Lazarus Needs a Robe of Scarlet Thread

by HerRosesNeverFall

Summary

Three weeks ago, Dean woke up in a pine box. He thought dealing with the nightmares was going to be the most difficult part of his new life after Hell, but at least they were something he could understand. Something he could deal with. Something he deserved.
Then he began having agonizing visions of crucifixion. Wounds appeared on his body out of nowhere. Wounds that refused to heal and coated his skin with the sickly sweet smell of roses.

Stigmata are said to be the marks of saints, but Dean is not a saint and the wounds are only the beginning.

Notes

This fic contains ideas and concepts that some might consider blasphemous. First and foremost, this is my attempt at coalescing Christian mythology with Supernatural's own mythology. Secondly, despite this premise, I am not a person of faith. I am an irreligious individual who has a love for Christian mythology strictly as mythology. While there is a Catholic-leaning - by virtue of my own upbringing and to a certain degree the subject matter - I take my inspiration from many different sources. Some are historical and some are mythological. Some are canonical and some are non-canonical. Above all else, it is my goal with this fic to be as impartial as humanly possible.

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April, 29 A.D.

Jerusalem, Roman Occupied Judea.

The night was cold. Far colder than the arid, cool nights Castiel had come to recognize as normal. A chill had swept its way through the city’s narrow streets, freezing the stone rooftops that a few hours before were baked in heat and sunlight. He leaned against the frigid wall of a balcony on the third floor of an inn, staring up at the moon as it rose over the city through a haze of fog. Though the cold air had no effect on him, he knew his vessel would likely be shivering.

Castiel listened to the chatter coming from inside the room connected to the balcony while the smell of roasted lamb and freshly baked matzo wafted around him. Eight men with thick Galilean accents laughed and joked with one another, their voices slurred by wine. Peter debated the finer points of net tying with his former fishing partners, the Zebedee brothers, and his own brother Andrew.

They were men Castiel knew, but not well.

The two men Castiel did know well were seated at the end of the table where they joked quietly with each other between sips of wine. They were brothers. The two eldest sons of a carpenter from Nazareth. The younger one was called James. The older one was called Jesus.

Jesus was a prophet, the man Castiel’s father had chosen as the Messiah and Castiel was charged with keeping watch over him.

Castiel wanted more than anything to leave Jesus alone, to let him enjoy his Passover Seder, but he had to speak to him. Two of the apostles, Judas of Kerioth and Simon the Zealot, were absent from the festivities. They had been missing all day.

Shortly after sundown, Castiel heard Judas pray a quiet and resigned ‘yes’. After that, Judas was silent. Suppressed.

Castiel sighed, stepping just beyond the threshold of the room.

Finally, Jesus caught his gaze. Castiel gave a slight nod and exited the room, walking back onto the balcony.

Jesus rose from his place at the table and followed Castiel outside, stopping a few paces beyond the threshold. “You’re not here to join us. Are you, Castiel?” He glanced down at the wine cup in his hand before locking his eyes on Castiel.

“Unfortunately, No, I’m not.” Castiel shook his head. “They’re—” Castiel paused. “They’re going through with their plan.”

Jesus furrowed his brow. “How? You etched cloaking sigils onto my ribs and the ribs of all my disciples. Even Simon the Zealot and Judas.”
“Yes, but that won’t do you any good. Not anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“They have Judas.” The words hung in the air. “They’ll use him to find you.”

Jesus frowned. He was silent. “Do they have anyone else?”

“The Roman Prefect,” Castiel explained. “Even if he wasn’t possessed, Pontius Pilate would have no qualms putting a would-be messiah who caused a near riot in The Temple to death. He’s killed far more for less.”

Jesus didn’t say anything. He ran his hand down his face, shutting his eyes as he began to pace around the balcony.

“I will fight them off,” Castiel declared. “Anna and Balthazar will help me.”

Jesus stopped. He lifted the cup to his mouth, drinking down the rest of his wine. “No. You won’t.”

“What?” Castiel blinked. He stepped closer to Jesus “You can’t—”

“At this is to be my fate, then it is to be my fate.” Jesus shrugged, tapping the rim of the cup with his thumb.

Castiel clenched his fists. “So you’re just going to give up?” he hissed. He closed the space between them, glaring. “You’re going to give them what they want?”

“Yes,” Jesus snapped. “Because what they really want from me I won’t do. I can’t do.” Jesus glanced into the room, looking briefly at his brother. Tears filled his eyes. “I won’t see the world destroyed. This—is only way I can ensure that it won’t be.”

“What about your mission?” Castiel asked.

“This is my mission now.” Jesus paused. “And perhaps,” he glanced up at the night sky. “Perhaps it always was.” He brushed the tears roughly away from his cheek.

“Do you truly believe that?”

Jesus didn’t say anything. He looked at Castiel. “Just promise me you won’t try to stop it.”

Castiel shook his head. “I can’t promise that.”

Jesus placed his hand on Castiel’s shoulder. “Then promise me you won’t get yourself killed.” He pleaded.

Castiel didn’t say anything.

Jesus gave him a sad smile, patting his shoulder before he headed back into the room. When he sat back down at the table, he took one of the remaining pieces of matzo into his hands. He looked back at Castiel, clearing his throat before he turned his gaze to the apostles.

Not long after, the men gathered up their belongings and left the inn, heading into the street were they found Simon the Zealot hiding in an alleyway. He shared a few words with Jesus before joining them on their walk to the city gates.

Castiel followed them at a safe distance to a garden called Gethsemane, located at the foot of the
Mount of Olives. He paced around the edge of the garden, moving in between the twisted olive trees, his sword safely tucked inside the sleeve of his rough wool tunic.

By midnight, Castiel had killed two demons and three of his brothers. Their bodies lay at the entrance of the garden, the charred impressions of their wings contrasted highly against the sand in the moonlight.

While he paced, Castiel listened to the sounds coming from deep within the grove. The rhythmic sound of a knife sliding across a whetstone. The work of either Peter or Simon. The Zebedee brothers whispered and bickered with one another. The rest of the men were fast asleep.

At least twice, Castiel heard Jesus and James fighting. The fights took the form of Jesus ordering James to go back into the city followed by James steadfastly refusing. At first, they were hisses, and then they became shouts.

When Jesus wasn’t yelling at his brother, he was praying. Half spoken prayers of sorrow, anger—and most of all—fear. Fear that shook his entire body. Castiel could smell the blood Jesus was sweating.

During one of these bouts of prayer, Castiel visited Jesus and tried to comfort him. He sat with Jesus and healed away the blood he had been sweating. He asked Jesus to change his mind, to let Castiel fight his siblings, but again, Jesus refused and ordered Castiel to leave.

As Castiel made his way back to his post, he saw the glow of torches off in the distance, breaking through the dark and fog. They shone a low light on the figures of a squad of men that were making their way through the garden.

Then Castiel heard the sound of sandaled feet making contact with gravel and dirt behind him, far ahead of the squad. Castiel turned to find his one of higher ranking brothers standing there, the bright moonlight casting a shadow of wings under his vessel.

“Zachariah,” Castiel said. His gaze drifted down to the leather coin purse, heavy with silver pieces, tied to his belt. “You didn’t have to make Judas take blood money.” Castiel nodded at the dagger at Zachariah’s waist—its blade made of silver and etched in old Hebrew—and the hamsa pendant dangling around his neck, just visible under the hood of his cloak. He noted the small cloth bag filled with clumps of rock salt, a slingshot hanging loosely on the other side of his belt.

“We needed to operate with the utmost discretion.” Zachariah’s voice was detached as he circled Castiel. “Besides,” he scoffed. “After that money buys him a jug of wine or two Judas won’t pay it any heed. Despite your clever little attempt at hiding The Nazarene and his followers, getting consent from him wasn’t difficult. All I had to do was go into his dreams and persuade him a little. Not shocking, really. After all, Judas knows exactly what’s at stake and he knows the debt he owes us.”

Castiel raised his eyebrow. “A debt?”

“We pulled Judas out of Gehenna, Castiel.” Zachariah’s voice was blunt.

“And you are throwing him back in. He —”

“—Judas is a faithful servant of Heaven,” Zachariah said annoyed. “You know the prophecy: ‘The righteous one who begins it must be the one who finishes it.’ And he is. By helping The Nazarene fulfill his destiny.”

Castiel shook his head. “This is not Jesus’s fate.” His words were angry. “And Michael wouldn’t jeopardize his —”
“—Michael is the one who gave us the order.” Zachariah glared. “The final two seals are set to be broken before the festival ends. If the Nazarene wants to continue acting like a petulant child than this will be his fate. We’ll wash our hands of him and start over.” Zachariah watched Castiel for a moment. He gave him a smug smirk. “The fate of the world is more important than the life of one ape. Even if that ape is the man Our Father has chosen as His Son.”

Castiel’s eyes narrowed. Carefully, he lowered the sword hidden up his sleeve, letting the weapon slide into his hand. Before he could strike, however, Zachariah knocked the blade out of his hand and slammed him against one of the olive trees. He pressed his own sword against Castiel’s neck.

“Once the Nazarene is dead, we’ll make sure that the brothers and sisters you led astray are handed over to Naomi and dealt with. You can thank Uriel for that, he was loyal enough to come forward and beg that their lives be spared,” Zachariah hissed, his eyes narrow. “As for you? Anna convinced Michael to spare you. And because you’re one of our best soldiers, we will, but this is your last chance. The next time you defy a direct order, brother, it will be your last.”

Zachariah began chanting. A blue-white light glowed from the mouth and eyes of Castiel’s vessel and he felt himself being pulled, wrenched out from the body. He fought it, desperately, but to no avail. The next thing he knew Castiel was floating, incorporeal and invisible, above his unconscious vessel.

Zachariah walked over to his vessel and placed a hand against his chest before snapping his fingers.

With that, Castiel's vessel was gone. Hidden from him.

A slight distance away, Zachariah joined the squad of men. They spoke briefly before marching further into the garden.

Unable to do anything, Castiel heard Jesus speak words of anger at Zachariah before the clearing erupted into chaos. A knife sliced through the air, followed by a blood curdling scream. A bright light flashed and there were more screams.

When the chaos stopped, Peter was pinned into the dirt by a man with a bleeding ear, while another pried the blade from him. Simon lay against a tree, his hand pressed against a bloody sigil painted on the trunk. The rest of the apostles had fled.

Jesus and Zachariah had disappeared.

The last thing Castiel saw was James, running out of the grove and back to the city in nothing but his tunic, his cloak ripped from his body. His knuckles and face were bloody and his eyes red with angry tears.

The night air became colder.

Chapter End Notes

:: Although Jesus' actual name would have been 'Yehoshua', I chose to use the common, anglicized version of Jesus's and The Apostles' names purely for the sake of accessibility.

:: While Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians believe that the Virgin Mary
remained a virgin her whole life, most Protestant denominations believe that Jesus had biological siblings.

:: James, also known as "James the Just" was Jesus's brother. He is named first in Mark along with the rest of Jesus' siblings- brothers Jude, Simon and Joses and at least two unnamed sisters- and is presumably the second eldest after Jesus. In a letter often attributed to Pope Clement I, he is described as "The Bishop of Bishops." He is believed by most secular historians to have taken leadership of Jesus' ministry following his crucifixion. Because of the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity held by Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians, he is often assumed, along with the rest of Jesus' siblings, to either be Jesus' cousin or older half-sibling.

:: Most secular historians believe Jesus' Cleansing of the Temple to be the most likely reason for Jesus' arrest. It is documented in all four canonical gospels and, along with his baptism by John, is thought to be one of few historically likely incidences in Jesus' life.

:: The Roman occupation of Judea, which lasted between 6 CE and 135 CE, was a very tumultuous time. Uprisings and messiah claimants were commonplace and most met violent ends at the hands of the Romans. Some of the best known ones were Simon of Perea, Judas of Galilee and Simon bar Kokhba.

:: In stark contract to his portrayal in the gospels, according to both Philo and Josephus, two contemporary Jewish writers, Pontius Pilate was a man who ruled over Judea with an iron fist. He was a man of 'vindictiveness and furious temper' who was insensitive to Jewish sensibilities and would use excessive force to quell uprisings. According to Josephus, he was recalled to Rome by Emperor Tiberius in 36 CE for ordering the brutal massacre of a group of Samaritan pilgrims.

:: There is a theory that some historians ascribe to that Judas' supposed last name, 'Iscariot', is a play on the Latin word 'Sicarii' or 'Dagger Men'. The implication being that Judas was an assassin/zealot, an idea which lends itself easily to him being a hunter.

:: In both the gospels of John and Luke, Judas is described as being 'possessed by the devil' at the time of his betrayal of Jesus. In the Gospel of Judas, a Gnostic text, it is said that he actually betrayed Jesus at Jesus' behest, being the only Apostle who truly understood Jesus' mission.
October 9, 2008.

Bethlehem, Connecticut.

Sam and Dean were in a quiet New England town, one with more maple trees than it had people, dealing with the vengeful ghost of a young woman wrongfully hanged for witchcraft. She had already killed six descendants of her murderers following her posthumous pardon by the town, and it didn't appear that she was going to slow down any time soon.

The hunt ended with a salt and burn. The biggest hurdle for the brothers had been finding the unmarked grave in the Puritan cemetery on the outskirts of town. It had been a pretty typical hunt for the brothers, easy, even. A welcome change from what their lives had become. There were no trench coat sporting angels, no threat of broken seals or the very real possibility of Lucifer being freed from his Cage. They weren't dealing with the impending Apocalypse. Just a three hundred year old dead girl throwing a fit. It was familiar, comparatively easy and nostalgic.

Dean was thankful for that. He was even more thankful for the dive bar within walking distance of the motel. The special that night was a heady combination of half-priced apple pie shots, a curvy brunette bartender, and friendly local barflies who assumed a Midwestern drawl meant an honest game of pool that Dean took full advantage of.

Scoring a phone number, four hundred bucks, and one hell of a good buzz, he staggered his way back into the motel room. A Thursday night well spent.

“Sammy. You got no idea what your buzzkill ass missed,” Dean chuckled as he shut the door behind him, leaning against it. He looked over and smirked drunkenly at his little brother who was fast asleep in his bed. “The bartender? Bangin’ hot. Literally. And they had these… shots. Apple pie in booze form, dude. You should’ve come with me instead of turnin’ in early like a chump.”

Sam rolled over in his bed, mumbling swears at him before he passed out cold again.

Dean tossed his leather jacket and the room key onto the table before marching over to the kitchenette. He grabbed a half-drunk bottle of whiskey off the counter before sitting on the end of his bed.

Dean took a swig from the bottle. His buzz had begun to fade and with it the howling of hell hounds and the screaming began, just as they had every night since his resurrection three week prior. No matter how much he drank, they always came back.

Before the first one could even reach his stomach, he took another sip.

Dean’s smirk faded as the whiskey burned its way down his throat, numbing him. The alcohol suppressed the weeping and gnashing of teeth he had brought with him out of the grave. It made it easier to tuck it back into a corner of his mind, though never doing so completely.

Dean was alone. Alone with the burn of alcohol as it tried to fight for him.

Except Dean wasn’t alone.
As Dean sat on his bed with nothing but the numbing of his mind to distract him, he began to get the feeling that something was in the room, something besides his dead-to-the-world brother. A presence was in the room with him, a presence he hadn’t felt before. Watching him. Not a ghost, not a demon, and not an angel, as far as he could tell. This was something different and that alone was enough to put him on edge.

The bathroom light flickered. Instinctively, Dean put the bottle on the floor. He grabbed the salt-round shotgun he always kept next to his bed and tiptoed to the bathroom, the gun pointed and ready to shoot. There was nothing; no cold spots, no sulfur or strange shadows. Just their toiletries, a pile of dirty towels, and the faint odor of Sam’s aftershave.

Dean turned toward Sam’s bed, expecting to find whatever it was hovering over his brother.

Nothing was there.

“Need to lay off the Jameson,” Dean mumbled to himself, scanning the bathroom once more. He flicked the light on and off a couple more times. “Shit’s makin’ you paranoid.”

He dropped the shotgun back to its former resting place. Sitting down on the bed, Dean kicked off his boots and leaned against the headboard. He took another swig of whiskey and the world began to blur once more. He put the bottle on the floor next to him and closed his eyes, enjoying the medicated tranquility before he had to fall asleep, before the nightmares came. He drifted, quietly humming to himself.

Suddenly, the room was silent. Completely silent.

Dean’s eyes snapped open. All the sounds in the room were silenced; the buzzing of the bathroom light, Sam’s snoring, even the wind blowing outside. Everything ceased but the sound of Dean’s own breathing.

Light filled the room, white and luminous. Warm and inviting, the light washed over him, engulfing him like water. Instantly sober, Dean could hear the sound of wings.

He felt calm. At peace, even, for the first time since he’d woken up three weeks before in a pine box.

All too quickly, the feeling of serenity was replaced with anxiety, and the comforting warmth became blistering, arid heat. Dean could feel his heart racing, and he broke out into a cold sweat.

Thoughts began to echo through his mind. The voice wasn’t Dean’s and it spoke in a language he didn’t recognize—but somehow—he understood. Its words were shaken, strained and heavy with suffering.

“…You must protect them. You must endure this. You must be strong…”

Despite all the pain it carried, the voice wasn’t malicious.

It was benevolent and human.

But the kind voice was replaced with a sound he had often heard in Hell, something cracking as it cut through the air behind him.

The sound of a whip.

Then there was pain. Hot, slicing pain. Leather thongs and pieces of jagged metal tore through the skin of his back. The pain paused only briefly before the whip struck him again and again, ripping
deep, through layers of flesh and muscle.

For a brief moment, Dean thought he was remembering Hell, until the voice returned. It was screaming, almost crying.

“…Abba! Please Abba! Help Me! Stop this! Make it stop!…”

The voice, the strikes and the pain they brought with them, finally ceased, and Dean found himself curled up in the fetal position, screaming, trembling, his back engulfed in pain that was vicious and all-encompassing. Pulsing, throbbing pain.

“Dean! What the hell happened?” Sam was crouched on the floor next to him, his eyes wide with horror; he had been jolted awake by the sound of Dean screaming in a language that sounded vaguely like Hebrew. He’d bolted out of bed to find Dean lying on the floor, the back of his flannel shirt intact, but stained in ever thickening crisscross patterns of blood.

“Somethin’… whipped me…”

“What whipped you?”

“I— I don’t know…” Dean’s voice shook with uncertainty as he tried to lift himself up off the floor. He cried out, falling down with a thump, his head hitting the carpet.

Sam grabbed Dean and pulled him up off the floor, walking them as quickly as he could manage into the bathroom. He helped Dean sit down on the toilet. Dean groaned as Sam got him a glass of water which he pushed away. Dean managed with Sam’s help to get his shirts off, wincing sharply as the blood-drenched fabric pulled his torn skin.

“How bad is it, Sammy?” Dean rasped with pained breaths, his question equal parts boggled by fear and characteristically nonchalant.

Sam was silent. He focused on the scarlet gashes that marked the whole of his brother’s back. They were jagged and deep in chaotic clusters of three. They were scourge wounds.

“Sam!” Dean barked, voice panic ridden. “What’s it look like?”

“Bad.” Sam cleared his throat. “Y— you need stitches. A lot of them. ” He grabbed the first aid kit and the bottle of whiskey from the bathroom counter. He glanced briefly at the purple handprint scar on Dean’s left shoulder.

Sam handed Dean the bottle of whiskey and began to thread the needle with trembling fingers.

“Awesome.” Dean sighed as he took a sip from the bottle, gritting his teeth with a guttural groan as Sam began to suture him up.

Dean had a high threshold for pain and Sam had a knack for meatball surgery—to the point of it being a skill—but the task nevertheless moved slowly.

It was a sluggish process of piercing needle, tugging thread, burning whiskey. Rinse and repeat. Twice, Sam had to stop to steady Dean so he didn’t fall over and, even with all the practice he had, it didn’t take long for his hand to begin to ache. Sam wrapping layers of gauze bandage around Dean’s torso was a welcome relief to the both of them.

“You’re positive you don’t have any idea what did this?” Sam asked with concern, eyebrow raised, as he finished wrapping the last bit of gauze. “Ghost? Witch? Daeva? Anything?”
“No.” Dean shook his head. “Whatever it was, it was somethin’ we haven’t come across. Ever.”

Sam didn’t respond. He handed Dean the glass of water and again Dean refused it. Sam paused for a long moment as he watched Dean carefully. “Maybe it was in your mind.”

Dean paused, finally taking the glass of water from Sam. “What?”

“Your memories of Hell. Some psychosomatic thing.”

“No.” Dean’s eyes narrowed. He looked away, taking a sip of the water and gagging on it.

“Well, that’s the only thing I can think of, Dean. I mean they must have tortured you in The Pit. What if your memories are starting to manifest themselves… physically?”

“This ain’t Hell, okay? This… this isn’t memories of Hell. Trust me.” Dean lifted himself slowly up off the toilet, putting the still full glass on the counter with an angry clank. “Just drop it alright? I just wanna go to sleep.”

Sam shot him a look of frustration, wrapping Dean’s arm over his shoulders as they started the slow and limping walk over to Dean’s bed. He lowered his brother down, but not carefully enough, causing Dean to hiss as he repositioned himself to his side.

“You gonna be okay?” Sam asked.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. It just hurts like a bitch.”

Dean winced as he closed his eyes, waving Sam off weakly. Sam walked away and Dean curled his body into itself, wrapping his arms around his knees. He ached horribly, not just with the physical pain of the wounds, but with confusion, uncertainty, and something much more profound that he just couldn’t put his finger on. He ached with sadness. A terrible sadness that was piercing and tight, like barbed wire had been wrapped around his heart.

Sam stepped back into the bathroom to grab some spare bandages, knowing Dean would need them in the morning. His eyes shifted over to the glass of water Dean had left on the counter, but it wasn’t water anymore. It was deep red. Reluctantly, Sam picked up the glass and smelled it. It was bitter with the smell of fermented grapes.

It was wine.

Sam turned back to Dean, now draped in his comforter and facing away from him. He could see the blood already starting to seep through Dean’s gauze. He dumped the wine down the drain and washed out the glass.

Sam grabbed the bandages, laying them down on Dean’s side of the nightstand. He stared at his brother for a moment before he crawled back into his own bed without a single word.

A smell had begun to waft throughout the room. Not the smell of blood or whiskey, but of roses.

Dean could smell it.

So could Sam.
Witch trials were pretty common in Connecticut in the mid-late 17th century. Ten occurred in Hartford alone between 1662 and 1663, thirty years before the more famous Salem, Massachusetts trials. None, however, occurred in Bethlehem. That's purely artistic licence on my part.

It's common for stigmatics to go into altered states of consciousness known as religious ecstasy. These trances are often revelatory, during which they will receive visions.

Changing water into wine is, according to the Gospel of John, Jesus' first public miracle.
Sam opened his eyes shortly before dawn. He hadn’t really slept. He lay there, staring up at the ceiling, trying to fall asleep. Every now and then, he would glance over at his brother before forcing himself to look away, his mind racing from the events of the night before. He sat up and looked over at Dean, studying him.

The room was quiet, save for his brother’s strained, heavy breathing. It was different from the battle-induced, wounded sleep that was common after a particularly bad hunt and it was a far cry from the fitful sleep Dean had been suffering from—though he would never admit it—since he was resurrected. He wasn’t weighed down so much with nightmares of terror, but rather with melancholy and deep pain. Dean’s breaths sounded almost like sobs.

Then Sam noticed the smell. That fragrant stench that had begun the night before had now engulfed the whole room. Roses.

Sam got out of bed, giving Dean’s bandaged torso a quick glance before he crouched down. As carefully and quietly as he could, he opened the drawers of the nightstand between their beds, searching for the hex bag he was hoping—praying—that he had missed when he did a sweep of the room the night before.

There was nothing but a Gideon Bible that was always stashed away in motel room nightstands. They were different colors, and in different parts of the country had different stages of wear, but they were always there. Sam had managed to read the whole thing, cover to cover, at least three times without ever buying a copy of his own.

When they were little, Dean would read the Bible to him as a means to fend off boredom during power outages or when the motel room television didn’t work. Each of them had their favorite books. Sam liked the Psalms and Dean liked Judges and Samuel—the stories of David and Samson. Dean had even taught Sam to read using motel Bibles.

As a teenager, however, there were nights when Dean would come back into the motel room smelling of cheap booze or cigarettes and without saying a word would grab the bible and a pen and write on the inside covers. Most times Sam never even saw Dean write in it. His only clue was the lyrics to The Battle Of Evermore or Kashmir written in Dean’s handwriting when he went to read it the next day.

When Sam started hunting with Dean, he would see Dean highlighting the more questionable chapters and verses. After he told Dean that he believed in angels, Dean would make a point of reading those passages out to him with a scoff and a shake of his head before shoving the bible back into the drawer.

Since his resurrection, Dean wouldn’t even open the drawer the bibles were kept in.

Sam flipped through the Bible, checking it for a hex bag.

He checked the whole motel room. He checked the dresser, the kitchenette, under both of the beds, behind the television—everywhere—doing so as quietly as he could manage so he didn’t wake
Dean. Looking desperately for a nonexistent hex bag or a trace of sulfur or ectoplasm, anything in the hopes that he could explain away what happened to Dean.

Eventually, Sam’s search worked its way back into the bathroom. The only things out of place were Dean’s bloodstained shirts, left behind after Sam had patched him up. Sam found them in a crumpled mess on the floor in the space between the toilet and the bathroom counter.

Sam picked the shirts up and inspected them. A wave of the rose scent washed over him as he moved them. The blood stains covering them were still bright red, without even with the slightest sign of oxidation. Sam lifted the shirt up to his nose and smelled it. Immediately, he reeled back, lowering the fabric from his face. The stench was overwhelming, turning his gut in its concentration. But it wasn’t the metallic tang of iron and plasma, nor the familiar, comforting scent of motor oil or cheap cologne that always clung to his brother.

It was roses and it permeated the fabric.

The smell was coming from Dean’s blood. From Dean’s wounds.

Sam leaned against the bathroom counter. “Damn it,” he hissed, folding his arms. His fingers drummed a tense rhythm against his ribcage.

After a moment, Sam left the bathroom. He threw the shirts on top of Dean’s laundry bag as he walked to his laptop. Dean’s leather jacket had been flung haphazardly onto it the night before, and he moved it to the back of one of the chairs before he sat down and turned on the computer. Glancing over to Dean, he made sure he was still asleep.

‘Stigmata’ was the first thing Sam searched.

It was quickly followed by ‘crucifixion’, ‘psychosomatic wounds’, ‘Francis of Assisi’, ‘pio of pietrelcina’, and ‘Mystery of the Scared Stigmata—Fr. Michael Frati’.

By the time he had checked the Bethlehem Public Library’s hours of operation, taken a shower, and gotten dressed, the sun had fully risen. Dean was still sleeping when he left the motel room. Sam was thankful for that.

Dean slowly opened his eyes. The late morning sun that filtered through the motel window had stirred him awake. He was lying on top of the comforter and his body ached all over. Dean could see his pillow resting on the ground against the bottom of the bed and he sighed. Careful not to jostle his back, he reached down to pick it up off the floor, covering his head with the pillow to block out the sunlight and pulling the comforter around him in a desperate grab for a few more moments of sleep.

It had taken him hours to pass out the night before, and when it did finally come, the sleep hadn’t brought him any relief. It had only brought him nightmares, just as it had every night since his resurrection. Every time he closed his eyes he was back The Pit, trapped with a grotesque, white-eyed monster and the sound of his own and others’ weeping, screaming, and pain.


He heard the screams when he was awake the same as when he slept. He heard them at the sight of blood and in the shrill cries of the people he saved during hunts. He heard the screams when he was
sober. Sometimes, he even heard them when he was drunk.

But the night before, Dean had heard something else in his dreams: The Voice. It was accompanied by the rustle of wings, wailing cries as a whip cracked through the air, mocking laughter and mourning sobs, and the terrible sound of wood and iron striking against each other.

Dean lay in his bed for a few moments in silence, trying to get back to sleep, but it was no use. He slowly pulled the pillow off his head and looked at the clock on the nightstand. It was almost eleven. “Son of a bitch,” he mumbled softly to himself. He hadn’t slept that late in years.

Reluctantly, Dean lifted himself up onto the side of his bed and gasped, feeling his pain spike. He hunched over, shaking, wrapping his arms as tightly as possible around his torso. Out of the corner of his eye, Dean noticed bright red blood stains covering the comforter in streaks and blotches. Despite the stitches and the layers of gauze, Dean’s wounds were still bleeding and they bled through the bandages.

“Hey Sammy,” Dean rasped, trying to get his brother’s attention. “Sam?” he called out again. No answer came. Dean frowned. He reached for the gauze bandage from the nightstand and wrapped it around the old one as best he could.

Slowly, Dean stood and limped over to his bag. He pulled a long sleeved thermal from it. He also grabbed a hoodie from Sam’s bag and carefully got dressed, trying his hardest to not only remain standing but to avoid rubbing against his stitches. He had slept in his jeans and he wasn’t going to even attempt to take a shower, not with fresh stitches in his back.

Dean was putting on his boots when Sam returned, two cups of Dunkin’ Donuts coffee and a paper bag in hand.

“Good, you’re awake. I got food. The bacon egg and cheese sandwich and Boston Kreme donut are yours. I figured you’d need it.” Sam placed Dean’s coffee and the food bag on the table as he took a sip from his own. “How are you feeling?”

Sam looked at the pale and exhausted face of his big brother. The last time Sam saw Dean like this, he had been electrocuted and his heart was failing him. That had been also been last time Sam had seen Dean borrow one of his sweatshirts. For Dean to be wearing it now, he must have been in a lot of pain.

“Like shit,” Dean scoffed. “I bled right through my damn bandages.” With Sam’s help he hobbled over to the table.

Dean pulled the sandwich from the bag. He looked at it with uncertainty. When he finally took a bite, it was void of taste and flavor, and that single bite seemed to fill his stomach. He stared at the bacon and egg for a second before he rewrapped and shoved it back into the bag. Taking a sip from his coffee instead was just as unappealing, but at least it had the benefit of being warm. The very thought of the doughnut made his stomach turn.

“You must have pulled on the stitches when you were moving around in your sleep.” Sam took a bite out of his blueberry muffin, taking note of Dean’s uncharacteristic lack of appetite. He hoped it was just fatigue and pain causing it, just like he was hoping the bleeding was from Dean turning in his sleep. “That’s gonna make the wounds bleed.”

Dean chuckled sarcastically. “Sam, I’ve had my fair share of stitches, and bleedin’ like this ain’t normal. It’s almost like the stitches aren’t even—” Dean shook his head as he took another sip of his tasteless coffee. The last thing he wanted was to argue with Sam. “While you were off gallivantin’
around town, did you happen to come across any possible jobs?”

“Dean, you’re in no shape to be going on a hunt right now—”

“I just wanna get the hell outta Dodge and the sooner we do that, the better.”

Sam shook his head with a sigh. "Hopewell, New Jersey. Three hours away. Possible Dullahan.” He took a sip from his coffee. “I’ll do the witness questioning to see if it’s actually our kind of thing while you rest up in the motel room."

Dean nodded. "Perfect."

Sam finished up the rest of his breakfast as he went about the task of cleaning up the motel room and packing their belongings and hunting equipment, bringing them out to the Impala while Dean stayed seated at the table, slowly drinking his coffee. It took Sam a single trip before he was able to walk Dean out to the Impala and check out of the motel, leaving Dean’s untouched food behind in the trash bin.

As soon as Dean got into the passenger side of the front seat, he closed his eyes, leaning his head against the window. Relief washed over him as Sam started the car. He wanted to put as many miles between him and that motel room as possible.

It didn’t take long for the relief to turn into agitation, brought on by the smell. Dean had managed to ignore it while he was in the motel room, but in the closed confines of the Impala, it was getting stronger and more concentrated and he couldn’t ignore it any longer.

They were just about ready to pull onto Interstate 84 when Dean suddenly twisted in the seat, shooting Sam an angry look.

“Jesus Christ, Sam! The cologne I can deal with, but I draw the line at puttin’ some fruitcake air freshener in my car!” His voice was strained.

Sam blinked. “What?”

“Roses.” Dean’s words were blunt. “All I smell is roses. It smells like a Golden Girl got laid in here.”

“I don’t smell anything…” Sam shot Dean a confused look as his fingers tensed slightly around the steering wheel.

Dean stared at his brother for a moment before he waved him off and curled back in his seat. Pulling the hood of the sweatshirt up over his head, he rested it against the cool window and once again shut his eyes. “Whatever, dude.”

Sam considered rolling the window down slightly to air the car out, but he decided against it. The chilled October air would make Dean colder than he already was and would no doubt cause him to stir again.

They made a pit stop just after crossing into New Jersey, where Sam made a phone call to a Catholic church in Hopewell. It was the only time Sam could ever remember Dean refusing the prospect of gas station cuisine.

Sam was still tense as he pulled into their new motel and checked into their new room. After bringing their bags in, Sam walked his brother into the room. Dean mumbled that he was starting to feel a little better and that he was going to enjoy taking a nap in a nice warm bed as he lowered himself face down into the pillow with a tired sigh of relief. Within a few moments he was fast asleep.
Sam took a drive over to Saint Alphonsus Church, a Catholic church a few miles away from the motel. Wooden and painted bright white, it looked more like an old Congregationalist or Baptist church than a Catholic one, save for the Virgin Mary grotto out front. Sam walked slowly up the path, his hands shoved into the pockets of his jacket. He hesitated, taking a deep breath before he rang the doorbell to the rectory.

Sam clenched his hands into fists, willing them to stop shaking as he took a deep breath.

After a few moments, Sam was greeted by a short, middle-aged priest with a mug of tea in his hand. “Hi… Father Michael Frati?” Sam smiled awkwardly as he quickly regained his composure. “I’m Sam. I called earlier?”

Father Frati nodded and chuckled. “The Princeton Religions major. Come in.” He offered Sam some tea which was politely declined before he led Sam into his living room, gesturing to a couch for him to sit on while he himself sat in a recliner to the side. “So what can I help you with today, Sam?” he asked through a sip of his tea.

“Well…” Sam cleared his throat. “I’m writing my senior thesis on the phenomena of stigmata. Your book’s been a major source of my research and when I found out that you lived only twenty minutes away…”

“You decided to stop by and ask me questions?”

Sam nodded. “Yes. Exactly.”

“Good. What questions did you have?”

“Well…” Sam took a notebook and pen out of the pocket of his jacket. “I noticed during my research and even in your book that there’s not a lot of set lore—dogma—on stigmata. Why is that?” He stared briefly at the St. Francis of Assisi statue on the priest’s coffee table.

Jessica’s grandmother had had one just like it on her living room mantel.

“Well, that’s because there really isn’t any official Church dogma on the phenomena.” Father Frati shrugged. “It’s more of a doctrinal footnote than anything. Also, the experience varies from stigmatic to stigmatic.”

“Right. St. Francis was different from Padre Pio and both were totally different from Catherine of Siena,” Sam paused as he aimlessly wrote something down in the notebook. “Is there anything that is universal?”

“Well, the Odor of Sanctity—the smell of flowers—is one. Wounds that won’t respond to medical care and will remain open and bleeding, but don’t fester. Blood that’s always bright red and fresh. Loss of appetite for anything but the Sacred Host. Usually the stigmatic will be deeply pious and have great sympathy for Christ and His suffering.” Father Frati shifted in his chair as he took another sip from his tea. “But I’m sure you knew all that already from your research.”

Sam nodded as he tucked a piece of hair behind his ear. A pit was starting to grow in his stomach. “Could someone who isn’t even religious, someone who doesn’t have faith… could they get the stigmata? Is that even possible?”

“Officially? No. As far as the Church is concerned, it’s far more likely that the person is exhibiting something purely psychosomatic. But, if God had a purpose in blessing them with it, then I suppose it’s possible.” Father Frati cocked an eyebrow as he placed the mug on the coffee table. “After all, He is omnipotent. Nothing is impossible with God.”
“Of course.” Sam nodded again. He shoved the notebook and pen back into his pocket as he rose from the couch. “Well, thank you, Father. That’s all I needed to know. I appreciate you taking time to see me.” He shook the Father’s hand and the Priest walked him to the door.

As Sam made his way out of the rectory and back to the parking lot, his eyes caught sight of a large crucifix on the far side of the small cemetery behind the church. He walked over to the chain link fence closing the plot off and stared at the crucifix for a long moment before making his way back to the Impala. He fumbled slightly with the keys before he managed to get the door open, climbing into the driver’s seat; he closed the door with a thud.

He sat there quietly for a moment, his hands resting weakly on the steering wheel. His eyes looked over briefly at the empty passenger seat before he turned the ignition on and backed out of the parking space, taking the short drive back to the motel room that seemed to take an eternity.

When Sam came into the motel room, Dean was sitting on the end of his bed, watching television and slowly drinking a cup of coffee, his face still very tired and pale. “So… what’s the verdict on that Dullahan?”

“False alarm, I guess.” Sam shrugged. “But that just means we can spend the next few days getting you healed up.”

“And figure out what the fuck it was that attacked me. Or if it really is that pyscho-whatever crap you were talkin’ about last night.” Dean lifted the coffee cup up to his mouth as he shot Sam a look.

Sam didn’t say anything. He couldn’t say anything.

For as long as he was able, he wasn’t going to.

Chapter End Notes

:: Francis of Assisi was the first recorded stigmatic. He was claimed to have received the wounds in 1224, two years before his death. Pio of Pietrelcina, also know as Padre Pio, was a 20th century stigmatic. Both Pio and Francis were friars and claimed to have had a vision of a seraph before before receiving the wounds. Catherine of Siena was a 14th century nun who was claimed to have suffered from 'invisible stigmata', were she felt the pain of the wounds, but had no physical marks on her body. She was also claimed to have the ability to survive exclusively on holy communion.

:: While stigmata is predominately a Roman Catholic phenomena, there have been a few cases of Protestants receiving the wounds as well.
October 16, 2008.

Rock Port, Missouri.

Dean was sitting on the motel room couch; silently polishing his pistol. He’d cleaned it six times that week already, twice today alone, but he didn’t care. It was a distraction, one that he desperately needed.

He and Sam had spent the weekend in New Jersey, trying with little success to get him to recover from his wounds. By late Friday afternoon, the bleeding had stopped, but the wounds themselves weren’t showing much, if any signs of healing. The pain that accompanied them eased, but not much. Instead, it became a dull ache rather than a ripping sting.

The oppressive smell of roses lingered heavily upon Dean's clothes and body. The smell even managed to soak into the interior of the Impala. No matter how many sponge baths he took or how much cologne he doused himself with, it never went away. Sam, for as many times as Dean asked him about it, always said he couldn’t smell anything.

Dean’s sleep wasn’t plagued with memories of his own torment, but by dreams that did not belong to him. They were still familiar, full of sorrow and suffering. The dreams were accompanied by a voice, one that Dean knew was not his own. Though the voice was heavy with pain and spoke words of doubt, anger and abandonment, it was never malicious. It was always gentle. And Dean didn’t fear it like the voices he heard in his own memories.

Dean knew these dreams weren’t the result of remembering Hell, even if they often bled into one another.

Sam was wrong. The wounds were not psychosomatic. It was something different. Something Dean couldn’t find an answer for.

On Monday, with no answer in sight, Dean scoured the newspapers, desperately searching for a hunt, any kind of hunt. Finally, he came upon what he could only hope was a poltergeist in Northwest Missouri. Sam protested, but the rest of the week was spent on Interstate 70.

By the time they made it into town late that morning, Dean didn’t have many options left for what had caused his wounds. In Dad’s journal, nestled in-between entries about incorruptible saints and weeping statues, he found pages from a biography of Saint Francis of Assisi that seemed to explain the smell of roses and the wounds not healing, but Dean didn’t fit the lore in one crucial way. Dean wasn’t holy. In fact, he didn’t even have Faith to begin with.

But part of Dean knew that it didn’t matter. He was living, breathing proof that saints didn’t have to be immaculate statues and there was a handprint-shaped scar on his shoulder that proved it.

He only read the pages once before he tossed the explanation out and he never mentioned the pages to Sam.
Dean was hoping his brother would find some other option, some other reason for the wounds that didn’t end with halos and harps. But Sam was still holding fast to the theory that it was Dean’s own mind that had caused the wounds, an explanation Dean hated even more. As far as Dean could tell, Sam wasn’t even looking for any others.

Sam seemed distracted. Preoccupied. Secretive.

Dean finished cleaning the gun, placing it back into the pocket of the jacket he had resting over the arm of the couch. He glanced out the window to the waning afternoon light and the empty parking spot just outside their motel room. Dean sighed heavily and took a sip from the glass of whiskey he had sitting on the coffee table, the liquid burning its way down into his empty stomach. He couldn’t even taste it.

Sam had spent the whole week desperately searching for a different one, but no matter where he looked, the answer remained the same.

His search brought him to a Psychology professor at Ohio State, Baptist church in Indiana and to an Episcopal church in Illinois, all under the guise of food and gas runs. He was thankful that aside from the occasional question about where he had run off to and if he could smell anything, Dean wasn’t prying. Instead, he was burying himself in The Job and ignoring it, just as Dean always did.

Sam was walking out of a pizzeria, pizza box in hand, having just paid a visit to the Rock Port First Lutheran Church, when he noticed a yellow Mustang sitting in the parking lot a few spots away from the Impala. A woman with dark hair was leaning her back against the driver’s side door. She was the first and last person Sam wanted to see. “Ruby…” Sam froze at the sight of her.

“Hey Sam,” her voice hummed. She walked over to him. “What’s up with you? You haven’t texted or called me all week. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were ignoring me.”

“No.” Sam shook his head.

“No.” Sam shook his head. “It’s just… Dean’s been sick.”

“Oh. Well he’s a big boy. I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

Sam scoffed as he walked over to the Impala in silence.

“Sam, what’s going on?” Ruby cocked an eyebrow, following him. Concern laced her voice.

“It’s nothing.” Sam unlocked the driver’s side door, putting the pizza on the passenger side of the front seat. He paused for a moment, his fingers drumming on the hood. “I’ve just had a rough week. Dean can be a real handful when he’s sick.” He lied.

“No offense, but your brother’s a handful twenty-four seven, three-sixty five.” Ruby sighed. She pulled a flask from the back pocket of her jeans and held it out to Sam. “Take this. You’re gonna need it.”

Without a second’s hesitation, Sam took the flask from her. “Thanks.”

“If it’s any consolation, I really hope Dean gets better.” Ruby smiled. She pulled Sam into a quick hug, kissing him lightly on the cheek before she pulled away and walked back over to her Mustang.
Sam watched as she drove off, waiting until her car was out of sight before he climbed into the Impala. As soon as he shut the door, he opened the flask and took a brief sip from it. He sighed, relived as the cool taste of iron, plasma and sulfur made its way down his throat. He quickly shoved the flask into the pocket of his jacket and started the car, driving back to the motel.

Dean was pouring himself another drink when Sam walked through the door. His face sank as he watched Sam put the pizza box on the coffee table and sit down on the other side of the couch.

“Pepperoni and hamburger.” Sam nodded hopefully, opening the pizza box, sliding it closer to Dean.

Dean just stared at the cheese and meat covered pie. He could feel his stomach tightening and turning at very sight and smell of it. Taking a sip from his drink, he slid the box back to Sam. “No thanks, man. I’m good.” He shrugged, turning his gaze away from the pizza.

“Come on Dean, you love pepperoni and hamburger pizza.” Sam chuckled, worried. “You’ve barely eaten anything all week. That’s not like you.”

Dean took a sip from his drink. “You wanna know what else isn’t like me, Sam? Getting my back torn up outta fucking nowhere,” Dean scoffed. There was frustration in Dean’s words as much as there was fear. “It’s been a week. A week and I haven’t figured out what this is. And you’ve got the exact same shitty-ass theory you had last Thursday.” He paused for a second then turned to Sam him. “While we’re on the subject, Sam, does your lack of a better theory have anything to with you taking real long trips to ‘get gas’ this week?” He squinted his eyes at Sam. “Or the fact that you’re clearly keeping something from me?” Dean’s question was leading.

