Searching for ways to get rid of the Mark of Cain, Dean stumbles across an old ritual that may work. It's brutal, but if it can help, he's willing to do anything. However, when he tracks down someone who is willing to do it, they may have ulterior motives for helping him—if they're planning to help at all.
Chapter 1

The bunker was dark. Shadows flooded around the corners and Dean had the First Blade in his hand. It was calling for blood.

There was already copious amounts of blood flowing along the floor. His boots struck in it as he walked, though he wasn’t sure of the source. He didn’t care. He was on the hunt, and he needed to find another victim. He craved the blood as much as the Blade—as much as the Mark.

He came upon a body on the floor. Cain, dead the way he had left him in that barn, one hand cut off at the wrist. A little further down the hallway he spotted Crowley. Lying with dead eyes staring up at nothing, a hole ripped in his chest. Dean didn’t spare him a thought, simply stepped over the demon and continued on.

"Dean."

He glanced up, seeing Sam. The Mark sang with need, a pounding in his head, crying for Sam’s blood and Dean stepped forward.

"Don't do this," Sam pleaded.

As Dean came closer to his brother, he glanced to the side and saw another body, wearing a bloodied tan trench coat. Castiel. The angel sprawled on the ground, carved up and gutted, wings burned into the bloody floor. The Blade sang in Dean's hand, a triumphant song.

"Stop this, Dean. Fight it," Sam pleaded.

Dean looked down at the blood, pooling further and further up his boots, looked at the Blade in his hand, and at the Mark glowing on his arm.

Then he finally turned back to his brother and a slow smile spread across his lips.

"No," was all he said before he stepped forward and raised his Blade again…

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Dean woke with a strangled cry, surging upright. He clutched at his arm, feeling the Mark burning. He dug his fingers into his flesh until his nails broke the skin, and the sharp pain brought him back to reality.

He took several deep breaths, his shirt sticking to his chest with sweat as his body heaved and trembled.

He'd been having these dreams ever since he killed Cain. Ever since Cain had told him his destiny. Night after night he watched himself kill Crowley, Cas and Sam in his dreams. Sometimes against his will, sometimes with a grin of horrible glee on his face, but the nightmares always ended the same: blood and the destruction of everything Dean cared about.

He tossed the tangled sheets away from him and pushed himself up, staggering over to the sink in his room and splashing cold water on his face, rubbing his hands over the back of his neck. The act woke him up a little but it did nothing to relieve the memories of the nightmares.

With nothing better to do, he went to shower, washing the terror sweat from his body and wishing he
could wash away the memories of the nightmare along with it.

It turned out he wasn't the first one up, though. He was on his way to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee after dressing for the day when he heard voices from the library. Frowning, Dean went to investigate but stopped before entering the room, ducking back to lean against the wall just outside the door.

"And how is Dean?" Cas' voice reached Dean, quiet, cautious. The angel must have come back either early this morning or sometime last night. He had been staying around the bunker more often again. Dean wondered if it was because Sam had asked the angel to help keep an eye on him or if it was because Cas' borrowed grace was failing again and he wasn't as strong as he should have been. Maybe a little of both.

"I don't know," came Sam's tired voice in reply, slightly muffled as if he had his head in his hands. "I just...I don't know what to do, Cas. There has to be some way to fix this. But we can't...we can't keep doing this. Dean, he's...he can't go on like this."

"Did something happen on your last hunt?" Cas asked cautiously and Dean's stomach twisted slightly with the memory. Something had definitely happened, he'd almost gotten a civilian killed.

He and Sam had gone after a werewolf pack and during the take down, Sam had been thrown into a wall, stunned, and Dean had been so caught up in killing that he hadn't even noticed that one of the werewolves had been carting off the girl they were supposed to rescue. If it hadn't been for Sam's quick recovery, the girl would be dead and it would have all been Dean's fault. All because he couldn't sate his bloodlust. It had been too long since he'd killed anything, Sam keeping him in the bunker as he recovered from his fight with Cain, and a little taste of blood again had set him off into some sort of berserk rage he could barely control. It scared the hell out of him.

"Dean's slipping, Cas," Sam said and Dean hated that he was the cause of the pain in his little brother's voice. He balled his hands into fists, digging his nails into his palms. "We need to find some way to get that Mark off of him before..."

"I know, and we're working on it, Sam," Cas assured him.

"I just don't think we have that much time left," Sam replied grimly.

Dean didn't want to hear any more of this and continued forward, making no effort to quiet his steps as he strode casually into the library.

"Hey, you're up early. Who's making the coffee?" he demanded with false good humor.

Sam and Cas both looked up at him, slightly startled.

"Uh, there's some in the kitchen," Sam told him.

Dean nodded in thanks and glanced at Cas. "When'd you get in?"

Cas shrugged. "Early this morning." He eyed him with deep contemplation. "How are you, Dean?"

"Me?" Dean raised his eyebrows. "Oh, I'm peachy. I'll be better when I get some coffee into me."

He left the room, but he could practically feel Sam and Cas sharing a look behind his back.

He got a cup and filled it to the brim before he set it down and leaned against the table for support. He squeezed his eyes shut, pinching the bridge of his nose as his head pounded. He could hear the blood pumping through his veins, the Mark egging him on, still excited by his nightmare, whispering
evil in his ear, begging for blood.

He shifted his hand down to press against the Mark and forced his eyes open again, snatching up the coffee and downing a big gulp of it, scalding his tongue and his throat at the same time. The pain chased away the Mark's call for the moment though so he didn't even care.

There was a step behind him and he turned around to see Sam, holding his tablet.

"Hey, so I was looking into some cases, and…"

"Sam, come on," Dean said tiredly, leaning back against the counter, taking another sip of coffee, willing the caffeine to start working. "We both know this isn't gonna work. I can't risk going out there until I can figure out what to do with the Mark. If you and Cas want to work the case, then do it, but I'm not…” he bit his lip. "I'm not in the mindset, right now." It hurt to admit it, but he just knew that if he went out there again now…well, he wasn't sure he would be able to stop once he started killing. His nightmares were still too fresh in his mind to want to risk that possibility.

Sam pressed his lips into a thin line but he nodded. "Okay. So what do you want to do?"

"Check the archives. Again. See if there's anything we missed," Dean said, already starting toward the library.

"Dean…"

Dean spun around. "Sam, I can't, okay? And you know it. If there's even a quick fix somewhere, we have to try it, man. I can't keep doing this."

Cas was standing in the hallway, a pained expression on his face. "Dean, we will find something."

"Well, then do it fast before I go completely off the rails and you have to lock me up," Dean said grimly, shoving past the angel and heading back to the library. He set his coffee on the table and went directly to the card catalogue, looking up any and all books that dealt with curses.

A few minutes later he heard the front door screech and then footsteps come up the stairs into the library. He looked up with some surprise to see Sam.

"You didn't go with Cas?" he asked.

"He said I should stay with you," Sam said. "It's just a couple of ghouls anyway, Cas can handle it."

"I don't need a baby sitter, I'm fine as long as there's no one around for me to accidently hurt," Dean grumbled.

Sam sighed and joined him, grabbing a couple of the cards from his hand. "I'm not here to babysit, I'm here to help. Because you're right. We do need to figure this out. As soon as possible."

"Well, at least we're on the same page," Dean said.

They pulled the books from the shelves and sat down to flip through them. It was long, arduous work that made Dean want to punch something. He wasn't sure if that was the Mark talking or just his typical aversion to bookwork. Either way, he was starting to envy Cas even if the angel was just hunting a couple ghouls.

Several hours and cups of coffee later, Dean finally pulled a book off the shelf that looked promising.

"Hey, what about this?" he asked, walking back over to the table where Sam was discarding another
"What is it?" his brother asked tiredly, rubbing his eyes.

"This says it's a cure for a 'dark curse of the body and mind'," Dean said, setting the book down on the table and tapping the page. "But none of this makes any sense to me at all."

Sam pulled the book over to him and frowned as he scanned the text. "It's in old English, but more than that, I'm not sure what any of this means in magical terms. I mean, 'place a mark on the heart'? I wouldn't even know where to start with that."

