Another Sun

by Edge_of_Clairevance

Summary

Time stamp for The Silver Collar series: in a motel room in North Dakota, Dean awaits a hunter who might become his new sponsor. Of course Dean has heard of him; who doesn't know John Winchester?

Notes

This story recounts the events from Dean and John's first meeting until the first night Dean spends at Bobby's. It contains SERIOUS spoilers for "Ends of the Earth, Edge of Heaven", so be sure to read the main work first to fully enjoy both stories!

Warning for physical, mental and verbal abuse, non-consensual slavery, violence and language. Read at your own discretion.

As always, CrazedPanda, alexofthegarden and ToscaRossetti challenged me with their wise comments and corrections. Thank you, lovelies!
Chapter 1

The pattern of the wallpaper is brown and beige autumn leaves over pale green-grey vines. There are four-hundred and sixty-one leaves on the wall stretching along the kitchenette and dining area and all the way to the back of the bedroom area. Dean knows that because he has been counting them repeatedly over the last two days.

It's the only thing he has to keep him busy. He has no books or newspapers, and the TV is on the other side of the room divider, impossible for him to watch from where he's sitting on the floor on his sleeping bag. He can hear it, but Vance keeps flipping through the channels, and trying to make it out is too exhausting.

Dean could probably calculate how many leaves are on the walls of the entire room based on the parts he has visible, but he can't make his brain do the math. He's too on edge, too stressed, too fucking scared.

A cell phone chirps and silence falls as the TV is muted. The bed creaks – Vance is probably reaching for the phone sitting on the nightstand.

"Yeah. You are? Room nineteen, the last one on the right. I'll see you in a few."

The bed creaks again, louder, and a grunt indicates that Vance is getting up. Dean can hear the footsteps and drops his eyes to his lap before the hunter crosses into his field of vision. He carefully watches the man's shoes as they halt before him.

"Winchester's gonna be here in a coupla minutes, so get the fuck off your lazy ass."

"Yes, sir," Dean is on his feet in no time, ignoring the protest of his muscles at the sudden movement after being immobile for so long. As he stands up, Vance's hand shoots out like a biting snake.

Dean's hair is short-cropped, but the man still manages to grab enough of it at the back of his head
and yank Dean painfully toward him.

Dean tries to just let himself be pulled, not to resist, not to make it worse. He has to force his hands to stay down and not reach up to pry the iron fingers off him. Vance bends him until his head is the same height as the hunter's, five inches shorter than Dean.

"You fuck this up," Vance growls. "And I'll fuck you up. You hear me?"

Dean manages to breathe out, "Yes, sir," and Vance drags him a step or two away from the sleeping bag and into the middle of the dining area, and only then lets go of his hair.

Dean straightens up but keeps his eyes on the floor and doesn't move otherwise as Vance downs the last of the beer can he's been holding and then tosses it into the trash.

Vance opens the fridge to get another beer, and Dean listens to the familiar sounds of the top being popped and then the loud gulps of the liquid going down Vance's gullet. But it's all a background noise, because right now Dean's heart beats so hard, it's drowning out everything else.

Winchester. John Winchester.

John fucking Winchester.

Of course Dean has heard of him. The man is something close to a legend in the hunting circles; even Dean's father had mentioned him once or twice. From everything he'd heard, Dean can see the image of a relentless, merciless hunter, strong enough to break a werewolf's neck with his bare hands, skilled enough to thread a silver bullet into another's heart from fifty feet away, after being cunning enough to lure the entire pack into his trap.

And he's about to become Dean's new sponsor.

Well, not immediately. Usually sponsors took a day or two to assess Dean's abilities and comportment before they wore the bracelet, and he assumes this will be the case with Winchester as well.

Dean can screw this up. He can present himself as insufficient both in hunting and in obedience, and Winchester will pass on taking him in. But if Dean does that, Vance is going to beat the living shit out of him, and Dean can't decide which will be worse. Vance is a mean sonovabitch, and Dean thinks he might as well take his chances with Winchester.

So he stands there and waits.

He can hear the cars in the nearby street, and then a growing roar of an engine right outside, in the parking lot. It closes in on their room, as if the car itself is about to come knocking on the door, and then the sound shuts off abruptly.

Dean tries not to freak out.

Even though he knows it's coming, the knock still startles him. He slants a glance up as Vance goes to it, gun already in hand, and calls, "Who's there?"

"Winchester," the voice is muffled by the closed door, but otherwise it sounds just as Dean imagined it – deep with a low, menacing rumble.

Vance stuffs the gun into the waistband of his pants, grabs the silver knife out of his pocket and the flask of holy water off the side table, and opens the door enough to offer them through the gap of the
security chain.

There's a pause while Winchester, presumably, assures Vance he's human, and only then does the door open all the way to let him in.

Dean has one last quick glance before fixing his eyes firmly on the floor. Jesus, this Winchester dude looks huge; Dean isn't short by any standard, but Winchester is taller, maybe only slightly, but his broad shoulders and confident stance make the difference seem greater.

"I trust you had a pleasant drive up here," Vance says.

"It was a short one, at least," Winchester replies. "That him?"

"Yeah. Be my guest."

Dean hears Winchester's approaching footsteps and then the man is standing in front of him. Just standing there, doing nothing for a full minute. No, not nothing; Dean's skin is crawling with the feeling of the hunter's eyes sizing him up. Dean can feel his knees shaking slightly. He hopes Winchester doesn't notice.

Winchester starts pacing around him, taking his time while Dean does his best not to be blinded by growing panic; he knows the man has no reason to hit him from behind, but his experience so far with sponsors, sponsors-to-be and hunters in general taught him that nothing is improbable when it comes to the way they think he deserves to be treated.

Winchester has completed a full circle around Dean, and comes to stand in front of him again. Dean involuntarily flinches when Winchester's hand rises, but the hunter only reaches to touch the collar.

"That's the thing? Doesn't look like much," the voice sounds deeper with Winchester so close to him.

"It doesn't," Vance replies. "But it's strong as hell. Can't be ripped off or cut with anything but the spell they used to put it on. It's safe."

Winchester's hand drops away from the collar. "You're Dean."

It's not a direct question, so Dean keeps his mouth shut. He doesn't want any trouble with this man, not less than five minutes after meeting him. But either Winchester doesn't know this rule many of the sponsors have, or his way of phrasing questions is different.

"Well?" It isn't entirely impatient, but Dean hardly avoids wincing.

"Yes, sir," he answers quickly, hoping his voice isn't too low to be heard.

"How old are you?"

"Eighteen, sir."

"Look at me."

Dean does, very gingerly. He didn't get a good look at the man's face before, and he wishes he could just keep staring at the floor; Winchester's eyebrows are thick and dark, the stubble on his face is just short of a beard, and his hazel eyes are sharp, penetrating. Dean feels like a bug under a magnifying glass.

"I have a son, he's thirteen and some, almost fourteen. He's been sick for a long time and is still weak. I want a bodyguard for him when we get back on the road."
Oh, great. As if being with a hunter isn't bad enough, he'll have to deal with some entitled brat who will run crying to Daddy whenever he thinks Dean so much as *looks* at him wrong.

As if reading his mind, Winchester goes on, "My son might be off his game right now, but you can believe I'll make you pay heavily for mistreating him in any way. You understand?"

"Yes, sir," he knows his voice is trembling but there's nothing he can do about it.

The hunter nods. "I'll need you to work with him on his training, get him back in shape as much as he can handle. Can you do that?"

Sure, train the brat so he too will be able to hurt Dean. "Yes, sir."

Winchester nods again, then turns toward Vance. "I'd like to see for myself what he's worth. You said you have a case around here?"

Vance picks up his discarded can and takes a pull from it. "Yeah. Let's sit down, I'll fill ya in."

Both hunters move to sit on the couch by the coffee table, where Vance's notes are scattered carelessly about.

Vance looks over at Dean. "Get Mr. Winchester a beer."

Dean takes a can from the fridge over to the couch and hands it to the man, then moves back to stand by the room divider.

Winchester pops the top and his eyes catch Dean's as he knocks it back. Dean hurriedly drops his gaze.

"He seems to behave," Winchester comments.

Vance snorts. "He knows he'd better. You remember about the collar not letting him hurt a sponsor, right?"

"Yeah."

"I'll show you how that works, but you should also know it don't do nothing for his attitude, whether it's dragging his feet or sleeping in or mouthing off or plain disobeying. This you'll need to beat into him on your own."

"That won't be a problem," Winchester says. Dean could try to tell him that he had never dragged his feet, or slept in, or mouthed off to Vance, or disobeyed him, not once; that his sponsor is quick to imagine slights and to castigate for them. But Winchester's indifferent tone sends a shiver through Dean's spine and he only ducks his head further.

He does that not only because of Winchester's voice, but because he knows what Vance is going to tell the other hunter next.

