same old excuses. It’s a goddamn choose your own adventure story and Dean’s bookmarked all the same pages. It’s the same script with bright red ink underlining all the same parts. Dean opens his mouth, but flinches suddenly like a metal spike has stabbed through his brain. Or like an angry archangel is clawing at his insides.

Something like exhaustion saturates Dean’s features, and he sinks back into his chair, rubbing a heavy hand against his face. Sam feels the fight leach out of him, and weariness settles in. He sits back against the chair he’d shoved away.

For a moment, there’s nothing but the sound of Sam’s heavy breathing and the sound of pipes groaning in some distant corner of the Bunker.

Dean drops his hands heavily to the table. “There’s a crack.”

“‘There’s a … what?’

“There’s a crack in the cage, Sam. I can feel it. Hell, I saw it. After that whole thing went down with Dominic, man, I don’t know. Something changed. And Michael is banging away in my head like it’s a fucking drum circle, and I can’t go ten fuckin’ minutes without – ” Dean forces himself to stop. Like he knows what he sounds like – and it doesn’t sound sane. He takes a breath, and Sam’s chest is tight. “Listen. The cage is going to give. Might not be today, might not be tomorrow. But eventually another hunter or another Michael Monster is gonna take a pot shot at me, and I can’t risk that being the bullet that smashes the cage open. I’m not letting Michael get out.”

“But we cured the grace poisoning, Dean!” Sam pleads. “Or okay – not cured, but we handled it! Michael can’t – “

Dean shakes his head and Sam immediately loses his words. “It’s not the same thing, Sam. It’s two separate problems. And if we can’t flush Michael out of my head – then we gotta flush me out too.”

“But into Hell!” And Sam shudders. He can picture it. He can remember. And that’s what Dean is planning to do. He’s planning to lock himself in the deepest part of Hell with not just one Michael to torture him for eternity, but two. And after all they’ve been through, Sam cannot believe that they’ve landed back into a nightmare where Hell is suddenly on the table again. And Dean’s pushing his chips all in.

“What am I going to do here, Sammy?” Dean asks quietly, and when Sam doesn’t answer, Dean closes the cover of the book and pushes it closer to Sam. Sam glances down at the blank cover, the spindly white writing of his brother’s name on the spine. “I got one card to play here, Sam. Michael’s ripped the rest of the deck up. There’s one ending that doesn’t end like… like the other universe.”

And he flaps a hand in the air, like he can pull aside a curtain and reveal the desolation and the horror of the Apocalypse Universe.

“It’s still an ending, Dean. It doesn’t matter if it’s the right or the good ending. This book means one thing.” And he slaps his hand on the glossy cover. “It’s death.”

“They’re all death, Sammy.” Dean says finally, and he taps a finger on the hand that Sam still has splayed across the book. “This is the only one that’s worth something.”

Sam picks the book up in his numb hands and his eyes refuse to focus on its slick surface.
“Sam –” Dean says, as Sam pushes back from the table. But Sam shakes his head at his brother, and Dean falls silent. And he doesn’t say a word as Sam turns his back on him and leaves the room.

Sam shoves the Bunker door open and leaves it swinging on its hinges. Billie’s book is still clenched tight in his hands, and he wants to rip it in half. Somehow the day has already tipped into evening, and there’s a biting cold in the air that makes Sam shiver underneath his thin jacket.

He stomps off along the street until his feet are frozen and numb in his shoes. Finally, he hits the wall of his endurance and feels like his anger is siphoning off like the warmth from his bones, and he’s left with nothing but fear and the beginnings of frostbite.

“Billie!” He yells into the night, and there’s not so much as an echo bouncing back from the fields. Like his voice will ripple out towards the horizon forever.

He throws the book down on the asphalt and watches it skitter away along the gravely surface. His phone buzzes in his pocket and it takes every ounce of self-control to not take it out and throw it down on the ground too.

He hears a scatter of dead leaves and grass get caught in a gust of wind behind him, and he glances back to make sure Dean hasn’t followed him. When he turns back, his hand flies towards his side for the gun he doesn’t have.

Formless in the darkness, a woman bends down and picks up the book in slim hands.

“Billie?” Sam asks, but he knows he’s wrong before he’s even finished the question.

Jessica the Reaper sweeps the long wave of her hair over her shoulder like it’s an irritant, and Sam wonders stupidly what her real form looks like. “Not Billie.” Jessica says after it’s clear that Sam is just going to stare at her slack jawed. “Death has better things to do than run when a Winchester comes calling.” But she sighs, as if she just realized that’s exactly what she’s doing.

“Is it true?” Sam spits out

Jessica turns the book over in her hands and opens the book somewhere in the middle. Sam can hardly see the book, much less if words have formed on the page. “Awfully vague, Sam Winchester. But if you’re asking about Dean’s fate, then yes. It’s true.”

“There has to be something else.” Sam says roughly, his voice dangerously edging towards a plea. “Something that doesn’t end with Dean in Hell. Please. Tell Billie I need to talk to her.”

Jessica shuts the book with a snap of her hand, and holds it against her hip like a student carrying a textbook. “You think you’re the first person to ask for an audience with Death? You’ve already had much more… personal attention than most ever receive.”

Sam feels the pressure in his chest cinch ever tighter. “Jessica, we have done everything that we can. We’ve stopped the apocalypse over and over. That has to count for something. We’ve… this can’t be the only end to Dean’s story. Not after we’ve come so far. Please, Jessica, let me talk to Billie. Please.”

Jessica purses her lips like she’s considering, and her fingers tap along the edge of the book. “No.” She answers simply. A frigid breeze stirs her skirt around her legs, but she doesn’t seem to notice it or the cold. “Look,” she adds, seeing something in Sam’s expression, “Death is never wrong. I’ve seen Dean’s shelves for myself. They’re all slightly different, I’ll grant you, but they all end the same
way. My personal favorite is one where Dean comes to look for you out here and a freak plane accident takes him out, and Michael breaks free. Relax, Sam – “ She adds, after seeing Sam’s horrified expression. “It’s not going to happen. But it could have, is my point. So yes, right now, Dean’s options are to hold out until Michael takes over, or to jump into Lucifer’s Cage. But his destiny has changed before. It can change again.” She holds the book out to Sam, and he curls numb fingers around the spine. She doesn’t let go immediately, and they hold the book between them in some bizarre frozen moment. “If you follow along the path Death set out in this book, maybe you’ll find a way to change the ending. I’ve been surprised by Winchesters before. We all have.”

Jessica tilts her head like she’s receiving a call and is listening intently. She nods her head as if answering a question. “Okay.” She says, and she lets go of the book, only to tap a finger lightly against the cover. The pages of the book flash brightly underneath the closed cover. Sam pulls the book closer and flips open to the middle of the book. Spindly black ink splashes over the pages in gibberish English and a smattering of other languages. He looks up at Jessica, confused, but Jessica just smiles cryptically. “Death sends her regards, and says next time you need to talk to her, not to try and summon her like a crossroads demon. She’s not at your beck and call.”

“Wait – “ Sam says, and reaches out a hand to grab Jessica’s forearm before she can disappear, but his hand slips right through her skin like vapor. “How do we – “

“Au revoir, Sam Winchester. Take better care of Dean’s book next time. Death doesn’t appreciate her things being damaged.” Sam blinks, and he’s alone on the street.

“Let me get this straight,” Bobby says, and Dean has to stop himself gritting his teeth at the eighth interruption. “Your plan – Death’s plan – is to track down the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse… who actually exist… to open up a portal to Hell so you can jump in with Michael trapped in your noggin?” The old hunter looks back and forth between the confused Nephilim and the stony and silent angel before returning his gaze to Dean. “Am I missing anything else?”

“No, that about covers it. Oh – last time we opened the portal, the devil snapped your neck like a friggin’ wishbone. Probably a non-issue this time around, though.”

Bobby’s eyes widen for a moment under the brim of his hat, before narrowing with suspicion.

“What – it worked out eventually.” Dean says, enjoying getting a rise out of the old man after he slammed him into a crater on the other side of the country without even apologizing once.

“Okay, any other questions?” Dean asks after a moment, slapping his hands together like he’s just asked everyone to place their grocery requests.

“Dean, you’ve had some terrible plans,” Cas grates, and his blue eyes are volatile and pissed, “but this is – “

“The only chance we have.” Dean cuts him off.

Cas glares at him for a moment. “I want to see Death’s book.”

Dean feels his stomach drop. “Sam has it.”

Cas shakes his head, “So, I’m guessing he’s taking this as well as you could expect.”

“Cas, we’ve been back and forth on this for almost an hour now. I’m getting sick of explaining myself.” Dean’s rancor is rising. He’s tried to be calm, he’s tried to be reasonable. But he’s sick of
everyone acting like he’s ready to swan dive into Lucifer’s Cage for kicks. They need to understand that this is it. There is no other option. The last time he disagreed with one of Death’s mandates, he had to kill the cosmic entity himself. And he’s guessing that Billie is better at ducking and weaving than her millennia-old predecessor.

“If anyone else has anything to bring to the table, I’m all ears.” Dean says, trying to shut the lid on his anger. “I’d much rather be throwing back margaritas on some beach somewhere, and not listening to Michael banging on the walls. But this is the hand we’re dealt. I can track down the Horsemens of the Apocalypse without you, but – “ and his sentence is interrupted as the Bunker door swings wide, and Sam steps onto the balcony. Their eyes meet for a tense moment. “ – but I’d sure as hell rather have you on my side.” Dean finishes, and his eyes don’t leave Sam.

Sam looks away, but Dean can see Billie’s book clenched tight in frozen hands. He can see the halting resignation in his eyes, but the fire of a fight boiling away in his core. They watch collectively as Sam takes the stairs down slowly and joins them. He looks like he’s just stepped in from a winter storm. His eyes are glassy, and his mouth is a thin line.

It’s the precipice of something. They’re teetering on the edge, and Dean waits to see which way they’ll fall.

Sam takes a shuddering breath, but holds the book out to Dean. Dean takes the icy book in his hands, and lets the book hang slackly at his side, forgotten. “Okay.” Sam says.

Dean raises his eyebrows. “Okay?”

Sam is unmoving for a moment. “Okay. We’ll do this. We’ll get the Horsemen, we’ll get the rings. But there’s one condition. You – “ And he jabs a frozen finger at Dean’s chest, “you don’t jump in unless we have a way to shove Michael in there without you. Michael belongs in Lucifer’s Cage. You’re not going with him.”

Dean wants to shake his head, but knows that’s just going to start a fight all over again. Sam can set any conditions he wants, can rationalize this any way he chooses. But Dean knows what the book in his hand means. And it means the end. “Alright, Sam.” Dean agrees, and watches as something deflates in his brother’s chest.

Sam nods slowly, like he can’t believe he’s even agreeing to that much. “Okay.” He mutters, mostly to himself. “So, what do we need to do?”

And it’s a relief to finally be able to talk about it. Days of tense lies and secret phone calls have left Dean more burned out than he realized. “Billie’s book is a tracking spell.” He holds the book up, and Cas takes it gingerly from his hands. The angel flips the book open and frowns at the scribbles – apparently visible to all, now. Dean shoots Sam a look, but his brother just shrugs one shoulder. “Billie said we need Rowena to get the spell working, but we need Archangel grace to power the spell.”

Sam’s eyes scrunch up, like he’s working out long division in his head. “The Michael Monsters.” He realizes, and turns back towards Dean with a significant look. “That’s why you wanted to pull the grace out of them. Michael’s grace in his army can power the spell.”

“Got it in one.” Dean says, knowing it’s not the appropriate time to smile, but still feeling that big brother burst of pride. “So, now we need to figure out how to track them down without me flying into barn roofs.”

And honest to God – Sam actually smiles. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone.
“Well… I just got a voice mail from Garth. And I think he has a lead on that.”

Jessica walks down the Vs in Death’s Reading Room, her fingers lightly tracing over the spines of the Valentines’, her footsteps echoing towards the far reaches of the library.

It’s technically not her day to shadow the Winchesters, but she was pleased to be picked for the assignment. It’s always amusing to stir the humans up. The alive ones, anyway. She much prefers humans that aren’t breathing.

“Jessica.” A voice greets her simply as she steps into the main corridor.

Jessica smiles to herself, feeling perfect lips split to reveal her pleasant human smile. She’s practiced it. Dead humans seem to appreciate when a Reaper has a comforting presence. Jessica’s last human form was a bit sharper, more edgy. Her closure rate suffered.

“Jessica,’ huh?” She says, and watches Death’s perfect eyebrow arch. But Death doesn’t seem irritated with her teasing. She’s Death – she can call her by her human name, or any name, if she wants. And Death and her – they go way back. She likes her. Even a Horseman can have favorites.

“How did it go?” Death asks, ignoring Jessica’s easy badinage.

“I told Sam what he needed to hear. He’s on board.”

Death nods, and leans back against the shelving thoughtfully. Jessica waits for her to say something else, but Death seems distracted by her own thoughts.

“You don’t think you’re being a little cruel?” Jessica prompts, mostly to get a rise out of her old friend. “You know there’s no stopping the plan once it’s in motion. There’s no changing Dean’s fate.”

Death doesn’t look at Jessica, but she barks out a sudden laugh. “Oh, I know it’s cruel.” Death’s lips curve into a smirk, and Jessica finally sees Billie under the thick pall of Death. “I just don’t care.”

Chapter End Notes

Not a ton of room for action in this chapter, but next couple should have a little more! Ugh I'm such a sucker for Winchester confrontation scenes. Thanks for reading <3
“Alright, Garth, you’re on speaker.”

The sounds of a Top 100 Pop radio station crackle through the speakers on Sam’s phone for a moment, before Garth mutes the volume. Dean shakes his head, and Sam kicks at his ankle under the table.

“Hiya fellas.” Garth greets cheerfully. “Sam, did you get my voicemail?”

“Hey, Garth.” Dean says, “Yeah, we got it. You mind explaining what you meant when you said you scored tickets to a *Team Michael Reunion Tour*?” His eyes close at the end of the sentence like he can’t even believe he said the words out loud.

“Uh, yeah. I got a call from Brett – “

“Brett?” Sam intercedes.

“Oh, yeah – Brett. He was my grace pledge buddy.” There’s a moment of dead air as no one knows how to respond to that. “We were at Hitomi Plaza – we took Michael’s grace thingy together. He doesn’t know that I was working with you guys. I signed into my voicemail on the burner phone you leant me, and he left a message for me. Said that the old gang was getting back together, figure out next steps now that Michael’s been AWOL for too long.”

“When did you get the message?” Sam asks, and he sounds skeptical.

“I dunno. Few days ago, I guess.”

“This is our shot.” Dean says, and drums his hands on the table, feeling adrenaline pump into his system like he’s already yanking grace out of Michael’s army left and right. “Even if only a few Michael Monsters show up, man, we gotta pull the trigger here. This could be our gold mine.”

Sam opens his mouth, but Dean talks over him before he can rain caution and patience on Dean’s parade. “Where’s the meeting, Garth?”

“Uh… I don’t know.”

Sam and Dean exchange glances. “Jesus, is it a Skype interview?” Dean replies testily.

Garth laughs, like Dean’s made a joke. “Nah. Guess it’s a big secret. Brett said that they’re cracking down, making sure that everything is still kosher. Guess Michael must like a tight ship. Brett told me to meet up with the group he hooked up with, and if they think everything’s groovy, then I’ll head out with them.”

“Give us a second, Garth.” Sam says, and he taps a finger on the phone’s mute button. “We can’t let him get back into this.” Sam says lowly, like Garth can still hear them.

Cas glances at Dean, and Dean knows they’re thinking the same thing. “It’s a risk.” Cas agrees after a moment. “But it’s our only shot to take out a contingent of Michael’s army, *and* get enough grace to power Billie’s spell.”
The surprise on Sam’s face is unmistakable, like he can’t believe that he and Cas are on opposite sides of this. “Cas, you cannot seriously want to send Garth into a nest of Michael Monsters. He doesn’t even have Michael’s grace in him anymore! What if they have a way of checking for that? We can’t – “

“Sam.” Dean interrupts, and Sam reluctantly settles his gaze on Dean. Sam’s face is stressed and worn, and Dean feels for him. He does. It’s been a shitty couple of hours. Fuck, it’s been a shitty couple of weeks. But Sam doesn’t have to hear the endless cacophony of an archangel trying to light him on fire from the inside out. He doesn’t understand – not really – that if they can’t pull off Billie’s plan, and soon, Garth’s life expectancy won’t outlast the rest of the planet’s. “I don’t have enough of a handle on archangel stuff to be able to wing my way over there yet. If we don’t do this, we’re stuck picking off Michael’s army one-by-one. We don’t have that kind of time.”

Sam glares at Dean, but they both know he’s right.

Garth starts humming the theme song to *Friends* quietly, and Sam winces. “Fine.” He snaps. “But I don’t like this.”

“None of us like this.” Dean adds, but taps the phone off mute before his brother can change his mind. “Alright, Garth. If you’re willing to dive back under mortar fire, we’re behind you. Same plan as last time – you get in, give us intel, and then we yank you out.”

Sam leans back in his chair and frosts his family with a look. “Because that worked so well last time.” He mutters, but the table ignores him.

“This isn’t just your fight.” Garth replies, and it’s the riposte that slices the wick off Sam’s fuse. “We all need to pitch in to stop Mike’s army. I may not be a hunter no more, but I’ll always be on the front lines when it comes to protecting my family.”

Dean swallows past the dryness in his throat. Garth’s right – he’s literally headed to the front lines here. And Dean’s a ticking time bomb that’s been sitting on his ass in HQ. “You’re a good man, Garth.” Dean says seriously, “One of the best. Alright – make the call. Let us know when you hear back about next steps.”

“Rightio.” And Garth signs off.

“God.” Dean says, after Sam’s tucked his phone back in his pocket. “I can’t believe the fate of the world is in the hands of Jennifer Aniston.”

Sam shrugs. “Actually – Garth thinks he’s more of a Joey.”

“What?”

“What?”

The Bunker falls into a holding pattern.

Garth doesn’t call, but he checks in periodically over text or some app that Sam has to pretend not to have called *Snapchat*. Brett hasn’t reached back out to Garth, but Sam figures that might not be the worst news. Sure - he knows it’s important to track down Michael’s army. But Rowena hasn’t returned yet, and without her, they have no idea how much grace they’re actually going to need to power the tracking spell. They’re on deadline, but without a solid plan of getting Michael in the cage without riding his brother on the way down, Sam is almost relieved that the meeting is taking a while
to set up.

And in the meantime, Dean and Cas play at angel school.

Sam watches sometimes. Dean and Cas often practice outside (because who knew shoving a nuclear explosion inside 6 plus feet of blood and bone was so volatile? Oh, wait.)

Sam will bring out a dusty stack of lore books, and catch up on research. He’ll lie on his back and breathe in the cold, grassy air while talking on the phone with their mom, and watch Dean out of the corner of his eye. He’ll interrupt a lesson with a couple plates of sandwiches precariously balanced on sweating cans of coke. Dean rolls his eyes and makes half an attempt at eating, purely for Sam’s sake. Once or twice, Jack joins them, and he and Sam will spar and practice throwing punches. That’s quickly stopped when it became readily apparent that Dean was much more interested in teaching Jack proper fighting forms than he was on being a transcendental wave of energy.

All in all, Sam has an almost restful few days. Dean, on the other hand, has to wrap his mind around the fact that with Michael inside – he’s effectively a card-carrying Archangel.

And his mind really, really has a hard time processing that.

It’s really something to watch. Dean will spend three hours trying to fly three feet away, and not move an inch. Cas will have him focus on what he calls se vol õigi lumen, or “the true light.” Apparently the closest translation to that particular slice of Enochian is a combination of Latin and a dead Livonian language, but Dean still calls it Glowy Death Hands. And when he’s not calling it Glowy Death Hands, he’s calling it that fucking stupid laser beam thing I’ll never fucking get.

But sometimes… something clicks. Not always on purpose. (Actually, mostly not on purpose.) Like, once when Dean was trying to focus on sensing the closest pocket of Michael grace, and he ended up setting the grass in the road’s shoulder ablaze, and no amount of water could put it out. Or when Dean stumbled over a rise in the asphalt, and crushed the bottle he was holding into atoms. The funniest and most alarming of the list is when Dean was bitching about not being able to appreciate a nice cold beer at the local bar, and ended up teleporting smack into the bar’s back store room. It scared the shit out of the waitress restocking napkins, and it definitely scared the shit out of Sam. But on the drive back, Sam laughed and laughed as his brother fumed in the passenger seat. Just seems kind of bullshit I can’t flap back on the return trip. And Sam laughs, just be grateful you weren’t thinking about New Zealand. And Dean has to shake his head, because that’s actually a problem he’s going to have now.

But Dean starts to get it. Some of it. He’s much faster at picking up the more… destructive and physical abilities. He can’t read minds or dream walk, but after he sets the first three wooden fence posts on fire with a snap of fingers, Sam stops snickering about the bar teleportation mistake. Dean can’t brush his fingers on Sam’s forehead and force him out of consciousness, but he picks up Jack’s practice junker car with one hand, and beams at them with a ten-dollar-grin. Dean still has some issues with flying, but can teleport to the dug-up mason jar of grace like he’s a goddamn homing pigeon.

Some of it is a hit. Most of it is a miss. But Dean is coming into his abilities like he was always meant to – and Sam supposes that technically, maybe he was. And if it wasn’t for the barely discernable flinches, the suppressed recoils, and the couple times he’s entered a room and caught Dean with his eyes closed and his hands massaging his temples like he’s fighting a killer migraine – or an apocalypse-prone archangel – Sam almost would have missed the clouds for the silver-lining.

Sometimes, you settle for the scraps.
Dean’s shredding the label on a beer bottle when Sam yawns his way into the kitchen.

Sam blinks blearily at him for a moment before shaking his head. “Really, dude? It’s like… 6 in the morning.”

Dean shrugs, but lets the accusation roll off his back. It’s funny how time becomes kind of absurd when your day isn’t sliced up by consuming meals or sleep. Dean wonders how Jack must feel; Dean may have gone from zero to a thousand, but Jack must have felt like he slammed into a wall so hard that he’s still reeling backwards.

“Can you even get drunk anymore?” Sam asks, and can’t quite smother down the begrudging respect in his voice when he sees the small army of beer bottles lined up on the table in front of him.

Dean huffs a laugh. “C’mon, Sammy. I couldn’t get drunk on beer even before I hit the blue acid. Anyway, why are you up so early?”

Sam shrugs, and pulls out a chair. The Bunker is silent – one of those odd, quiet mornings that’s few and far between these days. Though the Apocalypse Hunters’ tendency to avoid Dean has doubled down since the Dominic fiasco. He can’t say he’s too upset. Maybe he needs a break from the Bunker, too. A chance to hit the road, case out a hunt. Salt a grave and watch the match fall from muddy fingers, feeling the heat of flames like an old friend. He doesn’t feel much these days. Doesn’t really like thinking about the last time he felt nothing.

Dean flexes his arm on the table, and almost expects to feel the pull of a scar on his arm, the tug of a Mark on his soul.

Sam watches with shaded eyes, and Dean can tell he wants to ask, but is choosing to let it go.

“Any way.” Dean says after a moment, and drums his hands twice on the table. “Coffee?” He asks, already crossing over to the machine. Without that buzz of caffeine hitting his brain, the taste of coffee doesn’t really do much for him. But Sam without his coffee in the morning is like poking a bear with a larger bear. Read: inadvisable.

“Sure.” Sam agrees easily, and Dean starts filling the carafe with water under the tap. Dean hears the light tap of Sam’s phone thunking on the table, and knows his brother is scrolling through his algorithm program, hunting down new cases for his hunters. Maybe he can grab one of them, get that snag out of his system.

He dumps the fragrant grounds into the filter, and flexes his back like there’s a minor itch that isn’t worth scratching.

“Huh.” Sam grunts behind him. Both pushing and not pushing.

“Huh yourself.” Dean replies lightly, figuring his brother either caught a case or found a new smoothie recipe. But when he turns around, Sam is staring at him. Great, one of those ‘huhs.’

“What’s up with your back?” Sam asks, as Dean takes a seat across from him.

Dean frowns, having already forgotten the minor flex a few seconds earlier.

Sam continues, “You stretch your back like that – like… there’s something else there.”

And the moment is immediately tense and awkward as they both realize what Sam is trying to say.
Dean rips the band-aid off, “What – like wings?”

Sam raises his hands listlessly and lets them fall back to the table. Like it’s just one of those things.

Dean, on the other hand, wants to throw up. “There’s nothing there, Sam. Cas doesn’t run around knocking into doorways with wings. I don’t have wings. At least not, like…” and he waves a hand through the air, “like, here.”

“I’ve seen them.” Sam admits.

“Bullshit you’ve seen them.”

“In the church. With Lucifer. When you came in, they were like… impressions… like shadows on the wall behind you. Wings.” He adds, mainly to himself. Like he’s pushed past all the bad memories of the weeks that followed after Dean said yes to Michael, past all the struggle and pain and uncertainty, and is back in that first moment. The moment where Dean Winchester busted into a church, eyes glowing like a star gone supernova, dark wings painting the walls like they’re soaked into the grain of the wood. Sam might be able to remember feelings of wonderment and protection, but Dean can’t separate the before from the then. He can only remember sinking through the membrane of his mind and slipping into the darkness. A ship lost at sea.

There’s a phantom tightness between Dean’s shoulder blades, and he fights the urge to run a hand across the covered swath of his back. To make sure.

Sam is still waiting for him to say something, and his eyes are plaintive and so dark, it almost seems like a stranger’s gaze. The moment stretches too long, and finally Dean is about to blurt something probably caustic and honest, with those horrible choppy edges of vulnerability, when Sam’s phone rings on the table, startling them both.

Dean’s heart thuds in his chest as Sam checks the number, and Dean knows exactly who’s on the other end of that phone when Sam’s eyes widen.

Sam connects the call and punches the speaker button before Dean lunges across the table. “Garth?”

“Howdy, Sam. That brother of yours around?”

“Right here, man.” Dean greets, and keeps his eyes on the screen, avoiding Sam’s gaze. “Tell me you got something.”

“You really think your old pal Garth wouldn’t come through?” Garth chuckles over the line. Sam kicks Dean even before his brother’s opened his snarky mouth. Ow, Dean mouths, but they both know it didn’t hurt. “Got the meet and greet all set up. I’m catching up with Brett and his crew outside town in a few hours, and the big rally is tomorrow. Indianapolis.”

Dean works that out in his head. Little over 11 hours, no stops. Easy.

Sam nods slowly to himself. He may not be completely on board, but he’s not one to slack off on a job. “Alright.” He says after a moment. “See if you can find the location of the second meeting. If we can get that early enough, you won’t have to go in at all.”

“Oh, sure, Sam.” Garth says agreeably. “But that’s not the kinda outfit these folks tend to run.”

“We’ll head out soon, Garth. Keep us posted, okay? And thanks. Seriously – thanks.”

“Ain’t no thang. Wait, one more thing – you guys still there?”
They assure Garth that they are, indeed, still there.

“They assure Garth that they are, indeed, still there.

“From what Brett said over the phone... it kinda seems like they don't really know what happened to Michael.”

Sam and Dean exchange glances. “What do you mean? They know we peeled off with him - they stormed the Bunker to get him back.”

“Right, yeah.” Garth says quickly, and they hear the sound of a car horn in the distance. “But it sounds like they don't know that Michael is locked away in Dean’s head. Or at least they're not sure. They think that he’s in... I dunno, angel jail or somethin’.”

Bang.

Sam doesn’t catch the wince.

“They don’t know that Dean is behind the wheel?” Sam says, shocked.

“I dunno. Maybe. Guess I’ll find out later today. Alright, I gotta take a Tennessee Piss.”

“What’s a Tennessee P - “ Dean starts, but Sam quickly taps the disconnect button and treats Dean to a level 2 bitch face. Dean hardly notices - is already dumping coffee into a mug and splashing in way too much milk. He shoves it into Sam’s frozen hands and is already padding out of the kitchen.

“Dean!” Sam sputters, already muffled from the next room.

“Wheels up in an hour!” Dean calls back, and the smells of coffee and progress follow him into the hall.

Rocky’s Bar. His Bar.

Dean snags one of the folded copies of a newspaper from the bar on his way to the freezer. He doesn’t look up at the pacing archangel, though catches the movement as he hooks his ankle into a bar chair and sinks down. He scans the first few lines of text, and whistles low under his breath.

“You even created a fake Little League team in this town? Didn’t peg you for a family man.” Dean drawls, and slaps the thin newspaper against his knee until it falls flat. Michael’s expression is inscrutable, but apparently, he’s bored enough pacing a hole into the floor to actually give Dean his attention. Dean’s not sure he should be grateful. “But come on, Mike.” And he holds up the newspaper so Michael can see it. “The Westchester Weekly? Seems a little heavy handed.”

“I merely created the structure. You filled in the blanks.”

Dean clicks his tongue. “Kinda sounds like you just called me unimaginative.”

One side of Michael’s mouth curves towards a cruel smirk, but he stays silent.

Dean drops the newspaper onto the table, and dusts off a couple cracked peanut shells onto the dirty floor. “Thought we’d check in.”

“Interesting.”

“It’s really not.” Dean replies flatly. Too quickly.
“What are you trying to wrangle out of me this time, Dean? Clock’s ticking down. Unless… all this posturing is really just an excuse to come down here, see if the crack’s widened? Because I can assure you – “ And Michael steps to the window – the fractured glass splitting his face into uneven halves. “It has.”

Dean keeps his face carefully blank. “Yeah, we can break out the measuring sticks and see whose is bigger later.”

Michael raps a knuckle against the glass, and a small puff of blue disperses into the air. The room drops in temperature, and something brushes against the back of Dean’s neck. He’s up and out of the chair in half a heartbeat, but there’s nothing in the room except for himself and the dick wearing his face.

“You seem concerned, Winchester.” And Dean brings his eyes back around. “Worried something’s bleeding through the cracks?”

Dean forces a smirk, but it falls flat. “Who’s worried? I’m just surprised you haven’t run out of crack metaphors. Though there’s always cracks of the ass variety -”

“Do you remember when you were… let’s see… 8 years old? In that filthy motel in Montana?”

Dean feels his mouth click together, thrown into silence at the sudden topic change.

“Oh, come on, Dean.” Michael intercedes, catching Dean’s confusion. “You already knew that I’d tripped down memory lane. Only took a few seconds, really. You’re, what, roughly four decades old? Then another forty years in hell?” Michael must see a flicker of something on Dean’s face, because his lips curve into that close-lipped smile. “Give or take. Though I suppose hell must take more than it gives.”

“Guess you can ask our world’s Michael how he’s enjoying it. Didn’t do so great on my SAT’s, but I’m pretty sure he’s been clinking his mug against the bars for just a hair longer.”

The humor drops from Michael’s face, eyes shadowed under the brim of his ridiculous cap. Dean watches as all the feint of being human is smothered by the cold callousness of what’s really… just another monster.

“1987, Montana.” Michael continues, thumbing the rewind button. “Your brother was with Mrs. Larkin – the woman who owned the motel. She was taking him out for ice cream. You were helping John Winchester strip down his arsenal.”

Dean frowns, not a single word dropping from Michael’s mouth ringing any bells.

“You asked your father if angels were real.” And that twisted smile is back. “You asked if God existed, if he’s watching over you, and your family. Do you remember what your father said?”

Dean doesn’t remember the memory, but he sure as hell can remember his dad’s opinions on Heaven.

“Your father told you it was all a lie. Monsters are real, son.” And that’s goddamn John Winchester’s voice spilling from Michael’s mouth, “Wendigos are real. Demons are real. Angels – all that Bible shit – they ain’t worth the ink on the page.”

And Dean remembers now. Of course he does. He can feel the skin-warmed gun mag in his palm, the grease coating his fingertips. He can see the storm boiling under the stillness of his father, lightning trapped under ice. And Dean asked If demons are real, why can’t angels be, too?
And maybe Michael says it, or maybe it’s a memory dragged up from the dark, but Dean hears John Winchester say clear as day: “Because if God and angels are real, they’re the ones that put your mom on that ceiling.”

God. Dean doesn’t know what’s worse – that Michael rifled through memories that Dean didn’t even realize were still at the bottom of the bag, or that somehow, decades later, Dean’s found himself in John Winchester’s perfect nightmare.

“What’s your point?” Dean hears himself say.

“No point.” Michael gibes. “Just curious. You have all that stolen potential rattling around in that vessel, all that borrowed grace. We could do… well, anything, really. And I mean anything. And I just found it amusing that you have all that power locked down in your marrow, and countless people are going to die because you’re not good enough to find the right key to unlock it. It’s like finding the winning lottery ticket under the couch cushions after your family has already starved to death. It’s worthless.”

And all those doubts and self-recriminations that Dean’s tortured himself with over the last few days bubble up like stomach acid – his slow progress, his ineptitude to really master anything other than setting a few logs on fire. He’s seen the universe where an archangel decided to roll up their sleeves, and that world has nearly burned to the ground ten times over. And really, what is Dean, compared to that?

“Indianapolis mean anything to you?”

Michael blinks, but there’s a stir or something behind his eyes. It washes away almost immediately, almost before Dean can even see.

Almost.

“Oh.” Dean says, and the Archangel’s upper lip twitches behind the glass. “Now that was interesting.” But under the bluster, Dean’s heart is thumping double time. The element of surprise is only good if you’re the one that has it – and if Michael already knows that there’s something planned in Indianapolis, that means they’re walking into something Michael planned out weeks ago.

Michael seems to sense the dawning realization in Dean, and drops his attempt at nonchalance. In the end, he’s just like any other monster of the week – full of pride and self-importance.

“You know what else I found in that vapid head of yours, Winchester?” And he leans in so close to the glass that Dean forgets for a moment that it’s not him behind bars. “I discovered that despite that everyone around you ends up on the wrong side of the veil, they do seem to always jump at the chance to run through fire for you.” Michael lets that settle, and then adds in a different tone, “If you think that I didn’t know exactly what Garth was doing in Kansas City, then you’ve grossly underestimated me. I recognized that little upstart from your memories the moment he walked into the building. That was mistake number one.” Dean feels a thrill of fear lick down his spine, like he senses that feather light presence behind him again. Michael smiles. “Mistake number two was thinking you could get away with it twice.”

Dean’s eyes fly open in the passenger seat, and there’s a choking sound as he surges upright on the bench.

Sam knew something was wrong the second that Dean tossed the keys into his hands at the last gas
station. He flicks furious eyes towards Dean before they lurch back to the road. “Dammit, Dean! You said you wouldn’t go poking around in there!”

Cas and Jack had been chatting quietly in the backseat – but both immediately break off the conversation as Sam’s rancor fills the car.

“What is he talking about?” Cas inquires gruffly.

Dean scrubs a hand down his face, and shoots his brother a dirty look.

“He’s been talking to Michael.” Sam rats him out without regret, summoning the tone reserved specially for younger brothers.

“Dean, that is unbelievably –”

“Stupid, yeah, I know.” Dean finishes, digging his phone out of his jacket pocket. Sam squints as the screen as his brother scrolls through the contacts, only bringing his eyes back to the road as the Impala’s tires thunder across the shoulder’s rumble strip. He quickly jerks the Impala back between the lines, and Dean glares at him over the phone.

“What are you doing?”

“Calling Garth.” Dean replies shortly, and he jams the phone to his ear. The car is silent as Dean listens to the empty rings, before he finally thumbs the disconnect button and drops his phone roughly on the dashboard. Sam hardly catches his brother’s half-smothered wince as Michael thunders away in Dean’s head.

“What’s going on, Dean?” Sam pulls his own phone out to see if he has any missed calls or messages from Garth. He has a few unread case notifications, a new Kinkos Rewards email, but nothing from their resident werewolf.

Dean’s fingers tap a staccato beat on his thigh, and he jerks his head to the side. “I don’t know. Just something Michael said.”

“Not only should you not be going anywhere near Michael,” Cas begins, and Sam watches Dean’s face harden slightly, “but you can’t trust anything that he says. He’ll say whatever it takes to get you to break, Dean.”

“C’mon, Cas –” Dean protests, turning in the seat to flash irascible green eyes at his friend. “It’s not like he chanted some vague prophecy at me in Latin. He specifically mentioned Garth after I asked about Indianapolis – “

Sam interjects, “Yeah, maybe don’t tell the all-powerful Archangel where we’re headed, man – “

“Lord’s fucking name.” Dean complains, and sinks heavily back into his seat. “You guys act like we’re throwing back shots and adding each other on LinkedIn. I only went to talk to Michael to see if I could get anything out of him about Indianapolis. Guy’s literally chilling out in a freezer. Maybe he’ll play ball one of these days.”

Cas scoffs lowly in the back seat. “Michael is an Archangel – the first born of Heaven and its unrivaled defender. He’s not going to give up his battle plan because he’s cold.”

Dean turns towards the back seat again. His eyes are flat and inscrutable as they settle on Cas, and the silence stretches out to deadly proportions as the seconds tick by. Finally, Dean turns back to the front. “Okay, that was actually pretty funny.”
Cas sighs.

“Dean,” Sam intercedes, trying to go for reassuring, though now his own doubts are knocking around. “Garth will be fine. He probably just turned his phone off, he was only supposed to meet with Brett and his group, like –” Sam checks his watch, “like an hour ago.”

Dean still doesn’t look convinced, but does seem like he’s done talking about it. He crosses his arms, and his foot bounces anxiously in the foot well. Sam bites his lip, and turns back to the road. He’s worried about Garth, too. But he doesn’t see what else they can do except tick towards the red on the speedometer.

Guess that’s what they’ll have to do.

“Dean?”

“What.”

“You don’t really have a LinkedIn, do you?”

“Shaddup.”

Chapter End Notes

Jesus, how is this chapter almost 5k words, literally nothing happens.

I'M SOOORRRRY. I know it's a boring chapter. I really did want to skip "Angel Training Montage" but it needed to happen. It did. I'm sorry. It's over. Next chapter WILL be more exciting. I was going to leave this chapter at a cliffhanger, but figured I should be nice since this update was a little longer to come than normal. Should pick up a little now that we're getting into more exciting stuff. Guess I was just dragging my ass.

Thanks for reading <3 and for comments, as always!

I hate LinkedIn.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

If you're confused about who [new character] is while reading, scroll to the bottom A/N for explanation! EDIT: it’s supposed to be unclear at first, sorry for confusion. Don’t scroll too early!***

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Hello?"

"Garth?"

"Hello?"

"Garth, it’s Dean, we need to – “

"Ha! You’ve been Garthed! Leave a message, playa."

"Fuck." Dean grunts vehemently, and ends the call without leaving a voicemail.

"That’s like the eighth time you’ve fallen for that, man – “ Sam says, but Dean instantly glares him down, and Sam’s mouth shuts with an audible click.

They’re still a few hours out from Indianapolis. Garth had sent them a text a few minutes before he’d met with the welcoming committee, and they hadn’t heard back in hours. Hours. And after the oh-so-fruitful conversation with Michael, Dean’s sure that they’ve shoved Garth right in front of the firing squad.

And Michael might spew a lot of crap out of that borrowed mouth of his, but the bastard was right about one thing – people that help the Winchesters tend to get iced in the end.

Bang.

Bang.

Garth startles awake with a gasp, shooting up so fast that he clocks his head on the underside of a table.

“Balls.” He curses, and when he tries to rub at the back of his head, finds that his arms are secured firmly behind him.

He blinks sluggishly at the room, and tries to find some sense of balance. His head is spinning, and definitely hurts more than damage-by-table-bashing. He’s hit his head on a number of tables over the years (don’t get him started on the USC Frat Party of ‘99. He was picking splinters and glitter out of his hairline for days), but he knows that anything – or anyone – that can give him concussion-levels of pain through that supernaturally-buffed noggin of his can’t be good.
He’s in what appears to be a janitor supply closet. Someone had thoughtfully left the lights on for him, but chose to leave all the ammonia-drenched cleaning chemicals next to his head, and the odor is driving a pickaxe into his brain. He kicks one of the cleaners into the corner, but it doesn’t lessen the smell in the enclosed room. His arms are bound behind him – he can’t tell with what, but whatever it is, it’s strong enough to hold him. One of the table legs is threaded between his back and his bound arms, but he’s able to shove the table up with his shoulder, and slide his arms out from under. He hops to his feet, and the fog in his head starts to dissipate.

He remembers texting the Winchesters his final check-in, and remembers getting a kissy face emoji back from Dean. Wait – no, maybe he was the one that sent the emoji. Maybe his head is still a little fuzzy.

He was supposed to meet Brett at a laundromat outside of Indianapolis. Brett said he’d met up with a pair of vamps and a shifter outside of Kansas City after Garth had been shoved unconscious into a trunk, and everything else had gone to hell. From the laundromat, Garth was supposed to head into the city with the posse, and they’d link up with the rest of the regrouped army.

The last memory that floats to the top of his mind was pushing open the laundromat door, listening to the small brass bell chime as it clinks against the wooden door. He saw Brett sitting on one of the long benches alone, and Garth knew he was in shit-three-feet-deep when he saw the guilty expression on the werewolf’s face. And then he felt something slam into the back of his head, and then saw nothing but that miles-long stretch of darkness.

This is why he uses drycleaners over public laundromats. And because he likes those fun paper slips over the hangers.

A quick inspection proves that Garth’s phone’s been lifted from his person – which makes him feel a little bad, since the phone was technically one of Sam’s. Garth uses his knee to give the door knob a hopeful jiggle, but it’s locked. Naturally. He kicks at the door a few times, and after a stretch of silence, thinks he can hear the sound of footsteps retreating down the corner.

Garth gives the door a helpful little kick, but it’s solid. He kicks it again harder, and bellows “Room service!”

On cue, he hears footsteps approaching. He steps back from the door before the sound of crunching wood tears through the room, and the door is nearly torn off its hinges. The door swings open, revealing a very startled Brett, holding about a foot and a half of door with a metal handle. “Whoa.” He says, “Guess I still don’t know my own strength.” He grins at Garth, and there’s a flash of blue behind dark eyes. He drops the ruined chunk of wood to the ground noisily, and his head snaps to the side towards someone approaching from the side, someone Garth can’t see.

The expression on Brett’s face turns almost panicked, but he quickly schools his features. “I was just making sure – “

“Quiet.” A voice compels, and Garth backs up until his thighs hit the table. His heart thunders in his chest like wild horses on hard-packed dirt, and he feels his claws elongate as his fight-or-flight response kicks in.

Brett comes back to himself, and glances sheepishly at Garth. “Garth’s one of us. He was there at Hitomi Plaza – he’s a good guy. He’s on our side.”

“We’ll see about that.” The chilly voice says, and Brett scrambles back as a new form fills the shadowy doorway. Dark eyes blaze down at him, “Let’s see how on our side you are, Garth.”
Garth’s heart stops in his chest, and the name is a breath on his lips.

“Michael.”

Sam’s phone rings, and Dean nearly jerks the Impala into oncoming traffic. He’s back behind the wheel since their last stop – too antsy to be a passenger – but now it’s taking all his restraint to not snatch the phone out his brother’s bear paw hands.

Sam waves a hand for silence, though the car is deadly silent. His hand hovers over the green connect button, but he holds off. “Don’t talk.” He tells his brother. “We don’t know if the others are listening. If they don’t know Michael’s locked away, we don’t need to tell them.”

“Fine. Answer the damn phone.” Dean pushes.

Sam accepts the call. “Garth?”

“Sorry, nope.” A nervous voice answers.

There’s a beat of silence in the car and on the other end.

“Who is this?” Sam prompts, after it’s clear that the genius on the other end is done talking.

“Oh, right, yeah. This is Brett.” The voice crackles, breaking up over speakerphone.

Garth’s Brett? Dean mouths, and Sam jerks his shoulders in an anxious shrug.

“Where’s Garth?” Sam asks, voice hard.

“He’s… uh, he’s here. He’s – “ Brett’s voice is ripped away and the sounds of a struggle over the phone ensue. Sam and Dean exchange glances.

A reedy new male voice snaps, hard to hear from its distance to the phone, “God, Brett, you suck at negotiating.” His voice becomes louder as he addresses the phone directly. “We have your friend. And we know you have him.”

“Him?” Sam repeats, but they all know who the voice is talking about.

“Michael, you ingrate. We know you have Michael locked down in that little hidey-hole of yours. You have our leader, and we have your friend. Call it an even trade.”

Fuck. Dean mutely smacks the steering wheel with the flat of his hand. Sam was right – they never should have let Garth get drawn back into this. Especially not after pulling the same play from the playbook literally weeks before. Fuck, he’s so fucking stupid. He was so desperate to get his hands on enough grace for Billie’s book, that now Garth is going to pay for it with everything he’s got.

“We’re not in the Bunker right now.” Sam says, and Dean flashes him a disbelieving look. “We can’t release him.” Sam elaborates, for both Dean’s and the unknown caller’s sake.

“Then we’re gonna have a problem. And when I saw we, I really mean – “

“Yeah, I get it.” Sam snaps. “How do we know you’ll let Garth go once we release Michael?”

“Believe it or – “ The voice cuts off, and there’s the sounds of a tussle coming in over the line. Sam taps the volume up as they strain to hear.
“-am!” An almost inaudible voice yells, far away from the phone to come in quiet as a whisper. “Sam, De– Sam, you can’t… you can’t let him leave! You gotta keep him where he – “ There’s the sound of something being driven against flesh painfully, and Garth grunts, before silence fills the line.

The voice returns: “Well, there’s your fuckin’ proof of life. You have an hour.” The call disconnects.

“Shit!” Dean snarls, and slaps his palm against the steering wheel. “Goddammit.”

“Dean, it’s going to be – “ Cas starts from the backseat.

“If you say fine, I’m going to steer us into oncoming traffic.” Dean snaps. “We’re two fucking hours away, with an hour on the clock. You tell Garth he’s gonna be fine.” Self-recrimination boils under Dean’s skin like the familiar volatility of grace, and he hears the steering wheel creak in his grip. He glares at the road ahead, and slowly forces himself to relax his hands before he rips the steering wheel off the column. “Fuck.” He mutters, quieter. “Sorry, Cas. I didn’t mean… sorry.”

“We’re all worried, Dean.” Sam says, and his attempt to sound reassuring falls flat as his own fear underlines his words with bright red ink.

“This is on me.” Dean admits, “You said we shouldn’t let him get back on the ground floor of this, and I shoved him into the damn – “

“Dean.” Sam interrupts, and Dean’s eyes reluctantly slide towards his brother’s. “We’ll figure it out. We’ll get him home.”

Garth spits a glob of blood onto the ground, and ducks his head towards his shoulder to clean the smudge off his chin. He blinks blearily at his feet, and is startled when a thin hand snakes into his jacket collar and slams him bodily against the side of a support pillar.

He’d been dragged, bound and bleeding, into what looked like the gymnasium of a school. Only half the lights have been turned on, and the room looks almost misty in the dim light. A dozen pairs of eyes blink back at him, stationed in various positions around the room. Occasionally, a flash of blue will flicker behind the eyes, like a reflection of light caught in animal eyes – and Garth knows he’s literally landed in the lion’s den.

He shifts his attention back to the arm holding him elevated in the air. Michael – no, not Michael, Felisha. Felisha holds him bodily in the air, and Garth feels his heels tap against the side of a support pillar.

“What part of don’t say a word was unclear, Garth?” Her slim form slams him back against the pillar, and he feels his brain rattle in his skull like a ship rocking in its mooring. “Next time I hear even a whisper drop out of that mouth of yours, I’ll stuff your own tongue your throat. Clear?”

Garth nods quickly, and Felisha lets go. Garth tumbles into a heap on the ground, leaning against the laminated column. He doesn’t make an attempt to stand. Felisha glares down at him, and Garth has to suppress a shiver.

The last time he saw those eyes, that face, it was Michael who was looking back at him. Garth’s face tilts upwards towards Felisha’s like a supplication, and he can still feel the cold grace vial in his hands, electricity running through his veins like cold water flushing through magma. But it’s not Michael. Not anymore.

Felisha seems satisfied that Garth’s agreed to play nice, and her glacial gaze swings over to Brett and the other vamp that had made the call. Whatever they see in her expression, they both scatter towards
opposite ends of the room. A flicker of pain crosses her face, and Garth tracks her hand as she pulls it up to her upper arm, rubbing at some phantom pain hidden underneath her blouse. Blue light flickers sickly in her eyes, like the cooling center of a dying star.

She turns her attention back to Garth. “Where were you those first few days, Garth? No one seemed able to find you for a while.”

Garth opens his mouth, but hesitates around the words. Felisha rolls her eyes to the ceiling, and says, “You may speak.”

“Sam and… Cas captured me at Hitomi Plaza. I was imprisoned in their Bunker for a while.” He answers, skirting around the truth. If they already knew he had been in the Bunker, he’d put himself in a worse position by lying entirely. Looking around the room, Garth realizes this is a much larger operation than he’s anticipated, and he doesn’t know what tabs have been kept on whom. “And they let me go.” He figures that sounds more believable than him escaping from supernatural detention.

“They let you go.” Felisha repeats dully. A lock of hair escapes from her tight bun, but she tucks it behind an ear without interrupting eye contact.

“Yeah.” Garth says. In for a penny…. “With Michael… captured, they figured it was safe to let me go.”

“And then you thought you’d just join back up with the team again? Is that it? That’s why you reached out?”

Garth swallows thickly, tasting the metallic tang of his own blood on his tongue. “Brett called… and I thought I’d check out the sales pitch.”

Felisha’s eyes flash as she crosses her arms. The hint of a petulant smile eases across her face. The room grows darker as the sun begins to set and putrid light struggles to shine in through dirty gym windows. “That’s a nice story, Garth. Real nice. But not everything you’re saying is adding up.”

“It is if you’re bad at math.” Garth replies nonsensically. He shuts his mouth.

Felisha flexes her fingers at her side, like a restless tic. “You’re weaker.”

“Perdóneme?”

“It’s like you’re… empty. I don’t feel that… spark within you.” Felisha frowns, and crouches next to him. Her dark eyes study him from inches away, and her head tilts to the side. “It’s like Michael’s grace has been removed.”

“Uh, what?” Garth stammers. “No, it hasn’t. Still pissing blue into the urinal. Swearsies.”

Felisha straightens and nods at one of her compatriots. They catch her glance, and leave the gym, painted double doors banging shut with a splinterly echo behind them. “So you’re saying if I stab you through with silver, you’ll just brush it off? No – “ she answers, before he can. “Something is wrong.” The gym door reopens with a screech, and the Michael Monster returns with a duffle bag. He slings it over his shoulder and crosses the room towards Felisha and Garth. Garth hears the gentle ping of metal objects bumping into each other and swallows thickly. Not that he’s an expert on duffel bags full of torture instruments, but even he has to say… this isn’t looking good.

The graced-up vamp hands the bag to Felisha, and she drops it to the floor next to Garth. Her smile is wicked sharp in the darkening room. Her slim hand slips into the bag and she pulls out object after deadly object. A butterfly knife is tossed on the ground next to an old clay jug of holy oil. A hex bag
rolls a few feet away as she finally plucks out a gleaming silver knife from the depths. She rolls it in her palm. “Alright, Garth. Let’s see what it takes to get you to sing like a soprano.”

Gulp.

Sam’s phone lights up in the cup holder, and he’s dug it out before the first ring has finished. Garth’s borrowed number flashes up at them, and he thumbs the connect button immediately.

“Hello?” He says gruffly, a bad feeling already building in his chest.

“Put Dean on.” A cool female voice demands.

Sam’s stomach twists into knots as he watches his brother’s face harden. It hasn’t even been 45 minutes – well ahead of the deadline. There’s no reason for Garth’s captors to be reaching out unless something had developed. And whether it was pulled out of Garth through coercion or blood, things aren’t looking good.

Dean’s eyes flicker up to his, and Sam jerks his chin outside of the car. Dean exhales heavily, but slows the Impala down and slides her cleanly into the road’s shoulder.

“I’m not waiting for you to summon the courage to talk to a woman, am I?” The voice cuts in.

“Alright, alright.” Dean snaps, and pulls the phone from Sam’s fingers. “This is definitely the most aggressive phone sex I’ve ever had.”

Jack is visibly startled and his eyes squint between Dean and the phone. Sam would almost want to laugh, if he wasn’t pretty sure Garth was sliced up dead somewhere on the other end of the phone.

“Hiya handsome.” The voice greets sickly sweet. “It’s been a while.”

Dean frowns at Sam. “We met?”

There’s a pause. “Not technically.” The voice finally answers. “Though you might say we’ve had some… relatable experiences recently.”

“Well, peachy. Whatever that means. Where’s Garth?”

The voice laughs. “He’s resting his vocal chords for his next performance. Singing like a canary takes a lot out of you. And now that our friend doesn’t have all that magical blue jet fuel rebounding in his system… let’s say his stamina isn’t what it used to be.”

A muscle clenches in Dean’s jaw as his teeth grind together. “Put him on.” He orders flatly.

Sam isn’t sure how the dead air on the other end can be amused, but that’s exactly what it sounds like. There’s the scrape of something being dragged and dropped on the other end, and a wet gasp of air pops over the speakers.

“-ean, don’t – “ Garth’s thready voice is interrupted by a weak cough, “Sam, don’t let him – “

There’s the sound of something snapping, and Garth cries out in pain, which is cut ominously short.

“If you kill him – “ Dean threatens darkly, but is interrupted before he can finish the promise.

“Relax, Winchester. I’m not going to kill him. At least not yet. A dead bargaining chip isn’t worth much at the craps table these days.”
“Dean, you’re not – “ Sam tries, but Dean holds up a hand to silence him.

“What do you want?” Dean concedes, and Sam almost leans across the bench to physically shake his brother. Of course Dean’s goddamn guilt makes a resurgence, ready to throw him straight down the express lane to trouble. As per fucking usual.

“If you have to ask that, then you’re more hopeless than I thought. I’ll let Garth breathe for five more minutes. So strap on that superpowered jet pack.”

“Wait – ” Dean says quickly, as if worried the voice is going to hang up. “How do I find you?”

“Dean!” Sam snaps, ready to wrestle the phone away from his brother if necessary.

The voice laughs brightly. “There’s enough of Michael’s grace in here to ping off your radar, cowboy. Let’s just say that I had a little more of Michael’s… special attention than you did. I know how this game works. Five minutes. Otherwise I’ll mail you Garth’s head in a pretty pink box. No-rush shipping.”

The line clicks dead.

“Dean,” Sam starts, but his brother is already yanking open the door of the Impala and tumbling out like he’s going to be sick on the side of the road. “God damn it.” Sam mutters again, and waits for the next car to zoom past his door before pushing it open and following Dean outside. Cas is already out, holding Dean’s arm like he can forcibly keep Dean from winging off.

Dean is shaking his head at whatever Cas has said, and tugs his arm firmly out of his friend’s grip. Jack stumbles around the car, arms crossed over his hips like he’s trying to keep himself still.

“I’m not letting Garth die. Not when I can do something about it!” Dean says heatedly, and Cas is shaking his head in frustration. “Come on.” Dean adds, turning entreatying eyes towards Sam’s. “We told Garth we would keep him safe. Plus – what are they going to do? I’m immortal.”

Sam runs an angry hand through his hair. “Dean, you’re not immortal! You were blown to bloody pulp on your wall less than two weeks ago! This is Michael’s army we’re talking about! This isn’t villain of the week number three!”

“You know I got a better handle on this archangel stuff, Sammy. I can hold out long enough for you guys to get there. It’s just a… it’s just a delay until you can bust in with the cavalry.”

Sam is shaking his head even before Dean’s finished spewing that complete and utter nonsense. “How are you even going to get there, man? Last time you teleported, it was to a dirty mason jar full of – “ He cuts off as he realizes what he’s saying, and a cold sense of horror starts to sap the air from his lungs. “No – “

“I can feel it now, Sam. It’s like last time, at the barn. I don’t know… I don’t know where on the map, but I know I can get there.”

“How would we be expected to follow after you?” Cas intercedes. “You’re not able to fly with passengers. And you cannot take on the entire contingent of Michael’s army alone. We don’t even know how many of Michael’s monsters are present. They might have warding set up, they might have angel blades - ”

Dean jerks his head angrily. “They just found out that Michael isn’t locked down in the Bunker five minutes ago. I doubt they’ve had enough time to set up Angel Fort Knox. Not much can kill an Archangel – we fuckin’ know that much from experience. I’ll be fine.”
“We can’t take the risk.” Cas says, and Sam nods vigorously beside him. “Not even for Garth. If they are able to somehow get through to Michael, Garth won’t be the only one to not come out on the other side of this fight, Dean. You’re risking the world for one man.”

Dean’s eyes freeze over with conviction. “We’ve risked more for less. I’m not adding Garth’s name to the casualty list. I’ll find a way to get you guys my 20. I’m… I’m sorry.”

“Dean!” Sam exclaims, and lurches forward to grab at Dean’s forearm. But as his brother’s name tumbles out of his mouth, there’s the solid flap of unseeable wings, and Sam’s hand closes on empty air.

There’s the odd second of heavenly freefall, and Dean feels his weight slam down all at once on the balls of his feet. At least he stuck the landing this time, and didn’t trip over a three-gallon container of olives in the back room of a bar.

He’s disoriented, which he’s never quite been able to get over, even after his few practice trips with wings. But he immediately sees that he’s in some kind of high school gymnasium, toeing the center line of the basketball court.

“That was fast.” That familiar female voice gibes. “You still had two minutes, but I can appreciate punctuality.” Dean turns around to locate the source of the voice, but is interrupted as the bright flare of flames dance across his vision. He blinks, frozen, as a match falls from manicured fingers and ignites the ring of holy oil painted in a generous loop on the gym floor.

Fuck.

Dean takes a careful step closer to the center of the circle, feeling a weird twitch in his center, like the flames of the holy oil are plucking at something deep within that pocket of grace. The flames sear across his vision inordinately bright, but he squints across the fire towards the shrouded form.

Suddenly, all the gym lights flicker on overhead, and florescent light bathes the room. Dean’s insides seize in his chest as he sees that awful, familiar face. The last face he saw before he lost himself in that icy and smothering blue light.

He gasps out the name before he can stop himself, “Michael?”

A cruel, pleased smirk smears across the woman’s face. “Not Michael. But I guarantee that he’ll be here soon.”

Chapter End Notes

***Confused about who that character is? Of course you are! I'm bad at writing! Anyway - that character is the woman who was Alternate Michael in "The Spear." I thought she was fantastic. I wasn't planning on bringing her in originally, but I'm so glad I did. The name "Felisha" is the actress' name. I'm not creative.

Anyway! Yay some action! And it didn't take me five days to push out a chapter! Sorry Garth, for all the whump.

Thanks for reading and commenting <3 You guys rock. Ugh I don't want to wait three
more weeks for the next ep. Give me Michael angst NOW.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sam’s foot is almost flat in the footwell as he pumps the gas. His hands are tight on the wheel, gripping hard enough to feel crackly tingles in his fingertips.

“I am gonna stick Dean in his room and paint so much warding, he won’t even be able to open his door without permission.” Sam fumes.

He’s being facetious, but Cas nods seriously from the passenger seat, accepting that house arrest is probably the only thing that will keep Dean from lobbing himself into the line of fire.

Sam scrubs a worried hand down his face, and swerves into the slow lane to get around a minivan plugging up the left lane. “How’s the GPS going?”

Cas continues to tap away at the phone, and Sam is struck (not for the first time) how far they’ve come from those first few years. Not that Cas isn’t an asset – he’s still their strongest player, the pawn swapped for a Queen – but with most of Cas’ abilities effectively offline for the last few years, Sam almost misses the near omnipotence of those early angel dicks.

Cas curses in a language Sam doesn’t know, and refreshes the page, fingers rapidly tapping across the search fields. There’s another pause as he waits for the page to load, before he drops the phone angrily onto his lap. “Dean’s phone is offline.”

“Shit.” Sam mutters, and stomps the gas viciously. “Forgot opening the door – I’ll ward that room until Dean can’t even lift a toe off his bed.”

“Toss your phone.” The former vessel orders, and there’s a slim line of blue around her blown pupils.

Dean’s hand twitches at his side, but he doesn’t make an attempt to pull the phone from his pocket. Unless one of the Michael Monsters decides to join him in the circle, and he can lift a phone from them, his cell is Sam’s only chance of tracking him to Garth’s location.

He fights for time, cashing in a few snark chips. “What, so you can text your phone and grab my number? I don’t think so.”

The polished figure beyond the line of fire doesn’t twitch a muscle. “Cute. Toss the phone, or I’ll have Brady over there spill Garth’s guts onto the floor.”

Dean’s hand freezes against his pocket, and he turns mechanically to the side. Now that the lights have been turned on, Dean has no problem seeing his prone friend in 1080p technicolor detail. Garth is slumped against the distant wall, far enough away from holy oil fire for Dean to be unable to scope out the full extent of his injuries, but close enough so he can see every line of pain creasing the Tennessean’s face. Dark blood soaks into his ruined shirt, and Dean can see bloody furrows carved into what skin is visible from the shreds of his clothes. Another Michael Monster kneels next to Garth, a silver knife catching the light as he twirls it almost casually over Garth’s abdomen. When Dean looks over, the monster grins needle-sharp, vamp fangs extending from the gums. A thrill of anger and fear spills down Dean’s spine like ice water dumped from a cooler. His hand reaches
stiffly for the phone in his pocket, and he tosses it over the fire. The woman snaps it out of the air with a twitch of fingers. She crushes it easily in her slim hand, and shards of plastic and glass rain on the gym floor. She kicks a few scraps away with the point of her stiletto, and tosses him a pleased smile for his trouble.

“Wouldn’t want to give little brother Sam too much of a head start, would we?”

“Alright. I’m here. Let Garth go.”

Her face summons up a pantomime of perfect surprise. “Let him go? Why would I do that?”

“You said – “

“I said I wouldn’t kill him. As it is… come on, Dean. Look at him.” And Dean can’t help but let his eyes fall back on his injured companion. “Do you really see Garth limping out of here on those broken getaway sticks? Even if we weren’t keeping him around for… incentive, I don’t think he’d be able to do much more than piss and bleed.”

Dean bristles, and takes a step closer towards the holy fire. Dean’s never really considered the actual effects holy oil has on angels. He just assumed it worked like a devil’s trap – keeping angels and archangels pinned down until the flames were extinguished. But Dean can feel the effects of the flames thrumming against those cords of power in that pocket of his soul – can feel links deadened or paralyzed. The closer he gets to the flames, the more he feels the phantom vibration mute his senses uncomfortably. He steps back towards the center, and sees another, secondary circle of unlit holy oil inside the one currently ablaze. But that’s not what he needs to worry about right now. “Incentive for what?”

The woman rolls her eyes. “For you to play ball, genius.”

“More of a wrestling guy, myself.” Dean gibes, but that steady gaze rakes back his protective layers like brushing aside cobwebs. Dean knows it’s not Michael standing in front of him. But he looks into the former vessel’s flat, dark eyes, and it’s hard not to feel that sucking void that once pulled him under dark waters.

“So, how did you do it, Dean? How’d you manage to lock away the most powerful being in the universe in that empty little head of yours?” And the words sound like casual conversation – they sound like she’s killing time. But there’s a thread of real curiosity through her words, and her gaze is absorbing.

“Guess big Mike isn’t as powerful as you all thought, if any guy off the street can just lock him away.”

She snorts, and throws her head back to laugh. Throaty amusement bounces back from the rafters. “Right. And I’m sure there are no repercussions from playing archangel jailer – “ Her mouth suddenly twists into a pained grimace, and her hand flies up to her upper arm. Even under the bright room lights, Dean doesn’t miss the flickering sick haze of blue in those eyes, the veins of lightning running down her covered arms like fluorescent tattoos. Dean feels an echo of that old pain under his own skin, and almost feels sorry for her. Almost.

“Looks like I wasn’t the only one painted fifty shades of blue on the inside.” Dean says, but there’s no humor in his tone. “Guess Michael didn’t explain the rules to his mini-me.”

The woman’s eyes snap open, but her face is still creased with pain. “It’s Felisha.” She spits, and somehow, her name makes her less terrifying than Michael’s Rebound Vessel. “And you don’t know
what you’re talking about. Michael saved me.”

“I’m sure he did, sweetheart.” Dean drawls, but the conviction is clear in the set of her jaw.

She prowls closer to the line of the fire, and the flames light her face from under, giving her an ethereal and haunting gaze. “When Michael came to me those weeks ago, do you know where he found me?” She waits for Dean to take a guess, but his jaw might as well be wired shut. “I was dying. They call it Fatal Familial Insomnia. Rare disease. Less than twenty diagnosed in the last ten years – lucky me. There’s no cure for a disease like that – you just… die a few months later. Your brain just doesn’t let you sleep. Can you imagine that?” And the emotion in her strained voice is so palpable that some of the Michael Monsters within hearing distance shift awkwardly in place. “You suffer panic attacks, hallucinations. Dementia, eventually. You feel like you’re going insane. Like the world is melting into some kind of horror show around you, and you’re the only that can see what’s really going on. I went to my physician because I thought it was stress from work.” She laughs bitterly, and then laughs harder at her own abused amusement. “Michael came to me when I was lying in that hospital bed in Duluth, and I thought he was just another hallucination. Another vision my own mind summoned to torture me with. And he took my hand, and I felt that twilight pull of rest, and he didn’t offer me power or strength. He said he would let me sleep.

“And he fixed the unfixable. His grace cured me from the inside out, and I will thank Michael every day for the rest of my life for that blessing.” Felisha raises her polished hand in the air, and Dean can see the crackle of grace under the skin, lighting her up like a city at night.

“And now it’s killing you.” Dean guesses.

Felisha’s eyes flash irregularly, and she looks at Dean like he just dropped on one knee and proposed marriage. “Michael’s grace? It’s not killing me. It’s the only thing keeping me alive. It’s the only thing that lets me sleep at night, and keeps the hallucinations away.”

Her hand flexes at her side, a reminder of Dean shaking his hand out to expel the pent-up energy.

“Listen, Felisha – that’s shitty, what’s happening with you. But Michael’s grace isn’t going to keep you alive – it’s gonna microwave you from the inside out. Michael said so himself – he called it grace poisoning.”

Something like pity stretches across Felisha’s face, and she picks up a small jar of something off the ground, where a scattering of other bloody torture instruments lay. “You’re wrong. Once the rest of Michael’s grace leaves my system, I’ll be as empty as I was before.”

Dean tries to find the threads of her plan to tie them together. “What are you angling for, exactly? You want Michael to repossess you? Because if that were possible, I’d hand him over gift wrapped and watch you two ride off into the sunset. Before I angled a bullet through the back of your head.”

Dean feels a brush of something in his mind, like a whisper just inaudible enough to hear the breath without the accompanying words.

“Very romantic.” Felisha says, and her hands turn the small jar over in her hands. “But I have a feeling that Michael would rather keep his fancy new duds. You’ll hand control back over to him, and in return, he’ll reward me. He’ll reward all of us,” she adds, raising her voice to be heard across the gym. Some of the Michael Monsters look uneasy – maybe some of them are holdovers from the first army conscription, where Michael was issuing orders in Dean’s body. “And if that means tapping you like a keg to put a chink in the armor, and I can siphon off a little of all that go-go juice, then I’d call that a double – “
Her threats are interrupted when the double doors leading outside bang open. A tall woman steps through, her hands clenched around an angel blade and a phone. Felisha breaks off, an irritated eye brow arched in the newcomer’s direction. The new woman hesitates in the door frame, her eyes frozen on Dean trapped in the center of the holy oil fire.

“You’ve already ruined the ambiance, Jing. What is it.” But her irritation seems focused on Dean.

Jing slides the angel blade into a holster on her thigh, and taps the phone against her palm nervously. Her eyes slide away from Dean, “He, uh…” she starts, unsure how to address Felisha with Dean listening, “The man you have us watching is causing some problems. The man from Delaware.”

Felisha sighs and carefully sets the small jar she was holding on the ground. A lock of her hair has come loose during her tirade, and she winds it carefully back into the tight bun. “Keep an eye on him.” She instructs one of her nearest cohorts, and walks towards the double doors without a backwards glance at Dean.

The feather light presence returns to his mind, and Dean wants to pour bleach on his brain. Whatever can finally wipe Michael from his –

-an

What the fuck.

Dean?

“Garth?” Dean asks out loud, and the Michael Monster guarding Garth – Brady, or whatever his name is – smiles at him.

“Your guard dog’s down for the count.” Brady says, and drives his fist into Garth’s ripped up stomach. Dean flinches, but Garth doesn’t twitch. He must have passed out a while ago. Dean grits his teeth together, feeling helpless and pissed and stupid three times over.

So if not Garth, then –

Dean, can you… - me?

Dean spins around in a circle, and the smirking guard watching him shakes his head, as if Dean is looking for a gap in the fire to leap through. But Dean doesn’t see anything except for the scattered remnants of Michael’s army. Dean frowns, as the whisper brushes his mind again. It almost sounds like…

Jack? He tries, sending the prayer out into the void.

They’re pulling into the outskirts of Indianapolis, finally within city limits, but without even the slightest idea of where Dean and Garth are.

“Should we try the laundromat where Garth was supposed to meet them?” Cas suggests, as Sam accelerates through a yellow light at the intersection.

Sam shakes his head jerkily. “They called hours after they grabbed Garth. By now, they might not even be in Indianapolis. For all we know…”

“Indianapolis is 368.02 square miles, Sam. We don’t have the ability to check the entire city, let
alone expand our search parameters to encompass a larger – “

Jack listens to Sam and Cas bicker without heat in the front seat, and taps his phone against his knee. He’d tried calling Dean a few times, even though Cas had said that Dean’s phone wasn’t sending out any signals. All three calls clicked straight to the profanity that is Dean’s voicemail.

“Maybe Rowena can help.” Sam throws out, “Maybe she can whip up some kind of tracking spell – track Garth or something. I’m sure that’s where Dean is too.”

Cas shrugs, and turns his head to study the passing city as if they’re just going to see Dean and Garth strolling arm in arm down an alley. “It’s worth a shot. Anything is worth a shot. But we don’t know where Rowena is, and it’s entirely likely that she’s going to require something of Garth’s person to track him.”

“I’m gonna call her anyway.” Sam says, but Jack can see in the line of Sam’s shoulders that he’s just going through the motions. They all know that unless Dean is somehow able to get a message to them, there’s no way they’re going to be able to find them in a city so large. Sam steers the Impala with his knee while he scrolls through his contacts.

Jack frowns and taps his fingers against the car door, feeling as useless as ever since his father ripped the grace out of him. He taps into that inner pocket of power, and feels the wounded human soul shoved up against the remnants of his grace – and feels like a copper and galvanized steel pipe have been connected to control the flow, each metal corroding each other until all that’s left is a brittle and tarnished Nephilim that can’t even contribute to the conversation, let alone pull off anything useful. There was a time that he’d feel that calescence golden force burn behind his eyes and heat up his soul, and he’d be able to search the entire planet in a heartbeat. He’d be able to pluck Dean out of the heart of a star, if he wanted. He would hear Dean’s voice across a thousand miles away, and he’d hear Dean’s prayer, like –

Prayer.

He opens his mouth to relay his idea, but hesitates. Dean might be swimming in grace, but Jack sure isn’t. Who’s to say that even if Dean can receive prayers, that Jack would be able to hear a response? He’s something... less than an angel these days.

Dean? He tries, and the prayer feels more like a stone tossed into still waters than a thought in his head. He feels it ripple out to sea, and remembers the last time he heard a prayer – when Michael had fingers wrapped around Dean’s throat and was strangling the life out of him.

Jack can still hear Sam’s prayer echo in the back of his mind.

Jack, I don’t know where you are, and I don’t even know if you can hear this prayer. We need you.

Sam had faith in Jack. Now Jack needs to have faith in himself. And Dean.

Dean? Dean, can you hear me? He tries again, tapping that well of power and feeling it ripple like the E string plucked on a stringed instrument.

And then, like sinking his hands under murky water and pulling out a bottled message: Jack?

Dean! Jack feels relief flush through his chest. Dean, where are you?

Jack... I... Garth is... Felisha... grace.

Shit. Jack doesn’t know if the faulty angel radio connection is on his end or Dean’s – neither of them
is experienced enough as an angel to really have a grasp on any of this.

Where are you? Jack tries again.

There’s a few seconds of perfect silence, and Jack almost thinks that he’s lost the thread connecting him to Dean.

Then, a carefully enunciated response: No clue. … - think an - …gymnasium. Maybe - …school or … - looks like it hasn’t been - … in a while. Big ass BR painted - … basketball court.

“Are there any closed down schools in the area? That have the letters BR?” Jack asks out loud suddenly, interrupting whatever voicemail Sam had been leaving Rowena.

Sam and Cas turn towards the back seat with matching expressions, as if Jack had just taken a dump in the back and was trying to pass it up front for inspection.

“I prayed to Dean. And he heard me… and he said – “

“Oh my god.” Sam interrupts. “Sorry.” He says quickly to Jack, realizing he cut off the younger man. “Can you – can he do that?” Sam adds, turning to Cas.

“I heard your prayer before. At the Bunker.” Jack adds, feeling a little hurt, but Sam quickly shakes his head.

“No, I mean – I mean, can Dean really… hear prayers now?”

“It appears so.” Cas replies stiltedly, as if upset with himself for not having thought of it earlier. He unlocks his phone and starts quickly typing into the search bar. “Broad Ripple High School.” He reads from the screen. “Closed last year, but they haven’t repurposed the buildings.” His blue eyes meet Sam’s. “It’s about thirty minutes northeast of here.”

Jack?

Dean, we got an address. We’re on our way to you. Just hold on.

Careful. There’s - … maybe fifteen - …more.

“Is Dean okay?” Sam asks, flipping an illegal U-turn in an intersection and getting three long car horn blasts in response.

“I think so.” Jack replies, but Dean is praying again.

Garth isn’t doing too - … need to get - …the woman, it’s… vessel…

“It’s choppy, like it’s not coming through all the way.” Jack adds, and Sam and Cas exchange glances.

“It could be that there’s warding, or something else is blocking Dean’s full abilities.” Cas suggests. He hands Sam his phone, the GPS already plugged in with the closed school address. The estimated time blinks up at them like a countdown to detonation.

“We need to get there fast.” Sam mutters, and coaxes a little more speed out of the classic car’s engine. Stress and worry line the hunter’s shoulders, and Jack leans back in his seat, trying to keep a hold of that open line of connection between Dean and himself, no matter how frayed it might feel.

Shit – Jack, I think they’re –
And then the line is severed like a guillotine has cleaved the connection, and Jack is left holding the slack end of a rope.

*Dean.*

“Sam, I…” Jack stammers, and Sam’s worried hazel eyes flick up to his in the rearview mirror. “I lost him.”

*Jack? Can you hear me?*

But Dean can feel the absence already, like the walkie talkie’s batteries died. Shit.

The gym doors open, letting in a gust of wind to rattle the plastic tarps that had covered the bleacher surfaces. Lights from the parking lot frame Felisha in an orange silhouette, and with his enhanced vision, Dean can see the slick of red coating her fingers wetly, dripping oozing drops onto the dusty gym floor.

“I may not be fully online anymore, but there’s enough leftover archangel in me to know someone’s praying without permission.” She looks over her shoulder at someone unseen, and instructs, “Copy that mark around the building. I don’t want even a dot of morse code getting through the warding.” Satisfied with whatever answer she got, she lets the door close behind her, and the metal bang of the doors echoes in Dean’s head.

Felisha glances distastefully at the blood slicking down her fingers as she approaches the still blazing ring of fire. In her other hand, there’s the bright gleam of an angel blade, a long line of blood rolling down its length from her slashed palm. She closes her fingers around her palm, and white light shines from the cracks in her hands like she’s trapped a firefly in her palm. When her hand opens, there’s not even a scar to show for the healed injury.

*Trust me. That’s gonna leave a scar.*

“Well, Dean, looks like you moved up the time table a little. Why you couldn’t leave well enough alone is beyond me… I guess that’s one of those defining *Winchester traits* I hear so much about.” She tucks the angel blade under her arm like it’s a clutch, and bends over to scoop up the small jar she’d been holding earlier. “Catch.” She instructs, and lobs the jar in a low arc over the flames.

Dean’s reflexes kick in, and his fingers close around the clay jar. The lid – which had been loosened before the toss – flies off, and the contents of the jar spill all over Dean, coating him in a viscous liquid from neck to thigh. He pulls a face and spits out some of the fluid that had splashed on his lips, and feels the slimy tang of oil spread on his tongue.

He gives Felisha an uncomprehending frown, and drops the jar to the ground. The small clay jug cracks in half and the remaining dregs of the liquid pool at his feet. He wipes a slimy hand against his front, and his hand comes back shiny. “Pretty sure that’s not what a juice cleanse is.”

“My god.” Felisha says, and is actually shaking her head. “It really is non-fucking-stop with you, isn’t it?”

“All day, every day.” Dean answers on autopilot, but is starting to realize what the syrupy liquid really is. “Did you just paint party me with *holy oil*?”

Felisha smiles, “Quick on the draw. Don’t worry, Winchester. That’s only gonna be a problem if you make it a problem. Brady, get ready to slice and dice if Dean here gets any funny ideas of escaping.”
Another Michael Monster approaches with a bucket filled with slopping liquid. He sets it down next to Felisha, who lifts a matte red heel to rest on the rim. The angel blade is back in her palm, and she arches a brow at Dean over the flames. “You even think about making a twitch towards the door, or try and stretch so much as a feather, and Brady will debone Garth like a trout. And if that still isn’t incentive enough, think about what’ll happen if I toss a match in your direction when you’re covered in all that holy oil. I get a feeling Michael might be able to brush off being burned alive. But… you’re no Michael, are you?”

Dean feels his teeth grit together, and he glances at Garth’s unconscious form. His friend’s chest rises and falls, but each breath looks hard fought-for. Like it’s counting down towards the last.

“Clear?” Felisha asks, and Dean tears eyes away.

“What?”

“Are we clear?”

“Yes.” Dean snaps. Felisha doesn’t smile, but her eyes pull up at the corners. She toes the bucket over, and a wash of water dumps from the bucket. The liquid slices through the holy oil fire on the gym floor, and the rest of the circle blows out with a puff of heat. Felisha plants a foot over the water, and steps lightly towards the other side. She approaches Dean, who holds himself rigidly still. Felisha hops over the unlit holy oil ring like she’s skipping over a sidewalk crack, and pauses at the edge. She reaches behind her and plucks out a match tucked into her smooth bun, striking it against the bottom of a raised heel. The holy oil flames ignite the moment her match draws near, and that awful buzzing at Dean’s core comes flooding back. Felisha’s trapped herself in the holy oil fire with Dean, but she’s the one with a hostage. And an angel blade.

Dean forces himself to not flinch back towards the edge of the circle, suddenly worried about the close proximity of the flames and the holy oil dousing his clothes and slicking up his skin. He remembers a time when Cas Molotov cocktail’ed their universe’s Michael, and Michael made a return appearance not too long after, but Dean can still barely tie his angelic shoes. If he burns up, then he – Dean – might not be the one that lands back on his feet. It might be a different archangel entirely.

“Alright, Dean.” Felisha says sweetly, like it’s the world’s most awkward speed date, and she’s pressed for time. She twists a manicured hand in his jacket, and yanks him closer to her. The point of the angel blade a slow, light drag on his chest. “Let’s see how many slices it takes to wake the boss up.”

Dean’s heart speeds in his chest, but he loads a ten-dollar smirk in the chamber. “Bring it on, sister.”

Cas and Jack both jump up in their seats at the same time, like they’d been jabbed with a cattle prod.

“What?” Sam demands, but Cas and Jack only exchange unreadable expressions.

“I don’t know.” Cas grates, and glances outside at the night sky, like his bones are warning him about an approaching storm.

Sam checks the GPS on his lap nervously. 22 minutes left.

Cas continues to watch the sky.
Michael leans against the back wall, and watches as the walk-in light flickers. Cold freezer mist stirs along the edges of the metal walls, rippling in eddies and whorls before dissipating into icy air.

His contemptible prison creaks and groans as the pressure builds, like a monster of the deep bellowing its song under dark and frigid waters.

Michael drums his fingers along his crossed arms. He watches as the crack across the prison door grows inch by creeping inch along the brittle surface of the door. Icy blue tendrils drape themselves across the jagged line, slowly pushing through and leaking out into the space beyond.

The light blinks out overhead for a moment, and when it flickers back on, it illuminates the cruel and expectant smile of a captive archangel.

Jack rubs his hands down his arms, trying to brush away the goosebumps. All his hair stands on end, a combination of fear and some kind of electric charge in the air. He hasn’t felt this particular brand of electric pressure since Michael was throwing him around the destitute church in the Apocalypse Universe. It prickles his skin like the actual air is charged with thunder and calamity, so thick, he can taste it like battery acid on the back of his tongue.

Sam has to flick on the windshield wipers as the storm touches down, rain and wind whipping around the Impala like it’s trying to suck the car into the air and toss it into the heavens.

“Is this – “

Cas’ gaze finally leaves the thunderous clouds overhead. “When my brother Raphael touched down on earth, he discharged a significant barrage of energy and caused a coastal blackout.”

Sam shakes his head impatiently. “Yeah, Cas, we were there. So what does this mean?”

Cas sinks back in his seat, and his eyes return to the sky. “It means we need to hurry.”

Garth feels pain run like Christmas lights through his body, thin lines connecting hot, bright spots of agony.

He blinks his eyes open, and quickly slams them shut again. At first, he thinks it’s the swollen tide of his injuries trying to pull him back from the shore, but realizes after the pain finds a backseat, that it’s something else. Bright light hits the back of his retinas like a freight train, blinding him with that blue shock of light. He squints painfully up at his captor, and sees that the Michael Monster is staring slack jawed, glassy-eyed and captivated by the source of the light. The silver knife is slack in his hands, but it already takes all of Garth’s remaining energy to blink past the blue-white salvo of celestial light threatening to overwhelm him.

Felisha stands to the side, in a bright ripple of fire. Her focused eyes blaze so intensely, it’s nearly impossible to find color in those haunting eyes. Like she’s possessed, and someone else is looking out.

In her hands, she holds down a man, whose posture is tortured with restraint. Garth blinks sluggishly, before his brain clicks, and he realizes it’s Dean being half-supported by the thin woman. The bright tip of a blade of some kind catches the light, and she lowers it towards Dean – at an angle Garth can’t see. Garth can only watch as Dean grunts in measured pain, and sees Felisha’s face illuminate with inhuman light as something essential is pulled out of Dean. Blue-white mist, almost like a
viscous fluid, floats in the air like a will-o-wisp, before Felisha seems to… drink it in. The bright blue in her eyes flashes white, and she smiles down at her captive.

Garth slumps back into unconsciousness before she can raise the blade again.

Dean feels the snick of warm metal slice against the juncture of his neck and shoulder. The soft brush of a finger teases the wound, coaxing a small breath of grace from that swirling, injured vortex in his core.

Dean hisses through his teeth, feeling something indescribable soak out of him – like Felisha is leaching out Dean Winchester along with the rest of all the flickering, soiled grace. He feels the other slices on his body like glowing brands – tapped out connections of grace and power that Felisha’s already absorbed into herself.

He feels rage and helplessness like it doesn’t even belong to him, like he’s channeling it from somewhere else, and he’s merely the conduit. The poor sucker being possessed at a five-dollar magic psychic show. He says in Felisha’s grip, and his eyes cross for a moment. He sees two Felishas smiling down at him before they merge back as one.

“Can you feel it, Dean?” Felisha asks him through the waterfall pounding down on his ears. The tip of her blade carves another wet line down his skin. Her finger traces a cool path along the injured skin, like she’s brushing aside the pain. Dean can only grimace as she sucks out more grace, and he watches it swirl in the air for a moment before Felisha absorbs it like an addiction. Her eyes are blissed out and groggy. “I can. I feel it.” She adds, ranting like a drunk, “I can scratch you open and taste Michael under all that steel. He’s close.” She lays a bloody hand on his heart. “Do you feel him?”

And the worst part is – he can. Dean feels the division he’s built in his mind to contain Michael break away until it’s as thin as paper. He can sense all the blocks he’s thrown up to suppress Michael grow brittle, like roots digging through concrete, like Michael is poisoning them both, and playing chicken to see who drops first.

Cirri of the trapped archangel boil under Dean’s skin, and he feels it dig in like prickly thorns. Like all the gold of his soul is being scribbled over with a cerulean crayon straight from the Crayola 24-pack, waxing over Dean and covering him up. He feels the cold pool of anger that doesn’t belong to him – fury and betrayal that threatens to choke him with all the borrowed intensity.

Felisha digs the blade into his skin again, and the rage reaches a crescendo. The cold anger boils hot, and something breaks down in Dean’s chest.