"So, great, we're back at square one," Dean grumbled.

Sam pressed his knuckles against his mouth, biting his nails thoughtfully. "Well...there may be one person who could tell us what this means."

"Who—Cas? Crowley?" Dean asked.

Sam shook his head. "No. Rowena."

"Rowena?" Dean demanded. "You think that's a good idea?"

"No, but what choice do we have, Dean?" Sam demanded. "This may not be a permanent cure, but it's the first thing we've found that might actually work. At least until we can find a real cure. And Rowena is the most powerful witch I've ever heard of, if anyone were to know how to do this spell, it would be her. And, hell, she may even have a better lead than this for something to cure the Mark."

Dean heaved a sigh. "Fine. But if this goes sideways—"

"I know," Sam said, holding up a hand. "But it wouldn't hurt to try."

Dean again flashed back to his dreams, the blood on his clothes, on his hands. Cas' blood. Sam's blood. Sam was right, Dean couldn't live like this anymore. If there was a chance that he could even just put this Mark into a dormant state, he would take it. He couldn't stand the thought of it endangering the people he cared about. His family. First it was a civilian, but next it could be Cas or Sam or one of their friends. He was slipping and he didn't know how much farther he had to slide before they lost him completely. Before he lost himself.

"You're right," he said. "We have to do this. I need to do this."

Sam nodded. "Let's set up a meeting."

The next day found them sitting at a table in a little café—Rowena's suggestion of a meeting place. Dean's leg was bouncing under the table, impatiently awaiting the witch's arrival. This place made him feel uncomfortable, too classy. He felt like everyone was looking down at his flannel and jeans. His anxiety didn't make the Mark easier the deal with.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," Sam muttered as he glanced toward the door.

"No, but, we're here now, and it's too late to turn back."

"Och, the least you could have done was dress up a little."

Both brothers looked up to see the petite red-headed woman standing beside their table primly,
looking like she wasn't sure whether to join them, or bolt for the door. Sam offered a nod, holding out a hand and motioning to the empty chair.

"Rowena, thanks for coming."

"Save it," she huffed, sitting down with a put-upon sigh. "I don't even know why I came. Except I understand that it might be in my best interests to have the famed Winchester boys owe me a favor."

"Whatever," Dean said gruffly. "You're here, so you can help us out."

Rowena glowered at him. "I suppose I'll forgive your rudeness because you bear the Mark, Dean Winchester, but I'm surprised you ever get anything you want if you talk like that. You can't always just beat things out of people."

Sam cut in, defusing the situation as he pulled the book out of his bag. "Okay, just…Rowena, this is the spell I told you about on the phone, we thought you might know what it meant."

Rowena bent over the book as Sam opened it to the right page and studied the text. "Well, it's a very old spell, not really my type of magic—too…messy. I prefer more elegant methods."

"Like boiling waiters from the inside and turning hookers into attack dogs?" Dean asked blandly.

"We just need to know what it is."

Rowena glared at him again but turned back to the spell. "Despite the description, this is a binding spell, just one to keep something, a curse, a hex, in check."

"And would it work on something like the Mark of Cain?" Sam asked eagerly.

Rowena pursed her lips. "There would be no guarantee, but…it's possible. It wouldn't get rid of it, mind, just…muzzle it."

"Well, at the moment that's all we've got," Dean said. "So what are the ingredients?"

"Oh no, this isn't a potion, it's a ceremonial spell," Rowena told them. "A ritual is performed using heavy magical objects and when the ritual is complete, a brand, a locking sigil, is placed on the heart."

"On the heart?" Sam asked with a frown. "Like…figuratively? What does that mean?"

"No, dear, the actual heart," Rowena said as if explaining something to a child. "It's old, raw, very messy magic. It involves a complicated ritual, where the subject literally has to be opened up and a brand put on the heart."

Sam's eyes blew wide and Dean would be lying if he said he didn't feel queasy.

He wet his lips. "Why the heart?" he asked as Sam looked at him like he had lost his mind, still speechless.

"Oh, ancient science would have you believe that the heart is the center of all thoughts and life," Rowena said. "A bit outdated way of thinking, perhaps, but the spell works, all the same."

Dean didn't want to think about it, was still trying to wrap his head around a literal brand on the heart. But…if this was the only way…

"So what do we need for the ritual?"
"Dean," Sam finally hissed, eyes wide.

"Sam," he held up a hand and turned back to Rowena. "What do we need for the ritual?"

She sighed, shaking her head. "Some of the objects are rare, but…I'm sure you have some in that Men of Letters bunker of yours, and if not, I could get them for you…for a price, of course."

Dean nodded. "Okay, then make us a list."

"But Dean…" Sam was shaking his head. "This is…this is for all intents and purposes open heart surgery! Do you even know—"

"Yes, Sam, I know it's not going to be pleasant!" Dean cut in. "But nothing about this whole situation is good. If this is a legitimate way that we can make this Mark easier to deal with or at least get rid of the evil part of it so that I can cope with its effects better, then I'm willing to try it."

"Well, I'm not," Sam cut in. "Dean, you have no idea how risky this could be. This is one account from an old spellbook and we have no idea how legitimate it is. And if you die, you know what will happen. I can't…I can't go through that again."

"Come on, Sam. At least consider it."

"No," Sam said firmly. "End of discussion, Dean. There's no way I'm letting you do this."

Dean realized there was no point in arguing further and finally shook his head, throwing up his hands. "I'm out of options, Sammy. And if Cain was right, if this ends in blood—your blood—then I'll do anything to keep that from happening, do you understand?"

Sam's jaw worked as he fought with his emotions. Dean tried to ignore Rowena's interested staring. Sam finally bit his lip, shaking his head. "I don't like this."

"I don't either, and I'm the one who's going to have to be cut open for it."

Sam flinched but glanced at Rowena again. "This is a legitimate spell, right? It actually has a chance of working?"

"Well, as far as I know it could work," she told him. "The spell is genuine, I've seen rituals like these done before to success, but the Mark of Cain…it's literally the oldest curse in history. It predates everything. You understand there's no guarantee this will do anything."

Sam ran a hand over his face.

"Sam, it's my choice," Dean said firmly, settling further into his decision.

"You know what, no," Sam said, standing up. "It's too risky, and like Rowena said, there's no guarantee it will work. If it kills you that's just going to put us back at square one, Dean. I won't go through that again."

Sam left the restaurant and Dean shook his head, but he was even more determined than ever. He turned back to Rowena.

"Can you do it?" he asked her.

Her eyes widened. "Me? No! I'm no surgeon!"

"But it's a spell," Dean protested. "And I can't really die."
"It's a ritual that involves literal surgery, dear, not really my area," Rowena told him firmly, holding up a hand in protest. "I'm not really one for blood and gore if I can help it, thank you very much."

Dean sighed in frustration but had to let her have that one. Chopping up monsters was one thing, but ever since Hell anything remotely surgical made his skin crawl. "Okay so do you know anyone who could do this?" he demanded. Even if Dean had wanted to put Sam through this, he knew his brother wouldn't help him. He couldn't ask Cas to do it either, and he didn't really trust Crowley to hold a knife over him.

Rowena sighed wearily and then bit her lip. "Well…there is someone who might be able to pull off something like that, but…"

"But what?" Dean demanded.

Rowena shook her head. "They're not…they're not good people to get in with."

Dean leaned across the table and lifted his sleeve enough to reveal the scar to her. "If I have to deal with this Mark any longer, I'm going to be the worst person this world has seen since Cain, and I'm not going to be able to control myself. I don't care if they're good people, or if they're monsters. I need someone to do this if there's the slightest chance that it will work."

Rowena sighed, and pulled a small notebook out of her purse, scribbling something down and tearing the page out to hand to him. "Fine. Deal with them if you must, but make it a one-time deal. Do not give them reason to come after you later. Do business and get out. And do not tell them I was the one who sent you. I don't think they know who I am and I'd like to keep it that way."

Dean looked down at the paper. "This is just a name."