“…No, Dean.” Sam glared at him. “I haven’t been seeing Ruby.”

“Really? Then do you wanna explain what you’ve actually been going, then?”

“Yeah. I’ve been doing research.” Sam’s voice was matter-of-fact. “I’ve been trying to figure out what happened to you.”

“And?”

“…Nothing.” Sam shrugged, breathing deep. “I haven’t found any better explanation.”

“So you honestly think this is just some weird, Hell induced, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* thing?” Dean let out a desperate chuckle as he took another sip from his drink, shaking his head. “I’m telling you that’s bullshit.”

Sam paused. “As far as we know, no one has ever gotten out of Hell before, Dean. No one. How can you say that’s not even a possibility?” He swallowed hard.

Dean rolled his eyes as he ran a hand tensely through his hair. “Because the wounds haven’t healed and I smell like a fuckin’ Macy’s perfume counter!” He slammed the glass on the table. “Come on Sam!” He lifted himself up from the couch. “How I’ve been feeling? The dreams I’ve been having? I don’t know what’s goin’ on with me, but whatever the hell it is, it’s *not* my head.”

Dean marched into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him. He leaned his back against it, wiping tears from his eyes. After a moment, he moved over to the sink, pulling off his shirt and the
thin layer of gauze he had wrapped around him. He tossed the wrapping in the direction of the wastebasket, keeping his shirt in hand while he turned his back toward the bathroom mirror, his eyes staring at the brutal gashes and meatball surgery stitches that covered it.

Where scar tissue should have been forming in the wounds, there were bruises. Dark maroon bruises with shallow veins of crimson in them.

Dean dragged his fingers against the length of one on his lower back. When he pulled his hand back around, specks of bright, fragrant blood coated the tips of them.

Dean stared at it for a second before he put the shirt back on. Turning around, he placed his hands firmly on the bathroom counter dipping his head down, a shaky breath leaving his mouth. He stood there for a moment, listening intently to the muffled sound of Sam’s voice talking to Bobby on his cell phone. The word ‘roses’ came from Sam’s mouth, blunt and confident.

Sam could smell the roses. He could always smell them. Hurt and betrayal coursed through Dean, burning the corners of his eyes and tightening his throat.

Dean shook his head. His fingers gripped tighter around the edge of the counter.

Then, out of nowhere, came the sound of a whip cracking.

The pain returned with it, vicious and ripping anew over his back in pulsing and throbbing waves. Dean collapsed, the counter breaking his fall as he tried to pull himself back up again.

Then there was silence, like the calm before a lightning strike. All Dean could hear was his own breathing and the rustle of wings.

The voice returned, echoing through his mind with its sorrow and pain; but it was still gentle. Dean understood it, despite its unknown tongue, just as he had been able to before.

But soon other voices came. But these were Different voices. External voices. Mean voices. They laughed and jeered, mocking him. They also spoke Latin. Even though Dean knew the language, the words the voices spoke sounded foreign and strange to him, almost like he couldn’t understand them.

A barren wreath of thorns was shoved onto Dean’s head and there was more pain. Pain that was sharp, that poked, scratched and itched. It was followed quickly by a blunt strike to the side of his temple and a punch to his jaw. Then another and another as the laughing continued.

The benevolent voice wept and moaned.

Finally, the punches and strikes ceased. The mocking voices disappeared. The voice and it’s weeping soon followed and Dean found himself hunched over on the floor of the bathroom, his body leaned up against the side of the bathtub. His trembling hands pressed against the sides of his head, trying desperately to claw at the digging wreath to no avail. He could feel it poking into his skin, but there was nothing around his head.

Sam stood frozen in the threshold of the bathroom, terror plastered across his face. He had just gotten off the phone with Bobby when he heard a loud thud coming from the bathroom followed by Dean’s muffled cries in what he recognized this time as Aramaic. He had kicked the door open as quickly as
he could to find Dean on the floor, his head covered in cuts and scratches with streams of bright blood running down from them. The back of his shirt was once again soaked in scarlet.

“Sammy.” Dean’s voice shook pleadingly. He looked at his brother through a veil of tears and blood. “Help me. Please.”

Sam darted over to Dean and lifted him up off the floor, sitting Dean on the edge of the bathtub where he cleaned and bandaged Dean’s wounds, wrapping him in the two leftover gauze strips they had on the counter. He changed Dean’s shirt and threw a jacket on him before all but running him out to the Impala, sitting him in the front seat. “I’m taking you to Bobby. Just try to hang on,” he said, his voice laced with fear and panic.

Dean nodded his head weakly. Heavy, pained breaths left his mouth. “It feels like barbed wire wrapped around my fuckin’ head…” His voice cracked while he tugged at the gauze.

Sam quickly ran back into the motel room, grabbing the few things they had already brought in, thankful that they hadn’t settled in yet. He tossed everything haphazardly into the trunk before he jumped into the driver’s seat, his eyes briefly locking on a hunched over Dean, whose hands were pressed firmly against the sides of his head, before he sped out of the parking lot, barreling onto Interstate 29, heading north.

For an hour, aside from the roar of the engine, there was silence in the Impala, only interrupted with the sounds of Sam swearing under his breath every time they hit pockets of traffic and Dean’s quiet sobs as he slipped in and out of consciousness. They had just flown past the Omaha exits when Dean’s voice finally broke the near silence. “Salve, Rex Judaeorum.” His voice was quiet and strained. He lifted his head up from the back of the seat.

“…What?” Sam’s eyes glanced at him quickly.

“Salve, Rex Judaeorum,” Dean repeated, “‘Hail, King of the Jews’. That’s what the bastards said. You know what that—” His voice turned into a series of mumbles.

“It’s okay Dean. Just try to stay awake.” Sam’s fingers tightened around the steering wheel, a deep breath leaving his mouth as he sped the car up.

Two hours later Sam pulled Bobby’s driveway, the tank nearly empty because he didn’t dare stop for gas. He darted around to Dean’s door, opening it and walking Dean out. Sam closed the door with a hard slam that made Dean wince and shoot him a look of worry while they limped up the stairs of Bobby’s porch.

Bobby stood at the door, his jaw tight and his eyes glued on Dean. He helped Sam walk Dean into the house, sitting him down at the kitchen table. Bobby got Dean a glass of water and checked his vitals. With Sam’s help, he removed Dean’s jacket, shirt and the already blood-soaked bandages, inspecting the wounds and removing the sutures before he quickly rewrapped them with gauze from a first aid kit kept in one of his kitchen drawers.

“You boys shoulda come here sooner. A lot sooner.” Bobby said, frustration lacing his words. “This is the Stigmata.”

“…The Stigmata?” Dean’s body stiffened.

“You know…the wounds Jesus received when the Romans crucified him?” Bobby walked into his study, returning with a dust-covered Bible in hand. He pulled a yellowed prayer card from it, placing it in front of Dean. It bore an image of the crucifixion. “Crown of thorns, scourging, nails.” Bobby
glanced at Sam before setting his eyes on Dean. “A spear.”

“Yeah.” Sam nodded, clearing his throat. “They’re also known as the Five Sacred Wounds.” His shoulders hunched slightly.

Dean froze. “But…why the hell am I getting them?” His eyes moved back and forth with trepidation. “I mean, that’s a Catholic thing. Saints get them. I’m not exactly the epitome of chaste piety here,” he chuckled nervously, shooting Sam and Bobby a look of confusion. “…Shit, I don’t even believe in God.”

“Well, given your track record recently Dean, that don’t seem to matter.” Bobby gestured to the handprint scar on Dean’s left shoulder, placing a clean shirt next to him on the table.

Dean glanced at the scar. He bit his lip. “So what… I’m going through this just ’cuz God told some damned angel to yank me outta The Pit?” He grabbed the shirt, putting it on with a wince. "Why?"

Sam took a deep breath and shrugged. “Maybe it's your body having a reaction to your soul’s contact with The Divine.”

“Sam don’t—”

“With everything that’s been goin’ on these last three weeks, it could be just about anything causin’ this.” Bobby said, raising his voice. “We just gotta figure it out.”

Dean grew silent. He shifted his gaze to the prayer card. He picked it up from the table, holding it tight between his shaking fingers. He stared at it for a long moment.

Dean had seen the image of the crucified Jesus many times in churches and on the ends of waterswollen rosaries, more times than he could count. Mostly he saw it as a symbol of man’s vicious towards one another. Of what the powerful could do to the powerless. More rarely he saw it as a symbol of why he could never get behind the idea of God: the need of violence and blood sacrifice and a father allowing his son to die. Now it had become yet another symbol of Heaven’s interest in him. Interest Dean didn’t want. It scared him and, as the wounds now proved, would likely be the death of him.

A pit started to grow in Dean’s stomach. He cleared his throat as he pursed his lips together. “So… How do we stop this?”

Reluctantly, Bobby shook his head. “We don’t. All we can do is deal with this as best we can.”

A sad smile spread across Dean’s face as he placed the card back down on the table. He rose from his chair quickly, his body wobbling. He took a single step away from the table before his head started spinning. Before he could collapse, Sam grabbed him. “I’m gonna put him to bed.”

Sam flung Dean’s arm around his shoulder, starting the slow and clumsy walk upstairs with Bobby spotting them while they ascended.

Sam brought Dean into Bobby’s room, sitting him carefully down on the bed. “…You gonna be okay?” he asked as he untied Dean’s boots.
Dean shrugged. “Yeah, I guess.” A scoff left his mouth as he kicked the boots off, wincing as he shifted on the bed.

Sam nodded as he started to walk towards the door. “Well, I’ll be downstairs doing research if you need anything.”

Sam was about to cross the threshold when Dean’s voice rung out, “You knew.” It was weak, but forceful. “You knew this whole time and you didn’t fuckin’ tell me.”

Sam stopped dead in his tracks. He stood facing the door for a moment before he turned around, looking at Dean apologetically. “I knew how you were going to react. I just wanted to know for sure before I said anything.”

Dean’s eyes narrowed sharply. He shook his head. “I’ve got scourge marks across my back and a crown of thorns digging into my head,” his voice cracked as he made an attempt to yell. “I’m living out Martin Riggs’ version of Easter here. Why the hell didn’t you say anything, Sam?”

“Fine. I didn’t say anything because I was scared.” Sam locked his eyes hard on Dean, a mournful look spreading across his face. “Because this thing…these wounds…are gonna kill you. Maybe not right away but eventually they will and I can’t deal with that. Not again.”

Dean’s eyes lowered to the floor. The pit in his stomach was growing larger by the second. After a moment, he lay down on the bed. He turned to his side with a hiss that was pain as much as it was sadness. He didn’t say anything, feeling heat prickle in the corner of his eyes. He knew if he spoke Sam would hear the tears in his voice.

“I wanted to think that maybe this was something we actually had a shot at stopping. For once.” Sam took a defeated breath, holding it in before he turned and left the room, closing the door behind him.

Dean lay there in silence for a while before he pulled the left sleeve of his shirt up, his eyes squinting hard at the mark on his shoulder. He scoffed bitterly. Burying himself under the covers, he curled his shivering body into itself as that terrible aching sorrow once again wrapped itself tight around his heart.

Chapter End Notes

:: The Lingua Franca of the Eastern Roman Empire (which included the Province of Judea) was Koine Greek, not Latin. That's artistic license on my part.

:: The Five Sacred or Holy Wounds, according to Roman Catholic tradition, actually only pertain to the wounds of the crucifixion itself, ie, the nail and lance wounds (counting each wound individually). Though it's common in popular understanding for the crown of thorns and scourging to be included, counting the nail wounds in groups of two instead.
October 10, 2008.

Bethlehem, Connecticut.

Castiel stood in the motel parking lot, watching as the lights in the corner room went out. Sam and Dean had finally gone to bed. He leaned against the Impala for a moment and looked up at the stars.

The sound of the Heavenly Host’s collective voice buzzed in Castiel’s ears. ‘Dean Winchester has been Chosen. Dean Winchester has been Anointed.’

Castiel had always known Dean’s name and its significance; though the exact circumstances of how and when the man attached to it would be born had always remained a mystery to him until one cold January morning when that mystery ceased. There were no heavenly choirs, just a crying baby and a new mother whose dreams from the first time she felt him kick had told her that angels would keep him safe.

And they had. For twenty-nine years, Castiel watched over Dean. Now he had become something else. Logos. Mashiach. Emmanuel. The Alpha and the Omega. The Son of Man. The Son of God.

The rustle of wings sounded, along with feet walking on wet pavement. Castiel’s head turned in the direction of his brother, one that was under his command.

“Dean Winchester,” Uriel chuckled, shaking his head.

Castiel turned back to the motel. “This was long foretold.”

“It doesn’t mean I approve of it,” Uriel replied. “The boy can barely take care of himself, much less lead Heaven’s Army and take on The Adversary.”

“He will.” Castiel’s words were certain. “He has far more potential than you’re giving him credit for.”

“Potential?” Uriel scoffed. “That boy is a drunk, self-deprecating mud monkey. What sort of—”

“—That ‘boy’ is the Son of God and you teeter on blasphemy,” Castiel snapped, his eyes narrowing slightly.

“Son of God,” Uriel repeated. His tone was biting. “You’re forgetting that we are sons of God as well.”

“Not in the same fashion. We were made, not begotten.” Castiel watched Uriel.

“Exactly. By his very nature, Dean Winchester is now closer to Our Father than any of us have ever been and yet he has no respect for Him, or us for that matter.” Uriel paused, cocking an eyebrow. “Have you ever once heard Dean Winchester pray? His brother, The Abomination, prays more than him.”

“He prays when he needs to. That’s enough.”
The desperate, hopeful prayer of a little boy who lacked an understanding of mortality and wanted his mother back, the doubt-filled prayer of a young man who understood mortality far too well and longed for a cure for a young woman with a brain tumor. There were prayers that were actually intended to be conversations with a ghost and prayers that sounded more like blasphemes, but they were prayers nonetheless, even if Dean never realized it. Castiel had heard them all.

Uriel folded his arms. “Either way, it doesn’t seem fair.”

“Are you questioning Our Father’s will?”

“No. I just can’t understand why Our Father has Chosen of one of these humans again. Especially considering how well the last one worked out.” There was contempt in Uriel’s voice. “And Dean is twice as stubborn and thick-headed as the Nazarene.” Uriel paused. “In fact, if I remember correctly, He was also under your charge.”

Castiel stared at Uriel. His gaze hardened. “Our whole garrison was watching over Him.” His fists tightened. “Not just me.”

Uriel shook his head and sighed, taking a few steps away. “Then you remember why Dean Winchester needs to get his act together and learn some respect. Sooner, rather than later.” With that, Uriel was gone.

Castiel looked at the motel again. As he walked away, fear and doubt began to plague him.

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One Week Later.

Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

Dean had remained in bed for almost eighteen hours; the longest he had ever done so. Every few hours, Bobby would bring him tomato soup and crackers or a glass of water, checked Dean’s vitals and changed his bandages. Sam visited in the early afternoon bearing clean clothes and cherry Jell-O.

Despite Sam and Bobby’s best efforts, Dean barely managed to choke any of the food down.

When he wasn’t being coaxed into eating food that he had no appetite for, Dean slept. It was a sleep filled with dreams or, as Dean now understood them to be, visions. Visions of men draped in Roman legionnaire garb, visions of their mockery and degradation. He watched them twist a crown from a thorn bush and place a scarlet cape around his shoulders, letting it cling to the wounds on his back just long enough before they ripped it off, taking blood clots and skin with it, laughing as he screamed.

One of the soldiers Dean assumed to be Pontius Pilate. He had been dressed in the uniform of an officer and instead speaking words of detached mockery, he spoke words of embittered amusement and frustration. He also didn’t speak Latin. Instead, he spoke in the same language as the voice, what Dean now knew to be Aramaic. His words flowed with ease and confidence, far better than Dean thought they should since he clearly was not speaking his native tongue. In Pilate’s shadow, lit against the flames of hanging wall torches, Dean swore he could see wings.

Suddenly the visions stopped, leaving in their wake a silent, black calm.
Dean’s bloodshot eyes were crusted with dried tears. Eventually he managed to open them, rubbing them as he sat up, groaning as the wounds pulled.

The poking tightness around his head had stopped, as had the throbbing pain on his back, once again becoming that ache he had come to know so well in the last week. This pain was different than any Dean had ever known, different from any pain he’d felt before he died, far different from the pain he had known in Hell.

His suffering in Hell, one way or another, had been Dean’s own and despite being done to his soul, it was wholly physical and cerebral. Though this pain now belonged to him, it wasn’t Dean’s. While it affected both his body and his mind, it was distinctly spiritual and revelatory.

This pain cut deep into his body and his soul, not just one or the other.

Dean sat in bed for a few moments before he pushed the blankets off and stood up, wincing as his stiff legs shook with exertion. He limped as he made his way to the bathroom down the hall. Closing the door behind him, he peeled his shirt off, causing him to double over with a cry of pain as blood-soaked gauze and sore skin were pulled along with it.

He turned the shower on, taking the rest of his clothes and bandages off before lowering himself into the base of the tub. His knees pressed against his chest, the hot water stinging as it struck against his forehead and ran down his back.

He watched absently as ribbons of diluted blood flowed down from his body, turning shades of orange and pink as they swirled their way down the drain. Dean sat there watching the blood swirl until the water started to cool, long after the red had turned into an indiscernible shade of pink. Finally, when his body was almost shivering, he shut the water off and climbed out of the shower, wrapping a towel around his waist.

Dean stared into the foggy bathroom mirror, turning to inspect the wounds on his back and head. What a few hours ago had been jagged bleeding gashes had once again become bruises. Dark maroon wounds where the flesh refused to heal, just as they were before.

He wished more than anything he had never gotten them. He wished that damned angel hadn’t resurrected him in the first place. Whatever Castiel’s reason for it was, command from God or not, Dean hated him for it.

Reluctantly, Dean’s eyes drifted down to his hands, turning his palms upwards. They were almost as perfect as the day they clawed their way out of that pine box, unbroken and unblemished. Sporting little more than calluses he quickly regained thanks to shovels and socket wrenches.

Dean swallowed, closing his eyes. When he opened his eyes again, there were wounds in the centers of each of his palms. Crudely circular and deep, pooling with crimson. The same wounds marked the tops of his feet.

With a blink, the wounds were completely gone.

Panicking, Dean checked his hands and feet over before stumbling back into the bedroom. He grabbed the clothes from his duffle bag, fumbling as he put them on. Once he was dressed, Dean plopped himself down in the armchair at the side of the bed, wincing sharply as he tried his best to calm himself.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dean noticed his half-drunk glass of water on the nightstand. Dean cocked an eyebrow as he reached over and grabbed the glass. The water had become a deep shade
of red. His nose filled with the smell of fermented grapes and the all-too-familiar stench of alcohol as he swished the glass. Wine.

“You gotta be fucking kiddin’ me,” he sighed with a shaken breath.

Dean stared at it before he put the glass to his lips, taking a sip from it. He spit it back out, his eyes wide with shock, wiping his mouth with his hand as he put the glass back on the nightstand. It didn’t taste of bitter grapes and alcohol, but the stale taste of metal and salt. Blood.

A loud flapping noise filled the room, followed by the sound of the floorboards creaking under the presence of body weight. Dean’s eyes lifted, his gaze locking on the trench coat sporting angel standing on the other end of the room.

Sam’s head was planted on the table in Bobby’s study, a stack of books under him, his eyes closed in a dozing half-sleep. Save for a few hours on Bobby’s couch, he had barely slept.

He was awoken by the feeling of a cold, perspiring glass nudging against his arm. He woke quickly, rubbing his face as he stretched to find Bobby standing next to him, beer and a plate of dark brown grilled cheese in hand.

“Thanks...” Sam blinked at him as he grabbed the plate and beer, putting them in front of him on the table. He sighed as he bit into the sandwich.

“Don’t mention it.” Bobby patted him on the shoulder as he sat down at the table across from Sam, sliding one of the books over.

“How’s Dean doing?”

“He’s awake. Just got outta the shower by the sound of it. Guessin’ it must be over,” Bobby sighed as he flipped through the book. He paused as he glanced over to a clock on the wall. “It’s passed three.”

“...The Holy Hour.” Sam nodded as he popped his beer bottle open. “He was like that last Friday too.” He took a gulp from it.

Bobby was quiet for a moment, his eyes scanning one of the pages. “I’m shocked Dean didn’t pick up on the timing. And you, Sam.” Bobby looked up at him, shooting him a knowing look. “You being the ‘Bible believin’ type and all, sure is strange you didn’t.”

Sam’s fingers drummed against the bottle. “I should have said something, I know. It was dumb of me not to. Dean made that pretty clear last night.” Sam took another sip before putting the bottle back down on the table.

“I noticed. And that ain’t just ‘dumb’, Sam. It’s reckless. You boys are really damn lucky you didn’t run into any demons.” There was a note of concerned, even anger in Bobby’s voice.

“I know that,” Sam snapped. “It’s just after everything that’s happened this last year and a half—hell, everything that’s happened this past month—I didn’t know how to...deal with this.”

“I understand that, Sam. Better than anybody. I’m still grieving Dean and him comin’ back sure as
hell don’t make that any easier.” Bobby’s words were blunt but sincere. He looked at Sam sympathetically, his lips fixing into a concerned frown. “But you gotta be stronger than that. There’s a lot more hurt coming Dean’s way and even though he ain’t gonna say it, he’s gonna need you to be there for him.”

Sam was quiet for a long moment. “Dean’s gonna die again, isn’t he?”

“If he doesn’t start eating normal or takin’ communion, he will,” Bobby sighed, shaking his head. “But honestly, I don’t know. Some stigmatics survive for decades, some a couple years. Damned if I can figure out why he’s even getting the wounds in the first place. But whatever the reason is, it’s gotta be big.”

“How big?”

“Like Apocalypse big. Dean crawls outta the grave courtesy of an angel—a creature no hunter has seen for two millennia—then a couple of days later, signs of the End Times start, followed by him turning into Padre Pio. It’s all connected somehow.”

The ceiling above them creaked with the sound of a weight different from Dean’s. It was promptly followed by the muffled sounds of Dean speaking and his steps moving across the floor. Even though Dean’s voice was weaker than normal, it still carried through the floorboards. There was another muffled voice, exchanging words with Dean’s in a strange cadence.

“You think that’s him? Castiel?” Sam stood up from his chair slowly, his eyes glued to the ceiling.

“I’d say so.”

“Should we… ya know… go talk to him?” Sam paused, swallowing hard. His eyes shifted. “Are we even allowed to do that?”

Bobby shook his head. “Whatever he’s sayin’ to Dean right now is for Dean’s ears only. Trust me.”

Chills ran up Sam’s spine.

“Hello Dean,” Castiel’s voice rasped with the normal ethereal gravel that Dean was still trying to accept as normal. “You’re handling the wounds far better than I thought you would.”

There was sincerity in the angel’s voice, but it was lost on Dean as he rose from the chair, his eyes narrowed and his fists clenched. “Oh… So you know about this?” Dean cocked an eyebrow as he slowly inched his way over to the angel, anger making his voice crack.

“Of course I know.” Castiel nodded. “I raised you. The wounds are a part of your resurrection.”

“Well in that case, you can go fuck yourself right where the sun don’t shine,” Dean snapped. “You brought me back to life, knowin’ that your stupid angel mojo was gonna cause me all this bullshit?” Dean pointed to the bruises on his forehead, pushing back his damp hair. “Knowing it was gonna kill me? If this is some kinda joke Cas, I’m not laughing.”

“The wounds are a heavy burden to carry, I know.” Castiel sighed. “But you misunderstand. They are not intended to kill you. Nor are they my doing. It’s not in my power to bestow the Sacred
Then who did?” Dean scoffed. “God?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” Dean’s question was forceful. “Why me? The fuck did I do to deserve this?”

“You are meant to bare them, Dean.” Castiel paused, “You need them for the task ahead of you.”

Dean chuckled, “First, God commands you to pull my ass outta Hell because ‘he has work for me.’ Then, I’m supposed to prevent the fucking Apocalypse. Now, I’m turning into a walking crucifix and makin’ Chianti outta tap water.” He was quiet for a second before a sarcastic smirk spread across his mouth. “Who am I? Jesus Christ Superstar’s follow-up album?”

Cas was silent for a moment, his eyes locked hard on Dean. When he spoke, there was a hint of reverence in his voice. “As a matter of fact... you are.”

Dean’s body stiffened. “…What?” He whispered, his voice cracking.

Castiel’s eyes drifted up to the ceiling. “‘And they shall see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory.'” There was a profound weight and seriousness to Castiel’s words. His eyes lowered again, locking on Dean. “You’re His Chosen Son, Dean. You’ve always been Chosen.”

Dean was silent. His chest heaved as he glanced around the room, refusing to make eye contact with the angel.

“Why do you think those demons tried so desperately to get you to sell your soul? Why do think you were only given a year on your deal? They were trying to get you out of Heaven’s reach before your Hour came. Thanks to our efforts, they didn’t succeed. Unfortunately, your soul is still stained by its time in Hell. It must be made pure again. That’s what the Stigmata are doing. They’re cleansing your soul as well as marking you as Holy. Anointed.”

Dean shook his head, his hands rubbing his eyes.

Castiel pursed his lips, “God... cares for you, Dean.”

“Yeah well, I want him to stop caring about me. I want him to pick another son,” Dean snapped, his voice tinged heavy with fear and anger.

“That’s not an option.” Castiel shook his head, concern spread across his face. “Heaven needs you. You’re the only one with the power to prevent Lucifer’s release and you’re the only one who can fight him if our efforts fail and he is released. This is not a matter of choice, Dean; it’s a matter of fate.”

“I think I have a choice of what I do with my life and I. Don’t. Want. This.” Dean paused, taking a deep breath as his eyes began to gloss over. “You want me to stop Seals from breakin’? Sure. You want me to ice Lilith? I’m down! But... being the Messiah?” He scoffed, shaking his head, “That’s too big, Cas. Way too big. You guys are putting all your money on a losing horse.”

“You don’t think you're worthy of this,” Castiel’s words were matter-of-fact. “The same way you thought you didn’t deserve to be saved from Hell. But trust me Dean, you are.”

The flapping sound once again filled the room. With it, Castiel vanished.
“Damn it.” Dean’s eyes scanned the room, desperately trying to find him, but to no avail. He gritted his teeth. “Ya don’t drop a bomb like that on a guy and just disappear, you son of bitch!” His head dipped as the tears he tried to hold back started to fall.

Soon there was a knock on the door, followed by it being opened. Sam was there, his face wrapped in concern as much as curiosity. “Hey… Me and Bobby heard you talking to someone.” Sam slowly made his way into the room. He briefly glanced over at the glass on the nightstand before fixing his gaze on Dean. “Was it Castiel? Did he tell you why this is happening?”

Dean quickly wiped the tears away, nodding his head. “Yeah, he did.” He took a deep breath as he faced Sam. “You’re not gonna believe it though… maybe you will… I don’t know… I sure as hell don’t…” A nervous chuckle left Dean’s mouth as he rubbed the back of his neck.

“What is it Dean?”

“He told me that—apparently—I’m…” The words caught themselves in Dean’s mouth.

“That you’re what?”

“I’m the Second Coming.”

Chapter End Notes

:: ‘Sons of God’ is a term that appears in various Jewish texts, used to describe angels. It appears most notably in the book of Enoch, where angels have intercourse with human women and produce half angel/human hybrids known as 'Nephilim'. The term is separate from 'Son of God' which, according to Christian belief, is a messianic term.

:: According to the Roman Catholic dogma of transubstantiation, the bread and the wine used in the Eucharist become the literal body and blood of Christ. This doctrine is also held (though often referred to differently) by most Orthodox Christian denominations. Most Protestant denominations, however, believe it be a purely symbolic representation.
“You’re the Second Coming?” Dean’s words echoed through Sam’s ears as he repeated them, his eyes wide with shock. “...of Christ?”

Dean nodded. “Yeah. Apparently.” A shaken chuckle left his mouth as he started to trudge his way back over to the armchair.

“How?” Sam’s question was weighted with fear as much as confusion. As far as he was aware, their mother hadn’t been a virgin when she gave birth to Dean so virgin birth was impossible. Maybe Dean was made a Nazarite in the womb like Samson or John the Baptist, maybe he was the last heir to the Line of David or the Desposyni. Maybe Dean was just like him, claimed in the cradle, but instead of being cursed by a demon, he was blessed by the Holy Spirit. “Mom and Dad were,” Sam paused, furrowing his brow, “together long before you were—”

“I know, Sam.” There was an uneasy crack in Dean’s voice as he lowered himself back down into the chair with a wince. He collected himself before he spoke again, “Castiel said that God ‘Chose me’ as his Son. So… I don’t know. I guess God… adopted me.” Dean shrugged as he ran a hand through his hair.

Sam grew quiet. He slowly walked over to the bed, sitting down on the edge of it. His eyes locked on Dean before focusing on the bruises that marred his forehead, the reddish purple stark against his pale face. A long moment passed before Sam spoke again, “So... that’s why you’re getting the stigmata. They’re marking you as the Son of God.”

“Pretty much, yeah.” Dean sighed, his gaze lowering to the floor. “Cas said they were... ‘cleansing’ me of my time downstairs.”

“Makes sense.” Sam shrugged, folding his arms. “I mean, there could be false messiahs running around too. The wounds are a Sign that you’re the true one.”

“True one?” Dean shook his head, rolling his eyes. His gaze lifted back up to Sam. “Ya know Sammy, you’re takin’ this news a hell of a lot better than I’d hoped you would.”

“I’m not. Trust me.” Sam let out a weary chuckle. “But this explains everything that’s happened to you and in a way”—he paused as he swallowed hard—“this could be a good thing.”

“A good thing?” Dean snapped as he cocked an eyebrow. “Sam, we’ve got no idea what this actually means or even what this is gonna do to me. What this is gonna turn me into.” His torso became rigid as his eyes shifted. “Shit, if I’m the Son of God that means—technically—I ain’t even human anymore.”

“This means that you’re a game changer for upstairs, Dean.” Sam’s words were blunt. “And Jesus is believed to have been completely human and completely divine.”

“Yeah,” Dean scoffed. “And that worked out just fuckin’ peachy for him.”

Sam sighed, frustrated as he looked away from Dean.

Dean’s eyes once again lowered. He bit his lip as he laced his hands together between his knees, “Ya
know what Sammy… Since this started I’ve been having visions of the crucifixion. I’ve felt what he felt and you know what I feel? Pain. Sadness. Doubt. Fear.” Dean’s words were laced with dread. “If that’s any indication, being a Son of God ain’t a ‘good’ thing. In fact, it kinda sucks dick.”

Sam turned back to Dean, staring at him for a moment. “You know, as the Messiah it’s your mission to bring the world Salvation. Redemption. Peace, even.” There was a hint of disappointment in Sam’s voice.

“Except my mission isn’t to bring peace, it’s to bring a sword. I’m the guy that’s supposed to single-handedly blow up Lucifer’s Death Star.” Dean’s eyes narrowed as he looked back up at Sam. “I know you’ve got faith and I know you’re gonna try to find a… ‘silver-lining’ in this and that’s great, but I don’t and I can’t. Not about this.”

Sam didn’t say anything. After a long moment, he stood up from the bed, gesturing to the door. “You wanna tell Bobby or should I?”

“I wanna get this over with.” Dean sighed deeply as he started to lift himself out of the chair. As he got to his feet, Sam placed his hands on his shoulders in an attempt to steady him. He instantly wrenched free from Sam’s grip, shooting him an angry look as he made his way out of the room.

Sam followed behind. As he crossed the room, he paused briefly at the door, drumming his fingers against the door knob before he followed Dean into the hallway and down the stairs.

Dean stood against one of Bobby’s bookshelves, anxiously listening as Bobby read aloud apocalyptic and messianic passages from the Bible and explained bits of lore as Sam added his own knowledge and debated him. Daniel. Isaiah. Ezekiel. Jeremiah. Revelation. The War Scroll. Bobby and Sam had been going at it for what seemed like hours.

When the two of them had finished speaking, Dean cleared his throat. “Alright, so I’m somehow related to King David and I’m supposed to chuck Lucifer and Damien into Mount Doom and bring about a world of rainbows and lollipops. Got it,” he deadpanned with a nod. He quickly glanced over at Sam who was sitting at the table with Bobby before he started to move around the room, his gait slow and tired.

“More or less,” Bobby sighed as he shut the Bible, looking at Dean. “Except there’s one problem: you ain’t supposed to be here yet. Lucifer’s supposed to have his run of the joint first. You’re only supposed to show up after all the shit’s hit the fan. Don’t suppose Castiel said anything about that.”

Despite all the Bible Study, Bobby had taken the news with little more than a brief look of shock and a couple of sighed expletives. Dean was tremendously grateful for that.

Dean nodded reluctantly as he sat on top of one of Bobby’s filing cabinets, a tired sigh leaving his mouth. “Yeah. He said that I also had the power to ‘prevent Lucifer’s release’. ‘’ He paused, shrugging as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “So… maybe Heaven’s pullin’ some kinda preemptive strike.”

“Really?” Sam blinked, his eyes growing wide as looked at Dean. “Did he say how you could stop it?”

“Nope,” Dean shook his head. “Just that I’m the only one that can.”
Bobby groaned as he rose from his chair. “Yeah, well, before we can even think about doin’ that, you gotta get your damn strength back.” He walked into the kitchen, returning with a shot glass and an ornate silver box. Placing both on the table, Bobby opened the box, pulling a bottle of wine out of it. “Right now, this is the best option we got.”

Dean’s eyes grew wide. “Is that…?”

“Consecrated? Sure is.” Bobby nodded. “Some stigmatics are able to survive on Communion in lieu of food. Figured it was worth a shot. Father Connolly over at Saint Michael’s brought it over this afternoon. I helped him out with a revenant a few years back so he don’t ask questions when I ask him for stuff like this.” He whispered a few things in Latin as he poured some of the wine into the shot glass, carefully sliding it down to the end of the table.

Hesitantly, Dean made his way over, his eyes locked on the shot glass. A deep breath left his mouth as he took it into his hands. “Well… *sa’lute.*” Dean gave Bobby and Sam a couple of quick glances before he raised the glass to his lips, slowly drinking the shot. He let the wine sit in his mouth before he gulped it down, the bitter taste of blood washing over his tongue.

“You color’s starting to come back.” A shocked smile spread across Sam’s mouth, relief tinged his voice. “How are you feeling?”

Dean placed the glass back down on the table with a light clank, slowly letting go of it. “Well… I could go for a burger.”

For the first time in a week, the knot that rested heavy his stomach was gone. *Completely gone.*

“Best news I’ve heard all day.” Bobby patted Dean on the shoulder as he made his way into the kitchen. Soon the house was flooded with the smell of pan-fried onions, ground beef, and cheese. The next thing Dean knew, a cold bottle of beer was shoved in his hand and a juicy, grease slathered cheeseburger was placed in front of him. He took a bite out of it with barely a second’s hesitation, a groan of contentment coming from his mouth. “You want anything else?” Bobby asked, a slight smile spreading across his face.

“Nope. I’m good.” Dean shook his head as he popped the bottle open, taking a swig from it. “You and Sam go relax. Watch the History Channel or somethin’.” Dean waved them off, his mouth full of food. Sam and Bobby made their way into the living room as Dean took a few more bites from the burger and sips from his beer.

He managed to eat only half of it before he put it back down on the plate, almost despite himself. Almost.

Dean sat at the table, listening as Sam and Bobby’s chatter became snores accompanied by the sounds coming from the TV. His eyes shifted over to the Bible and prayer card Bobby had pulled out the night before, resting on a corner of the table along with the first aid kit. Dean reached over and grabbed it, sliding the plate away as he placed The Bible in front of him. He thumbed through the pages for a while, his eyes briefly scanning them, before he closed it again.

He quickly rose up from his chair, chugging the rest of his beer. Before he made his way over to the door, he threw his jacket on as he grabbed the Impala keys from a pocket in Sam’s jacket, shoving them into his own. He glanced into Bobby’s living room where Bobby and Sam were out cold before he left the house, closing the door behind him.

As Dean made his way down the steps of the porch, his eyes set themselves hard on the Impala. He paused for a long moment before he walked over to it, running his hand slowly against the hood as
he worked his way over to the driver’s side door. Unlocking it, he climbed in, shutting the door with a thud.

A sad smile spread across Dean’s face as he wrapped his fingers around the steering wheel. This was the first time in a week he had sat in the Impala’s—No. In Baby’s—driver’s seat. It almost felt as though she weren’t his anymore.

Dean sat there in silence before he put the key in the ignition, turning the accessory function and radio on. With a wince, he reached down into his shoebox of cassette tapes, briefly rummaging through them before he pulled one out.

Nirvana. *MTV Unplugged In New York*. Its case had gone missing years ago and its clear plastic and white lettering were scratched and turned yellow with age. Dean gave both sides of the tape a quick glance before he put it into the tape deck.

The Impala was instantly engulfed with the blaring sound of rhythmic feedback from the guitars and bass. Then the singing started. Kurt Cobain’s rendition of David Bowie’s ‘The Man Who Sold the World’. Unpolished and rough, but melodic and gentle. Mournful. Dean mouthed the lyrics as he laid himself down across the front seat, tapping his foot to the drumbeat and mimicking the guitar chords with his hands. Soon the singing was intermingled with Dean’s own off-key and raspy voice. “Who knows? Not me. I never lost control. You’re face to face with the man who sold the world.”

Dean’s chest heaved sharply.

His foot became still as his arms folded across his torso. Dean closed his eyes as his voice slowly faded, leaving only the distorted guitars and vocals coming out from the speakers to fill his ears, save for his occasional quiet mumbling of the lyrics as he let the tape play on.

When the music stopped, Dean shut the radio off and tossed the tape back into the shoebox. He climbed out of the Impala and went back into the house, finding Sam standing in the kitchen, Bible in hand, his eyes glued to its pages. Dean cleared his throat. “Hey Sammy. I don’t know about you, but I could go for a drink and a round of pool. How about we blow this Popsicle stand for a while, hit up Boondock’s or somethin’?”

“You sure you’re up for that kinda thing right now, Dean?” Sam looked up, cocking an eyebrow.

“Totally,” Dean chirped, his voice brimming with confidence. “That shot of Jesus Juice picked me right back up. I’m feelin’ the best I’ve felt in a week and I don’t wanna waste it.”

Sam shot him a look as he put the Bible back on the table. “Alright, but I’m driving.” Sam put his jacket on as he took the keys from Dean. After refilling the gas tank with a couple of gasoline cans Bobby had lying around and picking Dean up a black knit hat, they made their way to the bar.

It was an evening of Jack Daniel’s shots and overzealous flirting. By the end of the night, Dean found himself on his knees out behind the bar; his face between the thighs of a redhead dressed in a denim miniskirt and cut-off Gun & Roses t-shirt, listening to her enraptured blasphemes and feeling her fingers tug at the nape of his neck. Dean hated knowing that such sounds were, in fact, blasphemes and he knew, or at least assumed, that he shouldn’t have been causing them in the first place.

Though Dean enjoyed it, he spent the whole time trying not to weep.
Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

Sam and Dean stayed at Bobby’s house that week. Even though Dean had regained most of his strength thanks to the wine, a hunt would have been impractical given what they would no doubt have to deal with in a week’s time. Bobby advised the same. It became a week of bar hopping and lurid sexual encounters. A week of research and prayer. A week of preparation for what the brothers assumed would be coming Thursday night, just as it had done for the last two weeks.

Nothing came.

Thursday evening came and went, leaving no new wounds or bruises. Not even a sensation of pain. The wounds that Dean already bore didn’t reopen either. Friday morning was equally uneventful and so far, Friday afternoon was proving to be the same. No wounds. No pain. No visions. Nothing.

The lack of new wounds brought as much confusion, anger and fear as the wounds themselves would have.

“You know it’s quarter after noon, right?” Sam called out, his voice laced with concern as he made his way down Bobby’s front porch, the screen door squeaking and slamming behind him. He set his eyes on Dean who was sitting on the trunk of the Impala, a metal flask in hand.

Dean had been out there for hours. At first, he’d just been out there waiting. First sitting out on the front porch and then mindlessly cleaning the Impala. Now he was out there drinking. “It’s five o’clock somewhere, little brother.” A sad smile spread across Dean’s face as he toasted the flask, taking a sip from it. He went to take another sip, but closed it instead, tucking into his jacket.

“Quarter after noon…. on Friday.” Sam’s words were blunt as he walked over to the car, his eyes glancing at Dean, no more wounded than he was the day before, as he leaned himself against the trunk.

“I noticed, Sam,” Dean snapped as he shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jacket. “Maybe Heaven’s starting to give up on me. Maybe they found themselves somebody else. That would be awesome.” Sarcasm laced his words as he hunched his shoulders.

Sam sighed. “You’ve been given the power to prevent the Apocalypse. Why are you so hell-bent on rejecting that?”

Dean shook his head. “Because Huntin’ doesn’t require me to be somethin’ I’m not.” Dean jumped off the trunk with a wince, taking a couple of steps as he faced away from Sam. After a moment, he turned around, guilt covering his face. “Because I’m not just gettin’ the stigmata as a Sign that God Chose me… I’m gettin’ them as a penance for what I did in Hell.”

Sam’s finger’s gripped tightly around the bottom of the back bumper. A moment passed before he asked quietly, “What happened to you in Hell, Dean?” This was a question Sam had both wanted and dreaded the answer to.
The words tried to dislodge themselves from Dean’s throat as his eyes started to gloss over. “Down there… they hacked and… carved and… ripped into me. The way they went about it. Sometimes, it almost felt personal. I guess that it was.” A somber chuckle left Dean’s mouth as he rubbed his eyes. “At the end of every day, I was given a choice: They’d stop the torture if I got off the rack and tortured souls myself. Every day I told them to go fuck themselves. Every. Single. Goddamn day. For thirty years I said ‘no’. Then… one day… I stopped sayin’ it.” Dean’s voice cracked sharply as he bit hard on his bottom lip.

Sam’s eyes lowered to the ground as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his jacket, blinking away hot tears. “I broke in Hell, Sammy. The things I did? The people I hurt? A few rose-scented wounds can’t wash that away. That’s something you can’t wash away. Ever.” Dean’s voice shook bitterly, his puffy eyes not making contact with Sam. “I’m no Spotless Lamb. I’m no Savior and I don’t deserve to be to one either.”

After a moment Sam lifted his gaze back up to Dean, shaking his head. “Dean, that’s not your fault.” There was mournful comfort in Sam’s voice. “Messiah or not, you held out longer than anybody would and if they knew the truth about you, they must have been doing all that they could to get you to break. To corrupt you.” Sam paused, his eyes shifting back and forth as he took a deep breath. “Despite that, Heaven still Saved you and Chose you so they must see something in you that you don’t.”

Dean scoffed as he wiped tears away, shaking his head.

Sam was silent as he took a couple of steps closer to Dean. “But you know, there are ways that you can”—Sam paused—“rectify what you did.”

“Yes? How.”

“Well.” Sam shrugged. “You can change water into wine. If you can do that, you can work other miracles. You can heal people, Dean.”

Embarrassment washed over Dean’s face as he shook his head. “Sam, I’m not—”

Before Dean could object, Sam added quickly, “I’m not suggesting that we set up a tent church in Bobby’s back yard or something… but in our line of work, that’s a damn good skill to have. For whatever reason, the wounds are holding off so we’ve got time to find and work a case—maybe two—and if you happen to heal someone in the process, that won’t be a bad thing. I know you’re itching to get back on the road.”

A sad smile once again spread across Dean’s lips, a weary chuckle leaving his mouth. “That’s the understatement of the millennium.” He was quiet as he walked back over to the Impala, making his way around to each of the tires, nudging them with his boot. “Maybe I should nickname her MacManus. Ya know… ‘And Shepherds we shall be. For thee, my Lord, for thee’?”

A light scoff left Sam’s mouth. “We’re not Irish. Or Catholic. Or Irish-Catholic.”

Dean shrugged. “Technicalities.”
October 25, 2008.

Jericho, Wisconsin.