"You shouldn't sweat it, though. Just do what every other sponsor had done. The first night you wear the bracelet, you take him someplace nice and quiet and you tell him whatever rules you want him to follow. Then you lay into him as hard as you can, show him what he's gonna be gettin' if he breaks those rules. And don't pity him none either, that bastard can take some serious pain."

Dean feels Winchester's eyes on him as he cringes there. He can't really help cringing; all the times this lesson was administered flood his mind, and he knows – *he knows* – that with Winchester it's
going to be the worst of them.

"I see," Winchester says in the same indifferent tone. "Interesting. Does it work?"

"Most of the time," Vance reluctantly admits. "I had to remind him once or twice, but he's not too
dumb to learn his place."

Right now, Dean's place is where he stands with his back against the room divider, occasionally
ordered to get more beer from the fridge, but mostly listening to Vance relaying the details of the
hunt to Winchester.

Vance may be a foul-mouthed, drunken asshole, but he's a pretty good hunter and has a knack for
grasping patterns others easily miss. "You see," he tells Winchester. "Nobody thought that a couple
of murders in Townsend could be connected to others in Reed Point, Cody, Emblem and Wright.
But I did."

Winchester picks up a newspaper clip and studies it. "And why did you?"

"Because there were never just two of them, like they all thought. There were three."

"Oh?" Winchester's eyebrow rises.

"The third one wasn't strictly a murder, or so it seemed. It started out as a missing person, but in two
of those towns, a body was recovered later. The bodies belonged to two guys working deliveries,
each with his own route of regular customers. And guess who the victims were."

"Regular customers," Winchester says, and Dean doesn't miss the tone of appreciation in his voice.

"Bingo. Nobody ever made that connection, with so many other people getting their paper, or milk,
or groceries or goddamned organic buckwheat cookies delivered on those same routes, right? The
murders were far enough apart in time and place, and the police didn't bother checking that out. So I
did some diggin' on the other cases; nothing to tie the victims together but some kind of regular
delivery."

"And on the other cases, delivery people turned up dead?"

"Two of the delivery people are still missing, and on the last case, the killer must've taken the time to
get hired into work and then took off right after the murders. I didn't find any reports on missing
persons, so I asked around. There was a woman nobody reported as a missing person, who hadn't
showed up one day to work at the bakery where she used to do deliveries. The same bakery that had
lost two of its faithful clients during the previous weeks."

Winchester nods slowly, still flipping through the clippings. "You're thinking a shifter."

"Yes. It finds a town, either kills and replaces a delivery person, or just gets itself hired. Does its
rounds, studies the clientele, offs one, then another, then skips town and continues southeast."

"And here?"

"Here's not the nicest town, there were a few deaths in the last two weeks. I ruled out three that were
definitely not murders, and been working on the other two. I'm sure one of them's the shifter's doing;
as soon as I find out which, I'll be able to tell what kind of deliveries it's into."

"So you need some more research?"
Vance waves his hand. "The killings took place last week, so we got some time; in the other towns, the murders were two and even three weeks apart. If you wanna check the collared one out tomorrow, I know a place we can go."

Dean keeps his eyes on the floor while he waits for Winchester to respond. He knows the time for the hunter to see Dean's worth for himself will come, if not tomorrow then the day after that. And he knows he can impress Winchester, because the hunting community may consider him the most wretched person alive these days, but they can't deny he's fucking good.

Except Dean still isn't sure if he should impress this tall, sharp-eyed hunter; Winchester gives him the creeps. Does Dean really want him to be his sponsor, him and his snot-nosed brat?

Dean shifts a little and his back rubs against the divider. It awakes the dull pain in his side and he tries not to wince. He'll go along with it, he decides. He'll show his worth to Winchester and hope for the best. At least he'll be rid of Vance and his damned rubber hose before he busts Dean's ribs for real, and not just make them feel like they're broken.

"Fine then," Winchester gets up and Dean pushes his back further into the wall as both men pass him on their way to the door. "Tomorrow morning, bright and early."

Winchester leaves and Dean stays where he is, waiting for Vance's order to fix him dinner or do a load of laundry, or patch up his socks, or wash the car, or count his shotgun bullets, or whatever chore he feels like making Dean do. Except Vance just goes over to the fridge and pops another can of beer.

"What do you make of him?"

The question is so surprising and the tone so casual, that Dean raises his head and stares at his sponsor. Vance, for once, doesn't even rebuke him for his insolence. He gazes back and calmly sips his beer.

"I… I don't know, sir," Dean wouldn't take the bait, but Vance only downs another gulp and looks at Dean steadily.

"Yeah, you do know. You're not a stupid guy, far from it. Well, maybe not smart enough to get away with murdering your family, but then again, who knows how this psychopathic little mind of yours works, huh?"

Dean stays silent, but doesn't look away.

"He scares you, doesn't he? Winchester? He should. He's ruthless, and even more so when it concerns his son. One wrong word, one wrong move, and you'll wish you'd've taken that bullet when they gave you the choice two years ago."

Vance knocks the beer back, belches and tosses the can into the trash. Then he digs into his pocket, pulls out a roll of bills and peels a ten and a five off the stack. From another pocket he fishes a few ID cards, flips through them and pulls one out.

"Get me a six-pack," he says as he drops the money and the ID on the table. "And a ham and cheese sandwich and a bag of chips. You can get yourself something with whatever change is left."

Dean scoops up the card and the crumpled bills and practically flees from the room. He stops on the sidewalk and stands there for a moment, taking deep breaths.

Vance is fucking with his mind, of course he is. Vance wants Winchester to take Dean; he wants
Dean to behave so Winchester takes him. But Dean attempting to win Winchester over while being out of his mind with fear – wouldn't that be just so entertaining to watch?

Dean takes one last breath and closes his eyes for a minute. He needs to get away from Vance, he knows that much, and Winchester is his only way out. He has no choice, really.

What else is new?

Dean opens his eyes, tucks the money and the ID into his pocket, and gets moving.
Chapter 2

A sad day for the SPN family as we learn that the upcoming 15th season of "Supernatural" will be its last. I've started watching the show only about three years ago, and even then, didn't fall for it right away; but ever since I did, I was drawn into a magical world. Finding out the sub-community of fanfiction was a bliss I'll forever be grateful for. I hope all of you, writers and readers alike, will continue supporting the fanfic universe of Supernatural and keep it alive for as long as we can. Because, as Misha Collins had stated, "This family is not going anywhere".

Thank you all the kind readers who stick with my little Silver Collar verse, I hope you'll enjoy the rest of this story.

John leans against the Impala, arms crossed over his chest. He's a little early, but he doesn't mind waiting. He has a lot to think about.

The collared one, for example. It was a bit of a shock to see him. John had known he was young, but he'd only realized how young when he met him. Jesus Christ, he's just a kid. And he was younger than that when he shot his father and smashed his brother's head on the edge of a table.

Not that he looks like a murderer; but then again, John has seen enough to know that some of the cruelest monsters have the prettiest faces, and human monsters are no exception.

Does he really want to have this particular human monster near Sam? By all accounts, the collar's safe, he knows that – and he'll make sure it's indeed true – and all the sponsors he had talked to said Dean is obedient. But Bobby's words

You know what he did. You know what he is. You have to be fucking insane to ever let him near Sam

still echo inside his head, and he can't shake the disturbing feeling that he might be making a huge mistake.

The door to Vance's room opens, and Vance strolls out, followed by Dean carrying two duffle bags. John pushes off the Impala while Vance and Dean go over to Vance's Oldsmobile. Dean keeps his eyes lowered, but John can see him slanting a long glance at the Impala and can't help feeling a little proud at the awe the kid can't quite hide.

John follows Vance's car during the hour it takes them to get to their destination, an abandoned amusement park. Vance drives around it to a service road and they enter the premises through a rusty iron gate that is all but falling off its hinges.

Vance parks some way inside and gets out of the car, and John does the same. Dean climbs out of the Oldsmobile's back seat and retrieves the duffles from the trunk. The sun shines on the boy's freckles and blond hair, and makes the green in his eyes seem lighter in color.

Some of the cruelest monsters have the prettiest faces

"I guess the first thing you wanna see is that the collar's safe," Vance says, and John nods.
Vance walks backwards and stops about twelve feet away from John and Dean, who remains standing where he is, looking intently at his sponsor. Vance gives a nod, and suddenly there's a gun in Dean's hand, and three quick shots tear through the quiet morning air.

John starts, only barely catching himself in time not to storm at the boy and take him down. But Vance is still standing, completely calm, his clothes intact.

John passes his eyes from Vance to Dean and back. From this range, even a complete noob could have made the shot, let alone a trained hunter. But Dean had missed.

"Did you miss on purpose?" John asks him.

"He didn't," Vance replies in Dean's stead. "You can see he's aiming. Look closely. One more shot."

Dean levels the gun and fires. The aim is perfect, the gun steady, but the bullet, again, doesn't hit its target.

"Does the bracelet create a shield or something?" John asks.