"Look them up, I'm sure you'll find them." Rowena scribbled some more things and stood up. "Here's the list of things you'll need for the ritual. When I need a favor from the Winchesters, I'll call." She turned around and left.

Dean sighed and grabbed the book Sam had left, slipping the papers Rowena had given him into his pocket. "Great."

Sam was already in the Impala when Dean left the restaurant, and he simply threw the book in the backseat and started the car, tearing out of the parking lot.

A few minutes down the road, Sam finally spoke. "We'll find another way, Dean."

Dean didn't reply, jaw tight, hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel, trying to keep his anger in check since it only worked to feed the Mark. He wasn't going to let Sam talk him out of it this time. He would have liked to have his brother on his side for this one, but…he would be willing to do it alone too if it meant that this Mark wouldn't be so bad to deal with.

Hell, he had to be pretty damn desperate to offer himself up for this.

He left Sam in the library when they got back to the bunker, heard his brother talking quietly on the phone after a little while, probably to Cas. Reporting another dead end in their search.

Or so Sam thought.

Dean went to his room and grabbed his laptop and pulled out the note Rowena had given him. He opened a search engine and typed in the name: **Styne.**
As Rowena had promised, it didn't take long for him to track down the family. They seemed pretty influential in Louisiana. Practically founding a town from the look of it. Dean wondered if they dealt in voodoo or something on the side. That would probably make them qualified for this.

With a little searching, he found an email address, and sent a message to one Monroe Styne, explaining the situation as vaguely as he could and the ritual he needed performed.

It wasn't even an hour before he got a reply. Mr. Styne seemed to have all the marks of southern hospitality, inviting Dean down directly, saying they'd have his problem 'cleared up in no time'. Dean was skeptical, but it had been months since they'd had a lead. They hadn't heard anything from Charlie about her search for the Book of the Damned, if the thing even existed anyway. This looked like the only shot he had.

And he was going to take it.

That night, Dean waited until he was sure Sam was asleep, then quietly gathered all the things Rowena had listed for the ritual. It had been easy to track them down from the Men of Letters' vast supply of weird crap, and once the items were all settled safely into a box, along with the book that had the spell, Dean slipped quietly out of the bunker, leaving nothing but a short note to Sam about what he was doing.

He had a long drive to Shreveport.

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Sam woke with a start to his alarm the next morning. He was shocked to find that he had actually slept all night. He grabbed his phone and turned off the alarm, pressing his face into the pillow for a long moment, bracing himself for facing the day. Everything was just…it had been one thing after another and he was so tired. He just wanted to help Dean and it seemed like everything they thought might work wouldn't. Maybe he should have supported Dean about the ritual, but he couldn't even imagine letting his brother go through something like that, especially since even Rowena seemed skeptical about how well it would work.

Eventually he forced himself from his bed and staggered to the shower. Dean's door was still closed and he hoped that meant his brother was still sleeping. Or maybe Dean hadn't slept at all the night before. That seemed more likely considering Sam hadn't been woken up by Dean having a nightmare. He huffed. He wouldn't be surprised if Dean had spent the entire night in the library looking for something else.

But his brother wasn't in the library when Sam had gotten done with his shower. He wasn't in the kitchen. There was no coffee sitting in the pot, no dirty breakfast dishes in the sink. Sam frowned and went back to the dormitory wing. He hesitated only a second before he opened Dean's door, as quietly as possible, and looked inside.

Dean's bed was empty. Still made.

There was just a piece of paper sitting in the middle of it.

Sam felt bile rise in his throat as he gripped the knob tight enough to hurt his hand. Flashes of finding Dean's dead body missing came back. But he forced himself into the room to pick up the note, his hands trembling.

Sammy, the note read, I know you won't like it, but I've gone to try the cure. Be back in a few days. DO NOT try to follow me.
Sam closed his eyes, already rushing to his room to grab his phone. He dialed Dean's number instantly but it went to voicemail. He cursed, dialing again and again, with the same results. Of course Dean wouldn't pick up his phone, if he even had it on. Sam dragged a hand through his hair, furious, before he dialed another number.

"Sam?"

"Cas, you need to get back here now," Sam told the angel grimly.

"What happened? Is it Dean?" Cas' voice held all the dread Sam felt but he forced himself to keep calm and shook his head.

"He's gone, Cas. We found this crazy cure, and…I guess he's gone to try it. But, it's not…we need to find him."

"Okay, I'm already on my way back," Cas told him. "I'll be there in a few hours."

Sam ended the call and tossed his phone on the bed before going back to Dean's room, looking for any clue as to where he might have gone. Sam had no idea who his brother would go to to do this, unless he was planning on demanding Rowena do it after all.

He shuffled through papers on Dean's desk and found two small scraps in an elegant handwriting he didn't recognize. One was a list of items, probably for the ritual and he would bet anything that Rowena had written it down for Dean after he had left the restaurant. The other only had two words on it.

_The Stynes_

Sam frowned. Who were the Stynes? Dean's laptop was sitting out on his desk and Sam sat down, opening it up and clicking on Dean's browser history. Normally he would have stayed as far away from that as possible, but he saw a web search at the top for the Stynes. Sam opened the page and scanned the info but there was nothing to really indicate anything occult about them. They were just an influential family. The lack of weird actually made them more suspicious in this instance.

Sam frowned and opened Dean's email, seeing a message from someone called 'Monroe Styne' telling Dean to come meet with them and the address.

Sam wrote it down, but all the while something was nagging at the back of his mind. Something he had seen while going through the Men of Letters archives.

Following his hunch, Sam got up and went to the archive room, flipping through files until he found exactly what he was looking for.

Not a file, but a whole box. All labeled 'Styne'.

Maybe they were connected to the Men of Letters? Sam wondered as he set the box on the table and started to pull out the files.

As he looked through them though, he realized that wasn't the case. Dread settled more and more heavily in his chest until he felt like he wanted to vomit. His hands were trembling as he picked up a hefty file entitled 'victims'.

"Oh god," Sam choked out as he opened it.

Dean was in trouble.
Dean drove through Shreveport Louisiana to the address Monroe Styne had sent him in the email. He was surprised to find a huge plantation house at the end of his destination and even more so to find it was complete with gate guard.

He pulled up and the man standing at the gate glowered at him.

"What business do you have here?" he asked in a southern drawl.

"Uh, I'm Dean Winchester," he said. "I talked to Monroe, he's expecting me…"

The guard was already stepping aside as Dean spoke, the gate opening. Dean shrugged and drove through, pulling into a circle drive out front of the house and parking the Impala there. He stared up at the impressive house and felt trepidation rising up inside of him.

He really didn't want to do this. He wanted nothing more than to turn around and go back to the bunker, find Sam and Cas and look for a new cure. The more he thought about it, the more ridiculous this ritual crap sounded. Not to mention the fact that he was actually volunteering to be cut open, his freaking heart branded. He hadn't even stopped to ask about the logistics. Would he be awake? Would he be in some magical trance? Would it not even hurt at all? He didn't really want to find out.

But he had come all this way and if it would help…he had to try.

Steeling himself, Dean shoved his door open and grabbed the box from the backseat, tucking it securely under his arm as he strode to the door.

He rang the doorbell and waited a few minutes before the door was opened by a white-haired man in a suit and tie, a big smile on his face.

"Well, you must be Dean Winchester," he said.

Dean forced a half smile. "Yeah, that's me."

"Guard called up and said you had arrived. Monroe Styne; pleasure," the man held out his hand and after only a second of hesitation, Dean took it and shook.

"Come on in," Monroe said, waving a hand inside.

Dean stepped in after him and glanced around at a huge entryway with a spiral staircase winding up to the second floor.

"Some place you got here," he said, trying to dispose of his nervousness.

"Been in the family for several generations," Monroe said with a small smile. "Family's real important to me. But come, son, we have much to discuss."

Dean followed him into an office and Monroe sat down, motioning Dean to do the same. Dean took a seat and set the box in his lap.