Felisha must see something of the shift in his face, because she jerks the angel blade back like she’s been burned. Something in Dean clicks into place, and he feels like he’s been suddenly dropped into focus. He can see the individual dust motes in the air, every small pore in Felisha’s face. He loses the sum of the whole for the parts, misses the forest for the trees, and can’t look past her face without seeing the millions of cells and molecules and electrical pulses and synapses that are holding her together, and all that stolen grace rebounds inside, knocking aside and swallowing up the human soul that used to be Felisha. It’s her soft gasp of fear that brings him back, and he feels his entire body burn as all the snicks and cuts and slices heal over, like nothing of the last few minutes has happened.

Felisha recoils back a step, and the cupid’s bow of her lips parts into a perfect O of surprise.

Dean’s hand shoots out without his notice, and settles on top of her head, tangling into her hair. She
tries to scramble back, but is trapped against the wall of holy fire, and the overwhelming pressure dumping out of Dean like buckets.

His hand tightens further, and he hears a single word bolt out of his chest. It’s not his voice that thunders in the room, but the penetrating and earsplitting vibrato of angels, a word that echoes backwards and forwards in space and time. There’s the screeching of the dirty gym windows shattering outwards into the night air, and he can hear the distracting squealing as the bleachers shift around on the floor, buffeted by the pressure rocking the room on its foundation.

Dean’s hand grows icy and hot, and he watches as Felisha is burned from the inside out, overwhelmed by the attack on two fronts.

And the word that Dean had uttered, in the Enochian language he had never learned:

_Enough._

The GPS announces that they’ve arrived, but Cas’ phone has long since slid off Sam’s lap and bounced, forgotten, into the footwell.

He drives the Impala through the bright orange traffic cones, knocking over a handwritten sign announcing the school has been permanently closed, and trespassers will be prosecuted. Sam jerks the parking brake on and tears the keys from the ignition, more out of habit than intention. All three of them tumble from the car, and Sam’s muscles scream at him from being cramped in the car for so long, and he stumbles his first few steps towards the school.

The gym is the nearest building to where he hastily parked the Impala, and every step forward that he manages, he feels that heavy atmospheric pressure settle deeper in his chest, like the reverb of bass pulsing through his body.

It hurts.

He grits his teeth and soldiers on. There’s a machete in his hand, knuckles clenched white like bone. Light from the gym streams from the windows, like a beacon announcing _Dean is here. He is here._

“Sam, wait – “ Cas warns, and his voice sounds flat in the air, compared with all the vibration thrumming around them. Sam feels a hand fist in his jacket, and he’s jerked backwards off his feet the exact moment that a seraphic _word_ sharpens the air, and Sam has to clap his hands to his ears. The machete drops from his numb fingers, banging with a silent thump on the concrete. Glass shards rain down around the gym, missing the trio by mere feet.

By the time that Sam’s removed his hands from his head and cracked his eyes open, the air is dead calm. All trace of the oncoming storm has been reabsorbed into the dark clouds. The vapors quickly dissipate into the night, revealing the clean dark sky, freckled with diamond-cut stars and a waning moon.

Illuminated by the moonlight, two Michael Monsters stand guard at the front doors to the gym, but they make no reaction or defensive move as the trio approaches. The man and woman – one clearly a werewolf, the other less certain – stand ramrod straight, eyes open wide with horrible blue light leaking from their irises. Their faces are completely wiped of any emotion, and don’t even seem to notice the window glass that peppers their hair and clothes like freshly fallen snow.

“What the hell, Cas?” Sam breathes, as they hesitate a few feet away. “Are they… dead?”
“I don’t know.” Cas admits gruffly, and takes a step closer. Neither guard twitches.

There’s drying blood painted on the door, quick smears of warding that Sam’s never seen before, doesn’t know what it’s warding against. But even under his gaze, the blood seems to harden and dry, before it falls like black sand to the ground. Whatever the sigils were for – they sure aren’t warding against anything anymore.

Cas pulls open the gym doors, and they scream open on dry hinges. Sam hesitates at the two frozen guards, but follows Cas’ lead, and swiftly takes off after the angel into the gym. Jack is close at his heels.

The gym is darker – half the lights have been blown out by whatever force blasted the glass from the windows.

The first thing that Sam notices is that half the ceiling tiles have caved in, and old plaster and rotting ceiling insulation settles around the room, covering everything in a thick white, powdery dust. And in the dust, Sam sees his brother. Dean stands perfectly rigid in the center of a circle of fire, his back towards them. A body lays broken at his feet, no features visible except for the charred holes where its eyes were – exploded out by holy light.

But Sam blinks, and sees what he missed before. Wavering in the clouds of dust, invisible to the naked eye, but caught in the shivering motes of dust and plaster, large black wings grow from his brother’s back, stretching out at shifting, variable lengths. It’s like seeing a fish darting through a stream, hard to keep track of, hard to understand what you’re really looking at.

“Dean?” Sam tries, and has to cough to clear some of the plaster out of his throat.

Dean doesn’t hear him or chooses not to acknowledge him. He doesn’t move a muscle, holding himself completely still, even as those sharp and void-back pinions twitch in the settling dust.

Sam finally sees the scattered figures of Michael’s army – maybe fifteen to twenty frozen figures standing still, dead blue eyes unblinking even as dust settles against the faces, sucked into unresisting lungs.

Sam takes another few steps into the room, leaving footsteps in the dust like a trailblazer. He passes Cas, who has paused next to one of the frozen Michael Monsters. Cas’ fingers twitch out, brushing the arm of a woman frozen with her vamp teeth bared, but she doesn’t react.

“Dean!” Sam tries again, covering his mouth to not suck in any more of the disgusting air.

This time, Dean turns around. He meets Sam’s eyes, and there’s not a trace of Sam’s brother in those blue eyes – not even a sliver of green escaping the eclipsing light. The light in his eyes flashes once, and the holy oil fire is extinguished immediately. The room is darker now; Sam can see that Dean’s shirt is shredded into ribbons and soaked in blood, but Dean isn’t holding himself like someone struggling to keep their insides from spilling out. The wings grow fuzzier as more of the dust settles, growing more incorporeal as they lose their backdrop.

Dean watches them from across the room, and there’s not a trace of recognition blinking back at them.

Suddenly, someone coughs from the far side of the room, and Sam jumps, thinking for a moment that Michael’s army is waking up, ready to slaughter them with overwhelming numbers and all that superpowered stamina that only archangel grace can provide. But none of the Michael Monsters have moved, only one arm waves weakly in the dim light. The sound of wet coughing echoes in the
“Garth?” Sam asks, completely disbelieving, as he makes out the bloodied form of their werewolf friend. Garth is covered in blood and dust, and beckons them over weakly where he’s slumped against the wall. A Michael Monster hovers prone over him, a silver knife already slipping from dull fingers.

Sam tears his eyes away from Garth when he hears a familiar groan from the center of the room.

Dean’s rubbing his head like he’s fighting a pounding headache, and when he opens his eyes blearily – there’s nothing but exhaustion in his green eyes. The black visage of archangel wings has faded, leaving nothing but a dusty Winchester in a ruined shirt, anointed with drying blood and holy oil.

Dean squints his eyes like he’s staring into the sun and glances at the woman’s body at his feet before looking back at Sam. And that concerned expression is 100 percent Dean.

Dean coughs thickly into his elbow, before spitting out a thick wad of blood and dust onto the ground. He wipes his mouth with a bloody sleeve and frowns at them. "What the hell did you guys do?"

Chapter End Notes

There’s probably a good amount of plot holes here surrounding the prayer thing - but I really wanted to increase Jack’s role in this chapter, because I’ve kind of shoved him to the back the last couple chapters. Oh well.

Aw, Felisha. You are dead. I loved you, and you are dead. Also that disease is real - look it up. Trippy. Crazy rare though. Also that’s a real, closed school in Indianapolis. I actually had to do like... research for this one ¯\_(ツ)_/¯

Ugh there was something else I felt like I needed to explain about this chapter but now I don't remember. If anything is confusing, let me know. That's probably the bit I was planning on addressing... Anyway, thanks for reading and commenting <3

EDIT: oooooh right, I was gonna talk about the weird storm thing. Yeah, so that was like 50% #dramaticflair 50% canon. I’ve been digging deep on the spn wikia archangel powers page, going back and forth on what powers I’m gonna put in the fic, and one of the bits that I had forgotten about was a weird storm/temperature/electricity ability/effect that archangels seem to have. Specifically it said Raph knocked out power to a coast. And other things - like Lucifer apparently being able to control the temperature. So I didn’t 100% pull that out of my ass.
Chapter 16

Dean drunkenly tilts to the side for a lengthy moment, but seems to find his sense of balance before Sam can get close enough to assist. Or strangle his brother for disappearing on him.

Dean scrubs both hands through his hair like a dandruff commercial, and stares puzzled at the plaster coating his fingers before looking back up at Sam with a *uh what the fuck* slash *this is absolutely disgusting* face. Sam is already there, and has both hands fisted in Dean’s jacket, knocking him a step backwards.

“What – *Jesus*, Sammy.” Dean protests, and manages to disengage one of Sam’s hands from his jacket. But Sam refuses to take a step back – refuses to completely let go of Dean in case his brother decides to grow wings (or shit, maybe extra legs) and decides to flap off to Vegas or somewhere. Still not able to unclench his jaw, Sam starts agitatedly checking Dean over for injuries. When his hand skims over Dean’s heart, something flashes behind Dean’s eyes, and he roughly shoves Sam away.

“No.” Dean agrees, and takes a few steps towards Sam to get a better look at Felisha’s cooling body. “I think I might have done that.”

Dean looks down at her burnt eyes and twisted mouth. “Looks like it didn’t go so well.”

“Michael’s rebound vessel?” Dean finishes, and toes one of the woman’s arms so it flops to the side like a dead fish. Sam would reprimand his brother for being distasteful, but the former vessel’s sleeves are liberally soaked in blood, and Sam’s pretty sure it’s not her own. “Her name was Felisha. Guess she had a little crush on the freeloader in my skull. I think…” And Dean trails off, brows narrowed like he’s trying to rewind the tape on the last few minutes, “I think she was trying to absorb some of Michael’s grace.” And his hand scratches absentmindedly at his chest, over his heart.

Sam’s eyes snap up to Dean, but Dean is still studying the corpse. “What? You – “

“Sam!” Cas calls from across the room, and both brothers are snapped from their pocket of reverie and back to the real world. Cas is kneeling at Garth’s side, his hands soft against Garth’s chest. Jack is awkwardly maneuvering the empty Michael Monster at Garth’s side away from them to give them more working room. Cas is gingerly stretching Garth out into a more horizontal position on the floor. The bloody werewolf is already unconscious again.

Dean moves first, but Sam is close behind.

“Shit.” Dean curses as they kneel at his side. Cas has already removed what little remains of Garth’s
wrecked shirt, and Sam almost wants to tell him to put it back on, if only so they don’t have to see the gashes and slashes in Garth’s icy white skin. The werewolf’s increased healing factor seems to have given up Garth for dead, and the wounds ooze dully in thick, slow-moving streams to pool on the floor.

“Can you heal him?” Jack asks quietly, like Garth is just sleeping and had requested to not be disturbed.

Cas’ hand settles lightly on Garth’s chest, and rests there for a moment, fingers twitching. Garth’s eyes move weakly behind the lids, slits of sick yellow in black-rimmed sockets. “No.” He says, and his fingers curl into a fist resting on Garth’s heart, like the only comfort he can offer is his presence here at the end. “There’s too much damage, and it was done with a silver knife. There’s nothing I can do.”

“Maybe I – “ Jack begins to offer, but Sam closes a hand around Jack’s forearm and cuts him off. Jack’s eyebrows dip, but Sam just shakes his head, not taking his eyes off their fallen friend. Garth takes another reedy breath, and Sam can’t believe that he’s having to give up another friend to the never-ending Winchester-versus-the-world war.

It’s the fact that Dean shakes his hand out that makes Sam take notice. Like he used to do frequently back when was in the thralls of grace poisoning, and was trying to expel the encumbrance of grace. Sam’s only seen him do it a few times since – and always when he was trying to tap into that borrowed and undefined well of power. Immediately, he sees all of Dean’s idea laid out in front of them, like cards tossed down on a table.

Dean’s hand, already bloodied and slick with some kind of oily substance, moves to replace Cas’. Cas gives Dean a look, and some unspoken conversation is exchanged, some weird profound bond discussion that’s similar to the Winchester’s mute conversations, but translated differently. And maybe it’s an angel-thing, but Cas immediately gives Dean room to try something that might be momentously stupid.

Sam assumes that Dean’s attempt to heal Garth – because what else would Dean be trying – would end in some trial but mostly error. It took Dean days to even pull off the smallest of seraphic miracles, and that was with hours of explanation and discovery.

Dean’s fingers graze Garth’s bare skin, and Garth’s eyes snap open like they tapped with a live wire. Immediately, without a single hesitant pause, the oozing slices and carefully placed stab wounds marking Garth’s skin illuminate from within. The cuts heal over instantly, like a tide smoothing over imperfections on the shore, erasing any sign that there was ever any damage to begin with. Dean’s eyes flash that shivering blue for a single second, and it’s already done. Not even traces of blood remains smeared across the werewolf’s skin.

Garth comes up swinging.

The ex-hunter surges into a sitting position, and his right arm rockets out, catching Cas straight in the jaw. The angel rocks back a few inches, but seems more surprised at Garth’s rapid recovery than anything.

Sam realizes his mouth is hanging open when he turns to Dean. “How did you know how to do that?”

(“Oh my god, Castiel, I could have killed you!”)

Dean meets Sam’s eyes for the briefest of moments and shrugs.
Sam smacks the back of his hand against his brother’s bent knee. “Don’t even think of starting that up, Dean. You promised no more secrets with the angel stuff. Not after last time.”

“Cas, it’s okay to admit it. I’ve been told I have a wicked right-hook. Legendary, even.”

“Sam, I’m an open book.” Dean says, and his outstretched arms, revealing the bloody swath of ripped and bloody clothing, is not as reassuring as Dean seems to think it is. “It’s not like I changed colors and grew polka dots. Cas has healed us plenty of times. We know that’s included with angel health insurance.”

(“Your blow did not hurt me. I am an angel of the Lord, Garth. I have been obliterated by Lucifer himself. I have - ”)

“You know that’s not just what I’m talking about, Dean! You’ve never healed anyone before!”

(“A fortune cookie once told me that we are only human when we freely admit our pain –“)

Dean frowns. “I must have.”

“Must have?” Sam repeats, incredulous. “When?”

Dean visibly bristles, and straightens from his crouch. Garth had apparently started some kind of weird wrestling demonstration with Cas but Sam hardly notices – his full attention is on his brother. The one who apparently doesn’t see a single thing out of the ordinary in this blood-drenched room. Sam catches his brother’s sleeve before he can walk off, and uses the torn material to yank himself to his feet.

“Look around!” And he sweeps an arm vaguely at the surroundings. And it encompasses everything - the basically-drooling Michael Monster currently sagging against the wall, and the rest of his still frozen compatriots. Felisha’s body that he can smell charred from across the room, her hand tightly clenching the bloody angel blade that surely carved now-healed lines through Dean’s skin. The extinguished holy oil, the blown-out windows, the ripped-up ceiling.

And it encompasses all the things that Sam can’t point out – the rendering of inky wings cast upon thousands of particles of dust, the icy blue eyes watching their approach without recognition. And somehow – Sam is sure that if they had busted into the room only a few seconds earlier, they might not be standing where they are now.

But Dean doesn’t look around. His eyes haven’t left his brother’s, and maybe he can pick up on that storm thudding inside Sam’s eyes, or maybe he’s just finally letting the situation sink in – but there’s finally something that looks like unease in those green eyes.

Dean finally tears his gaze away, and walks over to one of the prone Michael Monsters. He pokes the woman in the middle of her forehead, watches her tilt back before straightening back like one of those blow-up punching bags. Silently, Sam turns wide eyes to Cas, who only shakes his head, stress already creasing his forehead.

“Jack, go ahead and grab that bucket over there.” Dean says after a moment, and Jack shuffles off to pick up a knocked over plastic bucket near the charred remains left behind from a ring of fire.

Sam frowns at the two separate rings of extinguished fire, but turns to Cas instead. “You don’t think…” he queries under his breath, and the angel’s eyes are solemn as he focuses upwards, “that… that was Michael?”
Cas shakes his head unequivocally. “Absolutely not.” Cas promises. “But whatever it was,” and he leans to the side a little to study where Dean and Jack are rounding on one of the Michael Monsters, “it wasn’t 100 percent Dean either.”

Sam shudders, but remembers suddenly why they’re here in the first place. “Jesus, Garth.” And he drops into another crouch next to the fallen werewolf’s side. Garth hasn’t made an attempt to stand, but seems fine overall. “Are you okay? God, I’m… We’re…”

There’s a shell-shocked hollowness lurking behind Garth’s eyes, but he forces a smile. “I’m fine, Sam.” And he slaps his abdomen. “Pretty sure Dean scraped off scars I’ve had since I was a little’un.”

“What happened?”

Garth’s eyes skip over Sam and land on another empty Michael Monster who’s sitting on one of the bleachers. It’s too dark for Sam to make out any features other than glowing eyes and a backwards baseball cap, but Garth’s expression is regretful. “They jumped me at the laundromat, and brought me out here. Michael – er, Felisha – wanted to know about… Dean and grace, and Michael.” He shimmies up the wall into a more elevated sitting position, and grabs at the cuff of Sam’s jacket. “Sam, I’m so sorry, I didn’t want to tell her, but she was – “ And Garth blanches white, horror rimming his eyes, and Sam’s worried that the small man is going to vomit all over himself.

“Hey, hey – Garth, no – “ Sam says, and claps a hopefully comforting hand on Garth’s shoulder. He can see Garth trying to swallow down the memories. Shit. Just more scars that Winchesters tend to leave behind on their friends. “Garth, no one blames you here. You did us a favor, and it bit you in the ass. You know Dean wouldn’t have wanted you to… die for him.” Right, only Dean gets to die for others. But he pushes past the thought.

“I don’t know what she did to Dean. I was… out of it for most of it. But she threw something on him, and then was cutting him with that blade, and pulling out all that light, and God – “ Garth cuts off his babble, and puts a hand to his mouth like he’s actually going to be sick. He settles after a moment, “It was like she was soaking it in. All that grace. I don’t know what happened after that – not until you guys Alabama-slammed your way in here.” Garth runs bloody hands through hair, inadvertently teasing it into a dusty mohawk. “Did Dean have… wings?”

Sam’s gaze flicks up at Cas for a moment, before returning to Garth. “Yeah, maybe.” He answers vaguely.

Garth is suddenly illuminated with the reflection of blue light, and then there’s a wet thump of a body thudding against the maple wood floor. Sam turns quickly and catches the last vestiges of grace dimming in Dean’s eye, and the gauzy pool of grace floating inches above his outstretched palm. Dean’s expression is unreadable as he inspects the fallen body on the ground at his feet. Jack holds the bucket out, and Dean lets the small chiffon of grace slide between his fingers and into the bucket.

Sam and Cas abandon Garth to his reverie, and are at their side in a moment. Cas kneels down at the woman’s side, and his fingers graze her forehead. There’s no longer light pooling in her empty eyes, and her chest is still. “She’s dead.” Sam breathes.

But Cas shakes his head, and abandons his inspection of the body. “She was hardly alive in the first place. You must have smote everyone in the room; only Michael’s grace was keeping them breathing.”

“I wasn’t smitten! Smote?” Garth calls from the side, but no one pays him any mind.
And Sam finds it much more disturbing now, standing in the midst of the frozen spectators. The Michael Monsters don’t do anything but breathe and blink, with that awful reflection of light sparkling behind their irises. It’s like Death hit pause right as the soul was about to expire, leaving them in some sort of half-shrouded twilight. Sticking them between worlds.

“Do you remember doing that?” Sam asks Dean quietly.

Dean glances down at his hand and clenches it into a bloody fist. “I… maybe.”

“Maybe?”

Dean doesn’t say anything for a moment. “I remember doing it. I don’t remember how.”

“Could you do it again?”

Dean’s hand drops to his side and he blinks up at his brother. “Yes.” He replies simply, and steps over the body to the next rigidly posed Michael Monster. Jack follows behind, hoisting his red sandcastle bucket.

Sam and Cas let them go. They don’t speak as Dean places his palm against the monster’s forehead. Dean’s back is to them, but they watch as the grace drains from behind the eyes of the monster, and he tumbles to the ground, dead. Dean drops the fragment of grace into the bucket and moves on.

“He seems… okay.” Cas says after a moment.

Sam huffs a disbelieving grunt. “For a guy that was captured, tortured, and then killed everyone in a twenty yard radius? Sure.”

“I mean… he seems like himself.”

“He said there’s a crack in the prison we caged Michael in.” Sam says quietly. Dean’s hearing has improved with the rest of his senses, but it doesn’t seem like he’s listening in on their conversation, as he continues to move methodically around the room. Drained corpses smack the ground like their strings have been cut. “He said it spreads when he’s hurt. Like with Dominic.”

Cas absorbs that. “Michael isn’t going to wait patiently for Dean to let him out. He’s going to use every opportunity, every chance that Dean is distracted, or injured, to try and break free.”

“Is Dean going to be okay, Cas? Can he hold off long enough for us to find a plan to get Michael out?”

Another body thuds to the ground.

“Dean is strong.” Cas assures Sam, but it also sounds like he’s assuring himself. “We’ll just have to watch for what leaks through the cracks.”

*Thud.*

Garth turns down the offer of a lift back to the Bunker, saying he just wants to get back to his family. Dean can understand that – the tough son of a bitch has already been carved up like a Thanksgiving dinner enough for one lifetime. Dean hotwires one of the cars in the parking lot – presumably one of the vehicles the Michael Monsters had rolled into town with, and they send Garth off with a borrowed cellphone and all the cash from their pockets.
They leave the corpses to rot.

Garth honks the horn as he swings out of the parking lot. Dean’s grabbing a fresh shirt from the small stash in the trunk, and raises a hand in goodbye as the tail lights disappear up the quiet road.

Sam tosses him the keys as he drops his unused machete into the trunk’s hidden bottom, and Dean twirls them in his hands, comforted by the cool metal.

Dean slides behind the driver’s seat, and his fingers curl around the steering wheel before he’s even slid the key in the ignition. It’s been all of maybe an hour since he was last behind the wheel of his baby, but it feels like days. Weeks.

He closes his eyes in the darkness of the Impala as the rest of his family slides into their own respective seats, and feels the thin line of a crack splitting through a door in his mind. He doesn’t dip too far into the room, doesn’t want to see the after from the before. But he can feel it, can taste the mist puffing from the door like he’s breathing in minty winter air.

Cas slides into the backseat, the bucket of grace balanced on his lap. He looks distressed until he catches Dean’s eyes in the rearview mirror and his brows narrow. “This feels sacrilegious.” He grates, as the grace swirls in his bucket.

Dean cocks a grin at the mirror and slides the key into the ignition. “Just don’t puke into it.”

Cas sighs and mutters under his breath, “I don’t get car sick.”

Dean’s not sure where they are exactly, since he winged it over to the school gym angel-style, but he’s always been a champ at following road signs and they’re back on the freeway leading out of Indianapolis. The tape deck gently pushes out a Zeppelin song over the speakers, stuttering over the same tape skip in “Black Dog” it has for years. It’s comforting, in its way.

Sam glances at Dean every few minutes, until Dean finally takes his eyes off the road and pulls a face. “Alright, Sam. You can ask once.”

“Are you okay?” Sam asks immediately, like he’s been biting down the question for the last several miles.

“I’ll be better once we get that bucket of fun back to the Bunker. But yeah, Sam, I’m good, man.” And it’s not exactly a lie. There’s an exhaustion settling in his bones, like getting grace sucked out of the marrow of your soul is the equivalent of two days without sleep. And there’s a new edginess in his head, something he can’t quite get his arms around. For a moment, he stands outside of Rocky’s Bar, and watches the murkiness beyond the windows, like there’s a grease fire in the kitchen and he’s waiting for the cherry red fire trucks to arrive and tell him what’s what. Whether it’s safe to go back inside.

But inside is a fuckin’ horror show.

Sam’s phone chirps in his pocket, and he slides the phone from his jacket. He frowns at the screen, before accepting the call.

The red-headed witch is already talking before the call’s connected, as if she is going to say what she’s going to say, and woe be the caller on the other end that takes too long to answer. “ – without a guest room already set up or a strapping Winchester to greet me.” She laments in that lilting burr.

“Rowena’s back in the Bunker.” Sam says to the car, and Dean’s eyes cut to his meaningfully.
“Who are you talking to, Samuel? I hear the purr of that car of yours. Am I to believe that after the days of begging me to return, you’ve suddenly other things to do?”

“No,” Sam says quickly, wondering if he needs to put a hunter on guard duty in the event that Rowena becomes a flight risk. “We’ll be back in the morning. Just – don’t leave, okay? We got the grace for the spell.” Hopefully, they have enough grace for the spell. Rowena’s attention span can be thin on a good day. “Hang tight – we’ll be back soon.”

A sigh crackles on the other end. “I am brimming with anticipation. I’ll make myself at home.” And she rings off.

Something like relief breathes life into the car. Dean drums his palms on the steering wheel, and grins at the road. “We got a Kentucky-fried bucket of grace and just the right witch to whip it all together. Three Horsemen to go and Adios Apocalypse.”

Sam’s glad that Dean’s catching the silver lining, but all Sam can taste is blood in the back of his throat when he thinks about the Horsemen. When their days were drenched in demon blood, hell and the Apocalypse Take One. “Yeah, ‘cause that was so easy the first time around.” He mutters, and turns the phone over nervously in his hands.

His brother seems to catch the gist of his mood, because he shoots Sam a bolstering glance. “Hey, that was before I could smite a whole basketball team plus their bench players. We’re running out of time, but we got a solid plan. And there’s been times we didn’t even have that.”

Sam shoves aside his brother’s uncharacteristic positivity and seizes on the bullet point of Dean’s comment, “Running out of time until what, Dean?”

Dean’s mouth hangs open for a moment, and he turns his attention back to the road, like suddenly safety is his number one goal. He seems to weigh his responses in his head, but the scale tilts towards the brutal. “You know what, Sam.” He says after a moment, irascibility flattening the humor out of his expression.

Sam nods sharply, and turns back towards his window. The same sick feeling he had in the gymnasium is back, and he stares resolutely at his reflection in the window. Worried that if he turns towards Dean, all he’ll see is a stranger staring back.

Rowena is sunshine and curls as they step exhausted into the Bunker’s front room.

She approaches Dean first, and her fingers flutter over his dust-streaked temple. “Well, you’re all sorts of blue dust and safety pins these days, dear.”

Dean scoffs low in his throat, ready to toss out a lame follow-up insult, probably nonsensical and stupid. But Rowena is already moving past him, arms outstretched for the bucket Jack hauls in from the hallway.

“What this would go for in coven circles, you cannot even imagine.” She says appreciatively, and Jack only relinquishes the grace after Sam nods. Rowena angles the grace to catch the light, and the reflection sparkles white across her cheeks.

Sam and Jack look ready to drop from exhaustion, and even Cas is looking a little ragged around the edges. Even Dean feels the pull towards his bed, the desire to force a few hours of sleep down his throat, before the whole shit show of their lives starts again, but he feels the pulse of the crack like a second heartbeat, and knows that there’ll be no warning when the dam finally breaks.
He blinks, and he’s in his room. Billie’s book is tossed on the nightstand – no longer needing to be hidden under nudie mags and coffee cups – and he scoops it up. A secondary muscle twitches in his back, and he’s back in the front room, Billie’s book retrieved.

Everyone jumps like he’s vomited fire on the floor and smeared it around with the toe of his boot, and Dean frowns at their expressions. It takes him a second to remember that he doesn’t do that, hasn’t done that, shouldn’t do that, but it’s hard, because he feels like he has. Like second nature swapped out for the first. Dean rubs the heel of his hand at his temple. Fuck, he needs a beer.

“Fascinating.” Rowena comments, but it sounds like a genuine compliment. Sam shoots him one of those concerned bitch faces from his collection, but Dean just shrugs. “Oh.” Rowena breathes, as her eyes land on the book tucked under Dean’s arm. She holds the bucket of grace to the side, and Sam snatches it before she lets it fall to the ground, forgotten in her anticipation for a new spell book.

Dean hands it over without comment, and the witch’s eyes flash purple as her painted nails tap along the spine. “It’s beautiful.” She whispers, and the Winchesters exchange glances. “It positively cantillates like an ending. A wee piece of Death, all wrapped up in a glossy cover. Forget the grace – imagine what you could do with a sliver of Billie herself.”

“Yeah, I’ll see if I can get her to sign it for you if I run into her in Utah again.” Dean drawls, ignoring the startled glances of the rest of the room – forgetting that he hadn’t told anyone about that second date with Death. Shit – he’ll probably have to put out for their third.

Rowena ignores Dean’s jab, and flips open the cover. Her fingers dance across the page over the sharp lines of text like she’s reading braille. Under her light ministrations, the pages seem to ripple with seeped light, reacting to her inner store of power. Rowena smiles at the text like she’s greeting an old friend.

“So, how much grace do we need to power that sucker up?” Dean asks, growing impatient with the book fondling.

“Och, more than that.” Rowena replies instantly, arching one perfect brow at the bucket swinging from Sam’s grip. “But it’s a start. Might bag us a Horseman and a half.”

Damn. “But can you get us a location on the first?” Dean presses.

Rowena flips a few pages forward, and then one page back. “Yes.” She admits, but her finger taps on the last sentence of the page. “But I’ll need a few days.”

“A few days?” Dean repeats incredulously. “It’s a fuckin’ spell book, can’t you just chant some mojo, dump some grace on the pages, and give us a friggin’ zip code?”

Rowena gives Dean a dirty look for his flippancy towards magic. “Some spells you read forward to backwards, some right to left. Some you cast all at once.”

“Yeah, I don’t know what that means.”

Rowena sighs. “It means you should all be lucky I don’t charge by the hour.” She slaps the book closed with a twitch of fingers and hugs it possessively to her chest. “I need some time, and you’ll need some more grace. Ruminate on that problem, and leave me to mine.” She pauses, and her blue-tipped hazel eyes narrow as she crinkles her nose at them. “Now you lads had best splash some water on those dour faces – you all look horrid. Go get some rest.” Rowena pulls a chair out at the table and settles in, Billie’s book splashed out on the table in front of her.

A mug of tea is already cooling at her elbow, and Dean realizes that she’d been waiting for them to
arrive. He smothers down all the uncharitable thoughts and half-formed threats in his mind, and taps his hand against his thigh. “Well… thanks, Rowena. For being here.”

She flashes them a million-dollar smile but doesn’t reply, already getting sucked back into that confusing world of spell work and magic.

Dean nods his head at the hallway, and Cas and Jack begin to trudge off. Sam hesitates for a moment, and then carefully sets the bucket of grace on the table next to Rowena. She hardly notices as her eyes flick right to left over the illuminated pages. Sam seems to wait to see if Rowena will have any other requests, but she doesn’t spare him a glance. Dean shrugs, and Sam follows him into the hallway towards their rooms.

And the last thing that Dean hears Rowena say before they’re around the corner: “And now, lads, things will get really interesting.”

Chapter End Notes

This is a really awkward chapter - the beginning was waaaaay longer than I thought it was going to be, so I had to chop off some of this chapter to save it for the next. Weird how it's almost 5k and like nothing happens. Oh well, at least that means I already have a chunk of next chapter done? Should have some time to write/post tomorrow! So - sorry about the filler chapter. Buuut I guess I don't feel too bad since I guess the previous two were pretty jam-packed? Idk.

Thanks for reading <3
Dean steps up to the front doors of the hospital, and the automatic doors *whoosh* open. The smells of antiseptic and latex swirl around him with their own clinical perfume, and he steps lightly through the dim foyer.

It’s past visiting hours, but there’s no one around to catch him as he passes the windowed receptionist box. A worn *Out to Lunch. Back in 30 minutes* sign is propped against the glass, but the lights are turned off. Dean pushes past the *Employees Only* sign without pause and follows the color-coded arrows towards the Long-Term Care ward.

Orange stretchers and empty food carts line the hallway, but otherwise, the hospital is remarkable only in its choice of lime-green painted walls. Dean’s eyes skim lazily over the color choice, interrupted only with the occasional floor-length mirror or eye exam chart.

A nurse passes Dean, giving him a distracted, cursory glance, but is clearly too deep into their sleepless shift to actually realize that Dean isn’t allowed to wander these halls. Dean moves past him and is around the corner into the ward before the nurse can realize their mistake.

The ward is mostly empty – the hospital is on the outskirts of Duluth. The patients that require more specialized and urgent care often being transferred to the more urban hospitals. The ones that breathe in the tepid air of this particular room are the cases without hope of recovery.

One man – early fifties, hair already thinning, face paler than milk – blinks up at the ceiling without seeing it, a steady slick of drool soaking down his cheek and into his yellow-stained pillow. Dean’s lips crinkle with disgust. A young woman with a shock of red hair sleeps in one of the other beds, a curtain of privacy only half-tugged shut. She’s hooked up to more wires and IV bags than seems even worth preserving, a bizarre hybrid of human weakness and mechanical life.

But it’s not those two creatures that Dean is here to see.

Another enervated woman lies reclined in bed, watching his steady approach towards her corner. Her eyes are rimmed with enough black to remind Dean of a plague victim, her arms are thin with loss of muscle definition and pale from lack of sunlight. Her hair had been fixed into a loose bun at her neck, but long waves have escaped, giving her a manic look. She’s not hooked up to any monitors; there are no IV bags dripping life-sustaining fluid or medicine into her veins. Even the chart tucked into the plastic folder at the end of her bed has but a few lines scribbled across in blue pen.

She doesn’t say a word as Dean approaches the side of her bed. Dean studies her from the few feet of separation, feels the exhaustion and mental strain in her gaze.

“Are you real?” She asks, and her voice that once held so much strength is thin as a reed.

“Depends on what scale we’re using.” Dean answers, and his voice is too loud in the gentle room. No other figure stirs as his voice disturbs the air.

The woman’s lips tug into a smile, but there’s no humor in the tired lines of her face. “Cute. I haven’t had a hallucination that was such a *charmer.*”
Dean’s mouth stretches into a closed-lipped smile, and he tugs the cap off his head. “Do you know what I am?”

A bark of laughter from the woman. “I don’t even know what I am anymore.”

“I am Michael.” Dean says, the words dropping from his tongue like poison and honey. “I am the First Born of Heaven, the High General of my Father’s seraphic armies.”

Now amusement does twist behind the woman’s features. “That’s a hell of a support group introduction.” Her voice dips quieter towards the end as her strength fails, but she continues louder. “I usually just start with My name is Felisha, and it has been 78 days since I’ve last slept.”

“You are strong, Felisha.” Dean says to the frail woman lying prone on her twisted sheets. A fire burns behind the fatigue in her eyes, a desperate struggle for life. And it’s always the desperate ones that give in so sweetly. “You have fought well. I can use that strength.”

It’s a testament to the miseries and horrors that Felisha’s suffered through that she doesn’t ask for elucidation, she doesn’t ask what her soul will cost her. She raises a weak arm and grips at his sleeve. Her eyes are dark with entreaty. “Will you let me rest?”

A courteous smile splits Dean’s face like the slice of a knife. “For eternity.”

Felisha hesitates, a film of ice over the black water of her eyes. Her hand drops from Dean’s sleeve to the starchy sheets of her hospital bed.

“Then yes.”

Ironically, it’s Michael’s roar rebounding off the walls, fists slamming into glass, that finally plucks him out of the tide of the memory. Dean wakes from the dream like a blank slate and waits a moment to see what new version of himself will be colored in.

_Bang._

He scrubs a hand down his face and squints at the clock blinking green numbers at him, and realizes he’s only been asleep for an hour. The weariness remains, but it’s a different flavor of exhaustion than sleep deprivation. Maybe Felisha had ripped out more –

Felisha.

And the dream filters back into focus. Was that a dream? Why would he dream he was _Michael_? And why did it seem… real? Maybe his brain was picking up the pieces of the puzzle that Felisha had started, monologuing her oh-poor-me backstory, and his brain shuffled them around into some sense of order.

But it doesn’t feel like that.

Dean flips onto his back, stares at the cracks stretched out across the ceiling. There’s a cluster of blood splatters freckling the corner – remnants of Dominic blowing Dean away in his own room. The memory almost doesn’t seem real, anymore. Flipping through his own head, a lot of his memories don’t seem _real_ anymore, and he doesn’t know if that’s a pre- or post-Michael problem. Sometimes, Sam will say something, bring up a memory or conversation from a few years back. And Dean will _remember_ it, of course, his memory has always been ironclad. But now… it’s almost like looking at a cardboard cut-out of the memory – all the details and features are there, the ink and lines
and colors. But if he places a hand on it, the whole thing might collapse in on itself.

His back twinges with that phantom itch, and he rolls over onto his stomach. Rowena needs a few days to make sense of the spell; they have some time. Maybe he’ll stretch his wings out, like he used to. Float in that slim disk of sky between the heat of earth and the sucking ice of vacuum. He relives sun-drenched memories that are warm and comforting and -

And also have never happened. Fly? What the fuck?

Dean throws the covers back off the bed, and decides that maybe two showers within an hour of each other really isn’t that weird.

Sam sleeps for most of the morning, waking up disoriented in the afternoon. He’s never been one for naps, but is glad he was able to catch a few hours while his brother drove back from Indianapolis. He hates having an irregular sleep schedule.

Not bothering to cover the ferocious yawn that tears out of him, Sam cracks his back against the sheets before swinging his feet off the bed. He’s already torn through the grimy tomes of angel lore stacked neatly on his desk, but there’s another hundred waiting for him in the library.

Plus coffee. Always coffee.

He swaps sweat pants for jeans and pads down the hallway. Dean’s door is closed, so he’s probably still sleeping off his angelic misadventure. Sam hesitates at the door, wanting to poke his head in, make sure that recent events haven’t brought back different memories of torture into his brother’s nightmares. But there’s no sounds of restless tossing and turning or murmuring behind the door, and Sam leaves his brother to his hopefully unremarkable dreams.

Cas sits in the War Room alone, his eyes flicking over lines of text faster than humanly possible. He glances up at Sam for half a moment, before finishing his page and roughly shoving the book away.

Sam pulls a chair out and sits across from the angel, forgoing coffee for the moment. “That good?”

Cas’ expression is unreadable as he drags another book from the stack at his elbow. “Perhaps I should return to Heaven and see if the angels have turned up anything new.” His fingers curl around the cover of the book, but he doesn’t flip to the first page. “These tomes are riddled with fallacies and inaccuracies regarding angels.”

“Welcome to the world of second-hand research.” Sam remarks dryly.

Cas shakes his head, and opens the cover. Sam almost wants to ask if the angel’s found anything regarding the archangel problem in Dean’s head, but knows that Cas would have led with it if he had. Sam bites back a yawn, and looks around the room. “Where’s Rowena?”

Cas gives him a dark look and then turns back to the yellowed pages. “She went to the archives. She said I read too loud.”

Sam tries to cover his snort with a cough. “Well, we might as well dig through fallacies and inaccuracies together.” Sam says amiably, and starts to push his chair back from the table. “I’ll put a pot of coffee on.”

“I already started one when I felt you wake.” Cas replies, flipping past graphic etchings of some kind of sacrificial ritual.
Sam’s ass thunks back down in the chair. “Wow. You sure you’re just Dean’s guardian angel?”

Cas looks back up, and grates, “I am not Dean’s – “ but his eyes narrow under shaggy hair when he sees Sam’s poor attempt at hiding his shit-eating grin.

“Has Dean been up this morning?” Sam asks after a moment.

Cas shakes his head mechanically, reabsorbed in the text.

“Huh.” Sam grunts, and – hearing the sound of the coffee machine spitting the last of its bounty into the carafe – leaves Cas to his gory picture book. “End of days, and Dean’s sleeping in.”

Dean is definitely not sleeping.

He’s also not even within a thousand miles of his bed. And if he had heard Sam’s comment, he would probably be offended at the implication.

Actually – he’s more offended at the fact that his third-favorite jacket’s sleeve has been shredded to all holy hell. “Fucking… Christ.” Dean curses eloquently, and shoves the Michael Monster away from him. The frenzied werewolf rips off about half of Dean’s jacket cuff as he’s thrown against the kitchen wall. Dean winces in sympathy as the wolf plunges through 18 inches of plaster and foamy insulation. Dean can hear the sound of a body colliding painfully with something wooden in the living room. He calls through the puffs of insulation though the wall: “That was your fault for knocking the coffee table over in the – “

But his ribbing is interrupted by something shattering against his back. Iron wrought chair legs and scraps of wood drop at his feet, and Dean realizes that the last untouched barstool has just joined its smashed brethren. Those suckers looked expensive.

Dean dusts splinters from his jacket collar, and turns towards the new Michael Monster that had arrived on the scene. She’s dressed in a popular gas station attendant uniform, and Dean wonders if all of Michael’s undercover army has to maintain such mediocre covers.

“That’s not how you play musical chairs, sweetheart.” Dean gibes, and rolls one of the iron legs back a few inches with his toe before kicking it up into his hands. “You can sit this round out.” He spins the iron in his hands and is in front of the Michael Monster in half a heartbeat. The woman’s eyes widen as they refocus on the sudden materialization of the hunter, but she doesn’t have a chance to even bare her teeth when Dean impales her through the stomach and into the wall. She cries out in pain as she thrashes against the iron pinning her, but only seems angrier than before. God, that Michael juice would sell like hot cakes in UFC circles.

Dean gives the thrashing monster a wide berth, and steps into the next room. The coffee table has indeed been smashed further, but there’s no sign of the monster he tossed through the wall. Fuck.

Dean ducks his head back into the kitchen, but the werewolf hadn’t doubled back through the other entrance. “Be right back.” Dean calls to the snarling werewolf, and pushes into the living room. It’s hard to hear sounds of retreat over the struggles of the pinned wolf in the kitchen, the quiet groaning of the vamp whose legs he broke and left in a bathtub upstairs, and the third and fourth he’d smote with holy light and left alive, but empty in a guest bed room. He closes his eyes, and tries to narrow in on the pocket of Michael’s grace in his runaway. But there’s too much pinging off his grace radar with the rest of the small sleeper cell of Michael’s army in the house.

Dean grabs one of the legs of the coffee table as he passes through the room. It’s a comfort thing.
Like a security blanket.

“Come out, come out!” Dean calls, and listens as his words echo back against the tall ceiling in the house’s foyer, bits of his voice refracting as it bounces off the crystals in the chandelier. It’s jarring, sometimes, having your senses dialed up past eleven.

Dean hadn’t heard the front door open, so he figures the monster’s hidden deeper in the house. He turns the corner into a yet-unexplored wing, and pokes his head into each room down the hallway. As if he’s not engaged in a one-versus-five fight to the death, but trying to find a pouting child hiding under a bed. Ridiculous.

Dean finds nothing in the bathroom at the end of the hall, and turns to retrace his steps.

“Hey, hunter.”

The Michael Monster stands at the end of the dark hall, thrown into resplendence as the early afternoon light slices in from the foyer. His eyes flicker yellow-then-blue as he smirks dangerously a few yards away, the barrel of a twelve-gauge aimed in Dean’s direction.

And in retrospect, Dean can see this playing out in a hundred different ways. He could have flapped those wings, appeared behind the werewolf and incapacitated him in a heartbeat. He could have thrown the table leg from the short distance and watch it sink 12 inches deep into the wall, pinning the monster like a bug behind glass. Shit, he probably could have let the guy fire off his first shot, and Dean could have brushed the bullets off his chest like bug splatter on a windshield.

But in that first moment, all Dean sees is the broad figure of Dominic outlined in the doorway of his room, wielding a Model 336 ready to blow Dean’s stomach into chunks, splashing him on the wall, and cracking Michael’s cage open wide.

Something snaps in Dean’s head, and he falls right through that pool of hunter-calm and smashes into the depths beyond.

A single word of the thundering language of angels erupts from his chest like it’s bypassed Dean entirely, pulled from the air like a conjured song. The glass in the family pictures lined up like soldiers explode from their frames. The entire left wall dividing the hall from the bedrooms bows from the pressure, and furniture from the second story crashes down as the floor boards disintegrate. The shotgun clatters noiselessly to the cracked floor as it slips from the dead man’s hands. The smile on his face doesn’t have a chance to fade as the monster is incinerated from the inside out – not even the grace swirling in his veins enough to protect him from holy fire that Dean had ignited inside his core.

Fire-rimmed ashes scatter to the floor like a fistful of rose petals, and if Dean had anything in his stomach, it would have painted the walls.

Turns out, Cas does read too loud, and Sam had to banish him to read in his room before he’s even finished his second cup of coffee.

The afternoon is dipping towards evening, and Sam pokes at his phone for the seventh time. Wondering with a sinking feeling how it is that a brother that doesn’t need to sleep is somehow pushing into the sixth hour of a nap.

Sam drops the bar coaster he’s using as a bookmark onto the pages of the lore book in front of him, and pushes back from the table. Privacy, his ass. Dean can help come up with a plan to pop Michael
out of his head, he tells himself. It’s easier to admit than acknowledge the bad feeling pooling in his stomach.

He’s hardly taken a step down the hallway, when the Bunker’s upper entrance clangs. Sam takes a step back, eyes narrowed up at the balcony. The upper entrance to the Bunker is hardly used – everyone always enters through the garage entrance.

The door finishes its outdated depressurization with a dull clunk, and the door swings open to reveal the extremely dirty, older Winchester brother. Their eyes lock instantly, and something like guilt and apology lurks behind Dean’s eyes, but his mouth pulls into a stubborn, unrepentant line.

Nearly shocked speechless, Sam gestures towards the direction of their rooms before he’s able to ask the question, “Have you been gone this whole time?”

Dean thumps a closed fist on the balcony and sucks in the inside of his cheek before finally answering, “Not even gonna ask where I’ve been?”

Sam’s rancor rises, and he takes an angry couple of steps towards the stairs as his brother begins to descend. “You’re covered in blood and dirt. And you’re missing half a sleeve. I’m not an idiot, Dean.”

“Nah, just a heavy sleeper.” Dean grins, but it comes across forced. “Used to be a time I couldn’t even crack the motel door without you pitching a –”

Sam waves away the memories before they can fully form. “Not the time for a trip down memory lane, Dean.”

Dean exhales heavily, but falls silent as he takes the last of the steps down. Sam sees the red-lidded Tupperware filled with swirls of grace. His eyes narrow, and Dean doesn’t make excuses as he drops the container onto the table, like it’s just another bag of takeout.

And no matter what Sam had expected, it hadn’t been this.

He’s pissed, now. Honest to God, grade A pissed. “You were taking on Michael Monsters? Alone?”

Dean at least has the decency to look sheepish. “I –”

“No – wait, you – shut up for a second, Dean – after everything that happened… literally yesterday… holy fire, angel blades, torture… you still went off on your own to track down Michael’s fucking army?”

Irritation twitches behind Dean’s eyes, but he bites his tongue.

Sam’s palms itch with the need to literally shove sense into his brother. Like maybe Dean’s forgotten that Sam is real, and if he can deck Dean and make him see stars, maybe he’ll see reason, too. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you, Dean, these last few days. But you can’t just flap off and take on an army without back up.”

“Why not?” Dean snaps, and irascible tendrils of grace – something that Dean’s long-since gotten a handle on – flicker in the shadows of his face. “Sam, you can’t bench me! We are so far past all that shit right now, that I am grade A fuckin’ shocked that you –”

“This isn’t about…” Sam throws his arms up in some desperate attempt to explain, “about benching you! This is about you,” and he jabs a finger into Dean’s chest, “always going off and doing things the Dean Winchester way, and only cluing your family in when you get caught.”
Dean pulls a face, “Lord’s fuckin’ name, Sam, I’m not some 16-year-old sneaking out of our hotel room.” He takes a step back from Sam’s reach, and holds the Tupperware of grace for Sam to take. Sam doesn’t, and it hangs awkwardly between them until Dean finally lowers it back to the table. “I took on five of those suckers, and they couldn’t even get in a solid punch, Sam. Rowena said we need to get fucking… double that amount of grace. I’m not gonna sit in my room and pretend to sleep, when I can be out there, cleaning up Michael’s mess. Getting the grace. C’mon, Sam – get your friggin’ head out of your ass and throw me a soft pitch, here. I can do this. Why are you so… pissed?”

“Because that’s not what we do!” And this time, Sam really does shove Dean, but his brother – all steel and blue spackle these days – doesn’t move an inch. “What was it that you told me all those years ago? In St. Louis? We’re stronger together than apart?”

Dean visibly bristles, like he always does when his own words are twisted around on him. “That’s not – those were… that was different.”

“Different, why? Because that time it was the Mark on your arm and not an angel in your head?”

And that’s the crux of it, really. Dean and his dogged determination to never let anything go. He swaps his soul for Sam’s like trading baseball cards after his spine was severed. He’s walking out of a motel room to grab bandages in Minnesota, but he’s really on his way to say yes to Michael 1.0. He’s sneaking angels into Sam’s head to heal him from the inside out, because he can’t let Sam go. And then days later, is dealing with fuckin’ Cain himself, infecting himself with all that darkness and frenzy. It’s the same shit as always. Dean’s always harping on about stronger together, but then he’s the one always leaving. And Sam knows that’s unfair – the Mark stole Dean away, Michael flapped off with Dean chained below the surface. But there’s no one forcing Dean, now.

Sam opens his mouth to try one more time, to fix this before it gets too broken. But Dean’s already speaking words he can’t take back, “It’s better if I do this alone.”

There’s a pregnant pause as the brothers stare each other down, a silent, well-rehearsed repartee of the usual arguments. Sam can feel Dean vibrate even in all his stillness, more a force of nature than a person these days. More seraph than brother. Sam breaks eye contact first, shaking his head at the ground. Dean doesn’t say a word as Sam flips closed the lore book, coaster still marking his place, and tucks it under his arm.

Dean doesn’t say anything until Sam’s already heading into the hallway. “Sam, I’m – ”

“It’s fine, Dean.” Sam says dully, but doesn’t – can’t – turn around. “I just…” He hesitates in the entrance to the hallway. “I didn’t realize we weren’t in this together anymore.”

Only one set of footsteps echo down the hall.

Sam doesn’t speak to Dean for two days.

Well, not exactly. He talks to Dean. He answers direct questions, he asks Dean to pass him the milk from the fridge when Dean’s digging around for his morning beer. He asks if Dean’s checked in with Rowena, he updates Dean on their mom and Dani’s hunt. But it’s different now. It’s closed off.

And it hurts. But Dean has to wonder if it’s for the best. Like sticking leaches on a bruise. He’s crossed the Rubicon, and there’s no going back. Dean’s held Billie’s book in his hands, and knows how the story ends.
Dean’s time passes in an unending loop. He doesn’t sleep; he avoids the kitchen unless it’s to snag a beer from the fridge. He can’t get drunk, but something about that electric fizz pouring down his throat reminds him of better times.

He’s in and out of the Bunker. Whenever he can feel a surge of Michael’s grace blip up, he’s there. California, Montana, Alabama, Colorado, Michigan. He rips the grace out of the remnants of Michael’s army, and it’s easier every time. Rowena’s long-since transferred the grace into a more appropriate receptacle. Dean only sees her when he comes in to add to the shallow pool, light glinting off more light, and Dean stares – wondering how much would pour out of him if he ripped it all out in one go.

It’s his fifth trip when he starts keeping some back. He stuffs a couple of the vials that Rowena’s lent him into his pocket, pouring out only half with the rest. The other vials he stuffs in an ammo box and shoves under his bed. There’s a half-formed plan in his mind, someone worth saving it for, and he knows he’ll figure that out when it’s time.

Cas and Jack make an effort. They do. And Dean appreciates it. But something’s changed since that day in Indianapolis – some part of Dean has bubbled away, and he doesn’t know how to get it back. He’s worried he can’t. But he also knows that soon enough, it won’t matter. As long as Dean holds out as long as it takes, it won’t matter. It won’t matter that Michael’s presence has become a torrential outpour in Dean’s head, like Dean’s self-inflicted solitude only leaves more room for Michael to spread. It doesn’t matter that the few times that Dean’s tried sleeping to get away from the trapped archangel, he’s dreamt those dreams. The ones where he stands at the head of a golden army, calloused hands wrapped around the polished handle of a lance. The dreams where he kills a brother, and it’s not Sam dead at his feet.

He doesn’t return to Rocky’s Bar.

Sam doesn’t speak to Dean for two days.

Chapter End Notes

Oooh I was really excited about the beginning of this chapter.

I ALSO don't like the Winchesters fighting. But c'mon, Dean...

Thanks for reading <3
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Basically - if I ever promise something is going to happen in the comments or A/N for a previous chapter - just assume I'm a lying idiot who lies and is terrible at following her outline.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dean’s in the War Room, nursing a beer and an apparent headache, when Sam walks in from the garage. Sam hesitates in the doorframe, a disintegrating cardboard box tucked under his arm and the leather keychain with keys to one of the backup cars clenched between his teeth.

But it feels more awkward standing in the entryway, so Sam pushes in. Dean’s facing away from him, in the same clothes from two days ago. His eyes are closed and his expression is carefully blank, but Sam can see the tightness in the corners of his eyes, in the clench of his jaw. His hand is wrapped lightly around the untouched beer in his hand, and it looks like the alcohol has long gone flat.

Sam drops the moldy cardboard box from an unnecessary height, and the wet thwack of it against the table snaps Dean out of whatever zoned-out thing he’s got going on. His hand jostles the beer, and it tilts dangerously to the side, but Dean’s lightning-quick hand snaps it out of the air before it tumbles over.

His eyes are wary as he blinks up at Sam. He doesn’t look tired – Sam supposes he can’t anymore. But he looks worn out.

“Talking to Michael?” Sam asks flatly, like it doesn’t matter, as he pulls out a chair. Not across from Dean. Not even within a few feet of Dean. But they’re at the same table. And that’s more contact than they’ve had in a few days.

“No.” Dean replies immediately, and Sam believes him, even though there’s no reason he should. Sam’s already turning back to the box when Dean speaks again. “I haven’t gone back there since before Indianapolis.”

“Huh.” Sam grunts, not sure if Dean’s trying to prove a point or genuinely trying to open up.

Dean rolls the bottle between his hands before finally pushing it towards the middle of the table and crossing his arms. “I don’t want to see what it’s like in there.”

And, yeah, Sam doesn’t know what that means either. The moment stretches past the point of comfort and collapses like a tower of cards.

Sam flips open the flattened top of the box. The first thing on top is a white paper bag, limp with absorbed steam, but Sam drops it to the side for a moment. The rest of the box contains boxes of lore books and research notebooks filled with blocky handwriting, and Sam starts stacking them on the table. Dean watches for a moment, before dragging one of the notebooks over and scanning the cover. He doesn’t look up at Sam, but Sam watches as Dean raises his eyebrows, half-interested.
“This looks like Bobby’s handwriting.” He comments, flipping through a few pages. He snorts as he comes across a few pages written in gibberish. “And half of it’s written in code, so of course it’s Bobby’s.”

Sam almost smiles as the ghost of Bobby Singer hovers between them like a bridge. Almost. “Yeah, Jody still has a stack of his stuff in her basement. I asked her to pull out anything that looked – “

“Angel-y?” Dean finishes, and there’s a shadow of a smile on his lips.

“Oh something.” Sam agrees, and drops the last book onto the stack. “She shipped me what she found. I just picked it up from the post office.”

“What is that?” Dean asks, and Sam assumes he’s talking about one of the books until he sees what Dean’s frowning at – the white bag containing his breakfast.

Sam pulls a face, forgetting the coolness between them for a moment. “You can’t have it.” He tugs the bagel bag closer, the inky pink print with the bakery’s logo more easily visible.

“You hate that place.”

“Yeah, well, it’s next to the post office.”

“Give it to me.”

Sam quickly drops the bagel bag onto his lap. He knows this game. And he knows that if Dean gets within reaching distance, the bagel will be gone from his life forever. “No. You don’t even eat.”

“You hate that place!” Dean repeats more insistently, holding a hand out for the bagel.

“It’s my bagel.”

“Can you fuckin’ idjits be any louder? Jesus Mary.” A voice snaps from behind Sam, and from Dean’s expression, he knows that hearing Bobby’s – because who else could it be – Apocalypse Universe counterpart just slammed them almost a decade into the past. Sam turns, and watches the grouchy hunter approach the table, and is struck, not for the first time in the last few months, how odd it is to see a man that looks like their Bobby Singer in the Bunker he would have loved.

But it’s not their Bobby. It’s another that’s leaning over Sam’s shoulder and peering at the pile of books. His mouth twists as he pushes past one of the lore books and reveals a notebook, dated and covered in gibberish. To Sam’s surprise, the old man barks out a sudden and genuine pleased laugh.

Sam and Dean exchange glances, still riding the swell of their temporary camaraderie.

Bobby looks up at both of them and taps a finger on the lines of coded scribbles. “It’s a grocery list.” Bobby explains. “Damn fool coded his own grocery list. Think I woulda gotten along fine with the old bastard.” He places the book carefully to the side, full of reverence now that he realizes it’s effectively his own work he’s handling. The hunter settles into a chair and pulls a stack of books closer. He gives Sam a dirty look when he sees the amused raise of eyebrows, but mutters darkly and inaudibly under his breath.

“You gonna help – ” Sam starts to ask his brother, but when he turns, he knows that the small bubble of possible reconciliation has popped. Dean’s eyes are sharp and focused, and he glances over his shoulder at something hundreds of miles away. Sam lets his sentence hang off unfinished until Dean pushes his chair back.

It’s Bobby who finally asks the question, “And where are you going?”
Dean glances back at the two of them, but the rueful half-apology in his eyes is all for Sam. Dean’s attention flicks carefully back to Bobby as he answers honestly, “Virginia, I think.”

“Virginia.” The old man grunts. “That desperate to get out of researchin’ to save your own hide, huh.”

Dean doesn’t say anything, and Sam can’t help but let the frustration and hurt he’s left simmering for the past few days bubble up, “No, Bobby,” he answers, “Dean’s too busy with his one-man crusade to actually pitch in.”

A vein pulses in Dean’s jaw. “Yeah, because catching asbestos from the books that Bobby used as library coasters is a much more important use of time.”

“I’m trying to find a way to get Michael out of your head, in case that’s something that you forgot. Or did you conveniently forget another one of your promises? Michael goes into the Cage, or no one does.” And now there’s a real crack of panic beginning to dig its way into all that anger. Because Sam knows his brother, no matter what terms they’re currently on. And he knows Dean will break any promise if he thinks it’s the right thing to do. And he also knows that Dean is capable of making promises he has no intention of keeping.

Dean deflects the barbed argument. “No point in coming up with Plan B if we can’t even get Plan A off the ground. We need the grace.”

“Yeah, thanks for the reminder. But Rowena hasn’t even cracked the location on the first Horseman. You don’t always need to go tearing off by yourself like we’re the step-family you can’t wait to get away from.”

Dean bristles, and Bobby silently watches the back and forth like it’s a well-executed tennis volley. “It’s still a… hunt, Sam. Michael’s army is out there, and they could turn an entire city into monsters during a commercial break. So, I’m sorry if my wanting to deal with that problem is a huge inconvenience for your fuckin’ 2019 reading challenge. Since when did we stop being hunters?”

And Sam actually barks out a laugh. “Seriously? We stopped being hunters when you decided that you didn’t need me anymore.”

Dean’s teeth snap closed with an audible click, and there’s a flicker of something unreadable behind his expression. “That’s not what this is about.”

“Really?” Sam says, and the word is loaded with disbelief. “Fine. Then let’s go be hunters again.” And he holds his hand out to Dean. Waits for Dean to grab his hand, wing them both to Virginia or wherever. And he waits without any real hope or genuine expectation, and they both know it. Dean’s fist hangs resolutely at his side.

Sam drops his hand back to the table, and pulls over one of the water-stained books. He flips open the cover and skims the first page without really taking anything in, feeling the eyes of Bobby and Dean on him. Bobby finally shrugs and goes back to deciphering his counterpart’s coded grocery lists or potato soup recipe or whatever. He continues his pretense at reading up until the point he finally hears the flap of muted wings, and Dean is gone.

Bobby gives him a few minutes, then finally asks, “You gonna eat that bagel?”

“No.” Sam says, and chucks the bag into the trashed cardboard box.
Turns out the Michael Monster blip isn’t in Virginia, but in North Carolina. But Dean gets there anyway, and that’s what matters. Dean sneaks a peek at his location services app, sees he’s in Fayetteville, high of 59, low of 40, 67% humidity, and 4 Michael Monsters somewhere in the city.

Fayetteville. Last time Dean was here, he was detoxing Cole Trenton from the fucked-up Khan Worm that had slithered down his throat.

He blinks, and instead of standing in the cold sun of the city, he’s in the forests skirting outside the city, rain like mist on his face. The taillights of Cole’s jeep disappear into the night, and Cole – slack and defeated, pale with self-recrimination and loss – is already slipping away as a half-forgotten memory. The enactment of Sam lets the rain fall where it does, curling his hair like a child’s, and spills his regrets about the death of Cole’s friend Kit in the air between them.

And Dean offers what biting comfort he can:

*You can do everything right. And even still, sometimes… the guy still dies.*

A car horn blares a few streets away, and Dean pulls himself back to the present.

Four of Michael’s army to track down. And in a city of almost a quarter million people, it’s really not going to be that hard.

The man from Delaware only found them because they found him first.

And it took a lot to bring just a few of them down – these hybrid creatures that he could beat bloody and would still snarl and sneer and spit. It’s a little trial and error at the beginning – bullets don’t work, silver doesn’t work. He doesn’t have a lot of first-hand experience, but he’s a fast learner, and has *always* been willing to put in the effort to get the final payout.

And at first, it’s more about setting an example. It’s about setting the precedent of *don’t fuck with me and I don’t fuck with you.* Because the man from Delaware has his own agenda, his own wrongs to right and rights to wrong, his own special crusade.

But as he slices apart one of the wide-eyed freaks, watching that bizarre blue light shiver in their eyes and blood like oil slicked through water, one of them finally says the words that make him pause. *Archangel grace.* And he takes notice, feels something like *revelation* lick up spine.

He slices off a little more, savors the pain like a fine wedding wine, and the man from Delaware asks: *Where?*

The first three are easy to find, easy to take care of. Dean slips the vials of their grace into his pocket and disintegrates them one at a time with a twitch of his fingers. He wonders when it became so easy to watch people with poison in their blood and breath in their lungs turn to sprinklings of dust.

One left.

Rowena floats into the War Room like she’s flying high.

Sam glances up from the entirely worthless *A Treatise on Angels: A Brief Commentary on Wingspan*
before immediately doing a double take. Billie’s book is clutched against her chest like she’s cradling a child, and the hazel of her eyes is cracked through with violent streaks of purple.

Sam half rises from his chair, watching Rowena waver in place like she’s snapping out of a trance. “Rowena.” He says sharply, and the witch finally stills and snaps the ethereal violet light out of her eyes.

Her eyes focus on Sam without hesitation. “Good morning, Samuel.” She greets in a clear voice, never mind that it’s mid-afternoon.

“Sure.” Sam agrees distractedly. “Are you okay? Have you… even slept?” He asks, suddenly remembering the odd comings and goings of the witch over the last few days. He can’t remember seeing her in the living quarters, or anywhere near the guest room they’d set up for her. But she doesn’t look tired. Just slightly manic.

Rowena smiles politely like it’s all merely small talk. “Never you mind about that. I take rest where I can.”

Sam frowns, but settles back into the hard-backed chair. “You mean you get rest where you can?”

Rowena doesn’t reply, but her eyes brighten. And Sam suddenly remembers thinking how everyone in the Bunker seemed just a little more worn out recently. Rowena’s smile grows when she sees the dawning on Sam’s face, but he just swallows down his suspicions. With Rowena, sometimes it’s better to just not ask direct questions or expect straight answers.

“You said you needed a few days to fully translate the spell?” Sam prompts pointedly.

The witch doesn’t answer for a moment, but brings the full force of her gaze on Sam, her cherry red nails tapping lightly against the cover of the book. “Aye.” She answers finally. “And?”

“And… it’s been a few days.”

Sam doesn’t like the knowing look that splashes like pity from Rowena’s gaze. “Castiel told me of yours and Dean’s agreement. I wouldn’t have thought you to be in such a hurry to assemble the portal.”

“It’s… I’m not…” Sam trails off, feeling like he was maneuvered into a dangerous position. “Despite what Dean seems to think, I’m not… stalling on tracking down the Horsemen.”

Despite her airy and affected pretense of aloofness, Rowena has always been able to read between the lines. “You know as well as I do that beings of that magnitude aren’t easily pried loose, Samuel. Despite your best intentions, there may not be much of Dean left after you pop Michael out of his napper.”

Sam’s hands curl into fists under the table. “I’ll take any version of my brother over sending him into the Cage.” Because maybe Dean isn’t the only brother that has a hard time letting go, despite their current distance.

Rowena’s expression flattens, solemn within flaming curls. “Archangels aren’t known for letting their vessels have a square go of it, Sam. You best be prepared.”

Dean finds her in the Cape Fear Botanical Gardens outside of town.
The Gardens have only just closed, but she remains wandering under the cherry blossom trees. She doesn’t notice him on the pathway just yet, but he’s all too aware of that degraded electric power running in her veins, like someone’s drawn a chalk circle around her and written *SMITE HERE* in all capitals.

She’s a shifter, he thinks. Currently masquerading as a twenty-something girl with a forgettable face and red-rimmed glasses. But she wears the skin well, and Dean almost feels regret.

She turns, finally. Hearing or sensing something lurking. And it’s pure fear that lights her face.

“Michael?” She whispers, cold wind whipping the water beyond her into a brief frenzy before settling.

Dean shakes his head. “Just cleaning up his mess.”

“Wait – “ She says, and takes a panicked step backward. “Wait!” She says again, even though he hasn’t taken a step or moved an inch. “I didn’t ask for this!” She stammers nervously, playing the damsel card for all its worth. “They… they *made* drink that awful vial. I just wanted to be left alone! I’m not hurting anyone, I swear – I drank it, and they said they’d leave me alone! Until they needed me, but they didn’t – they never… I’m not hurting anyone!” She insist again, backing up still closer to the water. A dirty wooden dock juts out into the garden’s pond, and she stumbles as the back of her heel connects against the raised boards in her hasty retreat.

There’s that flash of odd – almost too much – clarity for a moment, and the sensory output almost smothers Dean under its tide. The perfumes of the flowers, the slick reedy scent from the grass, the almost-soapy odor from the water lodges in his head, and he can’t suck in a breath past all that flavor. Every single fallen tree leaf and needle, scrap of bark, mote of sticky yellow pollen, every blinding ripple of the muted sun on gentle waters, it fills the air in front of Dean until he can only see a tapestry of color and filmy molecules.

But all Dean can hear is the thundering of an Archangel, the sounds of flesh-wrapped-steel bones against the thin metal of a freezer, the sounds of incoherent noise – not screaming, not roaring, but the eternal ringing of Enochian, the trumpet blast of angels, the sounds of a seraphic army rolling across a battlefield, and Dean is buried under six feet of muck, and a hand, cold as alabaster, heavy as tungsten, claps down on his shoulder, and Dean turns but he can’t see who, or what, or –

Everything clicks back into place like a bolt sliding shut, like a screwdriver sliding into the lock of a bar’s freezer walk-in, and there’s nothing but Dean and the shape of a girl.

“-name is Darcy, and she was already dying when I took her skin, she wasn’t going to need it, and her family, they think that she’s alive, and isn’t that a comfort, isn’t that something I can do, something I can offer – “

“Just shut up.” Dean snaps without really meaning to. But he just needs a moment of silence. A few seconds of nothing.

The shifter shuts up instantly, her teeth clicking together in her haste. She takes another step backwards up the dock, and she’s almost risen eye level to Dean. She takes a nervous step backwards along the dock as he finally takes his first step forward.

And it feels like a defining moment, in a way. It feels like something that would have been important if Sam were here, or if it were a hunt from a decade ago. Hell, a year ago. It’s taking the word of a stranger, of a monster, on faith, and hoping that you don’t make the wrong call. That someone else won’t die because you cracked open the steel cage around your heart and took a leap of faith.
But Dean has enough cages inside of him.

A last strip of light slides between the trees behind Dean, and slices over the girl’s face. Her eyes flash with that tell-tale shifter retina flash, a strip of silver reflection. But the sun dips lower, and all Dean can see left in those eyes is fear.

If Sam were here, Dean would be making a big deal of rolling his eyes, acting like he’s only really doing it for Sam’s bleeding heart. But Sam’s not here, because Dean left him behind.

“Alright.” Dean says, he lifts both hands up to show he isn’t armed – though considering that Dean is… well, whatever he is, that’s probably about as comforting as a gun pointed at your forehead – and takes a step closer. “Alright,” he repeats, “I’m gonna yank all that Chemical X out of you, and let you walk. But from now on, I got a fuckin’ finger on the pulse of this city, do you hear me? I see one friggin’ facebook post about even a mailbox getting knocked over – I’m coming for you. Got it?”

The shifter’s eyes go blank with surprise, before she seems to come back to herself, and nods vigorously. “Take it. I don’t want it.” Her hand shifts towards the small of her back, and for a bizarre moment, Dean thinks she’s going to take a bow, but she quickly pulls her arm forward.

Dean steps on the dock to join her, and holds his hand up in the air. He feels the sizzle of grace in her, the quiet resonance of the other three vials of grace stuffed in his pocket. She doesn’t flinch when he lays his hand on her forehead, her wide eyes just blink up at him from the short distance between them. Dean closes his eyes, and tries to be careful – tries not to rip the grace out like he’d done all the other times, where he didn’t care – he’d kill them all after anyway.

All the grace scattered in her body reacts immediately, pulling like a magnet towards his hand, wanting to reabsorb into that twisting column inside. He lowers the tempo, slows the march to a crawl. Still, he hears a smothered grunt of pain from the girl.

And – as if the shifter’s body had decided it had never really wanted the grace in the first place – something gives, and Dean tugs the silver-vapor out in one tug.

And then becomes suddenly aware of the angel blade buried hilt deep in his abdomen.

Jack takes the long way to the armory in order to poke his head into Dean’s room. He’s not expecting to find the older hunter lounging on his bed eating cold takeout, but still. Seeing the empty room, with its bed unslept in, and its occupant no where to be seen – it gets harder. Jack remembers when the room was left empty for weeks when Michael ran rampant around in Dean’s body. And the twist of the knife is that to Jack – this is ten times worse. Because Dean is choosing not to be here.

Jack shuts the door and heads deeper into the Bunker. He’d promised Andrea a few days ago that he’d help her straighten up and upgrade the armory from mess to a better-organized mess. The bulk of weapon maintenance had fallen on the hunter since they’d locked Dominic up, and Sam had said that Andrea was going stir-crazy. Plus, the Apocalypse Universe hunter had taught Jack how to strip a rifle down to parts in 15 seconds. Jack figures he owes her one after several days of rainchecks.

And when all the power cuts out to the Bunker, and he’s left in absolute pitch darkness, Jack figures he’s probably going to owe Andrea another one.

Jack holds himself completely still, listens to the total silence of the Bunker as the central heating and
life support systems grind to a halt.

And then – either the power is restored or the back-up generators kick in, because the lights flicker on. And over the groan of pipes and the hum of the electric grid coming back online, Jack can hear a pissed-off Sam Winchester yell “Damn it, Rowena!”

And yeah – he’s definitely going to owe Andrea a rain check.

By the time he makes it into the War Room, Sam and Cas are already glaring Rowena down. The witch, for her part, doesn’t even pretend to look sheepish or embarrassed. Smoke curls off the edges of Death’s book spread on the table in front of her, and her hair is… possibly a little singed, but her eyes are bright with excitement.

“A mere misfire, boys, no need to get your knickers in a twist.” Rowena says, and winks at Jack as he enters the room.

Sam glares at the back of the witch’s head. “So much for waiting for the rest of us for the spell, Rowena.”

Rowena waves an airy hand at the smoking pages and the thin wisps of gray vapor cut off immediately. “You never specified I had to wait for the rest of the class to catch up, Samuel.”

Sam shakes his head and fishes his phone out of his pocket. “Next time, consider it heavily implied.”

He taps a few keys on the phone, and holds it up to his ear. He nods at Jack, finally realizing in the ruckus that the Nephilim had arrived. Rowena hums quietly to herself as she flips a few pages backwards, and the previously black ink ripples in purples and blues under her fingers.

“Shit.” Sam curses, apparently hitting the voicemail of whoever he’s calling. “Dean. Get back here. Rowena’s ready.” He says gruffly, and then drops the phone to the table.

Rowena’s eyes flicker purple-gold-purple as she skims over the first lines of the first page. “There.” She says, satisfied, and turns her glowing eyes to the rest of the room. “Missed the first stitch at the beginning – tricky spellwork, I have to hand it to Death – but we’re primed, lads. Just need to add the power source.” And her outstretched hand flutters on the thin neck of the wide receptacle that Dean had been dumping grace into over the last three days.

“Jack, maybe you can… get in touch with Dean?” Sam asks, after a moment, finally tearing his eyes from the basin of grace.

Jack pats his pocket for his phone for a second before he realizes what Sam means. “Oh.” He says aloud, and then concentrates on finding that thread he’s plucked at before. It’s almost too easy to find – and he wonders if that’s due to the dwindling numbers of angels, and Heaven’s current state.

Dean? He tries, and immediately feels something is wrong. He sends the prayer down the line, holds the taut line of connection in his mental grip, but the prayer bounces off a block and falls into the multitudinous crowd of thousands, millions, of other prayers.

He frowns, and Sam doesn’t miss it.

Dean, can you hear me? Jack tries again, but with the same result. Jack doesn’t know what the circumstances are, if it’s intentional or if something more nefarious at play, but Jack might as well stick his head out the Bunker and shout for Dean’s attention.
Jack shakes his head at Sam and says, “Nothing.” He leaves it there, not wanting to alarm his family if the fault is on his end.

Cas and Sam exchange glances, but Sam just smacks his palms against his thighs and sighs.

“What do you want to do, Sam?” Cas grates, and his eyes settle on not-so-patiently waiting Rowena.

Sam chews it over for a moment, glancing back and forth between his phone on the table and the tracking spell almost champing at the bit to be loosened into the world. Finally, Sam just shakes his head. “Power it up.” He instructs, and he doesn’t need to tell Rowena twice.

The witch is already twisting the glass lid from the neck of the bottle. Jack almost expects her to dump the entire container of shining liquid-vapor onto the pages, but she merely pauses, eyes snapping gold and purple alternatively, and flips a few pages towards the center.

The book begins to glow lightly, brighter at the edges, and Rowena says a single thundering syllable in Enochian. The shifting purple-blues of the ink on the page begins to shift around, melting from their sentences and forming into sharp angles and smooth curves. It takes Jack a second to see what it’s forming into – a top-down view of a map.

Jack feels a constant dull buzzing in the back of his skull, and when the power cuts out to the Bunker again, his first thought is that he’s gone blind. But he can still see the repository of grace, can still see the illumination of the page, the light bouncing off Rowena’s eyes. The dull emergency lighting kicks on, bathing the room red, and Jack takes a step closer to Rowena’s side.

The heavy crystal lid thunks to the table as Rowena lifts the container of grace. Her face is all hard lines of concentration and flashing light as she tilts the vessel towards the page. Jack expects her to pour it over the pages, but she merely tilts it until the grace runs against the rim, and her carefully laid spellwork seems to do the rest. Misty white-blue vapor is tugged into the air, collecting into a slow, pulsing cloud that hovers over the pages. Finally, when a little over half of the grace has tugged itself out of the glass, Rowena sets it down, cutting off the flow.

Her hand hovers in the air next to the grace, and she turns towards Sam. Jack can’t see her face from where he’s standing, but there must be a question in her gaze, because Sam nods sharply, and crosses his arms.

Rowena turns back to the book, and says another sharp word in the language of angels, and it cuts across Jack’s ears like a physical pain.

The grace in the air pulses once, and Jack passes out.

It couldn’t have been for very long – Jack cracks his eyes open, and the light emergency lighting is the first thing to filter into his scattered brain.

Sam looms over him, having apparently dragged him to the side of the room and propped him against the wall. A worried hand rests on Jack’s shoulder, and the Nephilim blinks blearily at him.

Jack asks, “What happened?” at the same time Sam says, “Are you okay?”

“Maybe it’s no’such a good idea to have angels in the room when casting spells with grace.” Jack hears Rowena say, and fighting the heavy pulses of a headache, leans around Sam to see Rowena bent elegantly over an unconscious Cas.
“Cas!” Jack slurs, and stumbles getting to his feet. Sam catches his shoulder before he can tilt too far, and Jack lurches drunkenly to the angel’s side.

“He’ll be fine.” Rowena insists, rolling her eyes, which have settled back to their usual hazel. “Just a little extra hiccup I didn’t account for.”

“How?”

Rowena leans back against the table, crossing her arms. “The spell might have tried to tap into the grace of our angel lads here, but I rerouted the spell immediately. No harm. I’ve no’ exactly followed Death’s special recipes before.”

Sam sighs, and turns back to Jack. “You okay?”

And Jack is, for the most part. If a headache and a bruised tail bone will help them get a step closer to getting rid of Michael, then Jack will take the hit every time. He nods at Sam, and the younger Winchester turns towards Cas. He bends over to shake the shoulder of the prone angel, and there’s a flicker of discomfort in Cas’ unconscious face, and they take it for proof of life.

“Lads?” Rowena says, and Sam and Jack look over their shoulders at Rowena, who’s bent over Billie’s book. “We may have a wee problem.”

Jack and Sam exchange glances, and both quickly cross the room towards the tracking spell. Rowena takes a step to the side as they approach.

New silver lines have etched into the pages, like crystallized streaks of grace. Some look like random, errant markings, light touches across the map that maybe the Horseman had passed through, recent or not.

But the bright point of grace marking the location across millions of miles of earth doesn’t shine in the lower 48 states, or even on the same continent.

Rowena’s spell found a Horseman, but it tracked it right to the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

Chapter End Notes

Ok - I REALLY did think that the Sam and Dean make-up was going to happen this chapter, but I wanted to push up the first tracking spell location scene, and... you know how it goes... Shit happens - Spells are cast, someone get stabbed, there’s a dude from Delaware for some reason. Beyond my control. #Sorry

Thanks for reading <3 Look, we finally have a location on a Horseman! Friggin' 85k words in... I am a mess...
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

He feels the blood-warmed metal in his body in a detached way. There’s no pain, there’s hardly any actual sensation. Just the wet, fleshy feel of something foreign lodged in his liver, the scrape of metal against a rib cage – like a fork tine tapping against a tooth.

The shifter’s expression is flat, innocence burned off with a blow torch, as she retreats a step further down the dock. Dean forgets the small handful of grace in his palm for a moment, and looks down at the shining handle of the angel blade. Numb fingers wrap around the hilt, and he gives an almost gentle tug, sliding the blade from the meat of his stomach without flourish. Once freed from its grisly sheath, the metal drops from his hand, embedding itself in the soft wood of the dock.

“That was grade A fuckin’ stupid.” Dean says, his words hardly audible over the wind blowing past the trees, torn away over choppy waters.

The shifter doesn’t look frightened as Dean’s skin knits back together, sealing away any evidence that there was damage in the first place. There’s a foreign sense of fury, borrowed anger, boiling in the back of his mind. Irritation that a lesser being would think he could be killed with a weapon of his brethren. And that’s an odd sensation – because Dean didn’t know that. But there’s nothing fuzzy about the cloud of adopted indignation.

For all her earlier pleading and feigned fear, the shifter simply seems nonplussed. She glances down at the angel blade and – to Dean’s surprise – snorts. Dean doesn’t react as she tugs off the red-freckled glasses, probably just a prop, and bounces them against her hand.

“I volunteered for this role.” She says, and her voice is much older. “I had to interview for it – to lead the state division of Michael’s army – can you believe that? An interview? Angels really do love their chain of command, don’t they.” She stops tapping the plastic frames against her hand, and after a moment, tosses them into the choppy waters.

Dean tugs an empty vial from his pocket, guides the extracted grace in. He could give two shits about the shifter’s last aria, but he’ll let her have her martyr’s speech.

“We heard about what you’ve been doing. Tracking us down, somehow. Slaughtering entire companies after ripping the brightness out of them. I thought it was something else. That kind of diligence and heavy-handed commitment to vengeance doesn’t sound like a Winchester.” Silver flicks behind her eyes, retinal flare flashing. “It’s extermination, what you’re doing. And do you know who that reminds me of?”

“Shut up.” Dean snarls, and – like a stolen signature – raises his hand between them. The shifter smiles at him, a gleam of humor in her eye like a final twist of a knife.

Dean snaps his fingers, and the shifter transforms into an inferno, hissing liquids popping into the air as she disintegrates into pale dust. And the last word that sighs past her lips before she’s scattered into the wind:

“Michael.”
Dean’s phone buzzes in his pocket, but he doesn’t check the number. There’s no one he wants to talk to at the moment. And he doesn’t want a new calamity dropped on his plate.

The sun’s gone, now - dipped behind layers of artificially planted trees. Something living that doesn’t belong, ripped up and implanted where it wasn’t meant to grow. Like an archangel locked down in a human mind, casting roots so far deep below the surface, coiling and tangling all the way down to the mantel, that you can’t rip them out without pulling the earth apart.

He kicks the embedded angel blade, watches it skitter over the rough surface of the dock before it slips into dark waters. His phone buzzes once more, alerting him of a voicemail, but he ignores it.

As he walks towards the end of the dock, the wind steals away most of the shifter’s remains. He reaches the end, and sits. The bottoms of his shoes hit the water, fill with ice cold water, but he doesn’t feel the sensation, just recognizes that there is one.

He closes his eyes.

Rocky’s Bar. His bar.

It looks like he thought it might, more like a busted stage setting than a functioning bar – bits of the walls have broken off into the surrounding darkness. The polished length of the bar is cracked in half, like an earthquake shook the building on its foundations. Pasted pictures on the mirror are gone, neon beverage signs have been torn from the wall. The room is dark, indistinct as dust slowly settles after his entrance disturbed the grimy surfaces.

The freezer is a different story. Easily the brightest object in the room, it throws a blue warmth over the surroundings. The crack that bisected the front has transformed into a spiderwebbed mess, blue dust and vapor dripping down like water sluicing off a cave wall.

The screwdriver he picked up on sale at the local hardware store remains firmly slotted in the lock, holding back a veritable tsunami of power with a measly half-inch of steel.

The archangel is almost hard to see, leaning up against the back of the freezer. He looks up under the brim of his cap at Dean’s approach, and the cracks in the glass shatter his face into a hundred different versions, a diffraction of blinking green eyes, cruel and timeless, inspecting the hunter through the glass.

“What’s happening.”

Voice muffled by the barrier, Michael replies, “If you can’t answer that question by now, I’m sure you’re too idiotic for me to waste an explanation on.”

Dean slams his fist angrily on the door, pissed off and frightened enough to not fully realize how monumentally stupid that could have been. Michael smirks, and Dean sees it reflected a hundred times over. Dean takes a furious step backwards, jerking away from the door like he’s been electrocuted. Blue swirls against the cracks in the door, thickening until it pours like liquid down the side of the door, coiling in on itself. Dean takes another step backwards, can hardly see the archangel past all the vapor.

“What is it?” Dean asks, and it was more of a question for himself – he’s past the point of expecting Michael to offer up concrete answers.

And sure enough, the archangel only replies with: “Find out.”
Dean snorts, an ounce of snark creeping in past all the stiffness. “I might’ve had a bumpy childhood, but I learned better than to put just fuckin’ **anything** in my mouth.”

Michael chuckles low in his throat. “I lived all your memories, Dean. And I can think of more than a few times you’ve landed in trouble because of your blindness to danger. *How* many Turducken sandwiches did you eat before you had even a glimmer that something wasn’t quite right?”

Dean wants to be pissy, but those were some damn good sandwiches.

“Speaking of memories,” Michael continues, “how’s yours, recently? Noticing ones that *just don’t belong*?”

Yes, Dean thinks, but his jaw locks. Give Michael an inch, and the archangel takes the whole damn mile. Yes, he thinks, and remembers battles and wars and revelations.

“I know you well enough to know what your silences mean, Dean. I know you inside and out. You’re just a drop in the bucket, compared to the vastness of millennia. Easy to predict. I could sketch out the entirety of **Dean Winchester** in a few brushstrokes. And once you see the larger picture – once you open your mind to it, you’ll see that you and I are really not so different.”

“Lord’s fuckin’ name.” Dean blasphemes. “Are you *seriously* giving me *we’re not so different, you and I* speech, right now? You really are a fucking boilerplate of a villain sometimes, Mike.”