Despite Bobby’s paternal grumblings, Sam and Dean left early the next morning, having found a possible zombie case in southeastern Wisconsin.

They were making their way out of a Pick ‘N Save supermarket when Dean’s eyes caught sight of an older man sporting a Marine Corps sweatshirt and ‘VFW Post 7221’ baseball cap. He was sitting at a small table on the sidewalk just outside the entrance of the supermarket, a bucket labeled ‘DAV’ and a tray of silk poppy flowers resting on top of it.

He had a Purple Heart and Vietnam Service medal pinned to his hat and a white cane in hand; his eyes were covered by sunglasses.

Dean paused for a second before he walked over to him, dropping a few dollars into the man’s bucket as a respectful ‘Sir’ came from his mouth. Sam promptly followed suit.

“Thanks, sons.” The man smiled as he carefully picked up and handed them flowers. “I appreciate the donation, and the politeness on top of it.”

“It’s no big deal.” Dean shrugged. “Our Dad was a ‘Nam vet. Leatherneck too.” He nodded, his eyes focusing on the man.

“That so?” The man chuckled as he shifted his cane between his hands. “I was with Delta 1/3. What outfit was your Old Man with?”

Dean cleared his throat. “Echo 2/1.”

Sam chimed in, “He actually passed away a couple years ago—”

“Heart attack,” Dean added quickly.

“I’m sorry to hear that. I thank him for his service and for raising good kids.”

Sam nodded, quickly shaking the man’s hand before he started to make his way into the parking lot.

Dean shook the man’s hand, gripping it tight. “Thank you for yours.” Dean’s grip lingered as he patted the man on the shoulder before he finally let go, an anxious smile spreading across his face. As soon as his hand was free, Dean darted into the parking lot.

“What was that?” Sam stopped in his tracks, cocking an eyebrow at his brother.

“Nothing. Let’s go.” There was urgency in Dean’s voice as he backtracked, grabbing Sam by the arm in an attempt to pull him closer to the Impala.

Back on the sidewalk, Sam could see the man pull his sunglasses off, his body tense with shock. His voice rang out, “I can see… I can see! Jesus Christ I can see!” Various supermarket patrons had started to congregate around him among gasps of awe.

Sam’s eyes went wide; they slowly turned to Dean, a knowing smile spreading across his lips.

Defensive panic filled Dean’s voice as he made his way over to the Impala, throwing the grocery bags in the backseat. “I needed to see if I could do it and the guy needed it, alright? The VA’s
probably giving him all manner of shit over his eyes anyways. Now he won’t have worry about it.”

Sam chuckled as he climbed into the passenger seat. “No, that’s just very... Christ-like of you, Dean.”

“Shut up, Sam,” Dean barked. “I’ll curse your stupid hair like that fig tree or something.”

As Dean made his way over to the driver’s side door, a sharp twinge of pain began to radiate from the center of his right wrist. He winced as he quickly pulled up the sleeve of his jacket; expecting to find something, but there was nothing. Not a wound, not a bruise.

Just quickly as it appeared, the pain was gone.

Dean massaged the flesh of his wrist briefly with his other thumb before he climbed into the driver’s seat without a single word.

Chapter End Notes

:: Adoptionism, an early Christian doctrine held by Jewish-Christian sects such as The Ebonites, is the belief that Jesus was not born as the Son of God, but rather, was adopted by God either at the time of his baptism, resurrection or ascension. Shades of the belief can be found in the Gospel of Mark and in Paul's Letter to The Galatians, some of the earliest composed Christian writings. The belief was rejected and deemed heretical by The First Council of Nicaea in favor of the doctrine of Trinitarianism.

:: MTV Unplugged In New York is a live recording of Nirvana's performance for MTV's 'Unplugged' done in November of 1993. It was Nirvana's first album release following Kurt Cobain's death in April of 1994.

:: All four canonical gospels depict Jesus as healing the blind, often on multiple occasions. The Healing of A Blind Man Near Jericho occurs in all three of Synoptic Gospels, though the account varies slightly between the three. The Gospel of Mark gives the man a name (“Bartimaeus”) while The Gospel of Luke does not. In The Gospel of Matthew, Jesus heals two blind men, also unnamed. The Gospel of John depicts Jesus healing a man born blind.
December 4, 2008.

Augusta, Georgia.

A month and a half passed by in much the same way as it always had for the brothers. A vampire nest taken out in Tennessee and a salt and burn in Indiana. But things had also become very different, taking the form of broken Seals and fallen angels. There was a demon not seen for six centuries raised by a witch on Halloween and an angel reborn as a young woman. The brothers also found themselves trapped in a motel just outside of Raleigh the week of Thanksgiving courtesy of a blizzard, the newest round of ever-increasing demonic omens.

Nowhere were things more different than with Dean himself.

He was celibate now. A self-imposed vow he broke only once, with Anna. He also healed people. So often, in fact, that healings had become staples of hunts as much as dug up graves and salt-filled shotgun shells. He could also see the true face of demons and sense the presence of angel grace. These were Signs of what Dean was becoming, of what he had already become. Signs just like the wounds that marked his body. Though weeks had passed since the last one, Dean knew more wounds were coming, he just wasn’t sure when.

All of these were Signs to Sam that Dean had changed. Gone was the man who blared Ziggy Stardust as he sped down the highway, who flirted with anything that moved over shots of Jameson and who could find great joy in the tedious acts of putting antifreeze in an engine and snow tires on a car. Though Dean still did all of these things, most times they seemed empty. Aimless. Almost as though Dean was doing them only because he was expected to do them.

Dean wasn’t really Dean anymore and he couldn’t be. He was a mystic. A saint. He wasn’t even human anymore. He was The Son of God. The Word made flesh, casually drinking beer with him on the hood of the Impala. All of this frightened Sam because it meant that the man he had known for twenty-five years as his older brother was dying again, if he wasn’t dead already.

Sam had watched Dean die before, countless times. But he had watched Dean die as a man, with ugliness and tears and shrill screams and a reluctance to give up his soul. He watched Dean die as a human being. But now when that time came, as Sam expected it would, Dean was more likely to die with a beatific look upon his face as he quoted archaic scripture. Willingly giving up his soul to The Father without a shred of fear.

That fear was why Sam had been avoiding Ruby as much as possible. He hadn’t seen her since they met Anna and he wanted to keep it that way.

Sam was especially worried about that on this particular hunt. A twelve year old girl was possessed by a demon known as Naamah, one of Lilith’s cohorts. She was in the process of breaking yet another Seal.

It took forever—and one heated argument over using the knife versus exorcism—but the brothers
finally managed to get her into a devil’s trap painted hastily on the bottom of the living room area rug.

Before they could even attempt to exorcise her, she hurled her mother and Dean clear across the living room and into the kitchen with a wave of her hand, among the sound of sliding kitchen tables and crashing plates.

Sam, on the other hand, didn’t move an inch. A grin spread across his face as he watched her walk right into the trap.

“Nice try.” Sam glared, glancing quickly into the kitchen where he watched Dean—hurt—pick himself up off the floor and limp over to the girl’s half-conscious and bleeding mother. “But you should know better. That’s not gonna work on me.”

Naamah just smirked at him. “Pretty impressive there, Boy King.”

“You’ve got no idea.” Sam’s brow furrowed as he extended his hand out, open and fingers spread, his eyes focused on Naamah. Her eyes grew wide with pain as her body started to spasm. Sam’s fingers and teeth clenched as she began to choke and gag.

Naamah retched, but no black smoke billowed out of her. Sam clenched his fingers tighter, his knuckles turning white. His arm was already shaking and a thin stream of blood had started to run down from one of his nostrils when he could hear the sound of Dean’s steel-toe boots moving across the linoleum of the kitchen floor.

“Sam! You okay?” Dean yelled, his voice strained with panic.

Sam lowered his hand, wiping his nose with his sleeve as discreetly and quickly as possible just before his brother entered the room. “Yeah, I’m fine.” He cleared his throat. “You okay?”

“Peachy,” Dean winced. He limped his way over to Sam, a hand pressed firmly against his shoulder. He paused, shooting a look of confusion at his brother. “How the hell did you not go flyin’?”

“I don’t know. I think she was just aiming at—”

“You. You… reek,” Naamah spat, her exhausted face reeling in disgust. Her eyes briefly turned black as Dean reentered the room. “You smell like you took a bath in some old lady’s potpourri bowl. Roses. It’s disgusting.”

“Well.” A sarcastic chuckle left Dean’s mouth as he leered at Naamah, the twisted, grotesque figure underneath her girly visage. “With a face like that I’m sure all the boys are just linin’ up to take you to the Enchantment Under the Sea dance, so I guess we’re square.”

“Really?” Naamah laughed. “Mocking a middle school girl because she said you smell bad? I didn’t think you’d be so damn petty, Son of David. Then again, you are Alastair’s Star Pupil so you’re not that much of a saint to begin with, right?” A knowing grin spread across her meatsuit’s mouth. “I’m not scared of you. None of us are.”

Dean’s grip tightened around his shoulder, his eyes narrowing sharply. “Tell someone who gives a fuck.” Dean paused for a second before his voice boomed throughout the living room, “Exorcizamus te, omnis—”

As soon as the first word of the prayer fell from Dean’s lips, Naamah’s head jerked violently back, letting out a painful, bloodcurdling shriek. The smoky, black essence flew out of her mouth so quickly that it had already dissipated into a charred ring of burning ash and sulfur by the time the girl
she’d left behind collapsed to the floor with a thud.

Both brothers froze, their eyes fixed on the sight.

“Dean…” Sam swallowed hard and his chest heaved as his gaze shifted nervously between his brother and the now utterly motionless girl lying inside the charcoal ring.

“Holy… shit,” Dean’s voice trembled, his eyes wide with shock.

“Dean. She’s not breathing.”

Dean quickly collected himself, darting across the room to the motionless girl. He crouched down on the floor next to her, placing a hand lightly on her forehead as he whispered, “Get up.”

The girl’s torso jerked itself forward with a loud gasp. Her eyes darted around the room with fear before they locked on Dean, still crouching on the floor next her. Tears started to fill her eyes as she lunged at him, wrapping her arms tightly around his waist as she buried her face in his chest and sobbed. “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! That thing made me— “

Dean hugged her back, his voice calm and reassuring, “It’s okay. You did nothin’ wrong. You’re gonna be okay now. Everything’s gonna be okay.” He held the girl tight as he carefully helped her to her feet and walked with her over to her mother.

The mother stood in the threshold of the kitchen, clutching Dean’s beanie in her hand. “Thank you!” She ran over to her daughter and hugged her tightly. She looked up at Dean apologetically. “I’m so sorry about before. I thought y’all were some kinda Satanists. I didn’t know—”

“It’s no problem.” Dean cleared his throat. “Just… do me a favor and keep this to yourself, okay? Me and my brother like to keep this kinda stuff on the down-low as much as possible.” Dean shot her a nervous smile as his eyes took note of the silver cross hanging around her neck.

The mother nodded as she handed Dean his beanie, her eyes locking on the mess of thin bruises on his forehead. Dean quickly shoved it back onto his head as he marched back over to Sam, grabbing the hunting duffle from the living room floor.

Sam whispered as he followed Dean into the foyer, “Dude… Do you realize what you just—”

“I know, Sam. I know,” Dean wheezed as he flung the duffle over his shoulder. “We’ll talk about it later, alright? Let’s just get the hell outta here.” He gave the mother and daughter a quick glance as he made his way to the door.

Dean was reaching for the door handle when it happened. The duffle bag fell to the floor as the sound of a whip cracking and malicious laughter filled his ears.

Then there was The Pain. Tearing, poking, scratching pain that ripped itself afresh across his back and drove into his head.

Dean collapsed to his knees as he cried out, his hands pressed firmly against his head. Blood had already started soaking through his beanie, leaving behind splotches of red against the olive green fabric.

“Dean!” Sam darted over to Dean. He grabbed the duffle as he lifted Dean to his feet, throwing Dean’s arm around his shoulder before they bolted out of the house and down the front steps.

The mother and daughter just looked on in shock.
As they reached the driveway, Dean fell to the ground. A heavy, invisible weight pressed down upon his shoulders. A dead weight that splintered and chaffed against his skin.

As he fell, the night chilled concrete driveway disappeared, turning into a dusty and parched white brick alleyway bathed in burning late morning sun. The shouts of Roman Soldiers and the cracking of their whips echoed through Dean’s ears.

It was then that he saw her. Ima. Mother. Dean knew it was her. The voice in his head, the one he’d come to know so well, called her such with fear and desperation. It broke at the sight of her. She was standing amongst the crowd, garbed in all black with tears streaming down her face. A man the voice called James—Brother— held her back protectively, fear and anger plastered on his face.

Sam shoved his hands under Dean’s arms, picking him up again and he was back on the frost covered driveway, rapid clouds of breath escaping his mouth.

Sam quickly brought him over to the Impala, leaning him against the trunk of it as he rummaged through the pockets of Dean’s jacket, trying to find the car keys. Finally, Sam found them and unlocked the back passenger door, quickly sitting Dean down on the seat.

An eerie calm washed over Dean as the sound of Sam’s panicked mumblings became utter silence. Silence, save for the familiar sound of flapping wings. Dove wings. The old leather smell of the Impala’s cabin gave way to the stench of bodily fluids and dirt. It was followed by a feeling of rope burn around his forearms and the pointed pressure of cold iron against the flesh and tendons of his inner right wrist.

“Brother…” Dean looked up at Sam, his eyes with fear and tears. “Don’t— don’t let her watch.”

Sam looked at Dean with scared confusion. "Wh-what?"

Dean's mumbled words weren't in English. They were in Aramaic.

“Don’t don’t let her watch," Dean pleaded. "Please."

The sound of a hammer striking hard against metal and wood filled Dean’s ears, along with an agonizing wail. Pain. Dull pain that drove itself through skin, tendon, vein, and muscle and scratched against bone.

Dean’s eyes slammed shut as a guttural yell bellowed from his mouth. He cradled his bleeding wrist tightly in his other hand, trembling and drenched in crimson.

Sam caught him before he could fall out of the car and onto the pavement, his eyes wide as bruises appeared on the front and back of Dean’s left wrist. The bruises turned red and split open, becoming a circular, deep, bleeding wound. Dean screamed again.

Sam quickly pulled Dean’s feet into the cab as he ripped his own coat off, laying it across his brother as he haphazardly wrapped gauze from the duffle bag around both of Dean’s wrists. Sam removed Dean’s boots and socks just as bruises began to appear on his ankles. They, too, opened into wounds with yet another pair of guttural screams.

Sam fought back terror-ridden tears as he wrapped the rest of the gauze around Dean’s feet, the blood already soaking its way through the bandages. “Please for the love God, Dean. Just hang on. Please.”

“It… hurts so bad… Sammy,” Dean sobbed, this time in English. He was nearly motionless as he lay spread across the back seat. “I— I can’t move my hands.”
Sam sped the whole way back to the motel, the sound of his brother’s labored half-breaths and shaken cries filling the cabin.

It was early afternoon and Sam was exhausted.

He sat squeezed into the motel room’s arm chair, a cold cup of coffee resting in his hands as he tried to keep his eyes open. Sam listened to the sound of his brother’s strained breaths as he went in and out of what Sam could only hope was sleep, praying that the sounds continued, just as he had done all night and morning.

There was almost nothing Sam could do for Dean. Bobby was too far away and a hospital would ask too many questions. Medical care itself was almost futile beyond keeping the wounds bandaged.

Finally, Dean stirred awake. “Hey Sammy…” Dean’s voice came out more as a cry than a breath as he opened his eyes.

Sam stumbled out of the arm chair, placing the coffee cup haphazardly on the TV stand before he walked into the bathroom, coming out with a stack of fraying, pink tinted wraps as he walked over to Dean’s bed. A deep breath left Sam’s mouth he checked Dean’s vitals. “How are you feeling?”

“Aside from the nails tugging on my wrists and ankles every time I breathe? I’m doin’ alright.” Dean winced through a forced smile as Sam rewrapped his feet. He shrugged. “Better than last night, anyway.”

Sam was quiet as he moved on to Dean’s wrists. “I’ve gotta get some fresh bandages. We’re getting down to the wire here.”

After going through the eighth full roll of gauze, Sam had started reusing the bandages. The shower rack was now draped with drying strips of cotton and the sink was stained with a red tinted ring circling the drain.

“Well, Cas and Chuckles are outside...” Dean’s head wobbled as Sam sat him up, changing the wrappings around his torso and head. “I’ll just give ‘em a yell if I need anything.” He tried to put his hand around the glass of water Sam put to his mouth, but his fingers were immobile. He let out a frustrated breath as Sam lowered him back down, turning onto his side with a sharp hiss as he closed his eyes.

Sam nodded anxiously as he walked over to the motel room window, Dean’s water glass in hand, and peered outside from behind the blinds.

The two angels were standing at the second floor staircase, just outside the room.

Sam let out a disheartened chuckle as he walked over the bathroom sink, dumping the leftover water from Dean’s glass and refilling it before he rinsed his hands off. As he went to reach for the soap, Sam stared down at his hands and the traces of his brother’s blood, still encrusted into his cuticles and under the tips of his fingernails.

Instead of grabbing the soap, Sam just shut the water off.

He took the glass of fresh water back over to Dean, setting it down on the nightstand. “You know
Dean, I was thinking.” He paused, swallowing hard as he sat down on his bed. “When you’re feeling better… we should take a trip down to New Orleans. See if we can find you a hoodoo priestess or a faith healer. Something. *Anything.* Try to get you back to normal.”

“No, Sammy. We’re not doin’ that.” Dean’s voice was weak and already half asleep, but blunt.

Sam shook his head, a deep sigh leaving his mouth. “*Come on, Dean. Don’t you wanna at least try—*”

Dean opened his eyes again, cocking an eyebrow at Sam. “This is an *act of God.* Remember? There ain’t nothin’ we can do about it. We just gotta *deal with it* as best we can.” He sighed, frustrated, as he shifted on his bed. After a moment of silence, a morose look appeared on his face. “*Somebody’s gotta carry this burden, Sam. Might as well be me.*”

“Have you looked at yourself in a mirror lately?” Sam scoffed. “At the rate you’re going, Dean, you won’t *be* carrying it for much longer.”

Dean’s tired eyes locked hard on Sam. “Sam… if I could deck you in the face right now I *f*uckin’ would.” There was pained rage in Dean’s voice as he attempted to sit up. “How dare you? You’re the one who said I needed to accept this Messiah thing. To see it as a *blessing,* despite knowin’ Goddamn well what it was doin’ to me.” Dean’s eyes started to gloss over as he gritted his teeth. “Well, I *have* accepted it, as much as I can anyway, and now—suddenly—that’s a *problem* for you? You’re a *f*uckin’ hypocrite.”

“Dean—”

“Shut up, Sam.” Dean quickly lowered himself back down on the bed, turning away from his brother.

“Will you just—“

“I said, ‘shut up’!” Dean snapped, his voice cracking sharply.

Sam sat there in silence for a moment before he grabbed his jacket off the end of his bed, throwing it on his shoulders as he quickly left the motel room, slamming the door behind him. He marched himself over to Castiel and Uriel, angry tears welling up in his eyes. “*Both* of you. You get in there and you *fix* my brother. *Now,*” Sam demanded as he pointed at the door.

Uriel scoffed, disgust filling his voice. “You listen to me, you tainted mud monkey. Your brother might be able to give us orders, but *you* certainly—“

“That’s enough, Uriel,” Castiel snapped. He put his hand in front of Uriel as walked over to Sam. “What you’re asking of us isn’t possible, Sam. We can’t do that.”

“Can’t or *won’t*?” Sam’s eyes narrowed.

Castiel sighed, shaking his head. “I understand that watching Dean suffer is hard for you, but he *must* go through this.”

“Why? Why does he *need* to suffer? Hasn’t he suffered enough already?” Sam’s question was desperate. “He spent *thirty years* in Hell being The Lords Suffering Servant, letting himself get tortured despite *every offer* to make it stop. Doesn’t that count for something? *Anything*?”

“Of course it does.” Castiel’s words were as blunt as they were sincere. “But he *still* spent his last *ten years* in Perdition torturing souls. That left a mark on Dean’s soul. A mark that requires a tremendous
amount of grace and penance to remove. To make him pure again.”

Sam was quiet for a moment before he chuckled bitterly. “You know… my whole life… I’ve always had Faith. Always.” He shrugged, nodding sarcastically. “It’s good to know that it’s all meant something.”

Castiel watched Sam carefully. “Be careful, Sam.” There was caution in Castiel’s voice. “Envy, no matter how insignificant, doesn’t suit you.”

Sam stared at the angels, a look of disgust spreading across his face. “You think I’m… jealous of Dean?” Sam’s fists clenched. “I’m not.”

“Yes. Of course you are.” A chuckle left Uriel’s mouth. “With that depravity in your veins, Boy, that’s the least I’d expect from you.” He smirked.

Sam glared at them as he marched over to the Impala and climbed into the driver’s seat, slamming the door behind him. He quickly started the car and barreled out of the parking lot.

Sam was sitting in the Impala, a CVS bag full of gauze wraps resting on the seat next to him. A local rock station that he hadn’t bothered to change played Red Hot Chili Peppers’ ‘Under the Bridge’, low and desperate, through the speakers. His eyes quickly darted around the parking lot before he took a flask out of the pocket of his jacket. He tapped the mouthpiece tensely against his hand until the dregs of the cool dark red liquid dripped onto his palm. Sam licked it with a relieved sigh.

It was then that his phone went off with a text message: ‘You need another refill? Drank it all that fast?’

Sam responded back quickly: ‘Yeah. Blew the last of it trying to exorcise a demon last night.’

A moment later, he got another text: ‘Getting shabby again?’ There was a pause. Then another text: ‘I’m at The Red Roof Inn. Room 15. I’ll be waiting.’

Sam sat there for a moment. He stared down at his phone and then at the empty flask before he shoved both into his jacket and pulled out of the parking lot.

Dean was in pain. All kinds of pain. Pain that was mockery in the form of signs hung around his neck and crowns placed upon his head. Pain that made his shoulders, forearms, and back raw. Pain that pierced straight through tendons and muscle. Pain that twisted itself inside his wrists and ankles and made his lungs burn every time he breathed. Pain that was the sound of a mother’s sobbing and the utter silence of a father.

Pain that blended all together into a cacophony of suffering.

It was the suffering of memory. Of experience. Of one man’s untimely demise. It was suffering that was completely human. Vivid, horrific, tragic—but also sacred—mysterious, mystical, ecstatic.
It was suffering Dean never wanted and wasn’t worthy of, but suffering he bore as best he could.

It was in this state, as he lay half asleep in his bed, that Dean heard it. A voice. It whispered his name. Soft and quiet. Comforting, but sad. At first he couldn’t recognize who it belonged to, but somehow he still knew it, like a half-lost memory.

Then Dean remembered.

It was her voice. Mary. His Mary. Mom.

Dean’s eyes snapped open and he sat up to find her standing at the end of his bed. She was wearing her favorite white sundress. One he remembered being her favorite. “…Mom?” Dean’s salt crusted eyes went wide with shock as his voice shook. “Is this— is that really—”

“It’s okay, angel,” Mary cooed. A sad smile spread across her face she walked over to him. “I’m here.” She cupped Dean’s face in her hands briefly before she placed them delicately on his temples. He felt a sharp tug that made him wince as the poking pressure eased itself around his head.

Dean opened his eyes again to find her holding that vicious crown and the nails in her hands. She placed them on the nightstand before she sat herself down on the bed next to him, slowly lowering his head into her lap as she tenderly stroked his blemished forehead.

Dean curled his body up closer to her comfort as best he could.

“You know… I remember the first time I felt you kick. It was such a weird feeling, knowing I had this… life inside me.” A quiet hum left Mary’s mouth in between her words. “That night, an angel came to me. They told me that you were special and that they’d be watching over you.” She chuckled as she wiped away tears from her eyes. “I thought it was just some whacked out dream. I always hoped it was.” She paused for a moment, shaking her head. “I never wanted any of this for you, Dean. If I could take it all back, I would.”

“I know, mom.” Tears started to well up in Dean’s eyes. “Believe me. I know.”

The first thing Sam noticed as he walked into Ruby’s motel room was the smell. A blend of bleached sheets and towels, and lived-in room-funk. It smelled like a motel room and nothing else. No lingering stench of fermented grapes in what had previously been half-drunken glasses of water. No engulfing scent of roses, like the odor that had even begun to linger upon his own clothes as much as it did Dean’s.

“You look awful, Sam.” A concerned look spread across Ruby’s face as she shut the motel room door behind them. “You must have really had a rough night last night.”

“Yeah,” Sam’s voice shook as he breathed heavily. “Naamah’s one tough demon. She beat Dean up pretty bad.”

“He got the shit kicked out of him again?” Ruby chuckled. “That’s been happening a lot lately.”

“Yeah, it has,” Sam's eyes focused hard on Ruby as he stared down at her, roughly pulling her closer to him by her ornate belt buckle.
Ruby was a desperately needed escape from the constant pressure of caring for his brother. Ruby was nice curves in a low-cut tank top and tight jeans. She was body heat and sweet moans not held back as they moved together in an impassioned rhythm, skin against skin.

Ruby didn’t mutter Aramaic in her sleep when sacred vision and dream melded together in her subconscious. There was no glow that washed over her face like a halo against the flames of a burning grave in the dead of night. Angels didn’t follow her around and bend their knee to her.

Ruby wasn’t a constant reminder of how truly damned he was.

Without another word, Sam picked Ruby up by her thighs, wrapping her legs around his hips as he slammed her against the door. He kissed her deeply, all tongue and bitten lips. He could taste the faint traces of sulfur on her skin, and smell it within her hair. Despite himself, he let go to pull her jacket and shirt off, and she lifted her bare arms to wrap around his shoulders.

In a strange way, Sam had missed Ruby’s smell.

Ruby kissed him back with equal force as Sam ripped his coat and flannel shirt off, letting both garments fall to the floor as he carried her over to the bed, dropping her down on top of it. A grin spread across Ruby’s face as Sam straddled her, a deep moan escaping from his lips as he rocked his hips roughly against hers.

“You know Sam, I missed this. A lot,” she purred as Sam undid the button and fly of her jeans, exposing black panties.

“Me too,” Sam growled as he kissed his way down Ruby’s torso, licking over her breasts and stomach, her gasps and moans filling the room.

Ruby quickly reached for the knife on the nightstand, running it down the space between the bottom of her naval and the hem of her underwear, a thin stream of blood seeping out of the wound.

Sam wrapped both of his hands around her hips, his fingers digging into her skin in anticipation. A bloodcurdling scream came out of Ruby’s mouth as the stench of burning flesh permeated the air.

There was a thumping in Dean’s chest. Fast. Aggressive. Panicked. Strained.

It blended viciously with the burning pressure in his lungs, radiating throughout the whole of his chest, growing more intense with each passing moment. Then suddenly, it stopped. Cold. The visions faded and the pain ceased, giving way to silent stillness.

Then out of the blackness and calm came a sharp twinge of pain to the left side of his ribcage. It dissipated just as Dean’s eyes opened.

The first thing Dean noticed, apart from the ache that replaced all the pain his body had been subjected to, was the twitching of his thumbs. Subtle and disjointed.

Slowly, Dean lifted his hands up to his face. He examined them through a haze of drying water and salt and half open eyelids, watching his fingers move in clumsy, broken motions as he opened and closed them.
His eyes then glanced down to the worn gauze wrapped around his wrists and the thick blotches of crimson that stained the fronts and backs of them. Dean sighed, lowering his hands down to the comforter as his gaze shifted knowingly over to the end of Sam’s bed and to the angel sitting on it. “Ya know, I’m really not a fan of this fetish of yours, Cas. Watchin’ people sleep is creepy,” he rasped.

Castiel put the Bible he was skimming through down on the bed next to him. “While in a state of mystical ecstasy, you’re extremely vulnerable.” He rose from the end of the bed, his gaze focusing hard on Dean. “It’s my duty to protect and guard you while you’re communing with The Spirit.”

“Is that what it’s called? Coulda fooled me. I thought it was crucifixion.” A tired chuckle left Dean’s mouth as he glanced around the room, empty aside from the two of them. “Uriel bailed, huh?” He looked quickly at the clock on the nightstand. It was almost four. “Where’s Sam?” Dean’s question was equal parts concern and near indifference as he sat up with a pained hiss.

“Uriel had other duties to attend to and your brother left a couple of hours ago.” Castiel paused as he walked over to the nightstand, grabbing a silver flask resting on top of it and handing it to Dean as he unscrewed the cap. “He was rather… upset.”

Dean scoffed, taking the flask into both of his uneasy hands as he took sip from it, choking down the taste of wine that quickly turned into blood before handing it back to Castiel. A moment passed before he shoved the blankets off, moving himself around to the side of the bed. His gaze shifted instantly down to the gauze wrapped around his feet, marred with red blotches on each side of both ankles. Dean took a deep breath, biting his lip as he lowered his feet to the floor.

“Careful.” Castiel caught him just as his feet touched the ground, his legs instantly buckling under the pain. “I admire your determination, but it’s still going to take some time for them to fully heal.” He carefully placed Dean back on the bed, steadying him.

“Awesome.” A sigh left Dean’s mouth. “I’m a gimp and I’m covered in my own blood.”

Castiel watched him for a moment. “I could wash you myself if you’d like.” His suggestion was nonchalant, yet sincere.

“What? No!” Awkward panic covered Dean’s face. “You don’t gotta do that. I’ll be fine. Trust me.”

“I insist. It’s my duty to care for you, now most of all.”

Before Dean could object any further, Castiel disappeared into the bathroom, returning with some clean clothes, towels, and an ice bucket filled with water. He placed them on the nightstand as he helped take Dean’s t-shirt off, undoing each of Dean’s wrappings before he sat himself down next to Dean, the bucket and a washcloth in hand.

“Man, this is awkward,” Dean mumbled, rubbing his eyes. He hissed as Castiel put the damp washcloth to his back.

Castiel furrowed his brow. “I’ve touched your soul Dean. I fail to see how this could be uncomfortable.”

Dean bit his lip, shaking his head with a nervous chuckle. “Puttin’ it like that ain’t helpin’, Cas.”

Castiel was silent as he rung out the cloth and started to wash Dean’s head. “Soldiers mend each other’s wounds during battle. This is no different.” A sigh left his mouth as he moved on to Dean’s feet.
Dean shrugged. He watched as Castiel wiped his wrists. “Hey Cas.” Dean cleared his throat. “Why are my wounds in the wrists? I thought most stigmatics usually get ‘em in the palms.”

“They do. The Stigmata are usually bestowed to act mainly as a source of inspiration to the mystic or to their Community of Faith. As such, the details of their appearance are affected by the collective perceptions of the Faithful. Artistic depictions of Christ’s suffering. Paintings, crucifixes, mosaics.” Castiel took the now bloodstained washcloth and red-tinted water bucket back into the bathroom, returning with a clean t-shirt.

“So they’re… holy tulpa?” Dean cocked eyebrow as Castiel helped him put the clean shirt on.

Castiel nodded. “In reality, the palms can’t support the weight of a body. The Romans crucified through the wrists.” He paused, sitting himself down on Sam’s bed across from Dean. “Your wounds appear the way they do, Dean, because you’re reliving Christ’s Passion. Your wounds are His wounds.” There was a weight and reverence to Castiel’s words.

Dean’s eyes quickly looked down at the now-bruises on his wrists. “I still don’t get why I was Chosen.” His chest heaved as he shook his head. “I mean, I know why… but I don’t have faith. I never really have and I can’t have it. What I got now is knowledge and that ain’t the same thing.”

Castiel was quiet for a moment, deep in thought. “In a way, your lack of faith makes you more worthy. Your doubt gives you humility.”

Dean let out a weary scoff.

“Faith, as necessary as it is, can have the adverse effect of breeding pride,” Castiel mused. “Sometimes those with no Faith at all lead lives of far more virtue and righteousness than those with an abundance of it.”

Dean shook his head. “I’m not gonna argue with that one.”

“Though Jesus had faith, he too had his doubts, the same as you.”

Dean looked at Castiel suspiciously. “Really?”

“Yes.” Castiel paused. “He told me once that to even have Faith, you need to wrestle with it.”

Dean was silent for a moment. “You must have known him pretty well, then, huh?”

Castiel nodded. “You two are a lot alike. Like you, Jesus was the dutiful eldest son, a protective older brother. He was also very stubborn.” He took a deep breath. “But he cared about others deeply and had a strong thirst for justice.” He looked at Dean sincerely. “You might not give the Sermon on the Mount, but you’d certainly drive the money-changers from The Temple.”

Dean smiled reluctantly. “Well, at least I know I’m doing somethin’ right.”

“You’re doing a lot right, Dean. Far more than you could know”.

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Sam stood in the bathroom, scrubbing his hands furiously. He could hear the sound of Ruby moaning through the door.
He quickly shut the water off, making his way out of the bathroom and back over to the bed where Ruby was sitting, a bag of ice against the top of her naked hip. “I’m sorry Ruby. I don’t know why that happened.” He swallowed hard, trying to hide the panic in his voice.

“It’s okay, Sam. I know why it happened.” She winced as she removed the ice from her hip; the five small burn marks in the shape of fingernails had already started to disappear. “Dean’s been getting ‘injured’ a lot lately and you’ve had to take care of him.” Ruby shot Sam a knowing look as she placed the bag of ice on the nightstand.

Sam cocked an eyebrow her. “What exactly are you talking about?” He chuckled nervously.

“Dean has stigmata,” Ruby’s words were sincere and blunt as she stood up from the bed. “Not only that, he’s the Chosen One for the Light Side of the Force. I get why you were keeping it under wraps. It’s smart of you do to it. But you don’t have to keep it from me.”

Sam stood there for a moment. He was utterly silent as he grabbed his flannel shirt and jacket from the floor, quickly making his way over to the motel room door.

Ruby sighed. “There’s barely a soul in Hell who doesn’t know that, Sam. That’s why Dean got the deal he did and why you couldn’t bargain for him.” Concern enveloped Ruby’s face as she followed him. “But everybody down there thinks Dean is too tainted now. They’re banking on him being too tainted. Lilith most of all.”

Sam kept walking.

“Sam, all I’m trying to do is help you.”

“I know that.” Sam stopped in his tracks, just short of the door. “I just don’t think I should be doing —” he paused, turning as he shot Ruby a look “—this anymore.”

“You said you stopped Naamah from breaking a Seal last night.” There was worry in Ruby’s voice. “But you said you couldn’t exorcise her, right?”

“Right.”

“Then who did?” Ruby paused. “Dean?”

Sam nodded.

“Well that’s a big problem.” Ruby shook her head. “Now Lilith knows that Heaven’s found a way to fix Dean and that he’s getting stronger on top of it. She’s going to go after him, sooner rather than later, because once he’s at full Pinball Wizard capacity, that’s it. Game over. You’ve gotta kill her before she gets to Dean.” There was urgency in Ruby’s voice.

Sam didn’t say anything.

“I’m telling you the truth. I’ve been telling you the truth. You’re the only one who can kill Lilith and you need to kill her. You kill her, you save not only your brother, but the world in the process.” Ruby grabbed Sam’s hand. “Come on Sam, I haven’t steered you wrong before, have I?”

The last thing Sam wanted was for Dean to die at the hands of Lilith again. Ruby wasn’t lying. Dean wasn’t strong enough. Even Castiel had said so.

Sam was quiet for a moment. He shook his head, squeezing Ruby’s hand tighter as he dropped his jacket and shirt to the floor. “No. You haven’t.”
A smile spread across Ruby’s face as she led Sam back over to the bed. She pushed him down on top of it as she straddled him, grabbing the knife that was still resting on top of it. “Now, where were we?” she whispered as she ran it across her arm. A thick stream of dark red started seeping out of the wound as she held it out to Sam.

Sam took her arm into his hands, closing his eyes as he ravenously pressed his lips against it.

A vicious smirk spread across Ruby’s lips.

Chapter End Notes

:: Naamah is a demon who appears in the Zohar, a Jewish mystical text. In it, she and Lilith have sex with Adam while he is mourning Abel and they bear his demonic children who become the Plagues of Mankind. She is often linked with another biblical character who bares the same name, the daughter of Lamech, a descendant of Cain.

:: According to all three synoptic gospels, Jesus performed countless exorcisms during his ministry. Doing so with little more than a command that the demon leave the victim. Often the demon is seen to taunt Jesus, such as in the Exorcism at the Synagogue in Capernaum in the Gospels of Luke and Mark.
Mary stared into her dresser mirror, her hands running absentmindedly over the small bump protruding under her nightgown, pushing ever so slightly against light blue chiffon. A few short months ago, her belly had been flat and unblemished. Now it was swollen. So were her breasts— heavy and awkward—her skin marred with an ever increasing number of red-tinted, vein-like stretch marks.

Her body already bore plenty of scars. Thin lines made by silver knives she had always told John were from ‘cheerleading camp.’ Claw marks from an encounter with a werewolf she said came from a bear on a weekend ‘camping trip’ with her parents. But these scars she didn’t have to lie to John about. These were scars of motherhood, her very first ones, and she treasured them dearly.

A small ripple moved under her fingers as Mary felt a nudge—loving, but powerful—against her belly. Her breath caught in her throat at the feel of it.

She had been feeling movements like that for weeks, first as nearly indescribable flutters. Now they were getting more pronounced. Now, she knew what they were. They were kicks. The baby was kicking her. She had seen the baby do it earlier that day on a brand new ultrasound screen during a checkup and it had moved her to tears.

“So this is the baby?”

Mary turned at John’s voice and smiled. “Yup. Twenty-one weeks,” she glanced at John who was sitting on his side of the bed, staring intently at the grainy black and white sonogram photo in his hand. “You’ll be happy to know that I picked up some blue paint samples for the nursery.”

John looked up, an excited smile spreading across his face. “A boy? You must be bummed that we can’t name him Deanna. You were so set on it.”

Mary smirked as she waddled over to the bed. “No, because we’ll be naming him Dean, instead.”

She slowly sat down on her side of the bed with a groan, her hand pressed against her stomach.

“Dean? What? Like James Dean?” John smirked. “Didn’t you have a picture of him in your locker in high school?”

“No, I was thinking more Dean Moriarty.” A coy smile spread across Mary’s face.

John stared at her blankly.

“On The Road?” Mary cocked an eyebrow at him.

John shook his head. “Honey, you married a mechanic. Not Ernest Hemingway.” He shrugged as he laid down.
Mary laughed. “I know. I still love you.” She cuddled up to John as he tossed the comforter around them. She was quiet for a moment as she stared at the photo in his hand, her fingers brushing against the image. “Four months from now we’re gonna be parents. His parents,” she sighed. There was as much fear as there was excitement in her voice.

John nodded. “Dean Winchester.” The words played around in John’s mouth as he held the photo up to the light, squinting his eyes at the grainy figure of the infant within it. “I think he’s got more Campbell in him though.” He grinned as he put the photo on the nightstand. “He looks like you.”

Mary chuckled. “Oh thanks, I love being compared to a fuzzy blob.” She kissed him before she shifted onto her side. John followed suit, wrapping one of his arms protectively around her stomach.

She was awoken a couple of hours later by a strong kick to her ribs. The baby—Dean—was more active at night than during the day when she would play Beatles records and talk to him. He was mischievous and loved attention. Mary shifted, running a hand across her belly.

“You’re cute Dean, but Mommy needs her rest,” she mumbled quietly, half-asleep.

It was then that she heard the sound. A sound she hadn’t heard before, different from the creaks and groans of the house which she knew well; this one almost sounded like the rustling of wings.

Her eyes snapped open as she sat up, looking around the room. It was empty aside from John and her.

She sat there quietly for a moment, listening. The muffled, faint sound of music could be heard coming from down the hall. From the soon-to-be nursery. Fear filled her instantly.

Mary glanced quickly over at John, fast asleep next to her, before she carefully climbed out of bed. Swallowing hard, she crouched down, pulling a silver knife out from the space between the mattress and box-spring before she left the room. She shut the door behind her, moving as quickly and silently down the hallway as her body would allow.

Her fingers lingered briefly on the doorknob before she flung it open, the knife raised defensively as she rushed into the room.

It was empty aside from the crib she and John had put together a week before, the three small cans of blue paint and the radio she had been listening to while testing the paint earlier that afternoon. She could still smell the faint odor of paint as she tiptoed further into the room.

The radio was turned on and playing the 5th Dimension’s *The Age of Aquarius*. Psychedelic, hopeful, joyful, like a New Age gospel song.

There was a ghost. Maybe a poltergeist.

Mary paused for a moment, wishing now that she had some iron, before she walked over to the radio and shut it off.

The sound of wings rung out again, followed by feet moving on the carpet behind her. “Come on, that’s a great jam! Don’t be such a square, babe.”

Mary turned, her knife pointed at a man dressed in an olive green leisure suit, a Blow Pop hanging out of his mouth. “Who—what—are you and what the hell are you doing in my house?” Mary hissed, glancing at the open nursery door.
The man chuckled as he backed away from her, pulling the Blow Pop out of his mouth. “Easy with the kitchenware, Jill Munroe, I’m not here to hurt you.” He gestured nonchalantly to her stomach. “Or him for that matter.”

Mary quickly glanced down at her belly. “How do you know that?” Her voice shook with fear and anger.

The man scoffed. “Well, mostly because it’s my job to know.” He shrugged. “Also, the paint is blue. Ain’t exactly rocket science to figure that one out.” He glanced over at the neatly painted squares on the nursery wall. “I’d go with the Carolina Blue.” he nodded, a grin quirking his lips.

Mary’s eyes narrowed. “Is that so?” As quickly and as fluidly as she could manage, she slammed the blade of the knife into the man’s chest.

Nothing happened.

“Ya know.” The man just rolled his eyes as he placed the lollipop back in his mouth, casually pulling the knife from his chest and dropping it to the floor. “I get that you’re hormonal, but take a chill pill. The suit is dry clean only.”

Mary backed away from him, her eyes wide with shock. “You’re some kind of trickster, aren’t you?” She scanned him warily.

The trickster turned his head to the side, studying her. “Michael told me you were perceptive. And normally, yeah, I go by Loki. But today I’m an angel,” he deadpanned. “Ya know, of The Lord?”

“That’s not possible.” Mary shook her head. “Angels don’t exist.”

The trickster laughed. “Trust me, Mary Campbell, we do.” His eyes began to glow as a bright light emanated from him, filling the room. A shadow of wings—large and majestic—appeared behind him just before his eyes and the light faded again. “Earth’s just been a no-fly zone for us for the past two millennia. Technically, I’m not even supposed to be here right now, but I went AWOL and into ‘Witness Protection’ long before that and duty calls.”

Mary froze.

The angel cleared his throat as he sauntered over to her. “The name’s Gabriel. Archangel Gabriel. I’m here because you and me gotta have a little chat about that bun in the oven you got there. He’s kinda important to the Big Guns Upstairs, if you dig me.”

Mary was silent for a long moment. Her eyes then lowered down to her belly before they rose again. She swallowed hard. “…That Archangel Gabriel?”

“Bingo.” Gabriel nodded. “And this is exactly what you think it is.”

“But…” Mary’s chest heaved, her voice shaking. “But… how is that even possible? I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’m not a virgin.”

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “Neither was the other Mary. It’s kinda not the point. Mathew just couldn’t read Hebrew worth a single crap and Luke was trying to rip off Hercules. The kid’s as much His as he is John’s.”

“You’re telling me that my baby’s the…” Mary put both her hands over her belly, the words catching in her throat. Tears started to well up in her eyes as she fiddled with her wedding and engagement rings. “I’ve. I’ve gotta protect him. I’ve gotta leave John. What if—”
“No, no.” Gabriel placed his hands on her shoulders. “Heaven’s watching over him and they got him completely cloaked. As far as anyone or anything else knows, he’s just a regular snot-nosed kid and he’ll be one until he gets tapped. All you’ve gotta do is raise him. But, if anything does happen, you’ll know how to take care of it.”

Mary shook her head. “You don’t understand what you’re asking of me.” She wiped the tears from her eyes. “This is too big.”