"So, Dean, I'm familiar with the ritual you were talking about, but may I ask what the curse you're suffering from is?" Monroe asked, placing his elbows on the desk and leaning forward.

Dean wet his lips and shifted, uncomfortable. "It's uh…it's not exactly common."
"Well, that shouldn't matter to me. I'll perform the ritual either way, I just want to know what I'm dealing with."

Dean bit his lip and then tugged his sleeve up enough to reveal the Mark, turning his arm toward Monroe.

The older man inhaled sharply, his eyes widening in very real shock. "Oh my," he said slowly. "Is that...?"

"Yeah," Dean grunted, tugging his sleeve down. "So you see why I need any help I can get to keep it down."

"Yes, I think I do," Monroe said.

There was a light knock on the door and it opened a second later. "Father?"

Dean turned, seeing a younger man walk in, blond and tall, looking instantly suspicious as his eyes fell on Dean.

"Eldon," Monroe said, "this is Dean Winchester."

The young man's eyes lit with recognition, and he nodded, closing the door behind him. "Of course. The appointment you told me about."

"Dean, this is my son, Eldon, he assists me with my...work," Monroe said.

Dean didn't miss the small, swiftly hidden smile that quirked one side of Eldon's mouth and he felt a sudden uneasiness spread over him. "Oh, well, uh, nice to meet you." He turned back to Monroe. "Look, I appreciate the southern hospitality and all, but—"

"But you want to get to business; man after my own heart," Monroe said, standing up and motioning for Dean to do the same. "Follow me, then."

Dean was both relieved and anxious. He wasn't sure what would happen next, how the ritual would go.

He certainly wasn't expecting what he found.

Monroe led him down into the basement of the house, Eldon following at Dean's back in a way that seemed a little more insistent than it should have been. The Mark didn't like the other man's proximity and Dean's hunter instinct was throwing off bad vibes. He chose to ignore it though. Who knew what the hell Monroe and his family did, or what the hell they even were. Monroe obviously knew about the life to recognize the Mark of Cain like that, and Dean wasn't about to ask questions as to how he and his family fit into it.

He had a hell of a lot more questions once they got to their destination, though.

The stairs down led to a door which Monroe opened into a huge, tiled room. Dean stopped in his tracks the instant he saw it, nearly causing Eldon to run into him.

It was a surgery. A well-equipped one from the look of it, too, if not...well, as creepy as hell. First of all because it existed in the basement of a plantation house—fancy architecture and all, as was evidenced by the arches and tiling—and two, because it existed at all.

Stainless steel carts sat around the room holding surgical instruments and cleaning supplies and other
things Dean wasn't sure of the uses for. In the center of the room was a screen, half concealing a metal table that looked more like it belonged in a morgue than a surgery, a light on over top of it.

But the worst part was a long shelf against one of the walls that held jars with...hell, *organs* and body parts. Human from the look of them.

Dean's heart pounded, fight or flight kicking in with a vengeance. "What the hell is this?" he demanded.

Monroe laughed, reaching out to clap Dean on the shoulder, drawing him further into the room. "Oh this? This is the family business, Dean."

"And what exactly is the family business?" Dean demanded.

"Well, we do a lot of things. Our specialty is...*modifications.*"

Dean raised an eyebrow. "What the hell does that mean?"

Eldon smirked and began tugging at his shirt, pulling it from his pants. "Upgrades. To make a body stronger." He lifted the shirt to expose his chest and Dean's eyes widened as he saw a huge scar running up the length of his body from neck to navel. He didn't know what this freakshow he had fallen into was, but he suddenly wished he had convinced Rowena to do the ritual for him instead.

Not knowing what to say, Dean gave a sharp nod, swallowing hard, and glanced back at Monroe. "Huh. Well...good for you then."

"Point is, we know our way around the human body," Monroe said, clapping his hands together. "Your ritual—easy as pie. We'll have you out of here lickety-split."

Dean looked around, still holding the box of items. He shook his head slowly. "You know, I don't know about this...can I think it over?"

Monroe pulled a face. "Well, now, I'm going to be leaving town for a few days after this—it was just lucky you contacted me when you did for your appointment. But I'm afraid son, if you're going to do this, we need to do it today."

Dean bit his lip, swallowing down bile. He glanced around the creepy ass home surgery, to Monroe and his son and Eldon's creepy staring eyes, to the jars on the wall. He almost reached for the phone in his pocket, sure that Sam had called him a million times by now, but he refrained. If he talked to Sam he knew his brother would talk him out of this and, well, he couldn't take that chance.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly before he handed the box to Monroe. "Okay. Let's get it over then."

"Excellent," Monroe said, setting the box on one of the rolling carts and nodding to Eldon. The younger man went to one side of the room and grabbed a white coat, slipping it on and washing his hands. Monroe followed suit as Dean stood by awkwardly, body tense with anticipation.

"What happens now?" he asked.

"First you need to undress and get on that table; we'll talk through the rest then," Monroe told him and Dean twitched with discomfort but stepped behind the screen and started reluctantly to pull his clothes off.

He slipped his jacket off and took his phone from it, seeing, as he had expected, several missed calls
and a ton of texts from Sam. He almost sent him a quick text but he didn’t. Instead he simply turned his phone off, setting it on a table next to the bed with his jacket, soon followed by the rest of his clothes, and sat gingerly on the table, not even wanting to think of what had happened there before.

He was not at all comfortable but if this was how the ritual had to go, he would suffer through it.

Monroe and Eldon appeared and Dean didn’t like the way their eyes fell instantly to the Mark. He moved a hand to cover it.

"Alright then, let’s get started," Monroe said and nodded to Dean, indicating he should lie down.

Dean shuffled back slightly and carefully lay down on his back, his nerves twitching so much he could hardly stay still. Dean waited for Monroe to get the box and look at the spell but he didn’t, instead he and Eldon both came over, standing on opposite sides of the table and Dean felt very uncomfortable in such a vulnerable position.

"Okay, what now?" he demanded. "We gonna do this or what?"

They both reached out and Dean suddenly found his wrists locked into manacles. He tugged, making a surprised sound, as Eldon swiftly moved to the end of the table and locked Dean’s ankles in as well.

"What the hell?" he demanded as he yanked at the cuffs.

Eldon was smirking now and Monroe shrugged apologetically. "Sorry, son, but this is how it has to be."

"You really think we’re just gonna let the guy wearing that walk in here and let him get away?" Eldon asked, nodding to the Mark.

"You bastards," Dean growled. "You don't want to do this."

"Oh, I think we do," Monroe said, and all the kind southern gentleman ruse was gone from his demeanor, revealing to Dean what the man was: a dangerous sociopath. "You see, Dean, our family is very powerful. We have ruled the fates of countries for centuries. And we've heard about you and your brother. We knew you had the Mark and that you're trying to get rid of it. We know about the little red-headed girl who's after the Book of the Damned. I've got some of my boys out looking for her right now."

Dean felt his stomach drop at that news. If they hurt Charlie…

Monroe leaned over the table. "It was just a stroke of luck that you contacted me. I almost couldn't believe it. I was judging when I would have to send my boys after you, waiting to see if you would become a real problem, but lo and behold, you just came waltzing up to my door! And now…” he looked up at Eldon who was wheeling over a cart full of instruments that Dean hadn't seen the likes of since he had been on the rack, under Alastair’s knife. "Now, you're my new experiment, Dean. I can't wait to see what kind of effect something like the Mark of Cain has on the human body. Imagine the potential. What upgrades like that would do for a man."

Eldon grinned at his father and Dean fought a shudder.

"You don't understand," Dean growled, trying to keep his terror at bay. "This Mark on my arm means that I can't die. You flatline me, I come back and I come back with black eyes."

Monroe smirked as if he weren't bothered at all. Eldon strode around and leaned on the table at
Dean's head, looking down at him.

"So we let you go and then what? You just mosey on down the road?" the younger man asked mockingly.

Dean looked up, meeting his eyes. "No. But I will be human. Which means you may have a fighting chance."

Monroe pursed his lips. "You make a compelling case, and I hope you're right. Because a man that doesn't die, well, that is the perfect lab rat."