“Think about it. We both inherited impossible tasks from a father that rejected and discarded us when we needed Him the most. We both dedicated ourselves to eradicating the evils of this world, a path laid out for us without our assent or sanction. We’re beings of **action**, beings of purpose, Winchester – creations my Father built to destroy what needs to be eliminated, usher in the new era. You were created for that purpose, as was I.”

“This is about as convincing as a timeshare presentation. Maybe if you had more visuals, I’d be buying what you’re selling.” Dean says, crossing his arm, but there’s a deep pit of discomfiture settling in his core.

Michael laughs suddenly, like he’s surprised to find himself amused. “Even if you don’t see it now, you will. It’s only a matter of time. But I felt an echo of the perverse pleasure that you took killing the shapeshifter, and let me say that in this case… the pleasure was all mine.”

Dean remembers that sick feeling of indignation and righteousness, something distinctly *not him* infecting him like an abscess leaking poison into his blood.

The miasma continues its slow exhalation into the air, and Dean finds himself drawing closer. Michael’s presence on the other side of the door is like standing at the foot of a mountain, watching the avalanche draw closer, but it’s hypnotizing, too.

Dean hears whispers and the clash of metal on metal like it’s rebounding from the past, and his hand raises towards the shimmering leak without a second, cautionary, thought.

*What is it?*

*Find out.*

Dean lets his fingers trail through the glittering miasma, and he’s torn from the bar.
Dean alights in a dead field on the outskirts of a dead city. Scattered livestock outhouses and rundown houses pepper the landscape, and he frowns at the primitivity. Remembers a time when flourishing gardens hung in Babylon, and Greeks carved their sortilege into Parian marble. He looks upon the filth of the surrounding world and thinks of atrophy and ruination – the opening notes of Revelations.

The powerful stroke of wings beat the air behind him, and Dean turns to see the resplendence of his condemned brother. Outlines of golden wings catch in the dust he’s tossed up in the air, and Dean is momentarily stunned.

“You come alone?” Dean asks, the first words he’s uttered in this vessel. The words fall flat and inharmonic, with all the depth and resonance of their true voices stripped away.

Lucifer’s vessel shrugs like a human, already corrupted with their sins and mien. And Dean finds it strange that for a being that was willing to destroy humanity to simply make a point, how he now crawls along the dirt on his belly, a lizard with its legs cut off.

His brother has occupied a young man, tousled black-copper curls, a generous slathering of freckles across the bridge of his nose. He looks like a Spartan warrior plucked from history, mirthful and careless. “I figured you’d want to follow Father’s playbook. Even if it got kind of screwy with our true vessels lost.”

Dean’s vessel’s duster flaps behind him as the wind increases, blowing behind him like perverse wings. “You’ve never been willing to play by Father’s rules before.”

Lucifer winks, and Dean is disturbed. “Guess which big brother I learned that from.”

“You even talk like them.” Dean says, an inkling of his real disgust clipping his tone.

And Lucifer has the gall to laugh at him, but it’s a cruel, sharp sound. “I’m surprised at your enmity towards the humans, brother. After all, did you not choose them over me? I asked you to come to my side, and you smote me down with the rest of our brothers and sisters.”

And Dean isn’t going to let their last moments on this earth as brothers be distorted with Lucifer’s twisted prevarications. “I did not choose humans over you, Lucifer. I chose Father.”

“Right.” Lucifer says, voice bright, but eyes bitter. “And how is the old man these days? Thought he might at least come to say hello before he pits his favorite children to the death.” And Lucifer must see the admission on Dean’s face, because his eyes widen, “You haven’t seen him.” He says, wonder and danger thick in his voice. “He’s fucked off somewhere, and we’re still knocking on the door of the Apocalypse?”

“Do not blaspheme.” Dean orders harshly, and the ground shudders, a small flicker of irritation splitting a gorge twenty feet wide behind him.

Lucifer glances at the gorge, and arches an eyebrow. “Someone’s rusty. You sure you don’t want a few centuries of practice in your meatsuit before we engage in fisticuffs?”

“Do not trivialize my mission.”

“I’m just saying, brother.” And Lucifer disappears in a slow flap of gilded ibis wings, only to reappear overlooking the ravine that Dean had inadvertently formed. “Sloppy work. When you dropped anchor, you knocked out all the tech in North America. And I was finally catching up on Golden Girls. Reminded me when Gabriel sunk Atlantis beneath the waves on his first soiree.” And Lucifer cocks his head towards Dean. “Where is our baby bro? Thought he might look me up after I
flew the coop.” He waits for Dean to answer, and a red flicker of anger flashes behind slate black eyes. “Seriously? The silent treat – ”

“He never returned to Heaven after you were locked away.” Dean answers abruptly.

Lucifer lets that sink in, then rolls his eyes, “I was imprisoned for millennia, and he still finds a way to play the victim. Typical Gabe, he always – “

“What are you doing?” Dean asks, dark brows pulled down as he watches his younger brother play for time. “Why are you are postponing the inevitable?”

And there’s genuine surprise on his brother’s smooth face, a bright spark of naiveitie in his eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“Brother, you know what I am talking about.”

“The prizefight? End of days?” And Lucifer straightens from his inquisitive crouch. “I thought we were bullshitting.”

Dean lets his incredulity hang silently in the air.

“Michael, what is the point? Father’s gone, our brothers are gone. It’s you, and it’s me. We can run the show, now, there’s literally no one capable of stopping us. I have the denizens of hell all lined up like ducks in a row, and you have the home team just champing at the bit to wreak some biblical havoc.”

“No. I know my role.”

Lucifer is thunderstruck, even blurred underneath layers of human flesh and blood. “No?” He repeats, as if Dean has ever uttered an equivocal word in his long existence.

“With or without our true vessels, I will see Father’s fight to the end.” Dean says coldly, but relives uncountable formative moments with eidetic recollection. Lucifer and himself, with Gabriel and Raphael at their sides, at the original founding of this universe, more one being than separate entities. But that’s been broken long ago – shattered when Lucifer tore away. “We are set upon a path of destiny, written by our Father. He knew this moment would come, and I will trust in His plan for us. I believe that He will return once we’ve submitted to our roles.”

“Our roles?” Lucifer repeats again. “What kind of devotional bullshit are you spouting? Father is gone. Gabriel is gone. Raphael is gone. It’s only us, Michael. In case you didn’t get the memo, there’s no one left to perform for. You want us to destroy each other for nothing? Look at me, brother.” Lucifer demands, red snapping like fire behind the dark eyes of his borrowed form. “You betrayed me. Locked me away, imprisoned me for millennia, alone. And I forgive you. I understand, now. Father forced you, he made you turn your back on me. But He’s gone. We can make our own choices, can rule all three realms together. You cannot choose humans over me, Michael.”

Dean shakes his head. “The humans are of no consequence, brother. I am not choosing them, I am choosing Father over your delusions of ascendancy. You are a fool to place us on the same footing as Him. And I will see our Father again once I have defeated you. He is waiting.”

“And if he’s not?”

“I have faith in Father.”

Something like betrayal and hurt crackles under Lucifer’s olive skin. “But not in me, brother?”
Dean has said everything he can say, has done all he was ever asked to do. He watches betrayal radiate off his beloved brother. And in the end, it’s not about the end of times, or the set motions and trappings of destiny. It’s not about Heaven or Hell or humanity. It’s about family, and burning off the parts that need to be excised.

Lucifer throws the words back into air, cold fury beginning to electrically charge the surroundings. “Do you not have faith in me?”

And Dean has no reason to lie. “Not anymore.”

They collide in a thunderous impact that decimates terrene for miles, their first blows ripping tears across the sky, runic scars that will never heal.

Dean tears his brother apart in the skies over Abilene.

“Fuck.” Dean gasps, and finds himself panting on the floor of Rocky’s Bar. Exertion cripples him, and he kneels prone on the hard floor until he can finally fully untangle himself from the tendrils that Michael’s grace-memory-influence-whatever had spun around him. “Fuck.” He repeats again, if only to put himself in perspective.

“Do you see, now?” Michael asks, and Dean has to remind himself who’s speaking. “Do you understand the position that I was placed in? We are put in the most wretched of circumstances, are forced into the cruelest, most unforgiving of decisions, and it is our strength that allows us to emerge as we are. My Father orchestrated everything, maneuvered destiny until it fit His preoccupied vision, and then He abandoned me to live with the fallout. I killed my own brother at His behest… and now I will rip apart His creations universe-by-universe.”

Bile rises in Dean’s throat, and he spits thickly on the ground. His arms shake as he finally unlocks his muscles to pull himself to his feet.

Michael’s waiting for him, in front of the glass. Watching with entreatying eyes that snap with volatile blue under green waves. “We are the same. You would do exactly what I have done. You would tear apart worlds to seek vengeance against your creator.”

And this is where the schism stretches between them. Dean’s felt Michael’s influence creeping through him, muddying his motives, smothering Dean under waves of eons of power and unrelenting presence. He’s felt Michael’s corruption poison him ever since Felisha weakened him, and damaged the integrity of Michael’s cage. It’s why Dean’s pushed Sam away, pushed them all away, because he doesn’t know what is happening to him, and doesn’t like the version of himself he sees in the mirror. But there are some parts of Dean Winchester that are unbreakable, and this is the founding pillar of all that he is.

Dean steps up to the glass, makes sure that Michael can see every disdainful line in his face. “We aren’t alike. And you can talk about daddy issues, or destiny, or whatever. And you can blame God for making you the way you are, or writing you the ending he did. But I’m gonna make one thing real fucking clear for you, you arrogant dick. You always have a choice, and it wasn’t God that made you do what you did. We are nothing alike - because when push came to shove – it was you that killed your brother. And I’ll rip myself apart before I kill mine.”

Dean opens his eyes to the Botanical Gardens, and feels a sense of calm that he’s been hard-pressed
to find since Indianapolis. Michael’s cage is splintering, and wisps of the archangel are soaking into Dean’s head like poison. But he feels like he’s taken a step towards something good. Or maybe a step back from something worse.

He stands on the dock, his socks slushy with the pond water soaked in through his boots.

No remaining trace of sun stretches across the sky, and Dean is alone under the stars. He digs a hand into his pocket, pushes aside all the vials of tinkling grace, and grabs his phone. The late hour blinks up at him from the screen, along with a notification that he has a missed call and voicemail from Sam. He thumbs the message’s play button.

Sam’s sullen voice plays on speaker: “Dean. Get back here. Rowena’s ready.”

And it’s almost the voicemail that really drives it home – where he and Sam are at right now. Sam’s left hundreds of voicemails over the years on Dean’s phone, anything from a quick *I forgot my motel key – answer your damn phone unless you want cold coffee* to the long-winded *So check this out…* updates when they’re splitting up investigative duty on a hunt.

There are the ridiculous ones. Like the time that he filled Dean’s voicemailbox with a shot-for-shot reenactment of the Raiders movie Dean never *did* get to see. There’re the frantic voicemails left when Dean’s missing on a case, the ones where Sam is *pretty sure* that Dean’s just messing with him, but also can’t smother the rising panic. There are the worse ones, too. The handful he found on one of his burners after clawing out of a pine box following a decades-long stint in hell – those drunk and devastated messages that Dean deleted immediately after listening, knowing that’s a hole he’ll never climb out of. And others – back when he was bouncing from bar to bar with a demon on one arm and a Mark on the other, and he listed to Sam’s messages and laughed until he couldn’t breathe.

Dean listens to the short, choleric voicemail of his brother a second time, and for a moment, is back in the clouds above Abilene. It’s a towering perspective, but sometimes, that’s what you need.

Dean needs to fix what he’s broken.

“Rowena, I’m telling you, you did something wrong.” Sam insists for the seventh time. He slaps the back of his hand on the spell book and leaps back when an electric shock slaps back. He’s immediately very pleased that Dean isn’t around to hear the noise that came out of his mouth. Or he was, until he remembered why Dean isn’t around to hear the noise that came out of his mouth.

Insulted, Rowena frosts Sam with a look. “This isn’t some… calculator we’re talking about, here, Samuel!” She snaps, “I can’t just crunch the numbers again. This is powerful magic. And if there’s one thing I excel at… it’s powerful magic.”

Sam massages the tingles out of his hand. “The tracking spell found the Horseman in the *middle of* the Pacific Ocean, and that doesn’t seem odd to you? What are we going to do – charter a boat, and find a cosmic deity treading water somewhere east of Guam?”

Rowena rolls her eyes and leans back against the table. “Well, it wouldn’t be the strangest thing I’ve found treading water east of Guam.”

“Oh my God.” Sam sighs, and runs a frustrated hand through his hair. He has to admit that he hadn’t been completely on board with the whole “Lucifer’s Cage by way of Horsemen” plan, but now that it’s crumbling around them, he feels the dread start to sink in.

“Maybe the Horseman is… dormant?” Jack offers. “Maybe he isn’t in a physical form?”
But Cas shakes his head, peering over at the map again. “No, the Horseman have corporeal forms, despite their immense wealth of power. They were significantly more prolific when Lucifer had them under his control years ago, but they’re always present in some form or another. Always operating on some scale.”

“Do you think Billie is deliberately messing with us?” Sam has to ask.

Cas shrugs, pulling his gaze from the glittering map. “I don’t see why she would. It seems like an awful lot of effort to go through.”

Sam still wouldn’t put it past the testy Horseman’s warped sense of humor, but chooses to keep quiet. He pats his pockets for his phone, figuring he’ll give Dean another try, and remembers he left his phone on the table. His fingers have just nudged the plastic when the heavy sound of wind slicing through the air interrupts.

Sam turns, catches the tail end of his brother’s arrival. His boots and lower jeans are soaked through with water, dripping onto the floor. Bits of leaves and plant life cling to his shoulders, tangle in his hair, and there’s a rip in his shirt, but Sam can’t see a trace of blood, let alone a wound. His first instinct of concern is immediately doused when he remembers how they parted. “Good hunting? Nice of you to mute angel radio. Always a great idea to be off the grid.”

He expects some kind of bitchy response, but Dean just frowns at him, and turns to Jack. “You tried to pray to me?”

Jack nods.

Dean doesn’t seem overly concerned. “Weird.” He says simply, and takes a few steps towards Sam. “Got a sec?”

“We got the location of the first Horseman.” Sam says abruptly, and starts to pivot towards Billie’s book after he sees the brief flash of interest in Dean’s eyes. “And you’re not – ”

“Yeah, I don’t give two shakes about that right now. Can we talk?” Dean interrupts.

Sam turns back towards his brother, and now concern is defrosting all that cold hurt that’s settled inside. “You don’t care that we have a 20 on the first Horseman?”

Dean’s eyes are steady, don’t so much as flicker towards the book. “Not right now, I don’t.”

There’s a long moment of silence. Sam looks at Cas, Jack and Rowena in turn. The moment turns into a minute, and finally Sam utters, “Christo.”

Dean rolls his eyes, some semblance of humor finally cracking into all that seriousness. “Really?” He asks. “I’m not a friggin’ motel. No vacancy.”

“Just checking.” Sam says, crossing his arms.

“We’ll… give you two some space.” Cas says, and places a hand on Jack’s shoulder to steer him towards the hallway.

“Wait – no, it’s… we’ll go.” Dean says, and he holds out a hand towards Sam, like an invitation.

Sam feels like he’s skipped through an entire conversation and has suddenly found himself in the footnotes. “Whoa – wait,” and he takes a step back, “Dean, what’s going on?”
Dean looks worn out, and his right eye twitches with the telltale sign that he’s fighting the beginnings of a migraine. And considering his current immunity to migraines, Sam only needs one guess as to what the cause is. “It’s Michael, isn’t it.” Sam says, and Jack and Cas pause in the door.

Dean opens and shuts his mouth, and Sam can see that Dean is fighting every single instinct telling him to lie, to brush Sam off. “It’s not… just Michael. C’mon, Sam. Please.”

Sam studies Dean for a moment, sees something in his brother’s face he hasn’t seen in a while. His hand twitches at his side hesitantly. “You sure you’re not gonna leave half of me behind?”

The corner of Dean’s mouth twitches, “Only the ugly half.”

Sam huffs out a laugh against his will, and finally takes a step forward. “Alright.” He agrees. Dean smiles, and steps forward. Sam only half flinches when Dean’s hand claps down on his shoulder, and he feels that sickening sense of weightlessness. The Bunker fades from view, and he feels something soft graze his arm, like the brush of feathers, and he nearly slips when he suddenly finds wet grass under his feet. Dean’s arm snaps out to steady him in an iron grip, and Sam winces, knowing he’ll have bruises around his wrist in the morning. Dean immediately releases him, muttering a muted apology.

Bile rises in Sam’s throat before his stomach calms, and he rubs at his chest. “Didn’t miss that.” He grunts.

Dean chuckles, thumps a heavy hand on Sam’s back. “Don’t be a baby.”

Sam turns an incredulous expression onto his brother, who isn’t even trying to hide his smirk. “Coming from you?”

“Eh.” Dean replies, swatting the air. “Cast iron stomach. Even before all that archangel juice.”

Sam actually laughs, even though he really doesn’t want to let his brother off the hook that easily. He gets his nausea under control, and finally takes a better look at where Dean’s dropped them.

It’s dark, but the moon is bright. Sam shivers under his canvas jacket as he turns in a slow circle. They’re standing in what looks like a former vegetable garden abutting a church. Sam frowns, and toes one of the stepping stones that’s almost invisible under the overrun grass and dustings of snow. The church is familiar, but nondescript. But that doesn’t mean much - churches are a dime a dozen in their line of work.

“Wait.” He says, as context slides into place. “This is Blue Earth. Pastor Jim’s church. God,” he adds, looking up as icy moonlight reflects off the stained glass windows of the narrow nave. “I haven’t been here since… shit, 1990? 1991? When dad dropped us off so he could track down that shtriga in Wisconsin.” Nostalgia is quickly wiped away when Sam remembers what became of their old family friend. Meg sliced open Pastor’s Jim throat not ten yards from where they’re standing, and he bled out in seconds to protect the Winchesters. “Why are we here?”

Dean’s leaned over to inspect the wooden fence, colors drained by darkness and time wearing away at the old wood. He claps a hand on the splintering wood, and seems satisfied with the solidness. Finally, he turns back towards Sam, green eyes a flat gray in the night. “Dad sent me here a year or so after that. Don’t remember why, anymore. Pissed him off about something. God, I think you were… 8? 9? No – “ And he laughs to himself, like reexamining a once bitter memory, and realizing that most of the pain has faded. “You were definitely 9, because I was here on your birthday.” Dean averts his eyes, and drops into a crouch next to one of the plant boxes. His fingers lightly tap a wooden stake that once supported tomatoes, but now props up nothing but weeds. “Jim had me out
here, gardening like some kind of pansy,” but the sad smile on Dean’s face tells another story, “and fixing up the rotted fence posts.”

“I don’t remember that.” Sam says slowly.

“Yeah, you were young. You were spittin’ mad at me. I snuck into Jim’s office when he was with a parishioner, and I called through to every single motel in Scottsbluff, Nebraska until I found the one where you and Dad were staying. It was the ninth motel. I remember that, ‘cause it was your ninth birthday. I wanted to tell you happy birthday, tell you I’d see you soon, and you were so mad.” Dean laughs, “Nine years old, and you were pissed at me for not being there. You thought I was on a school trip. I told you that because I thought it would be easier.” Humor drains from Dean’s face as he sinks back into the memory. “I said I’d be back in time for your birthday. I thought I would be.”

“Dean – “ Sam tries, feeling old pain like the tightness of scar tissue. But Dean pushes on.

“Anyway, you hung up on me, and I felt like a million pounds of dog shit. I stole from the donation box and sweet talked my way onto the Greyhound to Nebraska. Made it all the way, too. I’d be a day late for the big number 9, but what’s a day when you’re a kid? I dunno – it was stupid, thinking back now. I had shit timing – I walked into the parking lot of the motel the same time dad was pulling in from a supply run. He saw me immediately, bundled me into the car like a security detail. He dropped my ass off at the bus station – told me I figured out how to get here by myself, I could figure out how to get back. And if I wasn’t back in Blue Earth by tomorrow, I’d miss your tenth birthday too.” Dean shakes his head, but the pain of the memory had been worn down over time.

Sam swallows, and tries pictures a young Dean running around this yard, patching fences, watering tomatoes. He can’t. “I didn’t know that. I don’t… I don’t remember any of it.” Sam says, and he’s not sure if that’s better or worse.

Dean nods slowly, and then shrugs. “You were a kid.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

A heavy exhale blows out of Dean, and he straightens from his crouch. He finally looks over at Sam again. “I lied to you about being on a school trip, because I thought that was easier. I figured you were too young to know about the shit that Dad and I got into back then. And now, looking back… I don’t know. Maybe if I had been honest about it, things would’ve been different. Better, maybe. At least between you and Dad. He and I… we butted heads a lot when you were really young – I don’t think you remember a lot of that. I got better about covering it up, letting things go with Dad, because I didn’t want you to think you had a shitty childhood. Didn’t want you to take your cues from me, start taking my side over his. Anyway – “ Dean says, with a quick jerk of his head, like he’s coming up from air after getting lost in the memories. “Point is – I got a habit of locking stuff down and lying to you when I think it’s easier than telling you the truth, or trying to… I don’t know, protect you.”

“Dean, you don’t need to protect me. We’re not… kids anymore.”

Dean smiles. “You’re still my kid brother. But yeah, point taken. I know we’re better when we’re on the same team, but admitting stuff to you means I have to admit the stuff to me, and that’s not always easy.”

Sam shivers, and it’s only partly from the cold. “What are you talking about, Dean?”

Tapping his fingers against his thigh, Dean bites the inside of his cheek for a moment. Finally, he leans forward, two fingers angled for Sam’s forehead. For a wild moment, Sam almost thinks that
Dean is going to put him to sleep. But his brother’s fingers graze his forehead, and Sam is suddenly in a new space entirely.

Rocky’s Bar. And he’s only there for half a moment, only has an instant to take in the disintegrating walls, the uprooted furniture and tables. The deteriorating shell of a prison, blue and silver light pollution slipping through cracks, grace runoff pouring down in a steady stream, soaking into the surroundings like a stain. There’s a brief flicker of movement behind a window in the door, and then Sam feels himself slammed back to his body like he’s been shoved off a cliff.

“Jesus Christ.” He breathes, still struggling to piece everything that he just saw into some semblance of meaning.

Dean’s already taken a big step back, arms crossed like he can hide his vulnerability if he can shield his heart. “I don’t… know what’s happening. I don’t think Michael’s a hot second from breaking free, but… but I feel him in all the places he didn’t used to be. My memories are all tangled up, just don’t feel real all the time. And then sometimes they’re too real. I almost leveled a house in Phoenix because I thought friggin’ Dominic was drawing down on me. I got weird memories, too, ones that aren’t mine. Battles and angels and fuck, even Heaven, I think.

“I just… feel this taint in me sometimes, like he’s slipped a few new cards in the deck, and I don’t know what’s me and what’s him and what’s us. I just…” And Dean finally loses steam, and his arms flap in the air in a useless gesture before falling lame to his sides. “I don’t want you or Jack and Cas to be there if I go nuclear, Sammy.”

And Sam can’t respond right away. Because he can remember being in that gymnasium, watching his brother turn towards him, and not know who he was. And words like family and faith and blood – they don’t have much meaning when you lose all the parts of yourself that make them true.

“Why are you telling me this?” Sam asks finally, “Why now?” And he has stacks of questions filling his brain, but that’s the one that scrambles to the top.

Dean smiles sadly, and there’s a faraway look in his eye. “Let’s just say that Michael’s given me some perspective on healthy family relationships.” He pulls himself a little further out of the funk he’s settled in, and some of the old Dean leaks back in, “And on dusters. You think I could pull off a duster?” And he flaps his canvas jacket behind him, like he can flutter it in the wind.

Sam snorts, falls into the rhythm. “Duster with a flannel? Classy.”

Dean laughs, and after a moment, Sam does too. The revelations that Dean’s dumped on Sam don’t seem easier, don’t even seem surmountable. But they’ve always been able to figure something out when they have each other’s backs and this won’t be any different. Sam feels new stresses piling on, but he also feels better knowing that Dean is back on Team Free Will, tainted or not.

Dean’s posture is closing off again, rebounding back after opening up, and Sam knows that he’ll probably get the brush off if he tries to go in for a hug. But he settles for dropping his freezing hand on Dean’s shoulder. “We’re going to figure it out, Dean. You and me – Cas and Jack. Maybe Rowena, if she sticks around. Michael’s just another name in a long list of archangels whose asses we’ve kicked.”

Dean smiles – sadly, but genuinely. “Yeah, man, I appreciate – “ Dean cuts off suddenly, and goes rigid under Sam’s grip.

“Dean?” Sam says, startled. He shakes Dean’s shoulder a little when he doesn’t immediately respond. Dean’s eyes dart from point to point, like he’s having a phone conversation without the
“It’s Jack.” Dean says, “He says…” Dean frowns, like he’s responding to a question. Half a second passes, and Dean’s back to all sharp edges and clear focus. “He says there’s a breach in the Bunker.”

“What? Who?” Shit, and he’d left his phone in the Bunker. God, if there was another block with Jack praying to Dean, they wouldn’t have known until it was too late.

“Give you good odds on a certain dickwad’s army. Let’s go.”

“Yeah.” Sam breathes. “Let’s go.”

Dean’s hand grips Sam’s shoulder like a vise, and they blink out of the small church garden, nothing but trodden grass and footprints through icy dew to show anyone had been there in the first place. The former garden falls back into abandon, next to a church that had seen the spilled blood of a good man.

But if Pastor Jim had been alive, he probably would have appreciated the company.

Chapter End Notes

Woof, that was a heavy chapter. Those ones are always harder for me. I prefer writing all the teasing and banter and nonsense. But yay @ Winchesters making up. I don't like when they fight, but they’d been taking a lot of swipes at each other the last couple of chapters, and I figured it would be better to finally just do one big fight and be done.

Anyway - should be more action coming up - first Horseman (FINALLY) coming up soon, so I promise I'll chill with the sappy/emotional brother moments lmao.

Thanks for reading and commenting <33
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Winchesters land in the armory – Dean’s still a little rusty at touching down on a dime, and they’re already sprinting out the room before either suggests a mulligan.

Most of the hunters are out on jobs, but they pass a few that are rushing back into bunkrooms to retrieve weapons. Someone finally triggers the lockdown procedures, and the emergency lights flicker on and bathe the hallway in scattered patches of vermillion. The air vents shudder and go silent – a temporary measure in case of contamination, pretty much useless against the supernatural – but if a Michael Monster wants to squeeze itself through a grate no larger than his arm, then Dean guesses they have the God-given right to try.

“Do you feel any?” Sam asks as they skid around a corner.

And Dean doesn’t need Sam to specify. “Yes.” And he can – small bright points of Michael’s grace so close that he can taste the fizz like pop-rocks on the back of his tongue. But there’s something off flavor about the presence, too. Like the grace is weaker, dried out. But he doesn’t know how to explain that to Sam, and a breach is a breach is a breach. No need to split hairs on quality over quantity.

“Do you know how many?”

“No.”

“Shit.”

And that’s a sentiment that Dean can agree with.

They arrive in the War Room, and already a cluster of hunters are waiting, weapons loaded and trained on the balcony. Bobby’s there, snapping colorful orders. Cas and Jack stand to the side, but both look over when Sam and Dean arrive.

“Good thing we got Muscles over here.” Bobby says, giving Dean a significant look as the brothers enter, but turns back to the hunter he was talking with.

“What’s happening?” Sam asks Cas, and Cas glances back up at the balcony, before returning his attention to the Winchesters.

“A few minutes ago, some of the warding in the Bunker failed. We can only presume someone cast a counter spell outside. It didn’t take down all the defenses, but enough to set off the Bunker’s breach sensors.”

There’s a thunderous clang on the Bunker door – muffled noises like footsteps, one long groan that sounds inhuman. Definitely nothing like a militarized Michael Monster army. The bang resounds again, and then there’s a clicking sound, followed by two solid, quieter bangs.

“Are they… knocking?” Cas asks, and sure enough, after a few seconds of a pause, there’s a light rapping at the door.

Jack takes a step forward, as if to actually welcome in new guests, and Dean catches him roughly on
the arm, yanking him back. The insistent tapping continues more impatiently, and then cuts off with an eerie absence.

There’s a moment of pause. Silence on the other side, other than the disturbing low groan. Bobby’s hunters keep their weapons trained on the balcony with the steady hands of experienced marksmen.

A slow hissing builds, almost like air escaping through a pressure valve. Then, a line of golden light glows under the door, thin as a shiny dime. But that new second sense deep in Dean’s chest twinges, sensing something warp the air. And anything powerful enough to disarm some of the Men of Letters’ warding is surely powerful enough to open a damn door.

The metal of the door bows inward, purple warding bleeding through from the other side. Dean takes a step forward the exact second that the door blasts off its hinges. The 12-inch-thick door flies clear across the balcony, slamming into the guard rail, taking down half the metal railing on its way down. Still, the door might as well as smashed into wet tissue paper. It hurtles through space like a projectile from an archaic war. Dean watches it arc in a heavy curve, and gravity and force drive it right towards Monica.

Time doesn’t slow – that’s not how it works. But something like adrenaline and grace mix into some volatile cocktail in Dean’s blood, and he feels goddamn *supersonic*. He can actually see motes of dust pause in the air, and one step forward feels like he’s traveled miles in the blink of an eye. He’s stepped in front of Monica almost agonizingly early, muscles vibrating like a racecar primed on the start line, and when the door finally connects with his raised hand, it’s like the metal thump of shutting a car door. Easy. The metal bangs to the ground in a horrid screeching noises, the door’s center twisted with warding and pure angel brute force. Startled, Monica fires a shot off her rifle, and it zings off the balcony’s metal grate, a shower of sparks igniting the air.

Dean glances back at Sam, who was blinking at the space where Dean had been standing. His eyes flick to Dean, takes in the rumpled metal at his feet, and the shocked hunter at his back. But Dean misses the moment his brother puts it all together, because there’s a sound of unsteady feet stumbling across an iron grate, a shower of sparks igniting the air.

And whatever Dean was expecting, it wasn’t straight out of a slapdash zombie flick. Two broken figures stumble out the smoke from the spell, and if the fangs hadn’t given them away, they were surely Michael’s Monsters. Because nothing else could have survived the damage that had been done to them.

They’d been tortured brutally and somehow kept alive. Dean, with his enhanced vision, can see every needle track on their arm where ostensibly dead man’s blood had been injected into their veins. Black, coagulated blood soaks into sweat-stained clothes, scraps that hardly hide the still seeping slices and slashes deep in cold flesh. Their faces are a wash of flickering blue eyes set in bloody faces, manic fear and pain stretching their faces past something human, into something animal and desperate.

Their arms have been hacked off, left to rot somewhere else.

Dean realizes why the grace felt off. Michael’s grace must be all but burnt off, keeping these two alive past the point that any being should have to suffer.

They stumble almost blindly onto the balcony. One of Bobby’s hunters takes a panicked shot, clipping one of the vamps in the meat of her shoulder, but the monster merely jerks back from the force. She groans that weird slurring noise they heard earlier, and Dean realizes their tongues have been carved from their mouths.
If it wasn’t so eerily disturbing, Dean might have whipped out a joke. It’s there, on the tip of his tongue, a well, *this shouldn’t be too hard*, or a simpering *let’s go give them a hand*. But their eyes are wild as they whirl around the room. Both of them seem to sense the resonating power inside Dean, and when they focus horrible gazes onto Dean, a slight inkling of humanity and realization slithers back into their liquid eyes, an entreaty and prostration that makes Dean want to gag.

Another figure steps out from the entrance way, wreathed in smoke. Adrenaline has whipped Dean’s senses into a frenzy, and almost leaves him blind, unable to see past the collision of dust motes and smoke and *molecules* warping the air.

The new figure coughs once – exaggerated and animated – and then remarks, in a voice Dean never thought he would hear again: “Guess I forgot my keys.”

The obscured form approaches the broken guardrail, and alarm klaxons explode Dean’s mind, and it’s all-fuckin’-hands-on-deck, grab the muskets, screw on the bayonets, pull the pins off the grenades, because Dean’s sure he’s going to nuke the geographic center of the US with a fuckin’ *twitch* of fingers and a poor decision.

A hand is run through shaggy blonde hair, and the devil gives them a causally apologetic look, like he didn’t *mean* to blast the door off on the hinges, he didn’t *mean* to drag himself out of the primordial ooze of the Empty and return here to scatter them into dust with a snap of fingers.

Adrenaline and grace carve searing blue lines down Dean’s skin, and he can’t get past the name *Lucifer*, can’t see anything but a brother leaping into the portal of hell to save the world, can’t feel anything but a hand smiting all that brightness out of him in the middle of a church. It’s fingers curling around his throat in a hell-forged cage, and it’s red eyes in the skies above Abilene, and Dean is scattering his brother into the ether, and –

And Bobby says, “Nick?” at the same time that Sam calls his brother’s name.

Dean comes up for air like he’s desperate for it, and sees a half-dead widow from Delaware on the floor of a church, and remembers there was a man before the devil. Nick – not the devil, he killed the devil – blinks down curiously at Dean, as if he’s the one that’s really intruding on a private reunion.

Dean clenches his hands at this side and pulls some semblance of control out of that frenetic core of himself. The light dims from his exposed skin like its ashamed, and Dean feels a whisper of a palm graze his back. He turns, finds that Sam’s crossed the room, and there’s a nervousness in his eyes that makes Dean think their problems are always far from over.

He nods at Sam, and a measure of concern leaves his brother’s face. He drops his hand, and Dean looks back up at Nick, the man he’d assumed for the weeks he was floating in all that murk in his mind that he’d killed along with Lucifer.

There’s an odd hunger in Nick’s blue eyes as he watches Dean from his elevated position, and Dean shivers. Reminds himself who it really is standing on the balcony. But it’s hard to associate *Nick* with *human* when he’s dragging around two mutilated soldiers of Michael’s army and blasting down doors to secret impregnable Bunkers

“What in hell is wrong with you, boy?” Bobby snaps, and he taps a steel-toed shoe against the door that lays near his feet. “Ain’t you ever heard of a damn cell phone?”

Nick shrugs with his whole body, and Dean sees more of Lucifer in that gesture than in the shape of the man. “I knocked. No one answered. I let myself in. *But* I come bearing gifts.”
And Nick takes a step to the side and plants a boot in the lower back of the one of his captives.

Sam says, “Wait, Nick – “ But Nick’s already shoved the tortured thing over, and she tumbles into the air with a thick, sucking gasp. The Bunkers’ inhabitants can only watch in horror as the vamp pitches over the side and lands with a wet smack on the lower level. The distinct sound of bones breaking is sharp in that big breath of silence in the room. The pitiful and broken creature continues to writhe and moan mutely on the floor, and one of the hunters’ weapons slips through numb figures and clatters to the floor.

“ Heard you’re collecting these.” Nick adds, eyes on Dean, and looks ready to shove over the other Michael Monster to deliver a matching set.

But Dean’s never asked the devil to do him any favors.

Dean’s finger twitches as his side, and both Michael Monsters cry out one final time as heavenly light ignites them from the inside, boiling off what remains of Michael’s grace along with the rest of them. Sam leaps back a step as the Michael Monster at their feet writhes in a single second of agony before slumping to the ground, nothing but a burnt husk and black blood. Dean’s attention never flickers from Nick, and he hears the metal bang of the second monster’s corpse crashing to the grate of the metal balcony.

Nick passively watches as the holy light devouring his captives fades, steady eyes soaking up their demise like he’s saving it for a special occasion. And when his eyes flick back to Dean, the humor’s hardened into flat, blue steel. “Now, that was a waste, wasn’t it?”

“I don’t like it.” Dean says, and Sam gets that. He does.

“Look, I know that this is hard – you’ve never known Nick without – “

“What, without the Devil being inside?” Dean interrupts, forgetting that they’re supposed to be having a hushed discussion.

A figure appears over Dean’s shoulder in the hallway, but it’s just Cas. Sam waits until the angel’s drawn closer before saying, “Yeah, I know. Trust me, it was weird for us too. But you didn’t see him after… after all that.” Sam doesn’t like thinking about the fight in the church any more than Dean does. “But he was recovering here for weeks while you were gone. And he was wrecked, Dean. He was all twisted up inside. He had to relive the murders of his family again.”

Dean shivers, but the ire in his eyes doesn’t dim. “He shows up here, dragging along those two, all giftwrapped in their own guts, and uses some weird mojo that we’ve never seen to take down Men of Letters defenses. And I’m the bad guy here for wanting more than a I needed space explanation? Lord’s fuckin’ name, Sam, what’s next? He tells you it’s not you, it’s me, and we give the guy the spare keys to the Impala? Jesus Christ.” Dean scrubs an irritated hand against the back of his neck.

Sam and Cas exchange glances. Cas finally says, “I spoke with Nick before he left the Bunker. He seemed… off, but genuinely regretful about letting Lucifer in.”

“Regretful?” Dean repeats incredulous, and looks back and forth from Sam and Cas like he’s expecting one of them to slug him in the stomach. “Are you two serious? I’m regretful when I don’t wash Baby for a few days. I’m regretful about the ‘Burrito Incident’ of ’04. But Nick’s gone full fuckin’ darkside and I’m sorry that I gotta question the motives of someone who let Lucifer in just because he asked nice.”
“Like I did?” Sam says brutally, crossing his arms. The tension in the hallway drags heavy knuckles across the floor.

Dean’s expression closes off like a finger running along the seal of an envelope, hiding something away for later consumption. “That’s not what I mean.”

It’s an old fight, old trauma. Sam doesn’t want to get into it. Doesn’t want to pour accelerant onto the argument and fire it up into something more, not after they’ve just agreed to be on the same page. “Let’s just agree – for the time being – to keep an eye on Nick. Okay? He says he wants to come back, wants to hunt. He’s clearly picked up some skills – “

“Ain’t that the fuckin’ truth.” Dean mutters, but waves his hand for his brother to continue once Sam gives him an exasperated look.

“I’m not crazy about the whole mutilation, torture thing either. I’ll talk to him. But honestly, Dean, we got so much other shit going on, that Nick’s hunting… methods aren’t exactly bumping the top of my queue right now.”

“Rowena found the location of the first Horseman.” Cas adds, and finally, interest replaces distrust on Dean’s face.

“Where?”

“Yeah, uh… probably easier to show you.” Sam adds, and can’t keep the doubt of the location’s accuracy completely out of his tone.

Jack and Rowena are alone in the War Room when they enter, standing near Billie’s lightshow of a book. Rowena seems to be explaining to Jack that there isn’t an actual horse treading water in the Pacific Ocean, and Dean glances at Sam like he’s worried he just had a stroke.

“Ah, Dean.” Rowena says, watching them enter. “Our one-man army. How’s your napper, m’dear?” She’s twisted her thick curls into a tight bun at her neck, and for a second – Sam sees a flash of the centuries behind the façade of youth.

“Peachy.” Dean grunts. “I hear you got one of our boys.”

Rowena doesn’t respond, only taps an elegant finger against the edge of the book, spinning it to face the older Winchester. Dean arches a brow at her apparent uncommunicativeness, but takes the book in his hand.

Sam glances over his shoulder, sees the bright pulsing marker floating in what's apparently the middle of nowhere. He waits for Dean’s irritated outburst, a demand that she redo the spell and try again. But Dean’s green eyes skim over the page, prickling with blue light reflected off the map.

Dean doesn’t set the book down when he finally speaks, holding it close to his face like the grace could evaporate from the pages at any moment. “What are we thinking?” He asks, and Sam wishes that he had better news.

“I don’t know, Dean. I mean, honestly…” he runs an exhausted hand through his hair, “I don’t know. Maybe there’s a remote island? Small enough to not show up on a map?”

Dean snorts. “What, like he crashed a plane on the island and is reenacting Lost? Seems up his alley.”

“I know for a fact that you never watched that show.”
“Shaddup – I’ve seen *enough* smoke monsters in real life.” He replies, but his attention is pulled back to the book. “Should I wing over here? See if I can get the skinny?”

Sam opens his mouth, but it’s Cas that replies vehemently: “No. We’ve fought the Horsemen before, and we only managed to incapacitate them long enough to retrieve their rings. These may not be the exact Horsemen that we faced years ago, but this is old and powerful diablerie. Wherever the current incarnations are, they could have warding or other magics in place to protect them from attack or ambushes. You could travel to the middle of the Pacific Ocean, and find your ability to return blocked.”

“Okay, but Lucifer isn’t yanking their chain around.” Dean intercedes, looking over the pages to address Cas. “You said years ago, they’re usually more behind-the-scenes. You think they’re painting up sigils on palm trees to stop, like, the five angels that are still alive from dropping in and spoiling their fun?”

Cas frosts Dean with a look, and Dean holds up a mordant hand in defeat. “Fine.” He says after a moment. He flinches at something unseen, and brings a hand to rub at his forehead. He suddenly looks exhausted, and Sam doesn’t know that that means for a person that doesn’t need sleep anymore. “Fine.” Dean repeats, and his hand drops to the side as he suddenly realizes that he was doing. “I won’t click my heels together just yet.”

Sam smotheres a yawn, glances at his watch. It’s pushing midnight and they all look wrecked. Dean catches the movement, and frowns. He glances at the rest of the group, sees the exhaustion-drenched features. “Alright, we can figure it out in the morning. Not like the Horseman is going anywhere in the middle of the – “ But Dean cuts off suddenly, like his brain severed the connection to his tongue. He returns his attention to the book, eyes narrowed at the bright point on the map.

“Rowena, which Horseman did you track? Is it War?” He asks, and turns green eyes onto their witch. Sam realizes that he’d never even thought to ask the question.

Rowena gives Dean a sharp look. “Aye.” She admits slowly. “What are you thinking?”

Dean doesn’t respond for a moment, turning his attention back to the book. “I’m thinking midnight might be too late to call in a favor.”

Sam exchanges glances with Cas, feeling like he’d been spun in a circle a few times and pushed into a different conversation entirely. “Who the hell are you gonna call?”

And, as if Dean needed another reason to make them question his sanity, he actually barks out a laugh as he pulls a phone from his pocket. “Someone who probably hoped to never talk to me again.”

Sam leaves to check on Nick and the other hunters, and that’s a chore that Dean is happy to not be a part of. Cas and Rowena talk quietly for a few minutes before Rowena heads to the guest room they’d set up for her. Jack seems like he wants to stay awake as long as Sam does, but Dean marches him towards his room. Jack is quiet and pensive as they approach the living quarters. Dean senses the question coming before the kid even opens his mouth. “Are you going to leave me behind when you leave to find the Horseman?”

Dean exhales heavily, and rolls his eyes to the ceiling. “I don’t know, Jack. These guys are the real
deal. Not exactly Monster of the Week number five.”

“You three fought them before and didn’t die.” Jack points out reasonably, but Dean frowns at the flippancy.

“Not that I’m not tickled that you’re limboing under the Low Winchester Bar,” Dean says, “but ‘not dying’ doesn’t always chalk up to a win.” There’s personal costs to every fight – not just physical scars and bruises. He can remember Sam’s relapse into demon blood under Famine’s influence, families killing each other after falling for War’s illusions, and blood boiling under disease-soaked skin with Pestilence’s infections. It’s not a fight he would choose to get into again – cosmic entities tend to hold a grudge – but dragging an unexperienced hunter seems like a good way to wind up with a body count.

There’s a dullness behind Jack’s eyes, a hollowness that reminds Dean that he hasn’t really been very present in anyone’s lives the last few days. “How are you holding up, kiddo?”

Jack seems to unbury himself a little, but Dean still expects the Winchester brush-off. But Jack thinks for a long moment and then says honestly, “It’s hard. I know that it’s been a few months since I’ve lost my grace, but it’s… never getting easier. I don’t feel sick anymore, since Lily’s spell, but I still feel like… like there’s more that I could be doing.”

They’ve reached Jack’s room, but remain in the hallway. “You can still help people without powers, Jack. Hunters do it every day. Trust me – I get it. All that power can be… a lot. And it’s definitely easier to blast a room of supernatural dicks to atoms than it is to stab your way through… But I gotta believe that I can do just as much good without Michael locked up in my head than I am piggybacking off his grace.”

Jack frowns, eyes narrowing in that customary Jack Kline constipated expression. “You’ve always helped people, Dean. You helped me, even before the grace.”

“That’s my point, man. You’re a good kid. A good man. Even if your grace never fully charges back up, I know you’ll do what you can, out there. I mean – just think about how much more you’ve accomplished than the average two-year-old.”

Jack’s laugh is sudden and unexpected, but some of the guilt drains from his expression.

“Listen, Cas and Sam – they’re gonna take care of you. Keep you on the straight and narrow. And if you get your powers back – great. But if not, you’re gonna be a great hunter, Jack. You already are.”

Jack flushes with either pride or embarrassment, but then something Dean says seems to sink in. “Why do you say Cas and Sam? Not you?”

“Uh,” Dean says eloquently, stumbling back through his words, realizing he said too much. “I just mean… I mean I’m not the best role model. They’ll teach you the pansy things like balancing a check book and using a library catalogue. I’ll show you the fun stuff like… girls and drinking.”

Jack doesn’t seem convinced, but seems more willing to take things at face value than Dean’s brother. “Okay.” He says after a moment, and a warm smile cracks through the stiffness. “You can teach me the girly stuff.”

“That is not what I said.”

Night passes. It’s boring. He doesn’t need to sleep, doesn’t really want to try.
Sam eventually goes to sleep, smothering a yawn as he passes Dean in the hallway. Rowena and Jack have long since fallen into their own beds.

In the silence of a slumbering Bunker, Michael’s struggles seem… louder. Dean feels the archangel’s presence like a snap freeze – sudden, and all at once, icing over the insides of his mind until it’s slippery and hard to keep anything in order. Dean considers trying to find a hunt to distract himself, but knows that he’s only just mended his relationship with Sam and doesn’t want to pick at the seams.

He wanders into the armory, cleans a few pieces, but his heart isn’t in it. Holding a gun in his hand used to feel like an extension of his arm – used to feel like power and protection. Now it just feels unnecessary. He leaves a rifle half-stripped on a towel, and – trying to ignore the scratching in his head, the squirming – finds himself stepping into the War Room.

Cas sits at the table, flipping through Bobby’s translated cook books – sorry, research – and comparing them to an ancient-looking book that was probably written on pig skin with whale blood or something equally disgusting and ridiculous. He looks up as Dean enters, and Dean can see that Cas is having just as much luck thundering through research as Dean expected.

Cas pushes aside one of Bobby’s books in disgust, and shakes his head as Dean pulls out a chair next to him. “I didn’t know there were so many ways to translate profanity.” The angel says, and Dean huffs out a laugh. He pulls one of the books closer, and his eyes skim lazily down the thick writing of Bobby Singer. Makes him miss the son of a bitch even more.

“No luck, huh.” Dean grunts, and sets the book back on the table.

Cas shakes his head. “We’ll find a way to get Michael out of your head safely, Dean. I just fear the answer isn’t written in one of these texts.”

“Yeah.” Dean mutters noncommittally.

Silence stretches past the point of comfort, Cas still staring earnestly at Dean with that dumb, open-book expression that only he can pull off. Dean hates it sometimes – it pulls honesty out of him like yanking swallowed floss out of a dog’s ass: painful, but probably for the best.

Dean taps his fingers against the table for a moment, losing the rhythm against Michael’s own off-beat drumming. “You ever think about Anna?”

Cas looks taken aback. “Anna? Milton?”

“Yeah.” Dean replies, splaying his fingers flat on the table to still his tapping before leaning back in his chair. “I mean, you’ve been human. Jack’s human. And don’t get me wrong – I’d flush Michael’s grace down the toilet if it meant I’d send his ass down the pipe, too. But… I don’t know. I’ve… seen some of Michael’s past. I’ve seen how desperate he is to be at the top of the food chain. But… I don’t know, Cas. I guess I just think about Anna – how she was able to carve all that power out of her without a second thought. Just give it all up. Leave it to rot in a tree in the middle of Kentucky. I know she dicked us over in the end, but can’t say she didn’t have balls that clang.”

Cas still looks confused, but Dean’s talked his piece and shuts up. He pulls Bobby’s book back towards him, and Cas returns to his own research after a moment. And if Cas thinks that Dean’s trying to find a way to hold up his end of a doomed deal, find a way to dispel Michael safely, then he won’t disillusion his old friend.

But – as the rioting of an archangel continues to drill holes in Dean’s sanity – maybe it’s not so bad
to lose yourself for a few hours in the writings of an old friend.

Cas leaves a little before dawn to cross reference something in the archives with one of Bobby’s books. And even though they’d done nothing but sit in silence for several hours, Dean finds himself missing the nearby presence. Someone that grounds him, keeps him from slipping off into whatever new memory of Michael that tries to bubble to the surface. He’d spent so much of the last few days seeking solitude, hardly even using the Bunker as a way station between hunts – but now he’s desperate for it. Anything to distract from the hours he spends waiting for the rest of the world to sleep.

Footsteps sound in the hallway, and for a moment, Dean thinks it’s Cas returning. But it’s not an angel that steps around the corner – at least, not one anymore.

Nick’s sandy hair is a riot of bedhead, and he yawns atrociously as he steps into the War Room. He blinks blearily at Dean, and scratches absentmindedly at his chest. It’s such a goddamn performance, Dean almost wants to applaud the effort.

“Dean.” Nick greets, and the back of Dean’s neck prickles as the man walks around the other side of the table.

Nick spins the chair around and sinks into it across from him. Dean feels a tightness across his shoulders, seeing the former vessel of Lucifer staring at him from less than three feet away. It sets off a million alarm bells across all decks, and Dean has to clench his hands together under the table.

Nick’s eyes are flat and unflinching, the crust of ice over a lake. He studies Dean with those dead eyes, and Dean feels that hollow twitch of grace buried deep inside him, like the inkling of a fight or flight response.

“So how does it work?” Nick asks, finally breaking his stiff posture. He glances down at his hands, and frowns as he picks at some kind of stain on his knuckle.

Dean pokes his tongue against the inside of his cheek before asking, “Gonna need more to go on.”

Nick’s hands drop onto the chair’s back, and he drags it forward a few inches, like they’re having a conspiratorial meeting. “C’mon. One Archangel vessel to another – how does it work? How does it feel?”

Dean bristles. “Like sticking your dick into a power socket. How the hell do you think it feels?”

Something hardens in Nick’s face until he forcibly smooths his expression. His hands curl over the back of the chair, tight enough to whiten the knuckles into bone. “I still feel all those hollow places inside me – where he used to be. It’s like he filled me up and moved all the walls around, and all that’s left is… this stretched-out husk.”

“Yeah, well.” Dean says vaguely, uncomfortable with the man before him, and uncomfortable with the conversation. “I saw what was left of Raphael’s first vessel years back. Dude was burnt out and drooling. You seem all right, considering Lucifer doesn’t seem the type to take care of his toys.”

Something flickers behind Nick’s eyes, but it’s gone in an instant. “Nah, I’m all good here. Fit as the devil’s own golden fiddle.” And a smile slices through his face like a wound. Nick’s hand skims along his side, right where Dean slid the archangel blade through the ribs. “You’re the one that really left a mark.”
Dean’s sure that he would have felt remorse regarding Nick’s fate, had he had the time to process it. But Michael snapped him up in his jaws before he’d even had a chance to inspect Nick’s body, and by the time Michael abandoned him on a street corner, Nick was already well on his way to recovery. And with the predatory gaze Nick is shining down on him, Dean’s finding it awfully difficult to summon even a shadow of regret for the guy. “Not sure what you’re angling for here, Nick.”

“What kind of condition you think Michael’s gonna leave you in after he drops you off at the coat check?” Nick asks, and his head jerks loosely on his neck, like an echo of the Archangel that left him behind. “Think he’s gonna stick a mothball in your mouth and leave you road-ready?”

Indeed if you could force me out, what do you think I’d leave behind, hm? You’d be nothing but blood and bone.

Dean feels the flash of angry grace snap behind the green of his eyes, but Nick’s smirk only widens.

“That’s enough, Nick.” A furious voice interjects, and the pair had been so absorbed in each other’s presence, that Nick and Dean both jump when Sam speaks.

Dean’s brother stands in the doorway, and Dean’s not sure how much of the conversation he heard, but apparently, it’s enough to put that steely glint in Sam’s eyes.

Nick holds his hands up in surrender, and rolls his eyes. “Guess Winchesters can’t take a joke. I’m sure you’ll be fine, kid.” He says easily, and stands from the table. He gives Sam a meaningful look over Dean’s shoulder – like they know a thing or two about Archangel possession – and crosses the room towards the kitchen in a few easy strides. He pauses at the opening, “Unless… what did you say, Dean? Burnt out and drooling?” And he’s stepped around the corner before the mortar hits.

Dean can sense Sam trying to meet his eyes, but he fixes his gaze towards the hallway Nick disappeared into.

“What was that about?” Sam asks after a moment, but Dean thinks it was pretty fucking clear what that was about.

“Nothing.”

Nothing but blood and bone.

Chapter End Notes

Weird chapter. I liked how Sam and Dean left things closure-wise in the previous chapter, but as I was writing this one, I think I got carried away and ended up deciding that maybe there needed to be some Dean/Jack and Dean/Cas moments too? It's funny that there's really only four main characters, and I still have a hard time balancing them in this fic. Anyway - so this chapter was a little odd. There was going to be a mini-angst-hunt starting this chapter, but I'm gonna move it to after the first Horseman fight, I think. Jesus - at nearly 100k, you'd think we'd have dealt with at least one. Also wtf am I even doing with this A/N? It's like a friggin diary entry. Yikes.

Anyway - sorry about the delay on this chapter! I'm getting kinda bogged down with that super inconvenient day job. Thanks for reading <3 I should have some more time to
work on next chapter this weekend, so there shouldn't be a 6 day delay again...
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

I woke up 90 min early to work on this before work, and now I'm running late as per fuckin' usual. So lots of typos, sorry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There’s the low beat of wings, and a white paper bag drops onto the book in front of Sam.

“Dude.” Sam bitches briefly, smacking the bag off the priceless, ancient book that’s basically the Sumerian translation of So You Think You’re Possessed? And Other Reasons Your Marriage Is Falling Apart. “This book is on loan.”

Dean snorts, and walks around the side of the table to face Sam. “Pretty sure you’re not gonna lose your library privileges. You’re probably the only person in a thousand-mile radius that actually carries a library card in their wallet.”

“Jerk.” Sam mutters lightly, and Dean’s following smirk substitutes the answer to the well-worn call-and-response. “You hear anything from our former leatherneck?”

Dean rolls his eyes as he pulls out a chair and settles in at the table. “Nah. But I wouldn’t be surprised if he just trashed the voicemail as soon as my number popped up on his screen. Not sure I’d want to talk to me either.”

“Well. We still don’t have a Plan B.”

“You’re telling me.” Dean says, draping an arm across the chair next to him, casual as you please. “I still think our only other option is for me to pop over, in and out.”

Sam frowns. “I thought Rowena was trying some kind of scrying spell.”

His brother shrugs, “Yeah, well. I guess Cas wasn’t entirely up his own ass about the warding thing. Rowena says something’s blocking her sight, and pushing any harder would just alert the guy we’re closing in. At least we know that there’s something there. I don’t think a Horseman would bother warding a square mile of empty ocean for kicks.”

Sam flicks a fingernail against the edge of the table, thinking. “Well,” he says, after a moment, “I guess we can give it a few more hours.”

“Yeah.” Dean agrees vaguely, like he doesn’t have a lot of faith in his own idea. There’s a moment of contemplative silence, before Dean kicks at Sam’s ankle under the table. “Eat your breakfast.”

Sam suddenly remembers the delivery service, and pushes his book aside curiously. His finger twists into the warm paper bag. “Did you grab me a bagel?” He asks, and flips the bag over, expecting to see the bright pink logo of the local bakery that he hates. Instead, there’s a blue stamp BB with the bakery’s contact information. Sam’s brows nearly shoot up past his hairline when he sees the Palo Alto zip code. “No way.” He breathes, and peeks inside the bag.

He glances up at Dean’s carefully blank face before looking back at the treasure in his hands. “You
went to Blondie’s? All the way to Stanford?”

Dean has that sober look on his face – the one where he’s pleased but trying not to show it. “Just as easy to get to California as Lebanon these days.” He says gruffly, and feigns interest in an open codex on the table.

Sam doesn’t bother to hide his grin as he pulls the delicious jalapeño bagel from the bag. He sees fresh pink slices of lox layered with the rest of Blondie’s Bakery locally-sourced veggies, and Sam has never been a man given to weeping, but there’s no rule without an exception. “You even remembered my order.”

Dean flips the codex closed. “Yeah.” He admits, like the knowledge is an inconvenience. “You bitched about it for like two months after I picked you up in ’05. I got that and your friggin’ Best Western omelet order down pat.”

“Well. Thank you.” Sam says, touched, and digs in. And it tastes like Stanford – youth and independence and Jessica’s cherry lip gloss. And if he drops some cream cheese onto the thick pages of the priceless tome, well. He’s pretty sure that there aren’t any ancient Sumerians around to be angry about it.

Dean watches him eat with something like gratification and envy, chin resting in his hand. Sam’s popping the last morsel in his mouth, when Dean suddenly leans back in the chair and looks off towards the hallway. Sam covers his mouth with his hand and asks, “What?”

But he asks the question to an empty room, because Dean is gone.

Sam blinks.

And Dean is back in the chair, clutching his ringing cell phone. Sam swallows down the last bite, gives Dean a dirty look for disappearing. Dean catches the look, and plasters innocence like spackle on his face. “What? It was charging.”

Sam rolls his eyes, figures that supernaturally-enhanced hearing might not be the worst trade-off of sharing head-space with an archangel.

Dean drops the phone on the table and taps the speaker button. “Cole fuckin’ Trenton.” He greets.

There’s a few seconds of crackly static, and then the voice of the former Marine says: “Dean-o. You hear me alright?”

“Loud and clear, man. Sam’s here, too. Thanks for giving us a buzz back.”

“Can’t say I wanted to. Honestly, until I got your voicemail this AM – I wouldn’t have been surprised to hear that you two weren’t kicking around this side of life anymore.”

Dean laughs, and Sam knows that Cole had grown on his brother after that one-and-done case they’d worked on a few years ago. “Well, can’t say we haven’t had our ups and downs.”

“That probably goes without saying. The sun almost went out a few years back, I recall. I looked out my kitchen window, and I had a gut feeling Winchesters were somehow at fault. Or am I wrong?”

“Well,” Dean answers vaguely, “that was more to do than God’s hot sister than us, but we may have been second-stringers.”

There are two seconds of absolute silence, and Sam almost worries that Cole’s hung up. Then the
former Marine says, “Think I’m gonna end this debrief before it starts. Anyway – I got your voicemail. And – I figured I owed you two one after trying to help with Kit a few years back. I called in a favor to my friend in Military Intelligence.” Cole breaks off, hesitant.

“And?” Dean prompts.

“And she was very curious to hear how I had coordinates within spitting distance of a US Navy stealth destroyer. And I gotta say – I’m not loving the fact that you two do, either.”

And even though that had been Dean’s assumption all along, Sam still sees the surprise of confirmation sink in. “Shit.” Dean says, and then thumbs the mute button for a moment. “Navy stealth ship?” He says to Sam, “We got a freakin’ Horseman on the Apocalypse with nuclear launch codes in the dead ass middle of the ocean?”

“We don’t know it has nuclear capabilities.”

“Great. ‘cause that makes me feel so much better.” Dean shakes his head. He takes them off mute, “Your friend tell you anything else?”

Cole still sounds unsure, but says honestly enough, “Not much. She’s already breaking about two dozen regs just talking to me, let alone divulging top-secret naval positions. But, she did say there was another reason it was odd that I’d asked about the USS Wormwood.”

“Wormwood?” Sam mouths to Dean, the word pinging something familiar off his stores of obscure lore and hunting knowledge. Dean doesn’t notice, is still listening to Cole.

“She said that they’d had a few weird reports from the ship a few weeks ago. Apparently, a high-ranking crew member went missing. Name of Captain Call.”

“Drowned?” Dean asks.

“That’s the weird part. You’d think so. He went missing for two days. They searched the vessel top to bottom, and there was no trace of him. And then, two days later, he shows up – acting like nothing happened.”

Sam and Dean exchange glances. “That’s gotta be him.” Dean says under his breath. Sam nods, thinks about how the situation somehow just got a lot clearer, and a lot more difficult at the same time.

“What’s happening, boys? Those are good people on that vessel. I don’t want to hear about them going down with their ship – ‘specially now that I know that you two are all wrapped up in this.”

“I hear you, Cole.” Dean says distractedly, “Don’t worry – we’ll take care of it.”

“You better. And next time you need classified military information – try the Pentagon. I’ve cashed in all my favors.”

“USS Wormwood.” Sam swivels his computer screen around, and Dean squints at the picture Sam’s pulled up. All odd angles and sharp edges, a large military vessel, blurry and pixelated, slices through green waters.

“Looks dumb.” Dean admits, and Sam closes the lid of the laptop slightly to give his brother a reproaching (read: bitchy) look.
“It’s not dumb. Billions of dollars went into that design. It’s intended to emit a minimal radar signature – it’s a stealth guided-missile destroyer. This thing is the real deal – it has an Integrated Power System, a tumblehome wave piercing – “

“Yeah, those sure are a lot of ten dollar words, and I’m sure very cool – “ Dean cuts him off, rolling his eyes to Cas, who has since joined the pair, along with Jack and Rowena. “But, is this it? This is where War is?”

Sam turns the computer screen back around, studying the image. “Not this one exactly. The USS Wormwood is a Zumwalt-class destroyer. The military planned to build over thirty of this class, but ended up cutting a lot of the project after it went way over budget. Technically, they scrapped the plans to build the Wormwood a few years ago.”

Cas asks, “So not only are we about to take on a Horseman in a remote location, but we plan on doing so on a ship that doesn’t technically exist?”

Dean taps his fingers on the table, then shrugs. “I mean, according to the US Government, Sam and I are deceased roughly five times over. Records don’t mean anything.”

Rowena rolls her eyes. “Americans.”

“So, what is our plan?” Cas asks.

And – like all good plans – no one is happy at the end of the explanation. Dean will fly himself, Cas and Sam to the vessel. (Why can’t I come? Because I only have two hands. ) Once on board, they’ll have to scope out the lay of the land, figure out how to track War. If the ship is a Lord-of-the-Flies-Carnage-Nightmare, it might be as simple as following the body trail. (Gross, Dean.) If War is lying low, and the crew isn’t the wiser, it will be more difficult to explain away the presence of three additions to a ship that no one knows about. That’s… currently miles away from land. Once they’ve found War, stab stab stab. (Dean, you know it’s not gonna be that easy.) Then stab a few more times, since Sam is being a bitch. And – if all goes well, Dean will return them to the Bunker. If the warding is still up, Rowena will have to find a spell that will somehow summon the group or knock down the warding. (What? How did I get volunteered for such a mission? If you’re not going to help, why are you even sitting here? It just would have been nice to have been asked, is all.) One ring down. Two to go. Easy.

(Yeah. Not easy.)

“Jack.”

Jack was absorbed in cleaning fouling residue out of a gun barrel, and hadn’t even heard Dean enter the armory. Andrea’s dark brow is raised over watchful eyes, a stripped-down shotgun balanced on her lap. Dean must have said his name more than once before Jack finally came up for air.

The Winchesters and Cas had made it clear that Jack wasn’t coming with them to find War’s ring, but that doesn’t stop the slow pulse of hope in Jack’s chest.

“Dean.” He says, surprised. “I thought you’d left already.”

“Not yet.” Dean’s eyes cut to Andrea’s and back. “Can I borrow your sidekick for a few seconds?”

“Sure, Dean.” Andrea replies, and goes back to inspecting the shotgun chamber for corrosion. “Guns aren’t going anywhere.”
Jack follows Dean down the hallway a ways, out of ear shot. “Did you change your mind?” He asks, when Dean finally stops. “Can I come on the hunt?”

There’s guilt in Dean’s eyes when he finally turns to face Jack, and Jack knows that whatever reason Dean wanted to talk to him, it wasn’t to ask him to join them. There’s a small bubble of discontentment threatening to pop in Jack’s chest. He’s a Nephilim – or he used to be. More powerful than anything in creation. Even more than the archangel taking up space in Dean’s head, and Jack can remember shredding the brightness in Michael as easy as tearing a crisp sheet of paper. He’s fallen a long way since then.

“No, Jack, that’s not it.” Dean says slowly. “Listen,” he shoves his hands into his pockets and takes a conspiratorial step forward, “this is probably the last thing you want to do, but I was hoping that while we’re gone, you could keep an eye on Nick.”


Somewhere further down the hallway, Sam hollers, “Dean! Let’s go!”

Dean shoots a glance over his shoulder, but returns his attention to Jack. “Honestly, pick a fuckin’ reason. I don’t trust him. I don’t want him here, and I got a gut feeling that while we’re gone, you could keep an eye on Nick.”

Jack shivers, momentarily forgetting his hurt at being left behind. “I don’t want him here, either.” He admits. Because he’d only known Nick as the guise of his father. It was Nick’s hands that killed Maggie, even if was Lucifer in control. It was Nick that Lucifer was riding around when he pulled Jack’s grace out of him and left him a shade of a human. Powerless. And it’s Nick’s red eyes that Jack sees when he recalls an archangel blade piercing his chest.

Dean must see something in Jack’s expression, because he thumps a hand against Jack’s shoulder. “I figured. But Cas and Sam – they don’t get it, Jack. They don’t understand that having something like that inside you – you’re not the same, after. Not really. I never knew Nick before he was Lucifer’s vessel. But when I look into his eyes… I don’t see much difference in what I see looking back out.”

“Why do you think he’s back?” Jack asks.

Dean doesn’t answer right away, looks like he’s still trying to figure out the answer to that himself. “I don’t know. I might be a paranoid son of a bitch, but I’d rather be paranoid than dead. Just… keep an eye on things. We shouldn’t be gone long, but…”

“I get it, Dean.”

A modicum of stress drains from Dean’s face, and he nods. “Thanks. I know you don’t like being benched. I get it. We’ve all been there. Consider it a… rite of passage. And be thankful we’re not shutting you in a panic room.” He smiles.

Sam calls his brother’s name again, and Dean turns to go.

“Good luck.” Jack calls, though he had determined earlier that he had every right to be terse and irritated. Now he watches Dean’s back as he walks away, and hopes that it’s not the last time he’ll see it.

“Thanks.” Dean replies, not turning around, but raising a hand over his shoulder. “We’re going to need it.”
Sam lands with one foot in the empty air of an open hatch, and would have tumbled down to broken bones and certain injury had Cas not fisted a hand in his jacket and yanked him back to solid ground. “Jesus.” Sam mutters, and has to lay a hand on his throat to quell the nausea. The slight sway of the ship on open waters doesn’t help the usual stomach-twisting of angel travel.

Sam has to assume from the lack of yelling and accusations that they haven’t landed in public space. He finally gets his nausea under control, and takes his first look around.

For Dean’s not-so-great landing, Sam is secretly surprised that Dean had gotten them on the naval vessel on his first attempt. Not that he would admit it to Dean, but he may have taken a deep breath before Dean tapped his shoulder and blinked them two thousand miles away – just in case his first few moments on the West Coast ended up being underwater.

They’re in a small room – no windows, one heavy door. Filing cabinets are bolted to the walls, secure locks preventing drawers from sliding open and spilling presumably secret military documents onto the floor. Space always a premium on ships, the room is small and narrow. Dingy, cold, cramped – what Sam had expected in a military ship. Sam’s surprised that Dean hasn’t already bitched about personal space, but when Sam finally turns to see why Dean is quiet, the question is answered for him.

Dean’s face is hidden in the shadows resulting from the single dim overhead light, but he’s bent over, one hand bracing himself on the wall. His head hangs loose from his neck, like he’s fighting a migraine or some assault on his senses. “Dean?” Sam asks quietly, his hand a light presence on Dean’s back. Dean doesn’t flinch away, just exhales heavily.

“There’s warding.” Cas grates, and now that Sam’s gotten a better look, can see similar lines of discomfort on the angel’s face. “War is here, and he’s warded the ship to dull supernatural and seraphic senses and abilities.”

“Against angels?” Sam asks, turning back towards Dean. His brother seems a little better, but still looks a little green.

“I don’t think the warding is intended specifically for angels, no.” Cas replies, and runs a finger along the surface of one of the filing shelves. “Probably against a whole host of the supernatural. These are ancient entities. They know more about warding and spellwork than possibly even Rowena.”

“So what does this mean? You guys are powered down?”

Dean flexes a hand in front of him, and Sam sees the flicker of grace skim along the surface. “No.” Dean answers. “Just running on low power mode.” Dean and Cas exchange a quick look, silently seeing if the other is okay.

Sam drops his duffle to the floor, and roots around until he pulls out his Taurus and his angel blade. He slides the gun into his waist band, but hefts the angel blade in his hand. “How are we going to do this? We’re not exactly inconspicuous in civilian clothing.”

Dean takes a step around his brother, lays a hand on the door’s release. He gives a light tap, but the door is locked. “Better take the hatch to the next deck. Don’t want to set off alarms ripping this off.”

They take the ladder down, and find themselves at the end of a long corridor. It’s readily apparent they’re in more public areas – there’s the low vibratory buzz of voices and the metallic chirps of boots tapping out a beat on metal. They duck into a side room, even smaller than the last, and Dean asks “How large is the crew on this thing?”
Sam tries to recall his extensive knowledge of the Wikipedia entry. “Roughly 130 crewmembers.”

“Fuck me.” Dean mutters. “We’re going to get caught.”

“Probably.” Sam admits, “We should try and find a computer. Maybe there are logs or entries about Captain Call’s disappearance.”

“I’d settle for a friggin’ map right about now.” Dean says.

The catch a lucky break two rooms over, finding an unattended laptop. It’s not password locked – a stupid mistake for someone that apparently worked on a top-secret classified stealth ship – but, as Sam discovers a few moments later, the computer isn’t connected to any sort of internet connection.

“The ship terminals must be connected to a secure network.” Sam says, when the Google Chrome dinosaur refuses to do anything but jump over trees. “Those are going to be impossible to hack.”

“Anything useful already downloaded?” Dean asks. He leans into the hallway to scan for approaching officers.

“Not unless you think minesweeper is useful.”

Dean pulls his head back to give Sam a weird look. “Seems kinda distasteful.”

Sam rolls his eyes and keeps clicking through files. There are two folders with downloaded porn, one with all five seasons of Fringe and then – the shiny pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

“Check this out.” Sam says, and Cas and Dean post up behind him. “Looks like…” Sam checks the file directory, “Seaman Garduno is a new recruit. They still have their briefing packet downloaded. Including…” he opens up two files, “a map and a staff roster.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.” Dean says, and leans over Sam to get a better look at the ship schematics. “This is just lying around on this kid’s computer?”

Sam shrugs, and pulls his phone out of his pocket to snap a picture of the screen. “I guess if there’s a spy already on board, they’ve got bigger problems on their hands.” He zooms in on his phone to make sure the writing is legible and, satisfied, powers the computer back off.

Dean is still shaking his head, “Yeah, no spies here. Just a cosmic entity jonesing for the Apocalypse.”

“Captain Augustus Call.” Sam reads off his phone. “His berth is on the deck above this one. Maybe we can catch him while he’s – “

“What are you – who are you?” A voice says from the doorway, and all three jump and swivel towards the door. Shit.

There’s a young soldier, decked out in impressive-looking dark blue BDUs, the name GARDUNO velcroed to his upper chest. He’s young, and must be pretty green to not have immediately called for backup. Though angel combat probably isn’t covered in basic training these days.

Sam’s hand slides to his jacket towards his blade. He’s not going to hurt the kid, but if War finds out hunters are roaming the ship, he might just run the USS Wormwood to the sea floor and try his luck in a different ocean.

But Dean takes a step forward, hands raised in front of him – as if that’s ever really made a
Winchester less dangerous. “Seaman Garduno?” Dean tries, all cocksure and radiating authority that only years of posing as federal officers can grant.

“Sir?” Garduno replies instantly, his spine straightening ever so slightly, before he realizes what he’s said, “I mean – “

Dean claps a hand on the soldier’s shoulder – startling him back into silence. Garduno tries to jerk back, but Dean’s grip is tempered steel and careful restrain. “Kid, your porn folder sucks.” And Sam watches mutely as his brother presses two fingers to a crinkled forehead. Garduno’s eyes roll back and he slumps over, held upright only by Dean’s grip.

“Jesus.” Sam says, and he feels that same shiver of dread he feels any time he witnesses Dean break out a new angel trick that he’s never done before. Dean turns his head, like he senses Sam’s disconcert, but all Sam sees is the shadow of blue light slowly fade from his brother’s eyes. A shiver of something slicks down his spine, but he doesn’t say anything as Dean carefully maneuvers the unconscious shoulder against a filing cabinet.

“What?” Dean asks snappishly, after the silence turns toxic.

“Nothing.” Sam says quickly, and repositions the laptop and the papers he’d displaced on the desk. “Let’s get going.” Sam checks the schematics he’d snapped on his phone – sees they need to return to the upper floor. “C’mon.” He mutters, and they file out of the room single-file.

They take a different ladder up, Sam in the lead. He’s about to push open the slightly ajar hatch when he hears footsteps approaching. He retracts his hand immediately, holds his breath.

Voices slowly come into hearing – echoing off metal walls. “ – hear about Garza?”

“Shit. No. What did she do now?”

“The first voice continues, “Guess she flipped her lid in the middle of the mess hall. Started yelling at PO Singh, like real brutal stuff. She tried to go after him with a tray or something. Jones told me it was a fork, but you’d have to be pretty desperate to go after someone with crappy military utensils.”

“Fuck.” The second voice says, “Garza could start a fight in an empty room, but I thought she and Singh were tight. Didn’t they go through Basic together? I…” But the soldiers’ steps are getting further away now, and Sam can’t make out the rest of the conversation. He pushes a hand against the hatch, and carefully slides it open. The hallway – oddly spacious for a military vessel – is empty, and he clambers out. Cas follows right behind, accepting Sam’s offered hand.

“You catch that?” Sam says in an undertone, as Dean joins them.

Dean nods, and glances towards where the voices had disappeared. “They’re still talking about it.” He says, and Sam had forgotten about his brother’s improved senses. “And I guess it’s not the first time someone’s gone postal since Call’s biblical return. I’d say we’re definitely on the right boat.”

Sam nods grimly. “Okay,” he says, checking the map on his phone. “Officer quarters are that way.”

They pass through a wide passageway, blue linoleum floors with white and gray pebbled in, off-white walls, paper rosters taped to the wall – it’s like wandering through a freshman dorm. It was almost charming. Or it would be - if they weren’t currently stalking a primordial entity devoted to stirring up enough discord and strife to devour entire civilizations.

They’ve hardly made it ten feet before half the lights cut out, and the rest flip to orange. Alarm
“F***.” Dean curses, and the sounds of heavy boots on metal pounds in both directions. “Guess Call wants to skip the foreplay.”

“Time and a place, Dean.” Sam mutters, and shoves his brother’s shoulder until Dean starts moving again. They hurry up the passageway at a quick clip. Bootsteps turn to shouts, and then the sound of a gunshot retorts down the hallway, amplified in the small space. Dean jerks his head around, and slows to let Sam and Cas pass him.

“That didn’t sound like it was intended for us.” Cas says shortly.

“I guess War decided to start the party early.” Sam says, “We need to hurry.”

“Too late. Those fuckers are fast.” His brother replies, and Sam hears the sounds of heavy breathing and rapid footsteps approaching from the rear. Sam sneaks a glance over his shoulder as they tear down the hallway. The loud retort of a gunshot explodes in his ears, and he ducks his head, hearing the metal ping of a collision before the bullet ricochets off into the metal wall. Two more shots ring out, but it sounds like a hundred.

“Go, go, go.” Dean hisses, and shoves Sam and Cas through a doorway when they hesitate. They stumble over the metal lip, and Dean slams the heavy door shut, before bringing his arm back and slamming his fist into the metal, warping the frame and sealing off the entrance. Any relief that Sam feels is quickly shot down when he sees two holes in the back of Dean’s shirt – small, perfect circles from bullets ripping through the fabric.

“Jesus, Dean – ” Sam gasps, already stumbling forward, hands raised, heart pounding like ambulance sirens in his ears, but Dean turns and knocks Sam’s hands aside. He gives Sam an oh, please expression, and reaches behind to tug at the hem of his shirt. Two crushed metal bits drop to the floor, like bronze bullet casings expelled from a gun.

“Sam. Dean.” Cas grates, eyes focused on a point over Sam’s shoulder.

The passageway is dim with lack of windows and the emergency orange lighting. It gives a false impression of sunlight, like standing in mist lit up by the dawn. A female soldier – blue BDUs and a name patch that reads TROY – stands in the passageway. Her uniform is askew and disheveled – one sleeve pulled towards her elbow, and blood pours from a wound at her temple. Her gaze is steely even where blood drips along the corner of her eye. But Sam’s real focus is on the sidearm currently trained on his chest, held in a shaking grip.

“Whoa – “ Sam says, and raises his hands in front. He’s armed, can still feel the cool metal of his Taurus nestled at his back. Might even be able to get a shot off, but he’s not going to shoot an innocent for no other damn reason than she was in the way. “It’s not what you think. We’re here to help.”

“Help?” The woman snaps. She’s young – maybe early 20’s. Her voice cracks around the word. Dean takes a step to the side, and the soldier brings her gun to bear on him. “Who are you? How did you get on board?”

“We’re investigating the disappearance of Augustus Call.” Sam says, and the soldier’s eyes flicker with confusion.

“The Captain?” PO Troy asks uncertainly, but she keeps the gun trained professionally on Dean’s center of mass. “He’s not missing.”
“But he was. For two days.” Cas interjects. Troy’s gaze flicks to the angel, but she keeps the weapon trained on Dean. “He was missing from the ship, and no one could find him. And then he returned without explanation.”

“Doesn’t explain how the three of you showed up on a classified military vessel. The Captain is fine. He – “ But the young soldier breaks off with a frown, clamping her mouth shut.

“Why are you bleeding?” Dean asks, and Troy blinks glassy-eyed at him. One hand leaves her gun and scrubs the side of her face, almost like she’s surprised to find she’s been injured.

“Lieutenant Francis… he… he went insane.” She replies without thinking. “He started screaming, something about some guy named Samuel Roberts. He said Roberts was on fire, and that ‘they’ were going to get him. And he… God, he… he shot Ensign Bishop.” The soldier wavers, her gun dipping lower. One hand raises to unconsciously wipe at her seeping injury again. She turns a sick shade of green under the blood, like she’s going to be sick. “I… he attacked me. Shoved me against a server door, and I… I hit my head. I shot him.” She adds, eyes widening. “Oh, God. I… I think I killed him. He just kept coming, and was screaming about Roberts, and I…” The hand holding the gun falls limp to her side without her notice.

“Samuel Roberts?” Dean asks suddenly, and Troy raises bleary eyes, “As in, the USS Samuel B. Roberts? What?” He adds, after Sam turns to look at Dean, worried his older brother’s gone insane. “You’re not the only one that knows dumb ship facts. It was a missile frigate that hit an Iranian mine in ’88. Told you Minesweeper was insensitive.”

“Lieutenant Francis was part of that escort mission in Operation Earnest Will.” Troy says thickly. “He must have been on board the Roberts. But why… why would… think he’s on - ” Concussed pupils blown wide, Troy seems to lose her ability to form words, and the gun slips from her bloody fingers. She sags to the side, catches herself on the passageway at the last second.

Dean pushes past Sam, and catches Troy’s shoulder before she tips over onto the floor. “It’s okay, kid.” He murmurs, and then lightly brushes his fingers against her forehead. Blue light reflects off her glazed eyes, and Sam has to squint as golden light pours from the soldier’s bloody injury. When the light dies, Dean releases her, and she staggers back a few steps – wound sealed, without even blood stains to show for it.

The grogginess of blood loss is gone, and her eyes are wide as she stares at Dean, mouth agape. “How did you do that? How…” Her eyes fall down to the gun that she’s dropped to the floor, before flicking back up to Dean with fear bright in her eyes, “Who are you?”

“There’s someone that’s not supposed to be here on this ship.” Dean says, “And they’ve probably killed Call. We’re here to make sure no one else dies.”

Gunfire from beyond the sealed door punctuates the end of his statement like a bloody exclamation point. PO Troy jumps back a step, startled now that her faculties have returned. She eyes the gun on the ground. Dean rolls his eyes and kicks the gun over. She scoops it up protectively, but doesn’t point the barrel in their direction.

“I just saw Captain Call a few hours ago.” She adds. “He’s not dead.”

“Whoever killed him most likely stole his identity and form to integrate himself into the workings of the ship.” Cas explains. Someone tries to wrench open the door, and it rattles on its bent frame. A dull banging vibrates through the wall, the butt of a gun being slammed over and over on the thick door.
“Has anyone been acting… weird?” Sam adds, “Not themselves?”

Some of the distrust in Troy’s expression steps aside to make room for incredulity.

“Uh… point taken.” Sam admits.

The woman studies them for a long moment. Finally, she exhales heavily, sliding her service weapon into the holster at her thigh. “If you’re really not here as saboteurs, why are you here? Who… what replaced the Captain?”

Dean’s mouth quirks with inappropriate amusement. “You want the short version or the long version?”

Troy’s face twists with the harassed expression of a stalwart officer stuck at a rank below their worth. “I want the non-bullshit version.”

“As commendable as we find your predilection for eschewing bullshit, we need to move on and continue our search.” Cas interjects flatly. “We’re running out of time before War finally gives up this venture and moves on.”

Troy’s gray eyes turn back to the two intruders that don’t sound like they learned to speak from academic journals. “I’m sorry – did he just say War?”

They finally manage to convince Petty Officer Troy that they aren’t secretly North Korean spies that have used Russian teleportation technology (*Just regular teleportation. Dean, shut up.*) to get aboard the ship.

“What is this ship even for?” Dean asks, ducking underneath the low frame leading into another passageway.

PO Troy – *Call me Helen* – gives them an uncertain look as she leads them deeper down the passageway, towards the ladder stairwell that will lead them to the top deck, where Captain Call is allegedly overseeing aviation maintenance of the ship’s two helicopters. “Naval Intelligence. We capture transmissions, radar signals and emission signatures from other vessels, and we send out dummy messages, usually disinformation and agitprop.”

“Agitprop.” Sam repeats. “So, propaganda.”

Helen shrugs, and recites the unofficial motto of Naval Intelligence: “*In God we trust. All others we monitor.*”

“Cute. Very Big Brother.” Dean says, and, turning to Sam and Cas, adds, “Why would War come here? Last time we ran into him, he was all… murder and demons and end of times. Now he’s plugging away on a computer like a regular asshole with a day job?”

Helen suddenly stops walking, and for a moment, Dean thinks that he’s offended her. But she says, “I… might know a reason.”

Dean had taken for granted the ambient, background noise and hum of the ship engines. So he’s as startled as the rest of them when the ship suddenly lurches to one side, and the low vibratory buzz of propulsion engines grinds to a halt. “Shit.” Dean mutters, correcting his balance. The gauzy illumination of the emergency lights flickers off for a long moment, before once again lighting the passageway. “What was that?”
Helen’s eyes are wide. She pats her pockets until she withdraws a small portable flashlight, and clicks it on. She motions for Cas to move to the side. He steps aside cautiously, and Helen shines her beam on the wall, thin fingers seeking a nearly-imperceptible opening in the wall. She digs it open, revealing what looks like a high-tech fuse box. She lights the panel, and studies the blinking numbers. Finally, she shuts the panel with a muted thud. “The gas turbines driving the electric generators have been disabled. We’re running on the reserves of the turbine generators.”

“So, what does that mean?”

“It means that the ship automatically sent out an SOS after detecting a power failure, and ONI is going to send out another ship to evacuate crew or aid in repairs.”

“We can’t afford to let War off this ship.” Cas says crisply.

“If that asshole already has access to helicopters, that might be a problem sooner than we think.” Dean says, and turns back to Helen. “What do you mean, you might know the reason?”

Helen blinks at him. “What?”

“The reason War is here.”

“Yes. Right. Sorry. A few weeks ago, right before Captain Call went missing, one of the diver teams was running maneuvers when we were closer to the coast. The Navy sometimes trains divers near old wrecks – usually World War era ships. But this was an undiscovered wreckage we found only through luck. And a top-of-the-line radar scanner. And the ship – it was old. The divers were marking the location for the Navy to return later with a research dive team, but they brought up an old crate they found.”

Dean nudges Cas, and mutters under his breath: “Ten bucks says it’s a cursed object.”

Sam glares at them for a moment, but turns back to Helen’s explanation. Cas catches Dean’s eye and nods. Dean smirks, but returns his attention to the soldier. “ – old junk, and some kind of long… lance weapon.”

“A lance?” Sam repeats.