"No," Vance starts walking back. "The collar makes his hand move just enough so the bullets miss the sponsor."

John nods in bewilderment. He had told Sam the collar prevents the bearer from harming the sponsor, but he did wonder how it worked with a firearm.

"Does the collar make him miss a punch as well?"

"It works a little differently with physical attacks. Here," Vance faces Dean and signals with his hand. Dean storms forward, fists raised, and then he's pushed back, as if shoved away from Vance – or better yet, pulled by some invisible leash.

"Again," Vance says, and Dean attacks, only to be hurled back a few steps.

"See, the collar doesn't let him near me if his intentions are harmful," Vance explains and signals for Dean to go again. John watches as the boy tries to get to Vance a few more times, and is pulled away by the collar, farther each time.

_They can't lift a finger against the person with the bracelet. If they try, the collar stops them_

_Like a shock collar_

_Yeah, like that_

"Okay, I get the picture," John says, and Vance raises a hand to make Dean stand still. John glances over at the kid and catches him reaching to rub his throat. It occurs to John that it must hurt Dean some when the collar is activated this way. But what of it?

"Bobby Singer isn't sure the collar is safe," John says.

Vance shrugs. "I respect Bobby Singer, and I understand why he might have doubts, but the fact stands that a collared one has never been able to either harm a sponsor or tear the collar off. I bet that when Singer sees for himself, he'll be convinced."

"Yeah, he might," another thing comes to John's mind. "What about when I need the collared one to push me or my son away from danger? For our protection?"
"It's the malicious intent the collar recognizes. If the collared one doesn't mean to hurt you, the collar doesn't stop him. I'll show you. You try to swing at me, and you," he turns to Dean. "You push me out of his way."

John draws his arm back and throws a punch at Vance and Dean steps in to shove Vance aside and stand in John's way while at the same time ducking his fist. John halts his forward motion and nods at Vance. "I see, that's useful."

"Yeah, it is," Vance turns to Dean, and with a fast motion slaps him. "Not so fuckin' hard, you asshole."

Dean fixes his eyes on the ground, Vance's handprint reddening on his pale cheek. "Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

John doesn't think the shove Dean gave Vance was all that hard, and Vance is sturdy enough to stand a hell of a lot worse, but he says nothing as Vance glares at Dean for a moment longer, and then turns to John.

"You wanna see how you keep him from running away?"

John is interested in seeing that; the bracelet's magic chains the collar to it, but it must be flexible, otherwise the collared one would be worthless on a hunt.

"Walk," Vance orders Dean, and while the boy starts pacing away from them, the hunter explains, "The sponsor creates a border with their mind. You can make it anywhere you want, you just need to think about where you draw it. See that trash can over there? I'm setting the border just next to it. Now watch."

Dean reaches the trash can and is about to pass it by when again he seems to be pulled by the invisible leash that had prevented him from attacking Vance. He makes another unsuccessful try to cross the magical border, and looks back over his shoulder.

"I'll set the border a little farther away," Vance tells John, and then hollers at Dean, "Keep going!"

Dean makes a hesitant step forward, finds out there's nothing blocking him, and resumes his walk only to bump into the new border.

Vance smirks. "Looks funny, doesn't it? I bet your kid'll get a kick out of playing with it."

John doubts Sam would find this game entertaining, but again says nothing as Vance calls Dean back.

"We started with firing guns, you wanna see how he does with that?"

They go over to the bumper cars ride, now just a sad, empty little lot. The back wall is covered with a mural showing a race track with cars buzzing along it. Dean crouches to unzip one of the duffles and looks up at John.

"Pick a weapon," Vance says.

John picks a 9mm Smith & Wesson handgun and Dean checks it and loads the magazine. He stands up and faces the lot's back wall, with John and Vance standing a step behind him on either side.

"Tell him where you want him to hit," Vance says. John looks at the mural.
"That chequered flag on the lower right corner," he says. It's an easy enough target, not too small from where they're standing. Dean raises the gun, and fires seven times in rapid succession, his arms hardly moving with the recoil.

When Dean lowers the gun, John takes a few steps forward to examine the flag; it's gone. Or rather, it looks like it's gone, because Dean had hit only the white squares, leaving the black intact and making the flag merge into the dark background. John turns to Vance and quirks an eyebrow at him.

"Yeah, he can be a show-off," Vance grumbles, and Dean gulps, his shoulders hunching some, as if he's waiting for another slap. Vance doesn't hit him, though, just looks over at John. "Choose a harder target."

John studies the mural. "That redhead person in the crowd, off to the left, near the light post. You see it?"

"Yes, sir," Dean raises the gun, aims, and takes the shot. The little spot of red hair is gone.

John points out a few more targets, which Dean hits easily, even though John made him step back and away from the ride. When John looks around for another target, he spots a pigeon sitting on the roof of a nearby concession booth, that, for some reason, hadn't been frightened away by the noise.

"Take it down," he tells Dean, and a few seconds later the bird hits the ground with a dusty thud.

John has to admit that this kid is probably the best shot he'd seen, surely among hunters as young as him. But he keeps his face schooled as if he sees something like that on a daily basis.

Vance has Dean remove all the guns from the duffle over to a stained drop cloth and asks John to point at the ones he wants Dean to dissemble. John elects the double-barrel, and Dean takes it apart and puts it back together as neatly as you please. He does that with a Ruger, a Walther and a sawed-off, hands quick and confident. John is tempted to make the kid try it blindfolded, but he doesn't bother; from the looks of it, Dean could do this kind of thing in his sleep. And anyway, it isn't like hunting is all about handling guns.

"What about other skills?" John asks.

Vance leads them to a roller coaster and points up at the rail. "Climb up to that rise before the second drop, then down again."

Dean approaches the foot of the ride, grabs the steel rods and gives them a shake – presumably to verify their durability – then starts climbing. Now, John knows full well that this kid is a murderer the world can do perfectly fine without, but his stomach still turns with worry as Dean scales the thirty feet to the top of that rusty ride, stands there for a moment, and then starts climbing down.

"Jesus," he breathes in a low voice while Dean jumps down the last few feet and comes trotting back to them.


Dean is drawing near by then and John suspects he must have heard Vance's remark. But Dean gives no indication, just comes to stand quietly next to them. He isn't even panting, just breathing slightly faster.

"You wanna see him run? Time him," Vance turns and gestures at a carousel with horses – some of them headless – circling a striped center pole. "Around that and back here. Go!"
Dean breaks into a sprint, circles the carousel and runs back to the men with his feet raising little dust clouds as he breaks. John looks at his watch with amazement.

"He's fast, isn't he? Time him again."

John does, and Dean runs a few more laps, keeping his result roughly the same, even though his breathing is starting to become heavier.

"You want him to go one more time?" Vance asks.

"No. I wanna see what he's worth at hand-to-hand."

"Sure, knock yourself out," Vance sniggers. "Or he might."

They find a patch of grass and John starts with some easy grabs and holds that the kid gets out of easily, and after having assessed Dean's strength, starts handling him more aggressively.

Or at least he tries; Dean worms out of his hold every time, and when John takes the wrestling up a notch, so does Dean, and John only barely manages to keep his feet when Dean reverses his own maneuver against him and almost trips him.

Even after the exercise of shooting, scaling the roller coaster and running, the blond boy is still agile and steady on his feet. But John has far more experience. He fakes a move, deflects Dean's arm and throws him down on his back.

Dean looks up at him, and John can see a flash of fear in his eyes; he's not sure if the boy thinks John is going to keep beating him as part of the test, or as punishment for failing. John takes a step back.

"Get up. Let's see you spar."

Dean's sparring moves are good, he can dodge quickly and hit at the same time; his fists are accurate and fast and his defense effective. John doesn't need to keep this up for long, he can judge that this kid has had plenty of training.

Vance brings out a bottle of water and hands it to John. John takes a long pull and glances at Dean from the corner of his eye; the kid's eyes are glued to the bottle, but as John lowers it and wipes his mouth, Dean turns his stare away.

John holds the bottle out to him. "Here."

Dean doesn't take it. Instead, he looks at Vance. John also looks at the other hunter, wondering if there could be an excuse to deny Dean of water, while Vance seems to consider this as if the collared one had been offered a bar of pure gold and not plain, lukewarm water.

"Drink," Vance says at last, and Dean gingerly reaches for the bottle in John's hand. He takes a few cautious sips and hands it back with a "Thank you, sir".

Vance finds some doors Dean can pick the locks on – they're rusty and Dean has to struggle with them, but John is satisfied with his technique. He has Dean fasten different types of knots and then free himself when John ties him to a support beam of the pirate ship ride.

They move to sit at a picnic table and John questions Dean about his knowledge of lore. Dean can quote a sizeable list of monsters and their characteristics, habitat, diet and weaknesses; his Latin is more than decent; he draws a dozen sigils and wards with practiced ease; he can specify survival methods, useful plants and field-med techniques; he recites recipes of common spells, even if he
doesn't remember the incantations – John thinks nothing of it since he himself usually needs to have an incantation either written down or memorized shortly before putting it to use, but Dean's shoulders hunch as he admits his shortcoming with a voice that seems to plead with John not to punish him for it.