Eldon took up a strip of cloth and shoved it between Dean's teeth, muffling his protests, tying it tightly behind his head as he struggled.

Monroe turned toward the cart of instruments and ran his finger over several. "Now, the only question is: where do we start?"

Dean felt the Mark responding to his rush of adrenaline, putting an extra surge of strength through his body. Monroe selected a scalpel and turned around just as Dean wrenched his wrist to one side, and felt the manacle snap open.

"Eldon!"

Dean reached toward the table to grab some kind of weapon, but Eldon was quicker. He grabbed Dean's arm, slamming it against the side of the table right on his elbow. Dean cried out past the gag as a numbing pain exploded up his arm and Eldon forced him back against the table with a force that wasn't exactly human. At least not that of a normal human. Dean's eyes widened as he started at the man, then snapped his head to the other side just as Monroe grabbed a handful of his hair and jabbed a syringe into the side of his neck.

Dean choked out a protest behind the gag and felt an instant lethargy wash over him. His body relaxed, sank against the table, and he felt Eldon securing his hand again as his head lolled to the other side, following Monroe as the man went back to the table.

"That should keep you compliant," he said. "Though with the Mark, not sure how long it will last—an interesting experiment in itself. Best keep an eye on him, Eldon, we don't want him getting out of those cuffs again."

"No sir," Eldon said and patted Dean on the shoulder mockingly.

"Now," Monroe said, turning back around with the scalpel as he stood over Dean who could only watch helplessly as the knife was lowered toward him. "Where were we?"
Castiel drove as fast as he could back to Lebanon. Sam's words echoing in his head. Dean had found a 'cure'. Castiel would have liked to be happy, but he knew how dangerous dealing with magic this strong could be and he just knew from Sam's voice that the cure was not a good answer to their problem.

But Dean was desperate. Castiel knew how desperate he was. He shuddered as he recalled his best friend so casually asking him to kill him if he went dark. As if Castiel would ever agree to that. He was determined not to let it come to that. Not now, not ever.

He parked out in front of the bunker and hurried inside.

Sam was leaning over the map table in the war room, bag already packed and sitting on the table next to him among a ton of open files that the younger Winchester was pouring over.

Sam looked white and drawn, not even looking up at Castiel's arrival and the angel stopped at the end of the stairs, cocking his head to one side as he studied him.

"Sam?" he asked cautiously. "What is it?"

Sam ran a hand through his hair as he finally looked up and acknowledged the angel. "Cas, do you know anything about the Styne family?" he asked.

Castiel frowned but shook his head. "No…I can't say I'm aware of them."

"What about the Frankensteins?"

Castiel furrowed his brow further. "A fictional name from a book by Mary Shelly…"

"No," Sam cut in. "They're not. They're real, and they have Dean."

They packed Castiel's car in minutes and were off on the road toward Shreveport Louisiana. Sam explained everything as they drove.

"I thought he had agreed not to do it," Sam groaned. "I'm so stupid."

"Sam, you can't blame yourself for this," Castiel tried. "Dean would have found another way to do it no matter what."

"I know, which is why I should have kept a better eye on him."

Castiel watched the road and spoke words he didn't believe in an attempt to reassure Sam. "It is possible they will simply perform the ritual for him and maybe it will work."

"You saw the files," Sam said grimly. "You saw what they do to people. These are not…they're monsters, Cas, and Dean, with the Mark? If they kill him…"

Castiel's hands tightened on the wheel and he closed his eyes briefly. "I know. He will be turned into a demon again."

"I can't go through that again," Sam whispered, pressing his knuckles against his mouth as he leaned against the door. "These people are megalomaniacal psychopaths. They work in the shadows to bring down countries, and they cut people up. If they really are like the files say, they had to have
known about us already. If that's the case, then it's no accident that Dean ended up there. They'll kill Dean, and then use him when he comes back as a tool to do whatever it is they do."

Castiel shook his head. "No, they won't. We'll get to him before that."

But they had a long way to drive, and Dean had a head start of at least six hours. There was a lot that could happen in that time and Castiel didn't even want to think about it.

He pressed his foot into the gas harder.

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_The first thing they did_ to him was study the Mark. Dean gritted his teeth against the gag as Monroe took the scalpel and experimented with cutting the scar, but the blade wouldn't cut across it. It would only cut the flesh around the Mark, and Dean's arm was soon mangled from all the attempts.

"Well, I have never seen something quite like that," Monroe said with bemused delight.

"No," Eldon agreed.

Dean made yet another weak attempt to free himself, but the drug was still keeping him sluggish, though he didn't think it was doing quite as much as before. Maybe if he waited it out, he could get free again while they were occupied with figuring out how best to take him apart.

"No miraculous healing abilities," Monroe noted. "Perhaps that only happens after the host turns demonic upon death."

Dean's stomach turned at the reminder of what would happen if they killed him. He growled past the gag and yanked at the manacles.

Eldon looked down at him with a frown. "Time for another dose?"

"In a minute," Monroe said, turning back to the tray and taking up a syringe and a small bottle. "I want to see how his body reacts to poisons. I'm curious as to whether the Mark will help the host fight off the effects, or if the only failsafe is turning the soul demonic after death and reviving the body. Have the antidote ready, just in case, Eldon. We wouldn't want to go quite that far yet."

Dean's eyes blew wide and he tried to renew his struggles as Monroe jabbed the needle into his arm and injected the poison into his veins.

Dean felt the burn and then the growing agony of the poison entering his system. He writhed on the table, and moaned past his gag.

His torments had just begun.

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Sam anxiously watched the mile markers fly by on the road. Part of him wanted to take over driving from Cas, but the angel was more level-headed than he was right now anyway. He tried calling Dean several more times but it just went straight to voicemail.

"He turned his phone off," he said grimly. "That means we can't track his GPS."

Cas' jaw tightened and he shook his head. "We know where he went. I don't think it will be hard to find the Stynes' place of residence once we get into town. And if they took him somewhere else we'll make them tell us where."
"I think a bigger problem will be getting in," Sam mused. "Family that powerful, and connected to the supernatural world, must be cautious. They'll have guards, possibly warding."

"Or they may be overconfident," Cas voiced.

Sam bit his lip. "Maybe." But they couldn't count on that. He looked up and saw the sign indicating they were entering Louisiana. He glanced at his map. Not long now.

He just really hoped that Dean would still be in any condition to rescue. Or, in the worst-case scenario, if he would even want a rescue.

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Dean didn't think it was possible, but this was perhaps worse than Hell.

In hell, despite the agony of the moment, and Alastair was very good at making him forget that anything else existed but the pain, he would always be returned, whole, at the end of a session. This…the only promise he got was that he would die, and then he would come back as a demon. No conscious choice, no getting off a rack and picking up a knife to slowly corrupt his soul. It was just an inevitability, a certainty, that would happen.

He lay trembling uncontrollably on the table, nausea roiling inside of him and sweat beading on his body, resulting from the cocktail of poisons and antidotes they had flushed through his system in the last few hours. The gag was gone for the moment because he had vomited and they'd at least had the courtesy to make sure he didn't choke on it. After everything else that would be a really humiliating way to go. He swallowed convulsively to keep from doing so again as he watched Monroe scribbling some notes into a journal.

"Why?" Dean finally croaked. "Why are you doing this? Why not just kill me and be done with it?"

Monroe glanced over at him with a snake-like smile. "Because, son, you're a one-of-a-kind specimen and I want to know everything about how you tick. And when you do die, and come back as a demon, you'll be even more use to us. See, we rule a very specific underworld, doing very important jobs for high up people with enough money to pay for our services. With that Mark on your arm and the right training, you would make an excellent soldier for us. And when you're not working in the field, you'll be here on my table, furthering my scientific endeavors. Like I said before; a man who doesn't die would be the perfect lab rat."

Dean closed his eyes briefly as another shudder passed through his body. "I'm flattered, really, but I think I'll pass."