“I understand better than you think I do, trust me. You’re actually handling this better than the first Mary did.” Gabriel smiled. “Speaking of which, I almost forgot.” He quickly scooted behind her. Reaching around, he placed his hand tenderly against the swell of her belly. A white light emanated from his hand, spreading across her stomach.

The baby kicked again.

Mary pulled away from him, placing her hand protectively where his hand had been. Panic filled her voice, “What did you do?”

“Chill. I just consecrated him. No biggie.” Gabriel shrugged as he took a couple of steps away from her. “If anybody asks, I wasn’t here, okay?” He turned around, a serious look appearing on his face as he placed his hand gently against her cheek, his eyes locking on her. “Remember, angels are watching over him.”

The sound of snapping fingers filled Mary’s ears just as her eyes opened, finding herself back in bed, early morning light filling the room. She lay there for a moment, her eyes moving around the room, before she sat up.

John was already up and getting dressed. “How are the two of you doing this morning?” He smiled as he walked over to her, kissing her gently.

“We’re good.” Mary nodded as she ran a hand across her belly. “John. Did you… hear anything last night?”

“A windstorm. Other than that, no.” John shook his head as he put his work shirt on. “Why?”

Mary paused. “No reason.” She shrugged. “I just had some kind of crazy dream, I guess.”

“Another one? You’ve been having them a lot lately.” John chuckled. “I’ll see you tonight. I gotta go into work. Tom called out. Again. Why they keep that kid is beyond me.”

As John left the room, Mary again reached over and stuck her hand in the space between the mattress and box-spring.

The silver knife was still there.

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*December 6, 2008.*

*Augusta, Georgia.*
Castiel could hear the sound of pained breaths coming from the other side of the motel room as his feet touched down onto the worn carpet. He moved quietly, purposefully, across the darkened room, his eyes locked on the soul sleeping fitfully in one of the room’s beds. It was a soul he knew well. He had handled it personally, having fought to take it back from those demons who had stolen it from Heaven. The soul of The Righteous Man. The Messiah.

When Castiel had wrenched it out of the chill and despair of Perdition, Dean’s soul was human. It was brilliant, far purer than it should have been after decades of torture, even with a stain—thick and black like smoke—upon it. The soul now glowed and it was white hot, the heat slowly melting away the black. While the soul was still human, the heat and the glow marked it as something else.

His eyes then focused on the man the soul belonged to: Dean Winchester. A man who thought so little of himself, though he had no cause to. He was a man of great courage, strength, and loyalty, who gave so much of himself and expected nothing in return.

Dean was also a man in pain who had scarcely left his bed for three days. He was barely even able to care for himself. Despite the sacred wounds having closed over into bruises, the bones and tendons in his wrists and ankles were still torn and shattered, rendering both his feet and hands almost useless.

Feet that chased after monsters and demons. Hands that healed the injured and raised the dead. These hands and feet had brought so many salvation and gave so many hope without being pierced. Dean needed his hands. He needed his feet. He needed to continue his work and doing so would be near impossible if he couldn’t walk or fight.

Castiel walked to the end of Dean’s bed, his gaze focusing on the man’s broken feet. Even though they were covered by a blanket, Castiel could see the faint glow of the wounds that marked them. Carefully, he placed his hands over each of the ankles. A light emanated from his hands, soaking through the fabric of the bedspread and into the skin and bone resting just underneath. He then moved over to the side of Dean’s bed and did the same to each of Dean’s wrists.

Though the wounds still glowed, Castiel watched for a moment as Dean’s fingers moved—once again fluid and unbroken—before he disappeared.

December 24, 2008.

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

Christmas was usually just another day for Dean. The previous Christmas, when Sam had tried so hard to make it a good one for him, had been first time he had even bothered with the holiday in years.

As far as Dean knew, last year’s Christmas was going to be his last Christmas. His last chance to drink rum-spiked eggnog and watch Sam open half-assed gifts bought at a gas station with a smile on his face. Dean wanted to make it count and he wanted to give Sam something fond to look back on the following years when he was gone, when Sam was alone. Despite the somber cloud hanging over it, Dean enjoyed it.

But Dean wasn’t looking forward to Christmas this year. In fact, he was almost dreading it.
Christmas was the Winter Solstice, the festival of the Sun’s conquest over winter. Darkness and Death. It was also the feast of the Son and His impending conquest over Darkness and Death. It was the commemoration of the birth of the Christ child, when God was believed to have entered the world, incarnate as a human being. The Spirit and The Flesh, dwelling together as a single entity.

It was what Dean now lived, every moment of every day. Dean could even feel it coursing through his veins every time he placed a hand on an injured person or exorcised a demon. Heat. Sometimes the heat was like fire, slow and burning. Sometimes like lightning, fast and buzzing.

It gave him purpose, clarity, confidence, but it lasted only a brief second before it faded again, leaving Dean cold, plagued by his fear, guilt, and self-doubt.

While Dean could do his best not to think about it before, now he was faced with a never-ending barrage of Christmas carols and nativity scenes, constant reminders of the conflict waging beneath his skin.

The Sunday after getting the nail wounds, Dean had woken up to find the bones and tendons in his wrists and ankles completely healed. Though Dean wasn’t sure how—he had gone to bed the night before barely able to hold a pen or walk the short distance to the bathroom on his own—he didn’t question it. Instead, he used it as an excuse to work cases.

On Christmas Eve, after an eleven-hour drive from Savannah to Pennsylvania to check out what Dean was hoping would prove to be demonic activity in Centralia, Sam demanded that they take a break, using the holiday as the perfect excuse for one. They had spent the last three weeks working almost nonstop all along the southern half of the eastern seaboard. Dean had become so engrossed by his quest for hunts that he hadn’t even bothered shaving.

There were no vacancies to be found anywhere, aside from a room with a single bed in a hotel that had likely once been a tenement building, just above a dive bar. The Alva Hotel. It was old and cramped, with the lingering stench of cigarette smoke. Lack of cleanliness and having to sleep in an armchair aside, Dean wasn’t bothered by it. What bothered him was the painfully obvious irony that he swore had to be some form of bad angelic humor and Sam’s jokes about there being ‘no room for them in the inn’.

Dean decided to spend the holiday distracted by rum-spiked eggnog and the twenty-four-hour marathon of A Christmas Story that played every year without fail.

He was making his way back to the hotel, a grocery bag in hand containing a carton of eggnog, plastic cups, and a fifth of Captain Morgan when a woman stopped him on the sidewalk.

“Excuse me.” She was standing on the sidewalk across the street from the hotel. As she walked over to Dean, she looked him over and glanced judgmentally down at the bag in his hand. “Have you ever thought about God’s love for you?” In her gloved hands was a small stack of mini New Testament Bibles. She held one out to him.

“Lately? Too damn much,” Dean scoffed. He shoved his free hand into his jacket pocket, refusing to take the Bible from her. “So, I’m good, ma’am. Thanks.”

“Are you really?” She looked at his bag again. “We’re all sinners. We all fall short of God’s grace. But it’s through the death of His Son that we are redeemed of our wickedness. He can redeem you too.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Yeah, well, if I’m not mistaken, that Son said, ‘Judge not and you will not be judged’. Why don’t you do yourself a favor and take that advice, okay?” He nudged her as he
She stared at Dean for a second. Then she gasped, a cloud of breath billowing from her mouth. “It’s… you.”

Dean stopped, cocking an eyebrow at her. “Excuse me?”

“Dean Winchester…” Her voice was filled with awe. “The angels told me I would meet you today.”

This kind of thing happened far more often than Dean liked; angels sending overzealous people of faith to him as part of some personal revelation. It started happening soon after he began healing people and it was becoming a frequent occurrence.

“They did, huh?” He smiled at her sarcastically.

She nodded as she scanned him up and down. This time, there was reverence instead of judgment in her eyes. “They told me that I would know you by the smell of roses about you.”

“That so?” Anger filled Dean’s voice. “Well, I see that paid off real well just a minute ago—”

“They told me that you need Faith.” Her voice became serious and almost pitying. “All you have is doubt, Dean. You need to accept your mission and trust in the Will of your Father.”

“My Father”? Dean’s fists clenched. “My father was a mechanic from Lawrence, Kansas. I’m a man and there ain’t jack shit that I can do about that. If the angels or ‘Dad’ or whoever the fuck else don’t like that, then they can go fuck themselves, okay?”

Dean marched across the street to the hotel and back up to the room, slamming the door behind him. He leaned his back against it briefly before he walked over to the room’s small end table where he took the liquor, eggnog, and cups out of the bag and quickly fixed himself a drink.

Sam walked out of the bathroom just as Dean was adding the eggnog to his three shots of rum. He chuckled. “You know what’s funny, Dean? We’re still celebrating Christmas at the wrong time of year. It’s only a month off now as opposed to a whole season but—” Sam paused as he leaned against the door frame. “You okay? You know I’m just joking, right?”

Dean sighed. “Peachy. You want a drink Sammy? ’M havin’ a drink.” Dean knocked the whole thing back before he lowered the glass. “A Christmas Story on yet? I can’t wait to see Flick get his tongue stuck to a flagpole.”

Sam watched Dean for a moment. “What’s going on?” Concern laced Sam’s voice as he walked over to him.

“Nothin’, I just really love Bible thumpers. That’s all.” Dean shrugged. He was quiet for a moment as he stared down at the frothy residue in the bottom of the cup before he placed it onto the table. “I’m goin’ out for a while.” His voice was blunt and somber.

Sam sighed. “Dude, it’s passed six. Everything is closed by now.”

“I’ll take a walk, then.” Dean breathed heavily as he stepped into the hallway.

Sam grabbed his jacket, following behind. “Dean. It’s Christmas Eve,” he hissed. “What if your wounds start bleeding?”

“They won’t,” Dean said bluntly.
“How do you know that?”

“How do you know that?” Dean stopped just before he reached the stairs. He turned, facing Sam, frustrated. “Look Sam. The Son of God just needs some alone time, alright?” Without another word, Dean walked briskly down the stairs.

Sam didn’t follow him out and he was thankful for that. Dean went back into the street, pulling the hood of the sweatshirt he had under his jacket up over his head to hide and shield himself from the snow that had started to pick up. He headed down the street, his gate determined, but his mind meandering.

He wandered the streets for a while. Eventually, he ended up walking past the Cathedral of Saint Patrick. It was white bricked and looked more like the churches of the Southwest—Mission Style—which struck Dean as odd, given that its patron saint was Irish. On the sidewalk, placed above its sign, was a nativity scene. Reluctantly, Dean walked closer. He stood in front of it for a moment; his eyes locked hard the little painted ceramic infant resting within as he listened to the muffled sounds of an organ and choir, the Christmas hymns coming from the church.

Dean paused briefly before he walked up the churches’ steps and opened the door. It felt twice as heavy as he thought it should have as he closed it behind him, the smell of burning candles and incense washing over him as he walked through the vestibule and into the nave.

“Oh crap,” Dean sighed. The pews were nearly all filled with standing parishioners, the priest having already started Gospel reading. ‘…and she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn…’ The mass was almost half over.

Dean was about to turn around and leave when he caught sight of a Virgin Mary statue set in a nook up by the altar. ‘…do not be afraid…’ He took a deep breath and walked over to the pews.

A few parishioners gave Dean looks as he awkwardly pulled his hood down and scooted himself into the first space he could find, in the back along the main aisle. As Dean stood there, his hands gripped tight on the back of the wooden pew in front of him, he felt a tug on his jacket. He turned to find a little girl staring up at him.

“Mister, you gotta take your hat off,” she whispered as though it was some kind of big secret.

Dean was still wearing his beanie. He shot her an awkward smile as he pulled it off, brushing his already matted-down hair over his forehead to cover up the bruises. “Thanks, kid,” he whispered back, relieved that that was all she had to say to him.

The girl smiled and nodded just before her mother scolded her, telling her to leave him alone.

The mass went smoothly despite Dean barely knowing when to stand, kneel or sit. That was until the priest started saying the prayers of Holy Communion. As the priest was blessing the wafers and wine, Dean’s wrists and ankles began to ache with a sharp pain. Dean quickly pulled one of the sleeves on his jacket up.

The bruises had cracked open into wounds, ever so slightly, and were bleeding.

Dean tried his best to stay calm, folding his arms across his chest, hoping that the bleeding wouldn’t get worse. His eyes locked on the statue, whispering the Ave Maria under his breath.

It was the only prayer Dean ever really said. Pastor Jim had taught the prayer to him when he was a little boy and while he didn’t say it much, if ever, he knew the words by heart.
As soon as the communion prayers ended, the bleeding stopped, but the ache continued. Dean remained seated through the rest of the mass and he stayed seated even after the church had cleared out, waiting for the ache to stop, his mind focused on a mantra of Latin.

A question finally broke Dean’s concentration. “You’ve got a strong devotion to The Blessed Mother?”

Dean looked up, his eyes settling on an elderly priest, the one who had said the mass. He strolled up the main center aisle, slowly, stopping at the pew in front of Dean.

“Yeah.” Dean cleared his throat as he leaned back in the pew. “I guess you could say that.”

The priest nodded. “It’s a good one to have.” He watched Dean carefully. “You know, I’ve been serving this parish for fifty years. I don’t think I’ve seen you here before.”

“I’m more of a… ‘Christmas and Easter’ kinda guy.” Dean smiled awkwardly. Then he remembered that he had taken his hat off. He was quiet for a moment before he locked eyes with the priest. “You know, don’t you?”

“The church doesn’t usually smell of roses.” The priest sat down in the pew, turning to the side. “And you have the look of a man who has the world resting upon his shoulders.”

Dean chuckled morosely. He was quiet for a second. “So, did the angels tell you I was here?”

The priest shook his head. “The angels don’t speak to me. I’m just more aware of things than most people.”

Dean cocked an eyebrow. “So you’re a hunter?”

“No. What I am died out decades ago. I’m a scholar of the world unseen.” The priest paused. “I take it that you’re a hunter though.”

“Well, I was,” Dean sighed. “Tell you the truth, I’m not really sure what I am anymore. Sometimes I think I know, but then—” Dean shook his head as he rubbed his eyes.

“Humanity has spent the last two thousand years trying to answer that very question. That’s why there are so many gospels. All the writers were all trying to comprehend the incomprehensible. It’s no less difficult for you,” he mused sincerely as a worried sigh left his mouth. “A terrible darkness is on its way. If you’re anything, you’re a light in that darkness. A Sign that even though The End is coming, there’s still hope.”

A sad smile spread across Dean’s face. “Thanks, Padre.” His eyes drifted down to his wrists before he raised them again, glancing around the church as he pulled his jacket off. “I haven’t shown these to too many people.” He took a deep breath as he pushed the sleeves of his sweatshirt up, the scarlet almost dried over the bruises in small but thick blotches in the centers of both sides of his wrists. Dean held them out, placing them over the back of the pew the priest was sitting in.

The priest crossed himself at the sight of the wounds. He hesitated before he touched Dean’s hands, turning each of them over as he inspected them. “You poor boy,” he sighed, remorse tingeing his words as he let go of them.

“It ain’t so bad.” Dean shrugged as he pulled his arms back and lowered his sleeves. “I’ve been through worse.”

The sound of the door closing followed by footsteps filled the church.
They were footsteps Dean knew all too well. “Hey Sammy.” Dean turned around, his gaze following Sam as he walked the short distance down the aisle.

As Sam walked over to them, he gave the priest a quick nod. “I got your text,” Sam lied.

Despite that, Dean nodded. “Right.” He quickly shook the priest’s hand as he threw his jacket on and stood up, wincing sharply as he limped his way out of the pew.

Sam placed his hands on Dean’s shoulders, walking him slowly out of the church. “You know Dean, I get that you were having an existential crisis, but it wouldn’t kill you to answer your phone. I tried calling you three times.”

“Sorry Gigantor, I was a little preoccupied.” Dean winced as they walked down the steps of the church and over to a parking space where the Impala was parked. “How the hell did you find me anyway?” He winced again as he climbed into the front passenger seat.

“Cas showed up.” Sam’s voice was as blunt as it was awkward as he climbed into the driver’s seat. “He said you were ‘participating in the Lord’s Supper’.” A little chuckle left Sam’s mouth as he dug into his jacket pocket and pulled Dean's silver flask out, handing it to him. “I don’t know what’s more shocking, you going to church willingly or an angel suddenly appearing in front of me.”

Dean took a quick pull from the flask, the taste of wine and blood washing over his tongue as the ache began to fade away. His eyes turned back to the church briefly before they set on the nativity scene he had been looking at before. He focused on the star made out of white Christmas lights set above it, shining brightly in the night and haze of snow. “Maybe it shouldn’t be shocking,” Dean said simply, closing the flask and shoving into his jacket. “Maybe I should start goin’ to church.”

“Really, Dean?” Sam blinked. “Are you serious?”

“Not all the time. But if we’re passing through someplace and a service is going on?” Dean shrugged “Wouldn’t hurt, right?”

“What brought this on?” Sam cocked an eyebrow, “I mean, you hate it when the people who hand out ‘Smile, Jesus Loves You’ pamphlets even acknowledge you.”

Dean leaned back in the seat. “I just think it might be a good idea, all things considered.” Dean broke his gaze away from the nativity scene, setting it on Castiel who was sitting on one of the churches’ side steps.

He was sitting there when they came out of the church.

Sam didn’t—or couldn’t—see him.

Castiel watched the reflection of the Christmas lights in the black door of the Impala as Sam helped Dean into the passenger seat. This Christmas was icy and he knew that if was he able to feel the cold as his vessel did, he would be freezing in the night air and snow with just his trench coat. He remembered the first Christmas and he couldn’t help but compare it to this one, the first he’d experienced on Earth in two thousand years.

It, too, happened on a cold night, though shortly after the feast of Purim instead of around the Winter
Solstice as it was now commemorated and it wasn’t during a census, but rather a time of familial loss and mourning. Castiel was stationed around the hills around Bethlehem with Uriel, Rachel, Inias, Hester, and Balthazar. At Anna’s command, they appeared before a small group of shepherds to use them as vessels. Though they were frightened, the shepherds readily consented. While angels could manifest on Earth whenever they chose, few humans outside of prophets or possible vessels ever saw them, but they nevertheless had great respect for and fear of them.

The angels had been sent down to watch over the child and to protect him if necessary. Even though King Herod was dying, he was still ruthless and paranoid and would slaughter the child if word of his birth got out.

They found him in a cave just outside the town. Though it was being used as a stable, dark and filled with the stench of animals, it was the only place where his mother and the midwife could get any privacy. The child’s mother was young; a teenager married during the previous summer harvest, little more than a child herself. She named the child Jesus, not as any grand gesture, but simply in honor of the great-uncle whose death marked his birth.

Though his siblings thought it an insult to the future Messiah for him to be born in such a way—among the smell of animals and in the aftermath of sadness—Castiel, thought it very fitting. The child was, after all, created in their Father’s image. His Father’s image. He was the Son of Man as much as he was the Son of God. He was a human and he needed to be as most humans were: devoid of pretension or grandeur. It was far more of a miracle for the son of a poor, grieving carpenter to bring salvation than the Emperor Augustus.

Castiel stood from his perch on the steps and walked inside the church, the fading scent of roses mixing with the smell of burning incense and candles as he wandered down the main aisle, gazing at the stained glass and frescos. Though Dean’s prayers weren’t directed at him, he was drawn to the church by them. He wondered how many—if any—of the parishioners knew whose prayers had joined theirs, if they knew of the sacred mystery that had been sitting amongst them.

Eventually, Castiel’s musings were broken by the sound of flapping wings. “First you heal him, and then you allow The Abomination to take him away when he’s supposed to be seeking atonement?” Uriel walked over to him, frustration tingeing his words. “Our mission is to watch over Dean Winchester. We’re only supposed to interfere when it’s absolutely necessary.”

Castiel stopped just before he reached the altar. “Our mission is to help Dean with his mission.” He faced Uriel. “I’ve done what’s necessary.”

Uriel scoffed. “Dean’s mission is to suffer and atone so he can be purified. So he can be of use to Heaven. In case you haven’t noticed, almost half of the Seals have been broken. We’re losing and we’re going to lose far more if our field general isn’t ready for battle.”

“Dean’s mission is to work miracles so that people may bear witness to him and know that he walks among them. So that they will still have faith when it is most tried.” Castiel’s words brimmed with conviction. “Victory is worth nothing if the flock is led astray.”

Uriel chuckled. “You said the same thing two thousand years ago. You’ve learned nothing.” His words were blunt. “These humans are cynical and barbaric. They’ll kill Dean just as they killed The Nazarene, just as they killed His cousin, The Baptist, before Him. Just as they’ve killed every single prophet we’ve ever sent them.”

“I’ve learned more than enough.” Castiel looked up at the crucifix hanging up behind the altar. He glared. “Not every prophet was slain by their hands.”
“We are agents of Our Father’s wrath and justice. Of fate,” Uriel hissed. “We do as we must. No one is above that.” With that, Uriel disappeared.

Castiel turned his gaze slowly to the Virgin Mary statue right next to the crucifix.

The statue that had begun to weep.

He watched it for moment before he made his way back down the aisle.

Chapter End Notes

:: Obstetric ultrasonography began to be used in American prenatal care during the mid 1970's and was standard practice by the early 1980's. Mary’s pregnancy with Dean occurred right on the cusp of this so there's a slight bit of artistic license and assumption on my part.

:: Both the Gospels of Mathew and Luke say that an angel announced the conception and birth of Jesus. The Gospel of Mathew does not name the angel, but in the Gospel of Luke, the angel is stated to be Gabriel.

:: The concept of Jesus' virgin birth appears only in two of the gospels, Mathew and Luke, and is never explicitly stated in any of Paul's letters. It is based mostly on an often ascribed messianic prophecy from the Book of Isaiah where, in the Greek translation of the text (the version used by the writers of Mathew and Luke), a "Parthenos" or "Virgin" is said to be with child. In the original Hebrew, however, the word used is "Almah" which means "Young Woman" and is a comment on her age rather than sexual experience.

:: According to Roman Catholic dogma, not only does the Eucharist become the literal body and blood of Christ via transubstantiation, it is a literal replaying of the crucifixion and is considered to be a sacrifice on par with the crucifixion.
The Promise of Shadows

Chapter Notes

Trigger Warning:
This chapter contains brief references to rape/non-con.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hell.

Year 30.

Dean’s screams rang out in a series of shrill sobs as they echoed through the dead space of the cold, dark room. The only other sound was the pounding of a hammer. His hoarse voice sounded in rhythm with the dull crack of a nail as it drove through his skin. It fragmented bone and sliced tendon, sending wave after wave of pain through his hand and down his outstretched arm as it lodged into the splintering wood.

For thirty years Dean had forced himself to become used to the pain; every day Alastair came up with new ways to inflict it. Day after day, year after year of endless slicing, hacking, and carving. He forced himself to endure it, to accept it. This was his choice. He may have damned himself, but he would not give in to the temptation to make the pain go away at the cost of him doing the same to another.

For Dean, the sound was always the worst part. He’d gotten used to the sensation of pain, but the sound of it was something he could never become accustomed to. The sizzle of metal against his charring flesh, the scrape of a knife as it sliced away layers of his skin, the squish of his organs, the slow crack of his fingers as they were broken, one by one.

The pounding of a hammer on nail was no different and Dean did his best to ignore it. He tried to focus his mind on other thoughts. Other dreams. The sweet humming of his mom’s voice as her fingers lovingly stroked his hair while he rested his head against her swollen belly. The opening acoustic guitar chords of “Ramble On”—rhythmic and fast, but gentle—as it bellowed through Baby’s cabin just above the roar of her engine. The stillness of a warm summer night where the only sound he could hear, apart from the small talk he and Sam made around sips of beer, was the chirping of crickets.

But Dean couldn’t ignore it. He couldn't distract himself. Ringing out over the sound of hammer, over Dean’s sobs, was a voice. Nasally. Boisterous. Mocking. It was a voice Dean had come to know all too well. A voice Dean had come to fear and loathe, one that always promised more pain.

“And here I thought I had lost my touch. Then again, after you’ve done this a few thousand times, starting again is just like riding a bike.” Alastair smirked as he looked over his work, the two nails and ropes pinning Dean’s palms to the X-shaped fixture. He walked once around the base of it before he stopped, looking up at Dean with a grin. His white eyes sparkled in the dim lighting of the dungeon. “I told you about that, didn’t I? Spartacus’ Army. Six thousand rebel slaves along the Via Appia. All done by Yours Truly.” He paused, brushing a fingertip over the blood streaming down
Dean’s forearm. “By the time I had hung up the last one, the first was already half-eaten by dogs. It was… electrifying, to say the least.”

“You’re one kinky son of a bitch, you know that?” Dean sobbed bitterly as he made an attempt at a defiant chuckle, his body shaking with chill and shock.

“Oh… I’m flattered Dean. Unfortunately, I’m not in the mood for that. Not today.” Slowly, Alastair ran his calloused hands down Dean’s bruised and naked torso and down his thighs. Stopping at Dean’s ankles, he tugged at both of them, testing the tightness of the ropes that tied his feet to the fixture. He glanced up at Dean, a grin spreading across his face. “We can’t really have fun until you give me the answer I want to hear.”

Dean hissed sharply at the rope burn. “No,” he spat as his head bobbed, dizzy and exhausted. “Go fuck yourself.”

“Oh. Well, that’s too bad.” Alastair smirked again as he placed his hand around Dean’s throat, steadying his head. His grip tightened slightly. “Maybe you’ll feel differently after hanging up here for a few days.” He let go of Dean’s neck as he tossed the hammer to the floor before making his way across the room. The door closed behind him with a sickening thud.

Dean stayed hung up on the cross for a week, alone with nothing but the sound of his shaken and strained breathing. At first, the silence was a blessing. He used it to keep fighting the pain, the constant cycle of torso rising, nail pulling, and skin chaffing so he could breathe, but by the end of the fourth day he was longing for a death that he knew would never come. That could never come. There was no death in Hell, only pain. And it never ended.

On what Dean could only assume was the seventh day, Alastair returned.

Without so much as a word, he pulled the nails out of Dean’s hands and untied the ropes. Alastair pulled him up into his arms, carrying him over to a wooden stake that he tied Dean to before walking to the far side of the room.

Alastair didn’t give him an offer.

“Wh— what are you doing?” Dean’s voice shook with panic, his eyes locked on Alastair as he watched him rummage through a table.

“I guess it isn’t like riding a bike, Dean. I completely forgot to scourge you first. Silly me.” Alastair chuckled as he sauntered his way back over to the stake, a light jingling sound of glass following his footsteps. In his hand was a whip. Its thongs of leather had pieces of broken glass laced into the tips. “The Roman Flagrum. It’s a real thing of beauty, isn’t it?” Alastair’s voice was filled with awe as he examined it, walking slowly behind Dean. “Forty lashes can kill a man.”

He purred into Dean’s ear, “Good thing you’re already dead isn’t it, angel?”

A crack filled the air and there was pain. Ripping pain and a scream that didn’t stop. Ten. Twenty. Thirty. Forty. Fifty. A hundred lashes. Alastair counted each and every one of them with glee. When he finally finished, Dean lay in a pool of crimson, slumped against the stake.

Alastair walked over to the stake. His feet splashed up blood as he crouched down next to Dean. “So
Dean, what’s your answer?”

Dean’s body was motionless, save for the trembling. His eyes locked on the sickening grin that spread across Alastair’s face. This wasn’t going to end. Alastair was going to do this to him, over and over again, for as long as it took, until he said “yes”.

Dean was silent for a long moment before he finally croaked out, “N— no.” His voice shook as much as his body did.

Alastair’s grin widened as he untied Dean from the stake and dragged him back over to the cross, the hammer and nails clutched tightly in his hands.

Dean lost count of how long he was up on the cross for. A day. A week. A month. A year. A century. All he knew was that every so often, Alastair would come back into the room, take him down and scourge him, just to hang him right back up again. One time he sent in a pack of hellhounds to rip his legs off. Another time Alastair didn’t tie his feet so he suffocated, fast and repeatedly. The final time, Alastair drove nails through his feet. After that, he didn’t return. Dean was left alone. Alone with the hot stinging that covered his back and the throbbing pain that radiated from his palms and feet that never ceased, with his sobs and screaming pleas that always went unanswered.

When the door finally opened again and Alastair’s figure appeared in the doorway, Dean’s voice spilled out of his mouth as a mumbled sob. “I’ll do it.”

“What was that Dean?” A sarcastically shocked look spread across Alastair’s face, his hand cupping his ear as he slowly walked over to the cross. “I didn’t hear you.”

Tears streamed down Dean’s face as his voice cracked sharply. “I’ll do it. I’ll do it,” he pleaded, “just… take me off this thing. Please.”

“Say the word, Dean.” Alastair’s voice was triumphant.

Dean choked back a sob. “Yes.”

“Good. I’m so glad we’re finally seeing eye to eye.” Alastair smirked. “We’re gonna have so much fun together, you and I.”

A malicious grin spread across Alastair’s face as he began untying the ropes.


Great Falls, Montana.

Dean heard the singing as soon as he got off the elevator. It echoed through the halls of the hospital.
ward—sterile and identical to every other ward, aside from badly painted circus animals on the walls—just over the beeping of heart monitors and the sound of televisions playing cartoons. The voice was beautiful—rhythmic, young, hopeful—but very tired, betraying the sickness of the body that it came from.

The sound of the voice made Dean smile as much as it made his heart break.

He followed the singing down to the end of the hallway until he reached the room it was coming from, the open door covered in worn out construction paper flowers and drawings. He glanced at the light next to the door that, if on, indicated a nurse or a doctor was in the room. He made sure it was off before knocking on the door.

The singing stopped. “Come in,” the small voice within the room chirped.

Dean paused for a second, taking a deep breath before he walked through the doorway, setting his eyes on a little girl sitting up in the hospital bed, brushing out a wig. “Hey kiddo.”

He smiled at her, waving his hand as he walked into the room. The space looked lived-in; its walls were plastered with drawings and any extra shelf space had books, Barbie dolls, and stuffed animals resting on top of them. It was obvious the girl had been in the hospital for a long time.

She dropped the wig onto her bed, a smile of recognition spreading across her thin face as she met Dean’s gaze. “You were at church today.”

“I was.” Dean nodded, smiling sadly. “I heard you singing. You’ve got a real pretty voice, Aleah.”

Ever since what happened on Christmas Eve, Dean had been batting around the idea of going to church. Dean knew as The Second Coming of Christ he probably should be going at the very least to observe “his” flock. Part of him even wanted to go so he could better understand what being Christ meant, so he could connect with the spiritual entity he had become, but the idea of church never sat well with him. Dean wasn’t a man of faith to begin with and institutionalized religion always left a bad taste in his mouth.

Still on the fence, Dean avoided going the Sunday after Christmas easily enough, choosing instead to drive through the night and morning across the country for a vengeful spirit case in Montana. But when they drove by the small Methodist Church on their way to the motel the next Saturday night, something about it just sat right with Dean. The following morning when he and Sam went to the service, he knew why: a seven-year-old girl with the voice of an angel, in the most sincere way he could mean it, had leukemia. Her family was so strapped for cash the church had taken a collection to help pay for her medical bills. Dean had been so moved by their act of love that he’d emptied his own pockets right there in the middle of the service, but it wasn’t enough.

“Thank you.” Aleah stared at Dean for a second. “You’ve got a halo,” she said bluntly, her eyes focusing on Dean’s head.

“Yeah.” Dean cleared his throat. “I get that a lot.” Whenever Dean healed someone, that was almost always the first thing they noticed. People close to death often noticed things others wouldn’t, or couldn’t.

“Are you an angel?” She tilted her head slightly.

“No.” Dean shook his head as he walked further in the room. “My name is Dean.”

Aleah studied him. She was quiet for a long moment before she asked simply, “Are you Jesus, Dean?”
Dean stopped dead in his tracks. “Kinda. Yeah” He took a deep breath as he gestured to a chair next her bed. “Mind if I sit down?”

Aleah shook her head slowly. She watched him in silence as he walked over to the chair and sat down. “Are you gonna take me to Heaven?” Her eyes began to gloss over. She paused, biting her lip. “Can I say goodbye to my mommy and sister first?”

“No, I’m not here to take you to Heaven.” Without a second’s hesitation, Dean reached over and grabbed her hand, his larger callused hand engulfing her smaller one. “Did you… want me to?” Dean couldn’t even if he wanted to, but the question caught him off guard. He hoped—even that she’d say no.

“I don’t wanna leave my mommy and sister alone.” Aleah shook her head, tears starting to fall from her eyes. “And I’m scared,” she whispered, guilt tingeing her words.

Dean gently squeezed her hand. “It’s okay to be scared. I get scared. A lot, actually. But I do my best to be brave.” His eyes locked on hers. “You’re a brave little girl.”

“I don’t think I am.” She wiped the tears away. “I just wanna stop hurting.”

Dean rose from the chair and walked over to her bedside, his hand still gripping Aleah’s. “Don’t worry. I’m gonna make the pain go away.” His voice shook, but it was filled with confidence and certainty. “I’m gonna make you feel better, alright sweetheart?”

“Oh okay.” She looked up at him and nodded, her lip trembling.

Carefully, Dean placed his free hand on the top of her bare head. As soon as his fingers made contact with her skin, he could feel the heat course through his veins. It ran out from his fingertips, seeping down into her head and through her body. He watched as she quickly gained warmth and her eyes lost their tired gloss.

“I—I don’t hurt anymore.” She sat there in awe, wiping tears away before she reached over and wrapped her arms around Dean’s waist. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Dean blinked tears away from his eyes as he smiled at her, hugging her back. “But you gotta promise me one thing, okay? You can’t tell anyone I was here.”

She furrowed her brow. “Why?”

“Because they wouldn’t understand,” Dean replied. “Just go and live your life, alright?”

She nodded as she made an imaginary cross over her heart. “I promise.”

“Good.” Dean gently patted her head before turning to leave. He only got a couple steps before she called his name.

“Dean?”

He stopped, turning back towards her. “Yeah, sweetheart?”

“Before you leave, will you pray with me?”

Dean paused for a second. “I’m not really much of the prayin’ type,” he admitted, breathing deeply as he walked back over to her. “But, I’ll pray with you.”

She bowed her head in silence and Dean followed. His eyes shifted slightly before he closed them,
folding his hands. ‘I’m scared, Cas. I don’t know if I’m going about this whole “Messiah” thing the right way or if there even is a right way to go about it. Hell, I’m still not even sure that I’m the right guy for the job, but what I do know for sure is that this—right here—is the right thing to do.’

A vocalized ‘amen’ came out of Aleah’s mouth as both of them raised their heads. Dean gave her one last smile and kissed her forehead before he turned and left the room.

Walking back down the hall, Dean looked down at the hand that had healed Aleah. He stared at it for a long moment before he cupped it in his other hand, pressing his thumb hard into the center of his palm.

The wounds that his palms had received in Hell—as he now knew all too well—had been for the same reason as the ones his wrists now bore—markings of what he was—even though their purposes were different.

Unlike his wrists, Dean’s hands bore no reminders of the wounds that been inflicted upon them. He had left them and the blood that been caked upon them in Hell, along with every other wound he had suffered. Castiel, *Heaven*, had erased all of them—all of The Pit—from his body, the same way they were trying to erase it from his soul.

But Dean remembered them. He always would remember them.

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*January 24, 2009.*

*Shawnee, Kansas.*

Sam had always been a man of faith. He had believed in God and angels long before he had actual proof of their existence. He prayed daily and had readily gone to mass with Jess and her family for the precious few Christmases and Easters they had together.

Sam had to have faith. In a world where myth and legend were reality, tangible and visible, he had no reason not to. Sam *needed* to have faith. In a world where monsters and demons dwelled in basements and back alleys, a world where they dwelled within *Sam himself*, he had every reason to.

Faith gave Sam hope. It gave him the possibility of the existence of true good in the world, of salvation, of *him* being able to be saved.

At first, Sam saw Dean being pulled out of Hell by an angel for what it was: a miracle. God stretched out His hand and had done what he had tried to do for months to no avail, God brought his brother back. For weeks afterward, that very fact was a source of comfort and inspiration to Sam. If Dean could be saved from Hell, then perhaps he could be as well.

Then Sam saw the price of that miracle. Dean marked by the stigmata, bleeding and in agony while angels looked on with indifference disguised as devotion to a higher purpose. Then Sam learned the reason for that miracle. Dean was Son of God, The Second Coming. The stigmata marked his body as a sacred vessel, but they were also his penance, a way of cleansing him of the stain of Hell.

Dean was saved and his salvation was preordained. Dean *needed* to be saved. Dean could see
evidence of it on his body, touch it and even smell it. Sam, however, was not and—as far as he knew, with demon blood coursing through his veins—he couldn’t be.

Dean may have been suffering, and while that did frighten Sam with the ever-looming possibility of Dean dying again, it angered him just as much. Dean’s suffering was a sign that Dean was holy, a fact that Dean could never seem to recognize, never wanted to recognize. Sam watched Dean look at his wounds, look at his role as Messiah, with apathy and annoyance at best, and sacrilege and fear at worst. He watched Dean hurl blasphemies at people who called him “Lord” and scoff at the idea of God being his Father.

Dean was the savior of humanity and he treated it like a burden, like a bitter cup he didn’t want to drink from.

It was why when Dean first started going to church Sam was confused, but largely unfazed by it. He went along with it as Dean made spur of the moment choices to go to Catholic masses and Methodist church services. Even when it became clear that Dean was planning them, he found amusement at the sight of Dean awkwardly sitting through Baptist sermons and Pentecostal prayer invocations. But when he watched Dean shrug off pastors and parishioners, albeit politely, Sam started to become annoyed. Dean chose to go to the services. He couldn’t reject his “flock” while still trying to observe them.

The hypocrisy of his brother’s actions grated on Sam the most.

So when Dean decided to turn a pit stop for gas off of Interstate 35—halfway through a ten hour drive from Bobby’s House to Oklahoma City—into a full-on break, Sam was expecting it. They had gotten a late start so both of them were tired and with it being his birthday, Dean wanted to spend as much of the evening as possible relaxing and enjoying himself. It was when Dean made mention of going to an Evangelical church in the morning that Sam couldn’t stay quiet any longer.

“A mega church?” Sam scoffed as he looked at Dean, laying on his bed and watching Die Hard on the hotel room’s television with a glass of whiskey in his hand. “Really?”

“Yeah. Why not?” Dean shrugged, polishing off his drink. “There’s one about two miles down the road. Saw it driving back from the liquor store. We can cross that one off the list.”

Sam rubbed at his forehead. Of course Dean had a list.

He was quiet for a moment, taking a sip of his drink before he looked back up at Dean. “Listen Dean, I get why you’ve been doing this whole “going to church” thing. Really, I do.” He took a deep breath. “But why don’t you stop beating around the bush and just reveal yourself?”

Dean turned his head, cocking an eyebrow at Sam. “Reveal myself?”

“Yeah. I mean, it’s not like no one knows.” Sam chuckled. “Every time we go to one these churches there’s always someone who knows who you are and you always just brush it under the table. You’re the Messiah, Dean. You’ve got no reason not to, at this point.”

Fear and frustration permeated Dean’s voice as he sat up in his bed. “I’m not David Koresh; I’m the real thing. I don’t gotta overcompensate and I don’t want to.” Dean reached down and grabbed the already half-drunk bottle of Jim Beam sitting between their beds and poured himself another drink, his eyes shifting nervously. “I’m making myself known well enough healing people and exorcising demons.”

Sam tossed back the rest of his drink. A moment passed before he spoke again. “So, exorcising
“Yeah. It is.” Dean’s eyes narrowed as he took a long sip from his drink. “When I do it.”

“How many times do I have to tell you this? I don’t exorcise demons for kicks,” Sam spat. “I do it for the exact same reason you do, to help people. To save people.”

“My powers come with the gig, Sam. I’m supposed to exorcise demons.” Dean’s words were blunt. “And they don’t involve me using demonic psychic powers that run the risk of turning me into the Antichrist.”

Sam grew very quiet. “You honestly think that’s going to happen?” He glared. “You honestly think I’d let that happen?”

Dean scoffed. “I don’t know, Sam, you sure seem poised for it with your whole “trusting Ruby”thing.”

Sam sat there for a moment. He chuckled bitterly as he stood up from his bed, grabbing his jacket as he walked to the door. “Well, I’m glad you have so much faith in me, Dean. Then again, not having faith is pretty par for the course with you.”

“Ya know, Sam, you’ve had a real shitty fuckin’ attitude lately,” Dean snapped. His eyes locked hard on Sam. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d almost say you were jealous.”

Sam didn’t say anything as he slammed the door behind him. He made it only as far as the bar next to the hotel where he sat down and texted Ruby. Six drinks, fifty dollars, and no reply later, Sam staggered back into the hotel room where he found Dean passed out cold on top of the covers. An empty Jim Beam bottle lay on its side, a small wet spot staining the bed spread. As quietly as he could manage, Sam pulled the covers over his brother and made his way into the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

Sam sat on the floor next to the toilet where he took the flask from his jacket pocket; his hand shook while he unscrewed the cap. He whacked the mouthpiece hard against his palm, marring the skin with red circular impressions as his motions became faster and more desperate with each subsequent whack. Finally Sam chucked it to the floor, the sound of the metal ringing out as it clanked against the tiles. Sam’s eyes fixed on it as he dug his hands deeply into his hair, his breathing heavy and panicked.

The flask was empty. It had been empty for nearly a week.


Shawnee, Kansas.

“You know this is a bad idea, right?” Sam chuckled. “This is the kind of church you said you wanted to avoid.”

“Yeah. I know. You reminded me three times on the drive over,” Dean scoffed as they walked
across the church parking lot. “But I’m givin’ it a shot, so how about you do the same?”

Dean stopped on the sidewalk leading up to the church door, his eyes locked on the sign: Redeemer’s Light Evangelical Church. ‘The Lion of the tribe of Judah has triumphed’ (Rev. 5:5).

It looked more like a billboard than a church sign, large and looming with a digital screen encased in marble. The church was likewise; sprawling, new, and meticulously well-maintained. Its steeple was so tall it looked as though it actually could touch Heaven. There were three large crosses fixed to the top of it, stark white against the red brick, and in the midmorning sun, they almost glowed.

All the churches Dean and Sam had visited since Christmas had been smaller and older than this one; a Methodist church in Montana that was a hundred years old and falling apart, a two aisle Baptist church in Wyoming, and a Pentecostal church they stopped at on the way to Bobby’s house that—although larger in size—looked as though it hadn’t been renovated since Sam was an infant.

Even though Dean wasn’t a believer, he nevertheless appreciated the honesty and humility of those churches. The Methodist church would rather put the collection money towards a child’s medical bills than towards a new steeple. The Baptist church ran a soup kitchen and clothing drive after every service. Even the Pentecostal church that Dean wasn’t too thrilled with had some of the best homemade pie he’d ever eaten, courtesy of a bake sale.

The sight of this church made Dean’s stomach turn, but if he was going to tell Sam to keep an open mind, he had to do the same.

In the back of his mind, Dean knew this was a bad idea. It was a bad idea going to a large church. It was a bad idea doing this the morning after his birthday while he was nursing a Jim Beam induced hangover. It was a bad idea being all of three towns over from Lawrence. In a different life, one without demons and monsters, he probably would have had a wrestling match at this town’s high school. It was too crowded, too early, and too close to home.

“We really don’t need to do this. We’ve been to enough churches already.” Sam looked at him reluctantly.

Dean shook his head. “Yeah, well we haven’t been to this kinda church yet, Sammy.” He shrugged. “Who knows, maybe they won’t be as bad as they look.” Dean breathed deeply as he made his way over to the door and walked inside, Sam following behind him.

As they walked in, Dean set his eyes on a small church fair going on in the vestibule. Two neat rows of plastic tables with signs taped to the front of them were set up in the middle of it. Some looked to be taking donations while others were selling things.

Without saying a word, Dean walked over to them, looking at each of the tables as he passed by. One table had a bucket taking donations for a church renovation that was so full the people giving to it had to shove the bills and checks through the slit on the top. Another table had a huge plastic bin—half full with cans of tuna fish, vegetables, and boxes of pasta—sitting on the floor next to it. Its yellowing sign said it was going to a quarterly food drive for the Johnson County Homeless Shelter.