John glances at his watch; it's way past lunchtime and his stomach is starting to rumble. He gathers he'd seen everything the collared one can reasonably demonstrate outside of a real hunt, and so he tells Vance he'd like to grab some lunch.

Vance takes them to a diner located at a rest stop on the highway out of town. It's cheap and looks it, but John doesn't mind; he's had to settle for much worse and he was never picky in the first place.

Dean waits for Vance's nod before he sits at the table with them. After giving the place a scan meant to spot threats, he fixes his eyes on the stained Formica table and doesn't touch the menu the waitress puts in front of him.

John glances at his menu, and then back at Dean and Vance. He assumes Vance will be the one ordering for both himself and his charge, which will be reasonable, since he's the one paying.

When the waitress comes back, they order a cheeseburger for John, a Chili Con Carne for Vance, and beer for the both of them.

"What'll you have, honey?" The waitress asks Dean.

"He'll have the meatloaf," Vance says, and Dean smiles up at the waitress. It's the first time John sees him smile, and he's almost stunned for a second at how adorable it makes Dean look.

"The meatloaf would be great, thank you," Dean says to the waitress, his voice light and casual, and she smiles at him and takes back the menus.

As soon as the waitress's back is turned, Dean's smile vanishes and John can't help but feel as if the sun was suddenly overcast by winter clouds.

"Thank you, sir," Dean says quietly, and Vance grunts something unintelligible. The waitress drops off their drinks and Dean waits for her to depart before he asks, "May I use the restroom, sir?"

"Yeah," Vance replies, and Dean disappears in the direction of the men's room.

Vance knocks his bottle back. "Whaddya think?"

John sips his own beer. "He's skilled, well trained, smart. I bet he's a great help on a hunt."

Vance nods.

"Why are you willing to hand him over so soon? You've had him for only a little over a month."

Vance takes another sip and his eyes wander away from John. "I don't have kids that I know of, but I've saved my fair share of children, every hunter does. And with him... I just can't look at him and not see the little boy he murdered. I know that letting him live, letting him bear the collar and hunt and save other people – it's for the greater good and I understand that, I was willing to do my part. But this was his fuckin' baby brother, man, the one he should've been the first to protect, hunter or not. There aren't enough children in the world he can save in order to atone for what he's done. I've been trying to treat him fairly, honestly I have, but if I keep him for much longer, I might be the one who ends up bashing his head into a table."
John doesn't answer, and they drink silently while Dean returns to the table and the waitress follows shortly after with their meal. The cheeseburger is greasy and overcooked, but John eats it just the same, and Vance digs into the Chili Con Carne even though its smell is less than appetizing. The meatloaf looks even worse, but Dean steadily consumes every last bite of it, even the half-wilted parsley leaves that are supposed to be some poor excuse for garnish.

John has enough of his hamburger – it's as if the grease is clogging his esophagus – and puts what is left of it back on the plate. He notices Dean glancing at it and his tongue giving his lips a quick lick before he drops his eyes back to his empty plate.

John almost pushes the hamburger in Dean's direction; he's a growing boy who is getting a lot of physical exercise, and is obviously still hungry. But Dean should be grateful for every day he's allowed to stay alive, for every night he spends outside of death row, for every meal he eats at a diner and not in a prison cafeteria. John leaves the plate untouched.

They return to the motel, where John and Vance change into monkey suits. They go out in Vance's car and drop Dean off at the public library with instructions to comb the local newspapers for wanted ads looking for delivery people, and also map out the local businesses that offer regular deliveries.

The hunters proceed to determine which of the two deaths was shifter-induced; they spend the entire afternoon and early evening going from the police station, to the morgue, to scanning the crime scenes. At the end of the day they are still not sure which of the cases was the shapeshifter's doing, although they have some educated guesses.

When they arrive to pick Dean up, the library is already closed. The boy is standing near the front doors, huddled up in his thin coat in the corner of the entrance under the stone arch, trying to stay out of the wind. He practically races for the car when Vance honks the horn, and settles into the middle of the back seat, where he can catch the heated air that flows from the vents.

"Did you make a list?" Vance asks as he pulls away from the curb.

"Yes, sir," Dean smooths a stack of folded papers, and John notices his fingers are trembling some. "Local businesses that run deliveries and want ads for delivery people. Also checked which ads were taken down the last few weeks-"

"Okay," Vance says, and Dean clamps up immediately and starts folding the papers. John thinks the kid deserves a little praise, a lousy "good job" at least, but Vance keeps his silence, and so does John.
They spend the next day doing further leg-work. Vance sends Dean into some of the businesses that advertised they are seeking delivery people, so the boy can gather information while he pretends to be looking for a job. John and Vance stay back in the car, but on two occasions John follows Dean in as if he's a customer coming to browse, and listens as the collared one works his charm.

And it's quite a remarkable charm. Young women almost swoon when he grins at them, older women beam and coo at him, even men's faces seem to brighten up at his smile. Dean is lively and outgoing in public as much as he is quiet and subdued in the hunters’ company, and John wonders if he was like that all the time before everything that had happened, before he was collared, before-

Before he murdered his only living relatives.

They finish the day exhausted as hell but with several good leads, and John and Vance are pretty certain now who the shifter's victim is, and also that the shifter must be a paperboy of a local paper which is being delivered in the afternoons twice a week. Dean had tried to get himself hired there, but was told that the paper doesn't need more delivery people at the time.

They can't be sure that the shapeshifter still works the same route it did when it murdered Mrs. Blass, so they spend the next day asking careful questions around the neighborhood. It turns out the paperboy is the same one for nearly a year now, which leads them to conclude that the real paperboy is as dead as poor Mrs. Blass.
Still, there's always a margin of error; the shapeshifter could be working in the next-door neighborhood, close enough to the Blass's residence. It could be either of the guys and girls who stood in for the paperboy whenever he was absent. John and Vance debate for a while, then decide to start with the regular paperboy and figure things out as they go.

They stake out the suspect's apartment the next day. The kid, Liam, isn't home when they get there, and they break in and scout the place, but find nothing to indicate where he went, or if he is indeed the shapeshifter. John and Vance leave Dean to watch the building's back door and sit in the car to watch the front one. Occasionally one of them goes to get some coffee, take a leak or check on Dean. When John is the one to do it, he finds the boy exactly where he was told to be. John doesn't think Vance has set the collar's borders to keep Dean in place; it would be pointless to deny him the ability to chase the shifter or to run to the hunters' aid.

Vance gets them sandwiches for lunch and goes over to give one to Dean along with a water bottle, and John realizes that it's probably the first drink the boy has been given since being stationed at his post. A brief, burning wave of guilt passes through him. There's probably a faucet somewhere nearby, John tells himself, and Dean could have gotten a drink of water. The thought makes the guilt ebb – a little, anyway.

A slim young man in a denim jacket, barely out of his teens, walks along the sidewalk and into the building they are watching, and both hunters tense up as they recognize Liam from the photo they had seen at his place of him and his mother.

They get out of the car calmly. They don't want to draw attention, of course, but they are also in no hurry; they'd already determined that Dean will be the one to make the kill so John can see him handle a real hunt.

They climb up to the third floor, and as they step into the corridor, they see Liam burst out of his apartment door. He sees them there, turns on his heel and makes a beeline for the fire escape. Dean storms out of the apartment after him and tackles the kid about ten feet down the hall.

John and Vance run with their guns drawn, but when they reach the two boys the struggle is already over; Dean straightens up, still straddling Liam, who is now thrashing feebly as he bleeds out from the deep slit in his throat, whose edges are charred by the touch of the silver blade.

"Inside, quick," John says, and Vance and Dean hurriedly lift the body and carry it into the apartment. John picks up the silver knife Dean had dropped, and takes a look around to make sure they aren't watched – the hall is silent, but a neighbor might have been spying on them through a peephole; the police could be here in a matter of minutes.

John retreats into the apartment and closes the door as Vance and Dean put Liam's body on the floor. As soon as Vance lets go of the body, he steps up to Dean and backhands him hard enough to make the kid stumble back a pace.

"How the fuck did he get away from you?!" Vance growls and backhands Dean on the other side of his face.

"I'm sorry, sir," Dean breaths out. "I tried to test 'im with the silver knife to make sure-"

"That would've taken you a few seconds at the most," Vance slaps him again, hard, and Dean lets out a little groan.

"The silver is corroded, sir," he says between gasps. "I wasn't sure it was touchin' his skin properly and he managed to throw me off 'im-"
Vance grabs Dean's coat and slams him against the wall, then backhands him sharply. "Fucking excuses! It's your job to keep the weapons clean, you stupid, good-for-nothing fuck-up!"