"Pity you won't get much of a choice," Monroe said, closing his book and turning to the table again as he selected a scalpel. Dean's stomach flipped as Eldon returned with another syringe and jabbed it into his neck. But this time Dean just felt the lethargic effects of the drug, not another poison.

He wasn't at all reassured by that, in fact, he was certain that only something worse could be on the way. And he was right.

Monroe flicked his wrists to move his sleeves further up his arms and smiled down at Dean. "Now it's time to see how you tick, Dean Winchester. Let's crack this piñata."

"No," Dean groaned, struggling weakly. Eldon shoved the gag between his teeth again and tied it viciously tight behind Dean's head. The hunter watched in horror as Monroe brought the scalpel down toward his chest and started digging it into his flesh.
Dean jerked as much as possible but the manacles wouldn't give. He had no more strength, even in his desperation.

The thought passed through his mind that Sam would be on his way, Cas probably in tow. But then he remembered his phone was off, his GPS untraceable. Sam could have found his email, maybe he had, but even then…Dean had the terrible suspicion they would never get there in time.

He cried out past the gag as Monroe methodically cut him open like a cadaver. Dean clenched his fists and tossed his head back at the agony tearing through his body. The blade slid down to his stomach and he whimpered.

Oh god, please no, not like this... he pleaded and then had an epiphany. He switched tracks, closed his eyes and tried to concentrate through the pain, put everything he had into this one prayer.

Castiel, please, just…I need help, please help me, I can't...A flick of the knife made him choke out a scream, breaking his concentration. Just, please help, please! He added his location to the prayer, over and over, hoping it would get through.

He didn't know if Cas heard him, if he even could still hear his prayers, but it was all he had. His last hope as the agonizing torment continued.

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Castiel finally drove into Shreveport, and Sam tried to get their bearings on the map, giving the angel as good a set of directions as he could but they didn't really know where they were going and both of them were tense with the idea that every second they took to get there was one more second that Dean was suffering at the hands of these psychopaths.

One more second closer to him becoming a demon. Again.

Castiel had flashbacks of Hell, of the desperate race to save the Righteous Man before he was corrupted, before he broke the Seal that would start the Apocalypse. Back then it had just been about duty. It was before Dean had become a dear friend, a brother, to him which made this race now, while not as catastrophically world ending should he fail, worse in a way for all of them involved.

He turned down another street at Sam's urging and sharp pain lanced through his skull so suddenly, he gasped, swerving.

"Cas!" Sam cried grabbing the wheel and directing the car swiftly from oncoming traffic.

Castiel somehow managed to pull over, one hand gripping the wheel and the other clamped across his eyes as a voice came to him.

Castiel, please, just…I need help, please help me, I can't...

Dean. Castiel gasped, feeling agony tear through his body on the tail end of the prayer, Dean's desperation was so strong and his need so great, he was broadcasting his emotions and physical pain along with the call for help.

"Cas, what is it?" Sam was demanding.

"Dean, it's Dean," Castiel said. "He's praying to me. He's…Sam he needs help. Now. He's—he's repeating the address, the same one we have." At least he was where they thought he would be.

Sam swallowed hard and grabbed the map again. "Okay, okay, so the address Dean got isn't far from
here, I think we just need to go down the right turn at the next light and then…”

The cut off sound of a police siren blared and Castiel looked in the rearview mirror to see a patrol car pulling up behind them. Sam saw it too and hung his head with an exasperated sigh.

"Dammit, dammit," he muttered.

"What do we do?" Castiel demanded, furious that they had another delay.

"Just stay calm, don't tip them off that something's wrong," Sam urged as the officer came up to the driver's window and tapped on the glass. Castiel rolled it down.

"What's the problem, officer?" Sam asked.

"License and reg," the cop said, not answering the question.

Castiel glanced at Sam and dug for his wallet.

"Hold on, you need to tell us what's wrong," Sam demanded.

"I don't need to tell you anything, son," the man said. "Besides, it's obvious. Taillight out."

Castiel and Sam both looked behind them in time to see the officer's partner take his club to the left taillight on the car.

Castiel was out of the car before Sam could stop him. "What are you doing?" he demanded.

The officer had a hand on his gun, patting it gently. "Now, son, you don't want to go trying anything, do you?"

Castiel rolled his eyes. "I don't have time for this." He reached out and touched the officer's head. The man fell limp, unconscious.

His partner drew his gun with a cry of shock, but Castiel surged forward and grabbed his wrist, putting him out too. He then dragged them both to the side of the road and got back into the car, meeting Sam's wide-eyed stare.

"Part of the Stynes' welcoming committee, you think?" Sam guessed.

Castiel nodded. "Let's just hope they didn't get enough time to warn them we're coming."

He put the car in drive again and continued on their way to save Dean.

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It was like Hell, and it wasn't. There were the blades cutting him open, flesh parting, fingers prodding inside, touching where they shouldn't…and the blood, dripping down his sides over his sweat soaked flesh. But the pain was so much more raw; there was no suspense of disbelief here topside. This wasn't an illusion Alastair created to make sense of Dean's soul being tortured, this was his literal flesh and blood, this was his living body, and it was too much.

Dean had long past screamed himself hoarse past the gag; he stared listlessly up at the ceiling, eyes blurred with agony as everything was numb, having nothing to do with the drugs anymore. Monroe and Eldon's comments faded into the background, and the only thing he was really aware of were the random bursts of pure agony that lanced through his body as they dug around inside of him.
His eyes widened, a little more awareness coming over him as he saw Eldon wielding a pair of something akin to bolt cutters. Not for bolts though, for his ribs. Dean thought of the irony—this would have happened to him during the spell ritual anyway, they may as well try it now, perhaps he could convince them.

He was sobbing and laughing at the same time before he realized it as Eldon lowered the horrific tool toward his butchered chest. He wanted to plead for Cas to come again, didn't know if the angel had heard him the first time but...when he prayed again all he could muster was a half desperate apology.

_Cas, if you're listening, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry._ Tears poured from his eyes, hitting the table and mixing with his blood. So much regret, so much agony of both the mind and body. _Tell Sammy I'm sorry for everything_ he finished quietly, feeling himself fading.

He could feel the slip in reality, felt the cold metal scraping over his bone and he knew this was it. He was going to die. Again. And he was going to become a demon. Again. And there was nothing he could do about it. No one could save him now.

He closed his eyes on a sob and willed himself to pass out before the next bit.

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_Castiel drove up to the gate_, and when the guard came out, pointing his gun, the angel simply put him out like the police officers. Then he drove ahead, crashing right through the gate, brakes screeching to a stop behind the Impala which was parked in front of the huge Plantation house.

It looked so out of place. Pale yellow with white trim, inviting, not at all the place you would think to find a dark crime syndicate.

Sam was jumping out of the car, grabbing their weapons, Castiel was right behind him, blade slipping from his sleeve before they rushed to the door.

As they stepped onto the porch, Castiel felt another wave of pain and nausea wash over him and he had to brace himself against the doorjamb as he listened to Dean's latest prayer.

"Cas?"

Sam's voice barely trickled in past the elder brother's pleas. He had given up asking for assistance and was simply apologizing. His agony and regret crashed over Castiel like a waterfall.

"Cas, is it Dean?" Sam asked desperately, a hand gripping the angel's shoulder.

Castiel simply pushed Sam aside. "Stand back," he said and kicked the door in, wood splintering as it completely broke from its hinges.

Their arrival must have been announced because the instant they stepped into the huge foyer, men with guns appeared on the stairs.

"Where is he?" Sam demanded, drawing his own gun. "Where is my brother?"

Castiel whipped around as men surrounded them, poised for a fight.

"Orders?" one of the men called to his fellows.

"Take these two out," another said.

The fight instantly broke out.
Gunshots rang out as Sam dove for cover. He and Cas grabbed the heavy door they had knocked off its hinges and used it to shield themselves against the bullets. Sam crouched behind the makeshift shelter, whipping his gun up and hitting two of the men. Castiel stood as men approached them and smote two and then three more in a row, taking out another with his angel blade, making quick work of them, before he had to pace himself. His borrowed grace was not as hearty as his own and would not hold up. He had to spare some to heal Dean. But in the meantime the blade would be sufficient, and he kept attacking as the men kept coming. He took a graze to his shoulder and another bullet in his side, but barely felt it. He was soaked to the elbows in the Stynes' blood.