One table being run by a young woman had Christian Rock CDs, T-shirts, religious tracts, and Bibles with edgy looking covers stacked on top of it. Dean stopped at the table briefly, picking up one of the CDs and looking at it inquisitively.

"Secular rock music is so damaging to young kids,” the young woman stated. “It’s good to offer them Christian alternatives."
“Oh, it’s not all bad.” Dean looked at her, smirking slightly. "Zeppelin actually did a cover of a gospel song.” He put the CD down and picked up one of the Bibles with a Grunge style cover, skimming through it amusedly.

The woman blinked at him. Hope and excitement then spread across her face as she watched him pick the Bible up. “That’s a great one to use, it’s not as intimidating. It’s forty dollars if you’d like to buy it.”

“No.” Dean chuckled as he put the Bible back down. “I'm not really the… preachin’ type.”

“What do you mean?” Shock filled the woman’s face. “Of course you are. It’s our duty as true believers to spread the Gospel so that we can save as many people as possible from Damnation. We have to let them know that the only way they can find salvation is by being Born-Again.” The woman’s voice brimmed with confidence and certainty.

Dean stared at her for a second. “Right.” He nodded, clearing his throat. “Of course.”

“A guy like you—young, approachable, down-to-earth, cute—you’d be great at it.” She quickly picked the Bible up and held it out to Dean. “I’ll give it you for fifteen.”

Dean smiled at her sarcastically as he took a twenty from his pocket and handed it to her. “Sure. Why not?”

“Good.” She grinned as she gave the Bible and change to him. “You’ve got the Holy Spirit working within you. I can tell. You just gotta let it lead you.”

“Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.” Dean nodded again as he took the Bible from her. His smile quickly faded from his face as he walked over to Sam, now sitting on one of the vestibule’s nicely cushioned benches. “Hey young man, have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?”

Dean shook his head as he sat down next to Sam, dropping the Bible into his lap.

Sam shot him a look as he picked the Bible up. “King James version,” he scoffed, skimming through it. “As far as translations go, this is by far the least accurate.”

“Yeah. I know.” Dean let out a deep breath, rolling his eyes. “Trust me.”

“So.” Sam smirked. “Is the lobby enough to convince you we’re in the wrong place?” He cocked an eyebrow as he glanced around the vestibule.

It was enough. More than enough and Dean was starting to feel the heat because of it. The same heat that coursed through his veins when he laid a healing hand upon someone or exorcised a demon, the fire and lightning under his skin. Now the heat had turned into smoldering embers.

Dean sat on the bench for a moment before he stood up, checking his watch. He sighed deeply. “Come on Sammy, it’s quarter till. If we go in now, we can probably still get good seats.” With that, he marched himself in the direction of the sanctuary door.

Dean glanced anxiously around at the throngs of parishioners seated in the plush pews as they entered the chapel. The sanctuary was large, but despite that, it was nearly full. Much to Dean’s dismay, the only seats the brothers could manage to find were on the aisle, a row from the front. He hoped he’d get through the service unnoticed.

Usually Dean did go unnoticed. Those who were more open to things—psychics, sick people, even hunters—tended to acknowledge him with little more than a smile or implied word. Those who the angels spoke to could almost never pick him out, mostly due to him not fitting with their assumptions
of what the Messiah would be. Were it not for the scent of roses or them catching sight of his wounds, most never even noticed him. But when they did, often they would make a scene of it, proclaiming him as Christ returned.

Dean hated that even more than when angels used them to give him messages.

The service began as most services did; a couple of songs performed by the church’s band and an opening prayer.

After a couple more songs came the scripture reading. It was from the nineteenth chapter of the Book of Revelation. Jesus Christ defeating Satan and casting him into a lake of fire.

The reading gave lead right into the pastor’s sermon. Sam and Dean gave each other wary looks as they watched the older, stout man stand at the pulpit, his voice booming across the sanctuary.

“War. Famine. Pestilence. Death. The Antichrist. They’re coming. The End is on its way. We’ve felt it. We’ve seen it in blizzards and electrical storms. Why, it’s been in the very air for months now.” He paused for a second as a smile spread across his face. “But do we have anything to worry about? No. Because He—Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior—has returned. But he’s come not upon the clouds of Heaven, but as a thief in the night.”

The parishioners clapped and cheered.

“Crap,” Dean mumbled under his breath. He tugged anxiously at the sleeves of his leather jacket and his beanie, eyes darting around the sanctuary.

The pastor continued, “As you know, last week my nephew, Joel, told me that an angel came to him. That Messenger of the Lord told him that for the first time in two thousand years, Christ walks the Earth.” He gestured to a nine-year-old boy sitting in a chair up on the stage. “Well, this angel has now told him that we’ve been Chosen. We are going to herald His Second Coming.”

The parishioners cheered and clapped again, the sound becoming an almost deafening roar.

Dean watched as the boy scanned the sanctuary briefly before settling his eyes on him, a smile spreading across his mouth as his eyes lit up with shock. “Oh shit,” Dean murmured.

Sam leaned over to him, his voice muffled and panicked. “We should leave. Now.”

“Yeah sure, we’ll just get up and leave right in the middle of the damn sermon,” Dean whispered sarcastically. “That’s real fuckin’ inconspicuous, Sam.”

“The kid saw you, Dean,” Sam hissed. “Whatever angel spoke to him apparently told him you’re gonna Rapture this whole congregation.”

“Yeah. Except I’m not,” Dean mumbled.

“Exactly. How do you think they’re gonna react to that?”

Dean glanced over at the child again. The boy was whispering something to the pastor, both their eyes landing on Dean briefly before the pastor nodded and sat back in his chair. Dean swallowed hard. “If we leave now the kid and the rest of the congregation are gonna go postal,” Dean rasped. “We’ll wait until it’s over and then haul ass outta here.”

As soon as the service ended, Sam and Dean jumped from their seats and started making their way out of the sanctuary, trying to weave themselves through the crowd as they moved briskly down the
aisle. They only made it halfway before Dean saw something dart in front of him. His eyes lowered to find the boy standing there, staring up at him in awe and wonder.

“You’re here, Lord. Zachariah told me you would be,” the boy, Joel, chirped.

“R— Really? That so?” Dean chuckled awkwardly. His eyes shifted over to Sam, who was working his way back through the crowd.

The boy nodded. His eyes darted down to Dean’s hands. He looked back up at him in confusion. “Where are your wounds? He said you bore the marks of your Passion.”

Dean froze. “Listen Joel.” He cleared his throat. His eyes shifted nervously as he glanced at the parishioners filing out of the sanctuary who had started to give him odd looks, some outright staring at him. He squatted down on the floor, right at the little boy’s eye level. “I get that you’re excited and all but you gotta tone it down a bit, okay? I’m not really here for the whole “Second Coming” thing today.”

Joel looked at Dean inquisitively for a second before he nodded. “Alright.”

“Joel! Leave that man alone. What have I told you about talking to strangers?” A woman with well-coiffed brown curls marched over to them. She shot Dean a nasty look, giving his flannel shirt and faded leather jacket a once-over as she started pushing Joel away.

“No, Mama,” Joel whispered, “that’s Dean Winchester. I told you he’d come today and he did.”

The mother froze instantly. Her eyes focused hard on Dean as she slowly walked back over to him, reverence flooding her face. “You’re— You’re Dean Winchester?”

Dean stood up again. He was silent for a moment as he glanced over to Sam before turning back to the mother. He nodded. “I am. But you gotta understand, I’m not here to—”

“You’ve Chosen us!” The mother’s face lit up. “Our Church. We’re going to be taken up to Heaven.”

“No, no. I just came here for a church service. That’s it.” Dean chuckled nervously as the rest of Joel’s family and a small group of parishioners made their way over to him, their eyes wide with excitement. “I don’t know what that angel has been telling you, but I ain’t here to Rapture anybody.”

The mother blinked at him in confusion. “But you’re here. At our church.”

“Yeah. And I’ve gone to other churches. Quite a few actually.” Dean’s words were blunt. “Me being here doesn’t mean you’ve got a special lifeboat on the Titanic.”

Joel’s father, a tall man with brown hair, stood next to his wife and child. “We’re Saved. True believers.” His words were certain. “We’re going to be spared Hell on Earth the same way that we’re spared Hell when we die.”

The embers under Dean’s skin were growing hotter by the second, red hot and crackling. They spread through the whole of his body, stronger than he had ever felt them before. Dean looked around at the parishioners. “You think just paying lip service to God is your Get Outta the Apocalypse Free card? It’s not.”

The faces of the parishioners fell sharply at his words.

One of the church’s officials, an older man with graying hair, narrowed his eyes suspiciously at
Dean. “‘No one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again’. John 3:3,” he said, glaring. “Are you telling us — ‘Lord’—that the Holy Bible is wrong?”

“I’m telling you that blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God and blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Matthew 5:8 and 5:10.” Dean shrugged, an angry smile spreading across his face. “But who knows, I might be misquoting it.”

Sam glanced around the sanctuary, now cleared out aside from the group of parishioners and them. He quickly walked over to Dean and grabbed him by the arm, pulling him down the aisle towards the door. “Come on, let’s get outta here,” Sam hissed.

They only made it a few yards before Dean pulled his arm free from Sam’s grip. “No Sam,” he rasped, “I’ve gotta do this.”

“No you don’t, Dean.” Sam’s words were panicked. “These people are—”

Before Sam could finish, Dean turned and marched back down the aisle, his finger pointed in the direction of the vestibule, anger plastered across his face. “There’s a box in the lobby taking donations for a homeless shelter. It’s been sitting there for a while too, by looks of it, and there’s next to nothing in it.” Dean’s voice echoed throughout the sanctuary as he looked around it. “But that renovation bucket, on the other hand, looks like Scrooge McDuck’s bank vault. ‘Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me.’ Or did you all somehow forget that?”

“It’s faith, not works that bring you Salvation. The Apostle Paul said so!” a woman with short blond hair spat. She glared at Dean as she marched down the aisle and out of the sanctuary.

“Yeah? Well I say it’s easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven!” Dean shouted, his fists clenching.

The parishioners grumbled amongst themselves.

“You listen to me.” Dean’s teeth clenched. “There are people who have never once stepped foot inside a church, people who don’t even believe in God who are gonna get past the Pearly Gates long before you ever do. I’ll make damn sure of that.”

The singer of the church’s band, a red-headed woman, stepped forward. “You can’t say that. That’s blasphemy.”

Dean just looked at her and smirked. “Sweetheart, I’m the Saint of blasphemy.” He glanced around at the parishioners, watching as their grumbling turned into shouts before he made his way back down the aisle, Sam following behind him.

“What the hell was that?” Sam hissed as he glanced back at the group of parishioners.

“What do you think that was?” Dean scoffed.

“No. I mean the way you were quoting scripture.” Sam stared at him. “It didn’t…sound like you.”

Dean promptly shook his head with a sigh. “Sam, we’ve got an angel who’s lying to religious folk. We’ve got bigger shit to worry about right now.”

As they made their way down a hall to a side exit, the pastor’s wife ran up to them. “Lord?” she asked with excitement.
Both brothers stopped.

Dean furrowed his brow. “Yeah?”

“During the service, Joel informed my husband that you were here.” She smiled at him. “He’d like the chance to speak with you for a moment if that’s alright.”

Dean studied her for a second. His gaze then turned a short distance down the hall where he saw the rest of the parishioners filing out of the sanctuary and into the vestibule. He watched as Joel, being led out by his mother, looked back at him and smiled. “Sure. It just so happens we’ve got something we need to talk to him about.”

“Wonderful.” The wife led the two of them down the hallway to the pastor’s office. The room was empty when they walked inside. “He should be here shortly.” She smiled as she gestured to a set of chairs across from a desk that both of them sat down in. She gave them a nod and left the room.

A minute passed, then five, and then ten. Sam glanced nervously out the door. “What the hell is taking him so long?”

“He’s probably talking his flock down.” Dean shrugged. “Either that, or he’s helping them gather up rocks to bludgeon me with.”

Sam glared at him. “That’s not funny Dean. We should get the hell outta here.”

“Dude. Will you chill out?” Dean rolled his eyes. “You’ve been on edge all day.”

“I’m serious, Dean. Something’s not—”

Sam was cut off as Dean groaned loudly, clutching at his temples. He collapsed to the floor, tears of blood streaming down from his eyes. His body was wracked with pain. Different from the pain he felt when he bled. This pain didn’t bring with it doves and stained glass, but memories of smoke and sulfur.

Sam jumped out of his chair and picked up Dean off the floor.

They were halfway to the door when the pastor walked into the room. Dean’s eyes locked on him instantly, not the pastor, but to the being that now dwelled within him, a horrible creature with white eyes. “Alastair.” Dean’s voice shook and his eyes went wide.

“Hello, Dean.” A smirk spread across the pastor’s face as his eyes flickered white. “Love the new look. Though I have to say I much prefer you bearing my marks, angel.”

Sam quickly raised his hand, but before he could react, Alastair sent him flying through one of the office’s stained glass windows with a casual wave of his hand. With another, he sent Dean colliding into a bookcase, a stack of books falling on top of him as he landed on the floor.

“Exorcizamus te!” Dean rasped, his blood streaked eyes squinting as he tried to shield himself from the hail of books. Nothing happen. No screaming. No smoke. Nothing. Alastair didn’t even so much as flinch. “Exorcizamus te omnis immundus spiritus!” Dean repeated, his voice growing louder. Panic began to take hold of him. He was trapped. Alone. And the exorcism, for as many times as he had done it over the last couple of months, wasn’t working.

“Sorry Dean. That little exorcism of yours isn’t going to work on me. I came here prepared.” Alastair rolled his sleeve up, exposing a binding sigil carved into the flesh of his forearm. “See? I’m bound to this meat suit. That, my dear boy, is magic not even you can override.” A vicious smile spread across
his face. “Let’s have a little chat, shall we? We’ve got so much to catch up on.”

Sam struck the ground with a thud, a shower of brightly colored stained glass flowing behind him. He tried his best to cover himself as the shards struck him, embedding into his clothing and skin. A large piece had already jammed itself into his shoulder. Despite the pain, Sam quickly picked himself up off the ground and stumbled to his feet, brushing the shards off and pulling the larger one out of his shoulder with a sharp yell as he started to limp his way over to the church’s side door.

The church band’s singer and the church official ran over to him from the parking lot.

“You alright? What happened?” the singer shouted as she ran over to him.

“I’m fine. Listen, you gotta get outta here!” Sam winced sharply, panic filling his voice. As she got closer to him, Sam noticed a scent wafting faintly around her, a smell he had gotten all too good at picking up on, the smell of sulfur. His hand was reaching into the pocket of his jeans where Ruby’s knife was just as her eyes flickered black. Before she could do anything, Sam stabbed her in the chest with it.

A few seconds later the church official came barreling at him, his eyes black as pitch. “What’s the matter Sammy? Lost your mojo?” he snarled.

Sam managed to dodge him and slice the back of his leg open with the knife, toppling the man to the ground. Without a second’s hesitation, Sam fell to his knees and went for the man’s neck, slicing it open with the blade. “Not anymore,” Sam growled as he shoved his face down onto the wound, sucking the blood out of it with such hungry voracity that he nearly choked before he stood up again and darted back into the church.

“Dean Winchester, Son of God,” Alastair deadpanned. He sauntered over to Dean. “You’ve certainly moved up in the world, haven’t you?”

“Yeah… looks like it.” Dean winced, glaring at him as he dragged himself out of the book pile.

Alastair chuckled, grabbing Dean by his jacket, the leather scrunching between his fingers. “You know, we always knew about Sammy; Azazel’s Favorite, the Prodigy, the Boy King, Our Savior. He was a given. But you Dean? You were a surprise.” He sent a punch into Dean’s stomach.

“Heaven did a good job cloaking you. You probably would have stayed that way too if weren’t for that faith healer looking into your heart. His wife dealing with black magic didn’t hurt either.”

Dean’s body curled into itself at the blow, his voice coming out of his mouth as a hoarse groan.

Alastair looked down at him for a second. “Of course, we couldn’t just kill you. No. You’d go right up to Heaven if we did that. And then they’d just bring you back. We were banking on you selling your soul for John. But when you didn’t…” Alastair shrugged. “Well, it turns out Sam was the better choice. A necessary sacrifice.” Alastair punched him again, this time in the face. “Besides, we knew you’d bring him back.”

“You son of a bitch,” Dean hissed, his lip swollen and bleeding.

Alastair kept punching him. The more Alastair touched him, the more Dean felt the pain. Not from
Alastair’s blows, but from the stigmata. From his wounds. He felt each and every one of the bruises on his back, forehead, wrists, and ankles crack and split open with a hot sting and he cried at the feel of it.

Alastair sighed as he watched the blood already begin to soak through Dean’s beanie. “You know Dean, between you being God’s Bastard and how long John lasted under my knife, I was expecting to have to work on you for centuries—millennia even—before you broke. In fact, I was looking forward to it. But all it took was a measly thirty years and all I had to do was hang you up on a tree for a few days. It was kind of disappointing. Anticlimactic, you could say.” A sick grin spread across Alastair’s face. “But I shouldn’t complain, after all you were such a great help to us, what with you breaking the first Seal and all.”

“What?” Dean rasped.

“Oh? Your feathered buddies didn’t tell you?” Alastair lifted Dean up off the floor, slamming him against the wall. “The first time you took my razor? The first time you sliced into that weeping bitch? That was the first Seal, Dean.”

“No.” Dean shook his head. “You’re lying.”

Alastair leaned his face in, pressing his lips just against Dean’s ear. “And it is written, ‘The First Seal shall break when The Righteous Man sheds blood in Hell. As The Lamb breaks, so shall it break.’” he hissed, his voice menacing but certain.

A lump started to grow in Dean’s throat. He swallowed hard, his eyes beginning to gloss over.

Alastair’s eyes locked on the blood that started to creep down Dean’s forehead and chuckled, pulling the hat off of Dean’s head, tossing it across the room. “Heaven actually thinks they can fix you with those wounds. But after all you did downstairs, after everything we did, there’s a mark on you that can’t be erased.”

Alastair grabbed Dean by the neck, lifting him slowly up off the floor. “We’re going to win, and when we do, we’ll owe it all to you, Dean Winchester. Your Father must be so proud of you.” Alastair’s grip tightened.

Dean gasped for air. His feet kicked helplessly as his hands tried to grasp desperately at Alastair’s forearm.

Dean’s blood streaked eyes had just begun to blur when he heard the office door kicked open, followed by Alastair being jerked violently away from him and hurled across the room as he collapsed onto the floor.

Through his blurring eyes, he saw Sam, covered in cuts and bleeding, standing just inside the office with his hand raised, pinning Alastair to a wall. He watched as Sam’s fingers tightened into a fist and Alastair screamed out, convulsing and glowing until finally the light faded and his body collapsed, slumping down in a broken pile against the wall. Sam ran over to Dean and lifted him off the floor, carrying him quickly out of the church and into the parking lot.

As Sam carried him out to the Impala, Dean caught sight of a half wiped away streak of blood on Sam’s face and hand.

Blood that smelled of nothing but sulfur.
:: Crucifixion was a fairly common method of torture and capital punishment in the ancient world, used mostly in the Near East and Mediterranean. It was first used by the Persians and the Carthaginians and was later adopted by the Romans who used it exclusively on slaves and non-Roman citizens as a deterrent against crime and insurrection.

:: David Koresh was the leader of the Branch Davidians, a religious cult and offshoot of the Seventh-day Adventist church, located in Waco, Texas. He was believed by both himself and his followers to the Final Prophet and Messiah. In 1993, a raid was conducted on their compound, the Mount Carmel Center, by the U.S. BATF. A later siege conducted by the FBI ended with the compound being burning to the ground. All of the occupants, including David, were killed.

:: The Rapture is a Christian belief that either before or simultaneously with the Second Coming of Christ, believers-both dead and alive-will be taken up to Heaven. While Catholics, Orthodox and some Protestant churches believe that this event will occur after the Apocalypse has ended, many Evangelical Christians believe that this event will occur shortly before The Apocalypse begins during a time known as the Pre-Tribulation, sparing Christians from the carnage to follow.
Sam’s arm pulsed hot with the stinging burn of whiskey, his teeth gritting against the repeated poking of the needle as he pulled the thread through his skin. He’d been working on sewing up the gash in his arm for nearly fifteen minutes—what felt like an eternity—and he still wasn’t finished.

“Shit,” he hissed as the needle slipped out of his blood-caked fingers for the second time in a row.

He glanced over to Dean who was lying still on his bed—fresh bandages wrapped around his wrists, ankles, back, and forehead—his breaths shallow and pained. Castiel had appeared in the room briefly, not long after they got back, to ask them about the attack in the church and to check on Dean. He had offered to heal what Alastair had done to Dean, but Dean had refused. Sam watched with frustration as Dean reprimanded the angel for not doing his job before sending him away.

Even though Dean had refused the healing, Sam still wasn’t sure if Dean needed to go to the hospital. He couldn’t tell how much of Dean’s pain was from his wounds opening up and how much of it was from the beating Alastair had given him.

“How you holding up?” Sam asked. He winced as he pulled another stitch through his skin. He took a large gulp from the whiskey bottle, wiping up the blood that ran down his arm with a dingy bath towel that was quickly becoming more red than white.

“Peachy,” Dean rasped. He turned his head toward Sam, watching as he began to pull the final stitch through his skin. “Ya know… I could take care of that for you, if you want.” His words sounded more like a plea than a suggestion.

Sam stopped mid-stitch, his eyes locking on Dean. This wasn’t first time Dean had offered to heal him. There was his bruised rib in Michigan, a vampire bite in Tennessee, and a sliced arm in North Carolina. Dean offered to heal them all, but Sam had always refused.

The idea of Dean healing him had never sat right with Sam. He didn’t feel worthy of it and the very idea scared him. He was scared that Dean couldn’t heal him. Couldn’t fix him. Dean not being able to heal him, more than anything else, would prove to Sam that he couldn’t be saved. That he was beyond redemption.

“No. I got this.” Sam turned his gaze away from Dean as he finished pulling the thread through.

“You need to rest.” After tying it off with his free hand and teeth, he poured the last of the whiskey over the wound, hissing sharply at the burn.

Dean scoffed, looking away. He shifted on the bed, his movements stilted and slow, before growing quiet once again.

Sam had just finished pressing a gauze pad to his shoulder when Dean sat up on his bed with a gasp, gently pressing his back against the headboard.

“I saw you kill Alastair.” Dean’s voice was calm, but it had a note of anger to it.

“Dean, listen.” Sam sighed, picking the bloody bath towel up from his bed. “I didn’t have a choice. He was gonna kill you and—”
“What I don’t get is how you did it. I mean, all of five minutes before, he tossed you clean through a stained glass window like you were a Raggedy Ann doll.” Dean pulled his silver flask out of his leather jacket and took a sip from it, wincing at the taste. He looked down at it for second before he closed it, shoving it back into his pocket. “What changed?”

Sam’s jaw clenched. He knew he had blood on his face when he rescued Dean. He had tried to wipe as much of it off as possible while he ran into the pastor’s office, and he did it again in the Impala when Dean wasn’t looking. He even washed his face when they got back to the motel room. He thought Dean wouldn’t notice it since he was so out of it from the beating and his wounds, but he’d been wrong.

“I got lucky, I guess.” Sam shrugged. Standing up from his bed, he began walking towards the bathroom, folding the bath towel repeatedly between his fingertips. He only got a few steps away from his bed before Dean spoke again.

“I saw the blood, Sam.” Despite its strain, Dean’s voice carried across the room.

Sam stopped, turning around. “What?”

“The blood on your face,” Dean repeated, narrowing his eyes. “And it smelled an awful lot like sulfur.”

“Dean, that wasn’t—”

“—Demon blood?” Dean’s voice shook with anger and fear as he swung his legs around off the side of his bed, his eyes locked on Sam. “You’re drinking demon blood? That’s how you’re yankin’ demon’s outta people?” Dean pressed a shaking hand to his mouth, pulling his fingers down his face. “I thought you were off the reservation with that psychic bullshit, but this? Do you have any idea what you’re doing?” He winced in pain as he stood up from the bed, leaning against the bedside table to steady himself.

“I’m trying to protect you, Dean.” Sam’s voice was desperate. “I’m trying to help you.”

“How?” Dean snapped. “By turning yourself into the fuckin’ Antichrist?”

“I’m trying to get strong enough to kill Lilith. I’m trying to stop her from breaking the seals. I’m trying to stop the Apocalypse,” Sam said, eyes narrowed. “If what happened today with Alastair is any indication, you’re sure as hell not strong enough to fight her. And what happens if Lilith does break the final seal? What then? You think you can take on Lucifer? You can’t even handle a demon, Dean. Ruby thinks—”

“Ruby?” Dean scoffed. He shook his head. “She’s got you by the fuckin’ nuts, Sam. She’s playing you for a chump and you’re falling for it.” Dean ran his hands tensely through his hair. “Tell me Sam, after everything that’s happened. After everything that’s happened to me, how the fuck could you ever think this was a good idea?”

Sam’s fists clenched. “What’s happened to you is why I’m doing this,” he yelled. “You were dead, Dean. I was trying to bring you back.”

“Well someone else beat ya to it,” Dean snapped.

“Yeah.” Sam’s voice was blunt. “That’s the problem.”

Dean blinked. “What?”
Sam paused. “You were stuck in Hell for months, Dean. Four months and I couldn’t do anything about it. Then suddenly, you weren’t.” Sam breathed deeply, his voice shaking with anger. “You came back because an angel pulled you out of Hell. Resurrected you because God commanded it. Because you’re the Messiah.” Sam was quiet for a second. He chuckled bitterly. “Things you always scoffed at and called bullshit. Things you always scoffed at me for believing in. Those things are what saved you. You’re a part of them and you’re still scoffing at them.”

Dean watched him for a moment, furrowing his brow. “Man, you really are jealous, aren’t you?” Dean shook his head. “Tell me Sam, would you want this?” He ripped the bandages off of his wrists and held them in front of him. His eyes narrowed sharply. “Would you wanna go through this?”

Sam stared down at the circular bruises, crusted with half-drying blood, on his brother’s wrists. “Yeah. I would.” Sam glared, looking back up at Dean. “And I wouldn’t treat like a burden like you do. I’d see it for what it actually is.”

“Yeah? And what’s that?”

“A blessing.” Sam spat.

“This is a blessing?” Dean scoffed warily, glancing down at his wrists. “Every time I fall asleep, I dream of getting crucified. Every night. On Fridays, I lie in bed bleeding, in agony, for eighteen hours straight.” Dean’s voice shook with anger and fear. “I walk around on a daily fuckin’ basis feeling like my body’s gonna explode at any second because I’ve got the universe under my damn skin. You want that Sam? Because I sure as shit don’t. I wouldn’t wish this upon my worst enemy.”

“Dammit, Dean! Don’t you fucking get it?” Sam gritted out in frustration. “You’re saved. You’re the most saved person on the planet and you don’t even wanna be.” He pressed his palm to his temple. “Every time I have to watch you heal someone or get visited by an angel—Hell, just being in the car with you, smelling those goddamn roses—I’m reminded of how damned I am.”

Dean lowered his hand back down, his fists clenched.

“I can’t ever be saved, Dean. I’ve got this evil thing inside of me that I can’t get rid of. This evil was forced upon me. It killed our mom and ruined our lives.” Sam’s eyes filled with tears. “The only way I can make that better, the only hope of salvation I have, is by making some good come out of it whichever way that I can. If that means drinking blood in order to get demons out of innocent people, then so be it.”

Dean remained quiet. He lowered his eyes to the floor, pinching his lips, his eyes closed shut for just a moment before he looked up again, locking his gaze squarely on Sam. Dean limped over to him, his fists clenched.

Expecting a punch, Sam took a swing at him first. Dean dodged it and grabbed him by the forearm. Dean opened his clenched hand, nearly slamming his palm down on the side of Sam’s head.

Sam froze at the touch, his eyes going wide with shock. “D— Dean?”

The only thing Sam could feel was the press of Dean’s fingers to his temple.

Dean placed his other hand to the opposite side of Sam’s head, squeezing it as he pressed down harder. His teeth clenched and a groan fell from his lips. His fingers trembled against Sam’s hair as blood began to trickle from the corners of his eyes.

Nothing happened.
“Dean!” Sam barked. He grabbed Dean by the shoulders and pushed him roughly away. “Dean, stop!”

Stumbling backwards, Dean’s eyes went wide and he took a sharp breath. He gaped at Sam for a moment before he looked down at his trembling hands. His body stilled as he stared down at them, his face washed pale in terror.

Dean wiped the blood from his cheeks, his expression hardening. Without a single word, he turned and headed over to his bed where he grabbed his jacket. He shoved his feet into his boots and walked over to the door.

Dean couldn’t heal him. He couldn’t purge the demon blood from his body. Dean couldn’t save him. Sam sat down on the edge of his bed in shock, staring blankly at the ugly wallpaper on the motel wall. He didn’t see Dean leave the room. He only knew Dean left by the slam of the door.

Dean had failed his brother.

When Dean placed his hand upon Sam’s head, no heat coursed through his body. For the first time since he’d begun healing people, there was no fire. No electricity. Nothing. Just cold and pain. Pain that Dean was sure would have led to his wounds reopening if Sam hadn’t pushed him away.

The small swirls of black smoke that he had felt swirling through Sam’s veins had remained unchanged. The smoke had fought off the heat. It suffocated it. Snuffing it out like dirt kicked onto a fire’s embers.

He slammed the door shut as he marched out of the motel room. As he stepped onto the sidewalk, Dean stopped and looked at the bar across the street. He briefly deliberated going over there before he turned his gaze over to the far side of the building. Quiet and vacant, away from the motel patrons in the parking lot.

Dean rounded the corner of the building. Panting, he began kicking the wall, hard and repeatedly, cursing himself until his boots had made a sizable hole in the cheap plaster. Finally, he turned back around, pressing his back against the wall as he slumped down onto the frozen pavement, his arms wrapped around his bruised ribs. Tears began to stream from his eyes; he wiped at them forcefully, relieved to see that they were no longer red.

Dean sat in silence for a while, crying with utter abandon, until finally his blurry eyes lifted up to the overcast sky.

“Help me,” he pleaded, his voice shaking. “Help me. Please.”

Dean waited for what felt like forever, waiting, hoping for a reply. But there was nothing. No booming voice like thunder. No pillar of smoke or burning bush. No blowing wind. Not even a dove. Only silence. Utter and complete silence.

A heavy breath left Dean’s mouth as he lowered his head back down. He wiped the tears from his eyes and dug his hands into his hair.

Then the sound of flapping wings filled the air. Dean rose from the pavement with some difficulty and turned the corner, setting his eyes on the angel standing in the middle of an empty parking space.
“Is this supposed to be some kind sick joke, Cas?” He narrowed his eyes. “I can heal cancer. I can bring people back from the dead! But I can’t purge demon blood from my own goddamn brother?” His voice shook as it rose.

“Don’t blaspheme Dean,” Castiel warned cautiously.

“Fuck my language, Cas!” Dean spat, taking a step forward. “Why can’t I fix Sam?”

Castiel sighed deeply, taking a couple of steps closer. “Purging demon blood from a human being is extremely difficult.” He paused. “Near impossible. Not even angels possess the power to do it.”

“So you’re saying I’m not strong enough.” Dean’s voice cracked.

Castiel shook his head. “That’s not at all what I’m saying, Dean.”

“Yeah, it is.” Dean’s voice was blunt. “I’m the Son of God, right? Logos? Deus Filius? Alpha and fuckin’ Omega? I should be able to heal Sam, no problem.”

“The Son has certain restrictions, Dean.” Castiel pursed his lips. “Unfortunately, that’s one of them.”

“Then tell me how to do it.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Can’t or won’t?” Dean asked.

Castiel didn’t answer him.

Dean shook his head, turning away from Castiel. He was quiet for a long moment. “So… is it true? Did I—” The question caught in his throat. “Did I break the first seal?” His guilt ridden voice was just above a whisper.

Castiel paused reluctantly. “You did.”

Dean shook his head, rubbing his eyes.

“From the moment your soul entered Perdition, we fought to get you back, but you were very heavily guarded. Ultimately, we couldn’t get to you in time.” Castiel’s voice was permeated with sadness. “The fact that I managed to pull you out before your soul was irrevocably damaged was nothing short of a miracle.”

“Why the fuck did you even bother?” Dean blinked tears away from his eyes, turning back around.

“I broke the first seal. I jump-started the damn Apocalypse. I’m the reason the world is doomed to shit. Why didn’t you just leave me there? Why did you bring me back?”

“It’s not blame that falls on you Dean, it’s Fate. You’re the only one who could have broken the first seal.” Castiel’s voice was honest and soft. “This isn’t the first time seals have been broken.” He paused. “When Jesus lived, we were also on the path to Armageddon. His death is what reset the seals.”

Dean’s chest heaved. He closed his eyes briefly, knowing what Castiel was going to say before he even said it.

Castiel locked his gaze on Dean. “The Lamb reset the seals. The Lamb must be the first to break them.”
Dean walked over to one of the benches sitting on the sidewalk and sat down on it, shaking his head again. “It doesn’t matter. I still broke the damn seal. I still broke in Hell.” Dean’s voice cracked sharply. “I—I can’t do this, Cas. I’m not strong enough. I’m not strong enough to heal Sam. I’m not strong enough to keep my shit together in The Pit. I’m not strong enough to fight Lucifer. You gotta find somebody else.”

“There is no one else, Dean. Our fate rests with you.”

Dean scoffed wearily, biting his lip as he stood up from the bench. He walked over to one of the motel’s support pillars and leaned against it, lifting his head up to the sky. “He’s not giving me a choice, is He?” His salt-caked eyes squinted against weak sunlight.

“No.” Castiel lowered his gaze to the pavement. “Believe me, Dean; more than anything, I wish that you didn’t have to go through this.” His voice was apologetic, guilt-ridden.

Dean lowered his gaze to Castiel, furrowing his brow. He watched the angel for a moment before he turned his gaze to the Impala, sitting at the end of the parking lot. Taking a deep breath, Dean marched over to her.

“What are you doing?” Castiel asked, following behind him.

“What I shoulda done months ago. Hell, what I shoulda done the moment you told me about this whole Messiah thing in the first place.”

When he reached the Impala, Dean popped open the trunk, grabbing one of his duffle bags from it. He pulled the contents out of it and replaced them with a first aid kit, a spare pair of jeans, a couple of shirts, a few pairs of socks, and basic toiletries.

Castiel watched him carefully as he packed. “Are you prepared for that?” Concern laced his question.

“Nope.” Dean shrugged, not looking up from his packing.

“Are you frightened?”

“I’m scared shitless. But like you said, I don’t have a choice.” He tied a wool army blanket to the top of his duffle bag and then looked up, meeting Castiel’s gaze. “The one choice I know I do have is to not sit on my ass.”

After he finished packing his clothes, Dean pulled his leather jacket off and put on a hooded sweatshirt and his warmest winter coat. He placed his wallet and the flask into the coat before he folded up his leather one, placing it carefully in the back of the trunk. The last things Dean packed were his handgun, a silver knife, a container of salt, a bottle of holy water, and John’s journal.

“I’m gonna make myself stronger.” Steel tinged Dean’s words. “And I’m gonna stop this damn Apocalypse before it even begins and I’m gonna fix Sam.”

“I told you Dean. You can’t fix Sam.” Castiel’s voice was cautious.

“Yeah?” Dean chuckled, closing the trunk with a thud. “Watch me.”

Dean quickly scribbled a short note on a piece of paper. When he finished writing, he folded the note and placed it between the Impala’s wiper blades. His eyes flickered to the motel room for a second before they turned back to the Impala. Dean stared at her for a long moment before he gave her a couple pats to the hood.
Dean took a deep breath. He shot Castiel a nervous look as he stepped away from the car. “So, which desert you would recommend, Cas? Sonoran or Mojave?”

“Ideally, the Jordan.” Castiel’s voice was simple as he walked over to him. “But he’s a God of the wilderness. If you’re going to try to find Him, Dean, you’ll find Him in the wilderness.”

Dean nodded. “Thanks, Cas.” A weary smile spread across his face as he gave Castiel a pat on the shoulder.

With that, Dean walked away.

He didn’t look back.

Castiel watched Dean as he made his way slowly down the side of the road with his thumb out. The street was bustling with cars, but not a single one stopped or slowed down or gave Dean so much as a glance. Soon the sound of feet, light and delicate, walking on the frosty sidewalk filled Castiel’s ears. The steps were followed by the voice of one of his sisters.

“What are you doing Castiel?” she snapped, her voice panicked and angry.

Castiel turned his eyes, setting them on Anna.

She had once been his field commander, the leader of his garrison. Castiel had always trusted her. She had seen him through many campaigns and missions. But she had also rebelled. She had hacked her grace out and fell to Earth where she was reborn as a human. Castiel watched her as she grew up the daughter of a church deacon in the Milton household. Despite the standing order to find her and bring her in, Castiel never told his superiors where she was. That was until Uriel found her grace, giving him no choice but to apprehend her.

Dean had helped get her grace back. Dean had also protected her by standing up to him and Uriel when they had been sent after Anna.

Anna had been Dean’s second display of disobedience to Heaven’s will. The second time he said “no” to an angelic order. The second time of many.

The last time had been when Dean healed Aleah, the young girl with Leukemia. He and Uriel had appeared to Dean just as he was leaving the hospital. They told him that the child’s death was preordained and that such actions would draw the wrong sort of attention to him. Dean responded by curing a young woman with AIDS and a Vietnam veteran with stage four esophageal cancer.

Castiel’s voice feigned indifference towards her. “I’m watching over my charge.”

“You call letting Dean go out into the world like that alone “watching over him”? Anna cocked an eyebrow. “He’s not safe.”

“I know that.” Castiel turned his gaze back to her. “But Dean needs to do this.”

“No, he doesn’t.” Anna shook her head. “We’ve asked far too much of Dean already.” She paused. “If Lucifer is released, we’ll be asking the impossible of him. Dean will have to—”

“I know what he’ll have to do, Anna. It’s Our Father’s Will. It’s not our place to question Dean’s...
“destiny.” Castiel paused. “Perhaps you’re letting your sympathies… your *feeling* for Dean get the better of you.”

Half of the seals had been broken already. Castiel knew what would happen if Dean wasn’t purified by the time the last seal was broken. He knew just as well what could happen if Dean became a spotless Lamb before the final seal was broken. What his sanctified body and soul had the power to do when it was pure and whole again. He knew what his siblings would force Dean to do if he didn’t start following their orders.

“What Dean and I did when I was human has *nothing* to do with this and you know it, Cas.” Anna glared. “And even if it did, what about your own sympathies? The Flood. Sodom and Gomorrah. Isaac. The First Born of Egypt. The Canaanites. David and Bathsheba’s infant. How many times have you questioned—*disobeyed*—direct orders?” Anna watched him carefully. “How many times have they had to reprogram you?”

Castiel grew silent.

“You’re alive right now because I convinced Micahel and Zachariah to spare you after what you did the last time.” Anna paused, her face softening. “After what you *tried* to stop.” Her voice turned sad.

“Yes. And look at what I caused. A civil war in Heaven. Our banishment from the Earth.” Castiel clenched his fists as he faced her. “Jesus refused to fight, Anna. He refused to listen. There was no other choice. *He* had no other choice. The fact that he was killed *means* that his death was ultimately His Father’s Will.”

Anna shook her head. “You don’t believe that. You didn’t believe it *then* and you certainly don’t believe it now. What the angels did—what we did—was wrong. You know that better than anyone. From the moment Jesus climbed out of the Jordan River, you never left his side. You walked with him to Golgotha.” Anna glanced down the road, looking at Dean. She watched him climb into the backseat of an oil truck before she turned her gaze back to Castiel. “Please, Cas. You have to stop this before it goes too far,” she pleaded, grabbing his hand.

“No.” Castiel shook his head, pulling his hand away. “I can’t— I won’t go through that again. I won’t *witness* that again. All that blood. All that pain. All that sorrow. Centuries later and I can still hear him crying.” He paused, bowing his head slightly as he shut his eyes. “Watching Dean relive it is difficult enough.”

“I know.” Anna sighed. “But putting Dean on a path to fulfill his destiny won’t prevent that from happening again.”

Castiel opened his eyes. “Maybe not.” He looked at her again. “But if I do nothing, if I don’t put Dean on this path, then I will be condemning him to death.”

“Dean could become a son completely dedicated and obedient to Him and His Will some of our siblings would still find fault in him simply because he’s a man. A human. Either way he’ll die, Cas.” Anna took a deep breath, shaking her head. “What happened today shouldn’t have happened. Two of our brothers were stationed near that church. They should have been protecting Dean.”

“They were. I selected them myself.” Castiel’s voice was blunt. “Alastair must have killed them.”

Anna paused, thinking for a long moment. “Demons didn’t kill those angels. If they did, we would have known it.” She took a couple of steps down the sidewalk before she stopped and turned back around. “Where was Uriel stationed this morning?” Her face was serious and her voice leading. “When was the last time you saw him?”
Castiel’s body stiffened, anger spreading across his face.

Without a word, he began to walk away from Anna.

Castiel’s feet touched down inside the church’s now-deserted vestibule. The stench of sulfur, smoke, and blood washed over him as he landed. It had almost completely overtaken the scent of roses, but he could still smell it, ever so faintly.

Silently, he made his way past spatters of blood, police tape, and chalk body outlines through the vestibule and to the sanctuary. His angel sword tucked into the sleeve of his trench coat.

Walking into the sanctuary, he found Uriel standing up near the pulpit, pacing around it. His footfalls were silent against the carpet.

“Castiel.” Uriel let out an annoyed breath as he went about inspecting the area. “I see you finally decided to join me.”

“Why did you do it, Uriel?” Castiel’s voice carried through the sanctuary as he marched down the center aisle. “Why did you try to kill Dean?”

Uriel turned around, his gaze judgmental. “I didn’t try to kill Dean.” He paused, shrugging, as he walked down the steps of the pulpit. “Alastair was working with Lilith. He already wanted to kill Dean. I simply gave him the opportunity by removing those who would prevent Alastair from trying.”

“Our siblings,” Castiel snapped.

Uriel shook his head and sighed. “And I only killed them because they refused to join me.”

“Why?” Castiel narrowed his eyes. “Why are you doing this?”

“You know why Castiel.” Uriel scoffed as he walked around the front of the sanctuary. “Dean won’t listen to us. He hasn’t listened to us from the moment you pulled him out of Perdition. It was bad enough when he wouldn’t let us take care of Samhain and Anna. But now he’s refusing to follow even the most basic of orders we give him. He’s making scenes in churches and healing whomever he pleases. People that were never supposed to be healed. Dean’s proven himself to be just like The Nazarene: a self-righteous liability that we will have to pay for. So I took matters into my own hands.”

“So you went against our mission.” Castiel glared. “Again.”

Disgust washed over Uriel’s face. “I never went against our mission. I did what we had been ordered to do. What the rest of our garrison refused to do because of you. Because of your unfortunate preoccupation with the Nazarene, with Dean, with all those mud monkeys,” Uriel hissed. “Once again, you can’t see that getting rid of the Messiah is for Heaven’s benefit.” He started to march down the aisle.

Castiel watched Uriel for a second. “If Dean dies with his soul in the state that it’s in right now, Lucifer rises without anyone to oppose him. We lose this battle before it’s even begun. Tell me Uriel, how does that benefit Heaven?”
Uriel stopped. He paused for a long moment before he turned back around. “Because if Dean dies, then there is nothing standing in Lucifer’s way.” He grinned. “Not even Michael.”

Castiel froze.

“Do you remember our brother? Do you remember how glorious he was? How powerful he was?” Uriel’s voice was filled with awe as he walked slowly back down towards Castiel. “Think of how much better Heaven would be under his rule.”

Castiel’s eyes narrowed. “I remember Lucifer being cast out of Heaven because he was full of pride and envy. Because he refused to bend the knee when Our Father demanded him to.”