Helen shrugs. “I guess. That’s what they called it. But it was weird. Everything in the case was basically worn down to nothing – salt water does that – but this was… perfectly preserved. Even the carvings in the wooden handle was perfect, the metal wasn’t corroded or tarnished. Captain Call went missing a day later.”

“It’s gotta be another Archangel lance.” Sam says, turning wide eyes back to Cas and Dean.

Cas nudges Dean with his elbow, holding a hand out. Dean slaps his palm away. “It could be a cursed Archangel lance.”

“Dean, just… shut up.” Sam says. “If there’s really an Archangel lance on this ship – and if it does anything like what Michael’s lance did, we need to get it before War does. You saw what it did to Cas last time – that thing mortally wounds angels.”

“Angels?” Helen repeats, and looks even more shocked than she did hearing that the cosmic entity of War was roaming around on her ship. “You’re an angel?” She asks Dean, wide-eyed, and her hand lifts halfway to where Dean had healed her head injury.

“Eh. I mean… maybe in the smallest sense of the word.” He admits, but ends the line of questions
before it gets started, turning back to Sam. “Forget War, forget all the Horsemen for a second – if we can get our hands on that lance, we might be able to kill Michael without the cage.”

Sam looks skeptical. “How would we do that without killing you?”

“I’ll worry about crossing that bridge when I’m knee-deep in water, Sammy – but we gotta get that spear.”

“Lance.”

“Whatever.” Dean claps his hands together, “Okay – you two go topside, see if you can find War, and if nothing else, make sure he can’t leave on one of the helicopters. Helen, do you know where they’re keeping the lance?”

“Yes. Two decks below, in locked storage.”

“Great, I’m right behind you.”

Sam is visibly startled, and his hazel eyes narrow at his brother. “What? No – we’re not splitting up, Dean!”

“I got exactly zero time to argue about this, Sam. We need to get the lance, and we need to get War before he fucks off to fuckin’ Antarctica. Stop arguing – go. We’ll grab the lance and we’ll meet you topside in five minutes. Keep War busy.”

He sees the moment when Sam gives in, but there’s a tightness behind his brother’s face, where he’s holding in and shoving down his fears. “It’ll be fine, Sam.” Dean adds.

“Yeah. Okay.” He jabs a finger into Dean’s chest as he repeats, “Five minutes.”

“The ladder to the upper deck is straight ahead,” Helen points out the direction.

Sam nods, and gives Dean one last, searching look. He pulls the Taurus out from his waistband and holds it out to Dean, but his brother shakes his head. Sam frowns, but slides the gun back into his jeans. “Be careful, okay? And don’t poke yourself with that thing.”

Dean grins, “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

Sam’s expression flattens into a practiced bitch-face, but he rolls his eyes. “Jerk. Alright. Let’s go, Cas. Guess we gotta stop a war.”

They’ve only gone a few feet when Dean calls, “That sounded cooler in your head!”

Sam flips Dean off over his shoulder, and they’re through the hatchway before Dean can start to get worried.

After the relative ease of the last few minutes, Sam had started to hope that maybe War’s influence had only infected a small number of the ship's crew. The first bodies they find quickly end that hope.

The first one is a middle-aged man, dressed in the naval BDUs with a reflective mesh vest pulled over – probably someone who worked on the flight deck. There’s a surprising lack of blood, and the corpse is slumped against the wall, still in kneeling position. He’d been shot execution-style, made to kneel and face his killer. Cas and Sam exchange glances but neither speaks.
They find the second body lodged in the lower rungs of the ladder they’d been looking for. It’s a younger soldier, young enough to still have soft curves over new muscle. Blood from an unseen injury drips from his arm in a melodic drip to form a small pool below. As they draw closer, it’s clear that the body has fallen from considerable distance, crunching and snapping bones on his long tumble down the shaft.

Whether he was pushed, or threw himself down, Sam doesn’t know.

Wordlessly, Cas helps him extricate the body, and they gently pull the kid from the yellow bars. They lay him almost gently against the passageway walls – and Sam can’t help but see Jack’s features in all that youth and broken promise of the soldier’s face, and wonders when he’ll stop feeling so damn old in this job. He catches Cas’ eyes on his own face, and has the feeling that Cas is wondering the same thing.

Cas leads the way up the ladder, climbing quietly and swiftly. Sam has a harder time maneuvering his long legs in the narrow passage, and the occasional slicks of blood on the walls and the rungs turn his stomach.

When Cas doesn’t immediately offer Sam a hand to pull him from the shaft, Sam knows that whatever is on the upper deck is worse than what they were expecting. Sam emerges blinking into the sunlight of the deck, almost incapacitated by the bright sun reflecting off open, cloudless skies, and long stretches of endless ocean. The deck is narrower and much higher above the water line than he remembers from the pictures. And has significantly more bodies.

One can see the meticulous adherence to military-spotlessness under the new additions of red and viscera smearing the deck. It looks like what Sam would imagine a pirate raid from one of his childhood books to look like – fallen men and women, bloodied and broken, fighting to the last breath. The carnage is horrifying. Some bodies lay slack-jawed and wide-eyed, staring sightless into a blinding sun. Others are belly-down, having crawled along to escape death, leaving slug-trails of wet crimson stretched out on the deck.

Of the dozen or so bodies, not a single one shows signs of life. “Let’s do a sweep for Call, or War, or whoever.” Sam says to Cas, pulling his Taurus from his waistband, and checking the mag. “I doubt he’d let himself get wrapped up in this, but we need to check.”

“Agreed.” Cas grates, and walks away stony-faced and unarmed towards the starboard side. Sam steps carefully along the deck, pausing to inspect any bloody corpse that matches Captain Call’s description. But the name patches continue to list other lost souls – Rivas, McMurtry, Kim, Schneider. He flips over one body, finds the name ripped off the Velcro. Sam frowns, and feels along the corpse’s wind-chilled neck for dog tags. Those are missing too. But the body is too young to match Call’s description, and Sam straightens from the corpse. Discontent boils like bile in his stomach.

“What do you think happened here?” He asks in a low voice, and the wind snatches away most of his words. He knows Cas can still hear them.

Cas crouches from where he’d shifted the corpse of an older woman into a less contorted position. He blinks at Sam with a neutral expression, and his fingers lightly brush against the soldier’s temple. “I can only see patchy surface memories of the recently deceased,” he says, loud enough for Sam to hear, “but from what I can piece together, it seems as if groups of these people believed they were... elsewhere.”

“What?”
“Almost like they were reliving past traumas. Former battles. Old wounds.”

“Like… PTSD? Like what Helen said about the Lieutenant she had to kill?” Sam looks back down at the corpse at his feet, sees lines of fear carved into the man’s face, death unable to completely wipe it smooth. “Back in the town that War took over a few years ago, he made the town’s occupants see their neighbors as demons and killers. He stirred something up in them, made frightened and violent.” Sam sees the bloody deck in a new light – sees fear and desperation strong enough to cause soldiers who’d worked and relied on each other driven to the point of tearing each other apart.

Sam suppresses a shiver, and wonders what the soldiers that hadn’t been infected had seen. Their friends and coworkers mad with fear and trauma, attacking and slaughtering the rest.

“Sam.” Cas says sharply, and Sam jerks away from the last corpse on his side of the deck. Cas is bent over a woman, whose head has been half bashed in with some kind of blunt object. Sam jogs over, careful not to slip in still-drying blood. He’s unsure why Cas is summoning him to inspect a woman’s body, when they’re searching for a middle-aged man with sandy hair.

“What’s – “ Sam starts, but chokes off when he sees why Cas called him over. The woman’s dark hair has been dislodged from her cap, strands of hair clumped together with blood. Her head’s caved-in, but her face is remarkably untouched. Dark eyes stare unblinkingly at the sky, her mouth slightly opened in surprise.

It’s Helen.

“What the hell…” Sam breathes, and his brain is unable to put together the pieces of the puzzle. Cas reaches out to straighten the corpse’s uniform, and the name patch CERVANTES is blood-soaked but unmistakable.

“Troy… Helen…” Sam mutters, and when it hits, it hits. Sam shoves himself to his feet like he’s been electrocuted. “We need to get to Dean. Now.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter's pacing is all over the place - and it's because I didn't write a chapter outline like I normally do like a freakin' DUMBASS.

Anyway, speaking of oceans/ships/Michael!Dean, if you haven't checked out "The Abyss Gazes Back" by Water_of_life, you are seriously missing out. Their depiction of Michael is just... omg. I can't stop rereading.

Thanks for reading/commenting! Sorry for the delay - but this is double my normal chapter length so don't be too mad... <3
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Yeah this probably should have been two chapters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sam’s voice chokes around his brother's name, desperate to squeeze words out past all the crackly pressure in the air. There's a bright shock of pain and he falls to his knees, adding to the pain of his sprained ankle. White, hot fire lights up nerve endings, and surely - he’s deteriorating at the cellular level, tearing apart, scattering to the ether, insubstantial as static and smoke.

The bodies of War’s thralls litter the floor, stirred up with enough of the Horseman’s hallucinatory visions to be struck nearly deaf and dumb. War’s nudges to the psyche have pushed them all past the point of personal regard, and Sam knows that whichever ones survive the next few minutes will never be the same again.

Sam can’t pull breath in past his frozen lungs and closing throat, and his vision starts to snap white and black.

Black – and Sam sees Cas’ unmoving form collapsed near the far wall of the passageway. Thick metal is dented from the force of the impact, red slashes from spilled blood drip down off-white walls like a work of art.

White – and Sam sees War’s smile, bright white teeth splitting painted lips in the eye of the hurricane, the crumbling edge of the cliff, the misty center of the whirlpool. The ship tears itself apart, and War spreads her arms and soaks in chaos and ruin like sunshine.

Black – and Sam sees Dean, but doesn’t see his brother. He stands stiffly, a still figure in the passageway, white walls spread for him like he’s parting the red sea. No warm green in the electric blue coruscation of his eyes, no flicker of Dean in the marble expanse of an almost familiar face.

White – and Sam sees blood of a hundred shades, blood so dark it’s black, so bright it’s blooming, and Dean’s entire right side is soaked through, bleeding through his shirt, dripping on the ground, but there’s no injury that Sam can see, nothing that should bleed like that and live, and maybe that’s the problem.

Black – and Sam sees an indistinct flickering behind Dean, like an afterimage hovering just over Dean’s right shoulder, a diseased outline of jagged pinions. Rich and dark feathers, blood dripping like it’ll never stop.

White – and Sam sees the wing no longer – it’s tucked away on another plane, but blood is slick and viscous on the linoleum. And Sam sees Dean, but he doesn’t see his brother.

Black – and Sam sees War, bloodied and kneeling in a parody of submission. And she turns to him, and her eyes are sharp with eons of battle and strife and death, and she smiles the smile of the young and careless. Sam sees her raise her ruined right hand almost eternity-slow, gesturing to the form of his brother wiped clean of Dean. Her voice is torn away in the chaos, but Sam sees the slow part of her lips.
White – and Sam sees… not much at all.

Earlier -

Dean’s forced Jack to watch enough spy movies and episodes of Scooby-Doo to know that suspicious people are… suspicious. And maybe it’s not ideal to base real life on popular media, but it would be a lot more helpful to catch Nick twisting a villainous mustache or practicing a maniacal speech to his reflection in a spoon.

But so far, keeping an eye on Nick has been boring. Maybe it was a little odd that he’d walked the perimeter of the Bunker twice, and maybe it was weird that he’d put the jelly on his PB&J before the peanut butter. But if there’s some hidden agenda in that, Jack isn’t sure what it is.

Nick chats amiably with a few hunters in the kitchen, bright and friendly. Asks about recent cases, laughs his way through a story about how he inadvertently killed an entire vamp nest by accident after rupturing a gas line. Guess that vamp learned the hard way that smoking is hazardous for your health.

Nick hadn’t twitched a suspicious muscle, and – though he agrees with Dean that Nick’s presence makes him uncomfortable – Jack is beginning to suspect that Dean’s request may have been a way to distract Jack from dwelling on the fact he was left behind.

Feeling guilty that he’d abandoned Andrea to the armory, Jack decides to give up skulking around and put in a few more hours helping the hunter clean the weapon stock.

He walks down the hallway, passing by Sam and Dean’s rooms – feeling another pang of deprecation – when the light padding of footsteps taps up the hallway behind him. Jack turns around, and is startled to find an arm being slung over his shoulder.

“Hey, kiddo.” Nick says, all easy blue eyes and slimy smile. “Toss the ol’ pig skin around with your old man?”

Jack bristles, and shoves the man off his shoulder. “That’s not funny.” He says, clenching his fist at his side.

Nick blinks at him, scummy amusement still bright in his expression. “It’s a little funny. God, a few months with the Winchesters and you’ve had all the fun sapped out of you.”

Jack doesn’t respond. He doesn’t like Nick, but tries to keep his expression neutral.

Nick finally takes a step back, raising his hands up in defeat. “Alright, alright, I can take a hint. Where you headed?”

“Armory.” Jack replies after a moment.

“Great, I’ll walk with you.” Nick says, and Jack doesn’t see a way of politely declining.

The first few steps are terse and awkward. Nick yawns loudly and comedically, scratching at his stomach like an old man in a cartoon. “So,” he says after they’ve passed from the living quarters, “where’s Tinkerbell and the dynamic duo?”
“Why?”

“Jeez, aren’t you a Worried Wendy.” Nick says, painting surprise like laquer on his face. “I wanted to talk to Dean about something.”

“I don’t think Dean wants to talk to you.” Jack answers honestly. Half the Bunker had heard about Dean and Nick’s earlier spat in the War Room.

Nick laughs, and the sound bounces off the walls, like the amusement of more than one man. “Yeah? Dean’s a big boy, he can take a little ribbing. I recall he did a little ribbing of his own.” Nick says, slapping his healed side – and Jack is suddenly back in that church, watching archangel steel burn his father out of Nick in a blaze of golden light.

And it makes Jack feel a little guilty. Nick had nearly died, caught up in the battle between Winchesters and the Devil, and no one had really given the vessel a second thought. In the tense ride in the ambulance, Sam’s concern had been wholly on Jack’s injury and Dean’s abduction – no one had given much thought to the widower that had bled and burned and endured for the permission he’d suffered to give so many years ago. He couldn’t have known when he’d said yes to the devil that he’d wake up years later on a bloody hospital bed with a puncture in his lung and a bright absence in his soul.

And maybe it’s that guilt that makes Jack finally ask, “What did you want to ask Dean about?”

And Nick’s smile is razor thin. “For starters, what he’s doing with all that archangel grace.”

“What?”

“I said – “ The horrible screeching of metal ripped from resisting hinges slices over Helen’s words, deafening in the narrow passageway.

Dean frowns at the soldier as he yanks the door from the frame and drops it heavily to the side. The metal bounces once with an echoing clang, and silence fills the gap.

“What?” He tries again.

Helen waits a second, as if to see if Dean is going to noisily rip off any other impediments in their way to lower deck storage. She asks again, “I said, what is your plan to stop War?”

Dean kicks at the metal door to push it a little further out of the way and gestures for Helen to step through the frame. “I heard what you said. I meant, what do you mean?”

Helen gives him an odd look, and then steps over the threshold into the dimness beyond. Dean follows just behind. “I mean, how do you stop War? If you kill him, what happens? All wars, all conflicts… is it just over?”

“Oh. Uh,” Dean thinks for a second, scratching a hand down the back of his neck. “Dunno. I killed Death a few years ago, and another reaper just took his place. And gotta say, the original had better taste in pizza.” He thinks for a moment. “Though Billie has better hair.”

Helen nods sedately and continues walking, the beam of her flashlight a steady light guiding their path. Dean glances at her out of the corner of his eye and he falls into step at her side. “What, not even gonna ask?”
Helen’s eyes slice up to his, “Ask?”

“I just told you I killed Death, and you didn’t even blink.” He’s not saying he was hoping for a reaction, but shock value is shock value, and Dean likes to deliver.

“Oh.” Helen says blandly. Her flashlight peters out and she shakes it to get it going again. “I mean, you’re an angel. War – who is a person, apparently – is running lose on the ship. I guess killing Death just didn’t seem that farfetched.”

Dean frowns. “I guess.” He says after a moment. He looks around the dark passageways, sees the gaping holes of open doors leading into empty rooms. “Wonder where everyone is.”

Helen’s beam dips into one of the rooms, illuminating a dark medic bay for a moment, but she doesn’t reply. Dean glances down at the short woman, sees the blankness of her face, the odd gleam in her eye as she doesn’t know that she’s being watched. Before, she was colored over the lines with fear and stress and concern. Now it’s like she’s someone else. Dean frowns. Something seems off, but maybe he’s too inured to the crazy to have a good read on ‘normal’ anymore.

“So, how does someone kill Death or War?” Helen asks, after a few moments of silence. “I’m guessing it’s not easy.”

Good fucking question. Their last samba down this path was paved entirely by luck and timing. Even killing Death was pure chance and probably a lot to do with the fact the old man wasn’t spry enough to bob and weave. “Might not have to kill him. Just trying to get something from him.”

Something in Helen’s eyes flash. “Interesting. And if you can’t get it?”

Dean shrugs. “Then we kill him. He was the easiest to take down last time.”

Helen throws her head back and laughs so loud, Dean flinches. The slice of the flashlight bounces down the empty hallway. “Oh, Dean.” She says after her moment of inappropriate mirth. “I like you.”

Okay – clearly Dean hadn’t healed all of the crazy that’s bouncing around in soldier woman’s head.

They pass through one more passageway, drop down one more deck. Dean thinks about Cas and his brother, hopes if they’ve found War, they’re holding their own. He feels the crackle of warding like a vibration at the base of his spine, something present and absent – he feels a numbness, like someone dropped a sheet over half of him and told him to make do.

“You feeling okay?” Helen asks, and there’s some kind of misty quality to her eyes in the dark, like vapor burning off a lake.

Dean flexes his back muscles, shakes out his hand at his thigh. Finally says, “Yeah, I’m good. Who knew warding felt like half a hangover.”

Helen turns back to the passageway. “There’s that Winchester charm.” She says to no one in particular, and the emptiness snatches up her words. And it’s odd, because Dean can’t remember telling her their family name.

“You feeling okay?” Helen says, and the beam of her flashlight cuts across a door half-ajar. The lighting is better on this deck than on the upper, but her light still makes an impression. Dean half-hesitates, but Helen looks up at him, innocent and confused. “What’s the matter?” She asks.

“You’re feeling okay?” Helen replies after a moment. Helen gives him a weird look, but shrugs with one
shoulder. She pushes open the door with the hand not holding the flashlight, pressing it flush against
the wall. Dean’s still in the hallway, but watches as she messes with something hidden on the wall,
and lights, unaffected by emergency protocols, flicker to life. She clicks the flashlight off, and arches
an eye brow behind her in Dean’s direction.

Dean pushes back the bad feeling that’s starting to bubble up, and steps past Helen into the room.

For a storage room, it’s not storing much. There are a few large, black crates shoved up against one
wall, a forgotten coffee mug balanced on a dusty surface. A handful of army-green metal cases are
secured in thick webbing, preventing them from sliding around the deck. There’s shelving along the
far side of the wall, hard plastic covers preventing smaller objects from rolling to the floor during
turbulent times at sea.

“The lance is here?” Dean asks, not seeing anything as obvious as a weapon display case or a neon
sign.

“Cabinet. Left side.”

Dean frowns, but crosses the room. There’s a wriggling in his brain, something he remembers
feeling… back in the school gymnasium. Back when Felisha’s warding cut off his connection to
Jack. Like someone is trying to pray to Dean and it’s not getting through all the ward-induced static.

Dean raises his hand to open the cabinet, but pauses. Remembers deceptions and decoys and that
there’s always a sliver of cheese in the center of the mousetrap.

"And the name of the star was Wormwood. And many men died."

Dean raps a knuckle against the tin of the cabinet. “There’s no lance, is there.”

And War’s laugh is delighted. “Took you longer than I thought. But you got there, in the end. As for
the lance, I assure you it exists. I’m just not stupid enough to let a Winchester lay hands on it.”

Dean turns, and any remaining trace of War’s borrowed form has been wiped, leaving only the
rough estimation of humanity. There’s a timelessness in once-scared eyes, an amused slant to once-
prissy lips.

“Helen of Troy.” Dean realizes aloud. War’s eyes glow beneath dark brows. “Cute.”

War takes a step further into the room, taps a casual finger against a borrowed cheekbone. “Was this
the face that launched a thousand ships / And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?” War’s head cocks
to the side, like a predator inspecting ensnared prey. “Let’s parley.”

Dean takes a step forward – no matter what form the Horseman is masquerading around, he’s not
gonna play the lamb ahead of the slaughter, not gonna let a pretty face bury him at sea.

“Ah.” War tuts, and her hands curve around the door and yank it shut, slamming the heavy metal like
it’s nothing. Dean sees the sigils too late, sees them painted on the side of the door. Runes and
symbols he’s never seen curved into interlocking circles. The moment the door slams in its frame,
connecting with three symbols carved into the paint on the wall, the entire scrawled etching lights up
a shocking violet, and Dean feels a wave of something fill the room. And Dean can’t move.

War inspects her handiwork on the door, before glancing at her captive with something akin to
disappointment. Like a fighter standing over the easy knock-out. Dean’s been thrown and tossed and
supernaturally pinned to walls hundreds of times, but he’s never found himself so entirely cut off
from motion. It’s like concrete had been poured into the room, trapping everything in a frozen
moment. Except for War, who steps lightly to the side, out of the focus of Dean’s frozen vision. He hears the unsnapping of locks, and objects being shoved around. Finally, the bang of a lid being slammed down on tin, and War steps back into his eyeline.

Balanced on her shoulder, an Archangel lance. Polykleitos’ *Doryphoros* reunited with his lost spear, a bronze warrior snatched from history. War’s raptorial gaze meets Dean’s, and he sees fuzzy blue impressions as blue sigils ignite along the lance’s shaft. The gleaming metal head of the lance is hidden behind War’s back, but he doesn’t need to see the full picture to remember its destruction. Designed to kill demons instantly, and angels slow and painful, it’s not a weapon that Dean wants to be intimately acquainted with.

“It belonged to Gabriel.” War explains, like an introduction among friends, “We traded for it… oh, nearly two millennia ago. I let him keep Alexandria, an archangel lance in exchange for an averted war.” War smiles as she brings the spear in front, tapping the base against the metal floor like she’s planting a flag. “Took the library with me on my way out of town. He wasn’t pleased, but there’s always a price to War, even if its narrowly avoided. What – nothing to say?” She adds, and seems to find amusement in the fact that Dean’s struggles don’t betray into even a twitch of fingers or a blink of an eye.

“It doesn’t work the same as the one your old friend destroyed.” War continues, referring to Crowley snapping Michael’s lance, ending the poisonous curse that was slowly devouring Cas alive. “Gabriel – always the pacifist. Forged the metal in the hearths of Heaven, and then twisted it with runes to make sure it can’t mortally wound anything on this plane.” She runs a finger along the shaft of the lance, and the sigils light up. Dean can’t flinch when she suddenly drives her palm through the sharp tip, and her hand splits around the metal like its melting through. But she removes her hand after a moment, and shows him an undamaged palm. She flexes her fingers as if to prove it wasn’t some kind of magic trick. “Next to worthless, really. I’ve used it a few times against the fair folk, but you can basically wipe out an entire civilization of faeries if you can think of a riddle that can twist around on itself twice.

“Now, I don’t know why my sister thought it worth betraying her kin for Winchesters, and I do aim to find out. I felt her cold fingers all over the execution of that tracking spell, and after I’m through with her, well… We’ll see if the next incarnation of Death is quite so amenable. But for now – let’s see how long it takes before she can reap your soul.”

War twists the lance in her hands, angling the gleaming tip at Dean’s throat. He feels a small thrill of panic when the metal dips into the muscle of his neck but slides through, leaving the skin unharmed. If he could breathe, he’d probably shuck out a sigh of relief.

But War’s expression is bright with gratified expectation. “Come on, Dean, didn’t you listen?” And the tip leans away from Dean, hovering off of his right shoulder. If he could move, his lips would be pulling down in a confused frown. “Can’t cut what’s on this plane, can’t wound what’s of this earth.” War clarifies, and the sharpness dips lower.

Dean experiences an excruciating explosion of pain as something pricks into that phantom form at his back. Only War’s eyes are in clear focus in his vision, and he sees her epicurean gaze trace along his right side, seeing something hidden and abstract forcibly dragged into existence. And Dean can feel the brush of summoned feathers graze against the cabinet at his back, can feel the ulna bone of a wing crack as metal slides against hollow bones, the spearing of a lance through secondary flight feathers. And his body is still, but his mind is a thousand shades of lightning pain, and he feels a black poison as if it’s curdling on his tongue, and he can’t even twitch, only see the reflection of twisting black in War’s shining eyes – the thrill of a hunt, the crippling of the long-sought albatross.
Dean can’t move as the lance skewers through the wings he’d never wanted the burden of, and hears the screech of metal, as War drives the lance through him and into the wall behind. Hot streams of blood mat the second convert feathers together like tar, and blistering blood soaks into Dean’s side, staining his clothing and skin. The purple flickering sigils of warding keep Dean rigid in place, even as poison seeps into his veins. And for a hazy moment, Dean wonders what would happen if he died here – if he’d be found glass-eyed and upright, motionless as a marble statue.

War’s hands release the lance, but it remains pinned through several inches of pinion and the hard metal of the wall. She gives Dean an almost playful smack along the jaw, and takes a step back. Blood had dripped off the shaft of the lance and coated her calloused hands and sleeves with dark crimson.

“Well, hate to leave you in such a state, but a War isn’t won in a single battle, and I have other conquests. I’ll leave this with you,” War adds, and slaps her palm on the butt of the lance, and it shivers under the meat of Dean’s flight muscles, scratching against the bone. His vision whites out for a second, but he hears War continue, “Don’t think I’ll need it to take on one human and half an angel. If you expire before I get back, and you see my sister – tell her I’ll be seeing her real soon.”

Sam drops from the ladder a few inches too high and lands badly on his ankle.

“Shit.” He snaps at no one, furious with himself, furious with Dean, furious with fucking everything as he and Cas tear down empty passageways and skid past empty rooms.

He’d checked the map schematics as they hurried off the deck of dead soldiers, leaving the ocean air to kiss corpse skin with salt. Assumes that if there was even a lick of honesty in the anything that Helen – War – had said, then surely, she and Dean couldn’t be much further ahead. They’d followed the trail of doors ripped off their frames, Dean’s fingers leaving heavy impressions on their edges.

Sam knows they can’t be far – it’s a ship, not an airport, he thinks, even as he limps along a dark passageway. His Taurus is digging into his hip bone where it’s shoved against the skin, but he doesn’t want to slow down to adjust it.

He only happened to be glancing at Cas when he sees the angel go down.

“Cas?” Sam exclaims as the angel stumbles onto one knee, pain stiffening his features. The angel grits his teeth and grimaces, but is able to pull himself to his feet with Sam’s assistance. “What the hell was that?”

“Warding.” Cas grates, and takes a step away from Sam, unsteady on his feet. “Powerful warding just went into effect in this vicinity.” He raises a hand, and his blue eyes ignite for a moment. Sam watches as purple sigils illuminate along the walls, indistinct up close, but brighter as they stretch down the hallway. “I suspect that War has triggered some kind of spell.”

“And Dean’s caught in the middle of it.” Sam realizes, and though his arms are extended to aid Cas, he can’t help but squint further down the passageway, seeing the loud purple sigils like they’re refractions of a larger, dangerous spell.

“We need to help him.” Cas agrees, and takes a lurching step forward. His leg seems to seize up the moment he places it on the ground, and he would have tumbled to the floor if Sam hadn’t caught his elbow at the last second.

“Cas, I – “ Sam starts, but the loud retort of a gunshot interrupts his thought, amplified times a
hundred in the tight space. Sam ducks his head, hearing the ricochet of a fired bullet ping off into the darkness. “Shit.” He curses again, his ankle protesting loudly as he shoves Cas into one of the side rooms. Another three shots are fired down the hallway; he swears he feels one whizz harmlessly over his shoulder as he ducks into the room. Cas catches himself on the wall, a look of pain still plastered on his face, but he seems otherwise uninjured. Sam pulls his Taurus from his side, thumbs the safety off.

There are voices now – the crazed mutters and pleas of those just a few shades below madness. Sam can’t make out full sentences, but can pick out enough words to know that Cas had been right – these soldiers were infected by War’s influence, and were reliving past traumas in crystal clarity.

Sam edges around the corner, but it’s too dark for him to fire off a warning shot and not accidentally hit one of the soldiers. He ducks back in, hears stumbles of War’s riled army come thundering down the hallway, inching closer, driven by something other than pure fear.

Sam glances at Cas, who doesn’t look any better, and back at the door, torn. He can’t leave Cas, but he can’t abandon his brother to whatever plans War’s cooked up for him. Cas reads the look, and shakes his head, “Go.” He insists, but Sam still hesitates – he can’t let one brother die to save another.

The stomps and mutterings grow louder, and Sam guesses that approximately ten or so soldiers are around the corner. He leans out of the room again, and can make out a few forms. His hand is steady around the familiar weight of his gun, and he sights the closest figure. Drops the angle a few inches and fires. He hears the loud cry, and someone goes down, a bullet lodged in their calf muscle. Sam drags his head back as another bullet goes flying past.

Then – all the noises, including the whimpering of the shot soldier – evaporate into silence. Sam and Cas exchange glances, and in the new silence of the passageway, Sam hears the light tapping of a solitary set of footsteps from the other direction. He frowns at Cas, but Cas shakes his head. Not Dean.

“Alright, Sam. Castiel.” A voice, affected feminine chords wrapped around tempered steel, calls down the hallway. “Let’s see if you understand a parley better than your brother. Come on out, or I’ll have to amuse myself reenacting the Battle of Pultowa with all my old shipmates.”

Cas’ gaze is heavy on his face, and Sam knows that the angel will back whatever play he decides. Sam’s hand tightens on his weapon, but he nods jerkily at Cas. Whether they hunker down while War kills off the rest of the crew, or reveal themselves, War has them right where she wants them. And with Dean missing, and Cas powered down, they don’t stand a chance of escaping off this vessel. Sam shoves his Taurus into his waistband, and steps over the frame, Cas only a few painful steps behind.

He senses the presence of the soldiers at his back, but doesn’t spare them a glance.

War waits for them in the hallway, shrouded in shadows and darkness. She seems to likewise dislike the dim light, because she claps her hands once, and all the bulbs in the passageway ignite with white florescent light. The emergency orange lights blink off, and the distant sounds of an alarm blaring cuts off instantly.

War – in PO Cervantes’ form – is alone in the hallway, the purple remnants of warding that Cas had managed to materialize give her a haunted look. Her eyes are the gaze of a lone warrior, of a general of armies, and her hands and sleeves drip red with fresh blood.

“Better.” She says, and Sam isn’t sure if she’s referring to the lighting or to their apparent surrender.
“Where’s my brother.” Sam snaps into the quiet stretched between them.

War seems to notice the blood on her hands, and she wipes it against her thighs with a private smile. “Let’s say – that’s a problem that will take care of itself. Toss your angel blades away.” Sam’s heart tightens in his chest, picturing sludge like leviathan blood dripping from his brother’s mouth, poison lighting up his insides like Christmas lights, and knows that if he doesn’t get to the lance and destroy it, he might lose more than just a few coveted angel blades. He slides the warm metal from his jacket and throws it down, hearing the echo of Cas’ weapon following right after.

War nods sedately. “I appreciate adhering to terms of surrender. I’ll kill you both quick, after you tell me what I want to know about my sister.”

“Sister?” Cas asks, and Sam can’t see him, but can hear pain tightening his voice.

War scratches at her neck, and the thin metal line of dog tags are pulled from underneath her uniform. Tucked along the stolen tags, Sam can make out a new addition – War’s Ring. He doesn’t say anything, but knows that Cas has noticed the same. “My sister. Death. I know she gave you the tracking spell to find myself and my siblings. And I want to know why.”

“Why?” And there’s real confusion in Cas’ voice. Sam wants to stomp his heel on the angel’s foot, but knows it would probably hurt his bum ankle more than Cas.

A flicker of amused incredulity passes over War’s face. The Wormwood catches a particularly large swell at that moment, and Sam almost has to catch himself on the side of the wall. His and Cas’ angel blades roll a few feet down the passageway. “Why?” War repeats. “My former incarnation and siblings may have been forced into Lucifer’s servitude, but we are the bringers of Revelations, the Horsemen of the Apocalypse. We’ve existed from the beginning, brought into this world with the first breath of humanity, and we will not be subjugated by humans and angels. I ask again – why is Death betraying her kin for Winchesters?”

Sam opens his mouth and closes it. And what can he say? Billie hates them. Has made it a personal point of hating them. He has no idea why she handed off the spell to Dean without asking for anything.

“Maybe she recognized that Michael is the real threat.” Sam tries. “We don’t need to kill each other. We just need the Horseman rings to open the cage.”

“Liar.” War snaps, her eyes flashing. “Archangels are difficult to kill, but I’ve taken care of Michael myself. Are you telling me that my sister cannot reap an Archangel? She will reap us all. Such is the way.”

And there’s that pinprick of fear again stabbing through Sam’s gut. “What did you do to Dean?”

Even in her steely fury and anger, War still pulls a smile out of the darkness for them. “Currently? Pinned to a wall and boiling from the inside – “

Boom.

Sam jumps, and a flicker of something darts behind War’s eyes. Her lips pull down into a frown, and a hand raises to tug at the dog tags at her neck.

Boom.

The thunderous bang repeats, and now, War turns to look behind her at the empty hallway.
The electric purple light of the warding echoing down the walls flickers once, twice, and then blinks out completely. Sam glances back, and sees that confusion has replaced the pain in Cas’ face, and he wishes that he could see that as a good sign.

And the sound of a door being blown off resisting hinges, a scatter of sparks further down as a heavy door collides with the metal of the far wall. A figure steps out from the doorway, a hundred feet away, and Sam wishes it was relief that he felt.

Dean feels curses and poisons pool in his blood.

And there are better deals to be made, but he would have traded half of whatever remained of his life to be able to at least sit down.

His vision has gone sparkly sharp, unable to move his eyes in their sockets, and he sees galaxies in the motes of dust that pass through the small focus he has.

His blood is liquid nitrogen, his skin has surely been reduced to crumbles of ash. But the worst pain is Gabriel’s fucking lance – pinning him to the wall like a work of art, a bird in flight stuffed and mounted. And any time the ship rocks, the lance shifts, and it’s agony – it is, it’s fucking agony, and Dean just wants it to be done, wants to rip the fuckin’ wing off at the root, wants to throw it into dark waters, watch it sink beneath the waves, and just be done.

Gone is clarity of sight, and Dean is left out of focus, and for whatever reason, here in his last moments, he thinks of the case fourteen years ago, when his heart was damaged and every fought-for beat dragged him closer to the end. And faith healers, and reapers, and black-fuckin’-magic spells – that’s all fine and good, but the only thing that’s ever really kept Dean from the teetering knife-edge of death has been stubbornness and faith and Sam.

But sometimes, that’s not always enough.

Dean feels a tug towards darkness. He rides the wave down.

Rocky’s Bar. His bar.

And that’s the thought that he has, but hell if he’s been here before. And it all looks like shit, like a flood came through and took half the bar with it, and the only parts that remained were the parts too stubborn to let go.

He takes a seat at the bar, and wraps his hand around something cheap and amber under the counter. There’s a half-empty shot glass gathering dust on the bar, and he throws the remains over the counter, and tops the glass off to the brim. And it burns going down, but it burns like it should, and not like poison.

There are noises from a freezer at the left of the bar, and he doesn’t remember much, but he remembers that’s bad. There’s banging and pounding, and he chooses to believe that it’s not the pounding of fists against a cage, but the pounding start of a migraine. He gets those sometimes. Pretty sure he does, anyway.
There’s a mirror propped against the dark wood of the bar, and he watches himself (he assumes it’s himself) drain another three fingers of golden swill. And it’s no House Special – hey, he remembers that – but it’ll do in a pinch.

His reflection blinks at him, and he blinks back.

And his reflection says, *So this is the plan?*

And he guesses it is.

*Just gonna roll over and let it end here?*

And he thinks that’s the general plan. Better than the alternative. Not that he remembers what that is.

*You want to try something else?*

And he takes another shot of amber, and thinks, well, that might be just fine.

A frozen hand unclenches, cracking icy magics that layered complex binding over skin. And grace – hot and electric – smashes through and the warding shatters, crumbling from white walls like slag.

The body sags, poison and death like black sludge dripping tar-thick through messy veins, but the figure catches itself stiffly. Blood is slick on the floor, slick on his side, bent feathers flicker in and out of existence in syrupy pools, and the figure wants to think of one brother but instead thinks of another ripped apart in the bright vault of a Texan sky.

Pain is felt in a detached way, cordoned and sealed off in another part of the mind, twisted up and pinched off. His hand curls around the wooden shaft of a heaven-made weapon, and the carved language of angels light up along the wood. Blue light leaks from bloody hands, and the wood incinerates into ash and splinters, and a gruff English voice reminds one half of the man that the magic’s in the craftsmanship. The silver tip remains buried in sheets of ship metal, worthless now – magic is wholistic, works with the sum and not the parts.

The corruption is smothered down at once, burned off like alcohol over heat. Blood seeps and drips between feathers in time with the pulsing of his heart, but it’s cold fury that takes precedence. It’s a disrespect that needs to be righted.

The door with the crumbling warding sigils blocks the way, but with a twitch of fingers, it’s torn off hinges. Blood drips behind him as he steps over the bent threshold.

Heart beats and ragged breaths are loud and sonorous further up a brightly lit passageway, and he takes one step, and he’s there, wing screaming but pain manageable. Sealed, twisted, and pinched off.

The personage of War, the never-ending crusade wrapped in borrowed flesh, faces his approach with wide-set shoulders and no fear. And half of him remembers a vivid red slick of a Mustang, and another half remembers the riots that burned Constantinople.

And the Horseman says in Enochian: *Tougher than you look.*

And he replies in the same tongue: *You were careless.*

Horsemen are distasteful beings – chained to their maxims and restricted by their inflexible natures.
He raises a hand to disintegrate the current incarnation of Bellum, but the twisting gold presence in his center holds him back. Something reminds him that he needs something from War – something to wage a greater battle.

Someone calls him by a name that a part of him recognizes, and he meets liquid multi-colored eyes for a moment before returning his attention to War.

*You know what I’m here for.*

*You’re naming terms before the battle has even started? I thought you knew better, General.*

A part of him bristles. *Don’t call me that.*

*I know you. I know all soldiers, I know all Commanders. I know all the boots on the ground and the grunts in the trenches. You can call yourself by any name, but you follow along my path. You always have.*

Another presence he’s discounted as part of the background, flickering grace wrapped in a tan coat, pushes forward a step closer. He repeats the name that the other man has said, and irritation at interruption flashes through him, vivid as lightning. The seraph repeats the name, and now he’s forced to tear his eyes from War, brings the full weight of snapping blue eyes on the creature that he knows he could snap out of existence with a twitch of fingers, at the same time he knows he never could.

Something twists in his chest – as painful as the wound ripped through the gossamer imprint of his wing.

The seraph’s expression changes, and a new name drops like poison into the air. The name of a General.

A boiling rage whites out his mind, and he doesn’t know from which competing piece of him it comes from. *Do not call me that,* he snaps out with words and power, and a wicked slash of white light erupts from his hand – smashing the seraph from where he stands, and the being collides against the wall before collapsing into motionless heap.

The action rips holes in the balance of the room, and War stirs the small number of their army into a lather. It’s insulting. His finger twitches at his side, and the dozen or so bright points collapse where they stand. He stops just short of obliteration, and he’s not sure why.

War doesn’t twitch as their army crashes to the floor en masse. And his anger boils out him, fills the room with smothering pressure, and the man with liquid eyes drops to his knees, and something in him says stop.

But he’s eons wrapped in decades, and he’s fought greater battles than War itself, and the ire that he feels, the blatant disrespect, is overwhelming.

He raises a blistering hand, and arcing white light snaps out, smashing into War. They raise their arms up defensively, slicing through most of the damage. He follows up with another concussive blast. This time, War can’t diffuse most of the energy, and they’re driven painfully to their knees.

A one-man army is still just a man. He informs the entity, and War pulls themselves to their feet. Spits out a mouthful of blood, and their smile is bloody and charged. His hand glows with holy light, and it burns his fingertips as he expels it. War tries to deflect it off course, but it slices their right arm through, blowing away the sleeve and leaving their arm bloody. The force of it spins War around, and their knees hit the ground painfully – shoved down into a parody of prostration.
The ship cracks and groans around him, and War’s lips part, and he almost whites out with wrath. *You and your brother always thought you were so much greater than us.* War says, and he hears the slicing words over the din of the torrent. *But all any of you really were, were weapons pointed in the wrong direction.*

War looks away from him, focuses on the scrap a man kneeling on the ground. Enochian slips off their tongue, replaced with something else as they address the man that’s past the point of hearing:

“Isn’t that right, Sam?”

*Sam.* And somehow, it was always going to be *that* name, and not the *other,* that was going to break through. It’s *Sam* that causes him to lower his shot glass to the splintered expanse of the bar, *Sam* that finally clicks the right version of himself into place.

It’s his brother that finally loses the fight with consciousness, but it’s Dean that throws open the door to Rocky’s Bar and walks out.

“Fuck.” Dean hisses, feeling like a hundred pounds of dog shit wrapped up in a thin napkin. His back – no, not his back – feels like it’s on fuckin’ fire. And he remembers so much, and nothing at all, but he knows that he’ll take the fire over the alternative 11 times out of 10.

He takes in the room for the first time, but it’s like visiting a place that you’ve seen in pictures. Being somewhere for the first time, but knowing where everything and everyone is.

There’s angry banging in his head, fists against a metal cage, and Dean flinches back a step.

*Shit,* and he remembers… Cas. Remembers smashing him away in anger, remembers white hot rage like it didn’t even belong to him, but remembers it all the same. And Sam, he glances around, sees his brother slumped to the ground – but he can hear a steady pulse, can see a chest rise and fall.

Helen coughs, and Dean refocuses on her. She – War – spits out a mouthful of blood on the slick deck floor.

“It’s over.” Dean says, and his voice feels foreign in his throat.

War studies him for a moment, before using her uninjured arm to push herself up to her feet. Dean feels something twitch in his back, feels phantom appendages stretch – and it fucking *hurts* – but he feels the scrape of incorporeal feathers scratch the sides of the passageway, yards apart. War glances over his right shoulder like she can see the wounded pinion – and maybe she can.

“Winchesters.” She says, and spits out another bloody wad. And then – to Dean’s surprise, her uninjured hand raises to her neck, and she snaps the chain of the dog tags. Her hand clenches around her ring and the tags. “I know a losing battle when I see one.” She says, and then switches to a new language – one that Dean doesn’t hear spoken in the air, but hears in his mind, *And I know sometimes it’s better to lose the battle to fight another day. But whatever plan you have, whatever path my sister has laid out for you – it’s not going to be easy. Pestilence and Famine – they’ve never been given to strategy. They’re more single-minded than I am, they don’t know when it’s time to cut their losses. They’ll fight you until they have nothing left.*

Dean doesn’t reply, doesn’t know how to respond, and War finally lets the metal slide from her fingers. The ring bounces once on the slick ground, but catches in the chain of the dog tags.

“Pity about the lance.” War says, and when Dean looks back from the ring, Captain Augustus Call, Petty Officer Helen Troy, War – whoever – is gone.
His step is heavy as he takes the few steps towards his brother, and the flickering pain at his back is worse now that he has the breathing room to concentrate on it. But Sam is already stirring as Dean bends over him. Dean’s palm is feather-light on Sam’s shoulder – and he doesn’t feel any major injuries, but he taps a finger against his brother’s forehead and heals the sprain in his ankle.

Sam’s forehead crinkles almost in annoyance, and he blinks open bleary eyes.

Sam wakes to green eyes, and has to immediately clamp his eyes shut in the bright florescent lighting.

“Sammy? You okay?” His brother – and that is his brother – asks, and Sam almost sags back to the floor in relief.

“Dean?” He tries, mouth full of cotton balls, and decides to give the business of opening his eyes another go. He scrubs a hand down his face, and opens his eyes. He’s lying on the floor, his brother standing over him. He blinks a few times, and remembers the iron tang of blood and the groan of twisting metal. He pulls himself into a sitting position, and his brother backs up a step to give him room.

War is gone, not even a body to show she’d ever been there – and Sam looks around, sees the fallen bodies of her army, and thinks maybe that’s not exactly true. But he’s alive, Dean’s… Dean, and Cas is already stirring from where he was thrown against the passageway wall.

The ship rocks slightly, teasing nausea out of Sam’s stomach, and he notices the glint of something in the empty patch of floor where War knelt.

“What happened?” Sam asks, but Dean’s already closing down.

“I got stuck like a pig, what do you think happened?” His brother snipes. Dean takes another step back, and Sam is surprised to see syrupy blood drip somewhere behind Dean. His brain tries to piece together some theory, but there’s something that won’t click together. “Let’s check on Cas.” Dean mutters, and turns around.

“Wait – Dean,” Sam says, and his hand drops on Dean’s shoulder to spin him around – Dean’s not getting off the hook that easy, not when he blasted away warding and armies and War, not when he looked at Sam like he didn’t know him, when he knocked aside Cas like he was an irritant. Not when there’s something going on that Dean is not telling him about, after all the promises that he’d made to be forthcoming, and that’s pardon-his-fuckin’-French horseshit, and Sam –

But Sam’s hand clamps down on Dean’s right shoulder, and Dean jerks like he’s been shot, and there’s a flash of blue in his eyes, and then Sam’s holding a hand in empty air. He blinks, palm extended, and he hears the sound of air sucked in bruised lungs, and Dean is… gone, but he’s not, because he’s three yards to the right – gone in a blink.
And Dean’s arm is still holding himself around his chest, but loosely. And there’s pain tight in his jaw if you know what to look for, and Sam always knows what to look for. Blue light crackles in Dean’s eyes, and the lights that line the walls flicker at his back. And for a single second, Sam’s vision slides away like he’s looking at one of those magic picture books he used to check out at the library as a kid – the ones where you cross your eyes and instead of squiggly patterns, you see elephants and hot air balloons and shapes all pushed into the page.

Because Sam blinks at his brother, and sees what’s carved into the air behind him. For one sick second, he sees not just his brother, but the substantial weight of dark wings, feathers the length of his forearm spread across a wingspan 15 feet wide. But before the mirage disappears, Sam sees the bent feathers, the dripping blood, the white gleam of bone through an oozing hole in Dean’s right… wing. And then the lights flicker back to full power, and the visage is gone. Sam is left staring at a blank patch of nothing over Dean’s shoulder, even as blood continues to drip from the wound, like its materializing out of thin air.

_I got stuck like a pig, what do you think happened?_

Dean gives Sam a distant look, and then turns towards Cas. Cas appears to still be recovering from the affects of the warding and his painful collision with the wall. Something like guilt flickers over Dean’s face for a moment, before locked down behind steel.

“Grab the tags, Sammy.” Dean says roughly, and bends over to gently lift Cas’s weight to his left – uninjured – side. Dean hesitates a moment, before grabbing Cas’ arm and slinging it over his own shoulder. He grits his teeth through the pain, and Sam quickly bends to scoop up the dog tags and War’s bloody ring. He snags his and Cas’ angel blades and tucks them into his jacket as Dean waits.

“Are you going to be able to… get us out of here?” Sam asks, not sure what the Navy’s reaction is going to be when they arrive and find a ship full of corpses and incapacitated soldiers, and three bloodied additions.

Dean jerks his head in a short nod, “Took down most of the warding earlier.”

“That’s not what I meant, I – “

Dean gives him a pained look, a look that pleads for him to drop it. “Yeah, I know what you meant. I’m fine. Let’s get Sleeping Beauty here home.”

Sam takes an uncertain step forward. Blood drips on Cas’ arm, soaking deep into the trenchcoat. “Dean – “ he tries one more time, but his brother shakes his head, and takes a step forward.

Dean slaps his bloody right hand on Sam’s shoulder. And then there’s that awful tug of angel travel, and Sam hears a whistling in his head, like wind screaming off a snag in a slipstream.

And then he’s in Bunker, stumbling forward and catching himself on an armchair. His fingers sink into the plush material, and he feels the dog tags slip from his hand, plink against the ground.

“Sam?” A voice says, and Sam looks up, shocked, to see Mary come around the corner from the kitchen. She must have returned from the Nebraska hunt while they were away. There are dark bags under Mary’s eyes from traveling, and a coffee mug is clenched forgotten in her hands.

Sam is still fighting down the urge to vomit, and waves a hand to show proof of life.

Mary blinks her surprise, and then her eyes catch on something over Sam’s shoulder. “God – Dean?” She says, and something in her voice tears the carpet out from under Sam. He jerks his head around, and sees the careful blankness in his brother’s face before green eyes roll back and Dean collapses
hard and heavy to the floor.

Somewhere behind Sam, a coffee mug falls and shatters.

Chapter End Notes

I hate heavy chapters. I need more lighthearted brother moments. Sorry Dean! (Not that sorry.)

8.7k words in one chapter?? What tf is wrong with me recently.

Also the one Jack POV might be a little weird but I didn't want to take it out? That was originally the start of the chapter, and then I went back and added the "flash-forward," and it kind of made the Jack/Nick POV a weird insertion. Any thoughts - should I take it out?
Jessica alights in Death’s Reading Room, and is surprised to find her old friend reshelving books. Death’s fingers are dusty with papyrus powder and inky flakes, and she hefts a thin woven scroll in one hand, and a folded vellum packet in the other. She doesn’t glance at Jessica as she considers the two scraps of writing.

“What are you doing?” Jessica asks, forgetting for a moment that she’s here to report on business. She glances up the row, sees the shelving littered with an assortment of mediums: thick onyx-colored slates scratched with chalk, goat-skin parchment, and crumbling woodblock printing. She frowns at the chaos. That’s not like Death - not this Death anyway. The original incarnation was prone to all sorts of odd predilections. Jessica had never appreciated the disorder of his Library, and many reapers were relieved when the next incarnation had decided on a modern approach for her Reading Room.

Jessica steps over a Han Dynasty hanging scroll, puzzled. Death ignores her question, and finally decides on an order of the two destinies in her hands. She slides them between an expiry scrawled on a cocktail napkin and a prophecy on a Mayan codex folded like a concertina.

Jessica waits patiently for a moment. Then a little less patiently. A grumble of irritation fuels her boldness – “Are you thinking about your predecessor?”

Death frowns at the shelving in front of her, and Jessica now feels a small prickle of regret. Of course Death is in one of her low moods – the Winchesters had just retrieved one her brethren’s rings, and by now, the other two would know that she had betrayed them for humans. It wasn’t an easy burden to bear. And maybe slipping back into her predecessor’s horrible library management reminds Death of a time when her existence was a little more… simple. When she reaped and reshelved, reaped and reshelved.

Death taps a finger lightly against the wood, and the entire expanse of shelving shivers for a moment, before rippling outwards in a transformation back to the black-black-black of hundreds of billions of books. And with her fresh perspective, Jessica is now slightly sad to see it go.

“What’s the report?” Death asks, turning to her, flat black eyes brokering no further discussion.

Jessica feels her spine straighten. “It’s as you predicted. War relinquished her ring.”

Death nods, a white-tipped finger rubs at the ring on her own finger.

“What’s the rest know?” Jessica asks.

For a moment, she almost thinks Death won’t answer. But then she replies: “If War doesn’t inform them, they’ll feel the trace once the witch casts the tracking spell.”

Jessica opens her mouth to respond, but hesitates as she realizes what Death is implying. “You knew that they’d – “

“Know I’d stuck a shiny apple in their mouths and served them up to Dean Winchester? Of course. They’re not fools. They know how to read the signs. The wards they surround themselves with are more tightly-wound than ever. Not even the witch MacLeod would have been able to smash through
those defenses. No – “She adds, and notices the hanging scroll on the ground at Jessica’s feet. Jessica makes a move to collect it, but Death is already scooping it up and furling it into a tight roll. “Without my spell, the plan would never have worked. But it’s the only option.”

Jessica watches as Death slides the scroll onto the shelf, and it melts into a smooth black book spine. “Surely it wasn’t the only option.”

Death is silent for so long that Jessica almost thinks she’s been dismissed. But finally, she says, “Check the shelves for yourself. The moment Dean Winchester’s hands closed around that book, the rest of his futures disappeared.”

There’s a shivering pause. Jessica steps aside as Death moves past her, heading towards wherever she pleases. Hearing Death’s light footsteps disappear down the hall, Jessica looks down the long lines of shelves. Sees the countless, ever-shifting prophecies laid out like dominos that might never fall, or might take down the whole interlocked web in their tumble.

And she wonders if maybe she won’t one day find Billie’s book shoved in along the mix, an end set in motion after betraying the rest of the Horsemen. An annihilation bought after throwing her chips all in, betting on brothers that have faced as many losses as victories.

When Sam was 10, their dad started taking Dean on hunts.

And Sam was young, back then, and he didn’t know much. But he did know that someone that was too young to get behind the driver’s wheel of a car had no business hunting down the supernatural.

He remembers long nights sitting alone in motel rooms – the TV sometimes on, most times not. Waiting for his small family to return. And he’d always thought that the waiting was the worst part. He’d pace the motel room, drink fizzy orange sodas to stay awake, sometimes jumping jacks to get the heart pumping – so long as they were on the bottom motel floor. Once he’d completely shredded the index out of a school textbook, and when dad found out, he’d made him run laps in the motel parking lot until he’d puked.

And the waiting was awful – but it turned out, it wasn’t the hardest part.

He remembers the night that John had smashed the motel door in with the heel of his boot. A thin strip of wood shattered off the frame, and there was John – bundling in a white-faced, bloody 14-year-old Dean.

John dropped Dean on the nearest bed from two feet in the air, and Dean gasped in pain as he bounced on the hard springs. But John was already slamming the door shut on its broken frame, and digging bloody hands into an army-issued duffel for a first aid kit.

And it was a damn stupid mistake. Sam could picture the whole thing – though John described it in only a few short, scratchy sentences. They’d been hunting a Kitsune eating its way through the pituitary glands of a town in West Texas, and had tracked it to an abandoned cabin on the town’s outskirts. Finding the cabin door locked, John sent in his eager son through a shattered window to open the door from the inside. And it was sheer bad luck, and as Sam saw it – terrible, thoughtless, careless planning – because of course, the Kitsune knew they were coming, and of course, the Kitsune was waiting for them. Before Dean had so much as a solid foot on the ground, he was knocked down and found claws carving his side from thigh to chest, ripping apart clothing and skin along the way.
And to John’s credit – he had bashed in the door as surely as he had destroyed the motel door, and had a knife in that thing’s heart before Dean could so much as call his dad’s name.

And Dean was 14 – so big to Sam back then, but still just a kid – still growing into himself, trying to impress their father. Of course I’ll go on the hunt, of course I’ll be bait, of course I’ll go through the window, of course, of course, of course -

And the entire time that John stitched Dean’s torn side up, Sam held his brother’s hand, clenched the numb fingers so hard that he was probably hurting Dean, but he couldn’t loosen his grip. He’d learned the real circumstances of their mom’s death only two years before, and holding Dean’s hand in that cold motel room, listening to his pained breaths as John drove a needle under the skin stitch-after-stitch, all Sam could think was Please God, not him too, not him.

And Dean’s been hurt over the years – minor elbow bruises to catching angel blades between the ribs – but somehow the smell of Dean’s blood always pushes Sam’s head back under water. And he’s ten-years-old again, holding his big brother’s clammy hand, watching blood soak into motel sheets.

“Dean?” Sam breathes, knees hitting the cold Bunker floor hard enough to bruise. His brother’s face is smooth and painless in unconsciousness, but Sam’s jeans are already soaked through with blood pooling along Dean’s right side.

And Mary is right there on Dean’s other side, hands fluttering over her son’s chest, trying to find the source of the bleeding. “God – Sam, what happened?”

“I… he was stabbed.” Sam replies jerkily, and slides his fingers against Dean’s neck to check for a pulse. It’s strong and maybe a little fast, but Sam’s never been intimately acquainted with angel anatomy – has no idea what Dean’s new physiology looks like with an archangel riding shotgun.

Mary continues to pick at Dean’s clothing, trying to find a wound. “Stabbed with what? What could hurt Dean while he’s… like this?” Sam had updated Mary frequently on the changes that he’d noticed in Dean, the recent ease controlling his abilities. He didn’t mention his suspicions that the more the walls in Dean’s head crumbled, the better grasp he seemed to have over his new powers.

“An archangel lance.” He admits, and immediately wishes he could snatch back the words from the air.

Mary’s hands seize, knuckles white where they’ve curled into her son’s jacket. For a moment, Sam had forgotten that Mary was in the barn when Cas was stabbed with Michael’s lance – that she had to see the fallout and the pain as Cas was forcibly dragged towards the end.

“No – no, I mean – “ Sam backtracks quickly. “He was stabbed, but he must have destroyed the lance. Or it didn’t work the same as Michael’s.”

Mary doesn’t seem to find any relief in that, kneeling in the blood of her son. Her wide and fearful eyes don’t leave Dean’s face as the sounds of other hunters stumble loudly into the room. Sam ignores the new spectators, but Jack is right on their heels. He catches the Nephilim’s eye as he enters and jerks his chin at Cas. Jack nods, hurrying to check on the angel that had fallen to the floor after Dean’s collapse.

Jack places a hand on Cas’ shoulder, and the angel immediately stirs. His eyes open and wince, and he blindly wipes a groggy hand against his forehead. He’d cracked it against the ship wall after Dean smashed him away – but already, the wound is sealing. Cas seems surprised to find himself in the Bunker, and with Jack’s help – raises himself into a sitting position. His eyes fall to Dean and freeze.
Sam’s own attention returns to Dean, now that he sees Cas is no worse for wear. There’s movement behind the closed lids, slits of green rousing like the dawn, and Sam is distracted – not noticing that Cas has moved behind him until the angel lightly drops a hand to Sam’s shoulder.

Sam looks up, sees what Cas intends, and quickly stands. “Is he – ” He starts, but clamps his mouth shut. The angel crouches down by Dean and studies him for a moment, before raising two fingers to press them against Dean’s forehead. Dean’s brow creases at the contact, a twitch of discomfort and pain filtering through unconsciousness. Cas’ eyes fill with icy light, and his attention drifts to something over Dean’s shoulder.

Finally, he removes his hand, and the light dims from his eyes. Dean doesn’t stir.

“Can you do anything?” Sam asks, anxious.

But Cas doesn’t respond immediately, continues to study something over Dean’s shoulder. “The taint is nearly purged. Dean must have been able to destroy the lance. I suspect it was Gabriel’s weapon – only his has the ability to slice through this realm and damage Michael’s true form.”

Sam frowns. “Michael?”

Cas glances at Mary for a moment, perhaps remembering his own near-death experience at the bloody end of an archangel lance, before focusing his attention on Sam. “In a sense. Gabriel’s lance only harms what can’t manifest on the earthly plane. It’s ideal for targeting seraphic beings, such as cupids or reapers, but won’t harm earthly flesh. If you were to run yourself through with it, it would most likely just pass through without harm.”

“Oh…” Sam says, not sure he’s following, not sure how a destroyed weapon is relevant when it’s his brother – not Michael – bleeding out on the floor. “I saw – or… I think I saw, an injury to Dean’s… wing, back on the USS Wormwood.”

“Yes.” Cas confirms briefly. He holds his hand over Dean’s shoulder, and his fingers unfurl, giving off an eerie silver light. He slides his hand in the air, and Sam can see the outline of… something. Like white mist curling around something unseeable, revealing carved, shimmery lines without actual substance. Sam takes a step back, and the whole thing unfurls like a picture. Sam can see the outline of Dean’s injured appendage - matted, bloody feathers bent and ruffled near a seeping wound, the gleam of bone visible, a slowing stream of blood puddling on the floor. The wing cuts through Cas like an illusion, and Sam almost feels nauseous, seeing Cas and his brother’s wing occupy the same space. Cas closes his hand, and the silver light cuts off, and it’s just Dean again – Dean and a lot of blood.

“Let me help.” Jack says, and he kneels next to Mary, who looks at the Nephilim, confused.

“Jack, that’s not – ” Cas starts to stay, alarmed, but Jack’s filled to the brim with stubbornness and that single-minded, self-sacrificing behavior that’s killed off almost every person in the room at least once.

“Jack!” Sam snaps out, horror giving notice to his stomach, and he jerks over his brother’s body as Jack raises a hand, blue eyes soaked with gold –

But it’s a different hand that snatches Jack’s out of the air.

“Dean!” Mary exclaims, and Sam is shocked to see Dean’s hand curled around Jack’s forearm, halting the kid’s sacrificial gesture and startling the sunshine from his eyes.

Dean’s eyes are heavy with pain, but nothing cracks through the mask of his expression. “Thought I
told you not to try'n touch me when'm sleeping.” Dean slurs.

The pain in his eyes folds over itself, falling behind a wall of careful blankness. Sam watches as Dean grits his teeth and struggles to sit up like he’s hungry for it – like lying down is the real problem. Cas stretches out a hand, and Dean gratefully latches on to it. A flicker of pain flashes through his eyes for half a second – blink and you’ll miss it – when he stretches out his back muscles.

Mary wraps bloody fingers around her son’s upper arm. “Dean, maybe you should – “

“Jesus, you’re as bad as Sammy.” Dean says, slapping away the concern battering down on him with an edge of humor, but Sam catches his discomfort when he glances at the audience of hunters.

“Alright, guys, give us some space.” Sam says, not taking his eyes off his brother, but hears the reluctant shuffle of hunters leaving the room. Dean’s expression relaxes infinitesimally.

Once it’s only the Winchesters, Cas and Jack, Dean finally turns to Cas and asks, “What’s the verdict, Doc?”

Cas’ blinks heavy blue eyes. “You’ve sustained injuries to your – “

“Yeah, I got that part.” Dean says quickly, like he’s uncomfortable with the word – the one he won’t say. “I mean, why can’t I heal it?”

Cas purses his lips, looking oddly human in his struggle to answer Dean’s question in terms that they’d understand. Sam’s pretty sure that a decade ago, the angel would have just waved a hand ominously in the air and said “Angel business, move along.” Or something.

But Cas finally says, “It’s more difficult for angels to heal their true form than their vessel.”

Dean bristles, offended, but Cas immediately holds up a consoling hand to cut him off. “True form being a nebulous term here. The fact is that, even though you’ve locked him away - technically, Michael is still possessing you. His true form is still here, still able to take damage and receive injury. It’s the same reason you’re able to take advantage of his grace and abilities.”

Sam feels the corners of his mouth pull downward, a small shiver lick down his spine. He hadn’t thought about it like that in a while – but Cas is right. Despite of the cage in Dean’s mind, despite his new abilities and apparent invulnerability, he’s still possessed. And that’s a problem they still haven’t found a solution for.

Dean doesn’t seem surprised, and Sam supposes that there’s never been a single second that Dean has forgotten that he’s renting space to an archangel. “Angels can’t heal their true forms? That’s kinda horseshit. You can heal humans but you can’t heal yourselves?”

“Earthly flesh is significantly less complicated than an angel’s true form.”

Dean grimaces, looks over his shoulder at the puddle of blood seeping into the Bunker floor.

Sam finally intercedes, “So if you or Dean can’t heal his wing,” Dean makes an uncomfortable noise in the back of his throat, “then… what? Dean’s bleeding… bad. He passed out – I didn’t even know archangels could pass out.”

“I’m right here, man.” Dean protests, but Sam doesn’t take his eyes off Cas.

“Despite the complications of healing,” Cas explains, also ignoring Dean, “angels – especially
archangels – are hardier than humans.” Which is Cas-speak for no shit. “Dean only passed out because he flew thousands of miles with two passengers with a severe injury to his true form. He’ll recover quickly, provided he doesn’t strain himself.”

And Dean does seem… better. Now that’s he’s awake. There isn’t quite so much blood materializing out of thin air to stain the floor. He’s more alert, no lingering haze behind sharp eyes. Sure - he’s holding his right shoulder stiffly, but there’s none of that snap, crackle, pop that Sam’s come to expect when his brother is hurt. He still seems… like Dean.

Dean opens his mouth to say something, but flinches back like he’s been slapped.

“Michael?” Sam asks in an undertone, but everyone is close enough to hear anyway.

Dean opens his eyes and glares at him, and that’s answer enough.

Cas helps Dean to his room – insisting that the older Winchester rest for a few hours. Dean’s already champing at the bit to find the location of the next Horseman, but Sam and Cas managed to talk him off the ledge. If Dean’s ability to zap them across the country is temporarily down, then getting the location of the second Horseman only serves to give the entity a heads up that they’re on their way. And Sam still doesn’t know what exactly happened between War and his brother, but apparently, it’s bad enough that Dean doesn’t argue the point.

Sam tucks War’s ring into his back pocket, dog tags and all. His ankle doesn’t hurt, and he supposes that he has Dean to thank for that. A busted ankle would have been the cherry on the cake at this point. Already three hunters have come into the War Room – wanting to check in – but Sam has so much stacked on his plate that there’re already bullet points sliding off the queue. He sends them away with a promise of a later debrief.

Mary squeezes his shoulder as she leaves, “I’ll make the rounds. Fill you in later.” She says quietly. “But come find me later – we need to talk. Bobby thinks your hunting algorithm is giving false positives.”

Another to-do item thrown on the pile. “Thanks, mom.” Sam replies on autopilot. And then he’s alone in the War Room with Jack and a whole lot of blood.

“Are you okay?” Jack asks quietly, after Sam doesn’t move for a few long moments. Can’t do anything but stare down at the viscous mess his brother left behind. He swears that if he looks out of the corner of his eye, he can see dark feathery shapes, outlined in gold, floating in the muck.

“Sam?” Jack says, and finally Sam looks up.

“What? Yeah, I’m fine. We’re all fine. It’s…”

“Fine?” Jack finishes, but there’s no amusement or humor on his face.

“Fine.” Sam agrees. “I’m just gonna…” He gestures at the blood, already lining through cracks in the floor.

“I’ll do it, Sam. Don’t worry about it.”

A younger version of Sam would never have delegated, would have insisted on removing any evidence of Dean’s injury himself. It’s a habit traced back to old hunts, treating injuries in shitty motels, quick and bloody stitch jobs in the back of the Impala, cleaning blood out of bathroom sinks
to not alert the gas station attendant. Like removing evidence is as vital as treating the wounds. Sam stares down at the evidence of Dean’s hemorrhage. And it’s been years – shit, decades – but Sam can still hear the splintering of wood as John breaks down a door with the heel of his boot.

“Yeah. Yeah, okay. Thanks, Jack.” Sam says after a long moment, and figures that maybe now – maybe here, it’s okay to share some of the burdens and responsibilities. He’s conscious of War’s ring in his back pocket like it’s burning a hole through his skin. One down, two to go – but Sam’s sure the worst is still ahead of them.

Nick watches the commotion from the sidelines, interest dark in his gaze as he watches Dean Winchester bleed out on the floor. His own scar itches something terrible as he sinks into his own memory. Six inches of divine steel splitting flesh, burning him from the inside.

Fascinating, really. How even archangels bleed with the right weapon, the right pressure.

He slips away with the crowd when Sam finally kicks the hunters out. Never room for others when there’s a Winchester life at stake. And that’s just how the world has always been. He picks a hallway at random, lets his thoughts wrap him up in their buzz.

His earlier chat with Jack had been illuminating, but he hadn’t gotten what he needed out of it. Maybe the kid just didn’t know what kind of gold mine they were sitting on. What could be powered up with all that sparkly go-go juice.

“Nick?”

He turns, and it’s Dani – the girl kid wonder. She’s still in traveling clothes, must have just rolled in from a hunt. She’s holding a tray with a slapdash meal on it, nothing especially appetizing. The Apocalypse Universe hunter is giving him a weird look, and Nick remembers to slap on some kind of expression onto his face. Harder to remember that, these days.

“ Heard you were back.” She says, takes a step forward. It’s obvious from her expression that she’s heard more than just that.

“What’s that for?” Nick asks, changing the subject. Dani’s eyes drop to the tray.

“Best guess? Eating, probably.”

God, he hates teenagers.

“I mean, why are you skulking around down here like an angsty teenager with a tray of food? Hiding from the rest of the class?”

Dani rolls her eyes. “Like I’d ever eat a tuna sandwich outside of gunpoint. It’s for Dom. I’m on dinner duty.”


Dani raises an eye brow, and shifts the weight of the tray to her other hand. “Don’t forget his disgusting insistence on tuna sandwiches.”

“And he gets said sandwiches delivered… why?”

Dani gives him a weird look, “On account of he’s sitting in a cell after turning Dean’s insides into
strawberry jam. With a hunting rifle.”

Surprise pushes Nick’s brows towards his hairline. “You’re giving me a serious cause of FOMO. I leave for a few weeks and miss all the fun.”

Dani frowns. “Not exactly how I’d put it.”

But Nick isn’t listening. His mind is whirling in ten different directions, sensing the loose outline of a plan starting to weave together. He realizes he’s been silent for a hair too long when Dani makes an attempt to step around him in the hallway. Impatient teenagers. Not like Dominic is gonna tip her for on-time delivery.

Nick takes a quick step to the side, heading her off. “I’ll take it off your hands.” He says, holding his hands out for the tray. “Gotta earn my allowance somehow.”

Dani hesitates, but he keeps that trust-these-baby-blues expression slathered on his face. Dani’s eyes flicker down the to tray, eyeing the steaming tuna with disgust. “Alright.” She says after a moment, and hands the tray off. She digs in her pocket and drops a heavy iron key on the tray. “That unlocks the little slidey door at the bottom.”

“Slidey door.”

“That’s what I said.” Dani remarks acidly. She slaps her hands against the sides of her thighs, and makes to leave, but pauses. “Just… don’t stick around. Sam doesn’t want anyone talking to him.”

Nick sends her off with a wink before turning down the empty hallway. “Ah, that’s too bad. I’m sure Dom and I have a lot to talk about.”

“I don’t get it.”

Bobby jabs a thick finger at the screen, irritated. “Your doohickey isn’t working.”

Sam isn’t in a joking mood, but even he has to swallow back a laugh as he and Mary make eye contact over the tablet.

They’re in the kitchen – Bobby made up some of his famous Bobby’s Brew. Which in an odd turn of events, is exactly like this universe’s Bobby’s Brew, but with the delicious addition of cinnamon. Sam takes a sip of the hot coffee, burning his lips as he continues to scroll through the search parameters he’d set up months ago.

“What makes you think you’re getting false positives?”

Bobby curses like an eloquent sailor, and jerks the doohickey out of Sam’s hands. “’cause I’m sure as shit positive that there isn’t a – “ he squints at the screen, “a vampire-dragon-shifter-werewolf-shtriga running around upstate New York.”

“I don’t know, Bobby – have you ever been to upstate New York?” Mary says lightly, trying to ease the tension from the room. Bobby frosts her with a look, but seems to take her casual warning for what it is.

Sam holds a hand out for the tablet, which Bobby promptly drops into his hands. Sam frowns as he runs the search again. “Weird.” He says, when he gets the same results. He opens up the news articles that had triggered the hit on the system’s algorithm and scans the contents in silence for a few
minutes.

Bobby glances at the screen. “So, what are you thinkin’? Is it busted?”

Sam doesn’t look up for a moment, finishing the last lines of the article. He lowers the tablet down to the kitchen counter, his coffee forgotten. “I… the articles all back it up.”

Bobby snorts. “Yeah, genius, I read the articles, too. It’s called due diligence, something we had before your fancy apps and nespresso machines. But I’ll eat my hat if that turns out to be anything more than a vamp with a furry fetish.”

Sam’s face wrinkles. Sometimes, just because he has questions, doesn’t mean he wants the answers. “Whatever it is – it’s still a case. Of… some kind.” He admits, after Bobby leans back against the counter and rolls his eyes into a cup of Bobby’s Brew. “I’m gonna take this one.”

Mary is surprised. “What? You just got back from fighting a Horseman. Let someone else take the case.”

But Sam shakes his head, already calculating driving routes in his head. “No. I don’t want to pass this on to someone if we don’t know exactly what it is. Don’t want to lose a hunter because of bad intel.” Sam had prided himself on assigning cases based on his hunters’ specific strengths and hunting specialties. Sending a hunter like Jeremy – who mainly took the shifter cases – could end badly if he ends up finding a Tulpa at the end of the body trail.

“Okay, I’ll come too.” Mary says.

And Sam appreciates it, he does. But he shakes his head. “You just got back from Nebraska. And Dani already told me you got winged in the side.” Mary’s expression doesn’t change, but she loosens the stiff way she held her arm against her ribs. “Just keep an eye on Dean for me. I’ll… take Jack. It’s good practice for the kid. He needs to get out there more.”

And it says a lot about Mary’s trust in her sons’ abilities that she agrees easily enough. “Alright. But you’re the one telling Dean.”

Sam knocks on his brother’ door, but there’s no response. He tries again, louder – knowing that Dean isn’t asleep, but when he doesn’t hear anything, he pushes the door open. Dean doesn’t look up immediately when he walks in.

Sam’s brother is sitting stiffly on the edge of his bed. He’s changed into a new shirt, scrubbed the blood off his face, but there’s still a dried streak of it under his jaw. Sam can see a few fresh slices of blood on his brother’s sheets, blood dripping from an injury that they can’t exactly slap a Band-Aid on. Dean looks up, expression hunted.

“What’s wrong?”

“What?” Dean asks, a little hoarsely.

“I knocked.”

“Oh.” Dean says, a little uncomfortably. “I didn’t realize that was out here.”

Sam frowns, confused, before he realizes what Dean is saying. Some of his fear must have bloomed on his face, because Dean’s expression is already sealing off like a finger running along a ziplock.
Sam takes a couple steps into the room, and pauses just a few feet from his brother.

“How’s… Rocky’s?”

Dean meets his eyes without hesitation. “Not gonna win any awards anytime soon. But it’s holding its own.”

“Good. That’s… good.”

“I’m good, you’re good, we’re all good.” Dean agrees. “War’s ring all squared away? Where is it?”

Sam opens his mouth, and hesitates for an awkward moment. “Safe.”

Dean huffs out a laugh, but his gaze is cool. “Don’t trust me, Sammy?”

And honestly, Sam doesn’t have an answer for that. It’s like there’s a sandstone bridge stretched out between the two of them, and if either of them scratches too hard, the whole thing will collapse. They made a deal – Dean doesn’t sacrifice himself into Lucifer’s Cage, won’t dive off the springboard into the deep end, until they remove Michael. And Dean keeps his promises. Most of them. But it’s the times he doesn’t that are rolling around in Sam’s head. “What’s the big deal, Dean?” Sam finally says, the breath of a challenge without the substance.

“No big deal here. Just a big – “

“Okay!” Sam leaps in. He ignores his brother’s shit-eating grin, and joins Dean at the edge of his bed.

Dean opens his mouth, but stops when he sees that Sam’s changed into new clothes. “Going somewhere?” He asks instead.

“Uh, yeah, that’s what I stopped in to tell you about. Caught a case.” Better to be vague on the details. Anything exciting – like a vampire-dragon hybrid – and Dean’ll be champing at the bit to tag along. “Vampire, I think. New York. I’m gonna take Jack.”

Dean thinks about that for a moment. “Vampire, huh? Driving 19 hours to give a vamp a Colombian necktie?”

“We’ve driven more for less.”

And Dean actually laughs out loud. “Hey – it’s not my fault that we were finishing up a job in freakin’ Florida when that diner in Idaho claimed to have the world’s best huckleberry pie. The world’s best. World’s a big place, Sammy. That’s a bold claim.”

“You didn’t even like it.” Sam protests lightly, falling into the rhythm.

Dean scoffs. “Yeah, but fuck my perky ass if I was gonna let a claim like that go by unchallenged. Alright – whatever. Go eat your pie in Maine.”

“Vampire. New York.”

“I’ve heard it both ways. But hey – “ And Dean catches the edge of Sam’s jacket as he stands from the bed. And all the humor’s been wiped from Dean’s face. “Call me if you need me. I mean it.”

“Sure.” Sam says easily enough, knowing there’s a snowball’s chance in hell he’s gonna call his brother to wing over on an injured… well, wing, just because he’s not sure if it’s silver blades or consecrated iron that he’ll need to stop the killings in Rochester. “Call you from the road.”
Dean flinches, suddenly, and rubs the heel of his hand against his temple. His eyes screw up for a second, before he blinks back at Sam. “Say again?”

Sam feels his stomach sink. “Said I’ll call from the road.”

“Yeah. Do that.” Dean says, and is already turning his focus back inwards, like Sam isn’t still standing there. Sam hovers in the door for a moment, hesitating. Maybe Dean should come on the hunt, where he can keep an eye on him. Maybe he shouldn’t be leaving for a hunt at all.

But he has to, and he will.

And Sam shuts the door to his brother’s room, leaving Dean and Michael to themselves.

Chapter End Notes

Okay - I'm sorry this took me almost a week to push out. And that it was a little boring. Basically - and I'm sure any fic writers reading this will commiserate - my outline got a little effed. I had a hunt lined up after the first Horseman, but it was a little too similar to the aftermath of the fight with War, so I scrapped it. Which meant I had to come up with a whole new hunt - and I'm still banging out the details, but I think it'll be fun. It was something plugging away in the back of mind - something from the beginning of s14 that never got addressed again.

Anyway - so, on a serious note: I try to kind of keep the levels of hurt/injuries to something consistent with the show, but I know I miss the mark sometimes. I'm fairly new to writing fic, and I'm really bad at figuring out tags, so if there's anything injury-wise, language-wise, or literally ANYTHING that anyone would like me to start tagging at the beginning of chapters, I'm MORE than happy to do it. Just leave me a note in the comments, or message me on or off anon over on tumblr @trevelies.

You guys are awesome <3 Holy shit almost 3500 hits. And I'm only bribing half of you.
Chapter 24

When Jack sucks in a shocked breath, Sam almost expects to see a ghost in the back seat, a sudden life-or-death injury. Maybe even a rogue clown waving a grisly white-gloved hand out of the rearview mirror – who is he to tempt fate?

But he jerks his head to Jack, and Jack is glaring at him.

“Jesus – what?” Sam demands, stomping the brakes and coming to a complete stop in the middle of the gas station, blocking a minivan from its return to the highway.

Jack is looking at Sam like Sam’s been replaced with a body double. “You didn’t signal when turning into the parking lot.” Jack accuses, and points at the turn signal lever, as if Sam had never seen one before.

“What are you talking about?” Sam finally waves a hand in apology at the minivan, and pulls forward to line the Impala up next to a gas pump.

“I mean – Dean told me that forgetting to use a turn signal in the Impala is a three-strikes-rule.”

Sam cuts the engine, turns to the Nephilim that’s still squinting at him with suspicion. Sam isn’t sure if he should smack a serious expression on his face, or if it’s fine to continue with barely-contained-amusement. “Three strikes… with the third strike being…”

“Death – ”

“Death, of course, death – ”

“Because Dean says that anyone that isn’t willing to respect the rules of the road, shouldn’t have the privilege of driving the Impala, and – ”

“You know, I think that Dean would forgive me for turning into a parking lot when there’s not a single car behind or in front of us.”

But Jack just shakes his head, an it’s your funeral expression splotched on his face. Sam huffs out a laugh and jerks open the car door, stuffing a handful of bills in his jacket pocket.

He heads into the station, throws a couple of bucks at pump 6, and by the time his feet have hit tarmac, Jack’s already filling the tank up. Sam hides a smile as he crosses the parking lot, and Jack looks up from where he was fiddling with Impala’s side mirror.

Jack’s apparently willing to forgive Sam’s gross lapse in turn signal etiquette. He squints against the sun at Sam before asking earnestly: “Can you tell me about the hunt now?”

Sam makes sure that the gas nozzle is firmly slotted in the fuel filler neck before reaching through the window to grab his tablet from the back seat. Jack comes over to lean against the side of the Impala with him as Sam starts sliding through the report his program had generated.

“It’s gonna be a weird one.” Sam admits, and passes the tablet over to Jack. “Guess we’ll see how much of Bobby Hunting 101 you’ve picked up.”
Jack frowns at the screen, flipping through a few news articles. “I don’t understand. I thought you said we were hunting a vampire… but… some of the victims had their hearts missing. Isn’t that a sign of a werewolf?”

Sam taps a finger on the screen, opening up one of the digitized coroner’s reports. A young woman is laid out on a cold metal table, a sheet pulled modestly over her body. Her face is blurred – her arm being the real focus of the shot.

Jack zooms in closer, focusing in on a burned handprint on the woman’s forearm. “Is that – “

“Honestly – not sure what to make of that one. Last time we saw something like that, we were hunting a dragon that was dragging virgins into the sewers.”

The woman pumping gas at the pump to their right gives Sam a weird look.

“Dragons in New York?” Jack asks, oblivious.

“Uh, yeah, probably not.” Sam says, lowering his voice. The gas nozzle pops, and he quickly slides it back into the pump. “Here – talk on the way.” The woman continues watching them strangely as they pull closed screeching doors and Sam fires up the engine.

“A shtriga.” Jack reads, once they’ve put a few miles between them and the gas station. “They’re pretty rare, according to Bobby. Have you ever fought one?”

Those memories are all sorts of fuzzy – he remembers best the one that he and Dean fought in Wisconsin just a few months after Dean picked him up in Stanford. He doesn’t remember much about the one that attacked him when he was a kid – only remembers that Dean clams up and doesn’t like to talk about it if he ever brings it up. And then there’s the more recent one that he fought – the one that still feels like a trip – the shtriga he and his grandfather Samuel took down when Sam was still walking and talking sans soul. He doesn’t remember much. Killing it dead while it fed on Samuel, vague impressions of the shtriga going after him and not finding much to feed on. God – all the warning signs of something not right, and he never –

“Sam?”

Sam jerks back to the present, finds that he’s drifted over into the shoulder a bit. He jerks the Impala a little roughly back between the bright painted lines, and ignores the apprehensive look that Jack throws at him.

“You okay?”

“Yeah – yeah. Fought a couple a few years ago, but you’re right. They’re rare.” Sam answers, maybe a few minutes too late.

“So what could do all of this?” Jack asks, continuing to swipe through crime scene pictures.

“Guess that’s what we’re gonna find out.” Sam replies. He flicks the windshield wipers on as rain begins to splatter the windshield. A flash of headlights cuts across his eyes – bouncing back from the rearview mirror, and Sam frowns. He adjusts the mirror – seeing a beat-up Saturn a few dozen yards behind them. Assholes have their high beams on, and it’s barely 6 pm. Like they’ve never driven a car before. Mirror adjusted, Sam turns his attention back to Jack. “I guess it wouldn’t be the weirdest thing we’ve ever seen – but monsters are pretty territorial. Don’t find a lot of them all clustered in one city or town like that. More monsters equals more bodies equals more hunters.” He flips his signal on to swing into the slow lane to let the Saturn pass, but the Saturn maintains course.
“There has to be something tying these all together.” Jack says, mostly to himself. He’s come to the end of the articles and reports. Sam watches out of the corner of his eye as Jack taps his fingers against his thigh, frustrated. Then he refreshes the pages and starts fresh.

Sam can’t help but smile as he turns his eyes back to the road.

“What?” Jack asks, catching the grin.

Sam glances back at the kid for a second, before back at the darkening road. “Nothing. Just… you’re gonna be a great hunter, Jack. Not everyone has that drive. Motivation. You got it in spades.”

“Oh.” Jack says, turning his gaze back down to the screen. And Sam can’t see his expression, but the kid is almost radiating gratefulness and appreciation. And Sam has to wonder if all the shit that Lucifer brought into this world – if one day Jack won’t wipe it all clean.

An hour passes in silence. Jack continues to reread and reexamine the images and articles on the screen, and Sam checks his phone every few minutes to see if there are any updates from home. Mary texted him once saying that Dean hadn’t come out of his room, but she’s checked on him and he wasn’t unconscious in a pile of blood. Chalk that up for bottom-of-the-barrel Winchester good news.

“Huh.” Jack grunts finally, and Sam turns to look at his screen-bright face in the dark.

“Huh? You found something?” Sam asks. And not to discount the kid’s abilities – but Sam’s pretty sure that if he and Bobby hadn’t found anything tying all the cases together, then Jack probably hasn’t either.

“Maybe.” Jack says after a moment. “Let me… let me look again.”

“Maybe you should take a break.” Sam suggests. “It’s getting late. I say we crash a few hours at the nearest hotel. We’re not making it there in one drive.”

“Okay.” Jack agrees easily enough. He frowns at the screen for a moment, and then takes Sam’s advice and powers the tablet off. He returns it to the case in the back seat, and then turns somber eyes on Sam. “But if you crash the car into the hotel, Dean is gonna be mad.”

“That’s not – “

“That was a joke, Sam.”