He retreated to Sam again for a breather and covered the hunter as Sam reloaded his gun, taking out another of the Stynes with a headshot before ducking behind the sturdy door that was shockingly still holding up. The Stynes were reassembling, obviously trying to find a way to get behind them. Castiel wasn't going to let that happen. He winced as he dug the bullet out of his side so he could start healing.

"Do you know where Dean is? Can you feel him?" Sam asked, darting up for a split second, tapping out a couple shots before ducking back down to avoid a responding hail of bullets.

"He's nearby, that's all I know," Castiel said, desperate to find his friend. The prayer had opened a pathway in Castiel's mind due to the bond he had created with Dean so long ago when he had pulled him from Hell. He could tell his friend was near he just needed to get past these gunmen.

Just as Dean braced himself for the extreme agony of having his ribcage severed so Monroe could get to his heart, Eldon pulled back. There were very loud noises breaking through Dean's muddled mind. He couldn't quite place it at first, but it was familiar.

"Father," Eldon said.

Monroe snapped his fingers at him. "Get him hidden. We'll deal with this quick enough and be back to business. Hopefully with some new lab rats to boot."

Dean couldn't quite make sense of this in his current state, but he felt a desperation at Monroe's words. Fury. Eldon grabbed a white sheet and threw it over him, making Dean suddenly claustrophobic—as if that were his only problem.

He glanced down under the sheet as a burning sensation started in his arm and saw the Mark beginning to glow through the blood that soaked him.

No. No, this wasn't happening. Not now. Not yet.

Cas, please...

The sound of a door being kicked off its hinges echoed in the room. Eldon and Monroe shouted, there were a couple gunshots and the familiar sounds of bodies hitting the floor.

And then the sheet was yanked off of Dean to reveal two familiar faces that he never thought he would see again.

Cas, please...

Castiel growled as Dean's latest prayer echoed in his head. He stood up, brandishing his blade as the
remaining gunmen rallied for one last effort to take down the intruders.

"Cas!" Sam cried worriedly, grabbing for him.

Castiel looked down at him, earnest, almost pleading. "I was too late to save Dean in Hell, Sam. I'm not going to be late again."

Sam's jaw tightened and he nodded in confirmation.

The two of them leapt up and rushed the Stynes. Sam's gun blared and Castiel's blade flashed in a deadly pattern as he cut down attackers and protected Sam's back at the same time. It was only moments before they finished the fight, leaving only the dead and dying in their wake.

Castiel went to one semi-conscious man who was on the floor, choking on blood. He pressed his foot against the man's chest and the Styne groaned.

"Where is Dean Winchester?" Castiel asked darkly.

The man coughed and lifted a shaking finger in one direction. "Basement." He grinned and chuckled past a burble of blood. "But you're too late. Monroe's been at him all day. He's probably—"

Castiel twitched his hand and the man's neck broke. He looked up at Sam who was staring at him in shock, but Castiel didn't have time to feel remorse. Not when it came to saving Dean.

They raced through the house, finding the stairs that led to the basement. They hurried down them and Castiel kicked the door in without ceremony.

Two more men awaited them there, dressed in bloody white lab coats. The older man reached for a gun and the younger one, grabbed a bone saw off a cart. But Sam and Castiel didn't give them the chance to attack. They each took one and soon both bodies were hitting the ground.

"Dean?" Sam called.

"He's here," Castiel said quietly, looking around.

His eyes lit on a slab with a bloody sheet covering a human shaped lump. Blood was dripping from a drain on the slab into a trough beneath. Dean's clothes rested on a table beside it, leaving little to be refuted. But Castiel knew for sure because he could feel Dean's agony like it was his own. His stomach nearly rebelled as he stood there.

"Cas..." Sam asked hesitantly, seeming unable to move forward.

Castiel steeled himself and did it for both of them. He strode to the table and took hold of the sheet. With a withheld breath he pulled it back.

He heard Sam choke behind him. "Oh god," he whimpered. "Oh god, Dean."

Castiel wanted to scream, or look away, or anything. He had seen violence that most humans couldn't imagine, but nothing had ever affected him so much as seeing such violence turned toward his friends—his family.

He finished uncovering the wounds—butchering would be a better word. Wounds held the mark of at least being gained in battle. These had not.

Castiel didn't even register the fact that Dean was still breathing until frothy blood dribbled from the side of his mouth. Sam finally joined him, tears streaming down his cheeks, a hand over his mouth.
"How..." he tried then swallowed thickly and tried again. "How is he even still alive?"

Castiel reached out a shaking hand to gently touch Dean's cheek, brushing a thumb through the tears and blood accumulated there. "It's the Mark," he said grimly. "It enables the host's body to endure far more than a normal human. But, unfortunately, it does nothing for the physical agony."

Dean's eyes fluttered then and Castiel and Sam both held their breath. But when the eyes slit open, they were green, not black. Dean let out the softest moan.

"Oh, Dean," was all Castiel could say as he hurriedly set to work. He unfastened the gag and pulled it from Dean's mouth before moving to the restraints as Sam took up position at Dean's head.

"S-s'm," Dean tried. "C-c-c...."

"Shh, it's okay," Sam tried, running his hands through Dean's hair, tears falling from his own eyes onto his brother's face. "It's all going to be okay. God, Dean, I'm so sorry." He glanced over at Castiel and the angel knew what he was going to say.

"Can you...?" he stopped, shaking his head.

Castiel bit his lip. The damage was immense. He had to heal Dean, and he could, he just wasn't sure if he would be able to walk out of there if he did and if more Stynes showed up...

But his family came first and Castiel would heal Dean as much as he could before his grace gave out.

He bent over the butchered man and began to fold skin and everything else back where it was supposed to go. Dean screamed hoarsely in agony and Sam shushed him as best he could, practically cradling Dean's head in his arms. Castiel then set both hands over the grievous wounds and closed his eyes, calling on everything his borrowed grace could give.

He had not failed Dean this time. Dean Winchester was, once again, saved.

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The agony tore through him again and Dean could feel the Mark pulling at him, the darkness taking further hold. But afterward there was bright light and a warmth that had nothing to do with the Mark. It was familiar, not just from all the times that Cas had healed him over the years, but it reminded him of being pulled out of the Pit. Which was funny, because he had never been able to recall his rescue before.

Now though, it was there in his head. Cas, standing there in Hell, glowing and fierce, covered in the gore of demons he had killed to get there, wings spread in challenge as he strode toward Alastair's apprentice who could only watch the scene dumbly, unable to process what he was seeing. Cas reached out and grasped Dean's shoulder and then there was a burst of light.

It was the same now on that table in the Stynes' basement. Cas standing there drenched in blood, determination on his face. Then the burst of light and the sudden feeling of being raised up from darkness.

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Castiel's whole being glowed as he forced everything he had into Dean. He watched the hunter's flesh close even as he felt his borrowed grace stuttering, having pushed it to its limits. He reached deeper, shoving what power he had out through his hands, hoping he could finish before his grace gave out...
"Cas!"

He ignored the cry at first, then jolted as someone grabbed his arm.

Healing interrupted, Castiel spun around, seeing Sam standing beside him, holding his arm tightly. Castiel sagged uncontrollably, catching himself on the table.

"Cas, you have to stop."

"I need to finish healing Dean," the angel murmured, already reaching out for the hunter again. The wounds were closed, though still raw. He could finish in moments... he just had to find the last of his power...

Sam caught his hands and held onto them. Castiel looked down, his own hands stained in blood, gripped tightly in Sam's larger ones.

"Cas, listen to me, Dean will live now, you can finish healing him later." Castiel looked up to meet Sam's eyes, the hazel orbs earnest and pleading. "But you have to save some strength for yourself. He's safe. Recharge and finish healing him later. I need you right now; you can't just pass out on me."