“To the humans, Castiel,” Uriel spat. “He saw them for what they really are: deceitful, murderous, rebellious apes. And Lucifer was right. We gave them paradise and they tossed it away. They were handed this planet and they’ve turned it into filth. They’ve killed themselves over land and the words in our books that aren’t even true begin with.”

“They were created in His image.” Castiel shook his head. “They are Our Father’s greatest creations.”

“They are a failed experiment,” Uriel hissed, frustration and anger tingeing his voice. “They are corrupted. They were corrupted the moment Cain picked up the jawbone of an ass and ran his brother through with it. They’re not worthy of our adoration. They’re not worthy to bear God’s power and call Him Father.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Am I? Think about it Castiel. Can you really picture Dean Winchester sitting at the right hand of Our Father’s throne? Judging the living and the dead?” Uriel chuckled bitterly. “The idea is laughable.”

“That’s not your decision to make, Uriel.”

“I’m not the only one who feels this way, Castiel.” Uriel smirked. “Why do you think I’m still alive?”

Castiel’s eyes narrowed. In one quick motion, he punched Uriel, sending him crashing into a row of pews.

Uriel lifted himself out of the pile of broken wood and barreled towards Castiel. He grabbed him and tossed him onto the stage, taking the pulpit and some chairs with him as he slid across the floor.

“We are sheep, Castiel! Our superiors are only following Dean because they’ve been ordered to follow him. They’ll think nothing of nailing Dean to a tree if it comes to it. Just like the Nazarene. Tell me, are you prepared to bear his cross as well?”

Castiel lifted himself up off the floor the stage, spitting blood from his mouth. “It won’t come to that.” He pulled his sword from the sleeve of his trench coat. “Not again. Not while I’m alive.”

He thrust his sword, but Uriel managed to dodge it, knocking it out of his hand as he pinned Castiel against the back wall of the stage, just below the choir loft.

“Dean will die, Castiel. One way or another,” Uriel hissed, punching Castiel in the face. He pulled his own sword out of his jacket, hovering it just above Castiel’s chest. “I’m almost tempted to let you live. Just so you can watch yourself fail again.”
Uriel was just about to thrust the sword downwards into Castiel’s chest when Castiel heard the sound of wings, followed by a gasp. He watched as Uriel’s eyes went wide, his vessel stiffening. The tip of an angel blade protruded out of the front of Uriel’s throat.

Anna stood behind Uriel, Castiel’s angel sword clutched tightly in her hand.

In one quick motion, Anna pulled the blade out. Uriel collapsed to the floor with a deafening scream as a bright white light spread out from his mouth and eyes. Grace emanated from his body, exploding with a sudden burst of energy that completely flooded the sanctuary with blinding white light.

When the light dissipated, Uriel’s body lay motionless on the floor of the stage; a pair of charred black wings spread out under it.

Anna took a few steps closer to him, offering him her hand.

Castiel grabbed it, lifting himself off the floor. As soon as he was standing, he let go.


Abilene, Kansas.

Sam climbed out of the Impala, setting his eyes on Ike’s Place, a small bar a mile off of Interstate 70. Walking inside, Sam heard the opening cords to Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Simple Man” —classic rock with hints of country and bluegrass—and took a deep breath. Taking in the smell of stale beer and greasy food, he went up the bar counter where an older waitress was scrubbing the countertop with a dishrag. Sam cleared his throat. “Hi. Are you Martha Johnson?”

“I am.” The waitress nodded, looking up at him. “And you would be?”

“Sam Phillips. I write a blog on the paranormal.” Curiosity and concern laced Sam’s voice. “I’d like to talk to you about what you saw here yesterday.”

“Sure.” The waitress chuckled, tossing the rag onto the counter. “What I saw was an act of God. That’s the best way I can describe it.”

Sam’s eyes shifted. He paused awkwardly. “What happened exactly?”

“Well, a man walked in. Young. Drifter type. Handsome thing. But he looked like he’d hit ten miles of bad road. Tired and sick lookin’. Kid had nothing on him but the clothes on his back and a beat up duffle bag. The odd thing was he ordered nothing ‘cept a glass of wine in a low ball glass. Nursed the thing for a full hour too.” Martha recounted, leaning against the countertop.

Sam nodded.

“Brett, our bartender, started talkin’ to him. He said the man had “The Look” and wanted to make sure he was alright. You see, Brett was a sergeant in the army. He did two tours in Iraq. Got half his face burned up in an IED explosion. He knew the signs like the back of his hand.” She pointed over to a picture of a young man dressed in an army T-shirt; a burn scar covered the left side of his face.
and neck.

Sam turned his gaze back to the waitress. “So what happened then?”

“They spoke for a little while. Then the man finished his drink, left a huge tip, shook Brett’s hand, and left. “Next thing I know, I hear Brett yelling. I run over and see him staring into the mirror behind the liquor shelves, tears running down his face.” Martha paused, her voice turning into a low whisper. “His scars were completely gone. Not a single trace of them left.” She gestured over to the other side of the bar.

Sam turned to see Brett, the same man in the photograph, surrounded by a group of what Sam assumed were the bar’s regular patrons, his face now completely healed.

“What about the man?” Sam swallowed hard. “What happened to him?”

The waitress shrugged. “Last I saw him he was hitchin’ a ride on a semi-truck, headed west.”

“Did he mention where he was going?”

Martha shook her head. “Nope.”

Sam smiled at her sadly. “Well thank you for your time, ma’am. That’s all I needed to know.” With that, he turned and left the bar, heading back to the Impala. He climbed in, shutting the door with a squeak as he leaned his head against the back of the seat.

He sat there quietly for a second until a female voice broke the silence.

“So?” the voice sighed out. “No dice on your brother, I’m guessing?”

Sam turned his gaze over to Ruby, who was sitting with her feet propped up on the dashboard of the car. “No,” he grumbled, pushing her feet off the dash. “He’s long gone.” Sam’s hand lingered on her calf before he moved his fingers away from her, running it through his hair.

Ruby shifted in her seat, facing Sam. “You know Sam, I’m no expert on your brother, but I’m guessing that if Dean wanted you to find him, you would have by now.”

“I know.” Sam’s eyes narrowed. “I just want my brother back.” He paused, his hands gripping tightly around the steering wheel. “How much longer until I’m strong enough to ice Lilith?”

Ruby contemplated for a moment, staring at him. “Not much longer. You already turned Alastair into a pile of broken bones.” Ruby shook her head. “But you’re really outta practice. Before you can even think about going after Lilith we’ve gotta train you up. I’m talking boot camp, Sam.”

“Good. Then let’s get started.”

Ruby scooted over with a lustful grin, climbing into Sam’s lap. She kissed him deeply. Sam grabbed two fistfuls of her hair, pulling her roughly to him. She moved back, removing her shirt and taking her knife out of her pocket. She ran it over the skin just above her collarbone. Bright red blood streamed down her bronze skin and Sam glanced up at her, his eyes darkening as he pressed his mouth to her skin, biting down hard against the wound.

The sound of Ruby’s gasps and moans as he drank her blood helped Sam forget that the Impala’s cabin, for as many times as he and Dean had cleaned it, still reeked of roses. For once, he couldn’t smell them at all.

Ulysses, Kansas.

Dean rested his head against the cool window of a pickup truck’s passenger seat. He stared with half-open eyes out at the empty fields of grass along Kansas Highway 25. Frost covered and gray, the landscape was utterly void of life for miles in any direction.

The truck’s cabin reeked of diesel fuel and Lucky Strikes, and the speakers blared nothing but Hank Williams, but Dean didn’t care. The last five days had been comprised of nothing but long stretches of walking interspersed with the occasional ride in a semi or pickup along the highway and state roads. At night, Dean squatted in sheds or barns, and the occasional storm cellar.

Dean hadn’t eaten anything. Though he was hungry, his hunger—ever so slowly—was starting to go away.

Dean didn’t know where he was going. He had only a basic route of away and that was it. Maybe he’d go out to the badlands of Montana or the deserts of New Mexico. Maybe he’d wander around Death Valley. Maybe he’d go nowhere at all.

He was afraid of what would happen if he couldn’t get stronger. He was equally afraid of what would happen if he did.

Then Dean saw it.

A wooden building, painted white, set back on a deserted road made of little more than dirt and gravel, barely even a road at all.

A church.

When the truck got closer, Dean could see that the paint was chipped, exposing rotted wood; its windows were boarded up. The church’s congregation was long gone, likely uprooted by the dust bowl seventy years earlier, but the county nevertheless was seeing to its upkeep as a place of historical significance.

It offered shelter from cold and seclusion. It was sanctified ground which brought with it safety and, as Dean was hoping, communion with the divine. It was everything Dean wanted, everything Dean needed. It was perfect.

Dean glanced over at the truck driver, Tom, an elderly man pushing near eighty. He had offered Dean a ride completely unsolicited back in Lakin. Dean had learned through conversation that as a young man, he’d gone to jail for stabbing a man in a bar fight. “Hey, this is where I get off.”

“You sure ‘bout that, boy?” Tom asked in a thick Oklahoma drawl, cocking an eyebrow. “There ain’t nothin’ out here.”

“Yeah.” Dean nodded. “Positive. Thanks for the ride.”
Tom pulled the truck over and Dean climbed of the cab. The cold air attacked him, but soon it faded. With each step Dean took closer to the church, he could feel the heat course through his veins, blazing strong. By the time Dean pried its door open, his entire body felt as though it were awash in flame.

Chapter End Notes

:: Golgotha, also known as Calvary, is the place where Jesus was crucified.

:: Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan River by John the Baptist is considered by the canonical gospels and by most historians to mark the start of Jesus' ministry.

:: Grant County, along with the rest of South Eastern Kansas and the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles, were some of the areas hardest hit by the Dust Bowl.
Dean closed the church door behind him. He listened as it creaked loudly against the cold, dead air. One of the windows near the front of the church had lost its protective boarding, letting the weak winter light filter through, down into the chapel. It gave Dean just enough light to make out the faded bible verse painted on the wooden paneling above the pulpit stage, “‘I am sending you out like sheep among wolves.’ Matt. 10:16.”

The dust-caked pews were painted white, chipped and rotted. Some had already collapsed with age. Walking down the aisle, Dean noticed the organ. It was covered in dust, but he could still hear it hum from the wind going through its pipes. The pews were covered with stacks and stacks of hardcover hymnals and bibles. They were water stained, and they looked as though they would fall apart if Dean picked one of them up.

But already, the musty stench of age and decay in the church had been covered up with the scent of roses. For the first time in months, Dean welcomed the scent. Closing his eyes, he breathed it in deep, allowing it to fill his lungs.

Finally he opened his eyes again as the air in the church began to thicken. It tingled and buzzed on Dean’s skin, like static before a lightning storm. Dean closed his eyes, letting the smell and the heat radiate through him until finally he opened his eyes again.

Dean could feel Him.

He swallowed, walking further down the center aisle, the floorboards creaking beneath his feet.

“Father?” Dean called out. The word didn’t sit right on his tongue as it echoed through the church. He glanced up towards the ceiling. “Listen, I’m not gonna leave this place until you speak to me. No angels. No bible-thumpers. Nothin’. Just you and me, mano-a-mano. You got that?”

God didn’t answer Dean.

Just before reaching the pulpit, Dean stopped. He planted his feet firmly against the wooden floor, taking a deep breath, and didn’t remove his eyes from the ceiling. “If you want me to stay in here and die, I can do that too.”

Dean let his duffle bag fall off of his shoulder. Crouching down, he placed the bag on the floor and opened it, pulling out a container of salt, which he used to draw a circle around himself.

Once he was done making the circle, Dean placed the salt back in the bag and sat down on the floor, folding his legs.

He sat inside the ring for hours, waiting for a sign—any sign—but nothing happened. The only thing Dean heard was the wood of the building creaking from the strong gusts of wind. Twice, he heard a car pass by. Apart from that, the church was still. Quiet.

The light turned to a weak shade of yellow, then purple, then blue, until finally it disappeared, casting the church into total darkness.

Not long after night fell, Dean’s eyes began to droop. He lay down inside the circle, wrapping the
wool blanket around him, his legs curled up tight against his chest.

He was asleep within minutes.

Dean was awoken the next morning by a voice. It was one that he recognized, one that was soft and feminine, that he had often dreamt of.

“Dean?” The voice echoed throughout the church.

Dean opened his eyes slowly. He sat up to see Lisa standing beneath the entrance in the back of the chapel. She walked quickly down the center aisle, her eyes wide with worry.

“Lisa?” Dean rasped, standing up. “What the hell are you doin’ here?”

“Getting you out of here,” she said, her words blunt and panicked.

Dean paused, blinking at her. “How the hell did you even find me?”

“Sam called me, he said you ran off. He thought I could talk some sense into you, so he sent me here.” She held her hand out to him. “Come on, Dean. Let’s go.”

“Sam doesn’t know where I am.” Dean paused for a second, looking her up and down.

Lisa’s face dropped its worried facade. She sat down on one of the pews, and Dean’s heart began to race.

Lisa didn’t have a shadow.

“Why do you need to save the world? Why do you think people need you to save them? Come with me, come back to me. I need you, Dean. Ben needs you.” She paused. “I don’t want Ben growing up without his father.”

Dean’s breath caught in his throat, his eyes shifting from the place Lisa’s shadow should’ve been, back up to her earnest eyes. “I know what this is.” He glared, taking a step back from her. “You’re tryin’ to trick me.”

“Trick you with what, Dean?” she scoffed. “A home? A family? A normal life? Giving you back what was taken from you?”

“That’s not my life, Lisa.” Dean glared, shaking his head. “That’s not supposed to be my life. It never was.”

“Then what is supposed to be your life, Dean? Sacrificing yourself? Dying a bloody death? For what, a world that can’t be saved? Because that’s how this is gonna end, one way or another.”

Dean didn’t answer her.

“You’ve got one hell of a savior complex, you know that?” Lisa shook her head and sighed. “You’ve gotta save everyone but yourself.” She stood up, taking a step closer to the circle. “You’ve done enough, Dean. Save yourself. Leave this place.”
Dean shook his head. “I can’t do that.”

Lisa stepped over the salt line. “Yes, you can. I can help you, Dean, just stay with me.” She wrapped her arms around him. “All you gotta do is nod your head and we can be in my bed, okay?” she whispered, leaning in to kiss him.

Dean’s breath caught in his throat. He could feel her. He could feel her warm skin against his, smell her sweet perfume. She was so close he could feel her breath against his lips. She felt real. Involuntarily, Dean moved closer, but before her lips could touch his, he pulled away.

“No!” He stumbled back from her, shaking. With a blink, Lisa disappeared.

Dean’s eyes moved wildly around the church, looking for her. He sank to his knees, tears streaming down his face. He closed his eyes; he could still smell her sweet perfume, but after a moment that was gone, too, replaced by the smell of roses.

After a while, he fell back to sleep.

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“What are you waiting for Dean?” He felt the putrid breath of the nasally rasp against his ear and shuddered. While the voice was menacing, the tone was light. Dean could barely hear it over the pleading sobs of the woman kneeling naked before him. “Cut her,” the voice demanded.

Dean turned his head, setting his eyes on Alastair, who stood behind him, hovering. Slowly, his gaze lowered to the bloody knife held in his shaking hand, still marred with a nail wound in the center of the palm, his fingers barely able to grasp the blade’s handle.

Dean froze, his body trembling. Tears filled his eyes. “N— No…”

“Cut her now, Dean!” Alastair grabbed him by the shoulders, his nails digging into Dean’s flesh. “Cut her! Cut her, or so help me, I’ll drag you back to that room and hang you back up on that fucking tree!”

With a cry, Dean raised the knife, thrusting it downward. His eyes snapped shut at the sound of the woman’s bloodcurdling screams.

Dean awoke and found himself curled up on the floor of the church, quietly sobbing.

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A few hours—maybe days—later, another voice sounded behind him, echoing through the chapel.

“Fucked up again, didn’t you, boy?” Hard and deep, it was a gruff voice that never failed to make his heart race. This voice was familiar and terrifying, one that played in his head more often than his own. It was disappointment and anger and slurred words on drunken Saturday nights.

Dean sat up, turning in his circle of salt to see John leaning against one of the rotten pews. He moved closer and Dean fought the urge to stand up straight.
“Dad.” His body stiffened, his eyes fixed, watching as John paced around the circle.

“I gave you one job, Dean,” John spat. “One. Save your damn brother. And you couldn’t do it. Instead, you got him killed. Then you made a deal to bring him back? How stupid do you have to be?” John shook his head, his expression scathing. “He would have been better off if you had left him dead, Dean. Because when you died, when you made your “heroic sacrifice”, you left Sam alone. Left him open and vulnerable, easy prey to whatever demon would try to take him under their wing.”

At John’s words, bile rose from the pit of Dean’s stomach. Dean looked down at the floor, swallowing thickly.

“While we’re on the subject of Hell, Dean, was it really so hard for you to keep it together? Fuck, boy. I was in The Pit for a century and I didn’t break. Not once. The thought never even crossed my mind. But you? The so-called “Lamb of God”? You caved in thirty. You fucked the entire world all to hell. Why, because you couldn’t handle a little bit of pain?”

Dean shook his head, roughly wiping away the tears with the back of his hand. He couldn’t meet John’s stern gaze.

“Now Heaven’s gotta waste their time cleansing you so you can actually be of some use to them,” John scoffed, shaking his head. “Despite what you did, they still bothered to save you. They gave you a second chance and you’ve got the nerve to be a little shit to them? To deny them?” John cocked an eyebrow. “All they’re asking of you is to be the Messiah you’re supposed to be, the Messiah you need to be, and you can’t even do that right. Why Dean? Because you don’t want to?”

“No.” Dean looked up at John. “No, Sir.” His voice shook.

“No. Bullshit. Don’t lie to me,” John snapped. “You’re having such a hard time with this because you’re scared. Because you’re a coward.”

Dean’s face hardened as his fists clenched. “I’m not a coward.”

“Yes, you are. You’re worthless, Dean.” John glared. “You’ve been nothing but a disappointment to me. You always have been and you always will be. The only thing you’re good for is cannon fodder.” John glanced up to the ceiling. “I can only imagine what He thinks of you now.”

“Shut up!” Dean rose from the floor, stalking towards John. He stopped right at the salt line. “Shut the fuck up! You’re the one who couldn’t take care of us! You’re the one that pushed Sam away!”

Dean narrowed his eyes, gritting his teeth. “I was dying and you couldn’t even be bothered to call. You were too fucking busy trying to get revenge for Mom to notice that you had two parts of her right there who needed you to be their Dad instead of their drill sergeant!”

John’s fists clenched. “You little—”

Dean grabbed John by the jacket. “I was always there for Sam. Not you.” Dean glared, his eyes sharp as daggers. “I was the one who made sure he got to school on time. I was the one who worked and hustled and whored my way through every shitty motel you dumped us at, all to make sure there was food on the table at the end of the day for Sam, even if that meant I went hungry! I was the one who was there for him, Dad!” Dean sneered. “You don’t even deserve that title. I was more of a father to him than you ever were.”

“That’s right. You were.” John nodded. He pulled Dean’s hands off of his jacket; his hands were cold against Dean’s wrists. John took a step back from his son and smirked. “And that’s why you’re
John vanished.

No sooner had John disappeared than another sound filled the church.

Behind him, a baby was crying and a woman was humming lowly, comforting it.

“Come and see him, angel,” a woman said. Soft and gentle. It was a treasured voice that Dean had almost forgotten. “Come meet your little brother.”

Dean turned his gaze to the other side of the church to find Mary sitting in the pew beneath the window. She was wearing a green hospital gown and had an infant in her arms, wrapped in a blue blanket. She was feeding him from a bottle.

Dean froze. “Mom?” He walked closer to her, his gaze locked on the baby in her arms.

“His name is Sammy,” Mary whispered, almost like it was some kind of awe-inspiring secret. She looked up at Dean and smiled. “You’re gonna be a good big brother for me and Daddy and help us take care of him, right?”

Dean swallowed and nodded. “Of course, mom.”

“I know you will, Dean. You’re such a good kid. My little angel.”

Dean smiled at her as tears filled his eyes. He watched her for a long moment before his voice cracked angrily. “Why did you do it, mom? You’re a hunter. Even if you wanted a normal life, you shoulda fuckin’ known better. You… you should have protected us, mom. Why did you make that deal with Yellow Eyes?”

“I’m sorry, baby, but I had to save John. The same way I needed to die in that fire.” Mary raised her eyes to him. “You needed to live this life, Dean. You needed to grow up a hunter. It had to happen that way, baby. You were destined for it.” She smiled. “You’ve always been the Son of God, Dean. Since the moment I felt you kick in my belly. Even before that, really.”

“You’re telling me I was destined to learn how to fire a gun at the age of six? To kill a man at age twelve? To kill werewolves at fourteen? To have to watch those closest to me get ripped to shreds by monsters? And you’re telling me that was my “destiny”? Dean snapped.

Mary’s face grew serious. “And if you had grown up safe and happy in Lawrence, you would have still ended up here, angel. You have always been the Messiah, and Sammy has always been… your opposite.” Mary pulled the bottle back. When she lifted him up, Dean saw blood trickling down the side of his mouth.

Sam’s eyes glowed yellow.

“No...” Dean shook his head. He backed away.

Mary and the infant disappeared in a burst of flame.

“No!”

Suddenly, John reappeared in front of Dean. But this time, his eyes also glowed yellow.

Azazel let out a hearty chuckle. “You know, the Son of God turning out to be the older brother of my VIP makes for such a nice conflict of interest, doesn’t it? You’re an insurance policy, Dean. And
you’ve been so very helpful to me.” Azazel grinned. “Still... I gotta admit... it’s a good thing Heaven cloaked you. Otherwise, your mommy’s sweet little ass wouldn’t have been the only one burning on the ceiling.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Dean saw the glint of an angel sword at his feet on the floor. He reached down and grabbed it, thrusting it into Azazel’s chest. He watched his body stiffen and glow before he yanked the blade out, pushing the body to the floor.

The sword and Azazel disappeared. The church was quiet. Utterly still. Empty. Dean was alone again.

Then the sound of clapping echoed throughout the church. Dean turned to find a balding man dressed in a suit standing in the center aisle.

“Bravo, Dean. Bravo.”

Grace glowed around him. It was brighter and stronger than any Dean had seen before. Stronger than Castiel’s or Uriel’s or even Anna’s.

“An angel?” Dean’s question was frustrated and disheartened. “You did this?”

The angel nodded. “I did.”

Dean sighed. “Wonderful.” He paused, staring for a second. “So what was this, some kind of hallucination or something?”

“It was a test.” The angel grinned. “And I’m happy to say that you passed.”

“Great.” Dean murmured sarcastically. He picked up his duffle bag and made his way down the aisle. “Well, I’m not really in the mood to deal with some dick angel right now so if you don’t mind —”

“I’m not just “some dick angel”, Dean,” he raised his voice slightly. “I’m Zachariah. Castiel’s superior.”

Dean stopped dead in his tracks. “Zachariah?” He cocked an eyebrow, disgust filling his voice. “I’ve heard of you. You’re the angel that was lying to that church back in Shawnee. You’re the one who told them that I was gonna Rapture them.”

“Oh, please. I never told them that.” Zachariah chuckled. “They were just making assumptions based on their own theology and feelings of self-importance. They assumed I was talking about the Rapture. All I told them was that they were going to herald your Second Coming and that’s exactly what they did. You revealed yourself to them. The preaching was a bit much, but you finally tapped into that righteous fury.” He smirked. “In fact, if you hadn’t gone into that church, you wouldn’t be here right now.”

“So you planned this whole thing?” Dean glared. “You let that church get attacked?”

“It’s not the road that matters, Dean, it’s the destination.” Zachariah shrugged. “And you’re exactly where we need you to be.”

“Who’s “we”? Dean narrowed his eyes.

“Let’s call it… Upper Management.”
“Right,” Dean scoffed. “And where exactly does “Upper Management” need me?”

“Up to snuff.” Zachariah’s words were blunt. “You’ve managed to beat most of your character flaws, shockingly enough. But you’ve still got to get that Hell grime off of your soul. Once you become the Spotless Lamb, you’re going to ride into battle and lay waste to Satan and his army. Paint the ground red with blood. After that you’re going to assume the throne and judge the living and the dead. So on and so forth.”

Dean paused for a long moment. “And who says I want to do that?”

Zachariah blinked. “Excuse me?”

Dean nodded sarcastically. “I think I’m gonna have to pass on that whole, “bringing on Armageddon” thing.”

“Oh, but that’s why you’re here, Dean-o,” Zachariah scoffed. “Didn’t you read the script?”

“Yeah. I have.” Dean’s words were blunt. “And from what I gather, I’m here to be a savior, not nuke the damn planet.”

Zachariah’s body stiffened with anger. “You can’t make that decision, Dean,” he warned, narrowing his eyes.

“Yeah, well.” Dean shrugged, glaring. “I just did.”

“Let’s get one thing straight, right now. You’re a human,” Zachariah spat, his face inches away from Dean’s. “All you are is a vessel, Dean. The Vessel. The sacred conduit of the Godhead, sure, but a vessel nonetheless. I can force you to do whatever I want and trust me Dean, if you don’t stop acting like a petulant child, I will.”

With a flap of his wings, Zachariah disappeared.

Dean stood in the aisle for a moment, giving the church a final glance before he flung his duffle bag over his shoulder and walked back out into the winter chill. Dean could see the morning sun rising to the east, just above the horizon. He walked towards it, his tired eyes squinting against the light.

The air was still thick and heavy. Dean could feel the static under his skin.

Dean could still feel Him.

February 17, 2009.

Murray, Kentucky.

Dean climbed the steps of the bungalow’s porch, his feet shuffling against the century-old wood. It was an olive green Victorian, with a wide front porch and a big bay window, where Dean could see into the modest living room. It was a house Dean knew well, one that he was sure would give him some much needed hospitality.
With the exception of an occasional barn or unlocked shed, shelter had been a rare commodity the last two weeks. More often than not, Dean had found himself curling up beneath an overpass or behind a dumpster in an alleyway.

For a few days, Dean had been able to crash in the spare room of a farmhouse an hour outside of Dodge City. Andy, a man in his late forties with a bad hip and a failing farm, had offered Dean a place to sleep and a ride into Wichita if he’d fix his 1972 Chevrolet C10. Before Dean climbed out of the truck, he healed Phil’s bad hip, curing him of his bone cancer.

While in Wichita, Dean found Joyland, a derelict amusement park he vaguely remembered John taking him and Sam to when they were kids. The park was also occupied by a teenage boy named Matt. Dean had discovered—after politely declining a proposition from the boy—that he had been living out on the streets for four months. His extremely conservative parents had kicked him out following their discovery that he and his best friend were actually romantically involved. His boyfriend had been shipped off to military school while Matt had been thrown out of his home.

Dean gave Matt the rest of his money and put him on a bus to Minneapolis so that he could live with a more understanding aunt. Before he left, Dean hugged Matt, telling him with the upmost honesty that there was nothing wrong with him. He also healed the boy’s bad case of gonorrhea.

A few days later, Dean found refuge in a truck stop diner on I-44, just past Joplin, Missouri. The owner, Phil, had to catch Dean before he collapsed in the middle of the candy aisle from a spiking fever. He gave Dean a piping hot bowl of fresh chicken noodle soup and two grilled cheese sandwiches on the house and let Dean use their shower facilities. He even let Dean sleep for a couple of hours on the couch in his office.

As he left the truck stop that night, even though he was still tired and weak, he came to the aid of a scrawny prostitute who worked the lot, protecting her from a hostile client.

The last leg of Dean’s trip was on Route 60, comprised mostly of walking and sleeping under highway overpasses. The one oil truck that picked Dean up some fifty miles west of the Mississippi River let him off at a Mobil station in Murray. Instead of trying to hitchhike as freezing rain began to fall around him, Dean remembered that Jacob Miller, a Lutheran pastor who had helped John and him out on a string of hunts while Sam was at Stanford, lived in the area. He decided to walk to Jacob’s house for a visit, and hopefully, a bed to sleep in.

Walking under the roof of the porch, Dean sighed, relieved at the mere prospect of a hot shower and somewhere safe to sleep before he walked over to the door. He took note of the iron cross hanging above the sill, before he rang the doorbell.

A minute went by. Then two. Then three. Finally the door opened just wide enough to reveal a man in his late thirties wearing a black shirt with a white collar and a cross around his neck. He stared at Dean with a look of confused recognition.

Dean cleared his throat. “Hey Jacob,” he rasped, giving the man a tired smile. “Long time, no see.”

“Winchester?” Jacob paused, squinting his eyes. “Dean Winchester?”

“Yup.” Dean nodded. “Sure is.”

“Well, I’ll be.” Jacob chuckled, opening the door wider. “I barely even recognized you. How long has it been since I saw you last?”

“Right. April, ’03. You and your old man saved my tail.” Jacob nodded. “So what can I do you for?”

“Well.” Dean cleared his throat. “I was passing through and I kinda needed a place to crash. If it’s not too much trouble, I was wondering if you wouldn’t mind putting me up for the night.”

“Of course not. You can stay for a week if you like. Looks like you need it.” Jacob looked him up and down. “What’ve you been up to?”

“Well… hitchhiking, mostly.”

“Hitchhiking?” Jacob cocked an eyebrow. “You didn’t lose that Impala of yours, did you?”

“No! No. She’s fine—as far as I know anyway—it’s just…” Dean paused awkwardly. “It’s… a long story.”

“Well, come in.” Jacob let Dean into the house, quickly shutting the door behind them. “You actually came at a good time. The town’s been waist deep in demons. They started popping up more and more about mid-September and we just haven't been able to keep up. Me and Susan have performed twenty exorcisms so far this month. Three this week alone, and it’s only Tuesday.” He shook his head, running a hand through his thinning hair. “We’re prepping for one right now. The monster is possessing a young woman from my church. If you’re up to it, we could sure use some help with it.”

Dean placed his duffle bag down on the floor in the living room. “How bad is it?”

“Pretty bad,” Jacob said wearily. “I counted seven demons in her so far.”

“…Seven?”

Jacob nodded. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Well.” Dean chuckled. “I can definitely help with that.”

“Jacob, who was that at the door?” Susan, Jacob’s wife, waddled into the living room, one of her hands pressed protectively against her stomach, the large swell making the purple fabric of her sweater tight.

“Don’t worry, it’s John Winchester’s kid.” Jacob gestured to Dean. “He’s gonna help us with our little problem in the basement and he needs a place to stay for the night.”

Susan looked at Dean for a second. “I’ll say he does.” She walked over to Dean and hugged him. “As soon as we’re done taking care of that demon, I’m giving you a big bowl of that beef stew I’ve got going in the crockpot. You look like you could use a good meal.”

“Not too big, I hope.” Dean lingered in the hug for a second before pulling away. “If I let you, you’ll give me the whole damn thing and you’re the one who’s eating for two.” Dean grinned. “Mazel Tov on the kid.”

“Thank you.” Susan smiled. “We’re due in April. We’re changing the guest room over to a nursery right now so if you don’t mind the smell of paint, you can sleep in there.”


“All the time. She never stops.” Susan chuckled. “Would you like to feel?”
“I’d love to.” Dean placed his hand gently against Susan’s belly, letting the heat flow from his fingers as surreptitiously as possible. He felt the baby kick hard before he pulled his hand away. “You’re not kidding,” Dean chuckled. “She’s gonna make one helluv—heck of a soccer player when she’s older.”

Susan glanced down at her stomach then looked back up at Dean, furrowing her brow. “Thanks…”

The three of them made their way down into the basement where an unconscious young woman with frizzy red hair, dressed in an oversized college hoodie and jeans, was tied to a chair. A devil’s trap was painted on the floor underneath her and her clothes had scorch marks where holy water had touched her. She also had two stab wounds in her stomach.

As soon as Dean’s feet touched the concrete, the woman snapped awake. Her eyes grew pitch black, locking squarely on Dean. She growled, low and vicious, her hands tightly gripping the armrests.

Jacob and Susan watched her for a second.

Warily, Jacob shifted his eyes over to Dean. “Why is she acting—”

“Don’t worry.” Dean stepped in front of Susan, extending his arm out. He looked back to them and nodded. “I’ll take care of this.” He made his way over to the woman.

As Dean approached, the demons began to laugh. “Well, if it isn’t the famous Dean Winchester. The “Righteous Man” who managed to bust himself out of Hell. If we knew you were stopping by, we would have picked out a sexier meatsuit.” The demons glared through the borrowed body. “Just so we could give you something pretty to look at while we rip your still beating heart out of your chest.”

“Yeah?” Dean stopped a couple feet outside of the devil’s trap. “Well, I’d love to see you try.”

“Oh, Dean.” The demons smirked. “You might think you’re something special now that you’ve gotten your Super Mushroom, but you’re about as threatening to us as a baby lamb.”

“Right.” Dean grinned; he watched the demons’ hands, still gripped tightly around the arms of the chair. His voice boomed across the basement. “Omnis immundus spiritus, omnis legio diabolica—”

The demons’ eyes went black. They started to scream, pushing into the back of the chair.

Dean paused, narrowing his eyes. “—Exorcizamus te.”

Instantly, the woman’s head jerked back and she let out of a bloodcurdling scream. Wave after wave of black smoke left her mouth. It dissipated into a burning, charred ring of sulfur and ash on the concrete as her body slumped over, motionless in the chair.

Dean walked over to her and gently placed a hand on top of her head. She gasped, lifting her head back up. Tears filled her eyes quickly as she started to sob.

“It’s okay.” Dean’s voice was calm and reassuring. “You’re gonna be alright.” He quickly untied her and lifted her up out of the chair. He looked back at Jacob and Susan who were both frozen in shock. Walking past them, he shot both of them awkward glances as he carried the woman up the stairs to the front door.

“You gonna be okay?” Dean asked, opening the front door. He set her down onto the ground and she swayed a little before shaking her head. “Do you need someone to drive you home?”

“No. I—I’ll be fine. I’ve got a cellphone.” The woman took a step onto the porch. She turned and
faced Dean, staring at him in awe. “Tell me are— are you—” Her voice shook. “Are you… Him?”

Dean paused for a second then nodded. “I am,” he whispered.

The woman’s eyes went wide. She smiled, leaned in, and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you, Lord,” she said softly.

“It’s no problem.” Dean cleared his throat. “Just don’t tell anyone what happened, okay? Pastor Jacob is a good man and I don’t want him gettin’ in trouble.”

The woman nodded before she walked down the steps of the porch.

Dean watched her walk down the sidewalk, taking a cellphone out of her jacket pocket before he shut the door. As soon the door was closed, he heard the sound of two shotguns pumping.

“I knew there was somethin’ up the moment I saw you on my porch,” Jacob snapped. “Who are you?”

“And what the hell did you do to my baby?” Susan hissed.

Dean raised his hands up above his head. He turned slowly to find Jacob and Susan standing behind him, barrels pointed at him. “I’m Dean,” he said with cautious honesty, eyeing the guns. “And your baby is fine. Better, in fact.”

Jacob squinted. “No, you’re not. “Dean” doesn’t have the power to exorcise demons with just a few words, nor can he bring people back to life. I watched those demons stab Molly in her stomach and liver. You don’t survive that. But you… you put your hand on her and suddenly she’s awake and talking? Like it never even happened?” He watched Dean for a second and then chuckled. “You know, I heard a rumor you died last year. Somethin’ about a crossroads deal. I thought it was just that. A rumor. But I guess I was wrong.”

“You’re right. I did make a deal and I did go to Hell.” Dean shook his head. “But I’m no demon or hellspawn or anything like that.”

“If you’re not a demon then how did you get out of Hell?” Susan spat.

“I was saved from Hell.”

“Saved by what?” Jacob glared.

“An angel.” Dean’s voice was blunt. “I’m sure you’ve heard by now that they’re walkin’ the Earth. Maybe you even heard of them speaking to people. Well, they’re here because of me.”

“Why?” Susan asked, slowly lowering her gun. “What do you have to do with all of this?”

Jacob did the same.

Dean paused, glancing between the two of them. “You noticed the smell the moment I walked in here, right? The smell of roses? Shit, I’ve been on the road for more than two weeks; I should smell like a fuckin’ dumpster. It’s the Odor of Sanctity. And that’s not all.” He watched Susan and Jacob. Once their guns were lowered, he moved his hands from his head. Dean rolled up the sleeves of his jacket and tugged on his sweatshirt, pulling them up just enough to expose the blood-marked bandages around his wrists. “I’ve also got these.”

“…the Stigmata?” Jacob’s eyes went wide. He looked at Dean for a moment. “What exactly are you
trying to get at here, Dean?”

Dean took a couple steps closer to them. “I’m a man who was resurrected by Heaven. A man who exorcises demons with a single word, brings the dead back to life and heals the sick.” Dean pursed his lips. “You’re a pastor, Jacob, so I think you can understand what I’m getting at.”

Jacob and Susan froze. They glanced at each other before turning their gazes back to Dean. “But you’re John Winchester’s boy.” Awe tinged Jacob’s words. “How can that be?”

“Well, I have another Father and I’m here to do His work. Part of it is trying to stop the Apocalypse from happening.”

“So…” Jacob looked at Dean with reverence this time. “You really are Him? Christ returned?”

“I am.” Dean let out a warily chuckle. “Trust me, when I found out, I was about as shocked as you are.”

Susan placed both of her hands over her belly; she stared at Dean for a long moment. “Well,” she said, taking a deep breath as she took hers and Jacob’s guns and put them next to the wall of the foyer. “That stew is still in the crockpot. How about we all sit down and discuss this more over lunch?” She took a couple steps closer to Dean and smiled. “I’m sure you’re hungry.”

Dean nodded. “Starving.”

The three of them made their way into the kitchen where they sat down and ate. Even though it had no taste, Dean ate two full bowls of the stew. After dinner, Susan brought Dean into the half-finished nursery. One side of the room was painted bubblegum pink and rabbit themed, stark against the cream colored walls and simple daybed with a quilt on the other side of the room.

“Well, this is it.” Susan shrugged. “Honestly, I feel sort of… bad putting you up in here, all things considered.” She laughed awkwardly.

“Are you kiddin’ me?” Dean shook his head, scoffing as he placed his duffle bag down on the floor. He glanced around the room. “A roof over my head? Soft, warm bed? Clean sheets? I couldn’t ask for more. Really.”

Susan nodded. She watched him for a moment, and then placed her hands on her stomach. “You said you… made Charlotte better. What did you heal exactly?”

Dean paused, reluctant. “A heart defect.” He gazed at Susan. He watched her eyes grow wide and gloss over. “I kinda… sensed that something was wrong with her. When I put my hand on your stomach, that’s when I figured out what it was.”

“Thank you.” Tears welled up in her eyes. “Jacob and me… we’ve been trying for years to have a baby. I don’t know what—”

“It’s okay. She’s gonna be fine now. Don’t worry.” Dean walked over to Susan and hugged her. After she calmed down, he pulled away. “Can you promise me something, though?”

“Oh course.”

“Once Charlotte’s born, I want you and Jacob to stop hunting. Don’t raise her in the life. It’s no way to raise a kid. I oughta know.” Dean pleaded, “Please.”

Susan nodded. “We will.”
That night, before going to bed, Dean took the wooden bunny hanging on the inside of the nursery door and carved a devil’s trap into the back of it.

The sleep Dean had in that bed was some of the soundest sleep he’d had in years. Not even his dreams of Hell could shake it. His sleep was calm for the whole time he stayed at the house.

In the evenings, Dean helped Jacob get rid of the rest of the demons in town and during the day he helped Susan set up the nursery. He made a toy box out of some wood crates he found in the attic. Dean left early Sunday morning, refreshed with a flask full of fresh consecrated wine, hitching a ride on a tractor-trailer headed for Chicago.

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February, 26 2009.

Peoria, Illinois.

Dean had been walking into a grocery store early Thursday morning when the ache began, a sharp ache that radiated through the whole of his body. It stole what little appetite he had, weighing him down with heavy sadness. He knew the ache was merely a harbinger of things to come.

Various people were standing in the aisles with faded smears of ash on their foreheads and most of them had half-priced packages of fish in their carts.

Quietly, Dean ducked into the bathroom and wrapped bandages around his torso, forehead, wrists, and ankles. He pulled a black beanie over his hair before leaving the store, hoping the ache would go away, or at the very least, not get any worse.

By early afternoon, the pain began.

Dean was sitting in a coffee shop trying to sip from the free coffee the barista had given him—that sadly tasted little better than ash—when it started. Pulsing twinges of pain emanated inside each of the bruises on his back. Soon the twinges split them open, turning them into bleeding wounds. Soon after, the pain moved to the bruises circling Dean’s temple as pointed pinpricks. After a while, they, too, ripped open his skin. Dean brushed his fingertips under the beanie, against the bandage around his forehead to make sure the blood wasn’t seeping through the gauze.

Then, with a muffled cry that Dean tried to pass off as a cough, there was piercing agony in his wrists and ankles. It was pointed, throbbing, and caused tears to spring up in his eyes. As discreetly as he could manage, Dean stood up from the table and limped out into the street, looking desperately both ways, hoping to see a church. With any luck, he would be able to hide out there until the next evening, after he stopped bleeding.

A church would be warmer than an abandoned warehouse and even though he didn’t like telling people about his wounds, if a priest or a minister found him there, they’d be far more likely to recognize the wounds for what they were. They wouldn’t try to take Dean to a hospital, which would not only be fruitless, since medical care did nothing to the wounds, but would likely lead to him being stuck there for psychiatric observation.

Dean only had to walk a couple blocks until he came upon St. Mary’s Cathedral. He had seen the
steeples of it through a light haze of snow as he walked down the street from the coffee shop and made his way directly over to it as quickly as he could manage. It was majestic—old and gothic—with high steeples and a rose window in front.

Without any hesitation, Dean limped his way up the steps and through the vestibule and into the nave, wincing against the ever-increasing pain of his ankles. He found it nearly empty, populated only by a few parishioners, all of whom were focused intensely on their rosaries and confession penances.

Not long after Dean took a seat in a pew in the back left corner of the church he felt the hot sting of the skin of his wrist and ankles cracking open. The sting seemed to go even deeper, making the bones ache.

Dean did his best to keep himself distracted by looking at the stained glass windows or skimming through the hymnal and missal books. He avoided the Stations of the Cross paintings that lined the walls of the church. Occasionally, he listened in on the prayers of the people in the pews around him. They echoed through Dean’s mind as much as his ears. Some, who seemed to be doing their yearly unloading of sins, were asking forgiveness. Other still were praying for loved ones.

Dean focused on details of the prayers, the names of loved ones and their illness, repeating them in his head like a mantra until little crackles of heat began to course through his veins.

“Are you alright, sir?” a voice asked, concerned.

Dean looked up, setting his eyes on a young nun dressed in a dark brown habit, standing next to his pew. “Yeah, I’m fine.” He nodded, giving her a half-feigned smile. “I’ll be even better tomorrow afternoon.” Dean paused, his voice shaking. “Hopefully.”

The nun gave him a quick once over before she turned and left. Dean watched her walk over to what looked like a Saint Michael shrine set in an alcove. When she emerged from it half an hour later, her gaze turned directly over to Dean. She stared at him for a second, then made her way up to the front of the church, genuflecting before she walked over to a side door.

One by one, the parishioners filed out of the church. As soon they were all gone and the church was empty, Dean lay down on the pew and closed his eyes.

Dean dreamed of whips, a crown of thorns, a heavy crossbeam across his shoulders that made him stumble onto brick pavement and sand. At one point in the dream, he felt the weight of the beam disappear as an arm wrapped tightly around his waist, holding him upright. Dean set his gaze on the man who was helping him, whom he assumed to be Simon of Cyrene. Simon shifted most of the beam onto his own shoulders, but Dean noticed he carried it with almost no effort. Dean could sense grace emanating from him. It was a grace Dean knew very well.

At least once, Dean swore he saw Simon’s sad brown eyes change to blue.

A few hours later, Dean felt the nudge of a hand on his shoulder. He opened his eyes to find a police officer standing behind him. “Sir.” The officer nudged him again. “You can’t sleep in here.”