John looks down at the knife in his hand. Through the blood coating it he can see the silver is, indeed, corroded; he remembers now that he'd noticed this when Vance handed him the knife through the gap in the door when they first met. And he also remembers that Vance wasn't keeping the knife in the weapons duffle but in his pocket, from where he pulled it when he passed it to Dean this morning. If it was anybody's fault that the hunt went sideways, it wasn't Dean's.

"I'm sorry, sir-" Dean's words are cut off with a huff of breath as Vance slams him into the wall again and leans in, close and menacing.

"You're getting sloppier than ever, aren't ya? We're gonna have a little session with the hose when we get back, see if that'll get you-"

"Vance," John says. The other hunter turns his head. "We need to get out of here. Now."

Vance stares at him for a few seconds as if John is speaking some foreign language, and then nods. "Right." He lets go of Dean, who staggers a little before finding his feet, and reaches a shaky hand to wipe the blood that had started trickling from his nose.

They wrap the body up in some blankets and carry it down, careful to watch out for nosey neighbors. Vance brings the car around to an alley while John and Dean carry the body along the back of the building so they can load it into the trunk unseen from the street.

Outside of town they find a place to make a fire big enough to burn the salted body, and then bury the remains. Between the three of them they finish everything up quickly, and are on their way back as the sun is lowering in the west.

John glances at Dean in the back seat, at the traces of dried blood around one nostril, at the way he is sitting with his shoulders hunched and his arms hugging his middle.

"We're gonna have a little session with the hose when we get back"

"I'll take him," John says, and both Vance and Dean stare at him.

"What?" Vance asks.

"I'll take the collared one. He seems adequate for my needs. Can you pass me the bracelet when we get back to the motel?"

"Yeah, sure," Vance replies, although his eyes linger on John as if he isn't sure what to make of him. Then he looks back at the road.

John glances at Dean again. The kid looks away quickly, and John doesn't have time to figure out his expression before his face goes blank. John doesn't know what he himself is feeling, really, but it's already said, and he won't go back on his word.

Back in Vance's room, the men leave Dean to start a pot of caffeine as they sit down at the coffee table.

"Let's talk compensation," Vance says.

John had been told of this; it's not a rule by any means, but it's a tradition grounded enough among the sponsors that John will have to abide by it.
"I paid his last sponsor a thousand bucks when I took the bracelet," Vance states.

"I ain't paying a thousand bucks," John says.

"I had expenses, lots of them," Vance argues. "Got 'im food, clothes, took him to a doctor once when he was hurt. Even bought him boots."

John glances over at Dean, who is pouring their coffee. The kid's clothes are second hand at best, and John had already seen the type of junk Vance is feeding him. The sponsor hasn't been wasting money on Dean's board since the room is a single, and any medical treatment probably cost him close to nothing; John is willing to bet the Impala that Vance had used a fake insurance card like most hunters do. As for the boots – if they were new when Vance bought them, then Dean must have spent his entire time running alongside his sponsor's car in order to wear them out like that.

He doesn't call Vance out, though. "You're forgetting I was on the road with my son before he got sick. I know how much it costs to support another person. Six hundred."

"I trained him some more, kept him in shape, disciplined him. You're getting a better hunter than I did. Nine fifty."

Dean approaches with the steaming mugs, sets them on the table and retreats. He takes position by the room divider, half hidden behind it, his hands resting on the top of its solid bottom half, between the bars decorated with large autumn leaves.

John takes a sip; the coffee is good, hot and strong. "You've had him for a little over a month, he didn't become this skilled just now."

"He didn't become worse like he could've if I hadn't kept him in shape. Nine'll do ya?"

"Six fifty."

Vance shakes his head. "There were other hunters expressing interest, you know. But I'm familiar with your reputation and I've given you priority. You hardly even had to drive out to meet me."

"Ain't no other hunter who'd pay you this much, and you know it. Seven hundred."

Vance is silent for a moment, and then says, "Eight."

John can afford that. He can afford a thousand, actually, having been out to hustle pool and play poker while at Bobby's and saving his earnings, but he just didn't want Vance to get his way. He looks up at Dean; the kid's fingers are curled around the bars of the divider, his expression tensed.

John looks back at Vance. "Deal."

Vance grins and leans to smack John's arm lightly. "You've got yourself a collared one."

John smiles back, but only briefly. It's compensation, he tells himself; for Vance's trouble, for the weeks he cared for Dean, for the risk he took having him around. John is paying Vance back, the same as Vance paid Dean's former sponsor, and that one paid the one before them.

Except it doesn't feel like it's as simple and trivial as that. It feels like lead in his stomach; because the compensation bullshit is exactly that. Bullshit.

John had just bought a person.

He looks over at Dean again, longer this time. Dean holds his gaze for a moment before he drops his
"You wanna show me the money?" Vance gets up and unzips a bag that is stowed by the bed.

John feels around in his pockets for his stack of bills, carefully pulls out just enough so Vance wouldn't see how much John carries, and counts eight hundred dollars onto the coffee table.

Vance returns to the couch with a small wooden box, counts the bills and shoves them into his pocket. Then he opens the hinged lid of the box and lifts up a short silver cord.

"Alright," he says. "I'll put the bracelet on you first, then take off mine. There are two bracelets so there can be two sponsors, like you and your son, but also for a new sponsor to wear before the old one takes it off. You do the same when you pass him on. You need to make sure there's someone wearing one of these at any given time, you get me?"

"Yeah."

Vance unfolds a piece of paper. "This is the incantation for closing the bracelet. Listen to me when I say it, and pronounce it the same way when you put it on your boy." Vance drapes the cord over John's extended wrist and starts chanting the incantation.

All of a sudden the cord jerks, twists and secures itself around John's wrist. At the same time John hears a sharp gasp and looks up to see Dean's face scrunched up in pain, one hand still grabbing the divider's bar while the other is held to his throat.

"It hurts him when the bracelet is put on a new sponsor?" John asks.

Vance throws a glance in Dean's direction and shrugs. "It might, yeah. So what?"

"So nothing. How do you take it off?"

"The incantation for the removal is also here, or you can just rip off your own bracelet and your kid can tear off his."

John takes the paper and examines it. "If the collared one knows the incantation, can he take the bracelet off a sponsor?"

"No. Doesn't mean you should leave it lying around, though," Vance holds his hand for the paper and John hands it back and watches the hunter chant another, shorter, incantation. As he finishes it, the bracelet slips off his wrist and falls onto the table with a tiny metallic clatter.

Vance picks it up, places it inside the box and adds the folded paper on top of it. Then he closes the box and holds it out to John.

John stands, but doesn't take the box. "I wanna make sure the bracelet works." Vance nods and John turns to Dean. "Come here."

"Yes, sir," the kid moves immediately from his spot and takes a few steps forward.

"Attack me," John says while signaling Dean, and almost flinches back when the collared one charges at him. Same as when Vance was demonstrating the bracelet's magic, Dean is suddenly pushed back before he comes close enough to even touch John, and the hunter feels a faint tingle on his skin under the bracelet.

John waits for Dean to straighten up and says, "Again."
Dean obeys, and is hurled back, a little farther. John signals him for the third time, with the same result. All the while he watches Dean closely to make sure the boy isn't faking, but it doesn't seem like it, so he nods and reaches to take the wooden box from Vance.

"Get your stuff," he tells Dean, who is rubbing his neck, and the kid issues a "Yes, sir" and within less than five minutes he is standing by the door, a duffle in one hand, the sleeping bag in the other.

John turns back to Vance and offers his hand. "Thanks."

Vance shakes with him and nods. As John is about to pull his arm back, Vance squeezes his hand, his eyes staring into John's, sharp and intense. "Watch your back. Watch your son's back."

"I will," John returns the squeeze and lets go. He walks out and Dean follows down the row of doors to John's room.

When they come in, John shrugs out of his coat and sits on the bed to take his boots off. After he gives his feet a little rub he glances over to where Dean is standing by the door with his belongings, slanting a cautious look at John from under his long lashes.

John realizes that his room is a single, same as Vance's. Sleeping on a sleeping bag indoors isn't all that bad and Dean is probably used to it; still, it makes John somewhat uncomfortable.

"You can take the couch," he says.

"Thank you, sir," Dean heads to it, puts the bags beside it and sits down with his shoulders hunched some and his hands cupping his elbows. John studies him for a few moments before he remembers

The first night you wear the bracelet, you take him someplace nice and quiet and you tell him whatever rules you want him to follow. Then you lay into him as hard as you can.

"I'm not gonna beat you tonight," John says, and Dean looks up at him. "My most important rule for you concerns my son, and I want you to meet him so you'll understand what I'm talking about."

"Yes, sir," Dean says, and John can see his tension easing, just a little bit.

"You can take a shower and go to sleep."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Dean disappears into the bathroom and John sprawls on the bed and stares at the ceiling. It is done. He has someone to protect Sam now, to take care of him when they go out on the road, a trained hunter forced into complete loyalty.