Castiel slumped slightly, but knew Sam was right. Sam gave a watery smile and reached up to grasp Castiel's shoulder. "Come on. Let's get the hell out of his place."

Castiel nodded and turned back to Dean, unconscious now. He shrugged out of his coat and placed it over the elder Winchester before he reached down and drew him up like he had so many years ago.

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The light and warmth suddenly disappeared and Dean found he could breathe again. The pain wasn't completely gone, but the Mark was no longer trying to pull him away. It seemed to have retreated. He lay with his eyes closed, just breathing, as Sam and Cas spoke above him.

Dean didn't really hear what they said. He was only suddenly aware of something covering him, possibly a tan trench coat, and then Cas wrapping one of Dean's arms around his neck before lifting him clear off the table where he thought he was sure to die only minutes before.

Dean normally would have protested being carried like a chick, but he couldn't be bothered right now. He only knew he was safe, and for the moment the Mark wasn't tugging on him, and so he dropped his head against the angel's shoulder and drifted off to unconsciousness.

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Castiel drove the Impala and left Sam in the back with his brother. The angel forced himself to breathe deeply, trying to keep from thinking of the destruction they'd left behind. Not because he was horrified at what he had done, but because he didn't want to think about how little he cared about the bloodshed.

"Is he gonna be all right, you think?" Sam asked quietly from the back and Castiel glanced in the rearview mirror. Dean was unconscious, propped against Sam. Castiel hadn't been able to heal him completely and his body was still suffering from shock. But Dean was stable, his wounds closed, and would survive until Castiel could regain his strength to finish the healing, he'd made sure of that.

Of course, he wouldn't regain his strength. Not really. His own grace would have regenerated, but
this…no. But he would rest and heal Dean when he woke up. That was all he could do.

"He will recover physically," Castiel said.

Sam continued to look at him, meaningfully. "Are you okay?"

Castiel sighed and slumped a little further in his seat. "I am weary, I expended quite a bit of power, but I'll recover as well."

Sam looked skeptical. "What you did…"

"I killed men who deserved to die," Castiel snapped before he bit his tongue. "I killed monsters."

"I'm not judging you," Sam assured him quietly. "I've just…I've rarely ever seen you like that."

Castiel stared ahead of him, watching the roads pass as they got out of Shreveport as quickly as possible. They always seemed to forget that first and foremost he had been a soldier, a commander of his own flight of angels. He just hadn't fought like that for a long time. "When I went to Hell to rescue Dean, I failed. I couldn't get to him before he got off the rack, I couldn't stop the First Seal from breaking," he said quietly. "Dean was already lost when I found him there, Sam. It's only because he is truly a good man that he came back the way he did. But he didn't have the Mark then, and after Metatron killed him, after he became a demon…” He shook his head. "I swore I would never let that happen again. Dean Winchester would never be lost again. I couldn't let them kill him and allow him to turn into that again. Dean never would have forgiven us."

Sam was silent and he gave a jerky nod, shifting his brother closer to him. "No. But he's okay for now. We got to him in time, Cas. And we'll work on finding another cure."

Castiel nodded, and continued to drive until they reached state lines and then pulled into the first motel they found. All of them needed to rest.

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The scent of blood clogged his nostrils and the screams of pain filled his ears. Dean tugged at the chains holding him onto the rack, desperate to be free.

"Where do you think you're going, son?" Monroe Styne stood over him, a hacksaw in his hand. "We're not done with you yet."

His voice hissed at the end and his face morphed into one Dean was never able to forget. Alastair's cold smile stretched across his face as he tapped his favorite razor against Dean's clavicle.

"It's been a long time, Dean. Now…where should we start?"

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Dean woke with a gasp, terror surging through him. He flung the blanket covering him off and yanked his shirt up, hands running down his chest and stomach.

There was a long scar running the length of his torso—it was still pink and ached slightly, but he wasn't cut open anymore so that was a plus.

"Dean!"

Hands were on his shoulders, Sam, leaning over him and Cas hovering behind. Sam's face was both worried and relieved. "Easy, easy, you're okay. You're okay."
Dean was shaking uncontrollably as he reluctantly looked down at his right arm and felt a sickness enter his stomach as he saw the Mark still there. He didn't know what he had thought, but he should have known that it would still be there.

He closed his eyes with a weary sigh and slumped back against the pillows. Sam's hand followed him down and squeezed his shoulder reassuringly.

"What happened?" Dean croaked.

Cas came over with a glass of water and Sam took it from him, raising Dean's head to press it to his lips. Dean wanted to protest but his hands were shaking too much to hold the glass right now anyway.

"We figured out where you had gone," Sam told him. "Found you there. Cas healed you." He swallowed hard and Dean could only imagine the scene they had come across. The whole thing was hazy to him. Except the memory of the pain. That of course was crystal clear. He reached up to touch his chest, fingers clutching in his t-shirt.

"The Stynes..." he tried, knowing those southern fried bastards would come after them. They weren't about to let him run off with the Mark.

"They're dead," Cas said firmly and Dean looked up at him. The angel was sitting on the other bed, slumped slightly against the headboard, but looking calm. Flashes of memory flowed through Dean, an image of Cas standing over him, bloody, what could only be called righteous fury burning in his eyes, before warm healing and light washed over him.

"We don't have to worry about them anymore," Sam confirmed, then shook his head, seeming unable to hold back any longer. "God, Dean, why the hell did you do that?"

Dean closed his eyes, settling his left hand over the Mark and digging his nails into his flesh just enough to cause pain. "I just wanted a cure. Even if it wasn't permanent. I can't deal with this anymore, Sammy. It's only a matter of time before I...before I hurt you."

"Then let us help you, you know you don't have to go through this alone," Sam insisted.

"Safer for you if I do," Dean murmured.

Cas pushed himself upright and came over to stand beside Sam's shoulder. "No, it's not. Dean, I speak from experience, when I have...not been myself in the past, sometimes the only thing keeping me sane was you. My family."

Sam nodded, eyes glistening with unshed tears. "Dean, you know the only reason I didn't become Yellow-Eyes' pet is because you kept me human. Let us do that for you now."

"But Cain said—"

"Cain was the only other person to carry the Mark," Cas said firmly. "It doesn't have to be the same for everyone. Yes, it's bad. Yes, it's debilitating. But it's just a curse. And we will find some way to break it." He reached out and settled a hand on Dean's shoulder, squeezing. "I will not stop until I find something."

Dean stared up at his brother and the angel. "But Cas, your grace..."

"I will go until I can't, but I won't allow myself to die until I see you cured," the angel said firmly.
Dean closed his eyes. "Don't say that, man. I need both of you on this." He opened his eyes again and looked up between them. "But if you're that committed I guess I can't say no."

"No," Sam said firmly. "You can't."

Dean rolled his eyes slightly then swallowed hard, turning back to meet his brother's eyes. "I'm sorry."

Sam pressed his lips together, a tear finally slid out of the corner of his eye and he quickly dashed it away. "I know, Dean. Just next time, please don't...don't run off. I don't...I can't lose you again. I just can't."

Dean reached out and gripped his knee, squeezing it, too choked up to say anything.

Sam swiped his hand across his face again and sniffed before returning to practicality. "You need to rest."

Dean wasn't even going to argue, completely wrung out from his ordeal. He hoped more nightmares wouldn't be waiting for him. The ones that would be added to his repertoire after his time with the Stynes didn't even bear thinking about, he was sure. But nor could he stay awake. He didn't know the last time he had really slept well.

"I will finish your healing after my powers recharge," Cas promised.

Sam glanced up at the angel, a worried frown between his brows. "You need to sleep too."

Cas huffed slightly, but also didn't protest. He squeezed Dean's shoulder once more, then did the same to Sam with his other hand, connecting the three of them, and for a moment Dean felt their shared resolve and their strength; a lifeline in this tumultuous sea he was drowning in. Despite everything, he knew that if there was a cure to be found they would be the ones to do it. Until then he wouldn't let the darkness take him.

He wasn't so worried anymore, though. Not when he had family like this to fight for him.

With that, he could do anything.

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