“Really?” Dean winced, sighing.
“Yes. Really,” the officer deadpanned. “If you need a place to sleep, you can walk to the homeless shelter downtown.”

“Trust me,” Dean scoffed, shaking his head. “I ain’t walking anywhere anytime soon.”

“Get up,” the officer ordered.

“I can’t.”

“Get up or I’ll make you get up.” The officer placed his hands on a pair of handcuffs. “Or I can bring you down to the station and you can sleep in a cell. How does that sound?”

Dean was about to retort when a voice rung out. “It’s alright, officer.” The nun that had spoken to Dean before made her way quickly down the side aisle and over to Dean’s pew. “You don’t need to bring him anywhere. I’ve already spoken to Mother Superior about him and we’ve agreed to take him in.”

“That so?” The officer turned to her. “And who are you?”

“Sister Joan-Hubertus,” she stated. “I’m one of the junior Sisters at the convent next door.”

“Well, Sister.” The officer chuckled. “Two parishioners called the station complaining about him and he’s been giving me all manner of lip. I’ve gotta do something with him.”

“This man is in pain. Can’t you see that?” Sister Joan raised her voice slightly. “He doesn’t need a cell, he needs a bed and some food. Two things we are more than willing to give him.”

The officer cocked an eyebrow. “Are you sure about that?”

“Positive,” Sister Joan said bluntly.

“Fine.” The officer sighed. “But I don’t wanna get anymore complains about him squatting in here. You understand that?”

She nodded. The officer turned and walked out of the church.

“Man, I hate cops,” Dean hissed, sitting up in the pew. “Thanks for getting him off my ass— I mean, uh, butt.” Dean flung his duffle bag over his shoulder and limped his way out of the pew. “Sorry, Sister.” He winced, half stumbling into the aisle.

Sister Joan chuckled, grabbing him. “It’s not a problem. Trust me.”

She wrapped her arm around Dean’s waist and they began to walk down the aisle. Even though she was about a foot shorter than Dean, she was able to carry the brunt of his body weight, having little trouble walking him the short distance to the convent behind the church. She took Dean directly into the infirmary, where she sat him down on one of the three white-sheeted beds.

“Ya know, for a nun, you’re pretty strong.” Dean winced, pulling his jacket off.

“I’ve had lots of practice,” Sister Joan said simply. She walked over to the counter to grab a first aid kit and a glass of water.

Even though her back was turned, Dean could see her bless the glass and quickly dip the end of her rosary into the water before she turned back around and brought it over to him.

Dean nodded, taking the glass from her. “Thanks,” he rasped, chugging the water down.
Sister Joan watched him drink it. “You’re welcome.”

She nodded, removing Dean’s boots. At the sight of Dean’s bloodstained socks, Sister Joan froze. Carefully, she peeled them and the blood-soaked gauze off of Dean’s feet and inspected the wounds.

When she had finished wrapping Dean’s feet with fresh bandages, she then set her eyes on the blood that had started to stain the sleeves of his dark gray hoodie. She pulled his sleeves up, setting her gaze on the crimson marked bandages. Without a single word she rewrapped Dean’s wrists. She did the same to his head and back.

When she finished wrapping Dean’s wounds, she grabbed the first aid kit and the glass of water and made her way back over to the counter. She only made it a few steps before she looked into the glass, stopping for just a moment before she continued her walk to the counter. She put the first aid kit and glass down and crossed herself, her hands trembling.

Sister Joan turned and faced Dean. “You haven’t noticed anything strange have you?” Her voice was calm, but Dean could hear a slight tremble in it. “The smell of rotting eggs? Strange people following you?”

“No anymore more than I normally do.” Dean shrugged. “I try to avoid demons as much as possible.” He cocked his head to the side. “So you’re in The Life?”

Sister Joan nodded. She folded her arms. “There’s been a spike in demonic activity around here lately. Possessions. Electrical storms. It’s gotten worse in the last month or so.” She paused. “Probably because you’re here.”

Dean nodded, taking a deep breath. “So what’s the deal with this?” He gestured to her habit. “Is this some case you’re working?”

“No. Not anymore.” Sister Joan shook her head. “But it started out that way. A demon had been possessing one of the Sisters. Me and my older sister went undercover as Sisters here for a couple weeks and after the job was over I joined.”

Dean cocked an eyebrow. “I’ve heard of clergy becoming hunters. I know some, in fact. But I’ve never heard of a hunter becoming a nun before.”

“There should be more of us, honestly. You’d be surprised just how often convents are the sites of hauntings or demonic attacks.” Sister Joan chuckled. “In the four years I’ve been here, I’ve probably hunted more monsters than I did out in the world.”

Dean chuckled. “But what about the other side of it?” he asked. “Giving yourself up—no holds barred—to God? After everything you’ve seen, all the evil in this world.” He shook his head. “How do you do that?”

“Faith is always something that came easily to me. I have it not in spite of everything I’ve seen, but because of it. The way I see it, you can’t have darkness without light. I’ve seen enough darkness to believe that the light is out there.” She shrugged.

“Ya know…” Dean looked down at his hands, smiling sadly. Already, blood had begun to seep through the gauze. “You remind me of someone.”

“Who?” Sister Joan asked.

“Someone who probably deserves to be The Messiah more than I ever could,” Dean scoffed, shaking his head.
Sam would have embraced being the Son of God with open arms the moment Castiel had told him. He would have had nothing but faith in what he was, unlike the doubt that always lingered in the back of Dean’s mind.

Sam needed proof—any kind of proof—that he wasn’t evil. It was something Dean couldn’t give him.

“You know, of all the things I can do, all the people I’ve been able to save, I can’t save him.” Dean bit his lip, looking up at her. “Shit, Sister. I can bring a perfect stranger back to life, but I can’t even do my one job: protect him.”

“It sounds to me like you need some faith in yourself,” Sister Joan said, concerned. She looked at Dean with hope instead of pity. “You’re going to need it.”

“I need faith in a lotta things, Sister.” Dean nodded. “But I’m working on that. Trying to, anyways.”

“Well, you’ve certainly come to the right place.”

Sister Joan lifted Dean up from the hospital bed and out of the infirmary, taking him to one of the convent’s dormitories. The room was small, containing little more than a bed and desk. The only décor the room had was a silver crucifix hanging on the wall next to the window and a woven area rug near the entrance with a Key of Solomon devil’s trap painted on the floor under it. As soon as Sister Joan left, Dean lay down on the bed and fell sound asleep. He didn’t wake again until the following afternoon.

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March 6, 2009.

Peoria, Illinois.

Dean decided to stay at the convent. Though his wounds healed over by Friday afternoon, he assumed they would open up again the following Thursday and he didn’t want to risk leaving the convent and ending up someplace where he was alone if that happened.

When Dean had woken up Friday afternoon, shortly after three, he heard a knock on his door. Sister Joan walked into his room bearing clean bandages and clothes and helped him into the bathroom where he took a shower. After Dean was washed and dressed, she helped rewrap his wounds and change his bed sheets before she walked him down into the dining room for a bowl of tomato soup and crackers that he barely managed to take even two bites from. Sister Joan then walked Dean over to the church where the priest, one of her cousins, said a quick mass for Dean and gave him communion.

To Dean’s shock, the wafer and wine not only eased his pain, but managed to satisfy his hunger. When Sister Joan walked him back, Mother Superior told him he could stay for as long as needed to, so long as he helped around the convent and parish.

When Dean wasn’t doing odd jobs around the convent, he spent his time alone in his room or sitting in the church, listening to people’s prayers and looking at the artwork. Even after the Sisters figured out who and what Dean was, aside from occasionally calling him “Lord” or looking at him in
reverence, they mostly left him to his own devices.

The church parishioners did the same. The only ones who ever acknowledged Dean were the children in the daycare room Dean volunteered to watch the following Sunday during mass and even then, they addressed him more with curiosity than awestruck reverence. One little girl named Nicole asked Dean if he could bring her pet gerbil back to life and a little boy named Anthony asked him why he looked nothing like the man in one of the paintings hanging on the wall.

Dean was sitting in the front pew of the church, the taste of blood still lingering on his tongue, when he heard wings flutter behind him.

"Hey Cas," he said quietly, looking over to the angel, now standing on the steps of the altar.

"Hello Dean." Castiel walked down the altar’s steps, stopping right in front of the pew where Dean was seated. He watched Dean for a second. “You look… exhausted.” Sympathy laced his words.

“Yeah, well, I spent the last month walking halfway across the country and the last eighteen hours feeling like I’ve been nailed to a tree.” Dean shrugged, rubbing his hand over his thin forearm. He knew he looked terrible, but he was beyond caring. It was enough for him to just make it through the day. He didn’t have to look good doing it.

Castiel paused for a moment as he glanced around the church. “We need to talk, Dean.” His voice was serious.

“About what?” Dean cocked an eyebrow. He put the bible that Sister Joan had lent him onto the pew, and crossed his arms.

“About what you said to Zachariah.”

“What about it?” Dean scoffed. “I told him I wasn’t gonna go all Sherman’s March on the Earth and I’m not. There’s nothing to talk about.”

Castiel shook his head. “You can’t do that, Dean.”

“What?” Dean squinted.

“You are meant to fight Lucifer and his army, Dean,” Castiel said bluntly. “You must do as you are fated to do.”

“No, I don’t.” Dean stood up from the pew, his hands gripping tight around the front of it. “I’m not gonna nuke the planet. I’m gonna stop the Apocalypse, not cause it.”

Castiel clenched his fists. His voice turned desperate and he took a step forward. “Dean you must understand, this is long foretold—”

“—Yeah? Well, fuck that! That’s not what I’m here for. I know that,” Dean spat, narrowing his eyes at Castiel. “And I’m not gonna let a bunch of asshole angels tell me otherwi—”

“—Dean, listen to me!” Castiel snapped, his voice shaking. “You must go through with this, do you understand me?”

Dean paused. “Why?” He scrutinized Castiel. “You told me once that you weren’t a hammer, so why are you telling me this now?”

“Because I have doubts.” Castiel exhaled sharply, his voice low and ominous, like the hushed
rumble of thunder before a storm. “Because my siblings will make sure you go through with it and neither of us will like how they accomplish that.”

Dean froze, his eyes shifting. “What are you talking about, Cas?”

“Angels are agents of Fate, Dean,” Castiel said, almost at a whisper. He turned and looked briefly at the crucifix hanging up above the altar. “We ensure that it plays out how it is meant to.” He paused. “One way or another.”

Dean watched Castiel, glancing between the angel and the crucifix. “Jesus didn’t go to the cross willingly, did He?” The question played on his tongue with fear as he stepped out of the pew and into the aisle.

“No.” Castiel shook his head. “He didn’t.”

Dean froze. “What happened?”

Castiel didn’t say anything.

“Tell me what happened, Cas,” Dean demanded, taking a step closer to him.

Slowly, Castiel turned and faced Dean again.

“Jesus was supposed to be a Prophet and Messiah to his people. He was supposed to remove the yolk of Rome from their shoulders and take their pagan gods out of the Holy Land. Eventually, He was to help the Heavenly Host take back the Earth from the various pagan pantheons.” He took a deep breath. “But then Seals began to break, and that all changed. Instead, we needed him to take up arms against the Morning Star.”

A sad smile played at the corner of Castiel’s mouth.

“Like you, He didn’t want to destroy the planet. He was stubborn, and he refused to fight Lucifer. So instead of trying to force the matter, some of my siblings schemed to have him crucified, knowing that his death would reset the seals. And they wanted him killed for what they saw as an act of rebellion. Jesus went to the cross willingly, only so far as it was the only choice he had to prevent the destruction of the world.”

“You’re telling me the angels ganked Jesus because he wouldn’t obey them?” Dean swallowed. “How did they even get away with that? I mean, he would have outranked all of you, right?”

“Technically, yes. But he was still a human. They could enact angelic justice upon him if his transgressions were deemed grave enough.” Castiel glanced down at the floor. “Not all of us wanted vengeance upon him. Some angels thought his death was necessary, that it was the Will of Our Father.” He paused. “But not all of us. Most of my garrison tried to protect him, myself especially.”

Dean folded his arms. “And what came of that?”

“The last great angelic war and ultimately why we were barred from manifesting on Earth— until now.”

Dean nodded. Quietly, he glanced over to the Stations of the Cross lining the church walls. His gaze lingered on the final one, Jesus being laid in the tomb, before he spoke again. “So.” He took a deep breath. “After Jesus died, what happened? Did his death do anything besides reset the seals?”

Castiel nodded. “It did a great deal, in fact. The moment he died, every hellgate on Earth closed—for
a time—and any demon roaming the Earth perished instantly. Death, the Horseman, appeared to reap him. When he appeared, all the dead in Jerusalem rose from their graves,” he recounted. “That’s one of the few details the gospels actually got right.”

“And three days later?” Dean asked, his tone leading, turning his gaze back to Castiel.

“Three days later, his body disappeared from the tomb.” Castiel’s voice was mournful. “The Apostles made their assumptions and some of my siblings who still wanted to carry out his original mission took advantage of those assumptions with dreams and hallucinations. They did it again with Saul of Tarsus and finally with Emperor Constantine.”

“So the resurrection.” Dean cocked an eyebrow. “That never happened?”

“No.”

“What happened to his body? Was it stolen?”

“One of my older siblings took it but beyond that, I don’t know what happened to it. No one does.” Castiel shrugged. “I can only assume that’s its atoms are strewn out among the stars.”

Dean pursed his lips. “Well, what about his soul? Was that destroyed too?”

Castiel shook his head. “That, the angels could not and would not destroy.”

“So it’s in Heaven, then?” Dean looked at Castiel warily. “Right?”

“No. Shortly after Jesus’ death, I was forced to return to Heaven. The first thing I did was look for him. I searched for his soul—desperately—through all the heavenly spheres, but I could never find it.” Castiel paused. “But…I did find his soul again. Eventually. I stood in its presence for the first time in twenty centuries, five months ago.” He locked his eyes on Dean. “When I pulled you out of Perdition.”

Dean’s body stiffened. He didn’t say anything.

“You’ve lived many times throughout history, Dean. Originally, your soul belonged to Adam. Later, it became the soul of Noah, Isaac, Joshua, Judah Maccabee and then, eventually, Jesus. After he died, it became the soul of the others until, finally, it became yours. But out of all of them, only you and Jesus have the distinction of bearing The Soul and being The Son.” Castiel paused. “I wasn’t supposed to tell you this, Dean, but you need to know.”

Dean closed his eyes. “So all these visions I’ve been having.” He swallowed, opening his eyes again, blinking tears away. “They’re my own…. memories?”

He’d suspected as much for a while now. The visions Dean had of the crucifixion were far too visceral, too intimate, too real to merely be an experience Heaven had bestowed upon him.

Over the months, other visions had begun to haunt him as well. He dreamt of the sunrise reflecting against cool lake waters and dry desert air, cold nights and warm fires, the rough touch of wood grain under his callused fingers. There were voices Dean recognized and knew the names of, even though he had never heard them before. At least twice, Sam had grumbled that he was being kept awake at night thanks to the Aramaic Dean mumbled in his sleep.

In the back of his mind, Dean had always known that the visions were, in fact, memories.

“You have a wall holding the memories back. It’s cracking, and soon, it will crumble,” Castiel said
softly. He paused for a moment, watching him. “Even though it’s the same soul, it’s still your soul Dean. You’ve made it your own. You’ve shaped it with your experiences, the life you’ve led. It’s always belonged to you.”

Dean walked back over to the pew in silence, sinking into it. He stared blankly at the crucifix hanging on the wall and shook his head.

“You are worthy, Dean,” Castiel insisted, watching Dean. “Even if you bearing the same soul weren’t the case, you still would be.”

Dean was silent for a while before he cleared his throat. “Yeah. I— I get that. This is my fate.” He nodded to himself. His eyes didn’t stray from the wooden and ceramic crucifix, painted in almost neutral hues of brown and white. The only color that popped out was the red paint on the feet, palms and forehead, stark against the near white pallor of the figure’s skin. A larger streak flowed down from the figure’s very noticeable ribcage.

The longer Dean looked at it, the more his wounds began to ache again. He clenched his hands against the pain. “But that doesn’t mean it needs to end that way.” He turned his gaze to Castiel, his breath shaking. “No angel is gonna hang me up to die on a tree, Cas. I’m not gonna let it end that way.”

Castiel took a step closer to him. “Neither will I.”

Chapter End Notes

:: Lent is a Christian liturgical season marking the forty days leading up to Easter, beginning on Ash Wednesday. It is celebrated mostly by Roman Catholic and Orthodox denominations, but is also celebrated by the Anglican, Methodist and Lutheran churches. It is intended to be a time of prayer, penance and self-denial, often in the form of fasting and abstaining from meat. Because of its connection to the death of Jesus, the stigmata are more likely to appear on person or bleed during this season.

:: The Gospel of Mathew mentions that at the time of Jesus’ death, ‘The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life.’

:: The Gospel of Mark, the earliest composed gospel, has no post resurrection appearances by Jesus in its earliest surviving manuscripts. It simply states that the women who went to the tomb on Sunday morning found Jesus’ body gone. A ‘young man dressed in a white robe’ sitting in the tomb tells them of Jesus’ resurrection and the women flee the tomb in fear. In later gospels, such as The Gospel of Luke, the resurrected Jesus goes unrecognized at first by his disciples when he appears to them.

:: Saul of Taurus, better known as Paul, was an Apostle. He was not one of the original twelve Apostles, having never met Jesus during his lifetime. According to the Book of Acts, while on route to Damascus, Paul was struck by a white light that blinded him, during which he heard Jesus’ voice, was converted and named an Apostle. Paul preached predominantly to gentile pagans and made Christianity more accessible to Greco-Romans by removing the need to observe Jewish dietary laws and circumcision that the original twelve maintained. He is also credited with composing most of the New Testaments’ writings.
Emperor Constantine, also known as Constantine The Great, was a Roman Emperor who reigned from 306–337 CE. He decriminalized Christianity within the Roman Empire via The Edict of Milan, convened The First Council of Nicea where Christian doctrine was agreed upon and transitioned Christianity into the official state religion of the Roman Empire. According to tradition, during the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, he received a vision of the Chi Rho with the phrase "In this sign you will conquer." He had the symbol painted on his battle standards and after he won the battle, converted to Christianity.
May, 26 A.D.

Bethabara, Roman Controlled Perea.

Jesus and his family had been on their way home from Shavuot when it happened. Two days into their journey to Nazareth, across the rocky Judean highland, dark clouds rolled in the west, grumbling with thunder and flashes of lightning. In minutes the storm had overtaken them, forcing the family to seek shelter at the base of one of the foothills along the road. The rain, which had been a slow drizzle for most of the afternoon, became a cascade of water, pounding down upon them all in waves.

Jesus pieced together a crude shelter from tree limbs and brush, where they waited out the storm. By the time the rain relented, the sun was low in the sky and they decided to make camp for the night.

James and Judah had been bickering since they left the city. Judah, the younger of the two brothers, hadn’t helped the family pack before they left Jerusalem, choosing instead to go to the market. James, already annoyed at Judah for some disrespectful comments he had made to a cousin during the festival, confronted him, resulting in a shouting match in the middle of the road. As evening fell their bad moods, made all the worse by the rain, erupted into a rage and a fight broke out.

After pulling them apart, Jesus ordered Judah to find some dry wood for a fire and James to help him set up the tents, if only to separate them for a while, but it was a futile effort. Judah found a way to make quips about the tent, and James berated him for getting wood that wasn’t dry enough.

By the time they had settled in for the night, Jesus’ patience was wearing thin. It had been ever since they’d arrived in Jerusalem for the festival.
Shavuot had always been difficult for him. It had been Sarah’s favorite festival, the last one his sister had attended before she died, a month before her seventh birthday.

Jesus spent most of the festival burying the guilt with wine and any carpentry work he could get his hands on.

Jesus was gathering more firewood when he noticed a small group of men and women heading East through the hills. They were filled with fiery zeal and purpose, singing psalms as they traveled, almost as though they were headed to a new Promised Land. When they approached, Jesus invited them to share the campfire. Though they accepted, they stayed just long enough to warm themselves before leaving, thanking him for the hospitality.

Jesus learned they were heading to the Jordan River for cleansing at the hands of a man called John the Baptist. Jesus knew him better as his cousin, John bar Zechariah. He was supposed to become a Temple priest like his father before him, but instead joined the Essenes, a monastic order who lived near the Dead Sea. A few months later, he left the order and went down to the banks of the Jordan, preaching about the coming Kingdom of God, the end of the world and, more importantly, repentance.

Jesus watched them as long as he could, repeating their destination under his breath long after they disappeared over the hills.

Just before dawn, Jesus awoke. Almost as if he had planned it all along, he packed his bag and walked away from the tent. He didn’t get over the first hill before he felt something small and hard strike him on the shoulder, followed by James hissing his name.

“Where are you going?” James whispered, sliding clumsily down the hill.

“The Jordan. To follow John.” He glanced down at the rock his brother had thrown at him, still feeling its sting.

“Why?”

“Because,” Jesus paused, “because I need to.”

“If you’re going, I should go with you,” James demanded.

Jesus shook his head. “No. You stay with the family. Take care of Ima, Dinah, and Joses for me.”

After a moment, James reluctantly nodded.

They hugged each other.

“I’ll come back home. I promise,” Jesus said, pulling away from James. He walked away, turning towards the sunrise.

It only took a few days for Jesus reach the Jordan River and less a day to find John. Little more than animal skin covered his thin frame, and his hair was long and matted. His commune of apostles lived on the banks of the river in caves and tents, only half a day’s journey away from the Dead Sea.

When Jesus arrived, John greeted him with joy, asking right away if he wanted to be baptized, but Jesus declined. He had gone there for cleansing, for absolution, for forgiveness, but he didn’t think himself worthy of the absolution the waters promised. Not yet.

He didn’t know what, if anything, would change if he allowed John to baptize him. Maybe he
wasn’t worthy and maybe he was. Either way, the answer was something he feared. So he held back. He kept quiet, listening to his cousin’s fiery sermons and watching as John baptized his followers in the river.

Three times he tried to step into the river, but every time he reached the water’s edge, he stopped.

Nearly a month went by before Jesus summoned the courage to wade in.

Gripping his shoulders, John lowered him into the river. Cool water washed over his chest, his neck and finally, his head, soaking his hair. Almost immediately, the sound of water rushing around him and John’s muffled voice were gone, and all was silent save for the beating of his heart.

A bright white light filled the water, engulfing him. Calm and inviting, it broke the silence, filling his ears with the sound of wings, that quickly gave way to high pitched buzzing. He had heard this buzzing from time to time for as long as he could remember. It ached his ears and made his head throb with pain. Now it didn’t hurt him. Now he could perfectly understand it. It was words. The collective voice of Heaven itself. ‘…Jesus bar Joseph has been Chosen. Jesus bar Joseph has been Anointed…’

The moment Jesus emerged sputtering from the water, the light faded and the buzzing ceased, leaving a blinding, searing heat in its wake. Hot as lightning, it coursed through his veins. A storm settled in his ribcage. It swirled in the pit of his stomach, filling him until it had worked itself into every nook and cranny of his flesh, purging any emptiness he might have had.

His fingers shook with unbridled power that filled him with awe and terror. Something had taken root within him, something powerful and all-encompassing. So powerful and all-encompassing that a mere human body couldn’t contain it. A human body wasn’t supposed to contain it, but now, somehow, it did.

Jesus’ starring gaze drifted down to his shaking hands.

“Did you hear them? The Angels?” John whispered, still holding Jesus upright. Awed, his fingers gripped Jesus’ shoulders even tighter. “They were speaking of you.”

Jesus nodded. “I did.”

By sunset, it was worse. The storm in the pit of his stomach grew until Jesus felt he had the whole of the night sky inside him. Millions of stars settled in the space between his heart and his throat. A swirling cloud of light blossomed, expanded all the way to the tips of his fingers. It pounded against his ribcage and pulled tight against his skin, threatening to rip him apart.

The power seemed to amplify the sounds around him, from the softest whisper of wind against the wings of a locust to the very movement of the constellations. He heard it all. The sounds pounded against his skull, a constant tick against his consciousness.

He could bear it no longer.

Taking nothing but his prayer shawl, a bag containing a day’s ration of bread and a goatskin filled with enough water for two days, Jesus wandered out into the desert.

He didn’t look back.
30 Days Later.

Jesus hid, ignoring the fire within him by focusing instead on the heat of the desert surrounding him.

At first, he walked along a tributary of the Jordan River, taking shelter and food from shepherds and caravans that traveled along it. One caravan traveling east from Jerusalem told Jesus around a campfire one night that John had been arrested by Herod Antipas and executed shortly thereafter. They claimed that he was beheaded by Herod on a drunken whim.

Before long, however, the tributary dried up, and Jesus had ventured far out into the desert. Arid heat blistered his skin, pocking his hands and feet. Even with a scarf wrapped around his head, the sun had burnt him until his lips were cracked and his forehead had peeled away in uneven splotches.

As far as he could see, the sun beat down upon an endless expansion sand and rock. It was oppressively hot. Desolate. Empty, and exactly what Jesus sought. But even surrounded by vast expanses of emptiness, he was never alone.

During the day he could hear the rustling of scorpions and the slithering of snakes. At night he heard the distant howling of wolves. Sometimes they were familiars, demons in the form of animals. Other times shadows of black smoke and sulfur followed him. Sometimes restless spirits joined him on this journey. Soon after he walked into the desert he had been plagued by visions, manifestations of his own doubts.

His stomach was empty. It had been empty for weeks, but he didn't feel any pain. He doubted he’d ever truly feel hunger again. What the heat hadn’t burned away, his mouth lost the taste for. Nothing tasted the same. Olives were no longer olives; they were fruit flesh, oils, and juices. Bread was no longer bread. It was broken down into its base ingredients: ground grains, salt, and water.

Two days ago, his stomach began to ache with hunger, but the only nourishment he found was in the sun-warmed water of his goatskin.

Jesus lifted it to his mouth, only a few drops remained, scorching hot against his tongue.

The sand dunes turned into rocky hills and plateaus. Half a day’s walk down one such plateau, Jesus came across a rock bluff with a sheer drop. He walked along the edge, standing a few steps behind it. Slowly, he looked down at the sudden drop, into the deep canyon below.

All he had to do was close his eyes and step forward.

He contemplated it, considered it even, but he couldn’t do it.

Quickly, he turned around, stumbling away from the rock bluff. When he was far enough away from the sheer drop, he collapsed to the ground, his knees digging into the sand. Jesus ripped his headscarf off, pulling the fringed shawl draped around his shoulders up over his head.

“Hashem,” he sobbed, pressing his hands over his eyes. He rocked back and forth. “Help me.”

Silence.

Only a small gust of wind blew against him, running across his face and through his matted hair and beard.
He waited again, but nothing happened.

Heaven wasn’t listening.

“Help me,” Jesus whispered again, running one of the shawl’s fringes through his fingers. “Please.” Jesus’ lip trembled and his head, too heavy for his shoulders, fell to his chest.

At the sound of flapping wings, hope flared in his chest, but he didn’t have the strength to turn around. Behind him, he heard feet scuffling against the sand.

Opening his eyes, Jesus turned to find an angel wearing a simple wool tunic and head shawl. The sunlight cast a shadow of wings against the rocks, long and thin against the evening sun.

Jesus had seen the angel many times while he walked through the desert. He’d seen him standing behind palm trees and on top of rock bluffs, hovering in the hills outside the tent of a Bedouin family who had given him shelter.

He was aloof, distant, often invisible. Were it not for the presence of the angel’s grace, Jesus wouldn’t know he was there. Before Jesus could speak, the angel placed two fingers against his forehead, and the world went black.

When Jesus awoke, he found himself lying on the rocky floor of a cave, covered with a heavy cloak. It was dark, the oppressive sun replaced by the chill of a cloudless night. Sitting up, he pulled the cloak up around his shoulders and wrapped it around his thin middle.

He set his gaze on the angel tending a fire near the mouth of the cave. Jesus’ goatskin and bag were sitting next to him by the fire, his prayer shawl meticulously folded and resting on top of the bag.

When Jesus stirred, the angel lifted his gaze, watching him intently as he grabbed the goatskin and handed it to him. “Drink,” he demanded, his voice deep and rough.

Without any hesitation, Jesus took the goatskin from him. He pulled the wooden cork out and chugged the water down, spilling some of it over his mouth that he wiped away with his sleeve.

“Who are you?” Jesus croaked, watching the angel carefully.

Apart from Michael, this angel was the only one Jesus had ever met. Since the time of the prophets, few had. The last time they had been seen at all was during Maccabean Revolt some two hundred years ago.

“I’m the angel charged with keeping watch over you,” he said simply over the crackling of the wood as he moved one of the charred branches with his fingers. “You prayed for help, so I came to your aid.”

“I’ve been praying,” Jesus said, his voice raised. “In fact, all I’ve ever done out in this desert is pray. I’ve—”

He bit his tongue, remembering Michael’s veiled threats of wrath when he had raised his voice to him all those years ago. Angels were vicious creatures that leveled cities and slaughtered armies. As
Messengers of The Lord, they commanded both fear and respect.

But the angel didn’t threaten Jesus with wrath. He just nodded at him.

“‘I know,’” he said calmly. “‘I’ve been watching you since you climbed out of the river.’” The angel turned another branch. “‘My garrison has been watching over you since you were in swaddling clothes, but we had orders to keep our distance until you were Chosen. You needed to commune with The Spirit of The Lord and I couldn’t interfere with that.’”

Jesus looked at him. “Then why are you here now?”

“Because you needed my help.” His voice was blunt. “This journey has become too much for you. You’ve gone as far as you can go.”

A pit grew in Jesus' stomach. “So I—” He swallowed. “—I failed?”

“No.” The angel shook his head. “Every Prophet reaches despair at one point or another. The fact that you resisted is victory enough.”

Jesus didn’t say anything. He took another sip from the goatskin, focusing his gaze on the flames and heat of the fire. While he did this, the angel walked over to him, holding a wooden plate covered with a cloth.

“Here. Eat.” The angel said, holding the plate out. “You need your strength.”

Peeking out from under the cloth was flatbread and hummus.

Jesus blinked. He looked back and forth between the angel and plate. “Where did you get this?”

“I flew to farm about a day’s journey from here. The woman wasn’t too pleased that I took her food, even after told her it was a holy sacrifice.” The angel recounted. “She called me a—” He paused searching for the word. “‘Brigand.’”

Jesus chuckled wearily; He took the plate from him. “You’re a peculiar one, aren’t you?”

“So I’ve been told.”

Jesus’ chapped lips quirked into a crooked smile. He lowered his eyes to the plate and said a quick blessing over the food. “What do I call you?” he asked, lifting a piece of the bread to his mouth. He watched the angel as he chewed. Even though the bread tasted of ash, when it reached his stomach, he sighed with relief, taking another bite.

“Castiel.”

Jesus nodded, swallowing another bite of bread. He raised the goatskin back to his lips. He spit it out immediately, wiping his mouth with his hand. The water had changed, becoming bitter on his tongue. Wine.

Jesus stared down at the red liquid on his hand for a long moment. He took a deep shaken breath. “So, Castiel, what I do now?”

“You return to Nazareth and preach to the people there. After that, you’ll go out into the neighboring towns and villages and preach to them. When the time is right, you’ll reveal yourself.”

Jesus scoffed. “You make it sound so simple.”
Castiel stared at him for a second, confused. "You don't believe it will be?"

Jesus shook his head. “Not with Roman legionnaires roaming the countryside. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but men like me—prophets, messiahs—” Jesus paused. “They don’t live long.”

"You don’t need to worry. You’re not like other men.” Castiel said reassuringly. “You actually are what you will claim to be.”

Jesus swallowed, taking in a sharp breath. “That’s exactly why I should worry.”

Castiel watched him for a long moment. “You have Faith, Jesus. Do you not?” He squinted at him.

“Of course I do.” Jesus' retorted, shaken.

“Then why do you have such doubts regarding your mission?”

“It frightens me,” Jesus said honestly, taking a deep breath. “Part of me even wishes that Hashem chose someone else.” Jesus shook his head. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t have faith.” He looked at Castiel. “To have Faith means you must wrestle with it.”

Castiel frowned. He got up and walked towards the entrance of the cave. When he reached it, he stopped. “You stay here and rest. I’ll be back in the morning with more food and water.”

Jesus looked at him and nodded.

With that, Castiel disappeared, the wind from his wings disturbing the fire for a second before they danced upwards towards the cave roof once more.

Not long after Jesus’ eyes grew heavy and he fell asleep.

When he awoke the following morning, he found fresh bread and a full goatskin. He also found a jar of aloe that he used on his sunburns. Castiel, however, was nowhere to be found.

For ten days this routine repeated. Jesus would wake each morning to fresh bread and a full goatskin of water. Sometimes he woke up to fresh firewood, sometimes an extra jug of water and basin to wash himself, sometimes sewing needles and thread to mend his worn-out clothes, but never once was the angel there.

On the morning of the tenth day, Castiel finally reappeared at the mouth of the cave.

“You’re looking much better,” Castiel said.

“I feel better.”

“Good, then it’s time you returned home.”

Jesus nodded. He flung his bag and goatskin over his shoulder and wrapped the scarf back over his head. “Once I get back to the river I just need to follow it north to Galilee. It shouldn’t take more than a fortnight to get home.”

Castiel shook his head. “That won’t be necessary.” He placed his fingers against Jesus’ temple.

Instantly the cave and desert were gone. The air was cooler and moist, filled with the familiar scent of burning cedar and olive wood. Jesus found himself standing in the hills just outside of Nazareth.

He made his way back into the village, passing farmers making their way to fields and olive groves.
They stared at him, almost as though they had seen a ghost. When he made into the village, the women huddled around the well gave him curious looks, whispering to each other.

Finally he made it to his family’s house. He quickly ran up to entrance way of the courtyard. He was about to run in when he caught sight of his mother sitting out on the front step of the house with a basket of goat wool she was winding into yarn resting beside her. Wrapped around her shoulders was a shawl. The section over her left breast ripped. She was in mourning.

“Shalom, Ima,” he said quietly.

She looked up, gasping at the sight of him. “Jesus?” She stumbled to her feet, running across the courtyard and hugged him tightly. “You’ve returned to me. Thank Hashem.” She cupped his face in her hands, tears welling up in her eyes.

“You know of what happened to John, don’t you?” he asked.

“Yes.” Mary nodded. “When you didn’t return home, I feared you were taken along with him.” She looked at his haggard appearance. “Where have you been all this time?”

“I was lost out in the desert,” he explained. “But I’m home now.”

Mary hugged him tightly. “Good,” she sighed, relieved. After a moment she pulled away from him, smiling. “We needed you home. James and Joses were getting behind on your piece work.”

Jesus laughed as he stepped into the house. Just before he crossed the threshold, he looked back.

Castiel was standing behind one of the olive trees.

Four Days Later.

Nazareth, Roman Controlled Galilee.

“The Angel said you had to speak in the synagogue today?” James whispered as he and Jesus walked to the synagogue.

Jesus nodded. “He appeared to me just before sunset last night.”

“Did he tell you what to say?”

Jesus shook his head nervously. “All he said was that Divine Inspiration would guide my words.”

“Don’t worry.” James patted him on the shoulder. “If Hashem is with you, you’ll do fine.”

“That’s easy for you to say.” Jesus chuckled slightly. “You always speak in the synagogue. You’re practically a rabbi.”

“Well, not anymore,” James said. “Things have changed.”

Jesus scoffed. “You’re still better at reading The Torah than I am. You also understand it better than I do.”
“You understand it just as well as I do—better in fact,” James argued. “You have a passion for it. You always have.”

Jesus stopped in his tracks. “I was the boy who asked too many questions and didn’t pay attention. I could barely read the Torah portion when I became a Bar Mitzvah.” Jesus paused. “Of course… that wasn’t my fault. Anytime I heard it being read, angels began screaming in my ears.”

James cocked an eyebrow. “Does that still happen?”

“No. After I came out of the water, it stopped. I can… understand their words now,” Jesus took a deep breath as he looked over at the synagogue, watching as the other men filed into it. He turned his gaze back to James, pursing his lips. “Maybe I’ll have you speak for me instead, like Aaron did for Moses.”

James sighed. “I’m supposed to read the haftarah today. I’ll give it to you. See what comes of it.”

Jesus’ other brothers: Judah, Joses, and Simon were standing at the synagogue entrance, along with Simon’s two young sons.

Simon whispered something to Judah and Joses and the two of them took the children inside. Once they were gone, he walked over to Jesus and James.

He looked Jesus up and down with a critical gaze. “Brother,” he sneered. “Did you stroll back into the village just this morning?”

“I came home days ago, Simon,” Jesus replied evenly. “I’ve been busy working on Dinah’s dowry.”

“Oh good,” Simon nodded and smiled, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Perhaps now you’ll stay home.”

“Is that all you have to say?” Jesus asked.

Simon shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t have much of anything to say to you.” He turned to leave with a smirk. “Big brother.”

Jesus grabbed Simon’s arm, pulling him back around. He narrowed his eyes. “I’m still the head of this family, brother. You should show me respect.”

“Respect? For what? Acting like a child?” Simon spat, pulling his arm away. “Abandoning your family?”

“I’ve never abandoned our family.” Jesus glared. “In case you’ve forgotten, I helped Ima raise all of you after Abba died and even before that.”

“Exactly. You know you have responsibilities, Jesus. Instead, you decided to run off, leaving us alone and vulnerable to Romans and brigands on the open road to follow our eccentric cousin around the desert.” Simon glared. “Then you refused to come home and provide for our mother, brother, and unwed sister as you’re supposed to do.”

“Joses and I got by just fine on our own,” James interjected, his voice raised. He shot Simon a look. “And without any help from you or Judah.”

Jesus glanced quickly at James. “Is that so?” He cocking his eyebrow sarcastically as he turned his gaze slowly back to Simon. “Then he should take the log out of his own eye before he starts pointing at the one in mine.”
“I have four children and a wife at home.” Simon glared at the both of them. “Judah’s wife is with child. We have our own families to care for.” He paused for a second, his gaze on Jesus. “But you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

Simon turned to walk inside. Jesus’ fists clenched as he ran after him. He only got a couple steps before James jumped out in front of him, shoving his palms against his chest to hold him back.


Jesus took a deep breath and nodded. “Yes. Right.”

Jesus and James walked into the synagogue. As they stepped in, James nudged him in the shoulder and gestured up at the woman’s gallery. Their mother was sitting up there with their sister Dinah and the wives of Judah and Simon.

“The whole family’s watching,” James whispered.

“That doesn’t help matters, brother,” Jesus mumbled.

“How? It’s just motivation for you to do well.”

Jesus grew quiet. He looked at the front of the synagogue where the podium was situated. Behind the podium was a cut out in the wall covered by an embroidered curtain, behind that lay a wooden Torah ark where the scrolls were kept. Jesus and his father had built it just before his bar mitzvah. Normally, looking at it made Jesus’ heartache. Now it caused a spark within him.

“Come on.” He took a deep breath as he glanced over at James. “Let’s go.”

They walked over to the front of the synagogue, standing next to the podium.

Soon after, the Torah scroll was taken out of out of the ark and paraded around the synagogue while the cantor chanted psalms. When the scroll came around to Jesus and he touched his fingers to it and kissed them, the spark within, always present, burst into flame. It only continued to spread through the Torah reading and blessings.

Then the rabbi looked over at James. “Today’s Prophet reading, from Isaiah, shall be read by James bar Joseph.”

Before James could say anything, Jesus stepped forward. “No,” he said confidently, “I will read it.”

The rabbi blinked. “Well, if you insist.” He paused, clearing his throat. “The reading shall be done by Jesus bar Joseph.”

Jesus walked up to the podium and placed his hands on the handles of the scroll. The fire grew stronger, crackling and burning under his skin.

His voice boomed throughout the synagogue. “….The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me; he has sent me to preach glad tidings to the poor, to heal the broken in heart, to proclaim liberty to the captives…. ”

When he finished, slowly, Jesus let go of the scrolled and backed away from the podium as the rabbi grabbed the scroll and rolled it back up and placed it back in the ark. Jesus turned to him, gesturing to the ark. “Now, this scripture has been fulfilled.”
The rabbi turned to Jesus. “What?” He asked, lowering the curtain back down.

“Today, in your hearing, it’s been fulfilled,” Jesus explained.

Confusion fell over the rabbi’s face. “That scripture speaks of the Messiah.”

“Yes.” Jesus nodded. He held out his hands as if to gesture toward his still too thin frame.

The rabbi shifted his eyes; he let out a chuckle as he walked back over to Jesus. “Well, it’s certainly admirable that you want to be the savior of your people and while every man has the potential to become the Messiah—”

“I am the Messiah,” Jesus said, his voice echoing through the synagogue as he glanced around it. “While I was in the desert, Hashem anointed me.”

The men and women started to whisper among themselves. Some muttered comments about him being the carpenter’s son who they had always thought was little strange. Some said it was his time in the desert that turned him into a fanatic. Others joked that another young man in a neighboring village had done the same thing a few months ago and simply shrugged it off.

The rabbi watched Jesus for a second. He nodded, cautiously. “Countless other young men have claimed the same. You’re just old enough to remember Judah of Gamla’s revolt and how much bloodshed that caused. He too was sure that he had been anointed by Hashem.” The rabbi patted him on the shoulder. “When you bring peace to all the nations or—at the very least—drive the Romans out of this land, then what you’re saying will be true.”

“Yes.” Jesus raised his voice. “But you’re not listening—”

“Stop this, Jesus.” Simon hissed as pushed himself through the crowd and ran up to the podium. “You’re embarrassing yourself.”

James quickly rushed over, glaring at his brother. “Leave him alone, Simon.”

“It’s alright James.” Jesus nodded. “A prophet is welcome everywhere but in his hometown.” He looked pointedly at Simon. “Even his own family will reject him.”

Simon rolled his eyes as he grabbed Jesus by the arms. He dragged him through the crowd and out of the synagogue. “What’s wrong with you? What are you doing?”

“What I’ve been sent here to do.” Jesus retorted, shoving Simon away. “I don’t expect you to understand.”

“Oh. I understand just fine. You’re mad.” Simon scoffed. “It’s no wonder you never got married.”

Something snapped within Jesus. In one quick motion, he drew back his fist and swung at Simon, landing a punch across his jaw.

Recoiling and spitting out blood, Simon was on him in an instant, pushing until they both slammed against the wall of the synagogue. They exchanged blow after blow before James and Judah grabbed them, pulling them apart, revealing Simon’s face, a large bruise blossoming on his jaw and left eye swollen. Jesus had a split lip; his knuckles were bruised.

Jesus shrugged Judah off, breathing heavily. He wiped the blood from his lip and stormed off, ignoring the calls of his brothers, a swirling mass of flame filling his chest.
Soon the flame of anger dissipated, leaving him cold for the first time since the river. With his lip swollen and his knuckles bleeding, Jesus wandered to the outskirts of the village, picking up a small stone on his way. Eventually, he came across a rock-hewn tomb, a pile of stones collected near the entrance. Staring at the tomb for a moment, he knelt and placed the rock on top of the already existing pile before he sat down.

He stayed there until long past sunset.

The sky was still deep blue when Jesus woke, only a thin slice of orange had begun to cross the horizon. He could hear James and Joses sleeping next to him on their bed mats, Joses snoring loudly. Mary and his sister Dinah were talking quietly amongst themselves in a corner of the main room. They were kneading the dough, getting a head start on the cooking they had been barred from doing during the Sabbath.

Even though the house was small in size, having only the main room, one small bedroom, and one storage room, it seemed empty. Over the years, eleven people had called this place home. Now only four remained.

Sarah had been dead for nearly twenty years. She had been the eldest daughter, the first after a string of boys. At the age of six, two seasons after Jesus' Bar Mitzvah, she was stung by a yellow scorpion.

Jesus' father followed her three years later.

From that point on, Jesus had been head of the household. As the eldest, he had been expected to care for his younger siblings. He also had the responsibility of providing for them and arranging their marriages when they came of age. He felt more like a father than a brother to Dinah and Joses, the two youngest.