The Saturn waits a few minutes before swinging into the lot, pausing long enough for two figures to disappear into a bottom-floor motel room.

The car cuts off with a groan, the clicking sound of an engine cooling in the brisk night air. The 44-year-old mother of three in the passenger seat exchanges glances with the 12-year-old behind the wheel - then nods.

The driver searches their pockets and comes up empty. “You do it.” They grunt, and the passenger rolls their eyes.

“You gotta shop around next time.” She says, and flips open the clutch that she’d shoved down in the footwell. She upturns the whole bag on the middle console and picks through the contents. Slightly disgusted, she fishes out a phone stuck in a cherry-red case proclaiming one of her kids is an
honor roll student at some high school or another.

She taps out a long string of numbers and the phone dials. “You talk.” She instructs the kid. “I hate talking to him.”

The preteen glares and jerks the phone from the woman’s manicured hand. “Fuck you.”

The ringing stops as someone connects the call, but only silence radiates down the line.

“The big one is on his way.” The driver says after a moment, figuring that was their cue to report. “He has the kid with him. Guess big brother didn’t think the signs were enough to warrant his personal attention.”

There’s a long length of silence, and the Saturn duo exchange glances. The passenger shrugs her thin shoulders, but doesn’t join the conversation. A thin line of blood suddenly drips down from her nose and coats her upper lip. She wipes it away with an irritated hand and smears it against her expensive shirt.

The driver is less patient. “What do you want us to do?”

A thin voice on the other line finally replies: “Return.”

“What about the other one?”

The passenger punches the driver viciously on the arm.

“Where you have one Winchester, the other isn’t far behind.” The voice says, and both the driver and the passenger blink at each other – it’s the most they’ve heard him say in one sentence.

The line goes dead a second later. The preteen drops the phone into the cup holder.

“Think he’s mad?”

The passenger picks distastefully at the slacks she’s wearing. “He’s always mad. Let’s just be happy he’s not mad at us.”

“Whatever.”

“Don’t be such a fucking child.”

The preteen’s dark eyes flicker with a trace of amusement, glancing down at themselves. The mother rolls her eyes. “You know what I mean. Let’s go.”

“You’re driving next time. Fucking feet don’t reach the pedals.”

“Don’t grab a child next time.”

Randy – the motel attendant – watches the two plumes of black smoke explode from the driver and passenger side of the parked Saturn. Glass shatters to the pavement as the oddly-shaped columns of combustion and soot streak off into the night sky.

He doesn’t move for a solid ten seconds, continues to watch the car to see if it’s going to explode in the parking lot, leaving him to the troublesome task of calling 911. But the car doesn’t explode. Or implode. Randy can’t remember the difference.
The pimpled motel clerk squints at the license plate, and checks it against the roster hand-written by the computer. The plates don’t match any of the vehicles registered to the motel guests.

Which means… not his problem.

Randy goes back to sneaking sips of Jack from the bottle under the desk and playing his losing game of solitaire.

There’s a brisk knock at Dean’s door. Dean’s not surprised. He heard the footsteps approaching from the other side of the Bunker.

“Yeah.” He grunts.

He knew it was Cas before the door opened – no one else walks so fastidiously. The angel looks around the room as he enters, almost suspicious in his perusal.

Dean’s sitting on his bed, his head leaning back against the wall. His arms are crossed tightly across his chest – he’s still suffering from the spiderwebbed pulse of pain from the injury to his wing. He watches Cas’ inspection from under hooded lids. “Looking for the surprise party?”

“It smells in here.” The angel says abruptly, and when he turns blue eyes onto Dean, there’s no offense intended.

Dean shrugs – regrets it when the small movement pulls at his back. “Smells like molecules to me.”

And take-a-picture-it’ll-last-longer, Cas actually smiles. “Yes.” He agrees, like they’ve shared a private joke. He takes a few steps further into the room.

“What’s up, man?” Dean finally asks, when Cas’ gaze seems to get stuck for an exceptionally long time on a pile of dirty laundry on the floor. “Sam or Mom ask you to check up on me? I’ve got cash to burn – I’ll put down some action on Sam.”

The angel frowns. “Actually, I’m here to see if you wanted to run an errand with me.”

Dean frowns right back. “We talking smokes or milk?”

“What?”

Dean swallows back his grin and uncrosses his arms. He’d been in a funk since Sam left – he knows that. When he’s alone, he doesn’t need to put up a front, and it’s all just Me, Myself and Michael. Sometimes it just feels better when there’s someone to perform for. Reprise the role of Dean Winchester for the masses.

“Nothing.” Dean finally replies, once Cas starts to get that classic squinty look on his face. “Where you headed?”

Cas seems to pick up on Dean’s lack of enthusiasm and subtle-not-subtle use of the word you, but replies, “Jody’s. She dug through more of Bobby’s archives in her basement. She believes she’s found a few that look promising.”

Dean lets that hang in the air for a moment, before sighing and admitting, “Come on, Cas. I know Sam’s all gung-ho about this – but you and I both know that there’s nothing in Bobby’s old grocery lists and phone books. If there’s an answer to popping Michael out like the psycho jack-in-the-box he
The Incans did not have a written form of language."

"Fuckin’ nerd." Dean gibes easily, but he can see that he missed the mark with his earlier comment. Cas might not have as much faith in finding a lead in Bobby’s library as his brother, but Cas seems set to spend all his free time digging through the lore. And that’s… pointless. But who is Dean to take away the angel’s Reading Rainbow hour. “So, driving to Jody’s?” He adds, hoping that Cas won’t address Dean’s pessimism.

Cas studies him seriously for a moment, but lets Dean’s cynical comment slip by without challenge. “Yes.”

And maybe now Dean feels a little bad for blowing off his best friend, and says awkwardly, “I’d go for you, if I could. You know – click my heels together, vamoosh, but…” And he gestures behind him at the wall, as if Cas can see the injured appendage. Fuck – maybe he can.

“I know you would.” Cas grates, “But it’s not safe. I’m fine to drive.”

Dean nods, but the angel still hesitates at the end of his bed. “Do you… miss it?”

Cas blinks at him, confusion slightly wiping some of the concerned lines off his face. “You know…” Dean trails off. “Flying. Teleporting. You used to zap all over the world – quick trips to Jerusalem, picking up supplies, rescuing my pretty ass on the daily. Do you miss it?”

Cas doesn’t answer for a few minutes, but seems to turn the question over thoughtfully in his head. Maybe sensing the deeper questions lodged inside Dean like a plug in the drain. The question of how someone could ever give it all up – let go of all that power. He knows his own fade-to-black will happen at the bottom of a portal to Lucifer’s Cage – but what if? What if they were able to yank the archangel out at the root? It’s almost not worth thinking about – his chest gets that weird wobble of hope and faith. And they’re past the time where that matters.

Finally Cas replies: “I… do miss it. There is a certain convenience. And I miss flight as much as I regret losing the instantaneous nature of travel.” Cas takes a seat on the edge of the bed, tan trenchcoat scrunching at his waist. “There’s a certain… altitude may be the wrong word for it. There’s a certain length of sky – where you’re up in the mesosphere, and… everything just looks like it once did. Back when it was all new. Not exactly, of course, the landmasses have moved. There’s the brilliance of cities lighting up the earth, but it feels far away from one’s problems.”

Dean’s throat feels dry. He can picture it exactly – but going back even further. A time when China’s great wall was just a scattered collection of fortresses, and the Persian War was ripping apart the Ionian Coast.

Cas seems caught in his own thoughts, doesn’t seem to notice Dean getting lost in memories that aren’t his. After a moment, Cas turns his attention more carefully on Dean and says, “But it’s been a few years for me, now. I’ve grown used to it. And I enjoy driving. It’s calming.”

Dean grimaces, and there’s an odd bubble of irritation and anger that threatens to pop in his chest. “That’s horseshit.”

Cas is visibly taken aback, but doesn’t seem offended, which only makes Dean angrier.

“You’re not used to it. You and the rest of the angels fell just a few years ago. What’s a few years versus… fuckin’… eons of time? That’s a goddamn blink of an eye, Castiel. Drop in the bucket for
angels. And you’re telling me that you – “

Dean jerks when Cas suddenly drops a hand on his foot – the closest part of Dean to the edge of the bed, and startles Dean into silence.

“Dean.”

Dean doesn’t answer, just glares. There’s still that sudden flash of molten anger sizzling in his core – borrowed, but put to use. Is Cas trying to make fun of him? As if Dean doesn’t get it now – like it hasn’t been made crystal-fucking-clear that he’s a scrap in the wind compared to that onslaught inside of him. He hasn’t been to Rocky’s since Gabriel’s lance burned a fuckin’ hole through his soul, and he doesn’t need to go back to know what a trip it really is in there. One lone flag of humanity against a globe mapping out Michael’s conquests. Dean feels the ebb of Michael’s memories like a downpour on the brink of swallowing him up – and it’s made him realize what a joke all of it is. Cas is his best friend – has been for years. And all those moments that have been… formative for Dean – a searing hand pulling him from hell, a cool finger on his forehead wiping aside nightmares, an encouraging clap on the back in Purgatory – what a fucking joke all of it really is. Dean’ll die, Sam will die. They’ll all die, and Castiel will be Castiel. And even if Sam’s able to stretch that out to decades, how could any of it chisel a place in all that time? How could they even expect to leave a dent in all that multitude of experiences?

Something grazes his arm, and he feels electricity ignite in his eyes like a lightning rod carrying off all that discharge. The angel with blue eyes says a name, and it takes him a long moment to realize that it’s his. The anger drains out of him – not as quick as it ignited, but it leaves all the same. He feels… less of himself as it goes.

Dean feels coolness in his veins as he relaxes and comes back. Castiel is still watching him. Dean’s almost too embarrassed to apologize, but his friend has never expected the impossible from him. And maybe that’s what finally lets him say: “Sorry, Castiel.”

The angel frowns at him, more curious than offended. “You don’t call me that.”

“What?”

“Castiel.”

And now it’s Dean’s turn to be more curious than offended. “That’s your name, ain’t it?”

“Yes.” Castiel answers seriously, as if Dean was actually verifying the angel’s Christian (ha.) name. “But that’s not what you call me.”

And now Dean’s blinking green eyes a decade in the past, staring down his brother in a motel room. And there’s blood on Sam’s lip, blood on Dean’s fist, and he’s telling his blood junkie brother whose expression looks fit to shatter: Cas said that if I don’t stop you, he will.

Dean’s back in the Bunker, back in front of Castiel – Cas – and he frowns. Cas. And somehow, he forgot.

Next day, they’re eating lunch on the road – sandwiches balanced on knees – when Jack finally shares his polished theory on the case.

“So – Rochester started a new crime scene protocol three years ago where they take a sample of the floor or ground or wall of every square foot surrounding a body in a three-foot radius.”
Sam nods, remembering seeing some tersely worded CSI reports in the file – apparently the protocol, despite its 3-year prevalence, was a huge pain in the ass.

“And they test each sample and create a chemical analysis, for evidence, DNA – tissue samples, blood -”

“Right – I remember this.” Sam says, not unkindly. He’d skimmed it briefly, but stray strands of hair and fecal matter didn’t usually factor in to his determination of what they were hunting. A tomato slips from his sandwich and lands on his jeans. He curses under his breath. “Keep going, I’m listening.” He tells Jack.

Jack takes that for encouragement, and speeds up his explanation. “I was looking at the lists, and it was mostly unhelpful. The killings happened in usually public places late at night, so there were a lot of DNA samples, and the investigators didn’t pay much attention to the samples, since there wasn’t a common thread of DNA across multiple crime scenes.

“But,” and now Jack flips the tablet screen around. Sam is driving, doesn’t have time to see much more than a handful of words that Jack’s highlighted across multiple reports, “one thing that was present at most of the crime scenes was a liquid fertilizer.”

Jack watches Sam proudly, waiting for Sam to announce that Jack’s cracked the case wide open.

“I don’t – “

“But,” Jack interrupts, seeing that he stopped his explanation too early, “specifically, they found what they thought was a common element in liquid fertilizers: ammonium thiosulfate.”

“Sulfur.” Sam breathes, “Demons. Jack – that’s… I can’t believe you caught that.”

Jack smiles broadly, pleased. Sam shakes his head at the road, “I can’t believe I missed that.”

“You had to drive.” Jack says, “You would have put it together if you had enough time to look at the reports a few times.” He adds modestly, but it’s clear that he’s proud of his breakthrough.

“But why would demons be killing their way through Rochester, and leaving behind the calling cards of other monsters?” Sam wonders out loud, talking mainly to himself. “A lot of the time, demon killings don’t pull anything up in our searches,” He adds, seeing that Jack is waiting for him to continue. “They usually kill humans like… humans. Not distinguishable from human-on-human violence. Seems… sloppy.”

“Intentional?”

“Maybe.” Sam grants. “But why would they want to draw out hunters?”

“Should we call… the Bunker?” And Sam knows the first name Jack was going to say.

“Well…” Sam starts, disliking the increasing effort going into keeping Dean in the dark about the specifics on the case. “Maybe just text him and Mary – say we’re pretty sure it’s a demon, not a vampire.”

Jack does, and the responses chime in a few minutes later. Jack squints at the screen. “Mary wants to know if we want backup – “

“Tell her we’re fine – “
“And Dean just sent a knife emoji and a saltshaker emoji.”

And Sam actually barks out a laugh. “Sounds about right.” He ponders the new revelations in silence for a few minutes. “Well, it changes things.”

“Our strategy?”

“Sure. But we’re gonna need a new set of wheels. Go pull up some rental car places near Rochester.”

Jack looks at Sam like he’s had a stroke. “What? Why?”

Dean’s not in the car – not even within a couple hundred miles of them – but Sam can see that cocksure, shit-eating grin as if his brother’s lounging in the backseat. Sam slaps a hand on the dashboard, feels Dean Winchester in the curve of his smirk. “Baby here is a little too famous to take into demon territory.”

The grandmother – playfully nicknamed Nan by her grandchild that had problems with hard g’s – feels her hands shake as she ends the call.

The middle-aged businessman with brows that could only be described as hulking raises his hulking brows. “And?”

“And… I think I need to take a fucking insulin shot.” Nan replies, hands shaking as she jams the key in the ignition. “I’m shaking like I’m having a goddamn seizure.”

“You’re also a billion years old. Can’t you ever pick a normal age?” The man says, and inspects his reflection in the car’s rearview mirror. Nan smacks his hand away and readjusts the mirror so she can see. “What’s the news?” He repeats, glowering as Nan backs up into traffic.

“Three minutes out. They switched cars. Got some rental. Honda.”

“Why the hell did they get a rental car?”

Nan takes her eyes off the road, narrowly missing clipping a bike messenger with her side mirror. “Do I look like Sam fuckin’ Winchester?”

“Maybe in 100 years.” The businessman replies icily. “You’re the one didn’t put the phone on speaker. Now I gotta be the one asking questions.”

“My hearing sucks. I couldn’t hear on speaker.” Nan snaps, and squints at the traffic light. It’s red, but she goes for it anyway. A silver Sonata swerves around their stolen car, horn blaring fit to deafen. Neither occupant blinks. Nan glances at the clock on the dashboard. “Two minutes.”

The businessman sighs. His phone rings in his suit pocket. He pulls it out idly. The caller ID says ‘FRAN – OFFICE’, the picture pulling up a woman holding a toddler – both covered in two birthdays worth of cake. He tosses the phone into the backseat. “It just woulda been more satisfying if they were coming in their bitch car.”

“What the fuck did you call me?” Nan snaps, swerving into the oncoming lane (thankfully, with no cars) to glare at the businessman behind coke-bottle glasses.

“Jesus Christ.” The man says louder. “I called the car a bitch.”
“Oh.” Nan says, turning back to the road.

There’s a tense moment of silence. Nan glances at the dashboard. “One minute.”

“Yeah.” And then: "Just make sure you don’t smoke out too early."

“What?”

“I said, don’t smoke out too – “

“I know what you fucking said – what the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

The businessman fiddles with window button, and cold air blows into the car, blowing around the papers in the backseat. “I mean, you have a well-documented tendency to smoke out too early.”

“Name one time or I’ll stab you in the fuckin’ thigh.”

“Reno. Supposed to walk that girl right over the edge of the building, and then smoke out. You left too early, and she clambered back to the ledge.”

“I don’t like heights. Fuck off.”

“Portland.” The man ticks off on his fingers, “You were supposed to – “

“Yeah – I remember Portland, jagoff. But that chick had reflexes like a goddamn cat. How was I supposed to know she’d jump out of the way of the bullet?”

The businessman loosens his tie from his neck. “You’re not the one who had to run through the fucking woods to finish off the job. Just don’t smoke out too early and leave grandma here to take back control of the situation.”

“Say again?”

“Are you fucking kidding – “

“Yeah, I’m messing with you.” Nan says in her quavering, matronly voice. “You got better eye sight than me – is that them?”

The rental Honda is still a distance away – but the large man squashed comedically into the driver’s seat is unmistakable. “Yeah. That’s them. Don’t fuck this up. Smoke out on three.”

Nan accelerates the car, swerving into the other lane. “On three or after three?” The Honda is coming in from a cross street from the south. Nan smashes into the median of the road, and the front right tire of the car pops on the jagged medal.

“Don’t be an asshole. Three…”

A minivan swerves out of their way - wide, fearful eyes torn away as the car accelerates past.

“Two…”

Nan’s hands shake on the wheel – two hours past her needed insulin shot.

“One…”

The man’s phone rings again: FRAN – OFFICE. Birthday cake still smashed on smiling faces.
“Now.”

Two pillars of smoke pour out of borrowed bodies, smashing through the windows and leaching out into the sky. A young man – blonde, blue-eyed, futzing with a borrowed suit – glances out the window of a Honda. Sees the car hurtling towards them 60 miles an hour. The older man, hunched and uncomfortable in the driver’s seat, sees the car too – too late to do anything but blink.

The stolen car smashes into the rental car, and then the two figures don’t see much at all.

Chapter End Notes

I... had too much fun with this chapter. Buddy demon AU spin-off anyone?

Also - might be a weird thing to include in my a/n, but Shishcabob22 (who just posted a really good fic "Hell Adjacent" - go read...) and I were looking around to do some brief drabble/ficlet challenges, like word or situation prompts or something, and we can't find any to do - so if anyone knows of any, please let me know!
He breaks the surface of consciousness like he’s desperate for it. Jack tries to suck air into frozen lungs, but not enough makes it to his brain – like he’s been poked full of holes and the air just whooshes right out.

“Sam?” He tries to say – but it comes out as something between a grunt and a cough.

His entire body feels like it’s been rung like a bell. Vibrating with pain and a bright brassy sound. His eyes finally decide to give him a few seconds of technicolor, and he sees vague impressions of glass, splashes of blood, the white of a dress shirt visible through rips in a black suit. There’s a tight line of pain across his chest, like he’s a sandwich cut diagonally. A seatbelt. He’s in a car.

Jack coughs again, feels something wet drip onto his chest. His head is a million and a half pounds, but he manages to roll it to the side.

Sam’s strapped into his seat – the seatbelt holding him upright in some ghoulish approximation of consciousness. The air bags had deployed – were already trickling back into deflation – and Sam’s head hangs loosely against his chest. His hair hides his face, but there’s blood on the deflating airbag, and Jack can’t see whether Sam is breathing.

“-am?” He tries again, weaker this time – already feeling the black pooling in the edges of his hazy mind.

His breath comes slower, and his vision of Sam darkens like someone’s wiped the colors from the canvas. There’s the sound of footsteps crunching on glass, and he somehow swings his head around to see two approaching figures – one tall, one short. One of them says something – the short one, he thinks, in the prepubescent voice of a young child.

There’s a roaring in his ears and the figures come to the side of the car. Jack’s chest is tight with pain, and his head feels like a pile of mush.

He spends his last few seconds of consciousness wondering why the kid’s eyes look black.

A tendril of Her miasma spears him, and he goes down like the scattering of molecules he is. Like they all are, compared to Them.

It’s Dean’s first War, but it’s the conflict that sets the course for all the battles that will follow. It’s the first War, the reason their Father created the four of them. From nothing, He scraped them together in His image, poured His brightness in them until they shone like new stars.

Dean hits the bottom of the plane of existence they’re waging their brutal attack, and feels all the edges of Her closing in. She tore through his wing, the gift of flight from their Father – punched through it like it was hardly there. He feels tendrils of Her poison and presence seep through the wound, attacking his grace from the inside like She’s turning him against himself.

A feather-light presence grazes his shoulder, and he turns crackling eyes up – sees fury and judgement in the eyes of his brother.
“You are injured.” Raphael says, no offense or pity in his tone.

Dean spits Her corruption from his mouth like a black venom. “Yes.” He says simply, straining to remain in this empty world. Grace and viscera and pinnae coming apart from his injury, burning off at the root. Raphael takes a disgusted step back.

“You are soiled.” He adds.

“I will fight.” Dean asserts flatly, but still feels the sharpness of the Darkness filling him with holes. “Leave me. I will join you.” He makes to stand, but his form won’t cooperate, like he’s weighed down to the bottom of existence with poison as the ballast.

“Brother, She has placed your end inside of you.” Raphael says without heat or sympathy. He declares it like cold fact, as if Dean doesn’t feel each pulse of Her dragging him into the Empty.

There’s the sound of breathy displacement, and a new form stands at his other shoulder.

“Michael!” His brother calls, and Dean feels his brother’s battle-warmed grip at his shoulder. Dean’s flickering vision returns, and brings into focus the bright visage of the Morningstar. Dark concern is laced through his eyes, and where Dean can see past the shining red, he can only see desperate fear. Raphael watches them coolly. “Michael is not long for it, Lucifer.”


A discordant detonation ignites the space above them, carving lines of light and shadow on Raphael’s upturned face. Raphael glances down at the pair before the vast banner of his wings unfurls and lifts him into the space above. Within a moment, he’s gone. Off above to join the golden flashes and shifting miasma tearing the fledging universe apart.

Dean tries to take stock of the raging battle, but his brother steps between them – like he can physically separate Dean from Her. Dean feels a hand brush his injury, his brother’s light touch carefully inspecting the wound, but he still has to bite back a curse of pain.

“It is not a normal wound.” Lucifer says, and Dean almost laughs at the understatement.

“Raphael is right, brother.” Dean says between his teeth. “You should leave me and help the others.”

Lucifer’s hand disappears from Dean’s wing, but there’s still the wild pulse of pain. Dean feels the edges of his grace burning down like they’ve been set on fire. Lucifer slaps him on the side of the face – not hard. Just enough to keep him fighting. “We cannot trap the Darkness without you, Michael. You are the best of us.”

But Dean doesn’t reply – his eye had caught on his brother’s forearm. He weakly grabs at Lucifer’s arm, tries to get a better look in the alternating light-shadow-light that illuminates the battle tearing the cosmos apart. Lucifer’s face is unsmiling – almost nervous – as Dean runs shaking fingers against the scar that marks his brother’s arm.

“Father did this.” Dean breathes, and has to spit out another mouthful of Her poison. It tastes like the dredges of grace.

Lucifer doesn’t speak for a long moment, and his silence is punctuated by the sounds of battle and war. He finally pulls his arm out from Dean’s failing grip, and Dean sags to the ground. Lucifer snaps out the Marked arm at the last moment, arresting Dean’s fall and propping him up solidly in his
grip.

“We need to heal your injury.”

Dean bats away the comment like his brother hadn’t spoken. “What is that? What has He done to you?”

And for a sliver of a moment, Lucifer’s face brightens – marble features warmed by sunlight. “It is a Mark of Father’s trust. A Mark that will trap Her and bind Her. But we need you to subdue Her, Michael. It is your birthright.”

Dean jerks his head. He holds his palm up, so Lucifer can see the spiderwebbed veins of black poison already crawling under this skin. “You waste your time, brother.” He says, and the blue of his own eyes reflects off the dark shadows of his brother’s face – slivers of purple in the embers of Lucifer’s eyes.

“No, Michael. You are the strongest of all of us.” Lucifer says, and there’s a dead certainty in his tone that almost makes Dean want to snap to attention, even as he feels himself spooling apart. The calamity and thunder of the sky are more muted now, but when Lucifer winces and risks a glance up, Dean knows that it’s just his own perception that is dimming. “You are strong, Michael.” Lucifer repeats. “You can save yourself.” Lucifer straightens from his crouch at Dean’s side, and extends a hand to his brother. The scarred Mark on his hand shines with bloody light. “I will help you.”

Dean looks back and forth between the glowing brand and the steady gaze of his brother. His head tips back slightly, and he feels the warmth and call of the war raging overhead – the fight he longs to turn the tide of. It’s where he belongs – not withering to ash with Her infection. Not succumbing to the death She laced through the breadth of dark wings.

Still, he hesitates. His own arm – streaked with corruption – pauses in the air. “You cannot save me, Lucifer.”

“No.” His brother agrees, but he offers his hand just the same. “But I will show you how to save yourself.”

And Dean believes him – like he will always believe him. Their Father may have created him to rule his armies – but Lucifer’s destiny will always outshine them. Lucifer smiles down at Dean, and it’s a smile of warmth and faith and resolution.

Dean takes Lucifer’s hand, and feels himself ignite.

“Dean!”

He jerks harshly to attention, snipped from the fabric of the memory.

He blinks open confused green eyes, sees four walls, ceiling, floor. Sees a woman standing in the doorway. Blonde curls, blue eyes, wrinkles from stress, wrinkles from laughter.

She says the name again, this time like a question, and he frowns. Unease and worry fill out the creases in her face, and he doesn’t know who she is, but he thinks of crusts cut off sandwiches and bandages smoothed over scraped knees. He thinks of a woman that died broken after shattering the bloodline he’d contrived for centuries.

There’s a stuttering in the bright blue chaos in his head, and Dean feels himself click back into place.
“Mom?” He asks, surprised to see Mary hesitating in the doorway.

Mary doesn’t answer for an extended moment, just looks at him like she isn’t quite sure what she’s seeing, or what she saw. “Dean, you – what are you doing?”

Dean glances around his room, before looking pointedly at the bed he’s lounging on. “Nothing.” He answers honestly enough. When she still doesn’t answer, he adds, “You’re lookin’ at me like I’m a teenager sneaking sips of Ten High Whiskey under the sheets.”

The anxiety on Mary’s face doesn’t exactly disappear, just shifts slightly. She’s holding a borrowed tablet in one hand – her phone in the other. Both are forgotten for the moment. “You just looked…” She trails off.

Dean feels the attempt at a grin lose its edge. “What’s wrong?”

Mary finally seems to pull herself out of whatever funk she’s gotten into, but now something like fear crosses over her face. She walks further into Dean’s room, holding her side stiffly.

Dean is on his feet. “Are you hurt?”

Mary shrugs a shoulder. “That’s not why I’m – “

“Mom.”

Mary rolls her eyes, some good-natured Winchester bounce-back returning into her expression. “Got a couple scrapes down the ribs. Not a big deal – “ She visibly starts when Dean touches two fingers to her forehead. She tries to jerk away – Winchester reflexes not appreciating sudden fingers on faces – but she stumbles back against the bed.

Dean pushes out some of that curative warmth from the spool of power in his center. Mary gasps, and bright lines of healing light are fuzzy and smothered under layers of canvas and flannel. A small measure of pain lifts from her eyes. “Jesus.” She mutters, and runs a hand up her side, before glancing up at Dean. Her eyes widen slightly, “Dean, are you – “

“’m fine.” He mutters. All he did was seal up a couple inches of flesh and wipe away a little infection – but he feels pain reverberate from his wing all the way to his core. He tries to remember what Cas said before he left – about how it’s not a physical injury to his wing – it’s an injury to the grace that the wing is a part of. He doesn’t really get it – but understands enough to know that if he can’t even pull off the smallest of angelic miracles without feeling like he’s tearing pieces off of himself, there’s no way he can take on another Horseman. Dean grits his teeth – this time, from frustration rather than pain.

“What’s up?” He says, cutting across any follow-up probing. “Caught a case?” He adds, eyeing the tablet that Sam had set up specifically for his hunting case algorithms. Mary glances down like she’s forgotten it was in her hands.

“I don’t know yet.” She answers cryptically. “Not exactly. But…” And she sits against the edge of the bed. “Sam and Jack might be in trouble.”

Dean’s jaw works for a second. “What?”

Mary passes the tablet up to Dean. There’s a traffic camera video queued up. The video is in grainy black-and-white, and the bottom corner lists an intersection somewhere in Rochester, New York. Dean’s eyes flicker back to Mary’s before he hits the play button.
A light-colored Honda pulls forward into the traffic lined up at an intersection. The camera fizzes with static for a moment, before clearing up. From the bottom left, somewhere off the camera’s range, a dark Suburban accelerates up the opposite lane, weaving through oncoming vehicles. As the car approaches the line of traffic, it doesn’t slow or brake. Dean watches as the pixelated car lays on even more speed, before smashing into the Honda. The camera turns to static right at the impact, but Dean swears that he saw smoke pour from the SUV right before impact. But when the camera static finally lessens, neither vehicle is on fire, though both are smashed to all hell.

Two figures appear in the frame, a lanky adult wearing a sports jersey from some unidentifiable team, and a kid with their arms crossed. They pass the SUV without glancing to see if the passengers in the car need assistance, and walk over crunchy glass towards the Honda. Dean watches as they peer into the car at something – presumably whoever was driving, but neither make any move to help the occupants.

The tall figure glances around, before looking up at the traffic camera. He’s wearing sunglasses, but he pulls them off and tosses them onto the glass-covered ground. It’s hard to see at the distance and the shit quality of the camera, but Dean swears that the figure smiles. And then black pours over the man’s uncovered eyes.

The video cuts off in a wash of static.

“What did I just watch?” Dean asks, dragging his finger along the video and beginning to watch it again. He can’t make out any passengers in either car. He’s confident that it’s a demon attack – which lines up with Jack’s last check-in. He’s not sure why Mary’s showing him a video about demon activity – he’s not working the case with Sam and Jack.

“I can’t reach Sam.” Mary answers, and something in her voice is dark and acidic. “Or Jack.”

Something shivers down Dean’s spine. “What are you thinking?”

“Dean,” Mary starts, and then cuts off like the words are all getting stuck in her throat. It takes her a few seconds to push out: “Sam and Jack took a rental car into Rochester. I just got off the phone with the rental car company. Sam checked out a Honda.”

Sam wakes up in stages. He has brief impressions – spread out across time. Splashes of memories mainly punctuated with long periods of nothing but black.

He remembers the wrinkled and kindly face of the older woman that turned her SUV into a battering ram – remembers black eyes like a chitin shell blinking back through a dirty windshield.

He remembers brief seconds of painful consciousness as EMTs pulled him from the smashed rental, a flash of an image of Jack sprawled out on a stretcher, eyes closed.

A moment in the ambulance – sirens screaming, hearing another kind of screaming from the driver’s seat. And then not hearing much at all.

The jarring pain of being dumped off a stretcher and onto cold floors – bought him a few more seconds, but he’s pretty sure he was back out before he rolled to a stop.

His next foray into consciousness feels more permanent. Sam blinks open hazel eyes, feels crunchiness in his head, a tell-tale slurry of a concussion and bruises that fills his brain like a fog. His eyes are open, but it takes a few seconds for the retinas to hook up to his brain.
The first thing he sees are bright yellow wolf eyes.

Sam jerks back in surprise, and discovers after he nearly pulls his arms out of their sockets that he’s strapped into a chair. Adrenaline banishes some of the sluggishness in his brain, and he blinks some of the bleariness away. It’s not an actual wolf – it’s a painting. Six feet of canvas, the bright yellows and browns of the predator’s eyes pop from the canvas like a living thing. Sam tugs at his bonds, but doesn’t feel an inch of give. There’s the feeling of fabric shoved between teeth – a gag.

The room is wall-to-wall (in some cases, ceiling-to-floor) art, and Sam figures he’s in some kind of museum or art gallery. He must still be in Rochester, unless the demons had sedated him and transported him elsewhere. But Sam doesn’t feel the gummy sensation of drugs, and can’t see why anyone would go through the trouble of crossing state lines when they can stash a couple of hunters in a city as large as Rochester.

Doesn’t make him feel better.

His muscles are tight and sore with whiplash from the accident and from being propped up and bound in a chair, but he tries to take in as much of the room as he can. There aren’t any windows in the gallery he’s currently in, but the weird mental clock in his brain assures him it’s night. That, and the fact there aren’t college students pointing at him and wondering if he’s part of the exhibit.

There’s no sign of Jack. There’s no sign of… anyone. No guards that he can see, nothing. He hears the whoosh of the air conditioning kicking on, and a breeze wafts from the ceiling.

Footsteps rattle off in the distance. The sound of metal dragging. Sam tries to figure out where it’s coming from, but there’s only one entrance to the gallery he’s locked down in, and that’s where the figures eventually enter from.

There’s a kid – maybe an older-looking kid or a younger-looking teenager. Never really around them, Sam’s always been a little murky when it comes to guessing kids’ ages. (Not Dean, he thinks nonsensically, Dean can guess it to the month.) The kid is dragging a chair behind him, looking almost like a sullen teenager, if not for the steadiness in his expression that only comes with age. If Sam wasn’t sure before, he is now. Demons.

The demon opens the glass door, and holds it open for the next figure. This one is older and taller, but thin as a toothpick. Sam makes out the purple of a Sacramento Kings jersey, but most of it is covered by the body that the demon has slung over his shoulder. Jack.

Sam can only see Jack’s dusty pant suit from his current position, but Jack’s posture is loose and unresisting, and Sam knows the Nephilim is unconscious. The taller demon, eyes flicking to black for a single second, smirks at Sam and maneuvers himself and Jack through the door. He judges it poorly, bangs Jack’s arm painfully against the door.

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Sam hears the kid demon say. “Was that on purpose?”

“Of course it wasn’t on purpose, you goddamn ingrate.” The taller demon says, irritated, and he steps into the room without further ramming of captives.

The kid rolls his eyes, and pulls the chair in behind his companion. “I’m just saying. That was a really shit way of trying to let Winchester here know we mean business.”

“Shut the fuck up, I said it wasn’t on purpose.” The taller one says. He waits impatiently for the other demon to drag the chair closer to where Sam is bound. Neither demon has said a word to Sam. “This meat sack is taller than I’m used to. All elbows. I feel like a fucking stick bug.”
The tall demon drops Jack heavily into the chair, and proceeds to restrain his arms and legs to the metal. Jack’s head rolls towards Sam. Aside from some scrapes on his face, and a gash on his arm – Jack didn’t get too banged up in the car accident.

“What the shit is a stick bug?”

“A Phasmid, technically. I was trying to dumb it down for your idiot child brain.”

“Jesus H. Christ, you possess a science professor one time and you’re just full of fuckin’ Sesame Street facts - “

“Jack?” Sam tries to speak around the gag shoved in his mouth, but it comes out like a smothered grunt. Jack doesn’t twitch, but it’s enough to shut the two demons up.

The demon possessing the kid frowns at Sam, and kicks at his chair. It barely wobbles. “Hey.” He says. A moment stretches – equal parts awkward and tense – before the demon finally concludes, “Shut up.”

His companion smacks him on the head. “Yeah, that was real fuckin’ intimidating. Maybe I’ll bang your arm against the door on the way out.”

“I’d like to see you try. I’m too wily.”

Sam doesn’t hear the phone alert, but the taller demon must feel the vibration in his pocket. He retrieves the phone, reads a few lines of text. “He’s coming in. Wants us out.”

The kid demon’s face closes off like a curtain’s been drawn. He glances at Sam, and when he sees that Sam’s already got eyes on him, he shrugs. “Guess we miss the finale. Fuckin’ typical.”

“Don’t let him hear you talkin’ like that.” The other demon warns, shoving the phone into his pocket. “He’ll turn your meat suit into cherry pie.”

Without another glance at Sam, the demonic duo pads towards the door. Their bickering follows them down the hall, until Sam can’t catch the words over the still-blowing air conditioning.

He tries to call Jack’s name again. The gag smoothes the syllables into grunts, but Jack’s closed eyes twitch. He’s coming around.

Satisfied that Jack isn’t brain damaged, Sam tries to flex his side to feel if his phone had survived the kidnapping in his pocket. But if it’s there, he can’t feel it. He’ll have to hope that his family can track him down the old-fashioned way. And fast.

“S’m?” Jack slurs, and Sam turns back to the Nephilim. Jack isn’t gagged like he is, but his bonds seem just as secure as Sam’s. Jack blinks open blue eyes, and then squints against the bright gallery lights. He sees Sam, but shuts his eyes and jerks his head like he’s shaking off the pain. When his eyes open again, he seems more settled.

Sam catches his eye and jerks his head in the best approximation of are you okay?

Jack nods. “I’m… a little banged up, but I’m okay. You?”

Sam can only answer in various pitches of grunts, so he chooses to shrug one shoulder as best he can. Sometimes, that’s the best you can hope for.

“Was it demons?” Jack asks, looking around. “I thought I remember two at the accident. Why didn’t
they just kill us?”

Even if Sam could speak, he doesn’t have an answer. Demons, monsters, angels – they never do the smart thing. Not the Sam would rather be bleeding out somewhere, but eventually, there’s going to come a time when one of the bads realizes that maybe… sometimes the best way to kill a Winchester is just to kill him.

The lights flicker in the gallery, and for a moment – Sam thinks of angels and his brother.

But it’s not either that walks through the door. A single figure enters from the hallway, and Sam immediately knows that it’s a demon. The man is middle-aged, almost unkempt in appearance, with a kind face wrinkled by laugh lines. But the occupant is wearing the face wrong – the jaw is held tightly, there’s a certain seriousness smoothing away the humor and gentleness. The man’s eyes never flick to black, and somehow – that’s worse.

He studies Sam from the doorway, in that awful stiff posture, and Sam feels his skin crawl. Like there’s something slithering under the surface.

From behind Sam, Jack asks, “Who are you?” And the question he meant is what are you.

The man’s gaze slips briefly from Sam to Jack without changing expression. He leaves the doorframe and approaches his captives.

His voice is thin, seemingly at odds with the possessed body’s natural tone, “This is Cesar Alvarez.” He says, and he pats a stiff hand on his chest. “I – “

“That’s who you’re wearing.” Jack interrupts boldly. “I’m asking who you are.”

Something dark and dangerous and ancient crests behind the demon’s eyes at the interruption – and if Sam had his limbs at his disposal, he would have yanked Jack out of the line of fire. They’ve fought demons of all kinds – princes of hell, crossroads, the black-eyed grunts. This one isn’t a garden variety demon.

The demon seems to settle. He doesn’t take his steely eyes off Jack, and raises his arms a few inches. “This is Cesar Alvarez. And so, I am Cesar. I had a name, once, many centuries ago. Time wears away all details, in the end.”

Great, a nut job.

Cesar turns away from Jack, like he’s already forgotten he’s there. His eyes fall on Sam, and there’s something disturbing and covetous in his gaze. “I’ll allow you to speak.” He says, in that whispering tone. “You can try an exorcism or five.” Cesar blinks once, and a film of white flicks across his eyes. “Though I cannot promise results.”

The bottom of Sam’s stomach falls out, adrenaline and acidic fear spilling into his veins. *Fuck.* A white-eyed demon. Sam hasn’t even *seen* one of them since… Alastair. Since Lilith. He hadn’t seen one before, or since – but they’d never come on the other side of those fights the same they’d been going in.

White-eyed demons, just a small drop on the pay scale from the yellow-eyed princes of hell, are still leagues above the usual black-eyed bastards. And since he and Jack are still sitting pretty and sucking down air – Sam doesn’t like what that means for their future.

Sam flinches when the demon hooks a finger against the gag and jerks it down towards his neck. He coughs, and spits a gob of blood and spit on the ground. Air comes easier, but Sam still can’t get
words out past his throat.

Jack seems equal parts nervous and nonplussed at Sam’s uncommunicativeness.

“I assume you’re wondering why we didn’t just slit your throats back at the accident site.” Cesar muses, and white flicks away to reveal warm brown irises.

“Not that hard to guess.”

“Enlighten me.”

“You want to be on the throne. King of Hell. You’re a demon – like I said, not hard to guess.” Sam replies, Winchester grit bolstering his resolve. In retrospect, maybe announcing to the backs of retreating demons that any challengers would need to go through him to get to the throne wasn’t… the best idea. But he was angry, then. Frustrated. Weeks of Dean’s abduction pushing him towards recklessness. And now he’s just landed him and Jack in six feet of deep shit.

Cesar’s expression doesn’t flicker – like he’s out of practice behind a human face. Finally, he says, “A true ruler doesn’t ask for permission. And true demons don’t take their cues from humans.”

Sam walks the line between pressing for information and pissing off their captor. “Then why the front row seat?”

Cesar’s head tilts on its neck and he studies Sam again. “I haven’t been top-side in a while. Couple dozen centuries. I don’t enjoy it. But with Michael rallying the monsters of Earth, I decided it was time to give upstairs my personal attention.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You think I came up for the fresh air?” Cesar says, and his mouth twists towards a scowl. “It’s time to get our house in order. Starting with wiping the Winchesters off the board, letting Death scatter you to the ether. If it were up to me, I’d prefer letting the boys downstairs work on you for a few millennia.” He sighs, but it’s more of a whisper. “Maybe it’s better this way. Winchesters have a way of bubbling to the surface eventually.”

Sam grits his teeth, thinking of blood and cages. “So, we’re back to why we’re still alive.”

“Pardon?”

“You said you could have killed us, before.”

“Oh – yes. Him, I’m going to kill.” Cesar remarks casually, gesturing with the faintest of movements towards Jack. “I’m not sure why they brought him here, to be quite honest. It’s the trouble with loosely-worded directives. So much room for interpretation.”

The implications are so at odds with the demon’s tone, it takes a few seconds for it to click home. Jack is staring at Sam, without fear – closer to mild surprise.

Cesar takes a few steps closer to where Sam is restrained, and Sam flinches back against the chair when Cesar pulls at Sam’s suit’s shirt collar. The multiple washes and bleach treatments have made the shirt thin as paper, and the white material splits easily – revealing the recently-retouched demon anti-possession tattoo.

Cesar’s head does that odd tilt again, and his gaze leaves the tattoo to meet Sam’s eyes. “You might be more trouble than you’re worth.” He taps a finger lightly against the tattoo. “But I thought I’d give
the boy with demon blood a try.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm SORRY. My job has been especially crazy recently, so the last thing I've wanted to do coming home is spend more time typing on a computer! This chapter was supposed to get a little further plot-wise, but it was already at 5k, so I'm cutting it off here. That's why it might seem a little weird with pacing.

I was rereading this just now before posting, and I have that one line about how Sam is shit at guessing kids' ages, but Dean is really good. And I meant it more like... Dean is the "big brother" - he's watched Sam grow up, he raised him, he knows what age is what, etc. But it came off as like... super creepy????? Whatever, I'm leaving it - but hopefully it didn't come off as creepy as it did to me lmao.

Also anyone else forget that Lucifer had the Mark of Cain? This bitch did

Thanks for reading <3
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the insane number of typos I missed in the last chapter. I am trash.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Dean!”

Mary’s footsteps echo down the hallway behind him, but Dean ignores her, ignores the pain radiating down his center, and ignores the hunters that scramble to get out of his way.

“What do you mean, it won’t work.” Dean snaps into the phone, stepping around Jeremy as the hunter edges by with a meal tray headed for the dungeon.

“I mean, that’s not how grace works.” Cas repeats, and his voice is crackly from the poor reception in Sioux Falls. “You can’t just… take in more of it. You need to let yourself recover.”

“You said Gabriel’s Lance injured Michael’s true form. That’s grace. Er-fuckin’-go, the grace for the Horseman spell will – “

“Dean, you’re not listening to me.” Cas snaps into the phone, “I’m worried about Sam and Jack, as well. But you reabsorbing the grace we’ve collected from Michael’s army will only result in having less for Rowena’s spell. It won’t fix you.”

Dean doesn’t realize he’s come to a stop until Mary steps around in front of him, like she can physically prevent him from snapping the locks on Rowena’s room and grabbing the receptacle of grace. If he wanted to.

“Dean?”

“I’m still here.” Dean spits. Mary’s hand comes to rest on his shoulder, offering comfort, but he hardly feels anything over the alternating numbness and pain that shudders under his skin. “What do I do, Cas? What – “

“There’s not a magical or simple solution for healing an injury to an angel’s true form, Dean. Trust me. The Lance kills with corruption – and some of that corruption remains. Only time will heal it.”

“That’s not what you explained before.”

“I didn’t think you would think up an idea so monumentally reckless in the 24 hours that I’ve been gone.”

Dean pulls the phone from his ear and has to convince himself not to hurl it down the hallway. Mary’s eyes are anxious as she watches him replace the phone to his ear. “There has to be a way, Cas, I – “

“There’s not.”

“I know there is, because I’ve seen Michael do it.”
Cas’ silence radiates down the line, almost louder than his words. Finally, after a tense few seconds, Cas says, “What are you talking about, Dean?”

“I mean – I’ve… I see Michael’s memories sometimes. And I saw one where Amara – the Darkness – she… I don’t know, she injured Michael somehow – poisoned him, and Michael was dying.” The words dump out of Dean quickly now, “And Lucifer, he showed Michael how to cure it, but I don’t know how he did it, he – “

“Dean, that’s – “ Mary starts to interrupt, panic starting to seep into her expression, but Cas is already talking – echoing Mary’s sentiment.

“Dean, whatever Michael is showing you, you cannot trust it. Whatever he says, whatever he is telling you – “

“Michael didn’t tell me anything.” Dean interjects, to both Mary and Cas. “Michael doesn’t know what’s going on, out here. He’s locked down, and I’m the only one doing the talking.” Not exactly, but for the sake of argument…

Cas’ disbelieving snort rings down the line – and Dean remembers a time when he never would have thought he’d hear an angel snort. “Right – I’m sure that you just happened to witness one of Michael’s memories that happens to coincide exactly with – “

“Dammit, Cas, listen to me!” Dean snaps, but his words are for Mary too. “Michael isn’t yanking my chain here. He’s not offering me any deals, making me any promises. He doesn’t even know what’s going on!”

Mary’s voice is flinty, “And you’re sure about that? Enough to risk your life?”

Dean swallows back his retort as Cas starts talking again: “I know you want there to be an easy fix, Dean – to save Sam and Jack – but there’s not. I’m on my way to Rochester, Sam and Jack will – “

“Cas, you’re almost 18 hours away. Mom and I called all the hospitals in the area – one of the ambulances from the accident was hijacked. That means that those black-eyed dicks grabbed Sam and Jack. I need to get there now or they’re as good as dead.”

Dean only hears the humming sound of Cas’ clunker engine for a few long seconds. Finally, Cas says bluntly, in a voice hard as steel, “If you use Michael’s abilities to try and get to Rochester, you will tear yourself apart.”

A pulse beats in Dean’s temple, and he clenches his jaw. “They have Sam and Jack, Cas. I don’t have a choice.”

Cas’ voice is flat – and only someone that’s studied in Cas can hear the genuine dawning of fear. “I hope you remember the consequences that followed the last time you said those words to me.”

The reminder hangs in the air for a long time, stretched across hundreds of miles. But it’s like he and Cas are in the War Room all those months ago, standing over Michael as his vessel disintegrates, and Dean’s just thrown his consent down on the table.

Their lives move in circles.

“Then I guess I’ll see you on the other side.” He thumbs the disconnect button, and cuts off any follow up protest from Cas.

He and Mary are alone in the hallway – Sam’s hunters wisely leaving them be. Mary still has the
tablet tucked under her arm, forgotten. In his mind’s eye, Dean sees the demon blink black eyes up at the traffic camera. Taunting them.

“Dean,” Mary says quietly, like she doesn’t want to spook him, “what are you going to do?”

Dean taps his phone against his hip bone for a moment, before slipping it into his pocket. Mary doesn’t bother hiding her anxiety behind a hunter’s calm, and Dean lifts the corners of his mouth in an attempt to reassure. Mary’s hand raises slightly, hovers in the space between them – like she can hold her son back. And he doesn’t know which answer is the right one to offer, so he doesn’t give one at all.

And then it’s only Mary in the hallway – hand still reaching – and the soft echo of wings.

It looks bad, and it smells worse.

Sam bears it, like he bears everything, and Jack feels the pain of having your flesh seared with a blowtorch like it’s his own skin.

The wild wolf eyes of the painting at Cesar’s back inspect his handiwork as he burns off Sam’s anti-possession tattoo, predatory gaze as sharp as the demon wielding the canister.

“Leave him – “ Jack yells over the hiss of gas and sizzle of flesh, but Cesar merely twitches a finger in his direction without a glance, and Jack’s voice is sealed away. He works his jaw a few times, but nothing but air makes it past his throat.

Sam slouches in his bonds as the flame finally cuts out. Cesar taps a thumb against his bottom teeth, an artist deciding if it’s time to finally scrawl his signature in the painting’s corner. After a moment, he tosses the blow torch to the side, and it rolls to a stop in the corner of the room.

“When’s the last time you consumed blood of my kin?” Cesar asks, and Sam’s eyes are furious when he raises them to meet the demon’s.

“Go to hell.” Sam spits, and jerks back against the chair when Cesar raises his hand to sweep away the hair that’s fallen into Sam’s face.

“Now, that’s a proper invitation, as far as I’m concerned.” Cesar says, in that reedy voice. “Maybe I’ll take you with me, after we send off that interfering archangel to the Empty.” Cesar smiles, and it sits wrong on his lips.

“You think you can take on an Archangel?” Sam says, voice tight with pain but broad with anger, “Demons weren’t enough to stop one in another universe. ‘s not a fight you’re going to walk away from.”

“There’s that famous hell-forged Winchester spark.” Cesar says, but the flatness of his tone belies his words. “But consider this.” Cesar’s hand drifts to Sam’s shredded shirt, and he lightly tugs it up to cover the injured flesh. “There’s only been one being that’s been able to defeat one of my nacre-eyed ilk. Just one.” He taps one spindly finger against Sam’s sternum. “And I’m about to take him off the board.”

Sam turns his head towards Jack, who can only grit his teeth in frustration. Sam’s gaze is steady until something like fear cracks through the hazel of his eyes. Sam’s gaze is still on Jack, until Cesar says quietly to the room, “Black’s Knight to F2. Check.”
And then Cesar jerks like his strings have been cut, and he collapses heavily to the floor. Jack feels whatever force was blocking his voice dissipate. “Sam, what did –”

Sam’s not looking at him anymore, but looking down with a blank expression at the possessed soul on the floor. The lines of pain and anger and frustration have been wiped from his slate. Jack’s heart thuds in his chest. Sam looks down at himself, almost thoughtfully – or so Jack would assume, had there been a single smear of an expression on the hunter’s face. Suddenly, the bounds holding Sam to the chair fall away, and Sam raises himself to his feet stiffly.

Despite being able to speak, it takes a long moment for Jack to find his words. A dark pulse of something he doesn’t want to name beats in his chest, and his breath catches when Sam finally raises his gaze to his.

“Cesar?” Jack tries to say, but the accusation comes out like a stutter.

Sam raises his eyebrows, and it looks like the expression of another man. His hazel eyes drop to the body at his feet. “This is Cesar.” He informs Jack, lightly tapping the tip of his shoe against the man. "And now..." He blinks, and the hazel disappears behind an opalescent sheen. "You can call me Sam Winchester."

And he smiles, and it’s wrong wrong wrong.

The demon smiles behind Sam’s face. “Checkmate.”

He wakes half-smothered in sand, the harsh spears of lake grass pricking at his skin.

Dean doesn’t know when – or how – he lost consciousness, just remembers unfurling dark wings that screamed and feeling like he’d been cleaved in two before his tumble to the earth.

It’s excruciating – the pain.

He could stop here – put his head in the sand and rest, let the healing process pull him along in its stride. It’s what he should do. Be patient, be careful. But he closes his eyes against the crashing pain, and all he sees is the traffic camera footage playing on a loop. Of a demon blinking up sick black eyes like he knew Dean was watching.

Dean tries to drag himself to his feet – feels sand sticking to the bloody wet of his back – but his hands fist in the sand like he’s kneeling in water, and he can’t. He can’t.

He needs to get to Sam and Jack, but knows it’ll rip him apart to move another mile.

He squeezes his eyes shut.

Rocky’s Bar. His Bar.

It’s wrecked.

He remembers signing the papers for the place, unlocking the doors with the master key for the first time. Sheets covering old tables, holes ripped in the cheap booth material. Deep rivets carved in the floor from years of use and careless employees dragging furniture around. The bar itself needed five coats of varnish to get that bar-light-shine just how he envisioned it. Half the bar chairs needed to be
replaced, and it was a bitch and a half to find ones to match the rest.

The bar is ripped apart, looks more like the dilapidated ruins of a war zone, but it’s his.

Dean stumbles over the splintered remains of a smashed bar table on his way to the walk-in. He kicks aside the local newspaper he’d dropped to the ground so many trips into his head before, and the paper disintegrates into dust.

He doesn’t see Michael at first – can’t see much through the spiderwebbed cracks in the door. For a single second, he almost believes that the archangel has escaped and is running loose in his head. But then there’s the shifting of a figure, and Michael is inches away from the glass.

Dean blinks at his own image, sees the contained fury in Michael’s face.

“You’ve been careless.” The voice is warped from behind glass.

Dean sighs, not up for the usual snark and back-and-forth with the archangel.

Michael studies Dean’s face from the glass, “Why have you come, Winchester?”

“You know why.” Dean says, and hates himself for saying it, because it feels like giving in.

Some of the anger drops from Michael’s borrowed face, and a measure of gratification fills the gap. “Locked up in here, how could I possibly?”

Dean smashes his fist against the walk-in before he can stop himself. “Cas was right.” He snaps. “You showed me that memory on purpose. You knew that there was something wrong, and you knew there was a way to cure it. Why?”

Michael doesn’t answer for a long moment. Dean fumes on the other side of the glass – again, with that flip-flopped feeling of not knowing which of them is really in a cage. “If you still have that bottom-feeder seraph nipping at your heels, then you already know that my true form isn’t easily damaged. That it will recover.”

A pulse beats in Dean’s jaw as he watches the archangel pull the threads together.

“Which means… something has happened.”

“Show me the rest of it.”

Michael smiles that close-lipped smile, innocent as a man on death row. “Pardon?”

“Show me the rest of the memory. How Lucifer showed you how to get rid of the corruption.”

“I never thought I would see the day. A Winchester – begging their enemy for aid. Though…” And the archangel trails off, falsely contemplative, “maybe it’s not as uncommon as I suspect. Crossroad deals, sneaking angels into your brother’s head, accepting Cain’s Mark… you do seem to put it all on the line for that tainted brother of yours.”

Dean’s fists clench at his side, but he resists the urge to beat them bloody against the door. “Show me the memory – or I’ll rip us both apart trying to get to him without you.”

Something twists behind Michael’s expression, but he smooths it away almost instantly. “What makes you think that would affect me in the slightest?”

And now it’s Dean’s turn to smile sickly sweet. “Because you wouldn’t have shoved that memory
into my head unless you knew I’d come in here to collect.”

Michael blinks once at Dean in surprise, and when he laughs, the sound is almost delighted. His next words catch Dean off guard: “I cannot imagine why my counterpart in this universe was unable to elicit your consent as a vessel. You apply the slightest of pressure on that brother of yours, and you bend the knee like a supplicant.”

And if Dean wasn’t trying to hold back the heady pain from sweeping him from the bar, wasn’t so anxious to make sure his brother and Jack were still alive, he’s sure he would have smashed the cage open himself in reckless anger. Instead, he feels himself deflate.

Michael waits to make sure that Dean’s fully let his words sink in, before speaking again. “Very well, Dean. I will give you the rest of the memory. Let’s see what you do with it.”

Dean feels his face twist with disbelief. “Just like that, huh?” He says, like he’s actually considering backing off. “Nothing up your sleeve, no parole request for good behavior?”

Michael’s eyes flash, and Dean’s suddenly aware that Michael is very, very close to the thin, cracked pane of glass separating them. “Just like that.” He repeats. “But despite your plea of ignorance, I think you have an inkling of what happens when you make deals with the other side.” Michael places one of his hands – calloused in all the same places that Dean’s is, covered in the same nicks and scars – against the glass and waits.

And Dean could call it all off. He’s asking Michael for help – asking Michael to deliberately pour more of himself in Dean’s head. And Dean’s already barely able to separate one from the other. But Sam and Jack are in trouble now, and that’s always going to be the part that matters.

“Come now, Winchester.” Michael simpers, and the cracks in the glass fill with blue light. “Don’t you trust me?”

Dean hesitates once last time, “Said the spider to the fly.” He mutters, and before he can talk himself out of it, he slaps his palm against the glass in the mirror image of Michael.

The soft blue miasma that leaks from the cracks darkens, becomes more corporeal. Dean almost yanks his arm back as segments twist and curl on each other. In his mind, Dean can hear the echoes of the battle between the archangels and Amara – muted, like it’s coming from outside the bar. He grits his teeth and forces himself to stay still as the blue threads from Michael’s cage slither up his arm – securing his hand firmly to the crackling light of Michael’s prison.

He can still back out. He can still pull away. But he won’t, and they both know it.

Dean’s torn from the bar.

“You cannot save me, Lucifer.” Dean enunciates carefully around the pain. His arm – riddled with Her darkness – still hesitant in the air.

“No.” Lucifer says, and his smile is all the brightness of their Father. All the radiance and promise that their Father aims to impart in His future creations, all His rapture and intention – it reflects a hundredfold in Lucifer. And his brother promises: “But I will show you how to save yourself.”

And Dean believes in Lucifer, filled with that blinding faith he thought he would only ever surrender to his Father.
Dean takes Lucifer’s hand.

The Mark on his brother’s arm flares as bright as grace – and Dean feels its warmth and knowledge trickle into him from Lucifer’s grip. Cirri of the Mark spread down Lucifer’s arm, like a different kind of corruption, and Dean feels the same unease he felt when he first sighted it on his brother’s arm.

The tendrils creep down Lucifer’s arm, until they jump between their joined hands, and pour down Dean’s own arm like a parasite. Dean feels his grip slacken as the Mark begins to consume – feed – upon him, drawing out what remains unsoiled from the Darkness’ infection.

Lucifer’s gaze is bright and absorbing as he stands over Dean. His golden wings spread behind him, stretching across the sky and blocking the purple and gold and dark flashes of battle in the cosmos. The shadows on his brother’s face turn sinister.

“Cast Her out, Michael.” Lucifer orders, and his eyes flicker.

Dean’s grip fails, but Lucifer’s tightens, refusing to let Dean slip away. The Mark pours more of its battle into him, and with it – Dean sees.

With a last bloody pulse of the Mark on his arm, Lucifer releases him. Dean half-collapses against the ground, and feels blessed coolness where there was once the taint of the Mark. “Do you understand, Michael?”

“Yes.” Dean gasps.

And he does. An echo of the Mark still rebounds off grace, a pale reflection of its hold over Lucifer, already fading away. But Lucifer – and his Mark – lit up Dean’s grace like he electrified it, and Dean felt Her corruption recoil. He felt Her presence distinct and separate, clearly senses the twisting segments of grace She’s burned through.

“Tear Her out.” His brother commands.

And Dean does.

He flays himself open, using the same grace to rip Her out as he does to heal what’s left – and he excoriates with bloody precision, casting off Her infection until it pours out of him in that dark miasma with all the grace She managed to burn along Her way.

And it’s excruciating. And it’s cleansing. And it feels like he’s slicing his own wing apart – removing the damage and cauterizing everything it’s connected to.

And when it’s done, he’s less of himself. But he’s alive. And the rest will recover.

Lucifer’s grip is on his shoulder, and Dean flinches away. Lucifer hesitates, then retracts his hand. A flicker of guilt pulses in Dean, and he holds out an apologetic hand to his brother to help him up.

“Is it done?” Lucifer asks, voice flatter than Dean expected.

“Yes.” Dean replies simply, and spits out the last of Her miasma. He drops Lucifer’s hand as soon as he’s on his feet, and casts his gaze up into the air. The cosmos light up with the battle, and there’s no reason for Dean and Lucifer to remain out of it. Still, he hesitates.

Lucifer smiles, and some of his good humor returns to his expression. Rather than the malevolence of the shadows, Dean’s brother’s face is washed in the light of Gabriel and Raphael’s fierce attacks.
Dean can’t forget what he saw. What he felt.

“You burned off the grace that she had infected, brother.” Lucifer explains, as if the hesitation on Dean’s face is instead confusion. “I helped you root out the corruption, but you had to tear out some of your power to do so.”

“It will replenish.” Dean replies. His wings flex behind him, lesser for their loss – but whole. Pure.

“Here,” Lucifer says, and he holds out his hand, “I will share with you some of my strength. We need you to rejoin the battle, turn the tide. Our brothers alone cannot hold her back for much longer.”

Lucifer’s hand is rimmed in gold, the Mark on his arm like an omen. Dean doesn’t move to take his hand.

“Michael?” Lucifer asks, confusion creasing his brow.

“I do not think that wise, brother.”

“What?”

“There is something… perverse about that Mark, Lucifer. I felt it. When this is done – when we have defeated Her, Father must remove it.”

Lucifer snaps his offered arm back like Dean slapped it away. Something more ancient then they crests behind his eyes. “This power saved you, Michael.” He says coldly. A salvo of purple discharge ignites the air above them, and Dean turns his head up for a brief moment. “We require it to defeat Her, to lock Her away. Father trusted me as the keeper of the Mark. He knows I can be trusted.”

Dean’s wings crackle with foreboding, like a shivering finger drawn down a spine. “Brother, it is no matter of trust. That Mark –”

“It is.” Lucifer interrupts. His face contorts into something unrecognizable before he smooths it over behind that pleasant mask. “It is about trust. About faith. I have faith in Him, as I trust in you. All that remains is, do you have faith in me?”

And the question hangs between them, growing staler with each moment that Dean struggles to find the answer. His brother saved his life – saved him from dissolving into the Empty. Lucifer abandoned the battle, his chance at glory, to come to Dean’s aid. He offered to share his strength, his grace, to bolster Dean’s reserves. And yet –

And yet, Dean can’t quite smother the sense of foreboding, the covetous and devouring presence he sensed in the Mark as it licked down his skin.

Lucifer waits, face still smooth in patience and fidelity. His golden wings ripple behind him, the paragon of sanctitude and piety, but the Mark is a stain on his arm.

“Michael?” Lucifer asks softly, a younger brother seeking reassurance.

“Yes.” Dean says finally, and builds a wall around all his misgivings, “Yes, I trust you, Lucifer.”

Lucifer’s answering smile is relief incarnate. “We should return to the fight. Raphael will be insufferable if he deals the final blow.”

Dean smiles at his brother, and nods his head once. Lucifer takes one last look at Dean, as if to
reassure himself that Dean is indeed saved. Then he casts his wings wide, and the sheets of gold carry him towards the riotous empyrean.

Dean’s own wings twitch in their impatience to join his siblings, but he doesn’t take to the cosmos yet. He watches Lucifer’s ascension to the battle, watches him rise. And hopes desperately he will never have to watch his brother fall.

Chapter End Notes

Soooo I had 7 "sections" planned for this chapter - and I only hit 3 of them before I cracked 4k. One day I'll learn to tell myself no. I'm a mess.

Thanks for reading <3
Jessica sits inches from where lake water sweeps the shore and wonders if this is the day she’ll reap Dean Winchester.

She knows she won’t. Knows that Michael would take control before she could lead the hunter into the light. But looking down at the Winchester bleeding all that human red and dull grace into the sand – it’s easy to play out the alternative in her head.

The wind picks up, and the gentle swells of the lake turn into white-capped waves. The water rushes further up shore, and would have soaked Jessica’s shoes, had she been fully manifested. And wearing shoes.

Dean sucks in a shuddering gasp, and his bright eyes open – filled with eons that aren’t his. He blinks blindly, but doesn’t see her – five yards away, with water soaking deep into sand where her feet might have been. She’s not disappointed. It’s when he does see her that they’ve got an Archangel-with-a-capital-A problem.

It’s when Dean Winchester starts to break apart that she remembers that humans can be just as big of a pain in the ass.

Jessica remembers Michael’s poisoning at the beginning of it all – because it was a story passed down. Significant. Michael was almost the first archangel to be reaped – snatched away from Death’s scythe with typical archangel bluster and the outstretched hand of the Morningstar. Jessica wasn’t around then – definitely wasn’t going by Jessica, either.

But she’d heard about the archangel slicing apart his corrupted grace – excising the damage. She’s half an angel, after all – knows that’s the equivalent of ripping out a human’s nervous system. Impossible. And yet.

And yet, Dean Winchester slices apart the archangel’s true form like he was deboning a fish – precise. Like he’s done it before. And Jessica takes a step back – several thousand, actually – and watches the aftermath.

The soiled grace is ripped from a wing that simultaneously scrapes the bellies of clouds, lies limp in a bed of sand, and somehow, isn’t really there at all. Grace slicked with muck separates from the source like a shadow severed, and Jessica wonders how pissed Heaven is going to be when they see the result of a Winchester lobbing half-dead grace around like sparkly confetti.

Grace hits the ground, and blooms, and dies. There’s just enough zip in the grace to fuel the creation, and just enough zap to burn it all out. Jessica watches from her carved out space between this realm and the next, and whistles between her teeth. Or would have, if, you know. Manifestation. Teeth.

On the shores of Lake Michigan, in dunes that can’t hold their roots, trees shoot from the sand.
Scraps of spores and petrified bits of seeds that are more rock than potential — soak in the diseased grace and burst upwards in accelerated growth. The trunks and canopies rise nearly 100 feet tall, and then stop, like they’ve reached a predetermined limit.

The shoreline of the Indiana Dunes National Park is blanketed in trees from fossilized bits of decay that went extinct millions of years ago. Dunes that were once held together with scratchy grass are ripped apart, and lose their shape as they’re treated as an impromptu forest floor.

For a shivering moment, Dean had borne a forest.

And then a few moments after, it dies. Dean’s already gone – wrapped up in dark, clean wings – lesser for the self-dissection, but Winchesters have never needed all that much to get them going.

The forest dies in stages, and Jessica sticks around to watch.

It’s always been her favorite part.

“Get out of him.”

The demon in Sam glances in Jack’s direction, and the white sheen flicks away, revealing impatient hazel. “This is why I typically don’t leave hell. The youth.” Sam’s voice says, but it’s flatter than Jack could have imagined, like champagne with the bubbles shaken out. “Age always brings out a sort of… piquant flavor. Peppery.”

The demon straightens Sam’s torn suit fastidiously, half-frowning at a chalky substance on the right sleeve. He hooks a foot underneath Cesar and flips him neatly on his back. The formerly possessed man stirs slightly, his face creased with pain and confusion. The demon studies his former vessel mutely as the man weakly begins to palm the ground. He glances up at Jack, as if to confirm he’s watching, and then holds three fingers in the air as if he’s balancing something.

Jack’s heart shudders in his chest, “Wait – “

But the demon twists Sam’s fingers in a casual half-circle, and Cesar’s neck snaps like a seal’s been cracked. Jack stares dumbly down at the corpse still twitching as the final impulses and muscle spasms ease into stillness. Cesar’s face is turned away, but the horrifying angle of his neck causes bile to sear the back of Jack’s throat.

There’s a flicker of something behind the opalescence of the demon’s eyes, like a touch of shimmery hazel, but the demon runs a hand back through Sam’s hair, and the conflict is smoothed away.

“You… didn’t have to – ” Jack tries to say, but it’s mostly shock that fuels the protests.

“Don’t be an imbecile.” The demon replies simply, “Didn’t your father teach you anything?”

Jack’s teeth click together like he’s been slapped.

The demon bends over, and pulls a cell phone and gun from Cesar’s pockets. The gun he slides into Sam’s waistband. He fiddles with the phone for a few seconds, like he’s unused to the new hands — as if he hasn’t already bloodied them.

Finally, Sam-not-Sam snaps his fingers, and Jack’s restraints are severed. Jack is startled enough that he doesn’t immediately move. He feels prickles where the restraints once cut off blood circulation.
The demon considers Jack, and there’s a foreign expression of dismissiveness and disappointment that Jack’s never seen on Sam’s face. Finally, the demon tosses the phone at Jack and, out of reflex, Jack snaps it from the air.

“Call him.”

“Call who?”

A flicker of irritation briefly mars Sam’s face, but is quickly tucked back behind the mask. “I don’t tolerate inane questions. Winchester, Michael – whoever answers the phone, I’m not concerned with details.”

And it’s not even a question. “No.” Jack says instantly, and he drops the phone to the ground.

Sam’s expression doesn’t change, aside from a slow blink.

And then Jack’s torn off his feet, experiences the sick feeling of tumbling through open space before his front hits one of the gallery walls. He hits it hard, driving the breath from his lungs, and he sags to the floor. Something halts his progress, and he’s jerked around until his back slams against the wall. Jack blinks stars from his eyes, tries to suck air into resisting lungs.

Sam – it’s not Sam – hasn’t moved from the spot, just keeps those borrowed eyes on Jack as if surprised to see that Jack’s found himself supernaturally tossed and pinned to the wall.

“I apologize, this must be new for you.” Sam says, and it almost sounds courteous. “But do not mistake me for one of those petulant little hellions that call themselves demons.”

Jack’s shoes scrape the floor, and the corner of a punctured canvas digs painfully into his upper back. “I’m not… calling… anyone…” he gasps out.

But the demon doesn’t seem surprised by his answer as he steps over his former vessel. In fact, he brings his heel down hard on the phone as he steps past, grinding it into unusable pieces. “What impression have I given you that implies I would ask a question twice?”

But Jack can’t answer as the demon holding Sam hostage redoubles the pressure pinning him to the wall. Jack bites his tongue hard enough to taste warmth and iron. The demon is several feet away, wrapped up in the man that Jack trusts more than anyone, and Jack feels… Jack is…

He’s scared.

“I’m going to kill you, now.” The demon says softly. “And I’m going to let just enough of Sam through the cracks so he can watch.”

And Jack doesn’t mean to gasp out: “Why?”

The demon’s laugh is stilted, affected. Miles away from the warmth he expects. “You really don’t understand how this game is played, do you? How refreshing. Maybe there is something to all that drivel about youth.”

Jack fights against the invisible restraints pinning him to the wall, but it’s useless. The sunshine of Sam’s eyes disappears behind cloud white, and the pressure intensifies, twisting Jack’s insides. He feels something break inside, and he coughs – feels warm red on his tongue.

Then he’s falling flat on his ass, the painting he was pinned against coming off the wall and bashing him on the crown of his head. His vision is a little disjointed, but when he finally pulls it back
together, Jack sees the rigidity of the demon’s face. Like he’s trying to hold himself together. The hazel eyes are back, but before Jack can cough out a name, the conflict is erased, and the white eyes roll back.

“Azazel’s tainted children.” The demon says, and brushes a hand down his chest, smoothing away wrinkles. “Hardy. But not unmanageable.”

Jack doesn’t know what that means – doesn’t know who Azazel is.

“Sam?” He tries, but the demon’s face doesn’t change expression.

“Exactly.”

Jack is finally getting his breath back when a force yanks him up. He floats weightless for a horrible second, and then the floor is ripped from under him as he’s thrown. This time, he doesn’t sink to the floor – but is immobilized against the wall. He grunts in pain, but can’t get words out past the throbbing pain radiating up his back.

Sam’s head turns on his neck, disturbing and robotic. He raises a hand casual and slow, and fear ignites in Jack’s stomach.

And he doesn’t mean to, but it’s sent off into the howling void of millions of prayers before he can snatch it back: Dean!

“If it helps you in these last moments,” Sam says, “the Winchesters won’t survive you for much longer.”

Sam raises his hand, and Jack knows he shouldn’t – knows what the Winchesters and Cas would say – but it’s this or die. It’s this or let Sam rip him apart.

Warm light fills his eyes as he unravels the threads of his soul, spooling them into something else. Power and strength fill all the gaps inside of him like how it used to, like how it’s supposed to. A shifting smokiness covers Sam, not enough to smother the figure, but enough to see that something is wrong.

Jack severs the demon’s connection holding him upright, and lands hard on his feet. The demon in Sam doesn’t have the emotional range to fully reflect his surprise, but there’s a beat of confusion and discontent.

Jack feels his palm grow warm with the piece of his soul he twisted off, but despite the fear pulsing in his chest, he hesitates.

“There you are, losing my respect.” Sam says, a wheezy sigh, and then flicks his hand at Jack to send him flying against the wall. Jack feels slimy tendrils of the demon’s power settle around him, but he slices out with his fist and severs the connection. Sam frowns. “You’re going to run out of soul long before I grow tired, boy. The only question remaining is how much of it you’re going to take with you downstairs.”

Fury rolls in, and Jack smashes out with a shimmery attack of his own. He doesn’t want to hurt Sam – just knock the demon prone. The demon raises one of Sam’s eyebrows, and bats the wave of power aside. It deflects to the side, smashing against the gallery wall. Somewhere in the building, an alarm begins to blare. Jack shields his face as debris and splinters rain down on them, and when the dust finally clears, both of them are covered in flaking plaster.

The demon doesn’t seem to notice the damage, just watches Jack wipe plaster off his face with milky
eyes. Jack tenses, waiting for the next snap of fingers, wave of a hand.

But the demon holds Sam absolutely still, and Jack doesn’t sense the supernatural blow until it wings him in the side and sends him crashing back against the wall. His head cracks painfully against the edge of a frame; he feels the skin split, but the golden power seals it up almost instantly.

Sam watches him disdainfully from several feet away, before his gaze turns inward for a moment. Then he says, “Sam is most concerned for you. For your soul.”

“I’ll rip you out of him.” Jack spits, wipes blood from the corner of his mouth as he hauls himself to his feet. He feels hollow, his hands shaking at his sides until he clenches them tightly.

“Better than you have tried.”

Jack braces, and is already reaching for that shining center – ready to rip off more and supercharge the small blip of grace he has left – when black blooms in front of his eyes.

Jack sees them for a second before the power burns out of him – the inky spread of dark wings settling, folding back. Jack swears he feels the flexible scrape of feathers against his forearm, sees the smooth, uninjured perfection, and then they’re gone – tucked away, hidden.

Dean’s back is to him, having appeared between him and the demon possessing his brother. Jack can’t see Dean’s face, but he sees the tightness in his jaw, the angry set of his shoulders. Drying blood slicked down his back.

“Jack?” Dean queries briefly, and his voice is tight with anger.

“I’m okay.” Jack lies. “But, Sam, he – “

“I see it.” Dean says shortly, and Jack almost flinches back from the furious evenness in Dean’s tone. Jack can’t see the smokiness surrounding Sam anymore, but Dean’s probably seeing clouds of it billowing off his brother.

The demon peers at Dean through his brother’s face. “Michael.” He says, like he’s greeting his final party attendee hours after dinner’s been cleared.

“Not so much.” Dean says. Pressure ripples off him, and Jack takes a hesitant step back.

The demon raises one of Sam’s shoulders in a stiff approximation of dismissal. “Names.” He says, “Not so important.”

“You got exactly one chance off to piss off back to hell.” Dean says, and his hand twitches at his side. “Or I’ll stub you out like a cigarette.”

Jack takes a few steps around until he’s more on the periphery of the fight – Dean’s face is lined with steel. His gaze doesn’t flicker towards Jack, but Jack knows Dean’s keeping an eye on him all the same.

The demon doesn’t laugh maniacally or arch a contemptuous brow. Nothing so classically demonic. He watches Dean like he’s just passing through. Finally, in that odd reedy whistle he slides into Sam’s voice, he says, “I’ve never held much esteem for witticisms. Lilith was too stupid for raillery. Though Alastair – he did enjoy his little ripostes, no?”

Jack can only see the side of Dean’s face, and he’s shocked to see Dean flinch. But if the demon’s pleased to have hit the mark, not a trace of it shows.
Dean’s mask has been cracked, now tinged with something more desperate. “Wrong answer,” he says, and his eyes crackle blue.

Nothing immediately gives away the exchange of blows, but the room’s pressure immediately intensifies. It feels like an elephant’s settled on Jack’s chest, pressing all the air out of him. His ears pop, and the alarms in the background grow louder. Jack presses a fist to his chest, tries to keep his eyes open to watch the unmoving battle waged in front of him.

The demon possessing Sam stands rigid, but Jack can see strain. White eyes roll down to cover the warm color, and his mouth twitches. Jack’s watched archangels rip through demons like wet sheets of paper. He doesn’t know who the demon inside of Sam is – but knows that whatever can withstand the full force of a powered-up archangel is worse than anything they’d been prepared to fight.

The crushing sensation increases, and Jack feels his knees click together painfully as he finally gives up the fight of staying on his feet. The lights flicker overhead – some pop out entirely – but Jack can’t keep his eyes open, and –

And then it stops.

Jack sucks in a shuddering breath of air, and the edges of his vision return. He looks up, and sees Dean wiping a fist under his nose, and his hand – when it drops back to his side – is bloody.

“Dean?” Jack tries to say, but it comes out as a gasp.

Something like gratification flashes behind the whites of Sam’s eyes. The demon says, “Either the quality of archangels has deteriorated since I’ve last been topside, or you’ve burned off quite a lot of all that zip.”

Dean grits his teeth, but doesn’t reply. Jack glances at the blood drying on Dean’s back – remembers the smooth perfection of his uninjured pinion – and wonders just how much grace Dean had to sacrifice.

Sam’s eyes slide to Jack’s, like he’s forgotten the Nephilim is there. The lights flicker overhead again, and Jack feels something curl around him – wrap around his throat –

And then Dean is suddenly between them, and the force disappears instantly.

“He is remarkably defenseless.” The demon says, but coming from Sam’s mouth, it’s like the fulfillment of every fear that Jack’s had in the last few months. Jack can’t see Sam’s face from where he’s crouched behind Dean, but the words come through loud and clear, “I could snap his neck quick-as-you-please. Wouldn’t even feel it. Guaranteed.”

“Fuck you.” Dean says, and his voice is steady, even as his hands shake with exhaustion at his side.

“It’s an offer I’ll only make once.” Sam’s voice whistles. “A quick death. I’ve never shared your teacher’s predilection for all that grisly mess, but patience we always had in common. And I can promise nothing but patience as I eviscerate –”

The words choke off when Dean raises his hand into the air. This time, the pressure isn’t as overwhelming and Jack manages to pull himself to his feet. He takes a step to the side, hand against his throat, and sees that Dean’s attempting to yank the demon from Sam. Sam’s eyes bulge slightly, and the demon clenches his jaw, but there’s no sign that Dean’s efforts are working. Another line of blood snakes down Dean’s upper lip, and his hand claws in the air.

Then, the demon flicks his wrist casually, and the pressure cuts out. Dean jerks like he’s been
punched in the gut, and his hand drops to his side.

“Pathetic.” Sam’s voice chides Dean, “Your brother was able to rip Alastair apart with just a few quarts of demon blood. And you can’t even perform a little angelic exorcism.”

Demon blood?

The demon gives the ghost of a smile, and straightens his right cuff. “I don’t think you’re putting forth your best efforts, Michael. Putting on kid gloves because I’m riding around in Sam? A fool’s mistake. You wear your heart on your sleeve.”

Jack had forgotten about the gun tucked in the demon’s waistband – doesn’t remember until he’s drawn it.

Dean’s expression is disbelieving. “A gun? Gonna give me some new button holes?”

“Hardly.” And the demon presses the barrel of the gun against the underside of Sam’s jaw.

“What are – ” Jack starts to ask, but the demon talks over him without taking his hazel eyes off Dean.

“I can pop a few bullets into this borrowed brain of mine,” the demon says easily, and the white eyes roll back down, “and I’ll spit them out into your hand. But you’re an experienced hunter. What do you think happens to Sam after I take on a fresh suit?”

Jack’s blood runs cold, as much at the demon’s words as the shattered expression on Dean’s face.

“And before you get cute and wait for me to put the gun away – I can do a lot more damage to this sack of organs before you can strip even a tenth of me off these bones.”

Dean swallows back his anger and fear – heart on his sleeve – and tries to slather on some kind of disbelief. “So what’s the play then, asswipe? I roll over and take it pretty? ’cause I guarantee that you won’t like what happens once you smash open that cage.”

The demon jabs the gun painfully under Sam’s chin, his fingers curling on the trigger. “I’m aware of the delicate balance in your horror show of a mind. And though my original intent was to wipe the Winchesters off the board, maybe there’s a simpler option.”

Jack hears the piercing screams of police sirens in the distance.

“There’s no end to this with you walkin’ out the door in Sam.” Dean promises darkly.

“Then you’ll get your brother back with a few extra skylights. One offer. One chance. One right answer.”

“You’re a shit negotiator, Herb Cohen.”

“What is he talking about, Dean?” Jack asks quietly, but he can feel the milky eyes of the demon settle on him.

“Hell under one rule, boy.” The demon answers for Dean, and his eerie eyes return to Dean’s face. “I can unite all the factions with enough time and patience. Just takes a little grease here, pressure there. But with an archangel enforcer on a short leash…” Dean’s face hardens, “Then the revolution is already over.”

A sick heaviness pools in Jack’s gut. “Dean would never – “…

“- would never let a demon possess Sam!”

White eyes flick away, “That’s up to Michael, isn’t it? Every negotiation needs leverage. And I got six and a half feet of it.”

Jack ignores the demon, steps closer to Dean. He brings his hand up to Dean’s arm and squeezes, but Dean doesn’t glance in his direction – can’t take his eyes off the gun pressed under Sam’s chin. “Dean.” Jack says, “Dean, you can’t – ”

“Rochester PD, get on the ground – ” Jack jumps back like he’s been electrified, and he jerks his head around. He hadn’t noticed that the sirens of squad cars had cut off – hadn’t even considered that the sirens were intended for them after the demon had smashed away Jack’s attack and set off the gallery alarms.

Four officers had entered the hallway, stepping over the debris of the shredded wall from the earlier destruction. Two have their service weapons trained on Dean – as if the blood soaked into the back of his shirt is an indication of danger, while the remaining two level weapons on the demon and Jack.

The first officer that had spoken trains her gun carefully on Dean, and says crisply, “On the ground – slowly – hands where I can – “

“Martinez!” The officer drawing down on Sam calls, finally seeing the gun in Sam’s dusty hands. “Drop the gun!” The first officer – Martinez – orders and the rest of the officers jerk their weapons around and train them on Sam’s center of mass.

The demon quirks Sam’s mouth almost quizzically. “Honestly.” He says, and then before Jack can blink, the pistol is jerked from Sam’s chin, and fires a single shot, drilling a hole into the forehead of the nearest officer. The retort of the gun echoes in Jack’s ears before he realizes that the officers have opened fire.

It’s over before Jack can process. Jack feels a pressure against his shoulder, and he’s suddenly on the other side of the gallery, watching from a distance. The patch of floor where Dean stood is now occupied by just a few drops of blood. Dean’s placed himself in the line of fire, the bullets meant for Sam slam into Dean harmlessly. The demon watches on passively, no vindication or pleasure marking Sam’s face. Finally, the magazines empty and the guns click in the silence. A last flattened bullet slips from the hole it burrowed through Dean’s shirt and hits the ground with a quiet ping.

“Good, Michael.” The reedy voice says quietly.

Dean raises a hand and a pulse of energy slams into the three remaining officers. Jack’s already rushing back across the room when he sees the officers go down. In his hurry, he can’t see a chest rising and falling, but sees Martinez’ face twitch – knows Dean’s knocked them unconscious.

Dean turns and fists a hand into Sam’s torn shirt and slams him back against the wall. Jack winces, though the demon gives no reaction or start of surprise. “Get out of my brother.” Dean threatens lowly, and his eyes fill with that shocking blue.

“Are you sure?” The demon says, “I don’t believe that was one of the options I laid out.”

Dean hesitates, his hand loosening slightly on Sam’s jacket. His gaze drops to the seared skin where
Sam’s anti-possession tattoo once protected him with warding and ink, and his expression hardens. Before Dean can say anything more, Sam’s fist raises almost casually before rocketing out and catching Dean hard across the cheek. Dean staggers back, and Sam’s fist comes back spackled with his brother’s blood. Dean wipes the back of his hand against his jaw, but doesn’t strike back.

“Sentiment. I presumed a few decades with Alastair would have purged you of it.” The demon says coolly, and then savagely – almost faster than Jack can see – slams his fist against Dean’s face again once, twice, three times. The force of the blows cracks the slick tile of the floor – spiderwebbing outwards. The right side of Dean’s face is a wash of red, and he sags in the grip that the demon has on his jacket, but he still turns his face upwards. Towards his brother.

Something stutters in the blank expanse of the demon’s face, that same conflict that Jack saw earlier cracking through the mask. The demon’s hand slips, and Dean lands hard on his knees.

Dean’s voice is quiet, “Sam?” The milky eyes roll away, hazel fills the gaps and for a lightning moment, he’s there – Sam is there.

“Dean?” Sam croaks, and he glances down at his bloody hand, and his brow furrows, “I – ” And then Sam is yanked back behind the curtain, and the demon emerges.