It's for Sammy, John tells himself. Sam needs to be safe. Dean will keep him safe. Dean has to keep him safe, he has no other choice.

And still.

John listens to the water running in the shower, then shutting off. Dean emerges from the bathroom door, but there is no steam escaping out with him, and John wonders if Dean only uses the hot water when given specific permission. Dean makes up the couch with the extra linen, wraps himself in the extra blanket, lies down and closes his eyes.

John watches him for a while, the events of the last days running through his mind. Sam needs to be safe, he knows that. Everything John does, everything John ever did is meant to keep Sam safe,
including this.

It's the right thing. It is. He *knows* it is.

What the hell has he done?...

Chapter End Notes

In the next chapter we'll be returning to Dean's POV. I hope that John's chapters have given you some insight about how he sees the entire situation.
Winchester calls his son the next morning after they check out. The tough hunter sounds different when he's talking to his boy, softer, as if the hard shell he's wearing has melted away. The corners of his mouth curl and there's a hint of dimples in his cheeks.

"I want you to go to your room when you see me coming, Sam," Winchester says to his kid. "And I want you to stay there until I put the bracelet on you. You hear me?" And even though it's clearly an order, it sounds nothing like the ones Dean is used to.

They eat breakfast at a diner before setting out. The diner isn't a fancy one, but it's ten times better than the kind Vance frequents. Winchester lets Dean sit with him at the table, and orders both of them the same food – sausage, toast and a heap of scrambled eggs. The last thing Dean had eaten was that lousy sandwich while staking out the shifter's place yesterday, and his hands are practically trembling with desire to stuff everything on his plate into his mouth.

But he knows better than that. He eats at a measured pace, cutting the food up into small pieces and chewing them well. Not just because it's polite and doesn't attract attention; it helps quell the stabs of hunger in his stomach and makes him feel like he ate more than he actually has. It's one of the oldest, most useful tricks in the book. After all, he never knows when he'll be fed again.

Dean is trying very hard to conceal his excitement about riding in Winchester's car – it's a real gem, a black '67 Chevrolet Impala in mint condition and kept as spotless as can be. Winchester thinks it's best Dean takes shotgun so he can react quicker if something happens on the road, and Dean is almost dizzy with the pleasure of watching the dashboard up close and feeling the engine purr like a mountain lion. Winchester might want him to wash her sometimes. He might even let him drive her, if Dean is good and shows himself to be trustworthy.

They don't talk during the drive. Winchester plays his collection of rock tapes, and Dean watches the road unfold itself before the shiny black hood of the car. Times like this, spent traveling, are safe times for him; a sponsor can't beat him while they're driving. They can do other things, they can keep him cuffed, or kneeling on the floor or even put him in the trunk. Or they can talk, which can sometimes be worse than a beating. But most of the time driving is safe, and Dean can let go some, try to forget what and where he is and relax, just for a little while.

At midday they stop at a gas station for fuel and lunch, and again Winchester buys both of them the same kind of food, burritos this time. He helps himself to a bottle of Jack he keeps in his duffle, and Dean is overjoyed to be given a can of Coke; he had almost forgotten what it tastes like.

The rest of the drive is as quiet as before. Dean almost dozes off; he is warm and full and comfortable, the car rocks him gently, the music caresses his ears and he has to strain in order not to nod. It doesn't help that he hardly got any shuteye last night. The first night with a new sponsor is always like that, even without getting the crap beaten out of him first; Dean doesn't know the sponsor yet, can't tell the warning signs. He had the advantage of observing Winchester during these last few days, yet he's had too much experience to let himself believe he has the man figured out.

He can't be caught off guard sleeping, not so soon, not before he's absolutely sure he knows how dangerous Winchester really is.

He'll know. After tonight.

They arrive at Sioux Falls in the afternoon, and Winchester navigates to a salvage yard and drives the
Impala under the arched metal gateway that has "Singer Auto Salvage" welded onto it in uneven letters. Dean can see dead cars stacked together into towers, and wonders if he'll be allowed to roam the yard a little. Probably not; he'll be expected to butler for Winchester's kid, wait on him hand and foot, which will leave him very little free time, if any.

Winchester parks the car in front of the house, whose walls are adorned with hubcaps, and climbs out. As Dean follows, the front door swings open and a man steps out. He is stocky and bearded, in his late forties or early fifties, wearing a tattered trucker cap and cradling a shotgun in the crook of his elbow. Winchester stands by the car to wait for him as the man makes his way down the porch steps.

So this is Bobby Singer. Dean knows who he is; practically every sponsor he ever had mentioned him, and most of them called him on occasion for advice or help. He is the ultimate Go-To Guy, it isn't surprising that Winchester would trust him with his son. And it goes to show a lot about Winchester that a man like Singer would watch Winchester Junior and let both father and son stay at his home.

Singer reaches them and holds out a silver flask. Winchester takes it wordlessly and sips, then passes it to Dean, who does the same, tasting the slightly metallic savor of the holy water. Singer takes back the flask, but keeps the gun where it is as he eyes Dean.

Dean stands perfectly still, keeping his stare on the shotgun, letting Singer have an eyeful, and Singer takes his sweet time. Then he starts circling Dean, the same as Winchester had, and Dean does his best not to twitch with nervousness at having that gun out of his sight.

Singer completes a circle, and Dean braces himself when the hunter comes back into view, because he knows that Singer will be reaching for the collar now, like most hunters do when they meet Dean for the first time.

"Hmmm," is all Singer says as he feels the silver cord around Dean's neck. All of a sudden, he gives it a sharp tug, and Dean is jerked forward and almost loses his balance.

"If you could tear it off that effortlessly, do you think he'd still be wearing it?" Winchester's voice has a slightly entertained note to it.

"Never take anything for granted, that's how I'm still alive," Singer replies. "Did you make sure it does indeed prevent him from hurting the person with the bracelet?"

"Yes, of course. Gonna show you and Sam," but Winchester doesn't make a single move to indicate he wants to come on into the house; it's clear he's waiting for Singer's approval, for Singer's permission.

It is not given that readily, though. Singer shifts the shotgun to his other arm and says, "Look at me, boy."

Dean raises his eyes.

"Inside the house there's a kid named Sam. He's Mr. Winchester's son, it's true, but I care about him as if he were my own. You do anything to make me even remotely suspect he might be in danger, anything, and I will use this," he bounces the gun a little on his arm and Dean gulps, trying not to make it obvious. "You understand me?"

"Yes, sir," the best he can do is a half-whisper, but Singer nods.

"Alright, let's go in."
The house is old, the study Dean is led to is crammed with books and papers, the wallpaper is faded at parts and the carpet is worn. But nonetheless, it has a warm, cozy feeling to it. It's a home, and a well-loved one at that.

Dean is left standing in the study with Singer – who had put the shotgun away, thank God – while Winchester takes the other bracelet out of its box, spends a minute memorizing the incantation, then climbs the stairs to the second floor.

Dean tries to steel himself for the moment Winchester's son wears the bracelet. He knows it's coming, but it's still a shock, like it is every time, the sensation as if the collar had suddenly grown long, sharp spikes that thrust straight into his throat. He gasps and his hands fly up to his neck, but there's nothing there; the skin is whole and smooth and the pain is gone almost as abruptly as it came, leaving a dull feeling of pressure.

"You okay?" Singer asks, and Dean nods, not trusting his voice right now. "You can feel the bracelet being placed," Singer half-asks, half-determines, and Dean recognizes the interest of a true researcher, nods again and waits for the clench around his neck to disappear.

But instead of slowly dissolving like it always does, the feeling lingers; it's not really uncomfortable, only strange, some sort of pulling, as if the invisible tether that chains him to the bracelet is becoming tangible.

He doesn't have time to figure it out now. There are footsteps on the stairs and he straightens his back.

Dean's first thought as Sam Winchester ventures forward to meet him is, the kid doesn't look like a brat.

He is short and skinny, pale-faced, with long golden-brown bangs that fall around his delicate, handsome features. No, he most certainly doesn't look like a brat.

Sam stops a few feet away and looks up at Dean, and Dean's breath falters, only for a millisecond, because Sam's hazel eyes make something resonate deep inside him, inside his soul. He isn't supposed to stare at a sponsor like this, he knows that, but he just can't look away.

Maybe it's because it's the first time in two years he has been allowed near a kid; other than casual encounters in the crowd, the hunters did their best to keep him away from children, and even teens younger than himself. He forgot how kids can look at you with innocence and interest that make their eyes all big and bright and lively.

But Sam's gaze isn't like other kids'. There's a shadow about him, a hint of dark circles under his eyes, traces of old pain in the corners of his mouth. He has been through his own hell and came back, but not all the way. Dean can relate.

And just like that, Dean is overwhelmed with the complete and utter need to protect this boy – it's deeper than a need, really. It's a sense of purpose, one he thought he had lost for good two years ago.