“Slippery.” The demon remarks, flattening Sam’s tone. And then he drives Sam’s knee up into Dean’s chin, and – caught off balance – Dean pitches backwards, landing on his back. The demon is there in a heartbeat, hand fisting into Dean’s jacket and raising him a few inches off the floor. “Still not going to fight back? Prove you’re worth your salt, Michael.” He raises his bloody fist again, but Dean manages to knock it to the side, and Sam’s fist shatters the tile next to Dean’s head.

“Leave him alone!” Jack yells, and – so much easier once you’ve already opened that door – he churns some of his soul into brightness.

“Jack!” Dean slurs a warning, sensing the surge in power, but Jack’s already too far. His blue eyes ignite gold, and he smashes the bright coruscation into the demon. The demon, not expecting the attack, is brutally shoved off Dean, and Sam slides against the floor until he hits the wall. But all Jack bought was a few seconds of reprieve – the demon is already hauling Sam to his feet, a slick of Dean’s blood smeared across his cheek like war paint.

The demon radiates irritation as he sets his sights on Jack, ignoring Dean for a moment. The demon raises an angry hand, and with the small pocket of power remaining from the pinched off reserve, Jack can see a smoky wave of something shuddering through the air towards him. He’s too slow – can already feel fatigue settling in his muscles, and the influx is power is too large to avoid –

But Dean is there – and he raises an arm in front of the sweeping upsurge as if he can catch it like a chunked beer. The demon’s attack collides and ricochets outward like it’s hit a wall – and the gallery walls and ceiling around Dean explode, raining debris and plaster around them.

“Wait, Dean – “ Jack coughs, but it’s too late – the ceiling abutting the already damaged wall begins to crumble, and large chunks of the second level begin to plummet down in the corner. Where the police officers have been knocked prone. Throwing out the last of the soul he ripped off, Jack sends a crest of power outwards, and the metal piping and portions of the ceiling are shoved harmlessly to the side. The officers are dusty – but alive.

Jack heaves a gulping breath, sucking in dust and plaster. He’s spent – physically and mentally – and his eyes water as he slowly sinks to his knees. A hand claps onto his shoulder, and he flinches away, before blinking watery eyes upwards to see Dean.
Dean’s face is smashed to all hell – but his eyes are clear and bright with concern. “Jack, it’s enough, okay? You’ve done enough.”

Jack nods mutely, doesn’t think he can do much more even if Dean asked.

“All answer, Michael. I don’t ask twice.” Sam’s voice is barely audible over the roaring in Jack’s ears.

Dean doesn’t turn around when he answers, and his agitated green eyes remain on Jack, “I don’t give two shits about Hell. I don’t care whose ass is in the throne. Fuck – I don’t even care that you might be the one player able to stop Michael. But any choice that involves you walking out of here in my brother ain’t no choice at all.”

There’s a beat of terrible silence, and the dust falls like the last flakes settling in a snow globe.

“Then you are of no consequence.” The demon concludes, and Jack sees a stained hand raise over Dean’s shoulder.

“Sorry.” Dean says to Jack, and there’s a sad smile on his bloody face. Two fingers press against Jack’s clammy forehead, and he flinches back.

There’s a roaring in his ears – a sick sensation gripping his insides. Something feather-soft grazes his arm. And then Dean’s fingers slip away from his forehead, and the sounds of the room change. Jack feels the heady pull of unconsciousness, but he manages to crack open bleary eyes.

He’s in the Bunker. And he’s alone.

He falls into blackness before he can piece the rest together.

Sam’s had a bad back for a few years now.

Not the problem he’d thought he’d have in his mid-thirties, in whatever cushy law office he landed in, shuffling papers and drafting depositions. Maybe he’d have a bit of a beer gut – sedentary office life style and all. Maybe a minor case of carpal tunnel or something that Dean would make fun of him for.

But now, his back is fucking killing him. Because a Nephilim had to burn off some of his soul in order to stop Sam from beating his brother to death with his bare fists.

The demon is currently holding his – shit, their? – body rigid, like the pulled muscle from being thrown into the wall doesn’t affect him in the slightest. And – remembering the gun shoved on the underside of his jaw only minutes before – he thinks maybe the demon just doesn’t care.

Jack’s gone – and that’s the biggest relief that Sam’s felt since the demon burned his tattoo off and slithered inside. Dean’s hauling himself to his feet, wiping the back of his hand against the blood dripping into his vision. Sam can’t move a muscle as his brother swings around and glares at him with agitated green eyes – glaring at the thing curdling inside Sam.

Sam’s been possessed before. But he’s never felt mere milimeters from the surface – never experienced possession in such crystal clarity. Though that’s exactly what the demon wants.

“Comfortable, Sam?” The demon asks aloud, turning the question inward. Something flickers in
Dean’s expression. “Because you’re going to watch as I shred your brother into more manageable pieces.”

Dean.

The demon raises Sam’s hand – and Sam can’t fight it. He’d come close a few times, struggled to regain control for just a few seconds, and hardly been able to put a stutter in the demon’s stride. The sensation of the demon trying to throw Dean back against the wall feels like a tickling sensation in his blood, like oil bubbling in water. Dean winces at the onslaught, but remains standing.

Then Dean is gone.

The demon lowers Sam’s hand slowly. Sam can only see what the demon sees – and right now, neither of them see an archangel.

There’s the sound of wings settling, and a warm hand presses against the back of Sam’s head. Warmth and light blossoms into Sam – chipping away at the smoke that’s latched onto his bones. “C’mon, Sam…” He hears his brother mutter under his breath. Sam feels something of the demon’s control give away and recede. But before he can press the advantage, the smoke bubbles back with a vengeance.

The demon spins around faster than Sam thought possible. He hauls Dean in closer by his shirt collar, and then slams him bodily back against the wall. One of the last paintings to remain secured to the wall is knocked from its pins as Dean is thrown backwards with enough force to crack the hard-paneled walls.

Sam can’t see them. But, with the second sense that he’s gleaning from the demon’s perspective, can sense the unfurl of wings as Dean tries to pull away from the demon’s grip. The demon yanks Dean forward and then smashes him backwards, jarring Dean momentarily. Blood drips from Dean’s jaw and splatters on Sam’s hand, hot as acid.

Dean’s gaze is dazed for a moment, and Sam struggles to comprehend just what Dean had to do to purge whatever corruption Gabriel’s Lance had leaked into him – how much of himself he had to tear apart to come and save him and Jack. And now Dean’s going to die.

Sam’s going to kill him.

Sam feels despair and fury fuel his side of the ongoing skirmish in his body to wrest back control from the demon. The demon knocks aside most of Sam’s clumsy, unpracticed attempts, but one push makes it through. Sam takes control long enough to cause a brief stutter, and the demon’s grip on Dean’s jacket slackens. Dean sags against the wall before catching himself. His pained green eyes seem to look through the demon – straight into Sam.

“Come on, Sammy.” Dean says, and his lips curve into a pained smile, “Gonna let a punk demon ruin this beautiful face?”

The conflict boils under Sam’s skin – even as his body is completely still, Sam can feel tendrils of the demon chasing after him, can feel himself blossoming through the crevices, squeezing through patches of taped down cracks. But the demon flares up with a fierce reprisal, and begins to beat down at Sam’s crumbling attempts to steal himself back.

He’s so close – can feel the tips of his fingers twitch from his own doing, can smell the awful stench of seared flesh as he sucks in his own breath of air. But the demon’s smoke wriggles around and Sam feels it slip through his fingers – unable to get more than a tenuous grip on the demon.
And then Dean’s hand is back, and Sam feels strength and warmth dump into him like a fever – Dean bolstering that Winchester nerve and grit.

And bit by aching bit – Sam pushes back against the tide, forcing the demon into a smaller and smaller pocket in the center. And it hurts – it fucking *hurts* – hurts like a deep bruise, like Sam’s pulverizing his insides to excise demon gunk off his bones.

And finally – finally, Sam feels himself click into place, holding back the swirling mass of smoke at his core.

“Dean.” He gasps, but it’s his mouth moving, his words. He gets his eyes working, and he focuses them on the green eyes of his brother – green eyes, not electric blue – and grounds himself. “I got him.” He chokes past clenched teeth, and his brother’s hand grips his shoulder even tighter.

*You can’t hold me.* The demon whispers in the back of his mind, thrashing like a slimy eel.

“I held back Lucifer.” Sam grunts aloud, because he can. “I can hold back *you.*”

And from there – it’s almost anticlimactic. Dean’s palm presses against his forehead, and Sam closes his eyes. He feels feather-soft brushes against his insides, the cool soothing spread of something foreign being stripped away. Like aloe smoothed over a burn.

Sam feels rather than sees the smoke pour out of him, and then it’s gone in a quick jerk. He opens bruised eyes, and sees the roil and churn of demonic vapor squirming in the air. He hears his brother say something – but he’s already falling in the black – can’t tell if his brother was speaking in Enochian or not.

Then, before darkness caves in: “You’re okay, Sammy.”

The last words for a while.

“You’re okay.”

Chapter End Notes

God, lots to say. First, I have NEVER struggled with a chapter so much in my (albeit short) fic-writing career. Good god. This is what happens when you go off book. So sorry everyone had to wait over a week for kind of a meh wrap-up. I originally had this planned (in my head) to be a little longer, maybe with Dean actually caving in to the demon’s demands, but then I was writing it and was like "uh ok Dean wouldn’t ever be okay with a demon riding around in Sam." At least not how I write ‘em. And with that, the rest of it fell apart, and I needed to get the demon out. Funny how plans change like that.

Second - I'm leaving for a trip, and will be gone for two weeks... So, sorry - no chapter updates for a while! This is a good place to stop though - we'll get going on the second Horseman when I get back. (Fucking finally, cheers the peanut gallery).

Third - if anyone else was disappointed with the Michael!Dean wrap up in the show, Exultation is writing a canon-divergence fic taking place after Ouroboros, which I'm really excited about, so please check it out - it's called "Passenger."
Thanks for your patience with this chapter - sorry there's an unexpected break in the posting schedule. Thanks for reading/commenting! <3

EDIT: I'm trying really hard to cram in writing a chapter before packing - it won't be long, and it won't get into the second horseman, but hopefully this means I can have my sister publish it next week while I'm gone! Fingers crossed!
Sorry everyone - I’m hiking in Peru without internet. My sister was supposed to post this draft on Monday. Apparently my multiple effing reminder texts weren’t enough. Sorry! I’m still in Peru so I’ll be slower responding to things and the next chapter will be a little delayed, but at least here’s one a little earlier than I thought!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Our top story tonight, folks - the nation’s newest national park made headlines again last week, and not because of recent budget cuts. We’re going live to the newly designated Indiana Dunes National Park, where KDCN’s own Rachel Liang is on scene. Rachel, tell us what we’re looking at here.”

“Thanks, Marc. I’m standing here with the Indiana Dunes’ Lead Ecologist, Martha Wright, and we’re just a few miles west from the popular West Beach, right here in the heart of the national park. Before we get to Martha, I just want to show a few shots of the sheer scale of what we’re looking at – ” The rain-splattered camera zooms out, and refocuses, capturing in its lens the huge expanse of a crumbling forest. Long sloping trunks, bare of branches, sag towards the churned sand of beach. Some of the trees towards the heart of the forest remain standing – their tangled trunks and canopies holding each other precariously upright. The camera does a slow pan – but it can’t take in the sheer scale and depth of the mangled forest. The camera shifts and refocuses on the news anchor and her botanist interviewee – patches of the forest visible behind them. “The National Park Service has delayed releasing a statement, but as you can see – we’re looking at what appears to be an entire forest that seemingly appeared out of nowhere. Dr. Wright, what can you tell us?”

“I wish I had more answers for you, Rachel. I’ve been an Ecologist here at Indiana Dunes before it was designated National Park status earlier this year – and let me tell you, I have never seen or heard anything like this in my career. Let me start by clarifying that calling these ‘trees’ is a bit of a misnomer – what we’re actually looking at here are more closely related to the lycopsids family – meaning they’re closer to present day club moss growth than trees.”

“You’re saying this is some kind of moss infestation?”

“No, not exactly. I wish I could say that it can’t get stranger than that – but we’ve been able to identify a few of the species, and – “

“Anything that would explain the sudden growth? Are we looking at a new invasive species?”

“No. In fact, Rachel, some of what we’ve identified indicate we’re looking at Sigallaria and Lepidodendron growth– plants that have been extinct for over 300 million years. We’ve only been able to identify them based on fossilized and petrified bits of the spores that these massive plants produced.”

“Fascinating. Dr. Wright, do you suspect that we’re looking at some new form of ecological terrorism, or – “

The door to the Bunker’s entertainment room opens, and Sam thumbs the mute button on the remote. Cas enters slowly, like he’s expecting to catch Sam napping.
“Hey.” Sam says, and powers off the TV entirely, pulling himself to his feet. “How was the hunt?”

Cas shrugs, “No problems.” The angel answers vaguely. “Dean and I managed to track down a cell of Michael’s army in Pittsburg, and another in Buellton. Michael’s army is much more dispersed that I had anticipated.”

Sam eases himself onto the arm of the long couch. His back is still giving him the odd painful twinge – despite the numerous healing sessions that Dean had attempted over the last week. Apparently, ripping a demon out of yourself is a young man’s game – and Sam’s had a slow week of recovery.

“How’s Dean?”

Cas blinks mournfully at Sam for a moment before glancing over his shoulder. Satisfied there’s no one listening in, he closes the door with a hardly audible click.

“That bad, huh?” Sam asks, trying to make it a joke, but feels his stomach sink.

“I believe that Michael’s grace has recovered sufficiently. At least, Dean is no longer suffering ill-effects from stripping the corrupted grace from Michael’s true form. It’s still unclear to me how he was able to accomplish that.” Cas says slowly.

“Yeah, he shuts down if I even mention it. But he’s fine?” Sam presses.

Cas shrugs, and he looks tired. “I don’t know, Sam. He doesn’t open up to me much about it. I know Michael is troubling him. More than he used to.”

Sam shivers, and gingerly rubs a hand against his sore lower back. “He showed me what it’s like in there. It’s… not good.”

“We should turn our efforts towards tracking down the second Horseman.” Cas says gently, but Sam still feels the twist of guilt and irritation. But he smothers it down. He knows that Cas isn’t trying to bring up lingering bad blood.

Days prior, Dean had been champing at the bit for Rowena to power up the tracking spell and hand over the location for the second Horseman. Sam and Cas had talked (read: yelled at) him off the ledge – finally managing to convince Dean that he needed a few days to recoup his shredded grace, and Sam needed time to heal. To say Dean wasn’t pleased with the decision would be an understatement.

“I’m worried, Cas. I’m worried something’s wrong and he’s not telling us again.” Sam admits. “We don’t have a plan to get Michael out of him – so it’s not like having all of the Horseman rings is a priority for us right now.”

“Not unless your brother is planning on jumping into Lucifer’s cage regardless.” Cas says brutally, but there’s no harshness on his face. Just concern.

Sam doesn’t say anything for a long few seconds, just lets it sink in and deflate. “Yeah.” He admits. “But I’ve hidden War’s ring. Just in case. We can’t let him, Cas. I’m not letting him.”

Cas hums his agreement, but he still seems troubled. The silence hangs in the air, Cas watching him with a serious gaze. Sam senses the change in conversation before it’s even happened.

“How are you feeling?”

Sam doesn’t shrug – that still hurts – but he raises a hand in a so-so gesture. “My back is still acting
up. Get a headache sometimes. Dean’s cleared up most of it.”

“And… the rest?”

Sam sighs – knows that Cas had been dancing around this conversation since Dean had flown them back from Rochester a week earlier. “Am I having a tough time being possessed again?”

Cas doesn’t push, just waits.

“What do you want me to say, Cas? Demons got the jump on us. It’s not the first time. I’ll deal with it.”

“Dean told me what happened. With the former vessel. And the police officer.”

“Yeah, I’m sure he did.” Sam snaps, feeling a small zing of anger. “And I’m sure you’re here to tell me it wasn’t my fault – that those deaths aren’t on my hands. That I didn’t come close to letting that white-eyed son of a bitch kill Jack and Dean. Stop – listen.” Sam adds, when Cas opens his mouth to interrupt. “I’ll make my peace with it. My way.” Sam knows that Cas’ intentions are well-meaning – but this isn’t the first time that Sam’s found blood on his hands that someone else left there. Meg, Lucifer, Gadreel. They’ve all left their scars and bad memories behind. But that’s all they are. Something to leave behind. “I appreciate it, Cas.” He adds after the silence stretches to a breaking point. “But there’s nothing you can say that will help. Not right now.”

Cas doesn’t take offense, just takes the blow in silence. “I understand, Sam.” And maybe Cas is thinking of the weeks that Lucifer rode around in his own vessel. Or maybe Cas just knows when to take a step back.

“So, how much did you get?” Sam finally asks, turning back to the original discussion.

“Seven of Michael’s army in total. We nearly have enough for the final Horseman’s location, according to Rowena’s estimates.” Cas answers. “Dean’s delivering the captured grace to the lockbox in Rowena’s room.”

“No, Cas. Of hotel conditioner.”

“We didn’t stay in a hotel, Sam.”

“Oh, my god.” Sam scrubs a hand down his face, “Yes, I’m talking about grace.”

Cas pulls his brows together in a look of perfect consternation. “Did you mention your suspicions to him?”
“Yeah, and when I did, he said that he was *doubling up* on the grace vials.”

Cas still doesn’t seem convinced. “What else could he be doing with the collected grace?”

“I was kinda hoping you could tell me. Maybe he’s… reabsorbing it?”

But Cas doesn’t answer for a long few seconds, just frowns thoughtfully. “That is extremely unlikely.” He finally replies. “We’re collecting relatively miniscule amounts from the Michael Monsters – particularly considering the grace degrades over time and with use. With Michael’s full power under his control, there’s no reason for Dean to be… ingesting the grace. It would be… a dump in the bucket.”

“A drop.” Sam corrects, on autopilot. He drums his fingers on the worn fabric of the couch. Cas is probably right. Why would Dean be holding back on the grace they’re pooling together for the tracking spell? Dean’s been pushing for the Horseman locations more than anyone. Sam must be paranoid – looking for signs that Dean is hiding something. They’ve got problems in spades. Sam doesn’t need to invent more. “Yeah, okay.” Sam admits. “Guess I’m just nervous. You’re right. Why would Dean be holding back grace?”

Dean still isn’t sure why he’s holding back grace. There are the fumbled threads of a plan pulling together in his head, so –

Okay, maybe he has an *inking* of why he’s holding back grace. What he doesn’t know is why he’s keeping it a secret.

Dean digs a hand into his pocket and curls a hand around one of the vials he’d stuffed into his jeans rather than pour it into that bright receptacle in Rowena’s quarters. It’s an odd feeling – warmth and coolness. He feels its sickly magnetism – sticking against the glass in an attempt to join the swirling pit in his center. He withdraws his hand.

Michael is silent, for the moment. The trapped archangel has been restless in the last week, if slightly less disruptive. Dean doesn’t know if he likes what that means. The constant prickle of whispers grazing the back of his mind is almost more disconcerting than the occasional pounding of fists on a cage. At least then, Michael’s intentions were clear. This…

He doesn’t know what this is.

Dean turns the corner, intending on stashing the vials along with the rest in the hidden cache in his room before checking in on his brother. But he pauses, listening. He usually tunes out most of the sounds of the Bunker to keep them from becoming overwhelming. It was easier to turn off that enhanced hearing than deal with the outpour of small creaks in the Bunker’s pipes. The private conversations. His mom’s recent (and secret) obsession with early 2000’s music that she pretends not to have.

But he hears a light scratching, a ping of metal whispering against metal, and something about it makes his hair stand up on end.

He has a feeling he knows where it’s coming from.

He stretches out those phantom muscles, and feels the slight tugging sensation of angel travel. It’s less than a second – less than a blink, and he’s standing in the hallway outside his room. Watching Nick trying to break in.
Before Dean’s fully materialized behind him, he sees Nick’s shoulders tense, sensing Dean’s arrival. Dean catches the almost indiscernible twitch of Nick pocketing something in his jacket. Dean still has that recurring thrill of discontent and tension when he sees Nick – still expects to see shining red in those baby blues.

But Nick turns around, and Dean is surprised to see that Nick has one hand pressed against his nose, and his lower face is a wash of dripping blood. “Jeez.” Dean says, forgetting for a second that the slimy bastard was trying to break into his room. “Introduce your face to a wall?”

If Nick is at all embarrassed or irritated to have been caught red-handed (and red-faced), not a splash of it shows on his face. He pinches his nose shut, even as the bright crimson drips onto the front of his white shirt. Dean can smell the heady scent of blood like a sugar-sweet heaviness, and it turns his stomach. Nick Replies nasally, laying it on thick, “Got a nosebleed. Thought I could clean up in your sink.”

Bull shit.

“And the lock picks you just palmed?” Dean presses, and he crosses his arms tight across his front.

Nick shrugs, not embarrassed. “Basically a hunter’s knock.”

“Hunter’s knock, huh.” Dean repeats. “That’s good. I’ll remember that.”

Nick wipes his hand against his shirt, smearing a bloody hand print against his front. “Don’t see what the big deal is.”

Dean takes a step forward and extends two fingers towards Nick’s forehead – though it makes his skin crawl. His fingers hardly graze the man’s skin, and the streaming blood staunches immediately, the blood evaporating from his shirt like it was never there.

“Huh.” Nick says after Dean’s retracted his hand. He blinks slowly at Dean, some suspicion lingering – and Dean’s almost glad to see some other emotion other than that false easy-going prickish attitude he usually lathers on in excess. Nick plucks at his shirt with crooked fingers, and raises a sandy brow at Dean. “That’s handy. You got a deep clean carpet setting?”

Anger pulses a beat in his temple. “You don’t step the fuck away from my room right now, I’ll deep clean your ass with my foot.” He says, quick and dark and serious.

Something bright blooms in Nick’s eyes and he looks pleased. “Ooh, scary Dean. Didn’t mean to ruffle any feathers. Rattle any archangel cages. Gonna run to little brother Sam and tell him I’m making you uncomfortable?” Nick smiles, and Dean has to stop himself from loosening some of Nick’s teeth. “We’re big boys, Dean-o, big leaguers. We can handle our own business.”

“Not sure we got much of that.”

Nick shrugs, “Fair point. It’s certainly none of my business that you almost shit a celestial brick when you saw me futzing with your door. Maybe gives the impression you got something hidden in that Jackson Pollock painting of a bedroom that you’re always so careful to lock.”

Something shivers down Dean’s spine, but he holds his expression steady. “Kinda sounds like you’re putting the moves on me, Nick.”

Nick barks out a laugh, but something dark passes behind his expression like a cloud flitting over the moon. “Soon enough, squirt. I’ll show you a real good time.”
Dean stands wooden as Nick pushes past him, carefully not flinching when the man claps a departing hand on his shoulder.

Dean waits until he hears Nick’s feet tap a light beat all the way down to the kitchen, where he strikes up a bright conversation with Jeremy. Dean wipes the rest out of hearing – having to listen to any more of Nick’s slime is going to give him a headache. He’d almost rather concentrate on the odd whistling sounds blowing around the back of his mind.

Dean doesn’t bother with the door, just lets his wings blink him into the locked room. He’s pretty sure that Nick hasn’t been in here, but he takes an uncomfortable look around. Nothing seems disturbed. Not that he and Cas have spent much time in the Bunker, but there’s no drawers pulled from cabinets or a slashed mattress indicating someone tossing the room.

Dean carefully digs the tinkling vials of grace from his pocket and balances them in his hand. The silky light splashes color on his face, and he tightens his fist around them. Dean turns on his heel and pushes the desk-chair-slash-flannel-hanger to the side. Crouching down, he runs his hand along the underside of the metal desk, and his fingers tap against a roughly hewn wooden box. He rips it from the duct tape securing it to the cool metal and hears the gentle pling of glass vials bouncing against each other.

He can hear Andrea and Jack’s voices raise in conversation coming up the hall. His hand clenches guilty around the box as he straightens. But not guilty enough to stop himself from sliding the new vials of grace in to join the rest.

Andrea and Jack pass his door, heading most likely for the kitchen. They don’t pause or slow outside his door. Dean’s almost surprised there’s not a lingering sense of tension clouding the hallway where he and Nick passed an uncomfortable conversation back and forth.

Dean’s about to return the box to the desk, but Nick’s voice tangles in his ear: Maybe gives the impression you got something hidden –

He doesn’t want to admit it. Always liked the thought that the Bunker is a safe place, that his room is his, his own small bubble of ownership – something more permanent than the transience of the Impala. And he may hate Nick’s guts to the extent he wouldn’t mind tangling his hands in them and tugging real hard – but maybe there’s a kernel of truth in all that slime. Dean’s not ready to share this, yet – and that means, it can’t stay here.

Dean stands alone in his room for an aching few minutes, thinking. Flipping through and discarding memories, places.

And then he remembers – a blaze of red hair, a pale hand resting on scabrous bark, the cool spread of a Kentucky sky.

The unceasing whispers in his head hits a shuddering crescendo – but he takes them with him as he disappears from the Bunker.

Jessica touches down in a field, and dew immediately soaks into her skirt. She frowns, irritated, but wraps it all up behind her usual placid expression.

Death is in her human form, too – all black curls and flat eyes. It’s a tough-as-nails, cold visage. Jessica’s had forms like that too – but there’s something more comforting to a lost soul seeing her true form tucked behind the face of the preschool teacher. She’d reaped the real Jessica a few years
ago, sent her off to her Heaven in the clouds. She’d kept the face and the name for her trouble.

Jessica approaches Death, who reclines on the dirty bones of a nearby fallen tree. Death doesn’t seem surprised at her interruption, doesn’t even look up from where she runs the whetstone along the already razor-sharp blade of her scythe.

Jessica waits respectfully for a few moments, waiting for Death to give any indication that Jessica’s presence is welcome. Or unwelcome.

“Your absence is upsetting some of the others.” Jessica says finally, after it’s clear that Death is perfectly comfortable letting her squirm.

“Not you?” Death says without missing a beat, and though her lips don’t move, there’s a twitch of amusement behind her eyes.

Jessica pulls herself up onto the fallen tree next to Death, casual and just letting a touch of disrespect bleed through. Death doesn’t stop her, only twitches a finger – and the scythe and whetstone disappear.

“Not really.” Jessica answers lightly. “I was thinking of staging a coup. Claiming Death’s title.”

It’s a ridiculous notion, and Death actually laughs. And in that moment of disregard, Jessica sees Billie. Jessica turns her face away and smiles.

Billie stays for a few moments, breathing in the sunshine with an old friend. But, like always, Death returns, and Billie slips back behind the curtain.

“Why are you here?” Jessica asks, genuinely curious.

It’s a beautiful setting. Spring is still making its initial approach, but the grassy field is already soaking in the sun’s warmth and sprouting new greenery. A giant of a tree, alone and out of place, hovers over them, splitting cracks into the otherwise open expanse of the bright Kentucky sky. The sun slants through the branches, and the effect is almost… shimmery. It’s not an ordinary tree.

Jessica searches for the word. *Significant.*

“Is something about to happen?” Jessica asks. Death glances at her, but turns her gaze back to the field without replying.

Jessica senses him the moment before he appears – a slight ripple in the plane between existences. Dean Winchester looks much better than the last time she saw him, bleeding crimson and poison into sandy dunes. But there’s a new haze surrounding him – a sick vibration.

“He’s struggling.” Jessica comments.

Death doesn’t reply.

Dean doesn’t notice them, and Jessica watches him turn in a slow circle – taking in the view. Like he’s been here before, in another time. His hand clenches a wooden box, and Jessica can sense its power from yards away.

“What is he doing?” Jessica asks, as the hunter approaches the vast trunk of the rising tree. The afternoon sun is dipping lower, and the light that floods the field tinges golden. Dean opens the box.

Death smiles, and Jessica tries not to visibly bristle. Her old friend knows exactly what’s going on,
and is choosing not to fill her in. “You can at least tell me if it’s going to disrupt the plan.”

Death slices her eyes to Jessica’s, and Jessica flinches nearly imperceptibly. But Death sees everything. “It won’t be a problem. It won’t change the end.” Death replies simply, and there’s the glow of an unidentifiable emotion buried under the layers of her dark eyes.

Jessica feels her borrowed brows pull together, but she buries the resentment deep. She turns her gaze back to Dean, watches as the hunter holds his hand over the box. Jessica senses the power twist and snap – and then the box falls forgotten to the grassy floor. Dean holds a bright fistful of power – grace, she realizes.

“That’s…” She begins to say, but stops. Death isn’t tolerating her presence for her running commentary.

Something of the tree resonates with the power that Dean Winchester holds in his hands, like swirling a finger on the rim of a wineglass. The tree is empty, but wasn’t always. And it’s hungry for it again.

Dean offers up the grace like a promise, and Jessica blinks in surprise as the grace sinks easily into the tree. The shining power soaks through the rough exterior, settling into the soft core, and Jessica feels the tree hum with contentment.

Dean lays a hand flat on the tree for a moment, and Jessica wonders if he can also feel its radiating satiety and gratification. But Dean doesn’t linger. Jessica watches the slow unfurl of dark wings, and watches them carry Dean away.

She and Death sit alone.

And she swears that Death almost looks pleased.

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully it was clear that was Anna’s tree in s4 - where her grace fell to earth after she fell. I’ve been trying to work this part into the fic for a while now, even had Cas and Dean talk about Anna back in ch. 20 so it was a little “fresher” but I just couldn’t find a way to fit this in! Now that Anna convo in 20 seems kinda weird lmao.
“How’s the back, old man?”

Sam shuts the door to the fridge, and turns to see his brother filling out the kitchen door frame. “Old man, huh?”

Dean smirks lightly, and pushes off the frame with his shoulder. “If the walker fits…”

Sam rolls his eyes, unscrews the top of the water bottle he’d plucked from the shelf. “My back’s fine. We’re getting old. Both of us.” He adds, catching Dean’s expression. “God, if we’re still doing all this in twenty years, Chuck is paying for my hip replacement.”

Something flickers behind Dean’s eyes at twenty years, but disappears fast enough for Sam to half believe he imagined it. Still.

Sam fishes out a half dose of painkillers from the bottle on the counter, swallows it down with half the water. Dean watches on impassively, but frowns at the painkillers. “If you’re in pain – “

“Dude, I don’t need you to whip out the magic fingers every time I get a headache.” Dean pulls a face, but thankfully, doesn’t comment.

Sam tracks his brother’s unhurried movement to one of the folding tables set up in the corner. He lowers himself into the seat, and his lips twist into a scowl at the sprawl of lore books, popcorn bags and half empty coffee mugs that litter the surface. Dean’s never been exactly happy with the Apocalypse Universe hunters’ presence in the Bunker. And Sam can’t blame him for taking as long as he did to get used to it. Michael had snapped him up for weeks, and by the time that Michael abandoned him in Duluth, the hunters were all moved in and comfortable in Dean’s safe space. And Dean doesn’t have a lot of those any more.

Dean shuts his eyes for a moment, and rubs his thumb idly against his temple.

Sam leans against the counter, and his back only betrays a mild pang of discomfort. “How’s the head?”

Dean’s eyes blink open, and some of the fog has disappeared. “Michael’s… banging around less.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh.”

“What?”

“Just… hoping that’s a good thing.”

Dean doesn’t answer for a moment, and Sam sees him pick up possible answers in his head and turn them over. He feels the conversation deflate before Dean opens his mouth to say, “So, where are we on the second Horseman?”
And now it’s Sam who hesitates, scratching at the label on the water bottle.

Dean raises a brow and flicks a fingernail against one of the coffee cups on the table. “‘cause I can go solo on this. If you need more time.”

“No.” Sam says immediately, and remembers broken feathers in pools of blood. “No, I’m coming. We all are.”

Sam heads off to find Cas, leaving Dean alone in the kitchen. That had been easier than he had thought. After the blowout last week about Dean pushing the Horseman issue, he’d been expecting more pushback from Sam. More nonsense about no urgency and still need a plan to get rid of Michael.

Dean already has a plan to get rid of Michael. Sam just doesn’t like it.

Dean doesn’t like it much either.

“Hell of a plan, Billie.” Dean mutters, and pushes up from the table.

Sam’s handling Cas – Dean supposes that leaves him with Jack. Dean’s not thrilled they’re bringing the kid on a Horseman hunt a week after Jack burned off part of his friggin’ soul, but he’s running out of excuses. Dean can’t say that Jack can be a valued team member without his grace, and bench him for being powered down at the same time. Jack’s a hunter. They all are.

I’m a hunter. He tells himself, to remember. He loses it sometimes to all the whispers and light crammed inside his head.

I’m still a hunter.

The hallways towards the hunters’ quarters are deserted, and Dean takes some mild comfort in that. He thinks of Dominic pacing holes in his cell across the Bunker, and wishes that Sam would just let him drop the dick off somewhere in Alaska. Or the Sahara Desert. Or Mars.

Not that Dean’s holding a grudge.

Jack’s door is shut. Dean knocks lightly. It’s mid-afternoon, but Jack’s committed to the sleep schedule of the two-almost-three-year-old he is. Dean knocks a little louder after there’s no response. He turns up the sensory output he usually keys down to make the Bunker bearable – and he can definitely hear choppy, uneven breaths.

Dean turns the knob and pushes into the room. Jack’s sprawled out on his bed, tangled in the sheets. The lights are out, but Dean can clearly see that whatever Jack’s dreaming about – it’s not good.

“Jack.” He says louder, but the kid doesn’t react. Uncomfortable, Dean crosses the room and approaches the bed.

Jack’s face is flushed and tense, brows narrowed over closed eyes. There’s the ghost of a murmur on his lips – a plea for something to stop.

“Hey – “ Dean says, and figures that Jack will forgive him for busting him out of a nightmare. His hand reaches for Jack’s shoulder, his fingers graze the damp t-shirt, and –

Dean’s torn from the room.
There’s no moment of transition – Dean is in Jack’s room, and then he’s not.

Eyes of fire glare at him from a canvas, giant wolf eyes stretched across blankness. Other works of art hang askew on their pinnings, or have already ruined themselves on the floor. It’s an art gallery. It’s the art gallery.

How the -

There’s the wet sound of a fist driving into flesh, and a familiar grunt of pain. Dean turns – and freezes.

Jack’s back is to him, partially obscuring the scene, but Dean doesn’t need to see it. He remembers enough.

It’s him, and Sam. Well, not Sam, but Sam. Or the demon that jumped his brother’s bones and rode him thirty miles over the speed limit. Dean blinks at the vision of himself – bloodied and dazed – supported in Sam’s bloody grip, as the demon pounds his fist into Dean’s face.

“Still not going to fight back?” The demon oozes, flattening Sam’s voice into something unrecognizable. “Prove you’re worth your salt, Michael.” The next fist rockets down, and whatever version of Dean is on the floor manages to divert the blow to the side.

“Leave him alone!” Jack yells, and Dean… Dean remembers what happens next. Jack pinching off some of his soul – burning through the little time he has left in order to heave Sam off Dean, saving Dean from being beaten to death by the white-eyed son of a bitch possessing his brother.

But that’s not what happens. Jack raises his hand to blast Sam backwards into the wall, but nothing happens. The demon blinks once at Jack, and smiles.

“That won’t work this time.” The demon informs him smoothly. “You don’t have anything left to burn.”

Is this a dream? “Jack?” Dean tries, but his voice comes out thick and viscous. The room shivers, but no one seems to notice.

“You used it all up.” Sam adds, and his eyes never stray from Jack’s – it’s Jack’s nightmare, and he has the starring role. “You have nothing left. And now?” And the demon smiles, expression infused with more cruelty than the actual demon had the range for. “Now I’m going to kill them.” Sam’s hand uncurls from Dean’s jacket, and Dean watches as the dream version of himself is dropped and lands heavily on the floor.

Sam raises three fingers into the air.

“Stop!” Jack cries, and the demon’s amusement deepens. Three fingers twist in the air, and there’s the horrible sound of bones cracking and joints popping. Dean watches the demon snap the downed Dean’s neck, watches himself fall still. And he remembers seeing the corpse of the first possessed man on the ground, remembers the awkward angle and wide eyes. Remembers that Jack had to watch a demon in Sam kill a man right in front of him.

And now it’s him – now it’s Dean dead on the floor.

Dean takes a step forward towards Jack, but it’s like walking through syrup – slow and sticky. Like running for your life in a nightmare, and not being able to get away. And he supposes that’s exactly
what this is.

“Jack, come on! Wake up!” Dean yells, and Jack flinches. “Jack – ”

But the demon starts talking, and if Jack felt Dean’s presence, the demon has taken back his attention. “I’m going to kill Sam next.” He didn’t draw the gun, but it’s suddenly in his hand. “You’re going to watch him die. Because you have nothing left, Jack. You’re empty.”

The gun jams itself painfully into the underside of Sam’s jaw, and the demon’s lips twist. “Checkmate.” He simpers, and the loud retort of a gun – so much louder than anything that could happen outside of a dream – shatters the room.

Dean is saved from watching his brother sink lifeless to the floor, because the nightmare shifts. Dean’s now in the kitchen of a home he’s never been before. Jack hasn’t changed position, but the figure that was Sam is now an attractive woman, long brown tresses, warm brown eyes – but there’s a sickness inside of her. Primordial ooze – Emptiness – leaking out of her.

Cas is there, rigid and angry and scared and silent, and – shit, is that Kelly? – Jack’s mom sits on the floor, horror haunting her expression.

The sludge inside the woman – angel, Dean realizes – grins at Jack, black oil slicks her teeth like leviathan blood. “Even after all this,” she says, “after everything that was sacrificed for you, for your soul… you lost it, Jack. You threw it away.” Blackness fogs over the angel’s eyes – Emptiness filling it like demon smoke – “And then you’ll be mine, again, Jack. Forever.”

The Empty raises a slim hand, and blackness bleeds out of her, soaking into the fabric of the kitchen. The room darkens, and lightens – and now they’re in an abandoned church. Nick lies in a burnt shell of angel wings, Sam and Dean stand over him – expressions impassive and unreadable.

Dean shivers, feels the weight of something settle against his spine. The version of Dean standing over Lucifer shows every inch of the half-smiting he was treated to, pain and exhaustion creasing his face. Dean watches himself turn to Jack, flat green eyes dripping with condescension.

“I said yes to save you, Jack.” Dean’s voice says, but they’re not his words. “I let Michael in because you were too weak – too human, without your grace. All you had left was your soul… and now…” Dean blinks, and electric blue light lines the green, and Michael fills Dean out like he was born for it, “Now you don’t even have much of that left. What resistance can you even think to offer, once I’ve broken Dean again?”

“Stop.” A voice says, and it takes Dean a full second to realize that he’s the one that spoke, not Jack.

Jack’s fear churns the room, roiling anger and anxiety, and when Dean calls Jack’s name again, the words get stuffed back into his throat.

“It’s not so bad, really.” Michael continues, and the visage of Michael blurs slightly – becoming darker and sharper, hiding behind that close-lipped smile. “After all, I don’t have a soul either.”

It’s with a sick sense of perversion that Dean can’t take his eyes off Michael. It’s different – seeing someone else’s fear of Michael manifested. Not Michael for the sake of Michael, but as the consequence of becoming something twisted and dark.

Dean doesn’t dream anymore. But when he did, he –

Something claps down hard on his shoulder, like a hundred thousand volts slamming into flesh. Dean is completely taken off guard – feels his head whip around like it’s barely attached to his neck.
A blur of a suit, carefully parted hair - green eyes, flickering blue, bore into his from mere inches away. Familiar, without three inches of a cracked freezer door in between.

Michael smiles, and the archangel’s grip on his shoulder tightens. “Hello, Dean.”

And from behind, Dean hears Jack’s voice say quietly, “Dean?”

The room falls away.

Dean comes back to himself, hand fisted in Jack’s sweaty t-shirt. Pulling himself up into a sitting position, the Nephilim blinks black-rimmed eyes at him.

“Dean?” He asks, voice rough from sleep and stress, and Dean jerks his hand away from Jack’s shoulder. “What are you doing in here?”

“I…” Dean starts, and what can he even say? Either I’m losing my friggin’ mind or I just accidentally invaded your private nightmare? But he can already see Jack pulling it all together, dusting the cobwebs off half-remembered dreams.


Dean feels his teeth click together. Jack waits for his answer, face still flushed from the nightmare. And God - is that what Jack dreams about? No wonder the kid seemed wrecked over the last couple of days. Dean's been pretty hands-off with this soul-burning business – leaving those awkward lectures to Cas.

But… becoming soulless?

And Dean sees it like he’s stepped backwards into the past – Sam stripped of his soul – knowing it’s still burning in Lucifer’s Cage (and Dean shivers for an entirely different reason at that). His brother’s blank eyes, empty words. There’s still enough of Jack’s soul left that he can feel the absence, can feel what he’s becoming. And that’s enough to give anyone nightmares.

Jack says his name again, and Dean pulls his head above water.

“Jack, I didn’t mean to – shit, I…” He pushes out, stupid – like he’s never used words before.

Jack still looks a little shell-shocked, but there’s not an ounce of accusation in his gaze. If anything, he looks a little embarrassed. And concerned. The remaining fog of sleep disappears. “I didn’t know you could dreamwalk.” Jack says, filling the silence that Dean’s left hanging.

“Yeah.” Dean clears his throat. “Yeah, me neither.”

There’s an awkward few seconds – neither sure the other wants to talk about it.

Finally, Dean rubs his thumb against his temple and lets the moment pass. “We’re going after the second Horseman. If you’re up for it.” He adds, but Jack is already throwing back the covers on his bed and untangling the sheets’ death grip around his legs.

“No, I want – I’m going. We all are.”

Dean sighs, and takes a seat at the end of Jack’s bed. “Everyone keeps saying that.”
The lights flicker in the hallway and the pipes groan in the walls as Jack and Dean head towards the War Room. Jack frowns suspiciously at the ceiling as they round the corner, coming across Cas leaning against the wall next to the War Room entrance.

Dean feels a prickling sensation at the edges of his grace, feels energy stirring the air. Feels… itchy. Like someone poured a can of soda over his head. Cas looks up.

Before he can ask what’s going on, crackly light explodes from the War Room and splashes across Cas. Dean feels Michael’s grace snap inside of him, resonating with something.

Rowena’s voice, magnified by magic and… Enochian? – spills out into the corridor. It’s the spell – what else could it be - damn, impatient witches – and Dean feels the batch of Michael’s grace they’d collected for this very reason – feels it burn. And for a shivering second, Dean swears that he feels breath on the back of his neck, a hand gripping his shoulder. Cas catches his eye, seemingly undisturbed by the tracking spell firing up in the other room, but before he can ask – the light cuts out and the sensation disappears.

The indecipherable whispering fills his head like exhaust – slower to clear out and tuck back behind the curtain. When he finally blinks the fog out of his eyes, Cas is there – watching him with sympathy. “Rowena’s spell… can be cumbersome to angels within proximity. As we discovered last time.”

Right. Sam had filled him in on that. He hadn’t actually been in the vicinity when Rowena tracked War to the USS Wormwood. He’d been standing on a dock while a shifter was sticking 12 inches of angel steel in his gut. Maybe that’s all this is.

Maybe.

Dean doesn’t reply to Cas’ assurances, but claps him on the shoulder as he brushes by into the War Room.

Rowena, Sam and Bobby are staring down at the pages of Billie’s book – white and blue light reflecting off their faces. Rowena doesn’t look up as they enter, her fingers curved protectively around the neck of the grace receptacle. Sam glances up as the three of them enter – their odd conglomerate of half-angels.

“Let me guess – we’re headed to Antarctica.” Dean says lightly, but his heart thunders in his chest. The second Horseman. They got a location. And unless this Horseman is sloppier than War – they know they’ve just been hit with a tracking spell.

The corner of Sam’s mouth quirks upwards – whatever weird, suspicious funk he’d been in this week slowly slipping away. “I’m guessing California’s Central Valley isn’t the answer you’re looking for here.”

“Fuck – really?” Dean approaches the book, takes in the glittering map and the shivering blue lines of grace streaked across the page, marking the bright point of the next Horseman’s location.

“Ah, California.” Rowena sighs. “If only it were on the beach, I would be inclined to tag along.”

“Could use the sunshine, peaches.” Bobby adds dryly.

Sam’s already shuffling through a collections of road maps, atlases and state maps he’d brought into the War Room. He may not have had the same fire lit under his ass that Dean does, but Sam Winchester never leaves something unsolved. He reads under his breath as he flips through pages in one of the West Coast map books, checking it against the shining book laid open on the table.
Finally, his finger slides along a page, and he hesitates. He checks the tracking spell again and his brows furrow.

“Sam?” Cas asks.

“Rowena,” Sam says slowly, and his hazel eyes fall on the witch. She raises a glamorous brow. “You tracked Pestilence, right?”

Rowena blows a raspberry, and threads a hand through her wavy tresses. “Why must you lot always ruin the mystery.”

“How did you know that?” Jack asks, approaching the tracking spell. His fingers tap the blinking lines of the spell and they ripple outwards at his touch. Dean searches for any lingering signs of Jack’s nightmare – but the kid’s eyes are clear.

“Cordova, California.” Sam says, like that’s a fuckin’ answer. His tablet is on the table, and he scoops it up. “I think I remember…” He mutters under his breath, booting up his case algorithm program. “There.” He says, and holds the tablet so the rest of the room can see. The location of the case report blinks at them: CORDOVA, SACRAMENTO COUNTY, CALIFORNIA.

Dean squints at the readout, but it’s Cas who says, “According to your program, this didn’t return a positive case hit.”

“Right.” Sam says, turning the tablet back around and swiping through a few of the screens. “It popped up as a possible hit. Whole lotta weird, but nothing indicating monster or demon activity.”

“Then why do you even know about it? God, you need a friggin’ hobby, Sammy.”

Sam dusts off a bitch face but doesn’t reply to Dean’s snark. “We send hunters on the positive case hits, right? But sometimes not enough of the boxes get checked in the algorithm and the program discounts it as a case. Sometimes things slip through the cracks and we miss real cases.”

“You can’t catch them all.” Jack protests, as if Sam is professing some great sin.

Sam smiles at the kid, “No. But we can try. I have the program send me the hits that are almost cases, and I look through the results myself – see if I can find something the program can’t.”

“Hobby.” Dean coughs.

“What were the details of the case?” Cas asks, but Sam is already turning the screen back around – coroner reports and medical file thumbnails line the screen. Sam passes the screen to Cas, who begins to quickly flip through the files. Dean watches over the angel’s shoulder.

“I’ll have to reread the files,” Sam prefaches, “but a few weeks ago, there was a sudden increase in coma patients in hospitals all across Cordova. There was nothing connecting the patients – they didn’t all live in the same neighborhood, they didn’t work in the same area. Ages are all across the board. People just… passed out and didn’t wake up.”

“And that didn’t immediately ping off your radar?” Dean interjects. Cas continues to swipe through the files. “Smells supernatural to me. Djinn?”

Sam shrugs, but there’s a troubled set to his shoulders. “All the vics are in coma wards, and the hospitals are spread out over the city. Seems like a lot of work for a djinn. They usually just grab and stash.”
Sam has a point. “Can’t see a djinn using Uber pool to get around.” Dean agrees. “But still seems like a case.”

“I’ll have to reread the case files.” Sam admits, “But I think I remember that the doctors found signs of injection. FBI got involved; Cordova is close enough for the local Sacramento office that it was too risky sending in hunters. Plus, with the injection marks… whole case seemed more like some psycho with a chemistry set.”

“Whatever Pestilence is injecting them with,” Cas adds, speed-reading through a coroner report, “it’s weakening their immune systems. Six have already died. Various causes, all consistent with autoimmune disorders.”

Sam looks stricken, and he pulls the tablet gently from Cas’ hands and begins swiping through the coroner reports. His face grows grim.

“Sam – ” Cas tries, but Sam just shakes his head.

“If Pestilence is injecting his victims, the disease probably isn’t contagious.” Sam says, eyes still glued to the screen. “That seems almost too… contained. Why not create something that spreads patient-to-patient? Why aren’t there more cases?”

Cas opens his mouth to reply, but it’s Dean who supplies the answer. “Lucifer isn’t sticking his boot up Pestilence’s ass this time, Sammy. The Horsemen aren’t always jonesing for the end days. Dude’s probably just… practicing.” Sam looks sick. “I mean, shit – before that, when did he actually crack his knuckles and get down to business? 1918? The Italian Flu?”

Sam looks up from the screen and frowns. “Italian Flu? You mean the Spanish Flu?”

A low ringing pierces Dean’s hearing, and he smothers a wince. “What?” He asks, after Sam says something else that Dean doesn’t catch.

Sam doesn’t have a chance to reply, because Bobby suddenly chuckles. “Spanish Flu? That’s what you yahoos call it?”

The room collectively gives Bobby a blank look. “What?” He says, seeing their faces. “Didja forget my postcode is in a different universe? We called it the Italian Flu. 1918 – infected 500 million people. Carried off about 100 million of ‘em. Brutal.”

Dean’s hearing filters back to normal levels, and the ringing fades into background noise. Dean doesn’t have to look at his brother to know he’s staring at Dean hard. “Why did you call it that, Dean?” Sam asks, and there’s suspicion in his voice if you know what to look for.

Dean scratches at the side of his neck, trying to keep his expression neutral. “Bobby must’ve said it before. Stuck in my head.”

Bobby raises a brow under his cap. “Uh-huh.” He says, disbelief thick as jam on toast. “Must’ve.”

The significance is lost on Jack, who mistakes the tension in the room for thoughtfulness. “So, how do we find Pestilence? How did you find War?”

“War found us.” Dean answers, before the others have a chance to. “Guess we’re working this like any other hunt. Pack a bag, meet back in twenty.”

And despite the bags that Jack’s already packed under his eyes, the kid looks excited. No lingering trace of nightmares or soul-burning. “Which badges should I grab?”
Sam sighs, and Dean knows that the interrupted conversation is far from over. His brothers’ fingers hover over the coroners’ reports lit up on the screen – the red-lit death count. “Honestly?” He says, “All of them.”

It takes Dean a few minutes to find where he’s stashed his back-up-to-the-back-up suit - the one with the weird blue stain on the rib cage. He’s pretty sure it’s ectoplasm or canid blood, but he’s usually able to pass it off as pen ink. Sam tells him to get a new one – that even *pen ink* is unacceptable, but Sam never seems to shred his suits as much as Dean does. Why waste it? Sam’s the one with the penchant for lost causes.

Dean shoves the suit into a duffel – dammit, if Cas can magic the wrinkles out of his suit for ten years, Dean can too. He stuffs an angel blade (won’t need it), his opalescent-handled M1911 (won’t need it), and a toothbrush (still needs it) into the bag.

It’s weird – working a case. Finding clues. Pestilence is gonna be warded up the ass with… well, *wards*. There’s no magical angel-y fix for finding one of those cosmic bastards. Where they’re even going to start with this one, Dean doesn’t have a friggin’ clue. Coma patients aren’t exactly known for their interview skills.

Dean zips the bag shut and drops it onto the bed. He can hear Jack slamming drawers and wrenching open cabinets in his room – packing in a hurry. Like they’d leave him behind if he’s a minute late. For no reason at all, Dean remembers his own dad giving him five minutes to cram his gear together – Dean throwing all his shit into that stained Salvation Army duffel, climbing into the Impala, and sorting through everything in the car. Remembers the time he somehow stuffed a motel hair dryer into the bag, and the stoic John Winchester, seeing the bright yellow appliance in Dean’s grip, laughed so hard, he nearly drove the Impala off a bridge.

*Not what I meant when I said we’d blow this sonofabitch away, Champ.*

The memory’s fuzzy – Dean can’t remember how old he was, can’t remember if Sam was there. Doesn’t know what city or even what they were hunting. There are missing patches in his memories that he hasn’t noticed before, stretches filled with blue exhaust and recollections from centuries ago. But he remembers that goddamn yellow hair dryer.

Dean hadn’t tripped back into his head since the Indiana Dunes incident, but can feel the bubbling of Michael’s back-burned memories, can taste the blue smoke like battery acid on his tongue. He cracked the door, when he asked Michael for the rest of the memory with Lucifer. Let Michael settle deeper in the cracks.

The banging sounds in Jack’s room cease, and Dean pulls himself to his feet. He crosses to the small sink in the corner, the one that Nick claimed he was breaking in to use. Slimy son of a bitch. He twists the tap on, and sticks his clammy hands under the cool water. He cups his hands and splashes his face, rubbing hard enough to pop stars into his vision.

Blinking the water from his eyes, he shuts the water off. He’s still half-thinking about how much he hates Nick, half-thinking about whether it’s worth zapping the Impala to Cordova, when he glances at his reflection, and sees blue eyes blazing back at him from cracked glass.

*I think you have an inkling of what happens when you make deals with the other side.*

Dean jerks back like he’s been shot, and his reflection doesn’t follow.
Michael watches Dean from the glass, just a layer of gratification smeared across an otherwise impassive face. Dean feels a snap of momentum deferred and expectation stagnate in the air.

And for a single sick second, Dean doesn’t know which of them is the reflection.

*Come now, Winchester.*

Michael smiles.

*Don’t you trust me?*

Chapter End Notes

The italics at the end are callbacks to the convo that Dean had with Michael when he was trying to get the rest of the memory. That's not actually Michael speaking. Sorry just wanted to be clear.

Soooo okay a few things - first, I am so sorry it took me so long to bust this chapter out. I came back from Peru, had a lot of shit at work to catch up on, and then this chapter was just so boring to write, that it took me a while to actually force myself to do it. But now it's #done, and I'm excited for the angst of the fight with Pestilence.

Second - I'm going to tweak a little bit of the dreamwalking mechanic in supernatural, and figure I might as well just mention it here. I'm sure everyone saw where this is going, but I guess #spoileralert - Dean finding out he can dreamwalk in this chapter, and then a Pestilence fight involving coma patients? -Meryl Streep voice- groundbreaking. Anyway, I'm adding in a mechanic where people that are dreamwalking can also have their own dreams/nightmares bleed into the dream they're visiting - hence "Michael" showing up in Jack's dream. This seems like a weird thing to mention, but I made this confusing with the overlapping Michael plots in this chapter. So that's not really the "real" Michael showing up in Jack's dream, that was just some dream-fear of Dean's.
“Mr. Butler?”

Sam palms the iron knife and takes a step back from the hospital bed. The patient, a healthy-looking man in his early forties, twitches in his sleep – but otherwise, doesn’t react to the small cut Sam nicked in his upper arm.

“Dr. Okoye?” Sam prompts, light and innocent. The doctor frowns, and glances between him and the patient. But the victim – Roland Guerra – doesn’t appear to have an arm hacked off, and what could a CDC Epidemiologist and his intern possibly be up to?

“Never mind.” The doctor says, and hugs the patient’s chart closer to her chest. She’s a younger doctor, and – luckily – new enough not to question that the CDC would send another Epidemiologist and his junior assistant for a second opinion. “Anyway, as I was saying – the physician assigned to these cases is Dr. Klousner, and she’s at the Sacramento FBI office with the CDC team there.” She frowns again, and suspicion begins to bleed back into her expression.

“It’s important to keep our investigations separate.” Sam lies easily, if maybe not completely convincingly. “We’re looking at a different angle at the cases. I can’t say too much, it’s classified.”

“Right. Okay.” Dr. Okoye says, “Well, other than what you’ve already been briefed on, I can’t tell you much more. The patients were all either dropped off at hospitals or found in unusual places.”

“Unusual?” Jack asks, looking up from the notebook he’d been scribbling in. Sam isn’t sure if Jack is actually taking notes, but he plays the burdened intern part well enough.

Dr. Okoye glances at Sam, as if she’s not sure she should be addressing him or Jack. “Inexplicable, as in places that the victims – patients,” she corrects, “weren’t known to frequent. Mr. Guerra was found dumped behind a gas station on the other side of town from his office and his home. The rest are like that, too.”

“And the ones that were brought into the hospital?”

“Some of the infected made it home before their families would call it in. More were found by passerby and brought in via ambulance.” She pauses, then says, “One woman checked herself in.”

Sam frowns, and tugs at his tie to loosen it slightly. “How does a coma patient check herself in?”

“No, she – “ Dr. Okoye hesitates, as if she wished she hadn’t mentioned it. “It wasn’t at this hospital – it was at an ER facility about fifteen minutes away. You should probably talk to them directly about the incident. I’ve… I’m not confident I have the story correct. Second-hand information… you know how it gets. And you really should be speaking to Dr. Klousner about these cases.”

“No, you’ve been very helpful. Can you write down the information for the ER you mentioned?” Sam says, and Jack helpfully offers a fresh piece of paper from his notepad.

“Sure.” The doctor says uneasily, but scribbles down the ER’s name and address on the notepad. “Are you –” She begins to say, when the comatose patient on the bed suddenly jerks his arm up and mutters a string of nonsense. Sam is shocked when the man’s eyes open and blink blankly at the
ceiling before sinking closed again. The patient’s breathing evens out after only a few seconds and he sinks back into a deep slumber.

Dr. Okoye doesn’t seem as surprised as Sam and Jack are. She checks her watch and scribbles a note on the chart.

Sam stands at the patient’s side stupidly. “I thought these patients were comatose.”

“Effectively, they are.” Dr. Okoye replies, and gives Sam an odd look. “Didn’t you read the briefing your colleagues put together?”

“Must’ve read a first draft. Can you fill me in?”

The doubt doesn’t disappear, but she answers readily enough, “I assume you’re familiar with the Glasgow Coma Scale?”

Sam opens his mouth to reply, but Jack is quick to fulfil his role as the trainee. “I haven’t, would you mind explaining it?” Innocence broadens his face, all wide eyes and crooked smile – and it’s different. He’s used to Dean’s brusqueness, an *of course I know, Doc, I put the capital P in Ph.D, but you explain for my partner here, he’s kinda slow. Use small words.*

Dr. Okoye doesn’t answer for a moment, and fiddles with the medical chart in her hand. Finally, she slides the chart back in the basket at the end of the bed. “The Glasgow Coma Scale is a neurological ranking system that’s used to measure a patient’s state of consciousness.”

Jack takes careful notes. Behind the doctor’s back, Sam rolls his eyes.

“It measures eye, verbal and motor responses and assigns a score based on their combined value. The more alert a patient is, the higher they rank on the scale. The scale tops out at a score of fifteen, but even a score as low as eight could indicate severe brain damage.”

“And the affected victims? Where do they rank?”

Dr. Okoye bites the inside of her lip for a moment. “Honestly? It doesn’t make sense. The eye and body movement, the speech. It doesn’t indicate a severe coma, but what else could it be? That’s the reason the FBI office requested the CDC side investigation. All of the patients have shown signs that they’re waking up from whatever illness they’ve been infected with. But then they just… sink back into it.”

“Has anyone woken up?”

The doctor hesitates, then shakes her head. “None. The infection almost functions as an autoimmune disorder. Whatever they were injected with, it targets the immune system. I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s horrible.” She adds, “That someone would do this to all these innocent people. What kind of sicko does that? What’s the *point*?”

Dean’s voice echos in the back of Sam’s head: *Dude’s probably just… practicing.*

But something else isn’t adding up for Sam. “If it’s targeting the immune system, why are all the victims falling into comas? Is that common for autoimmune disorders?”

“I don’t think anything about these cases screams *common.*” Dr. Okoye says dryly. “But some forms of narcolepsy can be caused by attacks on an immune system. This isn’t my area of specialty, but narcolepsy is caused by a lack of the brain chemical hypocretin, which regulates sleep.”
“So whatever these people are being infected with, it could be depleting that chemical?” Sam postulates. Jack scribbles furiously.

“Maybe. That’s why you folks are here, isn’t it?” The doctor replies, “Whatever the patients have been infected with, we’ve never seen it. And so - we don’t know how to treat it. We’re going to transfer the patients into clean rooms in the ICU next. Limit their chances of outside infection exacerbating the problem.”

Sam doesn’t reply for a good while, needs to let it all wash over him. He’s… tired. He should have insisted on waiting before tracking Pestilence – alerting the Horseman that they were on the case. It’d been a long week of recovery for him since the possession. Jack was probably still suffering from the effects of burning off his soul. Even Dean had seemed… off when he had emerged from his room the previous day, duffel slung over one shoulder, and a carefully closed off expression framing glassy eyes. He hadn’t replied in the affirmative when Sam asked if anything was wrong, but with Dean – that often meant yes more than it meant no.

“Mr. Butler?” The young doctor prods, and something shifts in her expression. Her hands are clasped in front of her, knuckles clenched white. “Are we… going to be able to save them?”

The need for sleep blows out of Sam’s brain. Dr. Okoye’s eyes are wide, rimmed red from sleeplessness and worry. She’s young enough to want assurances, experienced enough to know she won’t get them. Sam opens his mouth to say something soft and noncommittal. Instead, Jack’s voice cuts the air –

“We’ll save them.” He says firmly, and Sam turns to face the Nephilim – sees his face lit up with earnest determination. It’s a weird thing to say – weird in the context of CDC Epidemiologists gathering information for an investigation – but if Dr. Okoye thinks it’s odd, it doesn’t show.

Sam clears his throat. “We’ll certainly try.”

She studies his face. “Guess that’s all we can do.”

“How is this seriously all we can do?”

“An entire city is slightly more difficult to search for a cosmic entity than a ship, Dean.”

“Oh, slightly, huh? Smartass.” Dean mutters under his breath, but turns back to the corpse he’d been prodding. “I don’t get why we’re here. Corpses don’t talk. Least not the ones I come across.”

“Maybe you should try asking nicer.” Cas says, mock serious, but doesn’t look up from carefully inspecting the mottled bruise on the corpse’s arm.

Surrounded by corpses and dim lighting, the pair had traveled to the morgue that county had quarantined the bodies of the victims. Seven in total – one more had died since Sam’s algorithm had refreshed the coroner’s reports – all stretched out on the metal surgical tables. It’s colder in the room – not that that means much to Dean anymore. But it makes the corpses feel clammy and damp under his latex gloves.

Dean doesn’t want to waste time inspecting corpses. Or unconscious victims. And to be honest, the sense of urgency isn’t from some noble sense of altruism. He’s just trying to stay a step ahead of the blue smoke nipping at his heels.

The image of Michael and the reverberating voice from his memories hadn’t lasted more than a few
seconds – but long enough for Dean to know that not only is something wrong – something is wrong. Whatever he did – relying on Michael for the hidden memory, leaning more and more on Michael’s powers, whatever – Michael was bleeding through cracks Dean didn’t even know were there.

Tucked away in the freezer walk-in, Michael shakes the bounds of his prison, and Dean feels it chipping away, raining down blue powder. A layer of dust settling thickly over everything that separates Dean from the homicidal archangel finger-painting his insides.

No – the urgency to find and end Pestilence isn’t about stopping a body count, saving innocents. Pestilence is a Horseman of the Apocalypse – a part of the woven fabric of the universe. Stopping Pestilence is meaningless, the Horseman will just emerge somewhere else and start over. And somewhere deep down – he knows there’s something alarming in that justification. Knows that’s not the Dean Winchester reaction.

A scrap of a remembered conversation –

*How many people do you have to save?*

*All of them.*

*That’s a crushing weight to have on your shoulders, to feel like 6 billion lives depend on you. God, how do you get up in the morning?*

Sam would be disappointed in him.

Dean tries not to let that hurt, and turns his attention back to the corpse of the young woman in front of him. The bruise of an injected track mark sinks in her skin like a shadow – dark enough still that she must have been quickly carried off by whatever illness killed her.

Dean frowns at the arm in his grip, and tries to feel it.

Instead, he thinks of something else.

“Cas?” Dean says, and can feel the angel’s attention at his back shift to him. “Are all the injections in the same place? Crook of the arm?”

There’s a moment of silence before Cas says, “Yes, as far as these corpses are concerned. You’d have to check with Sam and Jack about the victims they’ve visited. What are you thinking?”

Dean lets the limb flop back on the slab, and Cas winces at the harsh bang of bone striking metal – as if the dead girl could feel it. “I’m thinking it’s weird that all the victims were injected in the arm. If they’d been jumped and injected, that’s a fuckin’ difficult place to stick someone. Their arms are jackknifing around like a synchronized swimming number.”

“You think they injected themselves?” Cas asks, though without much conviction.

“Don’t see why they would.” Dean admits, “But there’s another piece to this. Somewhere we’re not seeing.”

Footsteps echo down the outside hallway, and Dean lets the matter drop for now. The steps pause at the closed door, and then a hesitant hand pushes it open. The morgue attendant that had let them into the facility pokes her head inside. “Just checking on you two. Do you need anything? I can call the coroner if you have questions on her reports.”
Cas respectfully replaces the sheet of the last corpse, signaling he’s done. Dean replies for the both of them, “No, we’re square. Thanks.”

The attendant pushes into the room, and doesn’t so much as glance at the slowly decomposing bodies. Dean guesses that it’s like hunting – you can get used to anything eventually. “Did you find anything?” She asks hopefully.

“Other than confirming that corpses are corpses, not so much.” Dean lies. Cas might not think much of the injection marks, but Dean’s run enough cases without leads to know there’s no such thing. Sometimes, you just gotta shuffle the deck around.

Cas’ phone rings, and he slides it from the suit pocket. He catches Dean’s eye and says, “It’s Sam. Probably with an update from the hospital.”

“Right behind you.”

The attendant moves out of Cas’ way as he steps into the hallway. Her eyes follow him before turning back to Dean. “Lot of weird around here lately.” She comments, before crossing the room and beginning to straighten the sheets covering the bodies.

Dean watches her practiced movements for a moment, “Thanks for letting us poke around.” He remarks, and – after snapping off his gloves and dumping them in the trash – leaves her with the room full of corpses.

The hallway isn’t much warmer than the examination room, and Dean follows Cas’ dulcet tones down its length.

It would be stupid to assume that Pestilence was somehow forcing people to inject themselves with whatever he was brewing up. The Horsemen were powerful and had some measure of ability to alter people’s minds – but it wasn’t possession or direct mind control. Even if Pestilence could force the victims to poison themselves, the odds of them all picking the same exact spot on their right arm didn’t add up. Why not the neck, or the thigh? People are contrary – they’ll find a hundred different ways to do the same exact thing. Guaranteed.

Dean catches up to Cas, patiently waiting for him at the end of the hallway, still on the phone with Sam. Cas’ expression doesn’t immediately give anything away, but maybe Sam can make something out of –

Something suddenly curls around Dean’s arm without his noticing anyone was even behind him. He spins around faster than he probably ought to – but once he sees the morgue attendant, fingers curled lightly around Dean’s forearm, he forces himself to relax. Fuck, that was embarrassing. He must have jumped ten feet.

The morgue attendant blinks up at him, all bright green eyes and curling hair.

“You know you can’t hold him, right?” She says, and her voice is scrubbed of its earlier brightness. “And after Michael rips you apart, how much of you will be left?”

There’s a ringing in Dean’s ear, ash in his mouth, and he rips his arm roughly from the woman’s weak grip. She’s staring at him like he’s vomited blood on her, her arm still raised in the space between them.

“What?” He hears himself ask as if from a great distance, but the ringing in his ears dulls to a quieter roar.
Whatever Dean’s expression is, the attendant looks frightened. “I said, you left your phone in the morgue.” And sure enough, she holds up her other hand and offers the phone. Dean hesitates, his brain still in fight or flight mode, and slowly takes the phone in numb fingers. The attendant flees immediately, scurrying down the hallway without a backwards glance.

When Dean turns around, Cas is frowning at him. “Hold on, Sam.” He says into the phone, and pulls the phone down to his chest to block the receiver. His expression is more confused than worried – which only confirms Dean’s horrible suspicion that the nightmare in his head is bleeding out.

“Dean?” Cas says, and now there is concern. “Are you okay?”

He nods his head sharply, not trusting himself to speak – not sure what he’ll say. Cas frowns at him for a few more seconds, before replacing the phone to his ear and continuing his conversation with Sam. Dean’s hands clench, and he forces himself to relax after he hears the phone case crack in his grip.

There’s a scratching in Dean’s head, and he can’t help but wonder – what’s being scratched away?

Sam swings the rental car into ER’s non-emergency parking lot. It was a quick drive over from the hospital treating Roland Guerra, but Cas and Dean are already waiting out front. Sam supposes angel-travel is quicker than the carpool lane these days.

Dean is stiff and unrelaxed in his suit as they cross the parking lot towards the pair, but there’s a sharpness behind his eyes that Sam doesn’t want to test.

“Why are we here?” Dean asks without preamble as Jack and Sam join them on the sidewalk.

“Not sure. Something about one of the patients taking themselves in. The doctor wouldn’t say much, but I got the feeling it was our kind of thing.” Sam says, and begins to head towards the sliding doors of the ER’s entrance.

“Coma patients driving themselves to the hospital? And I thought drinking and driving was bad.” Dean remarks, and though it draws a laugh out of Jack, the whole thing feels like a classic Dean façade. Sam knows something happened at the morgue – could hear Cas asking Dean if he was okay – but whatever happened, it apparently hadn’t worried Cas enough to clue Sam in. Yet.

They approach the counter and go through the same credentials-and-badges-song-and-dance from the last four hospitals. The receptionist is friendly enough, but when Sam brings up the mysterious coma patient, the man’s face freezes over.

“I was out that day.” He says briskly, and Sam and Dean exchange glances.

“Wasn’t asking about your time card, buddy.” Dean replies dryly, and settles an arm heavily onto the counter to lean into the receptionist’s space. “Why don’t you grab someone who was, so we can put a gold fuckin’ star on their attendance record.”

The receptionist glares at Dean for a moment before roughly shoving himself away from his desk and stalking off down the hallway. Sam hears him mutter something under his breath, but the comment must have come in loud and clear in angel-range, because Dean smirks at the man’s back.

Sam glowers at his brother, but Dean only rolls his eyes.

A minute or two goes by, and then Dean suddenly asks an odd question about where the patients had
been injected.

Jack flips through his notebook – apparently, he was taking detailed notes the entire time – and confirms, “All the victims we visited had been injected in their right arms. Why?”

Sam listens intently as Dean explains why it stuck out to him as weird – the difficulty in injecting someone in the crook of their arm without restraining them somehow. “All I’m saying is – when I’m shooting up a vamp with deadman’s blood, I’m not waiting for him to stick his arm out.” Sam frowns, wondering why he hadn’t picked up on that. It was an odd coincidence, but the fact that they’re chasing after a Horseman kind of canceled out any question he had other than where Pestilence was.

“Horsemen can’t possess people.” Sam points out after a moment, and Dean gives him a long-suffering look.

“s’not what I’m saying.” Dean says, but his new nemesis comes stomping down the hallway, an older woman in tow. She’s clutching a half-empty mug of tea and has a magazine tucked under her arm. Clearly, they’d interrupted her lunch.

“Ms… Liao.” Sam says, reading the nametag pinned to her shirt. “Sorry to cut into your break. We’re with the CDC.” He holds up his identification for her to verify, “We’re here about the patient that checked herself in. From the comatose cases.”

Ms. Liao seems bemused. “Is this about the video? I thought they’d said the file was corrupted.” The receptionist glares at her.

Sam and Dean exchange glances.

Now Ms. Liao seems to sense the tension from her coworker and the four would-be investigators. “It’s nothing.” She says quickly, “I was coming off a double shift. I hadn’t had anything to eat, I was tired. They said I didn’t see what I thought I saw. And without the video –”

“What video?” Dean asks pointedly.

The older woman sighs, and puts her mug down on the counter as if to buy herself a few seconds. “The video with all the black smoke coming out of that poor girl.”

Ms. Liao leads them to the ER’s security server room, and they follow along the antiseptic scent-soaked halls. “They wanted to put me on administrative leave.” She says lightly, “But they don’t employ enough front desk staff to justify it. So, here I am. A week later and still just the crazy old woman seeing ghosts.”

“I don’t think you’re crazy, Ms. Liao.” Jack says kindly, and she smiles at him over her shoulder.

“Did the CDC or FBI ask questions about this? Debrief you?” Sam asks.

But Ms. Liao shakes her head. “Nope. We don’t have any of the patients on site anymore – they’ve all been transferred to coma wards in the larger hospitals. We’re not equipped for that kind of operation here. Mainly, we just see broken bones and fevers. All the paperwork and patient files were transferred along with the patients – and this never made it into the report.”

“And what is this?” Dean presses, bordering on rude. Sam elbows him in the side but Dean doesn’t so much as glance in his direction.
Luckily, the receptionist doesn’t seem offended. “I think it’s better to watch it for yourself. If it’s still on the server.” She replies cryptically, and stops outside of a metal door and digs a large ring of keys out of her pocket. “Then you can’t say that I colored your perception.”

Dean sighs. Ms. Liao unlocks the door and leads them into the server room – Dean holds the door for her and the rest as they pile inside the small room. The room is smothering from the excess heat spilling off servers and screens climbing the walls.

“Lotta security for a small ER.” Dean remarks dryly, but Ms. Liao shrugs.

“You’d be surprised what insurance companies ask for these days.” She steps around Sam and plops into the room’s only chair. Her fingers move rapidly over the keyboard as she logs into the system. It only takes her a few minutes to find and queue up the video. “Corrupted, my ass.” She mutters under her breath, and hits another key to stretch the paused video across the multiple screens on the wall.

“Ms. Liao, you mind stepping out while we… investigate?” Dean says, as the women is about to start the video.

She glances over her shoulder at the cramped quarters and shrugs with the casualness of a younger woman. “Sure.” She agrees easily enough, but after she gets to her feet, her eyes catch on the frozen screen and she pauses. “Not sure I want to see anything like that again.” And then she steps under Sam’s arm and leaves them in the sweltering room.

Dean leans forward and taps the spacebar.

The date from a week prior flickers on the screen – the video obviously snipped from a longer batch of security footage.

It takes a second for Sam to figure out the angle, but it clicks after a moment. The camera is placed above the ER door, capturing footage of the entrance foyer, waiting area, and receptionist desk. Ms. Liao sits behind the curved desk, typing at a computer hidden behind the counter. There’s a crackle of static, and the audio filters in.

Unseen at the current angle, the sound of automatic doors whoosh open, and a woman emerges from the bottom frame.

She’s maybe mid-twenties, short, with either dark red or light brown hair. Her clothes are mussed, the right sleeve torn where it was yanked up past her elbow – but her back is to the camera, and Sam can’t see her face.

Ms. Liao types a moment longer at her computer before finally glancing up, distracted. When she does look up and sees the woman, she jumps out of her chair. She asks something, but it’s too quiet to be heard over the entrance doors closing.

The older receptionist punches a button on a phone, and comes around the counter towards the woman, who stands rigid and still in the center of the room. Ms. Liao approaches cautiously, and when the woman doesn’t respond, places a gentle hand on her shoulder. The woman’s head turns eerily on its neck, still facing away from the camera.

“Do you need assistance?” Ms. Liao asks, her face partially obscured by the angle.

“Yes. Urgently.” The woman says blandly. “I’ve been injected with something.”

“My god,” Ms. Liao says, and she tugs at the woman’s arm to reveal her right arm. The resolution isn’t detailed enough for Sam to see signs of the injection, but it confirms that the woman had been
injected in the same place as the rest. “Were you attacked?”

“I’ve been injected.” The woman repeats, as mild as before.

“What were you injected with?” Ms. Liao asks, and looks over her shoulder – most likely to check on the status of the staff she’d paged.

“I’m afraid that’s all I can say.” The woman says, “But if you can’t help, she’ll die.”

Ms. Liao’s brows pull down in confusion. “She – ” She tries to clarify, but the woman’s head suddenly jerks back on her neck – Sam sees black slick over her eyes - and then dark smoke chases her scream past her throat – pouring into the air before the interference washes color and detail from the film.

“Jesus.” Dean mutters, as the camera struggles to make sense of the scene.

After a few aching seconds, the camera refocuses, and the image clears. The woman has collapsed onto the ground – Ms. Liao kneeling over her. The woman’s face is revealed, and frightened blue eyes sharpen her pale face. “Please.” She begs, almost too quiet to hear, “Please, help me.” Her hand weakly fists into Ms. Liao’s scrubs. “He did something… filled me up with smoke.” Already her eyes are beginning to flutter – the injection already working its diseased magic. “ - … took me somewhere…”

“Where?” Ms. Liao presses urgently, and Sam remembers that Pestilence’s work had been splashed across the front page in the region for weeks.

But the woman is beyond full sentences. “Saw medical… equipment…” She slurs.

If she says anything else, it’s lost to the sound of a stretcher being rolled in and scrubbed-up staff pounding down the hallway. A frenzy of movement surrounds the woman, but it’s only a moment later that she’s being lifted onto the gurney – her eyes have already sunken shut. An oxygen mask obfuscates her mouth, but, as they roll her away, it’s clear she’s already slipping into the drug-induced coma of Pestilence’s injection.

The video rolls for a few seconds longer, trained on a stunned-looking Ms. Liao still kneeling on the linoleum, and the ER crew whisking away their first lead on the case. Then the video cuts to black, and queues itself back up at the beginning.

Sam stares at the digits of the date printed across the screen. Their first lead, a week after the fact. Maybe a week too late.

“A demon.” Cas says unnecessarily – they’d all seen it. “Why would Pestilence employ the use of a demon? Lucifer may have previously sent demons to the Horsemen’s aid, but they’re not natural allies.”

Dean smacks his hand against his thigh like a shrug. “Hell if know. Answers one question though – if Pestilence is having some pissant demon possess the victims, it explains why they’re all injected in the same place. He grabs ‘em, pricks ‘em, dumps ‘em.”

Sam frowns at the blank screen, thinking. “Seems like a lot of trouble.”

“Not if you’re trying to throw Johnny Law off your trail. If you gotta pet demon blowing smoke up your victims’ asses and walking ‘em clear across town, there’s no pattern to track. No common location.”
“Would explain why they’re being found in odd locations. Dr. Okoye said most victims had been found and picked up in places they weren’t known to frequent. Or were taken home and brought in by family.”

“Makes sense.” Dean agrees, “Makes double sense if it’s a demon. Someone jabs a needle in your arm on the street, you’re not gonna go home – you’re gonna get your ass to a hospital. Now we just gotta figure out where they’re being taken.” He adds quietly, almost to himself. Dean glares at the dark screen as if it’ll reveal answers.

“That woman knew.” Jack interjects. “She said there was medical equipment wherever they took her.”

Dean nods distractedly, “Yeah, she’s also dead asleep, like Sammy after two glasses of Chardonnay.”

Sam pulls a face, but doesn’t take the bait. They need to find a different lead, figure something else out. Corpses and comatose victims don’t talk, even if you try until you’re blue in the face. Sam’s already flipping back through his previous conversations with the doctors from the various hospitals he’d visited that day, when Jack says –

“Dean can.”

But when Sam turns to Dean, his brother looks nonplussed. “Dean can what?” Dean asks.

“You can ask the woman where she was taken.” Jack clarifies, like it’s the most obvious solution in the world.

Dean exchanges glances with Sam, and even his brother hasn’t spent the last few weeks racking up honesty points, Dean genuinely seems like he has no idea what Jack is talking about.

“Am I gonna politely tap her on the shoulder, or – ” Dean starts to say, when suddenly whatever Jack is talking about clicks home, “Wait – “ Dean begins to protest, but Jack’s already speaking.

“You can dreamwalk. Go into her dream and ask her. You were able to dreamwalk into my nightmare by accident – this time you’ll know how to do it.” The Nephilim says reasonably, as if he’d suggested they take a stroll around the ER for some light exercise.

But Sam feels like he’s been spun around a few times and pushed backwards. “You did - he did what?” Sam sputters.

Dean gives him an aggrieved look, but turns to Jack instead. “Once. By accident.”

Irritation and fear sink low in his gut. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Dean’s eyes are slick like glass when he turns his gaze back on Sam. “Does it make a difference?”

“I don’t know, Dean, you tell me.”

Dean almost looks like he’s going to snap out with some pissy remark, but checks himself. He meets Sam’s gaze blankly and, for a moment, Sam has the unnerving thought that Dean is trying to play a part – figure out what’s the next line in the script. Like he’s forgotten something important.

The moment – if it even was a moment – breaks immediately, and something shutters behind Dean’s eyes. Sam watches his brother take a breath, collect himself, and then turn on his heel towards the server room’s exit.
Just a sliver of apprehension makes it into Sam’s voice: “Where are you going?”

Dean stops mid-step but doesn’t turn around. “Where do you think? Gonna find out which hospital our girl was taken to. We got some questions. Maybe if we ask nice, she’ll answer.”

Chapter End Notes

I knoooow, no dreamwalking this chapter. Next one. Promise.

Also - I had all our boys with Black Sabbath aliases this chapter, and then Sam ("Mr. Butler") was the only one that actually got called by his. So that was a wasted effort lmao.

ANYway - sorry my updates are taking a bit longer recently. My job's been fuckin insane recently, but I'm also looking for a new job, and so most of my "fic-writing" time has turned into "cover-letter-writing" time - the absolute worst.

Thanks for sticking with me <3
She straightens the hospital bed with practiced efficiency, smoothing away creases and wrinkles with near-military precision. The end of her shift is near, and Nurse Kegler is looking forward to it. She’d gone out of her way to pick up the double shift, but that didn’t mean watching coma patients shit, piss and sleep suddenly became interesting. Still, it was the job. She’d had plenty worse.

The hospital is emptying, the clock ticking closer towards the end of visiting hours. There aren’t windows in the hospital rooms she’d been assigned to prep for the next day, but she can feel the sun slipping away, her internal clock winding down.

She gives the sheets a last fastidious pat, then balls the dirty sheets up to deposit in a hamper by the door. Her scrubs could do with a replacement – the smell of antiseptic and vomit has a lingering sweetness – but with just one quick check on the coma patients left on her to-do list, it’s not worth the effort.

The hallways are clogged with staff, patients and visitors – all ushering each other out or being ushered out. She sidesteps a woman dabbing at her eyes with a scrap of toilet paper nicked from the bathroom. She offers the woman a clinical, bland smile, but the expression drops from her face like a used Kleenex as she steps past.

A patient limps past her, leaning on a hospital-issued walker. His face is carefully blank, the look of someone in pain but trying to hide it. He glances at her as he struggles to cross the hall, but does a double take. “Nurse Kegler.” He says in surprise, and she reluctantly pauses.

“Sorry,” He replies immediately, but plants the walker and leans heavily on the handles. His looks are unremarkable: close-cropped sandy hair, somewhere between youth and middle-age. “It is Nurse Kegler, right? You used to work at the Citrus Heights ER?”

Her phone – or maybe her pager – buzzes in her pocket. “Sounds about right.” She replies distractedly.

He smiles, like she’s said something funny. “I busted my arm a few months back – you were one of the attending nurses. Signed my cast and everything.”

“Something you need?” She says abruptly, and the patient looks a little surprised.

“Sorry, I should have realized – you’re on the clock.”

She turns without another word, but he limps behind her. “Hey, can I ask a question?” His walker makes small clicking noises at her heels. “The coma victims that the FBI are investigating… are there any here?”

“I’m not at liberty to say, Jason.” Kegler says brusquely, and puts on a little more speed. But apparently the promise of a juicy conversation is enough motivation for Jason to match her pace.

“Hey, you remembered my name.” He remarks as he hobbles along, pleased.

Huh. Guess she did. “You’d be surprised at what people remember.”
He chuckles, a little out of breath. “Must be nice. Apparently, I can’t remember how to fall gracefully.” He lets that sit, waiting for her to ask. When it’s clear she won’t, he adds, “Fell off a ladder patching the rain gutter. Last time I do home repairs.”

The buzzing in her pocket resumes, and she frowns, irritated.

“So is anything on the news true?” Jason presses, maneuvering carefully around an empty laundry cart. “People getting jumped, injected with magic sleep juice? Wish I had some of that in college.”

“Wish I had some of it myself, right now.”

“Say again?”

“Do you need me to call a nurse to get you back to your room?”

Jason’s grin widens, “Lady, whatever you ain’t saying about the coma folks, it’s gotta be juicy.”

The buzzing in her pocket ceases and resumes almost immediately. Nurse Kegler comes to a full stop, digs a hand into the pocket of her scrubs. Her phone vibrates in her sticky palm, an unlisted number on the screen, two missed calls blinking underneath.

She punches the green button. “Kegler.” She snaps.

“You missed the last check in.”

Jason studies her face as she grits her teeth. She turns her back on him, faces the wide-open space of the third floor reception area. It’s clearing out, most being people hitting the end of visiting hours. “It’s not the end of my shift. I don’t like shooting the shit on the clock.”

“As my assistant, it’s important that I know you haven’t fallen into Michael’s hands.”

“How sweet.”

“Do you have the latest vitals?”

She sighs, and tucks the phone against her shoulder so she can straighten the elastic of her scrubs. “Not yet. Give me ten.”

“Five. I’m about to add the stabilizers to the next batch.”