Of course it's your purpose. Winchester paid eight hundred dollars for it. You'd better not let his investment go down the drain, not if you want to see another day.

Winchester gives Sam's shoulder a quick squeeze before saying, "This is Dean. Dean, this is Sam, my son." The last word is stressed a little, just enough to make the hierarchy clear to Dean. As if he really needs to be reminded of his place at the bottom of the food chain.

Dean looks at the man when he talks, then back at Sam. He wasn't asked a direct question, not even
a Winchester-style one, so he keeps a lid on it.

Sam clears his throat. "Hi."

Before he can help it, Dean replies with a soft "hi", and then panics and glances at his sponsor to make sure he doesn't mind a collared one talking to his son.

It doesn't look like he minds. Winchester proceeds to demonstrate the collar's power to Sam and Bobby, then asks Sam if he wants to take his place.

Sam doesn't want to, Dean can tell. But the kid wisely obeys his father, and at Winchester's signal, Dean launches himself at Sam.

The pain from the collar is so sharp and harsh that Dean almost loses his balance and has to lean his hands on his thighs for a moment to catch his breath. It had never felt like this the first time he attacks a new sponsor, but maybe Sam doesn't count as a new one, since his dad is already wearing a bracelet. Yes, that must be it; there is no reason to think something might be different about this kid. No reason at all.

Dean is immensely relieved when Sam makes his father end the demonstration, and then starts panicking again when Winchester suggests Sam talk to Dean for a few minutes to see what he thinks of him. Winchester treated him rather fairly until now, but this might change if his son doesn't like Dean. Winchester might turn mean. Or he might kick Dean out altogether.

Dean can't tell Sam that, of course. So he does his best to be as docile and non-threatening as he can. He has to get the conversation going himself, but once he does, Sam seems more comfortable as he talks, telling Dean about his medical problem, assuring Dean he believes him when Dean says he wouldn't hurt Sam even if he could. And he doesn't want Dean to call him "sir", which is a little weird, but also incredibly adorable.

The wonders don't cease during dinner when Singer, the same man who threatened Dean with a shotgun less than an hour ago, seems upset to see Dean still hungry and pours him a second helping of the most delicious beef stew Dean has ever had.

Dean has some time to think about all of this as he's left to clean the kitchen after dinner while the others sit in the study. Many of the sponsors treated him like dirt, but not all of them. It would be unwise to expect anything from John and Sam Winchester; they could belong to the group of sponsors who took reasonably good care of Dean, but they could also prove to be as nasty as hell if Dean slips up, even only once.

He can't do that. He can't allow himself so much as a single mistake. If there's even the slightest chance the Winchesters continue to be like they've been so far, Dean mustn't screw it up.

But he really shouldn't worry about it. In just a short while, Winchester is going to give him all the reminder he'll need to remember to behave himself.

Dean washes the dishes, dries them and puts them away. He stores the leftover food in the fridge, wipes the table and the countertop, cleans the stove, sweeps the floor. Finally he has nothing more to do and no other way to put off the inevitable.

He goes over to the doorway and stands there, silently watching Singer and the Winchesters having their after-dinner drinks and talking. Winchester is devoted fully to his son, a light smile playing on his lips and his eyes soft and attentive. Sam is chirping away, clearly basking in the attention. Both father and son's dimples are showing, making their faces bright and sweet. Singer is also half-
smiling, even though he tries to hide it with the beer he is nursing.

A pang of envy lances through Dean's chest. His own father had never looked at him like that, with such warm care. Nobody had ever looked at him like that, nobody except-

_Don't think of Adam_

He closes his eyes briefly, inhales, and when Sam glances up and notices him, Dean's face is schooled again.

Winchester catches sight of Dean as well, and reaches to pat Sam's cheek. "Time for bed now, Sammy."

"Okay," Sam gets to his feet along with his dad. Dean tenses a little at their movement.

Winchester turns to him. "The first work shed, wait for me there."

"Yes, sir," in a heartbeat Dean is out the door and off the porch, where he stops to take a few big gulps of chilly night air. He looks to the side of the house, sees the shed, and goes inside.
The fluorescent lights illuminate everything with frost-white glare. The shed is corrugated iron over a steel infrastructure, stuffed with work benches and engine parts. Dean stands in the middle of it, his head down, trying to make himself stop shivering.

He's cold. His jeans are worn and his shirts – both of them – seem to have given up on keeping him warm anymore. He didn't pick up his coat from where he left it in the hall, but it would've done nothing for him, anyway.

*Winchester won't beat you up all night long, he tells himself. He won't cause lasting damage. He won't even mess you up so bad as to render you useless for service. Just get through this. Suck it up and get through this. It's not like you don't know how.*

There are footsteps on the gravel outside, then the sound of a car's trunk being opened and a minute later slammed shut. Then footsteps again, closing in on the shed, and Dean's breath hastens, the blood rushing through him driving the cold out of his muscles.

*Winchester comes through the shed's doorway. Dean raises his head and his eyes fall upon the thing the man holds in his right hand.*

Dean had been beaten with a wide array of implements – belts, canes, switches, straps, wire hangers, birches, ropes, floggers, electric cables, not to mention his father's riding crop and Vance's precious
rubber hose. He shouldn't be that terrified by the razor strop Winchester has, but he is; it's thick and long and heavy-looking, and Dean already knows how strong Winchester is.

*Just get through this. Suck it up and get through this*

"Shirts," Winchester says, and even though Dean feels like he's frozen solid, his hands move on their own and strip off his flannel, then his shirt.

The hunter waits until Dean had draped the clothes over a nearby workbench and walks over to a stretch of wall cleared of tools and scraps of metal. Dean follows him.

"Here are your rules," Winchester says. "You do whatever you're told, either by me, by Sam, or by any hunter I'm working with. You sleep where you're told, you eat what you're given, and you keep your mouth shut. That clear?"

"Yes, sir," nothing new so far.

"You saw my son," Winchester pauses slightly, but he isn't really waiting for Dean's acknowledgment because he goes on, "He's the most important person in the world to me, so this is the most important rule: you keep my son safe, protect him. At all costs. You hear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Repeat the rules."

"I do whatever I'm told, sleep where I'm told, eat what I'm given, keep my mouth shut, protect your son at all costs. Sir."

Winchester nods once and betters his hold on the razor strop. "Up against the wall."

Dean turns to the wall. There's a thick peg nailed into it just above his head, and he grabs it with both hands, leans a little forward and lays his forearms to rest against the cold metal. He is staring straight ahead, but he can still see Winchester's movement from the corner of his eye. Every fiber in Dean's body is screaming for him to *run-run-run*, but he doesn't.

You don't need to whip me, he wants to tell Winchester. I told Sam the truth, I'd never hurt him, even if I could. You don't need to whip me to make me keep him safe. You don't even need the collar to make me keep him safe. But he doesn't say a word.

"Can you hold still, or do you need to be tied down?" Winchester asks and Dean barely suppresses the jolt of panic that shoots through him.

*Don't tie me down, please don't tie me down. I'll hold still, sir."

"Fine, then," there's another little rustle as the man takes position to his left. "You break the rules, this is what you'll get." Winchester's tone isn't threatening. He is just stating a fact.

A few seconds later, the strop lands on Dean's back with a force that would've made him stumble forward if he wasn't already leaning against the wall. It takes another second for the pain to register, and then Dean senses it – a thick line of stinging heat across the middle of his back.

The strop crashes onto him again, painting another fiery line just under the first one, and Dean clenches his jaw and tightens the hold of his fists around the peg.

Winchester works his way down with even lashes until he reaches the waistband of Dean's jeans.
The next swat hits so high on his shoulders that the tip of the strop curls and nips at his upper arm. The strop moves down again to cover his back with those vicious, scathing strokes, and Dean's lips peel back from his teeth as he strains to keep quiet.

If the lashes were painful to start with, they are agony now, when the strop does it's third, then fourth journey down his back. Winchester takes his time, brings the leather down, waits a second for the pain to fully register, then lands it again. He doesn't bother to progress methodically over Dean's back as he did before; now the strop whips all over at random. A few swats hit his ass and the backs of his thighs. It's unlikely that they are the result of poor aim; it's probably Winchester's way of throwing Dean off balance, keeping him guessing where the next lash will fall.

Dean lets his head drop forward and rests his forehead on his arm. His entire body rocks with the force of Winchester's blows, but leaned on his forearms against the wall as he is, Dean is able to keep his position.

He doesn't do so well trying to hush his voice. He's trying, he is, not because he wants Winchester to believe he's so tenacious, but because he doesn't know how the man will react to hearing him holler with pain. Some sponsors got angry, others turned nastier. Dean doesn't want Winchester to be either.

But he can't keep quiet, because the razor strop is biting into his back and it burns, it scorches, and the most Dean can do is smother his cries some and hope they don't grate too much on Winchester's nerves.