She opens her mouth to reply, her eyes idly trailing over the room – when the elevator doors across the room open and her teeth click shut audibly.

“If this batch is ruined –”

“He’s here.”

Silence.

“Handle it.”

The line goes dead.

She lets the phone drop from her shoulder into her hand. Some mix of fear and anticipation shivers through all that roiling black in her center, cutting deep into the borrowed sack of Nurse Kegler.
Four men amble up to the receptionist desk, decked out in crisp, cheap suits. She hears the rumble of the staff’s voice informing them that visiting hours are over, but the tallest one slides a hand into his pocket for his credentials.

“Come on.” She says to Jason, and backs down into the hallway, before the irritated-looking one stuffed up with all that brightness senses her presence. She’d prefer not to be obliterated.

Jason is right on her heels. “Grounding me, huh?” He says cheerfully. “Sorry for the twenty questions – guess I rub people the wrong way.”

“Don’t worry.” She says smoothly, “I’m sure I’ll get under your skin soon enough.”

Dean eases the door shut to Heather Nagel’s private hospital room, and hopes the end of visiting hours means the nurses will forget they’re supposedly interviewing a patient. A nonresponsive patient. In a coma.

Well. They’ve had worse cover stories.

It hadn’t taken much questioning of Ms. Liao to learn the woman’s name and which hospital she’d been transferred to. Seeing smoke explode out of a young woman tends to stick in your memory and Ms. Liao is happy to aid in their investigation, trusting their badges and earnestness.

Heather Nagel, transplant from the Bay Area, works as a claims’ assistant for one of the health insurance companies headquartered in the region. She’s just a few weeks shy of thirty, but she already looks a decade older, laid out slack on the hospital bed. Her heart beats are steady as the monitor pulses out a steady drum. An IV drips fluids into her arm, and Dean’s skin crawls. The idea of being locked away in your mind while the world moves on around you… it hits a little too close to home.

Cas pulls the medical chart from the foot of the bed and gives it a cursory glance before sliding it back into the tray. “I’m not sure it’s wise that I’m not accompanying Dean.” He says for the eleventh time. “I have plenty of dreamwalking experience. I’ve visited Dean in his dreams many times.”

Dean pulls a face. “Can you not make it sound so weird.”

Cas squints at him, unsure. “Regardless – ”

“One angel per team.” Sam interjects, already dragging a visitor’s chair from its position by the door and placing it by the bed. “If demons are involved, we need to be careful.”

Dean rolls his eyes, but threads his fingers through the plastic backing of a chair and sets it next to his brother’s. “Didn’t you triple-dog-dare, like, forty demons to kill you if they want to plant their ass on the throne?”

“I didn’t triple-dog-dare them.” Sam mutters under his breath, but wisely lets the subject drop. Dean had not been happy to hear that particular update from his time underwater. Sam Winchester alone has a self-destructive streak a mile-wide. And a tendency to adopt dogs.

Sam and Dean take seats by the bed, and Dean can tell that Sam is suddenly just as uncomfortable as he is – staring down at the unconscious woman.

“It won’t hurt her, right?” Jack asks uneasily from the doorway. Of all of them, he had surprisingly seemed the least inclined to volunteer for dreamwalking. And considering that just a few minutes of
being in Jack’s dream had caused Dean’s fucked up mind to summon some vision of Michael – Dean can’t blame him for wanting to avoid more exposure to nightmares.

“Entering her dream? No.” Cas replies, “But everyone is at risk in a dream, much like our struggle to contain Michael in Dean’s head.”

“Straight for the cajones.” Dean mutters under his breath, but Cas and Sam ignore him.

“Like in 2008 when Jeremy Frost used dreamroot to try and kill Dean and Bobby in their own minds.” Sam supplies helpfully, as if Dean had ever forgotten the experience of going toe-to-toe with the black-eyed version of himself.


Sam rolls his eyes, but the lightness drains from his face when he glances down at Heather. Her sleep – for all its heaviness – doesn’t seem restful. Her brows are pulled together slightly, her mouth twisted into a worried frown. It looks like if they even just brushed her shoulder, she would wake with a start.

“Ready?” Dean asks his brother, and Sam nods tightly before gripping Dean’s shoulder.

“Be careful.” Cas cautions, and Jack nods his agreement.

Dean holds his hand over Heather’s arm, and before he can talk himself out of it, his fingers brush Heather’s arm, and –

Sam is alone.

One moment he’s sweating in his suit in a plastic hospital chair and the next, is by himself – alone in the coolness of the dark.

Sam blinks stupidly, and does a tight turn on the spot. His footsteps echo out into nothing. It’s like being in the blankness of Dean’s mind with Cas – before they located the manufactured memory Michael had wrapped him up in. Poughkeepsie.

“Dean!” Sam shouts into the void, and almost loses his footing when the ground starts to shake. Slabs of... something rise from the darkness – one clips his knee before he has time to juke backwards, and it stings with the odd half-pain only found in dreams.

Hundreds of mirrors rise up from the murk, reflecting Sam from a hundred different angles. The shaking settles, and Sam hesitantly calls his brother’s name once more, but there’s no response from Dean. Just the eerie echo of his own voice bouncing back from the slickness of mirrors.

Unnerved, Sam approaches and places his hand against the mirror closest to him. It’s cool to the touch, but decidedly normal. His own reflection watches him cautiously as he pulls his hand away. Not even his fingerprints smudge the glass.

He turns in another circle and wonders what his options are if Dean doesn’t turn up to eventually yank him out of Heather’s head. If he’ll be stuck in the forest of mirrors until Heather wakes up – or dies. And then what happens to him?

But it’s ridiculous to worry about that now. First thing – he needs to find his brother. And then they
can find Heather.

Sam picks a direction at random and winds his way through the obstructing mirrors. There’s no order or pattern to them – just reflections scattered at random.

Without anything to gauge time or distance, Sam isn’t sure how far he walks before he begins to worry. They don’t know what’s happening to the coma victims in their heads – and not knowing where Dean is or if he’s okay is beginning to gnaw on him. Dean’s been… off is a smallest word he can think to use, but five-seconds-from-an-archangel-turning-him-to-pulp doesn’t make Sam feel better.

But if Sam’s being honest, knowing that Dean’s super-charged does bring a sense of reassurance. Sure, the powers and the invulnerability don’t come without a cost (one too large to consider), but if Dean’s determined to keep his rush-headlong-into-danger card, it helps to be bullet-proof – well… everything proof.

And without really wanting to, Sam’s mind falls back to the last time he was separated from his brother. He can still feel the sizzle of the blowtorch against his skin, searing off his anti-possession tattoo, can feel his insides slithering with smoke and darkness.

Sam mires himself in the past until one of his reflections moves the wrong way.

He freezes, and the surrounding reflections freeze with him. His eyes dart from mirror to mirror, heart thundering in his chest as his reflection meets his gaze each time. Something stops him from opening his mouth and calling for his brother again.

But nothing happens and the mirrors only reveal Sam – hundreds and hundreds of him. He lets out a shaky breath and scratches at the back of his head, watches the multitude mimic the movement. He’s off his game. A week off the job in recovery and he’s as skittish as any new hunter. Ridiculous. He’s spent the last week trying not to think about Rochester and his time possessed – and here he is, letting it get to him while Pestilence is ravaging a town unchecked.

He keeps his gaze trained straight ahead, and tries not to look too closely at the mirrors after that. Sam calls his brother’s name again, but only silence calls back. Shit. They’re getting nowhere with this – any longer and he should probably pray to Cas to yank him out so they can regroup.

Sam threads his way through the path of mirrors for a few more minutes, growing increasingly exasperated. His fingers glide over one of the mirrors, glass slick like teeth –

- then he nearly runs into someone.

Sam curses and jerks backwards. But it’s not a person – it’s a mirror reflecting someone Sam doesn’t recognize.

It’s a man, staring without seeing, decked out in a uniform of some kind. A black handgun gripped loosely at his side. Sam takes a wary step forward – and light catches on a badge pinned to the man’s chest. Rochester N.Y. Police Department emblazoned in bold letters. Sam reads it three times before he realizes –

Rochester PD, get on the ground! Drop the gun!

And Sam’s stolen voice under it all, “Honestly.”
Bang.

The retort of a gun echoes around him, bouncing off a thousand mirrors and throwing the sound of murder back at him. The reflection of the officer jerks as an unseen bullet drills through his forehead – the glass shatters, and the man falls among the shards of the broken mirror, dead before he touches the ground.

“Simply collateral damage, Samuel.”

Sam jerks around, and almost misses the source of the voice as another reflection. Another Sam Winchester watches him passively from the glass. He’s wearing a suit – like Sam – but not the same. This one has been roughened by a car accident and torn at the collar, revealing seared flesh.

Bile rises in Sam’s throat even before the demon blinks, opalescent white eyes slicking over hazel.

“You’re dead.” Someone says, and it takes a second for Sam to realize it was him.

The demon cracks Sam’s face into a cold smile. “If the people we love don’t forget us, can we ever really die?”

“My brother ripped you apart.” Sam spits, and his hand automatically pats his pockets for the angel blade usually tucked away. His pockets are empty.

“Of course he did.” The demon agrees, and Sam takes a step back when Sam – Cesar – curls long fingers around the edges of the mirror and steps out as easily as stepping through a doorway.

“You’re the one that can’t seem to let me go.”

Sam nearly stumbles when he backs into the forgotten corpse at his back. His foot slips in glass and blood, but his eyes fall on the fallen officer’s service weapon. He glances back up at himself – Cesar – and goes for the gun.

Cesar doesn’t blink when Sam comes up armed, trains the gun on his center of mass and fires. The bullets drill into Cesar from six feet away, but the moment they meet flesh – the demon shatters into a thousand pieces. Tinkling shards rain down on the floor, then silence.

Sam takes a heavy breath, gun still leveled on the empty space.

“I’ve really rattled you, haven’t I?”

The voice comes from Sam’s right, and he jerks the gun around. Cesar is again framed in a mirror, unruffled. He doesn’t take a step from the mirror, which doesn’t reassure Sam much.

The white eyes fold away, and Sam’s own hazel blink back at him. “I can’t say I understand the fuss. You’ve been possessed before. If anyone should be upset, I’d think it would be that brother of yours.” And now three other mirrors whisk away Sam’s reflection, and are replaced with various visages of Dean. He knows he shouldn’t take his eyes off the demon, but the mirrors capture his attention anyway.

The one closest is Dean from a week ago – bloody and half supported by Cesar as he rams his fist over and over into Dean’s face. Dean’s expression is open and shattered, and Sam’s stomach clenches painfully. His own hand feels slick with blood before he can tear his eyes away.

The next is Dean leaning against the Impala – face smashed to all hell, seconds after Sam wrestled control from Lucifer before he could beat Dean to death, and seconds before Sam took the leap into Lucifer’s Cage.
The third shows Dean almost painfully young, soaking wet and slumped unconscious on a dock – when Meg had shot him in the shoulder while possessing Sam. The details are fuzzy – he hadn’t actually seen the aftermath of his shooting Dean, he’d only heard later from Jo. Dean hadn’t said a word about the gunshot. Not then, not ever.

Dean.

Sam grits his teeth and forces himself to look back at Cesar. The demon watches him patiently, and when he sees he’s recaptured Sam’s divided attention, he smiles. “Sense a pattern?”

“Go to hell.” Sam snaps, and levels the gun on the mirror.

Cesar’s smile grows. “Doesn’t seem to take.”

The sound of disturbed glass plinks from behind him, and – expecting some kind of demon trickery – Sam spins the gun around and fires.

Darkened by the surrounding murk, the figure jerks to the side and the bullet narrowly misses. “Jesus!” The figure snaps, and Sam starts.

“Dean?”

“Yeah, almost dead-Dean.” The shadow lightly bitches, and straightens. Sam lowers the gun slightly, but keeps it clench tightly as his brother steps a little further into the light.

“C’mon, Wild Bill Hickock, cool it with the slugs.” Dean says, hands raised in front of him. Dean’s decked out in his fed threads from the hospital, still has that glassy look in his eyes that’s been trapped there for a while.

“Dean, what – where were you?” Sam finally pushes out, and angles the gun at the ground.

But Dean is already cocking his head and looking over Sam’s shoulder at the reflection of Cesar in the mirror. “Dealing with my own nightmare, I guess.” He answers, distractedly. “Looks like I had better luck with mine.”

“Samuel here’s never excelled at battling his own demons.” The demon simpers at Sam’s back, and Dean pulls a face.

“C’mon, Sammy – dude doesn’t even talk the same.” Dean says, “Gonna let some punk demon distract you from saving the day?” Dean’s tone is light, but Sam can read the underlying concern in his brother’s expression, can hear Dean’s attempt to soothe.

But he’s right – it’s just… a dream. Just a nightmare. And Sam’s never let those bother him before.

He grounds himself in the moment – in focusing on the case. Heather is out there, somewhere – struggling against her own fears, and Sam knows better than to let personal shit clog up his common sense.

He turns back towards the mirror, and with a frown and a flicker – Cesar fades and the mirrors melt back into reflections of himself and Dean. The corpse on the ground, the gun in his hand, and the glass surrounding a broken frame – all fade to nothing.

Dean spins slowly around, checking for hidden demons – but turns back, satisfied. “Way to run him outta town, Virgil Earp.”
Sam huffs out a shaky laugh. His hands are shaking slightly, and he covers it by wiping his sweaty palms on his suit pants. “Really leaning into these old lawmen references, huh.”

And Dean actually snorts. “You see what you do when half your day isn’t plugged up with sleep. Only so much porn a guy can watch.”

Sam pulls a (bitch) face. “Dude. No.”

But Dean just grins, and takes a step forward to slap Sam on the shoulder roughly. “You okay?” He asks, seriously.

And Sam wants to say dude, yeah or of course, but something makes him hesitate. Maybe it’s because it’s Dean asking, and not Cas or one of the other hunters – or maybe it’s because they’re in the one place – someone else’s head – where no one else can overhear, but he hears himself admit, “I… I guess I’m still struggling with – “

And what can he even say? With almost killing you? With actually killing someone else? For feeling dirty and unclean and like there’s still some fucked-up demon grime gumming up his insides?

“Being possessed again?” Dean finally offers the lifeline. And Sam is… grateful that Dean doesn’t try and crack a joke or try and lighten the mood.

Sam doesn’t answer, but he doesn’t have to. Dean’s hand leaves Sam’s shoulder, and he sucks in a thoughtful breath. “I know there’s nothing I can say that you’ll believe, or that’ll make you feel better – but you gotta know, Sam – none of that shit is on you.”

“Two people are dead, Dean.”

“Yeah, and how many people are dead because of Michael? Because of me?” Dean says brutally, and Sam flinches.

“It’s not – “

“The same? You’re right – it’s not. You didn’t have a choice, unless you forgot to mention that you tried a DIY anti-possession removal with a blow torch for kicks. Me, I – “ But Dean cuts himself off, as if realizing that he’s taking the conversation down a dangerous road.

“What Michael did – that’s not your fault, Dean.” Sam says, tries to soothe aloe onto the burn. And he believes that – he knows it’s not Dean’s fault. If they’re really tallying up scores, then Dean only said yes to Michael because Sam was the one that needed saving. But he knows there’s nothing he can say that would make Dean blame him, just like there’s nothing that Dean can say that’ll take away the blame on Sam’s shoulders for not being strong enough to fight off the demon – or smart enough to see it coming.

But there’s two different conversations happening now – and both of them realize it. Dean sighs, and finally says, “Shit sticks the same, Sam. If it don’t stick on me, then it don’t stick on you. That’s the end of it.”

“I hear you.” Sam says, and though it’s pretty clear that Dean doesn’t believe him, he seems at least willing to let it go for now. And they’ve got other concerns at the moment. The main one finding wherever Heather is hidden in her own mind. But there’s one thought that pushes past his focus on the mission –

“So, who did you see?”
Dean had already been turning to leave, but he stops – and when his eyes find Sam’s, they’re wary. “What?”

“You showed up cool-as-can-be. You obviously didn’t need help getting over whatever you saw.” And he doesn’t mean it like an accusation – he’s genuinely curious.

“C’mon, Sam. Who do you think I saw?”

And really – the answer’s not far from Sam’s mind: “Michael?”

And at the name – the surrounding mirrors ripple. And even knowing the rules of the dream – Sam still takes a quick step back from the closest mirror – especially once it sketches out his brother – No, Michael – in that three-piece suit, that old-fashioned cap. The glass freezes over with glass and cracks. Michael smiles and it’s scattered.

Sam can’t find words, but his eyes find Dean and Dean looks… okay. Maybe even curious. Dean’s not looking at him, but watching another mirror color in – this time, with the vessel that Michael had assumed from the Apocalypse Universe. Confidence wrapped in a black duster, the Michael that Dean had saved inadvertently with a single word of consent.

The next mirror – and it’s Adam, their half-brother, who said yes because he had no other option, because Michael stole him away and broke him, and who is still trapped in hell because they couldn’t break down a damn door in time.

And another mirror - a younger John Winchester, smiling and almost precocious – the Michael that ripped Anna apart to preserve his carefully crafted bloodline, that would destroy any number of angels to reclaim his Sword.

And another – and this time, Sam doesn’t recognize the face that stares out. It’s a man, obviously accustomed to hard living. His ethnicity is hard to pin down – Sam guesses maybe a blend of Central Asian and Middle-Eastern descent, with flint-black eyes and thick hair gnarled from lack of care. His skin is leathery – burnt by the sun and hard work, and his clothes are no better coverage than rags. The man’s face is blank, but grace sparkles in his eyes.

“Dean?” Sam says sharply, and Dean visibly starts.

And at his name, Dean shuts it all down. One by own – Dean pushes back against whatever fear had summoned the different vessels of Michael, and the mirrors white out – as blank as canvas. Not even their reflections bounce back.

“Who was that?” Sam hears himself say, knows that Dean will know what he’s talking about.

And when Dean finally turns to face him, his expression is mixed parts of wariness and some other color of emotion that Sam can’t pin down. Just when Sam thinks that Dean isn’t going to reply, he answers, “Michael’s first vessel.”

And Sam doesn’t even know what his reaction is supposed to be to that. His eyes fall back on the blank frame that he’d seen the figure, tries to remember all the minute details and finds that he can’t. “You… remember him?”

“Course I do, Sammy.” And Dean turns towards the direction he had emerged from, and Sam can’t see his face. “I remember them all.”
The arid air bakes his throat.

Dean crosses the brittle plain, feels the scratching of desiccant grass against the soles of his bare feet. The landscape stretches on for miles under a cloudless sky, sweeps of green grass and disturbed earth rolling along gentle hills. At his back, the quarry he’d absconded from with his first vessel, where hundreds toil each day to extract slabs of pitted limestone.

Thrown into shadow by the departing sun, the monoliths and carved pillars of the region’s sacred site rise from the ground at Dean’s right. The laborers crawl over the complex, as thick as ants gathering, as they carve signification into the rough lime. Those that see him crossing the plateau alone don’t make any attempt to hail him.

Thousands of years from now, they will call this place Göbekli Tepe, and they will forget its meaning.

He never pauses, but Dean feels the warmth of the sun partnered with the coolness of the breezes carried from the distant Mediterranean Sea. He sees the endless bounty of land, the stripes of greens and browns and yellows that color the earth, and the human triumph and splendor of the monoliths, the fierce totems. Grazing herds of wild gazelle dot the lower plains, and a pair of white-winged cranes lazily cross the horizon. And Dean is…

Dean is disappointed.

The vessel is weak, but he hadn’t had the luxury of careful selection. He’s been sent to earth centuries before he was inclined, and is not pleased to find himself stuffed into an arrangement of blood and bone. Each twitch of his true self shreds the fabric of his vessel, and if his vessel makes it through the experience of the coming confrontation – he will not survive Dean’s departure.

The sun slips below the horizon before Dean arrives at his destination, and not even the bright scatter of stars in the heavens holds interest for him.

Crumbling mudbricks stacked against a gentle slope form the haphazard structure – and Dean hesitates to even consider it a suggestion of hospitable quarters. But the flickering light of a cooking fire is visible between the wide gaps in the walls. Dean senses movement beyond, and approaches the cloth that closes off the structure’s only entrance. The sniveling of a human in distress underlays the crackling of burning wood, and Dean knows he has located his mark. He pushes aside the threadbare curtain and enters the structure.

Two figures are seated in the cramped quarters – a man seated at the fire who doesn’t glance up at Dean’s arrival, and a young man, the source of the crying, squats in the corner. His hands have been bound before him, but otherwise, the boy is unharmed. Dean studies him for a moment, as the boy turns wild and pleading eyes up towards his face. No words are exchanged.

The man lounging near the fire finally acknowledges Dean, and the shine of the fire throws the features of his face into relief. The kidnapper is aged, though not old. His eyes are startlingly blue, his greasy hair graying with no indication of what its original color could have been. The man’s skin is darkened by the sun and creased with dreariness, but gives no other sign of the weight of centuries he has endured.

Dean’s vessel’s voice is dry from disuse and the baking air, and his words are thin as he utters his first words: “What have you done?”

A trace of amusement crosses the man’s face. “Bartering for a conversation, looks like.”
And Dean’s eyes travel to the weeping man, who has pressed himself as far into the wall as physically possible. Dean tries not to feel scorn for the man’s weakness. He is, after all, here for him. Dean turns back to the other, “You risked my Father’s wrath by capturing his prophet for the sake of a word?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” The man says, and now he does smile. “For several words.” And he easily pulls himself to his feet. Dean doesn’t interfere as he approaches the prophet, just watches as the man pulls a knife carved from bone from his clothing and runs the edge along the man’s bonds. The prophet keens with fright, and throws himself backwards hard enough to draw a line of red blood along his shoulder.

The man takes a step back, and the Prophet tumbles to the ground. “Go.” He commands, and the Prophet’s eyes widen. He hesitates only for a moment, before scrambling to his feet, and bolting out the entrance way. He doesn’t give Dean a passing glance, and Dean makes no move to follow him into the darkness.

“It is foolish to provoke Heaven, Cain.” Dean reprimands icily, and his irritation at being dragged down to the muck of Earth grows.

Cain’s impertinence is visible in each careless movement as the First Son leans back against the mudbrick wall and crosses his arms. “I wouldn’t have to provoke anyone or go to the great lengths of tracking down one of His prophets if any one of you would respond to prayers.”

Fury erupts in Dean for a single second, and in his anger, he forgets to keep a check over his true self. Grace flares deep, and overflows from the weak layers of earthly flesh. Power ruptures, searing and deadening the nerves in his vessel’s right arm, before exploding outwards. The resulting detonation is deafening, and the mudbricks of Cain’s hut turn to red powder as the structure disintegrates into flaky ash.

Dean feels a twitch against his upper back as he removes himself thirty feet to the west. The wreckage of the hut smolders in the darkening landscape. There’s no sign of life from the burning remains.

“And here I thought you were known for your patience, Michael.” Cain’s voice grates from behind him, and Dean turns to find the man standing a few paces away, unburnt and untouched.

Dean doesn’t respond, already regretting the imprudent slip of his temper.

Cain’s eyes are near purple as they reflect the smoldering remains of his home. “I ask for your aid.”

Shock and disbelief rush across Dean’s assumed face, dark eyes widening. And he answers in the same tongue, though its flatness from human limitation steals its edge: “You comprehend Enochian?”

Cain’s responding shrug is insolent. “Your brother would converse with me in the tongue. I thought it might be advantageous to keep such a skill.”

“No.” Dean says, and taps back into the language of his vessel. “I will not suffer your defilement.”

And Cain actually laughs out loud, and the sound is torn away across the plains. “Then we are in agreement on the subject.”

Dean doesn’t reply, doesn’t like how Cain’s manner seems to turn him about.

“Defilement.” Cain repeats, and his right-hand clenches at his side. Instantly, Dean understands why Cain has risked Heaven’s vengeance to call upon an archangel.
“I will not do what you ask.”

But Cain jerks his head sharply, and – as if Dean hadn’t spoken at all – pulls the loose sleeves of his long shirt up past his elbow. Dean watches impassively as Cain reveals his glowing Mark, and its light is nearly as bright as the burning wreckage behind him.

“Please.” Cain says, and the insolence in his voice is lost to the entreaty. “Please,” he repeats. “I’ve suffered this curse for centuries. Is that not enough? Have I not paid the price of my trade?”

But Dean is filled with only disgust. “You knew the price of your deal. Your brother’s soul for yours. You should have known to not make bargains with my brother.”

“God damn you!” Cain interjects, and his eyes are wild, and all trace of the carefully cultivated calmness is gone. “It was Abel that consorted with Lucifer! I… I was only trying to redeem his soul from your brother’s spoliation!”

“Yes.” Dean agrees calmly. “And now you bare the Mark. As penance.”

Cain is shocked into silence, mouth agape. His teeth are mossed with yellow, and Dean’s lip curls in disgust. The First Son, fallen among the sludge of the earth. “Penance?” Cain repeats, as if Dean has uttered something equivocal. “This is no penance. This is an affliction. This is persecution without recompense. And how is that worthy of your Father, Michael?”

Dean lets the tide of Cain’s wrath boil over him without flinching. He waits a moment, but Cain has wrapped himself in his anger and has fallen silent.

“I have neither interest nor sympathy in your plight, Cain. Though even were I inclined, I cannot remove the Mark from your arm.”

But Cain shakes his head. “I don’t believe you. You are an archangel, what can be above your power?”

“Lucifer’s Mark – and now, your Mark – that is of the like I have never seen. My Father created that curse to hold back the Darkness. You should know better than to ask for the impossible.”

“This Mark is poison. It corrupts. I spent years in a haze of death and blood, and only in my times of clarity do I even realize or remember what has become of me!” Cain’s blue eyes are fever bright. “Abel was the first to die at my hand. And I think of him after each life that I extinguish. Can you even comprehend the agony of living as your brother’s killer?”

Dean is silent, and the night’s wind twists the tall grass at their feet.

“No.” Cain spits, and yanks his sleeve down to cover the Mark. The clothing tears at his vitriol, a small gleam of poisonous red remains visible. “Not yet. I know the prophecy. The Revelation. Lucifer told me all of it. The careful culling of my bloodline, millennia of endured patience to create the Michael Sword. And once you have him, then we’ll be the same. Lucifer won’t defeat you, Michael. We both know it. You’ll rip him apart, and then we’ll be the same.”

Dean doesn’t flinch – doesn’t have the finesse in the sack of meat he’s squatting in. But Cain sees something twist in his expression, and the crazed man grins in a painful grimace. “That is my path.” Dean says, though he’s not sure why he’s offering up a defense to the twisted soul in front of him. “I did not choose it, but I will see it through.”

Cain barks out a laugh, sudden and sharp. “If you truly believe that, Michael, then you are even more diseased than I.”
Dean senses that his vessel is disintegrating from his presence, can feel the dissolution like a vibration. His remaining time is short, but he has already seen to the Prophet’s safety. And he owes the First Son no more of his time. Dean turns to leave, and his incorporeal wings stretch out unseen.

“Michael.”

And Dean will never be sure what made him pause in that moment.

“I’m going to find him.”

The words are heavy with significance, but Dean can find no meaning.

“Speak plainly, Cain.”

“I’m going to find him. Your perfect vessel. I have nothing, if not time. I’ll find him, and I’ll sink this poison into him, this Mark. And you’ll regret that you would not lend your aid, Michael. I swear on my brother’s soul.”

And Dean doesn’t turn until Cain has ceased his threat, and when he turns – his eyes are threaded with grace. “Your dead brother’s soul. What an interesting remark.”

Cain’s eyes are bright with hate. “You will remember this day, Michael. And wish you had taken a different path.”

“If I remember this day at all, it will be because it is the last that I ever see of you.” Dean says and, leaving the degenerating shell of his vessel behind, he ascends.

Jack is relieved that Cas and the Winchesters brought him along on the hunt for Pestilence. After the fiasco of the last hunt with Sam, he wasn’t sure they’d keep their word. But sometimes, an ounce of an Archangel is better than none.

So, he’s relieved. He’s here.

But he’s bored.

Jack sits at the end of the woman’s bed, and watches the brothers. Sam and Dean are propped up in the chairs, both with their eyes sealed shut. Sam seems to twitch every now and again, but Dean holds himself as still as a statue. For a man that’s built for motion, it’s a little unnerving.

Cas leans against the room’s doorframe, arms crossed. He’d almost look relaxed if Jack didn’t know better.

“Jack?” Cas asks, once he catches the Nephilim’s eyes on him.

“’m fine.” Jack says automatically. He expects the angel to turn back to his charges, but instead, Cas just smiles.

“Not as exciting of a hunt as you were expecting.”

Jack sighs, and loosens the tie at his neck. “Not exactly.”

“You should grab a coffee from the vending machine down the hall.” Cas suggests kindly. “No telling when Sam and Dean will be able to locate Heather in the labyrinth of her mind.”
Jack hesitates for a moment, glancing at the still brothers. “You think?”

“You know as well as I do that those two can find trouble brewing in the calmest of waters.” The angel grates, but a flicker of worry lights up his eyes. “They’ll be fine. Grab some caffeine, we may be here for a while yet.”

“Alright.” Jack agrees. And Cas is right – it’ll be nice to stretch his legs. “I’ll be back.”

Cas nods and returns to his silent vigil over the Winchesters as Jack pushes out of the room. The hallways are nearly deserted, now that visiting hours are over and a majority of the staff has left. A single nurse passes him in the reception area, but seems distracted and hardly notices that he’s somewhere he probably shouldn’t be.

The coffee vending machine looks like it could use a tune up and a good scrub, but Jack’s faced down worse enemies than bad coffee.

He feeds a couple bucks into the machine and watches as the spout spits steaming liquid into a disposable cup. The thick smell hits him immediately and perks him up. The first cup finishes dispensing, and he digs a few more dollars from his wallet, deciding to grab Cas a cup.

“Wow, two cups? Guess someone’s not planning on sleeping tonight.”

Jack jumps slightly, and turns around.

A man with close-cropped hair leans heavily on a walker, smiling ruefully at Jack. Jack doesn’t reply to his comment, and the man continues, “I got a fierce caffeine headache, but they say coffee won’t mix well with the meds they got me on.” He says, friendly enough, and clomps forward a few more paces on his walker. “But I do like the smell. Espresso’s better. More zip.”

“I don’t have much of a tolerance.” Jack says, and hears the last of the coffee spit into the second cup. “A little goes a long way.”

The man grins. “Ain’t that the truth, brother. You visiting someone? I thought visiting hours were over.”

Jack turns his back, uncomfortable, and grabs the two coffees. The disposable cups are thin and immediately warm his hands. “I’m here on an investigation. I’m afraid that’s all I can say.”

The man’s eyes twinkle. “You seem a bit young to be investigating anything. Though I can guess why you’re here. It’s just unfortunate timing, I guess.”

Jack had been moving to step around the man’s walker, but he pauses. “What do you mean?”

The man sighs, “’cause now I gotta kill you.”

The words don’t immediately make sense, and for a few crucial seconds, he just clutches the two cooling cups of coffee. Then the man in the walker smiles, and sheets of black slide over the warm brown of his eyes.

Jack doesn’t know if he drops the coffee before or after the steel leg of the walker smashes into his head.

Chapter End Notes
I know I went from two updates a week to more like one every week and a half, but I promise that I'm not going to stop! I'm just busy!

Anyway - I love writing Michael's memories. They're written a little stuffier and flow differently, and it would read too pretentious as a whole fic, but they're fun. For anyone that read my previous fic, I had one chapter that started in Michael's perspective, and I originally did all this research on this archaeological site in southeastern Turkey - it had always been my intention to make that era/location Michael's first vessel/time on earth, but I couldn't fit it into that fic. I'm glad I found a way to work it in here. Even though I tossed all the notes I had and had to start over. One little detail from my outline didn't make it in - Cain was going to comment that he recognized the vessel, that it was a local man named Göker - which means "Man of the Sky," but that didn't make it in the final. Oh well.

Also - spoiler-not-spoiler, the Mark of Cain isn't going to be relevant or a #Thing in this fic. I know I bring up the Mark a lot in my fics, but only because I loved MoC angst!! Didn't mean to tease out anything here.

I have friends in town for the next week and won't have a chance to write! Sorry! Thanks for sticking with me <3
Cas doesn’t wear a watch, but he knows it’s been exactly 14 minutes and 37 seconds since Jack left the hospital room.

Cas’ abilities had unquestionably deteriorated over the years that he’d been dispatched to earth, through circumstances of his own or the declining state of Heaven. A decade prior, he could sift through an entire city in a sliver of a second. He could be in six and a half places at once, locked in a sustained quantum state and still order a coffee – two sugars, no cream. He could have sensed Pestilence’s black-eyed helper even if the demon was buried twelve feet underground and wrapped in lead.

But that’s not to say that Cas feels powerless, and that’s only because of previous experience being actually powerless. Topping off slushie syrup in a sticky service uniform hadn’t exactly been where he supposed his duty would lead him when he was tasked with raising the Righteous Man from miles of brimstone. But that was another time. More seems to have happened in his decade on earth than the millennia of his former existence. He’s seen much significance over the years - watched as Sodom burned - but nothing seems to touch the experience of a few years with the Winchesters.

Castiel isn’t completely unaware, hasn’t entirely lost his connection to the universe. In the 15 minutes and 12 seconds since Jack left the hospital room, he’s felt one life begin and one life end on opposite ends of the hospital. Four rooms away, a woman cries behind a flimsy curtain, while the nurse checking her chart pretends not to notice. Two floors down, an exhausted doctor stumbles on a chair leg and laughs.

15 minutes and 28 seconds. Heather Nagel’s breaths are slow and deep as she lays on her hospital bed, and Cas can only sense the quick movement of dreams in the darting of eyes behind closed lids. There is an overwhelming expanse of life and death inside each human.

His Father created an odd world, but it is such a privilege to exist in it.

15 minutes and 56 seconds since Jack left the hospital room. And Cas doesn’t wear a watch, but he knows.

Something is wrong.

Cas focuses his attention to the hospital bed and the occupants of its nearby chairs. Sam and Dean are unmoving in their seats, Dean rigid and upright, Sam slightly slumped. Pestilence’s victim Heather Nagel lays in repose on the starchy hospital sheets. Before Cas can turn his back, that familiar thing blooms knowledge in his mind – the imposed nuisance of pop culture knowledge that Metatron had implanted in his head years prior, and for a brief moment, Cas’ mind is etched in with reference: a self-poisoned, sleeping Juliet, a black-and-white Lynn Bari draped in bed sheets, Rocky II’s Talia Shire comatose. Cas wipes it from his mind, feeling the small ping of irritation at the Scribe even after the ensuing years.

Maybe Rowena can get rid of it.

Cas tries to push out his senses to locate Jack, but the waning reach of his abilities is less than perfect. Jack is most likely fine.
Most likely.

Cas crosses the room, and no one near the bed tracks the movement. Cas lifts a hand, hesitates – then places his palm on Dean’s left shoulder.

*Dean?*

A few seconds of perfect silence. Then Dean’s voice rebounding back: *Jesus, I almost shit myself.*

Cas frowns.

*What?*

No, *you what?*

*I need to step out for a bit.* Cas says. No need to alarm Dean and distract the Winchesters from locating Heather. There’s no reason to think Jack is in danger… necessarily.

*Thanks for the breaking news, A.W. Merrick. Don’t forget to zip your fly this time.*

*Be careful.*

There’s the equivalent of a grunted acknowledgement, and Dean slips back into Heather’s dream. Cas hesitates to leave, but finally pulls his hand from Dean’s shoulder and turns towards the door.

It’s been 16 minutes and 54 seconds since Jack left the hospital room.

Jack wakes, and the pain in his right hand is worse than the throbbing in his head. His eyes blink open quickly, but it takes a few seconds for his mind to make sense of lights and shapes.

He’s lying on something soft – bright lights blasting him in the eyes. He squints as he tries to raise his right arm, but he doesn’t raise it more than a few inches before something jerks it back down. He hisses in pain, coming fully awake.

He’s alone – in what appears to be a private hospital room. At least he hasn’t been forcibly spirited away from the hospital; Cas is bound to come looking for him… eventually.

Padded wrist restraints secure Jack’s arms to the bed’s railing, but his feet have been left free. Now more alert, he can feel the slimy cloth of a gag shoved between his teeth. “He-o?” He croaks to the empty room, and his head feels like his brain was replaced with soup. His right hand is red and hot, coffee soaked into the sleeve from where he’d dropped the steaming cup when he was struck with the walker’s metal leg.

He squeezes his eyes shut for a second to sluice some of the pain from his head.

Jack doesn’t know where the demon went, but the fact he’s alone is almost worse. Before calling out and alerting the demon, Jack awkwardly maneuvers his restrained hand to pat at his left pocket – but the sought-after phone is missing.

“*Fhit.*” He mutters through the gag, and after one last tug on the restraints, tries his best to kick his foot against the metal railing. “‘m’n he’e!” It’s not loud – but loud enough. After a few moments, Jack hears footsteps tapping on linoleum. A small burst of hope blooms in his chest – until he hears the light *ping* of a metal walker.

The door opens, and the dark eyes of the demon instantly lock on his. “*Paging Nurse Kegler.*” The demon says, half-smiling at a private joke. Jack’s eyes narrow but he can’t do much more than glare
as the demon carefully shuts the door behind him. The walker is abandoned at the door as the demon crosses the room. Jack flinches back as the demon raises a hand towards him, but the demon merely hooks a finger into the gag and wrenches it from Jack’s teeth.

Jack gags once, feeling the slimy absence. The demon watches impassively, almost with minor disgust, and drops the gag onto the floor.

“Don’t you need that?”

His captor eyes the walker that Jack had absurdly been focused on. “He does. I don’t.”

Jack’s burn rubs against the wrist pad as he unconsciously pulls at the restraint. “Why are you possessing a patient?”

The demon glances down at himself, like he’s forgotten what skin he’s currently donning. There’s coldness but not hostility in his voice when he replies, “Shouldn’t you be asking why I didn’t just snap your neck in the hallway?”

“’cause Dean will kill you.”

The demon’s lip twitches, and he slips a hand into the pocket of his hospital gown. “Michael? Doubt he’s gonna come looking for you real soon.” The demon’s hand withdraws, and Jack’s stomach sinks. He’s holding an injector – filled with a putrid-yellow liquid. He catches sight of Jack’s expression, and smiles. “Would you believe I actually left this stick of wonders in my former duds? Fuck me, Pestilence woulda roasted me alive through three suits – and that bastard actually likes me.”

Dean! Jack sends off into the void, without any idea if Dean was even receiving calls.

“It’s like checking your pockets before you toss ‘em in the laundry machine. Shit’s always left behind.” He flicks the cap off the injector. “Like gum wrappers.”

“Don’t.” Jack says, and something cold and slippery settles in his stomach. He jerks his wrist as far as the restraint will allow, but the demon easily snags it from his side and straightens it.


The heavy wooden door explodes off its hinges, colliding noisily with the metal bed frame. Jack shields his face as best he can with his jacket collar from the splinters and plaster. When he looks up again, six feet of angel fill out the empty doorframe.

Cas looks displeased, to say the least.

“Jack, are you hurt?” He queries darkly, without taking eyes off the demon at Jack’s side.

“No.” Jack coughs, as the dust and plaster begin to settle. “The demon – he’s working for Pestilence.”

The demon looks almost ridiculous, standing there wearing a hospital gown and a fine coat of powder. “Just making sure your little treasure’s all up to date on his vaccinations. But now that dear ol’ dad is here – “ And the demon throws his head back, filthy smoke pouring out of his throat like a chimney stack.

And Cas says: “No.”
The angel’s eyes flash, and the demon is ripped off his feet – colliding painfully with the wall. Jack winces as the linoleum wall-covering cracks from the force. The black smoke stutters as the demon loses focus and is sucked back into the possessed patient like a vacuum. Black eyes blink open, startled, and the demon grimaces. Jack watches as remaining wisps of smoke linger like plaque around the demon’s gumline before sinking reluctantly into the skin.

“This isn’t the bed rest the doctor ordered.” He spits, and Jack can see the shakiness in the demon’s limbs as he struggles to free himself of Cas’ influence.

“What is Pestilence injecting the victims with?” Cas grates, and his eyes flash again from the effort. The demon grins, and nods at the fallen vial at their feet. “Stick your arm out and I’ll show you my – “ He cuts off with a choking sound, hands balled into fists. His eyes bulge as he struggles with whatever force Cas is attacking him with. After a moment, he sags against the invisible bonds holding him to the wall.

It reminds Jack of Michael.

The demon glares daggers at Cas. “I don’t know what he’s shooting them up with.” He snaps thickly, “All I know is that it works.”

“What is he?”

“Fuck you.”

Cas sighs. His eyes slide over to Jack’s, and Jack suddenly feels the wrist restraints slice open. The pressure in his head throbs powerfully, but doesn’t prevent him from quickly peeling himself off the bed.

“Go back to Heather’s room, Jack.” Cas grates, attention already returning to the prone demon.

“No.” Jack says immediately, and he’s not sure why. Cas meets his gaze steadily.

“Jack, I’m not comfortable leaving – “

“Help!” The demon suddenly shrieks, startling them both. “My God, they’re going to kill me! Call the police!”

Cas’ attention jerks back to the howling demon, and the patient’s mouth zips closed – but the damage is done.

Jack hears a shout down the hall, and remembers the gaping hole in the wall from Cas’ dramatic rescue. A single set of footsteps slap up the linoleum. Desperate, Jack turns to Cas, who is watching the doorframe, still pinning the demon against the far wall.

A man wrapped in a black security uniform looks shocked as he steps through the shattered doorframe. Eyes wide, the security guard’s stun gun is unholstered but trained low as he surveys the destruction of the door at his feet.

“Shoot him!” The demon cries, “He’s going to kill me!”

The security guard sees the demon flat against the wall, and Cas’ position several feet away – but apparently takes the demon’s word about Cas’ intentions as gospel. “Hands up!” He yells at Cas, who looks mildly irritated at the interruption.
Cas shows his hands in front, and the guard hesitates at the lack of the weapon. “Sir – “

“The kid has a gun!” The demon says – and with the magic words, the security guard spins around, trains the weapon on Jack’s center of mass, and –

The sparking attachments of the stun gun shoot over his left shoulder, gone before Jack can flinch. He blinks and the security guard is already slumping to the ground, Cas’ grip solid on his shoulder. The stun gun crackles as it hits the ground.

It’s all the distraction the demon needs.

“Cas!” Jack tries, but it’s far too late. The patient’s eyes roll back, and a smudgy blast of smoke explodes from the demon’s mouth. The smoke pours through cracks in the ceiling and is gone before Jack can say *sir you forgot your walker*.

Cas’ expression is inscrutable as he gently lowers the security guard onto the dusty floor. When he catches Jack’s eye, he offers a stressed, but kind, smile.

“He escaped.” Jacks says stupidly, and now that the adrenaline is leaving his system, he becomes more aware of the pulsing in his head and the burn on his wrist. “If only I hadn’t – “

“Jack.” Cas interjects roughly, and Jack steps out of the angel’s way as he moves to check on the unconscious patient. “You’re safe, and we have a sample of the injection.” Jack had completely forgotten about the dropped vial. “It’s one demon. We’ll catch up to him.”

Jack still feels wrecked. He picks up the vial, mindful of the exposed needle. The cap has disappeared in the plaster and dust. “But now Pestilence knows we’re coming for him.”

And to Jack’s surprise – Cas actually huffs a laugh as he lays the unconscious patient out on the hospital bed. “I’m fairly certain he knew we arrived the instant Dean touched down.”

Dean’s beginning to wonder if this is all just a giant ass waste of time. Sam hasn’t said anything in a while, but Dean knows his brother is thinking the same thing.

They’d left Pennywhistle’s Mirror Room of Horrors behind, only to find themselves wandering the endless stretches of Heather’s jumbled dreams. Dean wouldn’t bet a crisp Ulysses S. Grant on it, but he’s pretty sure that they’re passing through locations from Heather’s past. It’s fuzzy – in the way that dreams are. An empty neighborhood near the ocean, street signs blurred and illegible. A college campus, dead silent, without windows or students.

There’s no sign of Heather.

“She has to be here, right?” Dean says, when they’ve passed through the ocean neighborhood again – somehow looping back around despite never veering off their straight path.

Sam glances at him like he’s forgotten he was there, forgotten why they’re there. But he pulls himself out of whatever moody funk he’s fallen into and shrugs. “I’m about 20 miles south of being sure of anything anymore. Aren’t you the dreamwalking expert?”

Dean pulls a face. “Shaddup. You’ve done it as much as I have.”

Sam’s boot toe clicks against a rock and he watches it clatter into the street’s sewer drain. Not looking at Dean. “Sure.”
And Dean wants to say something bitchy back. Not to be a dick, but just to fall into their usual bitch-
jerk bickering. There hasn’t been much of that these days, and Dean knows that’s on him. And 
though it makes him want to gag to put it into words, he knows that Sam and him… they’re linked to 
each other, scales set in a rigid counterbalance, locked in each other’s orbit. And when one gets off-
kilter, the other is left spinning in the wind.

Or something.

The houses fade away, and the brothers are left on an oceanside trail. Dean swears he hears a dog 
barking, a car horn – but it’s ambiance. It’s a fill-in-the-blank. If Heather is here, she doesn’t want to 
be found.

Sam is silent, but his footsteps are heavy on the gravel.

Dean caves. “Want to talk about Cesar?”

“No.”

Dean exhales heavily, and stops walking for the first time since they’d arrived in Heather’s SIMS 2 
loadout. It’s just a dream, but the wind on his face is real, the spray from water striking the cliffs 
below is real. Seems like everything is really just fucking too real these days.

Sam walks on for a few steps before finally slowing, and turning towards Dean like his brother’s lost 
it. “What?”

Dean takes a few steps, but not towards his brother. He approaches the cliffside, and looks down, 
fifty-sixty feet down below into the crashing surf. He feels the vibrations under his feet, a low 
buzzing reverberating in his head.

“You remember when Dad took us to Blyde River Canyon?” He says, and his eyes draw up to the 
distant horizon.

“What?” Sam says, nonplussed.

“Fuck, we stood there for like… felt like hours. I remember thinking nothing could be that deep, like 
a hole that ain’t got a bottom. No end. I had this crazy thought that if I kicked a rock, it would land 
halfway down and hit a mirror stretching from canyon to canyon, like stage dressing.”

Sam is silent for a long time, the waves continuing to beat against the shore. The cliffsides fade, 
melting back into that empty college campus before Sam finally says, “Dean… we’ve never been 
there.”

Dean turns to face his brother with an expression like Sam’s just sworn up and down the Impala’s 
always been a shade of vomit green. “Come on, dude, you act like Dad just left us in hotel rooms 
and pissed off. How do you not remember?”

And Sam’s eyes are fearful when Dean finally meets them. “Dean… Blyde River is in South Africa, 
man. Whoa – Dean, are you – “

And Dean can’t hear the rest, because his head is filled with a dull roar – closer to a howl – and 
there’s the crashing of waves, spreading salt and sand and muck against the sides of his head. He 
distantly feels the feather light pressure of Sam’s hand brush his back: a silent, fearful question. Dean 
opens his eyes, and has to squint against the sun. The sky above the canyon is a wash of bruise 
yellow and sulky blues, and Dean sees his brother, his younger brother, their dad’s favorite, the 
morning star, tangled curls and eyes like cracked ice, and a smile that seems to sink teeth into the
landscape like he’s going to devour it all, take it away, and he can’t – Dean can’t – Michael can’t – he –

“Dean!”

Heather Lindsay Nagel knows two things.

One – she’s dreaming. And she knows this because she knows she wakes up. And she knows she falls back asleep. And it’s not a dream so much as a nightmare, because she can’t wake up, she can’t wake up, she’s alone, and alone, and she can’t -

Two – if she fails the company monthly drug test because a smoke monster made her inject herself with the coma juice that’s been in the news, she’s going to file a complaint directly with HR.

Heather remembers unfocused flashes of a hospital, brief gasps of air above the surface of the dream before she gets dragged back under and dropped back into the empty stretches of her head. She hasn’t seen a soul in days – or weeks. Not to be on the nose – but the passing of time has a dreamy unquantifiable quality. And she knows – she’s good with numbers.

She’s flipping through a blank book left on a bench in her emptied college campus when she hears it for the first time – voices. Proper voices. And after hours of searching for any sign of another person in this blank dream of hers, she’s not sure why her first instinct is to hide.

Two men – dressed in cheap suits wander through the campus, passing within feet of where she’s crouched behind a coffee stand. They’re not talking, don’t even look mildly inclined to, and she ducks when the taller one glances her way. Heather’s heart thuds in her chest, but the pair walk off towards Davidson Library, and she squeezes her eyes shut and wishes she could wake up.

She follows them, but she hides.

*She has to be here, right?* The shorter one asks later, and her heart skips a beat. She’s not sure if it’s relief or fear. If they’re searching for her, they’re not doing much more than walk around. It annoys her a little, the lack of effort. “At least yell my name.” She mutters, but freezes behind the brush when the shorter one stops walking.

Heather watches the pair talk, catching only snippets. *Dad – hours – canyon.* The taller suited man has his face towards her, and she sees something like fear or concern line his face like creases. It’s so unlike anything she’s ever dreamed about – a scene so inherently not involving *her* in any way, that it almost convinces her to reveal herself. To trust that the wandering pair weren’t something her head created to harm her.

The beach and mist fade away, and the lines of her college campus begin to sketch themselves in. The sea cliff next to the two men melts away, replaced with the brick exterior of a lecture hall. Heather, so focused on the pair in front of her, doesn’t notice that she lost her brush cover until it’s nearly dissolved. She manages to duck behind a flyer-paper pillar before she’s seen.

“Dean!” The taller one cries, and Heather risks a peek around the pillar. She needn’t have been so careful, however. The shorter – Dean – seems to be coming out of his own drug-induced coma, and the taller one doesn’t have eyes for anything else.

Dean appears to come back to himself fully, because he slaps the taller man’s hands away. “Jesus, Sam.”
The concern doesn’t fade in the man’s – Sam, she supposes – face, but anger colors itself in under
the fear. “Don’t _Jesus_ me, what the _hell_ was that?”

Dean straightens his suit jacket carefully. He’s not facing Heather, but whatever he mutters under his
breath, apparently it doesn’t satisfy the other man. “Yeah, right. This isn’t the first time. And I know
that something happened back at the morgue, I heard what Cas said.”

Heather leans a little further out of cover, and watches as Dean’s shoulders tense. “Talking ain’t
gonna do anything but waste time.”

Sam snorts derisively and slaps his right hand against his thigh. “Unless we’re talking about me and
my problems? But with you – with _Michael_ – that’s where we draw the line, huh?”

Dean doesn’t reply. The campus is dead silent, except for the rustling of flyers catching in the wind.
Heather wishes she could see his face.

Sam lets the silence hang in the air for a moment, but finally sighs and seems to collect himself.
Switches gears. “I know why you don’t want to talk about it. I get it, man. But this is… this is _big_,
Dean. And you’re freaking me out here. You’re spacing out, you’re talking like… like you’re
someone else, like you’re _him_. And the worst part of it all, is that I don’t trust a word out of your
mouth anymore. I don’t even know if it’s _you_ talking back. And it scares the shit out of me.”

Dean jerks back like he’s been slapped. “That’s a low fuckin’ blow, Sammy.”

Sam holds his arms out and lets them fall back to his sides. “It doesn’t have to be you versus
everything, Dean. Sometimes you’re actually allowed to ask for help. I would.”

“Would you?” Dean snaps.

“You know I would.” Sam says immediately, “And not just because you’re my brother. Because
we’ve had decades of crazy thrown at us, and I know that we always pull through when we’re
fighting the fight together. On the same side.”

Dean crosses his arms in front of him, feigning for casualness, but even an outsider like Heather can
see the riot of doubt and stubbornness in his posture. “Wow, Romeo, you gonna get down on one
knee too?”

And Sam just says, “Dean.” And Heather doesn’t know Sam, but instantly knows that he’s the
younger brother. And Heather doesn’t know Dean, but knows that Dean will cave. Because older
brothers always do.

And Sam senses Dean’s stubborn surrender too, because he gives it a careful moment, and then says
“Is he close to breaking out?”

“No.” Then, “I don’t think so.”

“Then what is it, man? Because sometimes… it’s like you’re… not _you_.” Sam says bluntly. Dean
absorbs the blow in silence. Heather holds herself completely still, not sure why she’s still hiding. “I
know you said that Michael was scrambling your memories, but this is different. This is worse. This
is _him_.”

Dean doesn’t respond immediately. He carefully leans back against the lecture hall doors and crosses
his arms. “I don’t think it’s _him_.” He says, “I think it’s… because of him.”
The fluttering of flyers and the angry battering of wind against empty buildings is almost driving Sam to distraction. And he wishes he wasn’t standing in the mind of a comatose 29-year-old woman, having this long overdue conversation with his brother.

“I’m about 20 steps behind here, Dean.” He said pointedly, trying to keep too much impatience from coloring his tone.

Dean exhales heavily, and his eyes roll upwards – not in exasperation, but like when he’s choosing his words extremely carefully. “I think I… let him in. More.”

“What… what does that even mean? More?”

“I… back when you and Jack got in the car wreck – when the demons grabbed you in Rochester. Cas was too far away, he wouldn’t have made it in time. Least not while you were breathing. I had to go – “

Sam frowns. “Yeah, Cas told me all this. He warned you that getting to Rochester was a bad idea.”

“He said it was impossible.” Dean replies without hesitation. “He said it would kill me.”

“But – “

“Whatever leftover shit – corruption, whatever – from the lance, it…” Dean pauses, backs up. “Michael showed me a memory when he and the other archangels fought Amara. Like, the big fight. Mark of Cain, locking her away, beginning of the universe, whatever. And she hurt Michael in the battle, tainted him, like with the lance. And he was dying, like – like dying, and Lucifer, he showed Michael how to rip out the taint.”

Sam sucks in a breath, but manages to reign back the small thrill of fear that threatens to bubble out as anger. “And Michael just… showed you how to do it?”

And now Dean looks deeply uncomfortable. “Not exactly.”

“Dean… what did you do?”

Dean straightens from his lean against the wall, his crossed arms falling to his sides. “I tried to get to Rochester anyway. I think I went down somewhere in… Indiana?”

_Indiana?_ And now Sam remembers the news program he was watching – the forest of extinct plants that grew and died within minutes along Lake Michigan – a crumbling forest that couldn’t exist, and didn’t exist for long. That grew right where Dean had landed, right before Dean appeared in Rochester – when Dean’s grace was… fractured. Lesser. Burnt.

Sam hears himself ask again, “What did you do?”

Dean’s eyes meet Sam’s. “Michael only showed me half the memory. The worthless half.”

“Half the – so you, what – you made a deal with him? Because that went so well the first time?” Sam demands sharply – feeling his blood rise.

Dean absorbs Sam’s ire, but something slams down behind his eyes. “I didn’t make a deal with him.” He replies, fast enough that Sam knows it’s not a lie. “But… fuck, honestly?”

“Yeah – honestly.” Sam snaps. “For once, let’s go with that.” And it’s not _Dean_ he’s upset with – and fuck, he knows that. _Knows_ Dean – knows that his brother would do whatever he has to do to
save the fuckin’ day. Whatever the trade, whatever the cost. Always. That’s the Dean Fuckin’ Winchester play, and Sam loves his brother, at the same time he could strangle him to death for following the same goddamn playbook every single time.

“I think letting Michael in… let Michael in.”

And Sam can only blink stupidly at his brother for a solid few seconds. “What are you – “

And then… Sam’s palm throbs. Sam glances down – wonders if he’s lost his goddamn mind for a moment – before he sees the thin white line of the scar – a scar he hadn’t thought about in years. The one he got falling on glass after reliving the Cage – the injury that grounded him when he was hallucinating his own personal archangel. Sam can’t tear his eyes away from the scar, hears the echoes of Lucifer in his head like he’s never left –

To summon a demon jackass Sam is very suggestible he said ‘shut up’ to me keep that sense of humor Sam it’ll get you through this when your heart stops Saint Dean glues you back together everything else is set dressing

“Sam?” And Sam feels himself resurface – his brother helping ground him. Again.

“Are… are you seeing him?” Sam chokes out, and his hand clenches around the scar.

Dean hesitates a fraction too long before answering. “Not in the way that you’re thinking. Not… not like Lucifer.”

“So you are seeing him.”

“Just once. Let’s just say it’s not Michael exclusively. But the memories are the worst.” Dean shuts his eyes for a moment and knuckles his brow. He almost seems… tired. For someone that can’t be – anymore.

“Like the other vessels.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Dean says, “And others. But there’s just so much of him, so much more than me. Dude’s old. Like my head has to trash some memories to make room.”

“What do you mean?”

And Dean gives Sam an exasperated look. “What do you mean, what do I mean. I mean… I mean, I remember stealing one of dad’s cigarettes when I was 14, and smoking half of it behind the motel in Tampa. I remember picking your ass up when you got drunk at the high school party because you thought you were drinking apple juice. But I don’t remember… fuck, I don’t remember learning to drive. I don’t remember where half my scars are from, I don’t know who some of the people in the Bunker are. I got a call the other day from some knucklehead hunter and I’m pretty sure I had the entire conversation in German and didn’t even realize until they called me a prick and hung up. Fuck, Sam, I don’t remember the name of your girlfriend at Stanford.”

Sam swallows past the dryness in his throat. “Jessica.”

Dean raises his arms and slaps them down in a parody of a shrug. “If you fucking say so.”

It hurts – and it feels selfish. Like Dean losing the pieces of himself are pieces that Sam is losing. And maybe it is. Dean glancing at the Impala like it’s just any old car, Dean not remembering the pretty girl that burned on the ceiling of a Palo Alto apartment. It’s the Dean that does anything for family, anything to stop the Big Bad, and without those pieces of humanity – maybe Michael’s
beaten them already.

“Maybe Cas will know what to do, Dean.” But even as he says it, he knows the angel won’t.

“Sure, Sam.” Dean says, but they both know it’s a pause on the conversation. “So now that 20 questions is out of the way, maybe we should talk to whoever’s been listening in for the last five minutes.”

Sam frowns, thinking that his brother might be back sliding – but sure enough, after a long second, Heather Nagel pops up from behind a flyer-papered pillar. Sam shoots his brother a dirty look for letting him prattle on like a jackass for so long.

“Hey.” Heather says awkwardly, and takes a few steps closer. She looks completely different from the slack form that’s lying in a hospital bed, prematurely aged and slowly dying. Her hair is dark red, nearly auburn, but clean and styled – not slicked with coma grease and bed head. She looks frightfully alive, and it pains Sam to remember that they’re only here for a lead on Pestilence. Any rescuing or saving was incidental.

“Heather?” Sam says, and the woman studies him for a moment before nodding.

“And you’re Sam and Dean. You’ve been yelling at each other for the past few minutes. Pretty easy to grab a first name.” She adds, once the brothers exchange looks. She turns slightly towards Dean and asks, “Who’s Michael?”

Sam flinches, but his brother answers readily enough, “A freaking jackass. But also the reason that we’re here right now.”

Heather nods slowly. She doesn’t answer right away, running a thin hand through her curly hair. “And… we’re in my head, right? I got infected with that coma poison that’s on the news?”

“Got it in one, kid.” Dean says, “I’m guessing you’re not reliving your glory days in here.”

And Heather actually laughs. “What – the unending party give me away?”

And the *real* Dean slots into place for an unchecked moment, and he plasters that cocksure crooked grin on his face. “Never did get the college party experience. Though I’m sure Chuckles over here spent more than a few nights worshipping the porcelain god.”

Sam pulls a face and smacks his brother with the back of his hand.

The surroundings begin to fade away, and the short moment of amity fades with it. Heather’s face falls as the single-story houses begin to stretch down a potholed street – a coastal fog obscuring the morning sky. “Is it going to kill me?”

“We’re trying to find the cure, but we need your help.” Sam answers instead. “Do you remember what happened?”

Expression haunted, Heather nods abortively. “I was… walking to my car. And there was a man leaning by the parking lot gate. I think maybe he works for a courier service or form delivery; I think I’ve seen him in the building before. But…” She trails off, and the neighborhood around them begins to darken. They’re soon standing in pitch darkness, the same emptiness that Sam found in Dean’s mind when Michael had hidden his brother away. Heather’s features are brightly lit, almost shockingly so, and she looks fearfully over their shoulder at something they can’t see. “His eyes were black. And then they weren’t, and then there was all this smoke. I don’t remember too much after that.”
Sam exchanges a glance with Dean, and says, “Do you remember where you were injected? Was there someone else there?”

Heather’s fists curl in the fabric of her skirt, and she doesn’t make eye contact. “I don’t really remember.”

“In the video you mentioned medical equipment.” Dean prods.

Finally Heather looks at him, brow creased. “Video?”

“There was security cam footage from the hospital you were dropped off at.” Sam explains, stepping neatly around the demon possession. Heather frowns, and the surroundings flicker. Sam presses on, “You were speaking to a woman at the hospital, before you fell unconscious, and you said you had been injected somewhere with medical equipment. Do you remember where you were?”

The blackness takes shape and slicks itself over with color, and the vague impression of the hospital fills in. The tiled floor, the receptionist desk. A smear of a woman, Mrs. Liao, faceless but present, kneeling on the floor over an empty patch of space.

“Do you remember where you were before this?”

The outline of the hospital fades to wisps of color and hovers inert. “Medical equipment.” Heather repeats slowly. Seconds tick by, and then Heather suddenly slaps a hand up to the crook of her elbow – right at the injection site. “I think I – ” She mutters, and then the splashes of colors change.

It’s a small lab – without much detail. Though Sam can’t blame Heather for not remembering to fill in the safety warnings and labeling on the surrounding equipment. Of equipment, there is a lot - though most of it is protected with dust covers. White, boxy machines that look almost like printers line the far wall on black-topped table stations, and shelves with empty bottles are arranged with the labels facing outwards. Half the room looks shuttered and inoperable, but the other half is meticulously organized and clean. Machines are uncovered and blink green and yellow and blue lights. One machine filled with hypos whirls and a fan lightly disturbs a stack of papers in the corner.

Sam looks for anything that might help them discover the location, a school logo, a hospital scrub – something that Heather might have remembered.

A man without features blooms from nothing, and a voice says, “The base line tests are complete. It really is much easier to mark results against the initial tests. Product control is vital.”

And then a clearer visage of Heather appears from smoke, expression aloof and casual as she leans against one of the sturdy slate tables. She’s wearing the same top and skirt that Heather is wearing, the same employee badge clipped to a pocket. And when she speaks, her voice is lower than Sam expects. “Yes, because clearly the results have so far been mixed.”

And the other voice laughs, unoffended. “You can always improve on any formula. That’s the beauty of disease. Always mutating, always updating itself.” There’s the tinkling of vials, and though the featureless man doesn’t shift, there’s the impression of movement. “I’ll need another subject by tonight.”

Heather’s expression twists. “Jesus, two in one day? That’s gonna mean a rush job on this sack.”

“I trust your discretion.”

“And apparently my stamina.” The demon posing as Heather mutters under her breath, and pushes up off the desk. “Alright,” she says louder, “hand over the party favor.” Faux-Heather raises her
hand and the scene pauses. But the real Heather isn’t studying her own image, she’s looking around the room.

“Have you been here before?” Sam asks, feeling a hint of relief.

Heather shakes her head, but her expression is still sharp and thoughtful. “No…but I recognize some of the equipment in here.” She takes a step over to one of the covered machines and lifts the edge of its white dust cover. But people can’t visualize what they don’t remember, and nothing is under the cover but the invisible bulk of a machine. Unperturbed, Heather drops the cover and crosses over to the row of printer-looking machines. She inspects them for a long moment, and then turns back to the brothers.

“This is a DNA sequencing and gene expression lab.”

“You know, that was my first thought too.” Dean drawls, but when Sam glances in his direction, Dean is studying the blank form of Pestilence near Faux-Heather.

“How do you know?” Sam asks, still seeing only an unremarkable and generic lab.

Heather shrugs, “My original major in college was biochem. We toured a lab like this in a Freshman seminar. This one is much larger, though. I don’t remember the layout, but I remember it took a while to reach this room.”

“You work in the health industry, right?” Sam presses. “Do you know where there could be a sequencing lab in the area?”

Heather rubs a thumb against her forehead, but shakes her head. “No idea. I only just moved into the area. But the one I toured in college was affiliated with the local university. Maybe you can start there.”

“Worth a shot.” Sam says, turning to Dean. There’s finally a sense of taking a step forward, of progression. Heather’s brief visit to a lab in college might not only have just saved her life and the lives of the other infected, it also might give them the opportunity to take a shot at Pestilence before he even realizes they’ve discovered his location.

“So… now what?” Heather says, and with her loss in concentration, the room begins to fade back into darkness. “What happens to me?”

Dean shuffles impatiently, and Sam shoots him a look. “We’ll track down the lab, and find a cure for you and the others.” Sam says, leaving out the demons and cosmic entity and possibility of traps and disease and death.

Heather shivers, but manages to put on a smile. “Good.” She says, after a moment. “Because if I have to spend one more hour walking around my old college campus, I’m going to actually start missing work.”

Dean pulls himself and Sam out of Heather’s drug-induced trip down memory lane. It’s instantaneous, and Sam nearly falls off his plastic chair from the sudden disorientation.

Heather is still laying prone on her hospital bed, and it almost shocks Sam. In her dream, she was bright-eyed and alive. Now, with her gray-tinged skin, dark circles buried under her eyes, and the loose-fitting hospital gown – it’s even more apparent that Pestilence’s cocktail of drugs is killing the infected. Burning through them like acid.
“Dean?” Asks a gravely voice at their backs, and Sam jerks his head around. Cas and Jack are both tense, and Sam finally hears the fire alarm blaring in the distance, and the shouting of voices on the other side of the door. Cas’ hair is rumpled, and Jack is covered in white powder and a smatter of wooden shavings. One of his jacket sleeves is ripped and the other is soaked in brown liquid, staining the once-white dress shirt underneath. Sam can see the white wrapping of a bandage under the sleeve. Jack doesn’t say anything, but then slowly raises a cheap coffee cup to his lips and takes a long sip.

Sam exchanges glances with his brother, and Dean says, “Jesus, kid, do you have to ruin every suit we get you?”

Chapter End Notes

Jesus, honestly, there's nothing you can say to me that I haven't said to myself. I always get butthurt when a regularly-updating fic I'm following suddenly goes and fucks off somewhere. So, I'm very sorry. I know it's hard to care (I never care about excuses lmao, I just want updates!), but my job has been absolutely nuts these last few weeks. I work in a field that requires a lot of writing and time in front of a computer, and honestly, coming home and spending more time writing in front of a computer has not sounded super appealing. I'll try and be better. This chapter was also a little boring, so there was less motivation. Next chapter will be Pestilence fight, so should be out sooner! Mein gott.
Shards of glass have painfully lodged themselves in Sam’s jacket collar, blood is slick on his palm. His throat aches, bruises like fingers already darkening the skin, and blood that isn’t his is matted in his hair. But he’s still pulling breath, and that’s more than he can say for the corpse cooling not ten feet from him.

It was stupid to not plan for every possibility, to take Pestilence lightly after the disaster that was their confrontation with War.

Now Dean is gone, and Cas is gone. Jack’s breath comes short and thin in unconsciousness at Sam’s side, slouched against a table as his blood and tissues are riddled with poison and disease. The kid doesn’t have minutes, let alone hours. They both might not even have that long.

From across the room, Pestilence laughs, “That’s your plan?” and Sam shuts his eyes.

The span of two heartbeats, and the room explodes.

Earlier.

The rented Toyota merges into an HOV lane as the hunters skirt downtown Sacramento in the early morning hours.

The air is thick with awkwardness and pine-fresh air freshener – even the hushed tones of the local Top 40 station apparently not enough to draw a bitchy remark from Dean.

Sam’s behind the wheel, and finds himself meeting Jack’s eyes in the mirror. The kid’s cleaned up some. He’d changed into a packed set of clothes, wiped most of the dust and plaster off his face, and Dean had smoothed away the angry burn on his wrist. Watching Dean heal Jack of his burn and minor concussion, Sam thinks about how easy it is to grow complacent, to accept and expect ease.

Sam’s eyes slide to his brother in the passenger seat, watches as Dean rubs his thumb idly against his forehead, expression tight. And Sam thinks about how an edge isn’t always worth the cost.

Jack finally tries again, and Sam wishes he wouldn’t. “Dean, it was my fault, not – ”

“It ain’t.”

“- Cas’, and he was only trying – “

“Not good enough.”

“ – to prevent the security guard from shooting me – “

“With a taser.”

“And – “
“Jack.” Sam says lowly, and meets Jack’s gaze in the mirror. The kid’s eyes are frustrated, and Sam shakes his head once. Cas and Dean go about their disagreements in their own way. They always have.

“It was one demon.” Dean says, and his sulky silence is gone. “One demon, and Cas let him go. Running back to Pestilence with the whole scoop. Peachy fuckin’ keen.”

Sam doesn’t need to look at his brother’s face to see the scowl plastered across it. He glances in the rearview before focusing on merging onto the Interstate, sees Cas’ inscrutable expression – the only sign of tension a pulse in the jaw. “I did the best I could under the circumstances.” Cas says placidly.

“Bull shit.”

“Dean.” Sam says, and wonders if this is Dean’s occasional bitchiness at his best friend, or if this is a heavenly Garrison Commander dressing down a subordinate.

“Whatever.” Dean snaps. “Might as well have sent out a Save the Date. Fucking demons. Fucking… fucking fuck.”

“I shouldn’t have lost concentration on the demon,” Cas admits, and Sam shuts his eyes for a moment, wishing everyone would just stop talking. “But the priority was Jack’s safety. And I’m not inclined to believe that our arrival was a secret. The demon mentioned Michael by name.”

Riled, Dean turns around his seat, and Sam can see his eyes snap a pissy blue even with his own gaze glued to the road. “Now it’s my fault?”

Jack tries to intercede, “That’s not – “

Sam feels the hair raise on his arms as crackly discharge fills the car. “Just man the fuck up and say you diddled the pooch here, Cas.”

Cas sighs. Dean glares at the angel for a long moment, then turns back to the front. The static buildup fades gradually. “God forbid an angel multitask.”

“He was trying to be careful, Dean.” Sam says lightly, and as much as Sam agrees that one lone demon shouldn’t have been able to wriggle away from Cas, he knows that crazy shit happens all the time. They’ve done stupider for less. Much stupider. For much less.

Dean snorts, and glances sulkily out the window. “Yeah, and I once watched Castiel zap Lot’s old lady into a fucking salt lick just for peeking over her shoulder, so don’t tell me that suddenly now we’re all Saint Cautious.”

Two heartbeats tick by before the shock has even registered. The biblical reference sails over Jack’s head, but Cas’ expression would almost be comical if Sam wasn’t also reeling.

Dean seems to sense the bombshell, and gives Sam a sedate look. “Hashtag honesty.” And then turns to look out the window as the interstate winds over the river.

No one says a word for the rest of the drive.

It hadn’t been that hard to track down the sequencing lab – a quick google search, an approximate zipcode, and an address fed into a GPS app. Heather’s guess had been right on the money, the closest gene sequencing lab was just a thirty-five minute hop on the interstate to UC Davis, to a local
sequencing facility that—shockingly—was shuttered six months ago from budget cuts. If that didn’t scream fucking convenient, Dean’s not sure what is. (Well, maybe gas station burritos.)

Sam easily guides the car into a loading zone behind the facility, and Dean hopes that the rental company has a bitch and a half of a time trying to pass along the parking tickets to Bawn Johvi. (Sam had promptly revoked Dean’s alias-choosing privileges.)

It’s early morning, a dawn freeze not quite enough to ice over the puddles on the sidewalk, but enough that Dean watches Jack jam his fists into his sweater pockets, and feel a sense of… disconnection.

The lab isn’t on the college’s campus, but stuck in with a number of other auxiliary outbuildings and portables. The sequencing lab is a large building surrounded by beige portables and shipping containers that looked rusted shut with the paint baked off. It doesn’t look like the evil lair of a cosmic entity, but Dean has to admit that even certain circles of hell can be relatively underwhelming.

Jack stamps his foot once, like he’s shaking out his nerves. Sam reflexively pats his jacket pocket to reassure himself that his angel blade is still in place. Cas is squinting at the building, still as marble. Dean watches his friend without comment. There’s a grating ping of a flag chain banging against its pole from across the lot, the squeal of bike tires from a few buildings over, and the crunchy sound of metal rusting inside his own head. The ructions of Sodom and Gomorrah burning.

“I believe the building is warded.” Cas says, and it takes Dean a solid second to find the angel in the flames. Cas frowns. “Dean?”

“Warded, yeah. Got it.” Dean says, and does his own quick sweep of the building. His gaze slicks over the exterior without settling—not even archangel vision can peek through Pestilence’s fancy paint. “Well,” Dean remarks, recovering, “Least we know he’s here. Maybe he’ll be smart and hand over the ring without a fuss like Big Sister War.”

And Sam actually snorts. “Without a fuss. Not how I remember it.”

Dean ignores his brother. “Alright.” He gives the place one last glance, as if he’s going to catch Pestilence ducking under a window sill. “Stick together. Hope everyone’s up to date on their vaccinations, ’cause this is gonna be like licking the wall of a strip club.” Sam pulls a face, but Dean knows that his brother is remembering their last run-in with the Horseman. He’d plugged them up with eight and a half diseases before they’d even been close enough to shake hands. Even Cas had succumbed to the cocktail of sickness before managing to separate the Horseman from his ring a la sharp fucking knife. Would that happen to Dean? The older Winchester glances at Cas, and thinks that the angel wasn’t much of one back then—

“That’s fascinating. There’s not a speck of angel in you, is there?”

Maybe just a speck.

And Dean’s not sure if it’s himself or Michael that waves away the possibility.

“Alright,” Sam says roughly, his own hazel eyes flicking over the windows of the shuttered lab, and Dean is pulled out of his reverie. “And, Dean, if he has another archangel lance?”

Dean raises a brow.

His brother punches him in the shoulder as he passes, “Duck this time.”
It sure looks fucking abandoned, except where it don’t.

The front door is unlocked, though Dean spies a twisted lockbox half hidden in the nearby shrubs. “Guess he wanted in-and-out privileges.” Sam remarks, following Dean’s gaze.

Dean wrenches the door open and holds it for the rest to pile through. “This ain’t no nightclub.”

The halls are relatively clean, with just a modest layer of dust on the floors and wall fixtures. Cardboard boxes and precisely labeled plastic containers are stacked neatly against the walls. The security cameras on each end of the hallway don’t blink – anything worth stealing long since had been relocated. It’s not difficult to track where Pestilence and his slimy sidekick have been – footsteps and drag marks in the light dust layer mark the way veering to the right wing of the building.

Dean wonders which set of prints are Heather’s.

There aren’t any lights on, but they press deeper into the building. Sam and Dean in the front, Jack trailing behind, and Cas bringing up the rear in some unspoken, agreed-upon formation.

“Are we really going to just ask for the ring?” Sam mutters lowly, but it sounds much too sharp to Dean.

“Might as well.”

“And what if he says yes?”

Dean glances at his brother as they tap quietly down the hall. “Then I buy the guy a beer, Sam, what’s the issue?”

Sam’s returning glance is disbelieving. “I mean we got over a dozen dead and dying from whatever Pestilence is brewing up in here. Assuming he does just let us leave with the ring, we can’t just leave the rest to die, Dean.”

And Dean thinks that’s pretty fucking naïve, mind his fucking French. “He’s just gonna pick up and go somewhere else, Sam. We could kill him, sure, but then what? We find out people’s insides are boiling out their ears in Nova Scotia? He’s – “

“ – killing people.” Sam finishes flatly. “Here and now. He’s killing them – he’s killing Heather.”

Dean feels himself deflate a little. “I know, Sammy.”

The silence that follows is a little awkward, a little more tense. And when Sam finally speaks again, it’s quiet – intended for Dean, though surely the other pair can hear every word. “I know it’s… dumb. I know it doesn’t change… him, or what he does. But that doesn’t stop us, Dean. It doesn’t stop you. And I don’t want you to… forget that. Don’t forget who Dean Winchester is.”

It’s the most direct that Sam’s been about Michael hemorrhaging through, about Dean getting drowned out in gallons of grace. It’s the line in the sand that Dean’s been trying to stay on the right side of, it’s the side that Sam is on. And it’s kind of silly and ridiculous, the idea that Sam can ask Dean to hold back the tide just because he says pretty please and throws a cherry on top. But that’s the Winchester Way – always demand the impossible. And Dean finds himself smiling, despite it all. “WWDD.”
From his peripheral, he sees Sam’s lip curve. “Exactly.”

They pass one room with its doors gaping, and it’s a similar layout to the lab from Heather’s memory, though the equipment is arranged differently and nothing is uncovered. But they’re on the right track. Pestilence is – or was – here.

The small invasion force draws closer to the end of the building, and it’s immediately apparent that they’re close. At the end of the hall, a soft light spills out of open doors. Dean’s eyes bounce off warded walls, but he can hear the light *whirr* of machines and a Bunsen burner clicking, warming something that his enhanced senses pick up as a salty odor. “He’s there.” Dean says, “Or his intern is.”

The wards prickle at his edges, snipping off and dulling pieces of grace. Dean glances back and sees the discomfiture in the lines of Cas’ face. “Right in enemy territory.” Dean comments when Cas notices his stare.

“Just like Sodom.” Cas remarks, too casually, like he isn’t making a point to call Dean out on his earlier reference to their half-borrowed memory. Dean glowers at the angel, but Cas’ gaze slides away from Dean’s face, and focuses on the entrance to Pestilence’s lab.

Dean walks in first, and feels an electric crack at the base of his spine. A runic mark painted in vivid purple on the wall near the door, glows white and crumbles – its attempt to incapacitate an uninvited guest extinguished as Michael’s grace shatters it.

It’s almost exactly the same as Heather showed it, minus a few changes easily explained by misremembering. Demonic possession and coma drugs do that. The salty odor gets stuck in Dean’s nose and he sweeps his gaze across the room, but there are too many places to duck behind and hide. Less than half the lab lights have been flicked on, casting much of the room into darkness. Dean catches the soft whisper of fabric as Sam pulls the angel blade from his jacket pocket.

“Knock knock.” Dean tries, but the room is silent except for the bubbling of an abandoned vial and the machines venting their heat.

Dean glances back at the group, sees that Jack’s also withdrawn his angel blade. His expression is tense as he scans the room. Jack coughs low in his throat, and catches Dean’s eyes on him. “Maybe the demon got here in time and Pestilence escaped?”

“Unless your demon pal decided to walk, he definitely beat us here.” Dean remarks. There’s a flicker of movement in the corner of his eye, but when he turns, it’s just the Bunsen burner’s flame shifting in the disturbed air. Dean’s eyes narrow as he sees a bubbling liquid in the vial. “Shit, wait – “

“Dean!” Cas grates, alarmed, and Dean, in all the focused attention he was giving the room, had missed that Jack’s terse cough had accelerated into a full-blown attack, and Sam is also choking down air at Dean’s side. Dean watches his brother put his weight on one of the slate-black lab tables, and retching up air like he’s about to spew bits of his stomach lining. Jack is on the other side of the table, hands on his knees, and Dean can see infection like black poison in the veins of the kid’s neck.

“Shit, Cas, get the fucking– “ Dean barks out, and only sees the swirl of the angel’s trenchcoat as he turns towards the vial.

Dean – closest to his brother – claps his hand to Sam’s shoulder. There’s the shriek of glass shattering, and Dean only looks up long enough to see that Cas had knocked the sickly vial spewing poison off its metal stand, and the flame winks out as the poison cools against the chilled table.
Dean can feel the bubbling of a silky poison wriggling throughout Sam’s blood and tissue, almost hissing under Dean’s grip. Sam’s muscles spasm from the wretched coughing, and Dean’s vision goes crystal sharp with dread.

He grits his teeth hard enough to hurt, and closes his eyes for a moment. Focuses.

In his head, Michael laughs.

When he opens his eyes, he feels the hot snap, crackle, pop of grace pooling in his eyes, feels furious fists on a metal cage, and hears a quiet, remembered voice of a brother I’m not going to help you tear it all apart.

Curative warmth pools from Dean’s center, and sluices into Sam, and Dean feels rather than sees the sickness being flushed out. Sam gasps, and Dean feels a brightness linger under his brother’s skin. Relief breathes over Dean, but with Jack still infected, he knows he can’t pause.

“Good?” He mutters under his breath, and releases Sam’s shoulder.

Sam jerks his head, still slightly out of breath – but healed, and whole. Dean nods once, and then turns towards the adulterated Nephilim, ready to churn up some of Michael’s brightness into something actually good, when a door bangs open from across the room.

And in a single second, Dean sees it all.

Dean sees a man stepping out of a lab supply pantry, with thin-rimmed glasses and pearly veneers set in a scholar’s face. It’s a remembered face – the same face, the same Pestilence as before. Cruelty in a green, banged-up Pinto. Poison in a glass.

Dean sees Pestilence’s mutilated hand, one finger sliced off from Cas’ quick thinking, but a green gem set in a silver band on the next finger over.

Dean sees Cas out of the corner of his eye, standing protectively in front of Jack, and knows it’s too late to get to the Nephilim and heal the taint from his blood.

Because Dean sees it all in a single second – sees Pestilence’s hand bloody like Cas had only loped the finger off seconds before, sees the freshly painted banishment sigil outlined on the back of the door – sees they fucked up.

Pestilence’s smile is crooked. “The doctor will see you now.” And he claps his sticky palm against the bloody mark.

An explosion of blinding light sears the room, and the two angels are wrenched from the earth.

Sam unshields his eyes and blinks away the colors that saturated the room. His body still feels scorched from Dean’s healing, and his hands shake at his sides, but whatever the light was, it appears to have left him unharmed.

Pestilence’s bloody hand comes away from the door, and Sam realizes that Dean – and Cas – are gone, blasted away with scribbles and blood. He is alone with Pestilence, and a very, very sick Nephilim.

Pestilence, for his part, doesn’t let a lick of concern show on his face, and shuts the door to the lab supply pantry. He glances down at his hand, still sticky, flexes the fingers – bits of already-dried
Sam is frozen, still feeling the echo of contagion mixed with the pulse of excoriation from Dean’s palm, but Jack coughs – thick and wet, and the very sound of it curdles Sam’s stomach.

Ignoring Pestilence, Sam breaks from his stillness, and hastens to the Nephilim’s side, shoving aside a lab chair and knocking his elbow painfully against a bulky machine. Jack is upright, if barely – kneeling on the dusty linoleum, one hand bracing himself on a cabinet, the other covering his mouth as he hacks up a lung. Sam can see the slick red of blood in the kid’s palm, and wishes to all hell that Dean had healed Jack first.

He’s alone – with a dying hunter to save and a cosmic entity to kill. No angels to back him up.

How very season three.

“I’d heard the Nephilim boy had lost all his grace in that Lucifer business.” Pestilence says, and Sam doesn’t look up from Jack when he hears a faucet turn on, hears the pump of a soap dispenser. “Still, it’s disappointing. I’ve had a number of recipes earmarked for Nephilim-testing. They are such a commodity, aren’t they?”

Jack’s skin is sallow and yellow-tinged, but his blue eyes are sharp with determination. He looks up at the younger Winchester, and says thickly, painfully, “Sam, I can help.”

“Jack – “

“I can fix myself, I can – “ And then the rest of what Jack can do is lost when suddenly turns his head and loses the contents of his stomach.

Sam remembers what Jack did to himself back when Sam was possessed, how he tore chunks of his soul off to hold off Cesar and his ill intentions. And it scares the shit out of Sam – that Jack doesn’t see, doesn’t understand the cost. To be without your conscious, to go around your every day life and not have some voice of morality, some voice that says wait. That says stop.

But is it better to let him die?

Jack suddenly sags to the side, tilting towards the puddle of his own mess before Sam catches him. The kid’s passed out, unconsciousness smoothing away the pain in his face. Sam stretches Jack out on his side away from the mess, keeping the solid length of a lab table between him and Pestilence, for all the good it will do.

Pestilence is checking on one of the machine readouts, having donned a new lab apron over his brown sweater. His hands are cleaned of blood, and he doesn’t glance up when Sam turns to him.

“Is that what you’ve been dosing the rest of your victims with?”

Pestilence makes a note on a chart fastened to a clipboard, and then shuts the machine off. “Good gracious, Sam, I would think not. We’re not nearly that far in the development process yet.” He pauses at his work station, then tugs off his glasses – observing some blood speck to be cleansed. “No, this one is an old fan-favorite. You might remember from our last encounter, before your loyal mutt stole something that didn’t belong to him.” His ring flashes in the high-intensity lab lights.

Sam’s options are limited, and he knows he needs to keep Pestilence at a distance. Luckily, he has more questions than answers. “Why are you… the same? War and Death, they’re different now. But you look exactly the same as last time.”
Pestilence returns his glasses to his face and blinks at Sam once with disdain. “War’s reckless enough that she’ll stick her finger in a power socket just to see what color sparks fly out. Deadly smart. But reckless. She’s been killed in as many battles as she’s waged, but that’s her shtick, I suppose. She just doesn’t care.” The ancient being runs a thin hand against his front. “I’ve kept Dr. Green’s visage for a few decades now. I’ve always been better at preservation.”

“But you have your ring back.”

Pestilence smiles. “But I have my ring back. And word around the cosmic grapevine is that you’re in the market.”

Sam’s hand twitches, and he remembers his dropped angel blade back where he first fell prone to Pestilence’s trap. Though he’s not sure how much good a frontal attack will do against a Horseman. Time to get creative.

“So, working with demons, still. Guess that wasn’t just a one-off for Lucifer, then.”

Pestilence shrugs. “A proper operation always requires good help. And lab assistants than can fetch not only fresh subjects, but can gather the testing results? The toxicology reports? The Coroner’s findings?”

“That’s why your demon is ditching them in public places. So they survive long enough to get to the hospital.”

“Mm.” Pestilence agrees, and turns his attention back to one of his machines, losing interest.

A chemical smell tickles Sam’s nose, but if it’s another of Pestilence’s attempts to sicken him, the lingering warmth in his chest from Dean’s healing seems to be holding strong. Sam glances down at Jack’s still form, hears the wheeze in his thin breaths, and knows he doesn’t have the luxury of playing for time until Dean returns.

“So, what do you want?”

“Pardon?” Pestilence inquires, eyes still on a screen’s readout. “You’ll have to much more specific, Winchester.”

“I mean – you blasted my brother and Cas with an angel-banishing sigil. You’re not an idiot, you know that’s not a permanent solution. War tried to take Dean out first.” And tried to take him out bloody. “What’s the game?”

Pestilence peers at Sam over the rims of his glasses, and pleasure tilts the corners of his mouth up. “If only you started playing for the other side, Sam, you could have truly been a wonder. The Boy King, Azazel used to say.”

Sam flinches. “Not a boy. Not a king.”

“Well,” Pestilence says, ignoring Sam’s remark, “let’s cut to the chase. We both have something the other wants. I want to cut a deal.”

“A deal.” Sam repeats flatly. The sour, chemical smell grows stronger as he edges closer to Pestilence. He senses the end of pleasantries approaching, wants to draw the fighting away from the unconscious Jack.

“A trade.” The Horseman clarifies. “I’ll cure your little protégé of the plague strain currently dissolving his insides; I’ll even pack up shop and be on my merry way. All in exchange for one tiny
concession.”

Sam is bewildered. “What?”

“I want him.”

“You want… Jack?” Sam says, feeling like he’s twenty steps behind.

Pestilence’s gaze on him is sharp. “Use that famous brain of yours, Winchester. Don’t be imbecilic. The Nephilim’s been drained of everything that makes him interesting. He’s no more useful to me than any other human.”

“Then – “

“It’s Michael I want.” Pestilence continues without a breath, his eyes frenzy-bright. “I’ve worked on humans, on monsters. I’ve had angels, dozens of them. But an archangel? The archangel Michael?” Pestilence spreads his arms, like he can show Sam all the plans, all the possibilities. “I’ve never gotten close. But here he is – all tucked away and trapped inside a mortal man.”

Pestilence is fast on his feet, and scuttles around Sam before the hunter realizes the Horseman was close enough to grab. Pestilence sweeps past him, and Sam breathes in the strange odor again, but this time it finally clicks – gas. The Bunsen burner with the vial of sickness. Sam had heard the commotion over his brother’s voice, remembers vaguely over his insides rebelling that Cas had knocked aside the vial and its stand. Whatever Cas did had put the flame out, and slowly, silently, flammable gas pours into the room.

Sam almost forgets where he is, who he is dealing with. He almost turns to a diseased-obsessed megalomaniac that just asked if Sam would trade his brother away, and says hey, maybe we should…

Sam turns and sees Pestilence has stopped in front of a blank whiteboard, pondering its emptiness thoughtfully. “It’s not going to be easy, of course.” Pestilence continues, like he’s mistaken Sam for his demonic helper. “There’s all sorts of logistical concerns.” He twists the cap off a green marker, and scratches a few quick lines on the board in a language Sam doesn’t recognize. He pauses, then draws a question mark at the end, the marker hesitating on the last line. “But angels were tough to crack, and I got to them in the end. It’s just a little time and patience, and a gallon or two of holy oil.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Sam says, and feels the words slip from his mouth like someone else spoke them.

Pestilence turns to Sam, annoyed, like the hunter’s interrupted him mid-lecture. “Don’t tell me you still want the ring? This is a win-win-win for everyone, Winchester. You get the cure, I get Michael, and he’s no longer your problem to deal with. I’ll make sure he’s nice and comfortable in an unnamed circle of hell where I can work on him in peace – Hell owes me a favor.” The Horseman pauses, studies Sam’s frozen expression like Sam forgot how to speak English. “Congratulations, Sam, you averted the apocalypse.”

Sam’s hand clenches into a fist at his side, joints popping. “Not happening.”

Pestilence raises his brows. “I’d call that awfully selfish, Sam. I’m doing you a huge favor, offering to take Michael off the board.”

“No.”

Pestilence sighs, and replaces the cap on the marker before setting it down. “I believe I see the issue. I’m talking to the wrong brother, aren’t I?”
Despite it all, Sam finds himself getting drawn into Pestilence’s web. “What is that supposed to mean?”

The Horseman’s expression is disdainful, almost sad. “Uniting the rings of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse only suits one purpose, Winchester. If your true goal is to send Michael to the Cage, then what is your concern with turning him over to me?”

“But that’s not Michael!” Sam explodes without realizing the fury building inside of him. “Because I’m not going to give my brother to you so you can torture him in hell!”

Pestilence raises his hands in farcical surrender, “Alright, alright. If I manage to burn the archangel out of him, I’ll return whatever is left, deal?”

Sam doesn’t realize he’s lunged at the placid Horseman, until his hands have fisted in his sweater and he’s bashed him against the whiteboard. Pestilence’s eyes blink up at him, unconcerned, as Sam’s fingers twist. “Go to hell.” Sam grunts, fury flattening his tone.

Pestilence smiles. “Isn’t that the very idea? Alright, I’ve had enough.”

Sam frowns, confusion chipping at the edges of his anger, when something, or someone, suddenly hauls him off his feet. Sam’s feet kick up off the ground, and he feels himself hurle in the air for a sick half-second before smashing painfully against the side of a lab station. His back pulses with pain, but he’s already scrambling to his feet, blinking white spots from his eyes. Two hands curl into his jacket and Sam is slammed back against the table again before he feels arms like steel bands twist his wrists behind him, holding him pinned.

“That’s quite enough for now.” Sam can barely hear the Horseman’s words through the ringing in his ears. He spits out a wad of blood at his feet from where he bit his tongue in the struggle, and twists his head back.

A large man, maybe even an inch or two taller than Sam, breathes foul breath in Sam’s face. He sees Sam looking and smiles wide enough for Sam to see broken teeth, and black tattoos so faded it could only be prison ink written illegibly along his jaw. Black slicks over the man’s eyes, and Sam finally meets the demon helper he’s heard so much about.

“I’ll ask once more.” Pestilence says smoothly, and for a moment, Sam sees the millennia of precision and impartial cruelty hidden in the skin of a man. A plague behind glass. The Horseman straightens his sweater and readjusts the straps of his pristine apron. “But I understand your frustration. You’re missing the big picture, blinded by familial ties. It’s noble in a naïve way, I suppose. I’ll sweeten the pot and toss in the antidote to my new formula.”

Sam strains against the demon’s grip, feels his shoulder joints burn. “Pass.” He spits.

Something flashes in Pestilence’s expression. “You’ll allow all those innocents die to prove a point?”

Sam tastes blood in his mouth, and his grin is feral. “No. I’m just not worried about it, since we anonymously dropped off the sample your partner left behind with the CDC Taskforce before heading here.”

The demon makes a noise low in his throat, and wrenches Sam’s arms more painfully at his lower back.

Pestilence’s expression is black as his attention flickers to his assistant. “We’ll discuss that error in due time. But kill the hunter. I’m far too busy to wait for the archangel’s healing infusion to wear off.”
Sam struggles to break the demon’s grip, but the possessed man’s strength coupled with the demonic supercharge is like beating against a stone wall. He stomps the man’s foot and only hears an irritated grunt. He tries to use his weight to shove the demon back against the lab station, but the man doesn’t budge.

The demon readjusts his grip, and Sam hears a scraping sound as something heavy is dragged from the table surface. Pain explodes against the side of his head, and Sam dimly hears something shattering against his skull, spots of red pricking his vision. He sags for a moment, stunned and fighting to stay conscious.

The demon grunts with exertion from taking more of Sam’s weight on, but presses the chance before Sam recovers.

Sam feels one of the thick arms snake around his throat and begin to choke off his air supply. His vision clears once his brain decides to do him a favor for once and not pass out, but his head is still ringing from the blow. Reggie, Sam realizes the tattoo says.

The demon says, low and pissed in his ear, “You’re gonna regret –”

“Oh, shut up.” Sam mutters through clenched teeth, and then abruptly sags in the demon’s arms like he’s passed out.

The demon, not expecting the sudden weight, loses his leverage for a moment – but a moment is all Sam needs. Sam plants his feet, and straightens to his full height – feels the wet crunch of the crown of his head meeting squeaky cartilage. The demon yelps in pain, and instantly releases Sam. The hunter drops low to his feet and ducks out of the demon’s range.

The demon’s eyes are black with hate as he holds a bloody hand over his nose. “Big mistake, hunter.”

Sam gasps for breath as he recovers from the attempted strangulation, and feels a dizziness sweep over him. The gas.

The demon lets go of his nose, and inspects the blood splashed across his palm. Blood has run down into his mouth, and when he grins, his broken teeth are smeared with it. “Don’t look so light on your feet, anymore.”

“Hey, asshole.” A new voice says thickly, and before the demon can do more than blink in surprise, three inches of angel steel is protruding from his abdomen, like a new rib grown wrong. An electric burst frames his black eyes, lighting up his insides before the demon – and his possessed body – sinks to the floor. Empty.

Jack doesn’t have the strength the keep his grip on the angel blade as the demon collapses, and it’s pulled from his weak fingers. Blood runs from his nose to his jawline, and his eyes are tight with pain and nausea.

“Whoa, Jack – “ Sam says stupidly as the kid sags to the side, but Jack catches himself on one of the lab stations before gently lowering himself into a pained crouch.

“Unbelievable.” Pestilence says lightly, and Sam remembers that it’s not the time to let their guard down. Pestilence had crossed back to his array of charts while Sam was having the stuffing kicked out of him, but now the Horseman is watching him with irritation. “Do you know how difficult it is to find someone who will work for minimum wage?”

Pestilence’s work is spread out before them. A whiteboard shoved into the corner near the window is
covered with lines of formulas and balanced chemical equations. A beat-up centrifuge spins stolen blood samples at Pestilence’s elbow. From his closer angle, Sam can see a medium-sized lab refrigerator, filled with pus-yellow vials. Dozens and dozens of vials filled with the same liquid that Pestilence has been poisoning people with, that’s been sinking them into comas and poking holes in their immune systems until there’s nothing left worth fighting. The hours, days, weeks that Pestilence has spent perfecting his formula – all surrounding the man that made it possible.

Be a shame if something were to happen to it.

Jack seems surprised to find that Sam is running at him full tilt, seems even more startled when Sam hooks his arm under his shoulder and lifts him bodily off the floor. “Sam?” He chokes out thinly.

“Please, where do you think you’re off to?” Pestilence tosses after them, and the door to the lab slams shut – rippling warding nearly invisible to the naked eye.

But Sam doesn’t slow down. Instead, he darts to the backside of the last slate-black station – sturdy and heavy in the way that lab stations are. Sam tries to be gentle with Jack as he lowers him back against the table, but the kid’s already unconscious again, his breath thready and pained.

“What on earth do you think you’re doing?” Pestilence says, and there’s a new trace of annoyance in his voice. “You have a few minutes at the most before Michael’s protection wears off, Sam.” And his voice turns thoughtful, almost introspective. “I did make a few tweaks to the new batch.”

Sam pats his pockets, instantly knocking fingers against the small metal box tucked low in in jacket.

“So, we’re hiding now. That’s your plan?”

If Dean were here, he’d pull some snappy remark out of the bag. Something like guess someone forgot to turn the stove off or stop, drop and roll, bitch.

For his part, Sam snaps the metal zippo open, feels the flame warm his fingers for a moment, and then launches it over the counter.

There’s enough time to wonder if this was a monumentally stupid plan.

The world ignites.

Chapter End Notes

So in case it wasn't painfully obvious, there will be a Sodom/Gomorrah Michael memory starring Dean, Cas and special musical guest. Only reason I'm spoiling it is because I made a lot of references to it in this chapter, but then I thought it would be weird to tack it on at the end (plus I haven't written it lmao), and I don't want that to lose its momentum? Idk how to say. Also sorry for breaking fourth wall, it was just too easy.

#SeasonThree

Thank for reading <3

P.S. Also my friend works at the UC Davis Gene Sequencing Lab, so this was purely selfish and lazy research.

P.P.S. There is one line in this chapter that Dean says that is 100% not in character for
Dean and 100% in character for me.
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

(Fergie Voice:) H- h- h- h- Hold up. Check it out.

Before anyone starts this chapter, I feel like I need to say this chapter is ONLY the Sodom/Gomorrah memory. I am still a good chunk of the way into the Pestilence debacle, but I checked my word count, and I was already over 5k words with hardly a dent in my outline. This Michael memory was 3.8k words, so rather than posting a stupid long chapter later, I'm going to drop this bit now as a separate chapter. I'm only saying this because there might be people who don't like the memory bits, and therefore might want to just skip this until the next chapter comes out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I do not understand.”

“We’re not asking you to understand. We are ordering you to heed our prognostication.”

“There are thousands of people that dwell here. I do not understand – you say my uncle has sent you?”

Dean’s irritation builds, and Lot senses the archangel’s darkening mood. “I… I apologize, I am sure that your journey from Hebron was taxing. I simply am… having difficulty understanding the purpose of your mission.”

“The sanctity of Sodom and Gomorrah have been called into question. As we have made clear, your Creator has tasked us with eradicating the cities to cleanse them of this corruption.” Dean articulates slowly, unable to completely keep his tone neutral. Heavenly.

Lot’s eyes are wide, his face pale beneath years of sun and time. His eyes dart between Dean and his two companions, and the awe in which he intercepted them at the Gates of Sodom is quick to be replaced by fear and foreboding.

“But, and by God, please forgive any disrespect from this humble servant,” Lot stumbles on his words, and Dean wants to turn his back on the man, sick of weak platitudes. Does Abraham’s nephew not recognize that he is Michael, Commander of the Heavenly Host? Dean would almost have more respect for the man were he to at least speak direct. Still, Lot presses on, “but are you not… Michael? The Lord’s kindness? His forgiveness?”

The angel at Dean’s right shoulder snorts, but when Dean turns to scowl at his companion, his brother’s face is carefully blank. “Consider this warning your kindness, Lot.” Dean says, and returns his attention to the old man.

Still the man presses, “Is there nothing to be done? Is destroying the city the only path forward?”

“Excuse my interruption, Lot,” Dean’s brother interjects, and Dean stops himself from rolling his eyes at the patience and sweetness in his brother’s voice. “Michael isn’t accurately representing our mission, I sincerely apologize. Sometimes he’s all fire and brimstone and needs some handholding to
cool his ire.” Dean glares daggers at his brother. The third angel, Castiel, or whatever his name is, looks deeply uncomfortable. As he should be – Dean cannot imagine why his brother enlisted such a wet-behind-the-ears member of the Host on this earthly excursion.

Lot glances nervously at Dean, before returning his attention to the other archangel, who continues: “There is always opportunity to redeem oneself in the eyes of our Father. He has agreed to preserve Sodom and Gomorrah under the assurance that there are still men of righteousness in the city.”

Lot still seems uneasy, but there is a flicker of hope in those dull brown eyes. “Surely there are some men with redemption in their hearts. My daughters are promised to local merchants, I will vouch for their piety. How will you determine this?”

The vessel that Dean’s brother has selected for this sojourn is young, a man given to joviality and cheerfulness. And when he smiles, the effect seems to wash over Lot and soothe his fears. “Your worry is misplaced, Lot. Our Father has agreed to spare the city if we find but ten good men.”

“Ten!” Lot repeats, and his relief is palpable. “Surely you will find more than ten men of such caliber. I shall offer you any aid you – “ The old man falls silence as a banging sound resounds from the front of the house. Dean and his brother exchange glances, the angel Castiel stiffens.

Dean extends his senses, hears the rabble of voices raised in anger and fear. One man, presumably the leader, bangs once more against the door and bellows Lot’s name.

Lot’s face is white as he turns towards the noise. “Please… please excuse me. Allow me to check on the… interruption.” He sweeps from the room, more agile that Dean would have credited a man of his age.

And the angels are alone.

“Father’s sake, Michael.” Gabriel grouses, and runs a hand through his vessel’s locks, an impression of human ease that Dean’s never been able to master. “And you claim I’m dramatic. If you wanted the old man to defecate in his undergarments, I believe you’ve succeeded.”

Castiel doesn’t move from his station at the wall, but his dark eyes flicker to Dean, shocked that any angel would have the gall to speak to the Archangel Michael so boldly. But it’s not a bond that Dean would expect an angel of a lesser order to understand. Gabriel is as fierce and destructive as he is ludicrous, at times. He is Dean’s brother. And he’s already lost one of those.

“He should be fearful, Gabriel.” Dean replies in their tongue. “To find ten worthy of saving in such a sea of depravity is no easy task.”

Gabriel rolls his eyes, and replies in his vessel’s language, “Then we have a fundamental disagreement on what the term worthy is, brother. Isn’t a desire to improve deserving? Shouldn’t we offer the city a chance at redemption before obliterating it?”

Dean glowers, but accedes to his brother’s preference for earthly language. “If they only desire to better themselves at the threat of destruction, there is no purity in their motives.”

Gabriel’s eyes flash with amusement, a hint of the golden angel flitting beneath the surface. “Should we ask Castiel what his opinion is?”

The angel tagalong, for his part, looks appropriately mortified.

“Excuse me.” A new voice says, and Dean reluctantly tears his scowling face from his grinning sibling.
A woman has joined them in the living quarters, and Dean recognizes her from their arrival to their home. Lot’s wife – Ado, or another name similar. In her hands, she holds a carved plate bearing dates – an apparent offer of respect, but her eyes are suspicious.

“My humblest welcome to our small home.” She begins, and her address seems to settle on Gabriel. “We’ve been here many years, but it seems we’ve always more to be done. Our household grows, but our home does not.” She pauses, seems to forget her excuse of offering refreshment. “I hope I am not too bold, but… if I may ask – “

“You’re wondering why Michael is a woman.”

“Gabriel.”

“No,” Ado says uncertainly, though she can’t entirely hide her confusion as she inspects Dean’s vessel, “but I overheard your discussion with my husband, and I know it is not our place to question His – or your – divine authority, but there is something I do not understand.”

She pauses for several moments, and Dean can hear Lot talking quietly with the men at the door. Men who seem to be upset with whatever the topic of conversation is. Gabriel’s voice is kind as he finally prompts, “Please, you may ask your question.”

“Thank you.” She says immediately, relieved. “I confess that I am unsure why the Lord would unleash his wrath upon this city – and Gomorrah – are we not all to be judged by Him after death? Shall the wicked of this city not find their punishment in the flames of hell, as surely as the deserving will find their reward with Him in Heaven? What is the purpose of such… timely expedience?”

“Be silent.” Dean says sharply, and Ado takes a flinching step as if struck, her expression frozen. “Our orders aren’t to be questioned. Did Noah question his Creator when commanded to build the Ark? Did those drowned men not find their judgement early in the eyes of their God? Your arrogance is – “

“Michael.” Gabriel says distinctly, tone firm.

“My deepest apologizes.” Ado says quickly, and deposits the bowl of dates on a low table, before quickly fleeing the room. Dean watches her leave with bitterness, as if he can sense some lingering disrespect or insolence.

Gabriel approaches Dean, puts a warm hand on his shoulder. Dean’s vessel is much shorter and thinner than his brother’s – a meaningless distinction that still irks him. “Michael,” Gabriel says, “surely you must realize our Father has no intent on the destruction of these cities.”

Dean’s eyes snap up to his brother, and he tries to see past the bronzed face of his brother’s vessel to determine his true meaning.

Gabriel lifts his hand off Dean’s shoulder in mock surrender, “Ten worthy mortals to save thousands? You have such a low view of humanity, brother, that you think this impossible. Father intends this as a warning, a portent to inspire change. We are the harbingers of a path to redemption.”

Dean nearly laughs at the absurdity, but his brother’s eyes are open and honest. “Gabriel, please tell me you are not this naïve.” And Gabriel flinches like a human. “You’ve spent too long walking among them.”

“And you have not spent enough. I am trying to understand Father’s creations, and I see so much inside each of them – the ability to hope and to challenge. To question. It’s a marvel, Michael, I wish you were – “
Dean can’t believe what he’s hearing. “To question is to err, Gabriel. Do you even hear what you’re saying? To question Father is to – “

“– that’s not – “

“– go down a path of destruction. This city and its sister city must be destroyed for the rest to see what their end could be should they choose to continue to question their faith and our Father.”

Gabriel’s expression melts from one of entreaty to one of frustration. “Father has always taught forgiveness. He has always accepted less than perfection.”

Dean snorts, and gives some attention to the rancor of the growing mob at Lot’s doorstep.

Gabriel seems to sense Dean’s loss of interest, and his eyes flash gold with uncharacteristic frustration. “This is about Lucifer.”

And that pulls Dean’s attention like nothing else could. “Gabriel – “

“No, Michael. No, it’s been centuries. It’s been millennia, and you’re still brooding, still carrying the ache inside you. You blame humans for Lucifer’s fate, and you always have. Lucifer made his choices, Michael, and we made ours when we cast him to his Cage. You know that Lucifer’s destruction began long before the humans walked this earth, back before with that corrupting Mark. If you continue to see humans as the fall of our brother, then – “

And Dean is across the room, and Castiel barely dodges out of the way as Dean pitches his brother against the rough wall. There’s surprise in his brother’s eyes, but no real fear, as Dean pins Gabriel to the wall. And Gabriel could break free in a blink, but allows them both to settle in the moment.

“Don’t speak of him.” Dean spits, furious, and shoves Gabriel once more before taking a painful step back. “Don’t ever speak his name.”

And Gabriel doesn’t move from the wall, instead twists his hand into his thin shirt, so painfully human that Dean closes his eyes. “He was my brother, too, Michael. You’re not the only one who lost him.”

And it’s a needle’s edge, and Dean forgets himself, and his next words are honesty pulled from the darkest chasm of his self: “I don’t want them to prove he was right.”

Gabriel’s expression is broken, shattered, human. And he opens his mouth to reply, when –

The voices that had begun as a quiet background argument had escalated into shouts and threats. Lot’s voice rises above the din, but he gives a grunt of pain, and the sounds of men shouting and pushing through the doors echoes to the living quarters. Dean hears the fearful cries of Lot’s daughters from the kitchen, and the soothing tones of their mother attempting to calm them.

Soon, men burst into the room. Dirty, scornful men with dust in the beards and weapons in their hands.

One particularly ugly man in front wields a scythe from the fields, and bounces it agitatedly in his hands. “The sentry said that Lot was hiding strangers after curfew hours.” He says, and his angry eyes flicker over the angels. “Explain yourselves, and explain why you are within city walls. Are you from Elam?”

The man looks from Dean to Gabriel to Castiel, and then to his companions. “Surely she wasn’t addressing us. Unless she’s simple in the head. Or blind.”

“Michael.” Gabriel says in a low voice, and only at his name does Dean realize that he’s disturbing the air with crackly electric power. Too much like his visit with Cain. Dean forces himself to settle.

“Gentlemen,” Gabriel says easily, and turns to the mob with nothing but spread arms and a warming smile. “Please, there is no need for violence. We’re simply friends on Lot’s uncle and have come to pay the man’s nephew a visit.”

There’s a murmuring from the crowd, and someone mutters to a friend, “I didn’t know Lot had an uncle.”

Someone replies, “Don’t be a simpleton, Josiah. Abraham, of course. The war hero.”

“Abraham has not been to Sodom in nearly 25 years.” The leader says loudly, over the muttering of his companions. “I’m not convinced the old man is still alive.” The man takes a step forward, towards Gabriel, and raises his weapon. “Either you come with us, or we’ll see how long you last without a throat.”

Gabriel still smiles easily, but it only seems to irritate the man further. He pushes his way across the bare floor, the quiet respect of his companions boosting his own self-authority. He approaches Gabriel until the pair are nearly toe-to-toe. “What is your business here?”

“To save your souls.”

The man’s face colors, and he uses the wooden shaft of the scythe in both hands to shove Gabriel. The Archangel allows himself to be knocked to the ground, and his expression remains placid and unconcerned. Dean’s does not.

“Back up, Elamite bitch.” The man snaps at Dean as he approaches.

“Michael.” Gabriel says, and now anxiety replaces his calm. He shakes his head once at Dean, but Dean ignores him.

Dean walks right up to the man with the scythe, who holds the weapon close to his chest, uncertain as he sees Dean’s slender form approaching. The man isn’t tall much taller than Dean’s vessel, and flinches when Dean leans into his personal space, feels the prickle of blue grace snap in his borrowed eyes. “I ordered you to leave this place.” Dean says, deadly quiet.

The man seems stunned for a moment, stares at Dean like he’s not sure if he can believe his eyes.

“Jerah?” Someone asks at the leader’s back, and the tone is half-laughing. “Just knock her down – unless you’re afraid of – “

Jerah grits his teeth, and his confusion quickly turns to hatred. “I’m not afraid of anyone, let alone a couple of intruders.” He goes to repeat the same blow he dealt Gabriel, an attempt to knock Dean to the floor with the worn handle of the farm tool. Dean doesn’t flinch as the wooden shaft slams into his tungsten skin, snapping in two perfectly even pieces.

“Brother, don’t.” Gabriel says, and hauls himself far too quickly to his feet. The men fall silent. Jerah is staring at the broken weapon pieces in his hand like he’s still trying to decide if it’s really broken, when he sees Gabriel’s supernaturally rapid movement. Jerah’s eyes flicker between the two, before
he seems to settle on Gabriel as the more honorable target.

He drops the worthless handle, and it rolls across the floor until bumping the low table, lightly jostling a date from its bowl. The scythe he raises between himself and Gabriel, and Gabriel’s expression is set in grim determination. His brother catches Dean’s eye and Dean hears the echo in his head, *Michael, please do not escalate the situation. They do not know.*

*They will.*

Dean raises his hand, and the men in the entranceway focus their attention on him, instead of their leader’s threatening of an unarmed man.

*Michael, stop –*

Warmth bursts from Dean’s palm – a blue light so intense, it’s nearly white – and sears across the faces of the men –

And then the screaming begins.

Jerah screams, his eyes transformed to a milky white, and he drops the forgotten weapon at his feet as he claps his hands madly at his face. The men at his back shuffle and stumble, their cries fearful and injured. Three of the stumbling men collide with each other, eyes peeled of sight, and one pulls out a pocketed knife and wields it blindly. The thin blade catches one man along his ribs, and bright blood blossoms against the thinness of his garment.

“You’ve blinded them.” Castiel says, the first words he’s spoken to Dean. The vessel’s voice is deeper, more grating than Dean would have imagined.

“You didn’t need to do that.” Gabriel says, expression inscrutable as he watches his would-be attacker fall to his knees, hands still blindly scrubbing at his face.

“They were impeding our mission.” Dean says, and snaps his fingers, a sound barely heard over the animal cries of man.

Instantly, the men disappear as if they were never there. Gabriel doesn’t ask where he’s sent them. Castiel wouldn’t dare. The only sounds are the crying of Lot’s daughters in the kitchen, the soothing hushes of their mother, the pained groan as Lot hauls himself slowly to his knees in the entranceway of his home.

Turning his back on his brother, Dean approaches the angel Castiel. The angel’s expression is flat, though seemingly due to inexperience rather than true remove. Dean can almost respect that. It’s better than seeing the careless ease in human flesh that Gabriel has come to possess.

“Relay to Lot and his kin we will give them the hour to clear the city limits. They are not to warn others, they are not to turn back. Lead them to Zoar, and then return. Ensure they do not turn or look back. We move to Gomorrah next.”

“Understood.” The angel solider says immediately, and departs from the room.

Gabriel’s expression, when Dean turns back to him, is a wealth of emotion. “Michael, this is absurd. Father doesn’t intend - ”

Dean is in front of Gabriel before his brother can finish the thought, and finally, dark fury is beginning to bleed through. ‘*Do not lecture me, Gabriel. Your… interpretations of Father’s will are bordering on blasphemy. This fiction you’re telling yourself is blinding you to the truth. These*
people were ready to destroy us because we were strangers to them. They judged without thought. This is not a city worth saving, there are not ten righteous men within the city. I doubt we would even find one.”

Gabriel’s expression is a picture of shock. “Michael, there are thousands of lives at stake. There are children, families. Some may not be perfect, but there is still goodness in – “

Dean doesn’t realize he’s laid hands on his brother until Gabriel has slammed back against the mud brick wall hard enough to rattle the wooden ceiling beams. “Do not question the mission.”

Finally, something like bitterness, like contempt curdles Gabriel’s expression. He picks himself up off the wall slowly and carefully, smoothing wrinkles from the front of his garb.

Dean is cold, feels no sympathy or regret for his brother – the most loyal of all of the Archangels. The Archangel with the largest capacity for empathy, for change. And for a halting moment, Dean considers that maybe his own constancy isn’t the comfort he’s always thought it was.

Gabriel’s eyes are brittle as frost as he eyes Dean, and says simply, “I’m not going to help you tear it all apart. That’s not why we were created. That’s not what Heaven stands for.”

And Dean hears the words he can’t take back: “Then maybe you belong down here after all.”

Gabriel jerks back like he’s been slapped, and his expression is unbridled hurt. Betrayal.

And then cold acceptance. Gabriel shakes his head, “Maybe you’re right, Michael.” A bitter smile. “Heaven’s going to be a riot with just you and Raphael up there. I give it two centuries before the angels burn it down from sheer boredom.”

Dean doesn’t respond, just watches his brother without expression. Gabriel waits, but what he’s waiting for, Dean doesn’t know.

And finally, Gabriel sighs, and some fight goes out of him. “I suppose this is my line in the sand, brother.”

“I hope it is worth it.”

And Gabriel smiles sadly. “It is.” He fiddles with his sleeve, and he looks so pathetically human in that moment, that Dean has to force himself to think of this form as his brother of millennia. Golden ibis wings, invisible to the human eye, slowly unfurl from Gabriel’s back, like the beckon of a swan. Like a goodbye. And Gabriel looks Dean straight in the eye and says, with a trace of regret, and says: “I have a bad feeling about the next time we meet.” And then a slow flap of wings, and Gabriel is gone – shielded from sight and hidden from sense.

Dean is alone in Lot’s home, in a city he means to destroy.

It feels like something momentous, but it really shouldn’t be. Gabriel won’t be gone for long. He’ll throw his tantrum and return back to heaven the instant that he gets bored. When he realizes the truth about humanity and their role as its curtailers.

Castiel speaks softly to Lot in the next room, but the old man won’t be much trouble. The fight has escaped him, and he accepts their word for what it is. Dean waits, allows the lesser angel to settle the details.

Castiel reenters the room a few minutes later, the same moment that Ado exits the kitchen with her daughters a few steps behind. Their faces are streaked with kohl and tears, and they keep their heads
bowed low, shuffling past Dean and Castiel with terror and dread.

Lot’s wife gives Dean a sober look as she passes, an expression loaded with carefully reined-in, but honest disappointment. Something curdles low in Dean’s stomach. He watches as she sweeps from the room and heads into the cool night air with her daughters. Her spine is straight and stiff with conviction.

“No man or woman worthy of soul or salt may look upon His cleansing fire, Castiel.” And it’s the first time he’s looked the angel in the eyes, the first time he’s said his name. “Remember that.”

Castiel doesn’t hesitate: “I will.”

Dean opens his eyes to brightness.

He’s not sure where he is, and he probably won’t figure it out before he yanks himself back to California and Sam and sickness. But in this still moment, there’s nothing but an icy sun, a rolling wheat field half-obscured under thin frost, and Dean Winchester.

Michael is quiet, for once. Dean wonders if he’s mourning a brother, or if Dean’s just getting used to his moods.

He feels a sense of urgency at the same time he doesn’t. It’s taking a few moments for his thoughts to reorder themselves in the scatter. He knows Sam is probably fighting for his and Jack’s lives, that Jack was already infected and dying. He knows that Cas isn’t here, and the fact that Dean can’t sense him… well, anywhere is probably bad news. He knows it’s probably all bad news.

WWDD.

Chapter End Notes

It was really hard to fit all the Sodom bits from the story in here!! I wasn't able to completely fit Lot's wife being turned to salt from turning around and looking at the city’s destruction, because that would have been a Cas memory, but hopefully I was able to imply/beat that plot point over the head with that super cheesy and stupid "salt" line. I think I rolled my eyes at myself writing it. #Salty

Also, it was really fun to write Gabriel, but it felt weird to not be able to slap pop culture references and slang into all of his dialogue. Damn you historical accuracy.

I've already written some of the upcoming Pestilence wrap-up, so shouldn't be too long of a delay. Just wanted to get this out here bc it was too long.

Thanks for reading and commenting <3
Okay. So the room doesn’t explode.

But Sam’s pretty sure he’s singed at least an inch or two of hair from his scalp, and his exposed hands and face feel like they’ve been hanging around in a tanning booth without the rest of his parts. His left hand to the wrist seems to bear the brunt of the damage – edging towards a second-degree burn in places. Not to mention he’s going to kick Dean’s ass for pumping him up with that extra healing grace – the warmth settles against his ribs uncomfortably, like a burrowing parasite.

The room isn’t large, but narrow and deep enough that Sam had dragged Jack and himself away from the worst of the blast – the sturdy table shielding them from an explosion that hopefully, if they played their cards right, was just enough to take out a cosmic entity that may or may not have wiped out the dinosaurs. (Sam’s read the theories.)

Sam’s hands hurt like all hell, but he manages to grip the table and peer over the edge just as the emergency sprinklers begin to cough water out of dusty pipes. The spray douses the small fires that had torched Pestilence’s piles of reports and research, until the room is filled with just smoke and rain. The blast had shattered the bulbs from most of the hanging lights, but there’s just enough morning light spearing through the windows for Sam to see…

No sign of Pestilence.

Either he’s dead or he’s escaped. Sam has his preference.

Sam lowers himself back to the ground, and finds that Jack is awake again – blue eyes slits of pain in a sunburnt face. “Did you – “ cough, “get him?”

Sam swallows dryly, “Don’t know yet. Are you…?” Sam’s throat seals around the word okay? “Will you be okay until Dean gets back?”

Jack doesn’t reply, but draws himself to a sitting position. His face is bone-white beneath the burn. He leans back against the table and draws his legs towards his chest in an attempt to soothe the nausea. “I think so.” He says, because he thinks he should. He closes his eyes for a long moment, and Sam hears the rattle in his lungs. Finally, Jack’s eyes blink open. “Are you… fine?”

“Yes.” Sam says automatically, and only then realizes it’s true. His hands hurt less, but he considers it adrenaline until he sees Jack is staring.

Sam frowns, and glances down at his hand, expecting to see a worse injury than he had thought. Instead, his hand looks better than he expected. “What – “ He starts to ask, but Jack interrupts.

“It’s healing.”

And sure enough – once Sam pays close enough attention, he can see the skin smoothing over, erasing the traces of a burn. It’s only then that he remembers the blow to the head, the bruises around his neck. He runs a hand through his hair, and there’s no bump or cut or bruise. No lingering soreness around his throat. Healed.

And Sam remembers the fester of grace in his chest, Dean’s inexperience or sloppiness leaving a
lingering trace. Something foreign and poisonous that’s working its way out of Sam’s system the best way it knows how.

Jack watches without expression as healthy skin creeps over Sam’s wrist. Then a cough stutters low in his lungs, and Jack is half bent over with the sudden wracking cough, until Sam’s not sure if it’s spit or blood the Nephilim is hacking up on the ashy floor.

And it’s a knife in the gut to realize the grace that Jack desperately needs is inches out of reach.

But maybe it isn’t.

The kid is fading, Sam can see, and so he reaches out and squeezes Jack’s shoulder to try and ground him. “Can you take it?”

Sam can tell from Jack’s expression that he knows what Sam’s asking. And maybe the honest truth is that grace is never far from the kid’s mind. “I don’t know.” He admits, but his gaze lingers on Sam’s right rib cage where the grace seems to have settled. Like he can sense it.

Sam swallows. “Can you try?”

And Jack smiles, his lips coated with flecks of blood. “Dean says to try everything once.”

He raises his hand hesitantly and lightly places it against Sam’s ribs. Water still spews from the ceiling, coating the dust and ash until everything is covered in paste and flood water. Nothing happens for long moments, and Sam glances over his shoulder, trying not to seem impatient.

He wonders if this is a waste of time. He wonders if this is a mistake.

Then – something gives. There’s a wrenching feeling under his ribs. Not painful, but uncomfortable. Like when Cas helped Sam extract the last of Gadreel’s grace from his system, but… gentler. More careful. Sam doesn’t see anything happening where Jack’s hand is on his ribs, but he glances up, and sees the flicker of gold behind pale irises, and Jack’s eyes widen.

It’s gone – Sam knows it is. Jack’s reabsorbed the small pool of grace that Dean had left behind, and Sam can see the ease settling into Jack – the wiping away of sickness. Jack’s eyes flash gold again, one last time – and Sam can hardly remember it’s been months and months since Jack lost his powers.

Jack straightens to his feet before Sam can urge caution, but Sam follows his lead. “Is it gone?”

“Which?”

“The sickness.”

“Yes.”

“Is the grace?”

A longer pause. “I think so.” And there’s the shine of loss in eyes, sharp and honest. “What happened to Pestilence?” Jack asks, and Sam lets the subject change.

“Let’s find out. But be careful. He could be back.” Sam pulls his phone from his pocket – thankfully, not broken – but no missed calls blink back at him. He doesn’t bother calling his brother. Dean and Cas will return – when and if they can.

The demon’s corpse is just lightly incinerated, but the smell of burnt flesh churns Sam’s stomach, and
Jack averts his eyes. They step around the corpse, and Sam wonders if anyone will miss him, or if he was an anonymous nobody the demon found ripe for the picking.

The water flow from the ceiling abruptly ceases as the pair creeps towards the windows, neither exactly sure why they’re being quiet.

Out of operation or not, the lab had done an excellent job putting out the fires before there was too much damage. The area near the blast was hit especially hard, the whiteboard is blackened and curled in on itself, the machines on the tables had been blown yards away to smash against the wall, and sat smoking quietly in the corner. The room looks – for lack of a better word – fucked.

Jack finds the Horseman first.

And Pestilence looks – for lack of a better word – fucking.

Sam whistles between his teeth when he sees Jack’s sudden jerking stop, and catches the grim sight on the floor. Pestilence had been mere feet from the blast, without the cover of a slate table, and if Sam didn’t recognize the relatively untouched slacks and loafers, he would have had a hard time identifying the body on the floor.

From about the waist up, Pestilence is a bloody, burnt mess. Sam’s stomach flip flops with that thrill of disgust and finds he can’t take his eyes off the horror. Pestilence had been caught in the explosion better than Sam could have ever expected when he tossed his lighter blindly over his shoulder. The Horseman’s face is unrecognizable – a horrid mass of crispy blacks and reds, his hair nearly singed off entirely. His plastic-rimmed glasses had fused to his face, the glass blackened from the carbon residue, like he’s switched to sunglasses in death. For a sick moment, Sam thinks the body is hissing, but the sound turns out to come from a ruptured freon tube from the refrigeration unit.

Sam forces himself to take a breath, and then crouches by the body.

“Sam, what are you – “ Jack says, alarmed and probably very disgusted, but stops when he sees Sam straightening Pestilence’s arm. The Horseman had fallen with his arm tucked underneath him when he collapsed from the flames, and Sam gingerly tugs it from under the weight of the body.

Knowing their luck – he half expects the ring to be gone, to have turned into ash or been sucked out into the universe for the next reincarnation or something equally dramatic.

But he gently tips the Horseman’s body and frees the arm – and there it is, a foggy green gem inlaid in silver.

Luckily, the hand hasn’t been too burned (light mutilation always being Sam’s preference over the alternative), and when Sam’s fingers graze the ring, it’s oddly icy to the touch. Jack makes a disgusted sound low in his throat as Sam starts to slide the ring from the knuckle, and Sam can’t blame him.

War’s ring, now Pestilence’s. Billie promised – he assumes – to hand over her ring when they’ve secured Famine’s ring. Sam’s heart begins to thud in his chest, as he realizes how close they are to really… pulling this off. To open the Cage and stuff Michael in like dumping an expired milk carton into the trash. And there is some relief in that – relief that it’s almost over, that Michael won’t be the next douchebag in line to kick off the Apocalypse. But there’s fear, too. Cold, icy fear that spreads its tendrils in Sam, because they still don’t have a plan to save Dean. Hours and hours of research, the remaining cadre of Heaven’s knowledge, figuring out which of Bobby’s lists are helpful and which are coded TV Guide schedules – and nothing has dropped even a scrap of a plan into their laps. Not a hint to follow up on.
The worst part is, Michael might not even arrive with a bang, but with a whimper. And Sam is piss-his-pants scared of the day that Dean looks at him and doesn’t see a brother, but just –

Pestilence’s hand slips from his grip.

Sam stares at it. Wonders how he could have possibly –

And then, Pestilence’s dead hand curls around Sam’s wrist.

Beneath the black fog of the dead man’s glasses, blood shot eyes fix on Sam’s. Jack lets out an unintelligible sound of surprise, and Sam is frozen as he stares at those sunken eyes and thinks:

*Oh shit.*

Sam tries to surge to his feet, rip his arm from the Horseman’s thin hand, but before he can rise from the floor, the supernaturally strong grip hauls him back, and his knees crack back down on the dirty linoleum.

The ashy mask of Pestilence’s face cracks with movement, and the Horseman’s ruined lips flutter, but no sound escapes them.

“Sam!” Jack yells, finally, but Sam can’t break the grip, can’t dislodge the Horseman.

Then Sam feels… not so well.

Chilled like bone, Pestilence’s hand tightens until Sam feels the bones in his wrist creak. Pale black tendrils, disease incarnate, begin to snake away from the Horseman’s grip into Sam’s skin. Nausea turns Sam’s stomach, and his vision begins to swim.

Finally, Pestilence is able to give breath to his words, and even his voice sounds dried up and burnt: “So kind of you to check on an old man.”

Sure, enough – as Pestilence’s disease sinks into Sam, there’s the germination of fresh, uninjured skin, spreading from the Horseman’s jawline and growing like an algae bloom. Sam’s health and life being pulled out of him to power Pestilence’s rejuvenation. Sam’s throattightens as sickness invades, and he tries to turn towards Jack to tell him to *get out*, but Jack isn’t behind him anymore.

Jack has moved to the front of the Horseman, and Sam’s vision isn’t the best, but he spent enough years with an older brother to know when someone is gearing up to kick someone in the balls.

Sam has lived the weirdest life.

Sam feels Pestilence’s body jerk rather than sees it, but the Horseman’s grip is gone – coolness bleeds into the sickness inside him – and Jack is there, hauling Sam away from the Horseman.

Sam coughs, feels something tug deep in his chest, and feels dizzy from the sudden movement – but also feels some life breathe back into him. He wheezes again, but manages to take his own weight from Jack, and asks: “Did… did you just kick a Horseman of the Apocalypse in the nuts?”

Jack’s eyes are still wide as they watch the pained body on the ground, but he nods, “Dean always says *go for gold.*” He manages to tear his eyes away from the Horseman, and his shocked face turns to Sam. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know.” Sam says honestly, and though he doesn’t feel like he’s about to keel over, he knows that some of Pestilence’s sickness remains inside of him.
The pair retreat a few steps as Pestilence’s scorched body drags itself to his feet, and the fury carved into the half-healed face is electrifying. The Horseman drags a hand to his face and knocks the useless glasses from their perch, and his eyes are impossibly florid with injury and rage.

Gnarled, harsh language spews form his mouth, maybe German, before the Horseman manages to tuck some of his anger behind the mask. “You ungrateful upstarts.” He spits past dry lips. “I’ll break you down to molecules.” Unmarred skin slowly creeps towards his eyeline.

Something shifts in the air, a heaviness settles. Jack’s hand rises to his chest, and its only that movement that clues Sam in to the fact the pained aches and cramps aren’t getting better – they’re getting worse.

Sam grits his teeth, and tries to haul Jack back further from the Horseman. Jack stumbles, but gets the idea, and the pair retreats towards the sealed door. A wriggling sensation of nausea and clenching cramps sear through Sam like a wave sucking him down.

Pestilence watches their slow retreat without an attempt to stop them. His posture grows more erect, his movements less pained. “You should have taken the deal, boys.” He says, but doesn’t sound very disappointed. “Would have saved you a significant measure of suffering. Now we have a room to ourselves, and nowhere to be.”

“Sam, how is he – “ Jack starts, but the miasma in the air thickens, and Jack’s question is interrupted with a pained gasp.

“Yes, Winchester, how is he indeed?” Pestilence repeats mockingly. “You think I need test tubes and hypodermic needles to make quick work out of a pair of idiots? That’s just part of the challenge. The innovation.” Something dark and ancient lingers behind his eyes, “I decimated populations with a couple of rats and a handful of shit. You think a brush with incineration is going to do anything but piss me off? It’s been too long since you’ve played in the big leagues, Sam.”

Sam rubs the heel of his palm against this chest, feeling a tightness settle. Where are you, Dean?

The corners of his vision prickle with black, and his attention must skip a few seconds, because suddenly Pestilence is much closer, and Jack is forcing himself into the space between.

“Jack – “ Sam coughs, alarmed, but Pestilence already has the Nephilim by the throat, and Sam can see the slow spread of black poison leech into the hunter. Sam lunges forward to wrestle the Horseman’s grip from Jack, but before he can make contact, Pestilence tosses Jack like a sack of laundry. Jack hits the ground with a pained grunt and a retching sound, but Pestilence’s attention returns to Sam.

“I think the angels would have given me a smidge more trouble than you sacks of pustules.” Pestilence says conversationally, and the crispy skin of his face is all but gone, giving way to the shiny pink of fresh skin.

Sam doesn’t see the blow coming, but he feels Pestilence’s fist connect with his gut, and feels the bloom of illness settle in the skin like a contact high. The air spews out of his lungs like a sigh, and he catches himself on the edge of a table.

Pestilence is laughing, but Sam can hardly hear over the sound of his pulse thudding in his ears.

“Should have kept that little grace inoculation from your brother, Samuel.” And this time, Sam sees the elderly man coming his way, but can’t do much more than raise his arms weakly in defense as he’s struck with a blow much more vicious than Dr. Green looks capable of delivering. This time,
Sam hits the floor, landing hard on his shoulder and hip bone. “Erbämlich. You Winchesters never did appreciate an advantage.”

Then, something shifts in the room. The air snaps, and even with the Horseman bearing down on him, even with sickness wriggling throughout his body, Sam finally feels a sense of palliative relief.

But to his surprise, it’s not Dean or Cas that steps around the Horseman.

“No.” Jack says, and the pallor of illness is gone. Jack’s blue eyes settle on Sam’s, then flash a shivering gold. Fleeting, the bolt of lightning that pierces the storm. “But I do.”

Pestilence’s eyes widen – not from fear, but from something nearing delight. He turns his back on Sam, and gives the Nephilim the full weight of his attention. “Remarkable.”

There’s a lightness to Jack’s features that Sam hadn’t realized had been missing. Jack’s spine is little straighter, his shoulders more broad. His eyes are charged with gold and defiance, the sickness that Pestilence dumped in him already chased away by Dean’s leftover grace – Sam hopes.

“Give us the ring.” Jack says.

And Sam can’t see Pestilence, but can almost feel the slimy smile spread across his face. “That’s more like it.”

There’s a shiver of movement, and Jack is gone, reappearing so abruptly in front of Pestilence that Sam swears he sees two of the Nephilim standing shoulder to shoulder. Jack’s arm flickers, and Pestilence raises an arm to ward off the attack. Suddenly, the Horseman seems much less recovered from his earlier incineration. There’s a burst of ignition, and blinding light sears across Sam’s retinas. He throws up his elbow to shield his eyes, but bright pops of purple and orange stain his vision. There’s the sound of something shattering, a grunt of pain, and the sick sound of flesh sizzling. Nausea bubbles in Sam’s chest, but he manages to keep what’s left of his stomach contents down.

Jack is standing over Pestilence, panting, and the gold fades from his eyes. Sam watches as all the self-assuredness and strength melts from Jack’s posture, replaced with loss and doubt.

Whatever Jack had done has forced Pestilence to his knees, and the Horseman’s panting breaths are threaded with pain and fury. Sam’s vision slides sideways as he tries to understand what he’s looking at. Then, like crossing your eyes and seeing the magic picture form, everything slides into place.

Jack’s summoned blast of energy had struck the Horseman across his side, from hip to neck. The remaining scraps of clothing have disintegrated, baring an uncovered stretch of skin. The skin is marbled – swathes of pearly white riddled with purple and blue and red veins. Sam picks himself up off the floor gingerly, and steps heavily towards Jack’s side.

Pestilence doesn’t glance at Sam, his fierce eyes are fixed on Jack. The sound of a gnat or a fly buzzing about Sam’s ears become distracting. “Guess there was some erzengel left in your fetid core after all.” Pestilence remarks, and there is an odd hollowness to his voice – words dropping down a well.

Jack’s barrage had struck more than Pestilence’s torso – the Horseman has been razed from neck to mid-calf on one side, and doesn’t rise from his prostration. Not comprehending, Sam stares at the odd sheen of the skin, its matte-like reflection of the mid-morning sun. It’s not until a muscle pulses in Pestilence’s neck and his arm falls from his lap that Sam realizes what has happened.

The clawed hand strikes the floor near the Horseman’s knee with a jarring clack – the metallic sound of marbles colliding. Nearly a third of Pestilence’s body had been calcified, mineralized, petrified.
Whatever you wanted to call it – a large chunk of Pestilence had been turned to stone.

Dimly, Sam hears Jack say something before his vision winks out, and he feels his weight remove itself from his feet. His vision slams back as Jack makes a passable attempt to arrest his fall, but Sam lands painfully on his ass like the graceful giant that he is.

Jack’s worried face swims into view inches from his face, blue eyes almost electric in Sam’s delirium. “Whoa, Sam – “ And Sam didn’t even realize he was tilting over until something grips his shoulder and steadies him. “I’m sorry, I don’t – ” a roaring carries away most of the sentence, “ – used up the rest it, I’m sorry, please, just wait for – ” and Sam tries to listen, but it’s hard when someone lights a firecracker in your insides and sparks are setting everything ablaze.

There’s a loud clap in front of his face, and Sam is momentarily brought back. Jack’s hands hover in front of him, Pestilence still kneels like a Greek statue half-brought to life. The Horseman’s eyes watch Sam with disdain. “That’ll be the liver disease.” He offers helpfully.

Jack’s earnest face reappears. “Dean says he’s almost here.”

Sam frowns, feels like he’s either dying, drunk, or losing his hearing in his old age. “Dean said – “

And then there’s the slice of wings cutting the air, and all Sam can see is the smear of canvas and blue light.

“Lord’s fuckin’ name, Sam,” Sam’s brother says, and Sam is jolted at the sudden clap of a hand on his shoulder. Instantly, there’s an infusion of warmth into his chest, and Sam feels poison and sickness drain from him. Again. “You gonna sit on your ass and let the kid do all the work? That’s not delegation, Sammy. That’s just being a dick.”

Sam’s sense of relief that Dean returned – and returned as him – is palpable. Still. “Pretty rich from the guy who shows up ten seconds after the fight is over.” But he grins and holds his arm up to Dean. His brother makes a show of rolling his eyes, and easily tugs Sam to his feet.

The angry buzzing surrounding Pestilence increases, and Dean turns to face the half-frozen Horseman. Dean’s eyebrows shoot up to his hairline, and he whistles through his teeth. “This is some Han Solo kinda shit.” He remarks. “Carbonite.” He adds, after Jack’s expression stumbles. “I hope you got a science-nerd explanation for this, and I don’t find out that someone cashed in their soul for poker chips.” Dean says, but the joviality leaves his face, and his expression is as stern and flinty as the battle commander locked inside.

Jack looks nervous, but Sam steps in for the rescue. “He used the leftover grace that you pumped in me. Thanks so much for that, by the way, pretty sure I’m gonna have heartburn for the next month.”

But Dean’s not listening to Sam anymore, and his expression is laser-focused on the Nephilim. “You can do that?”

Jack shrugs sheepishly.

“And then did that?” Dean adds, turning towards Pestilence with new eyes. “Damn, you gotta teach me that trick.”

Pestilence, who had largely ignored the conversation to this point, turns glassy, furious eyes up to Dean. He says a single sharp word in Enochian, and Sam watches as his brother’s jaw tightens.

“What?” Sam presses.
But Dean just shakes his head. “Nothing. Just calling me names.”

“A name, I would think.” Pestilence adds smugly.

Dean’s eyes flash blue, and he brings the full force of his gaze on the Horseman. “Big talk from someone moonlighting as a soccer trophy.” He glances at Sam, before taking a step towards Pestilence. “Let’s get what we came for. Should have handed this over when you had the chance,” he adds to Pestilence, as he reaches for the entity’s non-marbleized arm. “I’m sure my brother made a big gesture of asking for the ring nicely.”

Dean seizes the Horseman’s arm, and Sam and Jack both jump when Pestilence curves his wrist and wraps slim fingers around Dean’s forearm. There’s a sense of sickness and disease bubbling in the air, but Dean’s eyes merely flash blue, and he raises an inimical brow. “Really?” He asks, and Sam relaxes some. “That didn’t work the first time you tried it in Athens, and sure as hell won’t start now.”

Dean makes quick work of slipping the green-gemmed ring from the Horseman’s finger. Still restraining Pestilence’s arm, he inspects the ring in his hand for a moment, expression carefully neutral, and goes to shove the ring in his pocket. Sam coughs, holds a hand out for the prize. Dean exchanges glances with Jack before rolling his eyes and flipping the hunk of metal in the air like a cracker jack prize. Sam snaps it before it hits the ground, and curls cold fingers around the ring with a sense of finality. Sam now has both rings, and it’s the only thing that reassures him that Dean will uphold his end of the deal. No rings, no hell, no cage – unless Michael goes in. Unchaperoned.

Pestilence’s skin – the non-marble half, anyway – has taken on an ashy pallor after the ring was removed, the Horseman seeming weaker. It makes Sam’s skin crawl just to look at him, and he shoves the ring deep in his jacket pocket.

Dean goes to stand, but the Horseman’s grip tightens and he yanks Dean back so they’re at eye level. Alarmed, Sam scrambles to his brother’s side to pry the Horseman off, but Dean holds up a finger and Sam hesitates.

“You angling for a goodbye kiss?” Dean drawls, and Sam winces. “Not really digging the vibe.”

A muscle tenses in Pestilence’s neck, causing his stone fingers to rattle against the floor. The unharmed flesh of his face looks it would crumble if someone breathed wrong. Still the Horseman’s gaze bores into Dean’s. “Bajileim gen elasa gi l ap, Mikhael?” The Horseman says in Enochian, and Dean’s face hardens. ”En esiacacahe noaln eol capimao consibra c g aspt.”

Sam exchanges a glance with Jack, but if the kid had magically learned to speak Enochian in the previous five minutes, it doesn’t show past the confusion on his face.

Dean’s eyes flicker an irritated blue, and he finally breaks Pestilence’s grip. “Zacam de maelpereji.” Dean replies shortly. The Horseman is already not listening, the fight already expiring from his irate eyes.

“What did he say?” Sam demands, but Dean is already shaking his head.

“Nothing important, Sammy. Just trying to be dramatic.” Dean says, but there’s a new tenseness in his shoulders. “Alright,” He says after an extended pause, “I’ll take care of this bag of dicks. Why don’t you two head out?”

“Dean?” Jack asks suddenly, “Where is Cas?”
Dean doesn’t look up from Pestilence for a moment, and when he does, his eyes are guarded. “I don’t know.”

A bad feeling starts to tighten Sam’s insides. “You two didn’t get blasted away together?”

Dean eyes his brother impatiently. “Not even remotely how it works.”

“And you don’t know where he is?” Sam presses, “You can’t sense him, or something?”

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Dean snaps, and anger sparks blue and white in his eyes. Sam jumps when the few remaining lightbulbs suddenly flare up with a blinding light, shattering glass rains down at their feet. “Has everyone on the fucking planet forgotten that I’m not actually a goddamn angel?”

“Not with that attitude.” Pestilence answers weakly, but not without a trace of nettle.

Dean’s turned back to the Horseman faster than Sam can see, and even he has to flinch away from his brother’s rancor. Cracking jokes one minute, then threatening fire and brimstone the next. And Sam has the harsh realization that even if Dean maybe isn’t at immediate risk of Michael’s takeover, he’s still losing pieces of himself in all that internal struggle. The ring in his pocket suddenly feels a lot heavier.

“I’ll meet you outside.” Dean says again, forced calm in his words, but doesn’t turn back to face them.

“Five minutes.” Sam hears himself say. “Five. Then we gotta find Cas.”

“Fine.” Dean says, and his back flexes like it’s only done since it found the burden of wings.

Sam and Jack’s footsteps tap down the hallway, leaving marks in the dust and emptiness.

Whatever Jack had done to the Horseman was a goddamn marvel. Dean does find some deep-buried appreciation for angelic creativity. Turning flesh and blood to silky marble, rooting a cosmic entity to a dirty floor? Dean probably would have just blasted the guy in half and left it at that.

“Bet you got a lot of regrets swimming around in that big brain of yours.” Dean remarks, and flicks the Horseman on the forehead.

“If you think there is anything more unusual in this end than all the others, I hate to disappoint you.” Pestilence says, some of that battle edge coloring in the words again.

Dean just shrugs. Bits of Montana wheat are stuck in the creases of his boots, drops of morning dew soaked into the ends of his pants. He’d spent too much time in a memory, and a longer stretch of it sweeping the state of Montana for Cas before the lingering warding of the banishing sigil had dispersed enough for him to return. He’s got better things to do than kick a cosmic entity around.

Still. He’s got five minutes.

Dean taps a finger against the Horseman’s marbled shoulder, and the skin is as chilled as a mausoleum. “What do you think happens if I rip this part out?”

Pestilence smiles, blood soaked into the cracks. “Well, Michael,” and the buzzing grows louder, “why don’t we find out?”
And after it’s done, Dean didn’t need the entire five minutes.

"What do you hunger for, Michael?" / "My brother may make short work of you yet."

"Eat a dick."

Chapter End Notes

That Enochian exchange (translation above) was planned before I had really figured out the POVs for this chapter, and then I was like "oh fuck" because Sam can't understand Enochian. I used two translators that both gave me very different results, but... whatever man... it's not a real language... sue me...

two horseman down... anyway, didn't really want or MEAN to cut the chapter here, but I would have had to add too much to get to the cliffhanger I wanted... I'm slipping in my old age...
“None of us can believe it, Mr. Butler. I’m still pinching myself.”

“That’s great, Dr. Okoye. Really.” Sam replies, and finally drops the tablet he’d been clenching tightly for the last hour. “We’re all relieved to hear the locals were able to crack the formula.”

The CDC-FBI joint report had pinged his inbox an hour ago, and Sam had scrutinized every word of tempered half-admissions and irritating bureaucratic jargon until his eyes crossed. Finally, he decided to break his own rule of post-case non-interference and pick up the damn phone.

With the sample that Cas and Jack had nabbed from Pestilence’s hench-demon, the CDC had been able to synthesize a cure to Pestilence’s coma-inducing cocktail within a day. Sam doesn’t want to think about the stress and urgency the epidemiologists and CDC staff must have suffered in those crucial hours, picking apart the sample bit by putrid bit. Knowing they had one sample – one chance – to get it right.

And so, in the end, Pestilence’s ring was secured, and the affected patients were in recovery. It hadn’t exactly been smooth sailing, but Sam wouldn’t say they’d been blown overboard, either. Less bodies in the ground, less of that lingering guilt Sam had felt about prioritizing Pestilence over his victims.

Leaning back against his chair, Sam scrubs a hand through his hair for the millionth time, feeling the absence of the missing (read: singed to holy hell) two inches. He’d expected to catch hell about it from Dean for a few weeks at minimum, but his brother had merely glanced at it without comment when he’d exited the campus doors the day before. Somehow, that scared Sam more than the thought of what he’d find in Pestilence’s lab were he inclined to push past his brother and look.

Sam realizes that Dr. Okoye hasn’t replied, and the dead air prickles his nerves. “They saved a lot of lives.” He adds lamely.

“Yeah.” She agrees, almost distractedly. There’s an emotion threaded in her voice that Sam can’t pin down.

“Full recovery?”

“We’re keeping some of the older patients in ICU as a precaution, but everyone’s out of danger.” She pauses, “Which you would know, if you were really CDC.”

Sam stills, his hand still tangled in his shorter locks. But he doesn’t panic. Sitting in anonymity in the Bunker – what’s the worst the Californian doctor can do?

There’s a tense moment of silence. Then Dr. Okoye laughs. “That’s the reaction I was hoping for.” She says, and Sam distantly hears the sound of an office chair rolling across linoleum. “I guessed that after a sample vial of the disease magically appeared approximately six minutes – “

“That’s not exactly - ”

“-after you blew into town, that you and your team had something to do with it. So I called the CDC office to thank you.” She pauses, and Sam hears a phone cord being tugged nervously, “Funny how
no one seemed to know about a second epidemiologist team.”

Sam clears his throat. “Well. Things can… slip through the cracks. Government bureaucracy. You know, government agencies have a 63 percent chance of misfiling – “

“Yeah, yeah.” Dr. Okoye adds dismissively, and Sam can feel the eye roll across state lines. “Listen. I don’t know why or how you and your doe-eyed intern were involved, or how you got a sample of the injection, or… well… to tell the truth, I don’t really know much of anything that just happened. But…” and her next question is quieter, “can you at least tell me that it’s over?”

Sam swallows back his first thought: is anything ever really? But he clears his throat and hands her a different truth. “It’s over. I promise.”

The young doctor absorbs that in silence for a moment. “Well. Thanks seems like a small word, but… thanks.”

The call disconnects.

Sam exhales heavily and drops his phone onto the table. Its cracked screen lights up almost immediately with some email or text or call – some new dire emergency. But he lets it sit. The only person he’s waiting to hear from isn’t in cell range.

His tablet chimes with another alert and guilt pushes Sam to his feet. He stands from the table, feeling something pop in his back. God. Mid-thirties, his ass. Maybe he can convince Dean to let them retire before they end up getting an inversion table for the Bunker. Getting thrown into walls and digging up graves, it’s a young man’s game. And Sam never thought he’d feel old at 35.

Stiff and heavily feeling each of the forty-odd hours since he’d last slept, the younger Winchester pushes past his room’s wood-paneled door. Wonders if it’s too much to hope that a freshly brewed pot of coffee is waiting for him in the kitchen.

The hallway is deserted, which is refreshing – if not a bit ominous. Sam pads down the silent halls, and the unexpected lack of hunters in the Bunker means that someone’s assigning them cases – and it’s not Sam. He’s letting things slip through the cracks.

He rounds the corner into the War Room, and his eyes fall on his brother. He’s letting things slip through the cracks. Now he just wishes he could feel sorry about it. Sam’s almost surprised to see Dean in the War Room – though he’s not sure where else his brother would go. Maybe that’s the scary part.

Dean’s in the same clothes as yesterday, his arms crossed over his chest as he leans against the map table. Dean doesn’t look ill, but his face seems drawn and pale – his scattered freckles somehow more prominent. He doesn’t look thin or gaunt, but he seems… unhealthy. Like he’s being eaten alive from the inside.

Dean glances up at Sam’s entrance with something like impatience, but not surprise. The brief contact lasts no time at all before the older Winchester is turning back towards the room’s other occupant.

Jack is seated at the table, a cold cup of coffee untouched at his elbow. His eyes dart behind closed lids, but as Sam steps down the hallway stairs, the Nephilim’s eyes blink open dazedly.

Sam glances between the pair, “What’s going on?”

“Kid’s trying to pray to Cas.” Dean says wearily, and Jack half-flinches.
“Oh.” Sam says, knowing better than to ask how it’s working out. Jack’s blue eyes are rimmed with exhausted red, and he scrubs a hand down his face. Sam knows he recently hasn’t set the best example when it came to catching some very necessary Z’s (and don’t get him started on Dean), but he regrets not keeping a better eye on Jack.

“I can’t reach him, Sam.” Jack finally says, almost to himself. “I don’t even know if he’s – “

“I’m sure he’s fine.” Sam says quickly, and takes the few steps across the room to the table. “It just takes him a little while to get back without his wings.”

But Jack doesn’t look convinced. “I’d still be able to pray to him. When I try, it just…” he slaps his hands against the table, frustrated, “it just gets lost.”

“Jack, Cas wasn’t weak or injured.” Sam tries to explain. He gets that Jack is worried. Sam isn’t exactly thrilled that their friend and resident angel is still missing, but his brother’s got an archangel stuffed in his head – it made sense that Dean would resurface sooner from Pestilence’s warding. “Angel banishing sigils don’t kill angels unless they’re already close to death. Dean?” He adds, hoping his brother will help soothe Jack’s fears.

Instead, Dean looks a little uncomfortable, and the crinkles around his eyes tighten. “Uh.” And he wriggles his fingers in a kinda? gesture.

Sam’s mouth tugs into a scowl. Dean knows exactly how angel-banishing sigils work – first-hand, he could add. “Dean.” Sam says flatly, “You know Cas is – “

But Dean interjects, holding up a placating hand. His earlier gruffness disappears under a swell of apprehension. “Cas is… probably fine.”

Sam’s open mouth closes with a click. Then: “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Dean?” Jack says, his brows sinking. “Is Cas hurt?”

If Sam could read minds, he’s sure he’d hear Dean groaning internally. “It’s not that simple.” He says after a moment. “It’s not always… there’s… more pieces that factor into it.”

And Sam feels his stomach sinking. “Whatever you’re trying to say, man, I’m not tracking.”

Frustrated, Dean pushes off the table he’d been leaning against. “Fuck me. Okay. I guess… when you banish an angel with warding or a banishing symbol, it’s not just like they just fuck off somewhere. Using a sigil, it…” he searches impatiently for a word, “scatters them, but incompletely. Angels don’t exist entirely in this dimension, and an angel banishing symbol effectively dislodges the angel’s presence on this plane and cuts off their ability to manifest in a specific location, but it’s an instantaneous disruption, and the force of it is… well… if the universe is stroboscopic, we’re intermittently existing and not existing as we mesh-and-unmesh through the fabric of space, but warding can prevent an angel’s true self from being flush with the dimensional fabric. It’s basic physics, Sammy, a quantum superposition, a contiguous spatial anomaly, whatever floats your dinghy. It’s not just… the condition of the angel, it’s… the state of Heaven, the lunar cycle, how much iron is in the blood, barometric pressure – but that’s usually negligible - there’s a formula for it, actually, and you can run a pretty slick regression analysis – “

“Dean.”

And Dean actually looks annoyed to be interrupted. Sam is almost slack-jawed. A quantum superposition? Regression analysis? Sam’s never once, for a sliver of a second, thought his brother was stupid. He’s seen Dean build an EMF detector from junk in a glove box, has watched his
brother build a car engine from piles of scraps and dogged persistence. Dean didn’t stick with school long enough to walk out with a high school degree, but he’s never been slow, and he’s never been dim-witted.

But he hasn’t exactly been hitting the stack of advanced physics books piled up in the library, either.

And now Dean is staring at Sam like he’s the one that’s off his rocker. His green eyes are wide with impatient irritation, cut off at the apex of his lecture. And then, blink and you miss it, Dean’s eyes flash jolt blue for a shivering second, and Dean minutely winces.

Neither Sam nor Jack miss it. “Are you – “ Jack tries, but Dean’s glare is breathtaking.

“If anyone asks if I’m fine, they’re gonna find themselves sitting on the ocean floor with a fucking Pepsi bottle of air.” Dean snaps, and scowls after realizing he’d been rubbing at his temple. His hand snaps to his side, and Sam almost thinks he can see the whorl of grace under the knuckles.

He exchanges a quick glance with Jack, neither sure what Dean’s recent volatility of temper means. And it’s only one reason in a long list of why they need Cas back.

“So,” Sam starts slowly, swallowing down his questions and fears for later, “Cas is… scattered… and we don’t know how long it could take him to pull himself back together?”

Dean agrees with a grunt, and seems to make a valiant effort to smooth out his edges.

“Is there anything we can do?” Jack asks. “To help him? Or… reach him?”

The older Winchester exhales heavily. His eyes shift from Jack to Sam, and when he takes in Sam’s disheveled appearance and ragged expression, he narrows his eyes. Some lightness bleeds back into him as he pulls out a chair tucked under the table and slides it until it’s level with Sam. “You look like you’re about to pass out, Sammy.” He says, and rolls his eyes to take some of the embarrassment out of it.

Sam’s fingers curl around the back of the chair absently, but he doesn’t sit. Dean sighs. Turning back to Jack, Dean says, “If there’s an angely way to save Cas, the answer ain’t floating around up here.”

No, just quantum physics and the statistical applications of angel warding.

Sam shuts his eyes for a moment, and grips the splintery wood under his hands. They’d returned to the Bunker the day before, and Rowena and Bobby hadn’t had a guess between the two of them regarding tracking the missing angel. Sam already knows there’s no easy way to track an angel – he’d learned that the hard way those first few weeks after Michael abducted Dean. Heaven’s a wreck and fresh out of help. And he’s worried about Cas, and he’s concerned for him, but another aching side of it is that he just can’t do this without Cas. The enormity of the Michael problem sits like a crushing weight on Sam’s shoulders, and only the reminder that he’s not slogging through it all alone alleviated any of it.

Then Dean says: “I could ask him.”

And Sam’s eyes slam open. “No.” He replies instantly. Firmly. “No.” He says again, because he thinks he has to.

“Sam – “

“Dean, stop.” Sam snaps, and he knows deep down that he should avoid straining Dean’s already tenuous hold on his composure, but fuck it – he’s tired. “There is nothing worth the cost of Michael’s
help.”

And Dean doesn’t answer, because they both know Dean will go to the mat anytime one of them is at risk or in danger. It’s ruinous and distressing, at the same time it’s Dean friggin’ Winchester to a T – noble and heroic and the death of them all.

“Look,” Dean says, after a tense moment passes, “I know it’s confusing or frustrating or whatever. I know that I feel like sometimes I’m reading off Mich- off an archangel instruction manual, but sometimes it’s just…” and he waves his hand in front of his face, “fuckin’ nothing. I got nothing.” He repeats.

“I get that.” Sam says, and tries to erase the edge from his tone. “No one would argue that archangel powers haven’t been… helpful, but we’ve worked plenty of cases without them. It’s not on you to get Cas back, Dean. We’ll figure something else out. All of us.”

Dean’s expression tugs into a tight, but genuine, smile. “God, Dad woulda kicked our asses if he knew we were doing things the easy way.”

It’s a sliver of a nice moment. The reminder of simpler – if maybe not better – times. The problems they’d faced in the last few years would definitely raise both John’s eyebrows, and he was typically a one-brow-raise kind of man. Their lives now would have seemed too incredible to believe back in the days of cheap motels and the crusade against the demon with eyes like mottled sunshine.

Jack watches the Winchesters soberly, his expression heavy. He places his palms flat on the table and quietly scrapes the wooden chair back. “I’m going to see if Rowena’s come up with anything new.” He says, and Sam’s exhausted brain can’t think of anything to say as the younger hunter climbs the stairs and disappears around the hallway.

After he’s sure that Jack is out of hearing, Sam says, “It’s been over a day, man.” And some of his real worry bleeds in, “I know Heaven’s basically closed up shop, but Cas has always made it back before.”

Dean sighs. “I’m not sitting here with my dick in my hand, Sammy. If I could help, you know I’d be out there.” But there’s no accusation in his tone. Sam knows his brother’s frustration is only with himself.

“Just… stay out of Rocky’s, okay?”

His brother cracks his knuckles against his jaw, but there’s a hint of a smile. “Honestly? Don’t think Big Mike would have much to say. From the acid trips down memory lane he’s dunked me in, didn’t seem like he was real keen on teamwork. Michael didn’t really give two shakes about the rest of the Host. Pretty sure he scared Castiel shitless in Sodom.”

It’s not the easy familiarity of discussing Michael’s thinking, or the casual mention of a biblical tragedy like he’s lived it. It’s not the impersonal, formal use of Cas’ name. It’s the fact that Dean doesn’t even blink, that his eyes are clear and present, that tightens Sam’s insides.

“Great.” He says woodenly. “Good.”

Dean frowns at Sam. “Ahead of me fireman carrying you kickin’ and screaming to your room for some shuteye – any update on Pestilence’s vics?”

“Uh… yeah.” Sam says dumbly, having forgotten the reason he had left his room. “Doctor Okoye says full recovery. Heather and the rest of the infected are gonna pull through.”
“Good. I liked her. Spunky.”

“Spunky?”

“Oh, shut it, you friggin’ orangutan.” Dean bitches, and it half teases a smirk out of Sam.

“Anyway…” Sam says, and he runs his fingers longingly through his shorter hair. “I think we’ve dealt with enough cosmic entities for a while. Could do without puking all over my shoes next time.” He sighs, and gives up on his hair. “Kinda funny.”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Pestilence. Hospitals. I know it’s not the same, but the whole thing reminded me of Pastor Jim dragging us to the free clinic for our shots when dad dropped us there, ‘cause he couldn’t be bothered.”

“Pastor who?” And Dean’s expression is quizzical, not alarmed. Who? He asks. And Sam realizes like a stab to the gut that Dean doesn’t remember the memory he just relived a few weeks ago, standing next to Sam as he shivered in the Minnesota churchyard fog.

Sam shuts his mouth and swallows dryly. Dean is still watching him curiously. “No one, Dean.” He says. “It’s not important.”

Sam finally heads off to bed, something in his expression telling Dean that he said something wrong again. It rubs him the wrong way, like European cars or sweet potato fries. Tense conversations and worried expressions are not how he wanted to fill these last few weeks with his brother.

Dean’s not especially worried about Cas. Heaven may be all slow lane these days, but there’s no doubt in Dean’s mind that Cas won’t return eventually. No other angel has the same fire to live that Cas does. He’ll drag himself back together, even if it takes weeks. Months. Years.

Half of Dean hopes that Cas is back before he stop-drop-and-rolls into his brother’s cage. (Lucifer’s Cage, he reminds himself. Lucifer’s.) The other half of him thinks maybe it’ll just be easier this way. Less damage control. For him, anyway.

Alone in the War Room, Dean’s head is full of crackling. Dean closes his eyes. Feels himself blow past the outskirts of his mind, Michael’s grace slipping him into the fabric of everything. The plane of angels. Heaven is sealed tight, dissolving and ragged at its edges. He can sense the attention of the few remaining angels focused dimly on him, voyeurs behind a filmy curtain.

He feels the healing scar of the angel banishing sigil in California, a small pocket wrinkling the spatial continuum where he and Cas were blown apart and scattered, follicles of their grace streaking off like leafy venation into the rest of the seraphic plane. Dean collected himself in Montana, but Castiel is still slowly picking himself back up.

Alone in his head, Dean feels Cas in the rhythm of the universe. But doesn’t know how to untangle all of Cas from all of all.

“Earth to Winchester.”

The voice slices across Dean’s mind, the tone registering in his head before his memories can drum up the name.
Dean blinks his eyes open and tries to settle back into himself. He feels the flutter of electricity in his eyes as Michael launches his usual 7 o’clock evening salvo against his prison walls. Though when he sees the figure leaning against the entryway into the hall, it’s hard to know if it’s the douchebag archangel in his head, or the son of a bitch smirking lightly that causes his mouth to twist into a scowl.

“Nick.” Dean says, and not a trace of his dislike is hidden. Nick doesn’t blink. “When you huffed and puffed and blew our Bunker door down, thought you said you wanted back in the hunting game. Sure doesn’t seem like you’re walking your beat.”

Nick’s smile widens as he pushes off the wall with his shoulder. “That’s a good one, bud. Could say the same about you. Taken out much of your old army recently? Oh – ” He says, mock apologetic, “Sorry, I meant Michael’s army. Anyone ever tell you that you guys look scary alike?”

Dean’s fist clenches at his side, but he tamps down on the influx of bright power that bubbles under his palm. “I don’t know if anyone’s told you, Nick, but you really are an aggravating son of a bitch.”

Nick’s expression doesn’t twitch, but his eyes are feral. “That cuts deep, Dean. Honestly, I thought we could be on the same side of something. But you don’t know a single goddamn bullet point about who I was, or who I am. You do know I’m not actually Lucifer, right? I’m just another one of the bodies you and your brother leave behind in the dirt.” There’s a slip of his composure, something that wasn’t part of his plan. “I only got dragged into this mess because I was the fucking understudy to your starring roles in the Apocalypse. But you know what?” He pauses, and the cold silence spreads like frostbite in the space between. “You know the part that makes this all so goddamn funny? You and your brother look at me like I’m the monster for carrying the devil in my marrow, but at least I had to be tricked into saying yes. Deceived. Not like you, Dean-o, no. No, you just bent over and spread it for – ”

Dean’s hardly aware of himself – who he is, what he’s doing – as power soaks into his palm. It smashes out of him in a fury, a shock of shivering white in the air in front of him. Frozen for half an instant like lightning trapped in a bottle.

The blast strikes Nick square in the chest before he can blink, and the widower is torn off his feet. The force blows him from the entryway, and he collides painfully with the tiled wall of the hallway. Dean’s hand hovers in between them, fingers crooked, as he holds Nick upright against the tiles. The pinned man’s feet don’t scrape the floor inches from his boot heel.

The wind’s been blown clear from the bastard’s lungs, and Dean feels a sick sense of perverse pleasure watching the man squirm for breath. Dean’s hand curls in the air, and Nick grunts as the pressure doubles, and there’s the glassy clink of tiles cracking at his back.

He can’t see it, but feels his eyes blaze bright, and it ignites something inside of him. Something warm and human gets chipped away, shoved down under righteous electric anger, and there’s laughing in his head and he doesn’t know whose it is.

Nick must have bit his tongue in the collision, because fresh and vibrant red paints his lower lip. A small nick near the base of his neck leaks fresh blood and it pools in his shirt fabric like a worse injury. But the man smiles, even through the pain and discomfort, and his teeth are slick with blood. “Scared, Dean?”

“You don’t know me.” But it’s the shrieking of angels that fill his ears, the piercing pitch that slices ear drums and shatters glass, and something stutters in Dean’s head.

The blood from the slice in the abandoned vessel’s shoulder-neck junction steadily leaks into his
plain shirt, bleeding until it slicks down his chest. Michael watches it stain in its slow path, and is reminded brutally of the death blow Dean Winchester dealt to his brother – a golden knife slipped through the same bruised ribs –

Nick’s –

Lucifer’s –

His brother’s –

Fuck.

*We had a deal / thanks for the suit / he wouldn’t stop squirming*

*Not him, not me, that’s not mine, that’s not -*

Rocky’s Bar. His bar.

Michael watching him through the blue, Michael in a thousand pieces of cracked glass, the door holds, the prison holds, he’s holding it together, he’s holding it together, he can hold it together –

“Dean!”

The voice slices his concentration cleanly in half, and Dean flinches back. Nick falls like a puppet with cut strings, landing painfully on his side. Dean jerks his head towards the voice, arm still raised, and sees Jack’s face tight with open fear and confusion.

“Dean, what’s going on?” Jack says, and takes half a step towards Nick.

Nick pushes himself up to a kneeling position, and his gaze skims over Jack to land on Dean. He holds his right arm close to his side, and there’s a pained but satisfied glint in his blue eyes. “Yeah,” he coughs, and runs the heel of his left palm against his bloody mouth. “You’re real adjusted. Michael doesn’t stand a chance.”

Jack looks taken aback, and hesitates at the periphery of the scene. He turns concerned eyes over to Dean, adrenaline banishing all the earlier exhaustion.

As the anger and grace fades from his system, Dean feels…

*Regretful* isn’t the right word. Not for Nick. *Embarrassed* doesn’t cover it either. *Scared.* He’s scared.

Nick holds an arm out to Jack wordlessly for a help up. Unsure, Jack glances at Dean, but steps lightly to Nick’s side and helps him get to his feet unsteadily. Nick drops the Nephilim’s hand as soon as he’s firm on his feet. Tile plaster dusts his hair, and he makes an absolute production of turning towards the wall he was thrown against with wide eyes. “Wow.” He says, “What do you think little Sammy is going to think? That big brother Dean is losing it?”

“Get out of here, Nick.” Dean says lowly. An overabundance of charged grace pulses painfully in his core, itching to be used. Drowning out the golden lines of his soul.

“I’ll do that.” Nick replies, slime as thick as jam on toast. “Tell Michael hey for me.” And, still holding his right arm stiffly, Nick trudges off towards the living quarters without a backwards glance.

Jack watches him leave, but when he turns back to Dean, there’s something like nervousness on his
“Dean, what happened?” He repeats, and Dean wishes he had a good answer for him.

“Guy riles me.” Dean says, and Jack is literally standing in the cracked tiles of the understatement of the century.

Jack frowns. “Still.” He says, and there’s more reproach in that little word than Jack’s ever offered before.

Dean sighs. Tries to take a breath to smooth out all the wrinkles inside of him. Already the outburst is retreating back inside, he’s already half-doubting the moment of Michael. “I shouldn’t have lost control like that.” Dean tries again, and Jack looks slightly more mollified.

The Nephilim glances down the hallway that Nick’s disappeared down. “What did he say to you?”

“It’s not important.” Dean answers. Firmly.

“Should we… tell Sam?”

Ugh. Sam.

“I’m sure he’ll hear eventually.” Dean replies, glancing at the smashed wall. Drops of Nick’s blood freckled on the floor. “Let him sleep.” And – trying to push past the disaster that is his own head – Dean looks Jack up and down critically. “Speaking of – “

Jack already knows where he’s going, and lets the earlier subject drop. “I don’t want to sleep when Cas is… out there. Somewhere.”

Dean lets all the air out his lungs in a long exhale, trying to soothe the vibrating grace back inside Pandora’s box. More and more he doubts his recollection of what just happened. But back on Cas. “Jack, I get that it’s hard for you to believe that Cas is fine, but trust me. I know he is.”

Jack doesn’t seem convinced. “Can you sense him?”

“I sense… he’s okay. Or will be.”

The younger hunter’s expression darkens. His father’s frustration sharpens his face, but his mother’s compassion rounds it out. But there’s longing threaded in his words that only someone who has felt power slip through their fingers can know: “I raised him from the Empty, Dean. Pulled him back – pulled him here. Now I can’t even…” and he slaps his hands against thighs. “I can’t even tell if he’s okay.”

Fuck Dean’s beautiful ass, but the kid’s right. It’s been months since Jack had his grace sucked out of him, and now only his human soul was keeping him upright and moving. It’s hard to remember sometimes that Jack is a Nephilim. That anything Dean could do with Michael’s grace, Jack could do… better. Especially because he knew what to do. It’s all instinctual. It’s goddamn biblical. Fuck, Jack was able to turn Pestilence into a living rock with just a smidge of some extra Michael grace laying around.

Jack was an angel. Maybe he can be one again.

“Dean?” Jack says, some of the frustration giving away towards concern again. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

Chapter End Notes
I like the idea that angels just know weird things. Cas has done it a few times in the show - weird physics knowledge. I've had Cas do a few weird things like that in my fic - like knowing the exact square mileage of a town or knowing how long Jack has been missing to the second. I wanted Dean to randomly do something like that too with all that damage in his head - but I swear to God, I will never do it again. It was endless googling of physics questions plus fear that someone reading this actually understands physics and knows I'm full of shit lmao. I promise it half makes sense. I think.

I missed writing Dean. Didn't realize I haven't done much of his direct POV recently.

Anyway, sorry about the recent delays. Been a busy work month, plus I was on vacation plus I'm moving next week. Don't know why I'm complaining about that here. I'm just a complainer. (finger guns) Also I will try and fix typos but the wildfires here knocked out my internet so I need to post now or FOREVER hold my peace (until tomorrow)

Thanks for reading

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!