If they do, it's not evident from the lashes that keep raining down on his back. They are not crueler than before, but not lighter, either. Dean holds the peg so hard his fingers ache and clenches his jaw until his teeth feel like they are about to crack with the pressure.

*Please stop, it hurts so bad, I can't take it anymore, please stop, please-*

*You take it, you fucking bastard. You take it because you deserve it for letting Adam die. It was your fault, you're the one who left him alone with Dad running around as crazy as he was. You got him killed, your own fucking brother. And now you keep your mouth shut and you take it, you take what you have coming and you thank the Lord Jesus this is all you're getting, you fucking sonovabitch. Murderer.*

And Dean takes it. Just stands there, leaning against the iron wall, ears ringing with the sounds of leather on flesh, tears running down his face, and takes it. And he is thankful for it, thankful that it evens the score some, covers a little bit more of the debt he owes for killing his brother.

And it serves to dull the throb in his heart. Not a lot, certainly not permanently, but at least for now. He knows the throb will be back later; maybe tomorrow, maybe even tonight. That throb is a constant, a hole that was left inside Dean when Adam was ripped away from him and the sun went out and the world shuttered so completely it can never be right ever again.

The strop lands one more time, and then silence falls. Dean is shaking bad, his breath coming in sharp, sobbing gasps. Above the drumming of his heart and the racket of his breaths he thinks he can hear Winchester panting a little, too. Dean doesn't move. He doesn't know how he's going to move when his sponsor orders him to, because he can only stay upright thanks to the peg he's grabbing onto for dear life.

"Repeat the rules," Winchester says.

Dean wants to obey, he does. He tries, but the best he can do is move his lips a little; he can't mold
his gasps into words.

Winchester's hand is on the back of his head, and all of a sudden, the man's fingers grab at his hair and his head is jerked back, making a pained sound escape his mouth.

Winchester's face is close to Dean's, the smell of beer and leather and gun oil and sweat sharp in his nose. "Repeat. The rules," the man growls into his ear, and Dean would have crumpled with terror if the hunter wasn't still gripping him by the hair.

"I d-do w-whatever I'm t-told, s-sir" Dean's voice is husky, his entire body straining to force the words out. "I s-sleep where I'm t-told, eat what I'm g-given, keep my m-mouth s-shut, protect your s-son at all c-costs, s-sir."

The hold on his hair is gone, and Dean's head falls forward onto his arms.

"I'll be waiting outside. You have ten minutes."

Winchester's presence vanishes from his side, and his footsteps move away until Dean can't hear them anymore over the roar of blood in his ears.

It is then that Dean finally lets go of the peg. He sinks down to his knees, hands dragging along the wall, his body shaking worse than before. His back is screaming with pain, as if a sheet of red-hot iron was pressed onto it.

He's crying openly now, with fresh tears streaming down his cheeks and sobs wrenching his diaphragm. "I'm sorry, Adam, I'm sorry, kiddo, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."

It takes a while for Dean to calm down. He stays on his knees with his arms and forehead leaned against the wall, and tries to regulate his breathing. Winchester gave him ten minutes, but Dean didn't take a look at his watch and doesn't know how much time had already passed.

He takes one last breath and forces himself to his feet, stumbling and nearly falling over until he manages to stand upright. He waddles over to the corner, where a paint-splattered sink is set, and turns on the faucet.

The water is ice-cold, but Dean is used to it. He washes his face, then cups some water in his palm and carefully lets it drip down his back. He cringes and hisses when the fluid runs over his burning skin, and makes himself suffer a few more handfuls of water. Then he grips the edges of the sink and stands there for a moment longer, head down.

It was every bit as bad as Dean expected, but he got through it. Not too gracefully, but he did.

Dean straightens up, goes to pick up his shirts, and uses them to wipe the water off his face and torso. He can't touch his back without the pain flaring anew, so he only pats it very gently with the shirts, then puts them on.

He has to freeze and grit his teeth as the fabric scrapes over his blazing back, but the thought about his ten minutes running out gets him moving, and he steps out of the shed.

Winchester is half-sitting on the hood of the Impala, long legs stretched before him with one ankle resting over the other, and his arms crossed over his chest. The razor strop is nowhere in sight.

The hunter waits for Dean to draw near before saying, "Sam doesn't need to know about this. He wouldn't understand and it'd just upset him. Get it?"
"Yes, sir," Dean replies quietly. His voice is steady and he's grateful for that.

"I'm not sure Bobby'd like it, either, so keep him out of this."

"Yes, sir."

Winchester is silent for a minute. When he talks again, his voice is somewhat softer. "The razor strop is in the trunk, I normally use it to sharpen the little knives. It's all I'm gonna use it for as long as you follow the rules. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay," Winchester pushes off the hood. "Let's go back inside. You're gonna be sleeping in Sam's room so he can get used to it, but if he tells you to get out, you sleep on the sofa in the study. Bobby put a blanket there just in case."

They go back into the house, and Dean picks up his duffle from the study, where Bobby is sitting at his desk, bent over a dusty tome. The older hunter raises his head as Winchester and Dean go through the study on their way to the stairs, and Dean does his best to walk naturally, even though the shirts rubbing over his back make him want to whimper.

Sam is already in bed with a book. Winchester sits on the edge of the bed to check on him and tuck him in, and Dean has to look away, because it reminds him too much of how he used to tuck Adam in their shared bunk in the RV, and the throb inside him is back, stronger than ever.

After Winchester leaves them alone, Dean tries to act normal, but Sam proves to be sharp-eyed enough to notice something is wrong and determined enough to make Dean show him his bruised back. It does upset him, just like Winchester said it would, and the thought of his sponsor's reaction to Dean upsetting Sam makes Dean nauseous with fear. But he's also, strangely, touched by how much the kid seems to care about whatever is done to some worthless, collared nobody.

He tries to tell Sam he's dangerous; he had already gotten his brother killed, he can easily get Sam killed as well, but Sam isn't having any of it. He makes Dean take a painkiller – Dean is sure Winchester will have at him if he finds out, but he can't refuse, not with that look on Sam's face – and only then finally turns in.

Dean lies on the cot he was assigned, listens to Sam's breaths becoming deeper and calmer, and thinks about this strange new place he ended up in. Winchester Senior is intimidating as hell, but he's kept Dean fed and didn't touch him beside the mandatory whipping. And Winchester Junior… there's something about the boy that Dean can't quite fathom yet, like one of those pictures Dean had seen in a magazine once, that looks like a blur of colors until your eyes adjust just right and a three-dimensional image surfaces all of a sudden.

He can still feel the pull of Sam's bracelet on the collar.

Sam starts tossing a little, then moaning. Dean props himself up on his forearms and watches the younger boy intently. Sam's breathing becomes heavier and strained, and he writhes harder and whimpers.

Dean sits up on the cot. The kid is having a nightmare, that much is clear. Adam used to have them all the time, and Dean has plenty of experience soothing him back to sleep. Should he try to calm Sam down? Is he even allowed to?

Sam lets out a sob and Dean is on his feet without even thinking about it. He takes a seat on the edge of Sam's bed, in the same spot Winchester sat an hour ago.
"It's just a bad dream," Dean whispers. "It's okay, go back to sleep."

Sam twists under the covers, almost kicking Dean, and whimpers miserably.

"It's okay," Dean repeats. "Just a bad dream." He reaches a hand to pat Sam's face; he can't help it, the kid looks tormented, and the feeling Dean had before, that need, that purpose – overflows inside him.

"It's okay, Sam, everything's okay. It's just a bad dream. I'm here, nothing's gonna hurt you."

Sam calms down under Dean's gentle caress. He exhales and settles, his eyelashes flutter a little, then come to rest. His breaths even out, become slow and deep. Dean stays where he is, fingers brushing lightly through Sam's hair.

He's not Adam, he tells himself. Adam is dead. This kid is your sponsor, your master, he's not a little brother to replace the one you lost.

But Dean stays there just the same, stroking Sam's hair. The throb in his heart is still very much there, like a phantom pain of a limb that will never grow back, but there's a strange new light that shines in that dark abyss. It's a tiny, trembling light, like a single candle in the midst of the deepest woods, but it's as real as the hole in Dean's soul, and it warms his chest in a way he hasn't felt for the last two years and thought he would never feel again.

He gives Sam's cheek one last pat, goes back to his cot and lies there, watching Sam sleep.

He misses Adam. Misses him with every fiber of his being. Misses him so thoroughly and completely it's a fucking wonder he's still relatively sane. There will be no replacing Adam, like there is no replacing the sun. There will be no forgiveness for letting him die.

But there can be a second chance.

Dean closes his eyes and drifts off to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, fabulous readers, for sticking with this story, this series and with me. You're the reason I keep posting, so give yourselves a huge kudos from me❤

I plan on more time stamps for The Silver Collar series, you're welcome to subscribe to my user to get notifications for new works, or you can mail me at edge_of_clairvoyance@yahoo.com and ask to be notified when I post a fic (and also to ask questions, suggest ideas or just say hi😊).

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