With a groan, Jesus rose from his mat and walked over to a shelf where a jug of water and bowl rested. He quickly washed his bony hands, the right one bruised along its knuckles, whispering a prayer while he did so.

When he was done washing, he entered the main room. He walked over to the table where Dinah was mixing honey and crushed walnuts.

She looked up at him, “Shalom, Jesus,” she greeted.

“Shalom,” he replied, smiling slightly.

Dinah glanced down at his right hand. She cocked an eyebrow. “Why did you fight with Simon yesterday?” she asked, concerned.

Jesus sighed. “He said some things he shouldn’t have.”

Dinah nodded. “Last night, before you came back home, he and Judah came by. They don’t want you to come to the wedding.”

Jesus scoffed, shaking his head. “And what do you think? It’s your wedding day after all.”
She shrugged, looking at him sincerely. “You’re head of the house. And you’re still my big brother; even if you are little mad.”

Jesus took a deep breath, smiling wearily. “Well, the dowry is almost done. I just need to finish the table.” He grabbed the jug of wine sitting on the table and headed to the door.

He was about the cross the threshold when his mother walked in. Mary glanced down at the jug in his hand. “Makes sure you come back inside for morning meal,” she demanded. “We’re making honey cakes.”

Jesus’ mouth salivated at the thought of them, but his stomach stiffened. “I will.” He nodded. “Thank you, Ima.”

“I mean it. You need to eat, my son. You look ill.” Mary said, cupping his hollow cheeks. She paused briefly. “And next Sabbath, promise me you’ll stay quiet in the synagogue. Just listen like you always do,” she pleaded, her face flooding with worry. “I don’t want you and your brothers getting into any more fights.”

Jesus nodded sheepishly. He left the house, making his way into the large, walled in courtyard.

Jesus fed the goats, patting them each on the top of the head before he headed to a covered alcove in the corner. Where a donkey would have resided in a wealthier home, were piles of wood instead. A large workbench rested against the long wall, his tools haphazardly stacked atop it. A leather tool bag rested on a hook.

Jesus glanced at the finished set of mezuzah cases and placed the wine on the workbench. He approached his task for the day: a wooden table sitting flush against the back wall of the courtyard.

He was almost finished with it. Some detail work on the carving was all he had left on the actual construction of the piece. Then he needed to smooth it down and stain it. The tabletop had come together nicely. Between the precise measuring and gentle sanding, not even the most discerning eye could tell where one plank began and the other ended.

A streak of pride run through him at the sight of it.

Jesus lifted the table with a grunt, carrying it away from the wall. His thin arms shook with the weight, and he gently placed it facedown over the top of his workbench. Two months before, he could have carried the table over his shoulder without blinking. Now, he could barely lift it.

Though Jesus had returned from the desert nearly a week ago, he still hadn’t regained his former strength. He had little by way of an appetite and what food he did eat consisted mostly of bread. Wine was one of the few drinks he had any taste for. This reduced appetite, combined with the strength it took to maintain the galaxy in his ribcage, had weakened him.

Jesus grabbed the wine, saying a quick prayer before taking a sip from it, the alcohol stinging his cracked lip. He relished the pain. He took another long drink then put the jug on the ground next to the table. With trembling fingers, he grabbed a hammer and chisel from his work bag and began chipping the rough side paneling slowly until it was uniform and smooth. He was a third of the way through the second panel by the time the sun had fully risen.

James and Joses came out of the house, both of them laughing. Joses ran over to the work table, briefly greeting Jesus as he grabbed a small wooden amulet, intricately carved—a gift for a girl he had his eye on—from the table before running out of the courtyard. James walked over to him, leaning against the work table. He watched Jesus work for a moment he let out a slight laugh. “In the
entire time Joses and I covered your work we never made anything as impressive as that table.”

Jesus didn’t respond and instead just kept chiseling away at the wood.

James’s tone shifted to one of concern. “How is your hand?”

“Sore.” Jesus sighed deeply; he paused briefly. “Not as bad as Simon’s jaw, I’m sure.”

“I think his pride was wounded more,” James said. “He shouldn’t have said that to you.”

“Simon just spoke out loud what everyone else in town already thinks.” Jesus paused. “Maybe they’re right.”

James chuckled, “Why would they be right, Jesus?”

Finally, Jesus stopped his chisel and lifted his gaze up to James. “Because I feel like I am going mad.” Jesus’ voice shook. “I walk around carrying the sun in my chest.” He took a pull from the wine jug before he walked over to the work table. He placed the hammer and chisel down and grabbed a pumice stone and started to sand the top of the table, his movement fast and nervous.

James was silent. After a few moments, he cleared his throat. “Well, once we get away from home, once we leave Nazareth, things will be different.”

Jesus cocked an eyebrow. “We?” Immediately he stopped sanding the table. He stood up straight, his gaze hard. “When I leave, you are not coming with me.”

“What would you have me do then?” James retorted, frustration filling his voice. “Stay home?”

“Yes,” Jesus said bluntly. “And marry. Have a family like your brothers and sisters.”

“I had a family.” James raised his voice slightly. “Rachael and our child are buried in the tomb with Abba and Sarah.” He paused, stepping closer to Jesus. “I was with you when Michael spoke to you. I’m already a part of it and I have been since we were children.”

“I’m aware of that, brother.”

“Then you know why I won’t let you do this alone.”

“I won’t be alone,” Jesus said, picking the jar up taking another swing from it. “I’ll get followers.”

“From where?”

“Capernaum.” Jesus shrugged.

“So strangers?” James said annoyed. “Men you don’t even know?”

“A few of John’s followers came from that village.” Jesus shifted his eyes. “I met some of them at the Jordan and with John dead—”

“—John was killed, Jesus.” James narrowed his eyes. “Beheaded, if the rumors are true.”

“Exactly, and a similar fate has been shared by all men like me.” Jesus’ voice was blunt. His face flooded with fear. “You would suffer that fate far swifter than anyone else would because you’re my brother.”

James watched him for a moment. “Yes. Except you’re forgetting one thing. You aren’t like our
cousin. A messenger of Hashem pulled you from the desert.” He glanced up to the sky. “Heaven is watching over you. It will watch over us.”

“I know that.”

“Then why won’t you let me come with you?”

“Because no more of my siblings are going to die on my account,” Jesus snapped. He grabbed the wine jug and turned away from James.

Silence fell between them.

A moment passed before James spoke again. He breathed deeply. “You still blame yourself for what happened to Sarah? How many times have you gone to her tomb asking for forgiveness?”

“Not enough,” Jesus sighed.

James shook his head. “You were a boy. It wasn’t your fault.”

“I was thirteen. I was supposed to be watching her. I had one responsibility and I failed.”

“Is that you or Abba talking?” James asked knowingly.

Jesus didn’t say anything.

James sighed he slowly walked over to Jesus. “Out of all of his children, out of all of his sons, why was he always the hardest on you?

“Because I was his firstborn, but I was nothing like him.” Jesus paused, drumming his fingers against the wine jug and scoffed. “Because I looked nothing like him.”

“What?”

Jesus took a deep breath as he faced his brother. “From the moment we laid Sarah in the tomb, he didn’t speak a single word to me. Not one. Until the night Shiva ended. I found him out here. He was slumped over his work table with an empty pitcher of wine in his hand. He looked at me and he said I didn’t belong to him. He thought I was a bastard. That Ima had betrayed him while she was in Judea with her cousin Elizabeth.”

“But Ima would never do that.” James shook his head. “They were married in the summer. You were born the following spring.”

“I know I’m his son. The angels called me such when I was in the river.” Jesus sighed. “But after Michael came to me, I tried to speak to Ima about it. To see if she knew anything. She just began weeping, mumbling something about the Archangel Gabriel.”

“Archangel Gabriel?” James thought for a second. “Do you think maybe you’re like Samson? Consecrated in the womb?” he asked. “Perhaps Abba was just…confused.”

“I don’t know.” Jesus shrugged. “In any case, I have a new abba now so it doesn’t matter,” he mumbled.

“What do you mean, ‘a new abba?’” James asked, confused. “What does that mean?

Jesus froze. “Don’t worry about it, little brother.” He lifted his gaze up to James. His voice shook as he started to walk back over to the work table. “You wouldn’t understand.”
“Well then… make me understand,” James demanded.

“No James—”

“—Let me go with you!”

“James!” Jesus shouted, his free fist clenched. “I said no. Leave it at that.” He sank down on to a stool next to the workbench before taking a long pull from the wine jug.

James sighed. “The morning meal is done. You should come inside with me and eat.”

“You go,” Jesus grumbled. “I need to finish my work.”

James turned and began to walk away, but before crossing the threshold into the main room, he paused, turning around. “Brother, I’m the only member of your family who doesn’t think you’re insane. Don’t push me away.”

With that, James walked into the house. A few minutes later, he returned with a cake, setting it down without a word.

Jesus stared at it for a moment before picking up and taking a bite. Though it was covered in honey, the dough was bitter on his tongue.

More than anything, he wished it tasted sweet.

Four Days Later.

Cana, Roman Controlled Galilee.

Jesus had hated weddings from the time he was old enough for betrothal. He dreaded them.

It wasn’t the service itself that bothered him. The joining of two households under a canopy was a beautiful thing and he always enjoyed the feasts that followed. He loved the music, dancing, food and wine, reveled in them in even.

But weddings were also a time of questions. Questions about children, marriage arrangements, and proposals, questions that were, one way or another, always directed at him.

Men threw their arms around his shoulders, their wine-soaked breath in his face, attempting to pair him with daughters and nieces while joking about his age. Mothers and aunts stared at him with concerned expressions while they pestered him for a reason why he wasn’t already married.

Jesus knew why. Most men his age had been married long enough to have children who in a few short years would be making Bar Mitzvahs, if they hadn’t done so already. Aside from a short-lived arrangement Joseph set up just before he died, he’d never been close to getting married, let alone having children.

After what Michael had told him, Jesus knew Heaven had different plans for him. Then after Joseph died, he had to provide for the family he already had. He couldn’t afford to have a family of his own
on top of taking care of nine other people.

He had different priorities, a different future. Marriage and children were not to be a part of it. That was what he told himself during the long nights he spent alone out on the roof, away from the snores of his younger brothers when he had only night sky and the gentle hum of the angels to keep him company. It was during those nights that he longed for nothing more than the warmth of a companion’s arms around him.

Jesus had resigned himself to a lonely life. He contented himself with the family he had, not the family he’d never gotten to build. A family he was never meant to build.

His reluctance did nothing to stop the proposals, however. By the time he was twenty; three more had come Jesus’ way. He turned them all down. At first, the parents of the girls and his relatives all assumed he was just being diligent in taking of his mother and siblings, but after James and later Simon took their own trips under the canopy all that changed. Now, he was seen as peculiar at best. At worst, cursed.

So when Dinah’s new father in law, Daniel, called him over to meet a family friend who was attending the wedding with his daughter, Jesus almost refused to go. But the hopeful look on his sister’s face as she watched the exchange between the two men ultimately made him consent to the meeting.

Jesus walked over to where an older man wearing a nice tunic was speaking to Dinah’s father in law. He threw back the cup of wine he’d just gotten in one gulp, letting the warmth of the alcohol fill his belly.

The man’s daughter stood behind them, leaning against the wall. She was a grown woman, only a few years younger than Jesus. Her long dark hair was worn loose under her richly dyed veil, a sign that she had never been married, and the light scent of jasmine wafted from her. She glanced at Jesus briefly and smiled, warm and inviting.

She was beautiful.

“Jesus, this is Elias of Magdala.” Daniel gestured to the man, “I was showing him the table and mezuzahs you made and he thought they were just magnificent.”

Elias nodded. “Yes. The craftsmanship was some of the best I’ve seen. You’re quite talented.”

“Thank you,” Jesus said as he glanced at the girl. It was strange that Elias hadn’t introduced her first. Usually, it was the first thing a prospective father-in-law did. Maybe he was getting a feel for him first, Jesus thought.

But Elias kept droning on about the storefront he wanted Jesus to build for him. There was talk of payment, but never once did Elias mention his daughter. He didn’t even so much as look at her.

Jesus couldn’t understand why anyone would want to ignore her. He could barely pull his gaze from her. Finally, Jesus gestured to the woman, clearing his throat. “That’s your daughter over there, isn’t it?”

Elias blinked. “Yes it is,” he said awkwardly. Almost as though he had forgotten she was there.

“And you haven’t introduced her to me yet?” Jesus cocked an eyebrow.

“Introduced you to Miriamne? No. She’s—”
Without missing a beat, Jesus stepped between the two men and walked over to her.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hello.” She looked up at him. “You’re Jesus bar Joseph, aren’t you?”

“I am.” Jesus nodded. “It’s nice to meet you, Miriamne.”

“You as well.”

Before Jesus could get another word in, Elias walked over and pulled her away. He stood there watching the two of them walkway until he heard the sound of one of his uncles laughing, followed by an arm being flung around his shoulder.

“You finally found a girl you like, nephew?” he slurred. “We should put the both of you under the canopy get you wed now, while there’s still time. It’s bad luck if you’re not married by thirty.”

“I’m already thirty.” Jesus glared, pulling his arm away.

His uncle laughed. “Exactly why we must make haste.” The man stumbled away, still laughing.

Jesus rolled his eyes, darting out of the door and over to a grove of olive trees.

Sitting under one of the olive trees was Miriamne. She looked at him and chuckled, “You’re relentless, aren’t you?”

“What?” Jesus blinked. He shook his head and sighed. “No. I was just trying to get away from—”

“— endless, well-intentioned, but still incredibly insulting questions like ‘Why haven’t you gone under the canopy yet?’” she asked.

Jesus bit back a smile. “You too?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “Though in my case, it’s ‘Why didn’t you get under the canopy while you still had the chance?’” After a long pause, she said, “So, why are you, a firstborn son with a trade, unmarried?”

Jesus shrugged and sat down next to her. “I guess I haven’t found the right companion yet.

“Were you ever close?”

Jesus was quiet for a long moment before he nodded. “Before my father died, he arranged a marriage for me with the daughter of a stonemason from Sepphoris, but I broke it off.”

“Why?”

“Abba died,” Jesus said. “Suddenly I had to care for seven younger siblings and a grieving mother who was with child. I had too many mouths to feed as it was to worry about adding a wife and however many more would come along.”

“Did you care for her?” she asked.

Jesus shrugged. “I barely knew her.”

Miriamne nodded. “Most of your siblings are now married themselves. You still didn’t want to get married?”
Jesus paused. “That’s not the life I’m meant to have.”

“Why do you say that?” Miriamne asked.

Jesus ignored her question, deflecting it. “What about you? Why aren’t you married?”

“Well, like you, I was betrothed once but—” Miriamne took a deep breath. “Hashem didn’t want me to get married.” Her voice turned sad. She didn’t say anything more.

“I’m sorry.” Jesus lowered his eyes. “I shouldn’t have asked. That’s none my business.”

“No. It’s alright.” She shook her head. Clearing her throat. “I can’t get married. I’m not a suitable bride for anyone.”

“I find that very difficult to believe,” Jesus said. “You’d make some man very happy.”

“Thank you.” A sad smile spread across her mouth. “But I’m ill. Very ill.”

“What’s wrong?” Jesus asked, furrowing his brow in concern. He watched her carefully. It was then that he noticed the slight shake of her hands and the various signs of trauma her body bore, her right hand scarred by burn marks, a scar on her brow, each one a different age.

Miriamne opened her mouth to speak, but before she could reply, Mary burst into the garden, her face plastered with worry.

Jesus stood up and walked over to his mother. “Ima, what’s wrong?”

“We ran out of wine,” Mary whispered.

“What do you mean we ran out?” Jesus scrunched his brow. “There was enough for sixty guests.”

Mary shook her head. “It’s gone.” Tears formed in her eyes. “Dinah will be humiliated.”

“Don’t worry Ima. Go back to the guests.” Jesus nodded reassuringly. “I’ll figure something out.”

Mary pressed her hands to his cheeks. She was just about to walk away when she glanced over at Miriamne. “Shalom,” she called out, wiping her eyes. “I am Jesus’ mother.”

Miriamne stood up and walked over to them. “I am Miriamne, daughter of Elias,” she replied.

Mary glanced between the two of them, the ghost of a smile upon her lips. With that, she left.

Jesus sighed, running his hand over his eyes.

“Is… everything alright?” Miriamne asked. “Your Ima looked rather upset a moment ago.”

Jesus sighed. “We ran out of wine, and the wedding isn't even over yet.”

Miriamne paused. “So,” she looked at him. “What are we going to do?”

Jesus glanced at her. “You don’t have to do anything. This is my responsibility.”

“No.” Miriamne shook her head. “I want to help.”

“Alright.” Jesus hesitated for just a moment, watching her. “Can you help me carry the wine?”

Jesus didn’t respond. He led her out of the garden, heading to the storage room of Dinah’s new home.

James was already there, pacing across the room. His face was etched with worry. He was about to speak when his gaze locked on Miriamne. “Who’s this?” he cocked an eyebrow at his brother.

Jesus cleared his throat awkwardly. “Miriamne of Magdala.” His cheeks flushed.

James nodded in understanding. He turned his gaze over to Jesus. “So, what are we going to do?” he asked, concerned. “We can’t afford to buy more.”

Jesus shook his head. He took a deep breath. “We won’t have to.” Jesus pointed into the corner of the room where there were six large clay vats, filled to the brim with water. “I collected that this morning.”

James glanced over at the vats. “But that’s water, Jesus,” he said, as if explaining something difficult to a small child.

“Yes,” Jesus said. He shrugged. “For now.”

James cocked an eyebrow. “What are you talking about?”

Jesus didn’t respond, he just walked over to the vats. His eyes slipped shut as he placed his hand against the side of one of them. Heat crackled under his skin, working its way down his arm, into his fingertips, and soaking into the clay. He opened his eyes and pulled his hand away. He gestured towards the jar for James to inspect. Reluctantly, James and Miriamne stepped forward and peered into the jug.

James froze. His eyes widened.

Miriamne gasped. “You just—” she asked, her voice soft with wonder.

“I did.” Jesus nodded.


“You could say so. Yes.” Jesus said. “But my family hasn’t exactly taken a liking to it.”

Miriamne looked at Jesus with understanding. She nodded.

With that, Jesus walked over to each of the other five vats, touching them with his hand.

When he was done, James walked over to him. “Jesus, if you could do this, why did you did you buy from the merchant in the first place?”

Jesus shot James a glare. “James, why don’t you enlist the help of our brothers and have them gather
up the empty jugs from the tables.” He turned to Miriamne, “Could you help me gather up some of the jugs in here? We’ll fill them and bring them out to the wedding table.”

A moment later, Mary rushed into the room. “What are you all doing? We need to find some wine.”

“It’s alright Ima,” Jesus said, “I found the rest. I ordered these this morning.” He gestured to the large vats of wine between them. “I simply forgot to lay them out for the guests.” His gut twisted at the lie, unable to meet his mother’s eye.

“It was right here the whole time,” James added.

“I was sure I looked in….” Mary looked at the two of them for a second, studying them briefly before she looked around the room. “And you’re sure it was here the entire time?”

Just as Mary looked as though she was going to consider this, Joses stepped into the room. “Ima—”

James quickly interrupted him. “—Joses, why don’t you help me gather up some of the—?”

“—It was Jesus, Ima,” Joses blurted out, determined to speak. “He turned the water into wine. I saw him.” His voice trembled.

Mary stiffened. “No.” She stared at Jesus, her eyes wide with shock. “How could you do this?” She quickly turned, running outside into the walled courtyard.

With a deep sigh, Jesus followed her. He found her standing perfectly still, her eyes filled with tears.

“First you followed John around the desert, and then you started causing scenes in the synagogue.” She sobbed. “I thought it couldn’t get worse than that, but now this?”

Jesus shook his head. “Ima, you don’t understand.”

“No! You don’t understand,” she snapped. “I’ve dreaded this the day from the moment I felt you move within me.” Her voice shook. “When the archangel Gabriel spoke to me and told me what you were. Who you are.”

“There’s nothing I can do about that, Ima,” Jesus sighed. “I didn’t choose this.”

“I know that. And I know what sort of fate awaits you.”

James joined them outside.

Mary shifted her gaze over to him. “And I know James will follow you,” she said, “He’s been tugging on the bottom of your tunic since before he could walk.” Mary shook her head. “I won’t see my sons killed. But I have no choice. You’re going to do what you must do.” She looked pointedly at both of them. “There is nothing I can do to stop you.”

“Ima—” James began.

“—No,” Mary cut him off, shaking her head. “Just,” she paused. “Just go. The both of you.”

Jesus lowered his eyes. Slowly he walked over to Mary and wrapped his arms around her shoulders. She squeezed him back briefly before she pulled away, cupping his face in her hands. Without a word she let go and did the same to James before she went back inside the house.

Silence fell between the brothers for a moment before James cleared his throat. “Well,” He looked over at Jesus. “It looks like I’m coming with you after all.”
Jesus didn’t respond. He just took a deep breath. “Let’s go back to the inn. If we leave in the morning, we’ll be in Capernaum by nightfall.”

James nodded.

Just then Miriamne walked out. She walked over to them slowly, her gaze locked on Jesus. “If you’re ever preaching in Magdala and you need a place to stay, my father has a very large house. He’ll give you shelter.”

“Are you sure about that?” Jesus asked.

“Yes,” Miriamne said. “Because I’ll make sure he does.”

A sad smile quirked at the side of Jesus’ mouth. “Thank you.”

With that, Jesus and James walked away from the house. They made their way to the small inn that their family was staying in during the wedding. Instead of staying the night, they just grabbed their bags and left, making their way east to the Sea Galilee.

They reached Capernaum just before daybreak.

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Two years Later. August, 28 A.D.

Nazareth, Roman Controlled Galilee.

“I’ll ask you again,” Castiel growled, his voice filling the stable while he paced inside it, his gaze focused on the demon tied to one of the stall gates. “What are you doing here?”

Three more demons lay in the far corner of the stable, another two out in the field, their eyes vacant pits of charred flesh.

“Like I told you before, you daft heap of bird sinew, we didn’t come here to rip the family of The Nazarene to shreds,” the demon spat. He glanced up at the Enochian devil’s trap painted on the ceiling. “Though I’m certainly changing my mind on that.”

“If you didn’t come here for that, what are you doing in this village?” Castiel narrowed his eyes.

“We were looking for someone special. Very special,” the demon hissed. “Sadly, he’s not here.”

“Who?”

“The one who will to bring us Salvation.” The demon chuckled. “They’re going cast all of you down from your clouds and smite you, your Father and his bastard Son.”

“Be rid of him, Castiel,” Anna called out to him while she stood at the stable door, cleaning her angel blade on the hem of her vessel’s veil. Contempt filled her voice. “We don’t have time for the lies of demons.”

Castiel nodded. He walked over to the demon, pulling his sword from his sleeve and hovering it
above the demon's chest. Just before he thirsted it down, the demon let out a hearty laugh.

“The Nazarene is a weak man. Almost as weak as the man who broke the first seal.”

Castiel stopped his blade.

“He won’t have the stomach to do what you will ask of him.” The demon smirked. “And because of that, you will lose.”

“That’s enough out of you!” Anna shouted. She walked over to the demon. In a swift motion, Anna plunged her sword into the side of the demon’s torso. His body lit up and convulsed before going limp against the post. Pulling the blade out, she looked at Castiel. “I want you to go and find Balthazar. Make sure he takes on another vessel. I don’t care how much he enjoys roasted swine, we’re supposed to be inconspicuous. Possessing a Roman Legionnaire in Galilee is the exact opposite of that.”

Slowly Castiel nodded.

With that Anna turned and left the stable.

Castiel stared at the demon’s corpse for a moment before he followed Anna. “What was that demon talking about? What won’t Jesus have the stomach for?” he asked.

Anna shook her head. “Don’t pay attention to him, Castiel. Demons lie,” she said matter-of-factly. “They’ll lie about Jesus even more so.”

Castiel squinted at her. “What are we going to be asking of him, Anna?” Castiel asked again, this time his voice was demanding.

Anna stopped in her tracks. She paused briefly before she turned to Castiel. “For now, nothing. He’s to do as he’s done for the last two years. Preaching, healing, exorcizing demons, and spending his days with a bunch of surly fishermen.” Anna paused. “But two seals have already been broken and the next full moon hasn’t even come.”

“And if we can’t prevent the breaking of the rest the seals and Lucifer does rise?” Castiel cocked an eyebrow.

“Jesus will have to fight him.”

Castiel’s eyes grew wide. “But that could bring the destruction of the world.” He shook his head. “We can’t ask that of him.”

“I know,” Anna said. “But he doesn’t have a choice. Jesus needs to fight Lucifer.”

A pit grew in Castiel’s stomach. “What if he can’t?”

“He will stop Lucifer. He’ll have the help of the righteous man who started this whole mess in the first place, Judas of Kerioth.” She took a deep breath. “I’ve tasked our sister Asariel with retrieving him from Gehenna and giving him his mission.”

Castiel squinted his eyes. “And how exactly will he help Jesus?”

Anna paused for a moment before she walked back over to Castiel. “Please, Castiel. I know Jesus is your charge and I know that you care for him, but you must do only has your mission commands. Don’t interfere.”
Anna disappeared. Castiel stood out in the field for a moment before he looked back at the stable. Doubt swirled in the pit of his stomach.

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*September, 28 A.D.*

*Gerasa, Roman Controlled Decapolis.*

Jesus and the Apostles had been traveling on the road to Gerasa, a mostly pagan city with a small Jewish population, when they came across a cemetery located on the side of the road, a short walk beyond the city gates. They had just passed the first sarcophagi when they heard a growl, low and guttural, coming from within, stopping them dead in their tracks.

It was then that Jesus noticed the smell of rotten eggs. He quickly made his way out from the group, walking in front of them. “You’re not going to need that.” He said gesturing to the knife Peter had pulled out. “All of you, wait here,” he ordered before walked into the cemetery.

All of them did as they were told. All except for James who followed him.

Near the cemetery’s edge, Jesus found a man wearing a bloodstained tunic. He was bound by iron chains and ropes to the innermost sarcophagus, the sides of it painted haphazardly with eyes and pentacles. Steam rose from his skin that touched the manacles around his wrists and ankles.

When Jesus got closer, the man’s eyes turned black.

“Well,” he spat, “if it isn’t the bastard from Nazareth, here in the flesh.”

Jesus' eyes narrowed as he stared into the man’s face. A horde of grotesque, demonic faces reflected back through it. “There are quite a few of you in there,” he said conversationally. In reality, there were so many Jesus couldn’t even count them.

“We call ourselves Legion,” the demons chuckled sarcastically. “Not that knowing that will help you much. Not unless you know each and every one of our names.”

Jesus shook his head. “I don’t need to know your names to exorcise you.”

“Maybe not,” the demons chuckled. “But that doesn’t change the fact that each and every one of us want nothing more than to rip those lovely green eyes right out of your skull.”

“Is that supposed to frighten me?” Jesus scoffed.

“It should, because that’s not a threat, Son of David. It’s a promise.” His gaze shifted briefly to James before turning back to Jesus. He smirked. “He’s coming soon.”

“Who?” James asked, unable to keep quiet any longer.

“Our Father.” The demons hissed. “He’s going to take what rightfully belongs to him, what belongs to us. And there’s nothing you or your feathered companions can do to stop him.” They let out a hearty chuckle.

The heat beneath Jesus' skin began to swirl like a sandstorm. His hands clenched into fists. “Unclean
spirits,” he yelled, his voice trembling with rage. “Leave him.”

Smoke billowed from the man’s mouth, falling to the ground in a never-ending wave and filling the air with the rotten stench of sulfur. When the smoke finally cleared, the man the demons left behind collapsed against the sarcophagus with a thud, utterly still.

Jesus walked over to him and gently placed his hand on top of his head. The man let out a loud gasp, his eyes snapping open. “Wh-who are you?” he asked, his words shaking.

Jesus shook his head. “Don’t worry about that. Are you alright?”

The man nodded slowly.

Jesus turned to James, “Grab Peter’s knife so we can cut the ropes from him.”

James nodded and ran off, retrieving the knife.

After cutting the ropes, Jesus and James walked the man back to the road were the Apostles were still waiting. They gave the man some food and water, before taking him to the city where they searched out a blacksmith to remove the chains. They had barely entered the city gates when the inhabitants crowded around them, demanding that they leave.

Every magician, priestess, and hunter in the city had tried and failed to remove the demons. Anyone with the power to remove them, they feared, was likely a demon themselves. Even after Jesus had them sprinkle him with salt and touch him with iron, they refused him and the Apostles access into the city.

That night they made camp inside a small grove of acacia trees.

Jesus made sure to carve the Seal of Solomon into each of the tree trunks. By the time he made it back to camp, most the Apostles were asleep.

James was sitting next to the fire, staring into the flames. He smiled tightly in greeting when Jesus joined him, and scooted over on the fallen log to allow Jesus to sit. “How many demons were in that man?” he asked, poking the fire with a stick to turn one of the logs over. The flames rose up, their heat blowing across Jesus' face as the wind shifted.

“At least fifty,” Jesus said, sitting down next to him. “Likely more.” He warmed his hands.

“Have you ever seen anything like that?”

Jesus shook his head. “No.”

“What did the demons mean by ‘Their Father’?” James paused for a second. “Do you think they were talking about Samael, The Adversary?”

“Samael is an angel,” Jesus stated. “He tested Job on Hashem’s behalf. He is an adversary only to Humanity insofar that he tests our faith.”

“Some believe that he is a fallen angel, cast down from Heaven because of his hatred for Humanity,” James said. “That he twisted the spirit of Cain into a demon as a slight against both Man and Hashem.”

“Where did you hear that?” Jesus asked, cocking an eyebrow.

James did not quite meet his eyes when he shrugged. “I’m not sure,” he replied.
Jesus shook his head. “Cain became a demon because he was jealous of his brother and slew him. Demons are the product of evil inclinations. They are souls that have been corrupted by wickedness,” he paused. “And they deceive.”

“Yes.” James nodded. “But on occasion, they speak the truth, if not for any reason other than to confuse.”

Jesus grew quiet. He reached over and grabbed a cloak, throwing it at James. “Get some sleep. I’ll take the watch.”

James wrapped it around himself and lay down. He was asleep within moments.

Jesus stayed awake, watching the fire. When the fire burned low, he rose to gather more wood. He wandered around to the surrounding trees and bushes, breaking off various branches. He was about to crack one of the bigger sticks over his knee when he heard the sound of wings, followed by familiar steps making their way through the corpse of trees. “Hello, Castiel,” he said. He turned to face the angel while he cracked another stick, the sound echoing through the night air.

“It’s late,” Castiel murmured, walking over to him. “Shouldn’t you be sleeping?”

Jesus shrugged, breaking another stick. “I couldn’t sleep. And besides, someone needs to stoke the fire.”

Castiel watched him carefully. “Something is troubling you.”

Jesus paused for a long moment. “In every town I’ve visited, I’ve exorcized no more than one, maybe two demons. In the last fortnight that number has gone up to half a dozen. Today, I pulled out at least fifty from a single man.” He looked at Castiel. “What’s going on?

Castiel’s brow furrowed. “You’ll learn of it soon enough.”

“Tell me,” Jesus demanded.

“I can’t,” Castiel replied. He shook his head. “The time isn’t—”

“—Now,” Jesus interrupted. He narrowed his eyes. “Whatever it is, I need to know. Now.”

Castiel paused, watching him. “The birthing pains have started.”

“The birthing pains of what?” Jesus blinked.

“What the Essenes call, ‘The War of the Sons of Light Against the Sons of Darkness.’” Castiel’s voice was low and ominous.

“The Apocalypse?”

“Yes,” Castiel said bluntly. “It’s not here yet, but it will be soon. That’s why you’re seeing more demons on Earth. They’re amassing an army.” Castiel paused. “For The Destroyer.”

Jesus froze. “Samael.”

Castiel nodded. “Yes. Though his true name is Lucifer. We have to prevent his return. If he comes, all of Gehenna comes with him.” He looked at Jesus. “And if he does come, you are the only one who can destroy him.”

Jesus swallowed. “How?”
“I’m not sure,” Castiel sighed. “What I do know for certain is that our fate rests with you.”

Jesus shook his head. “First, I was to be the messiah of my people,” he let out a wearily breath. “Now I’m supposed to save the world?”

“You’ll have help,” Castiel replied.

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_October, 28 A.D._

_Tiberias, Roman Controlled Galilee._

Shouting buzzed through Jesus’s ears, the sound of his disciples and some of the local me yelling at each other. He could still hear them even as he stood in the alleyway behind the synagogue. When he had left a few moments before to get some fresh air it had been a discussion about one of Jesus’s teachings, now it was an argument. An argument he almost didn’t care about.

A few short months ago he would have gladly debated them, but now such arguments seemed almost trivial. Seals were breaking. Sixty stood between the world and Lucifer rising. From the Apocalypse.

Taking a deep breath, Jesus turned to face the Sea of Galilee. Cool, calm, and peaceful. He glanced briefly back at the synagogue before he started to make his way down the alleyway.

Jesus only made it a few steps before two men came out from behind the back wall of the synagogue, walking over to him slowly. They both wore dark-colored tunics and rusty brown cloaks. One wore a small silver mezuzah around his neck; the other wore a silver hamsas pendant with blue glass beads with eyes inside of them.

He had the seen the men twice that day. Once when he healed a blind girl and again when he pulled a demon from a young man. Unlike most of the people who watched Jesus perform miracles, these two men seemed to be watching him more than the acts themselves. Whispering and arguing amongst each other.

The man wearing the silver hamsa pendant walked up to him, his steps slow, almost reluctant. “You’re Jesus bar Joseph of Nazareth, aren’t you?” The man asked, his accent Judean rather than the Galilean Jesus was used to hearing.

Men who had traveled all that way had to be here for a good reason. Because of their dark clothes and the knives at their belts, at first, Jesus thought that they might be assassins, but he quickly abandoned that idea. If they were, Jesus would have been dead already.

Jesus watched him carefully for a second. Slowly, he nodded. “I am. Who might you be?”

“My name is Judas of Kerioth.” Judas turned briefly and pointed at the other man wearing the mezuzah, exposing a long, thin scar across the palm of his right hand. “This is my cousin. He’s known as Simon the Zealot.”

Jesus shifted his eyes between the two of them. He then glanced down at the dagger at Judas’ belt.
Its blade was made of silver, etched in old Hebrew. Even though it was clearly old, it was razor sharp.

“You’re demon hunters, aren’t you?” Jesus asked.

Hunters were small in number and tended to live in seclusion, but they were well known. King Solomon himself had been one. Mothers would get amulets from them to protect their infants from Lilith and fathers, before building a home would get engraved bowls and bury them under the foundation of their houses to ward off demons. Some hunters were rumored to be able to tap into great angelic and mystical powers.

Judas nodded. “Our clan heard tales of your miracles. You heal the sick with a touch and exorcise demons without knowing their names, all without the aid of sorcery. Your power is a gift from Hashem.”

Simon took a couple steps forward, standing next to Judas. “Some have claimed that you’re a prophet and, possibly, even the Messiah.”

“We needed to know if the rumors—all of the rumors—were true and since they are,” Judas paused. “We—I— need to follow you. Help you.”

“Well,” Jesus took a deep breath. “Having hunters around would certainly be useful during exorcisms.”

“I’m not talking about exorcisms,” Judas said bluntly, shaking his head. “I’m talking of the Apocalypse. The rise of Satan and the war that will come along with it.”

Jesus froze. “You know of that?”

“I do.”

“How?”

“One of Hashem’s angels told me of it.” Judas didn’t say anymore.

“Judas was freed from the bondage of Sheol by that angel. Resurrected,” Simon declared. “He’s a walking miracle.”

Briefly, Judas shot Simon a look. “Her name is Asariel. I summoned her a fortnight ago. She told me that I’m a—” He paused, trying to force the word from his mouth. “‘Righteous one.’” Slowly, he turned his gaze back to Jesus. “I’m supposed to find the Messiah and help him stop the apocalypse. She didn’t tell me how I would do it, just that I was the only one who could help him.”

Jesus grew quiet. After a moment, he nodded. “Join me and Apostles for supper tonight.”

Jesus and the Apostles were seated around a table in a small second-floor inn room, a spread of figs, hummus, and flatbread before them. Joining them at the table were Simon and Judas.

“So, my brother told us that you’re demon hunters. Do you hunt anything else?” James asked looking at both of them.
Judas didn’t say anything. He just took a sip of his wine.


“And how do you kill them?” James asked.

“That depends. Shapeshifters and Lycans you have to stab in the heart with a silver blade. Estries you behead with a sword.” Simon paused. “Dybbuks you can fend off with a sling and rocks of salt or a bow with arrows hewn from acacia wood, but if you truly want to kill them you have to salt and burn the bodies of the deceased that the dybbuk came from. We do that to every abomination we kill.”

“You desecrate the bodies?” A note of disgust flooded James’ voice.

“It’s the only way to insure that they don’t return.” Simon shrugged. “But when we bury our own fallen, we don’t burn them on pyres like the pagan hunters do. We bury their bodies inside of tombs. We just drape a tallit over the burial wrappings and wash the entrance of the tomb with salt water. An easy feat since we live near the Dead Sea.” He took a sip of his wine. “That’s one of the many ways we’re different from pagan hunters.”

“How else are you different?”

“Well.” Simon grinned. “We also kill gods.”

One of the Apostles, Thomas looked at Simon and scoffed. “‘Gods’? You mean pagan fairytales?”

“What?” Thomas shrugged. He looked around the table. “We all know there is only one god.”

“There’s one true god,” Simon stated. “The god of our ancestors. Hashem. But there are other gods. Monsters that require human sacrifice.” He gestured over to Judas. “We would know. Our clan’s ancestors helped Moses and Aaron kill the gods of Egypt, the Prophet Elijah kill Ba’al and the Maccabees kill Zeus after Antiochus the Wicked forced his worship in The Temple.”

“Not permanently,” Judas added, taking a sip of his wine. “One of our cousins living in Rome tried to kill ‘Divine Julius’— a god the Romans created out of one of their emperors.” He paused. “He was already dead when they nailed his body to a tree just outside of Rome.” He drummed his fingers on the table. “As long as the pagan gods have worshippers and sacrifices, they have power and empires that worship them, likewise, have power.”

“Which is why we need to hunt them, it’s our duty as Hashem’s Chosen People.” Simon looked over to Jesus. “We need to be a light to The Nations.”

“Chosen,” Judas scoffed. “Between the Egyptians enslaving us, the Babylonians exiling us, the Greeks and now the Romans oppressing us, it seems more like we’re cursed.”

Without saying another word, Judas stood from his cushion and walked out of the room, shutting the door behind him.

Jesus watched Judas leave. After a moment he stood from the table and followed him. Leaving the room, he found Judas sitting on the ledge of the second-floor walkway, his feet dangling over the side and his back against one of the support arches, a goatskin filled with wine in hand.
He stood there for a moment until he said quietly. “Resurrection hasn’t been an easy thing for you, has it?”

“No.” Judas took a pull from the goatskin. “There’s so much suffering and pain. Not just among our people, but out in the world. And evil. Real evil. I’ve seen so much of it.” Judas paused. “I used to doubt if Hashem was even there. I didn’t know and I was fine with that because at least then I didn’t have to wonder why He allowed such things. Now I can’t doubt.” He looked over at Jesus. “I’m sure, being the Messiah; you must think that horrible of me to say.”

“No,” Jesus shook his head. “I have my own doubts and they grow larger with each passing day.” He walked over to the ledge and sat down next to Judas. “In the two years since I was Chosen, Hashem has never spoken to me. Not once.” He looked down at his right hand. Once caked thick in calluses; it had long since been smoothed. “I can feel Him, but there is only silence. That silence is the worst part.”

“What about your mission?” Judas asked. “Do you doubt that?” He handed the wine skin over to Jesus.

“No. I haven’t. And I won’t,” Jesus said bluntly. “That enrages them. They say to me, ‘You must obey us, son of Joseph.’” Jesus paused. “But I’m not a puppet. None of us are. We have a choice.” He looked up at the night sky. “We were made in His image and because of that, we’re special among all of Creation.”

“That’s true, but you do think any of the angels understand that?”

Jesus nodded. “One of them does.”

April, 29 A.D.

Jerusalem, Roman Occupied Judea.

When the bright white light dissipated, Castiel found himself lying on the ground of an alleyway strewn with pieces of shattered pottery. He stood up slowly while he brushed away the shards from his vessel’s tunic, feeling his grace root deep within the molecules and atoms of the body. The flesh trembled ever so slightly, fighting to contain him.

The vessel Castiel was wearing was a man named Simon, from the town of Cyrene. He was far from perfect, a second or third cousin of his first vessel, and because of that he was weak, but Castiel hadn’t had a choice. Zachariah had cloaked his first vessel and his family, and Castiel didn’t have the time to go searching for them, let alone convince them to accept his possession.

Simon was the most suitable vessel he could find, and luckily, he was pious man and who gave his consent almost instantly.
Once his grace had settled, Castiel stripped off his clothes and picked up a shard of broken pottery from the ground. He carved a few cloaking sigils into his vessel’s stomach, just above the loincloth, before quickly dressing again and leaving the alleyway.

He spent the rest of the night trying to locate the Apostles, but to no avail. When the sun began to rise, he made his way in the direction of the Antonia Fortress, where the Roman Prefect and garrison in charge of watching over the city was stationed.

If Jesus was being kept anywhere, it would be there.

Castiel was almost at the fortress when he saw Judas walking away from it. He moved uneasily, his steps slow and staggered, down the road, with a goatskin in hand. The coin purse and Zachariah were long gone. When he got close enough to Castiel, he stopped dead in his tracks, squinting at him. “Castiel?”

Castiel didn’t reply.

“No. It’s you,” Judas said sarcastically as he stepped closer to him. “I—I can see your halo.”

“Please,” Castiel hissed, glancing around the street. “You have to be quiet.”

“Why?” Judas scoffed. “Jesus is as good as dead now. If the scourging didn’t kill him, the tree certainly will.” His eyes glossed over. He took a long gulp from the goatskin, wiping the wine from his chin. “And I’m the one to thank for it.”

“Judas—”

“—I tried to give the purse back but Naomi wouldn’t take it. Michael wouldn’t take it, so I tossed the cursed thing,” Judas hissed. “Tell me Castiel, what sort of fate befalls the man who betrayed the Messiah?”

“You didn’t betray him, Judas,” Castiel whispered.

“No. I was just a ‘servant of Heaven’.” Judas shook his head, glaring. “Asariel should have left me in Gehenna. I had enough blood on my hands. All you angels did was cake them with more. All you did was damn me more.”

With that, Judas walked away. Castiel watched him until he melted into the crowd. When Judas disappeared, Castiel made his way to the fortress.

As he got closer, Castiel could tell from the small crowd of onlookers that had started to move and disperse along the street that the procession had already begun. He listened for the muffled sound of shouts in Latin and followed them down a side street until he came upon the crucifixion procession. Castiel pushed himself through to the front of the crowd.

Then he saw Jesus.

He had fallen, his knees digging into the cobbled streets with a crossbeam tied to his arms. Were it not for his soul, Castiel would not have even been able to recognize him. His hair was matted and bloody; a crown of thorns circled his temple. His face was covered in bruises and cuts, the back of his tan tunic had been dyed red with blood.

Draped over his shoulders was a scarlet robe that was ripped and moth-eaten. Just as he forced himself to his feet, he stumbled over a loose rock and fell back to the ground, the weight of the crossbeam slamming his face into the dirt with a thud and a whimper of pain he couldn’t hold back.
Castiel watched him as he staggered to his feet, barely regaining his balance before he fell yet again. Two Roman soldiers whipped and kicked him, taunting him as they did so.

A third soldier ran over and shoved the other two away, berating them briefly before turning his gaze to Castiel. He looked at him for a moment before calling out. “You!” he yelled in Aramaic. “You get over there and help him carry that.” He walked over to Castiel and grabbed him by his arm. “At the rate he’s going, he’ll be dead before he gets to the damned hill,” Balthazar hissed.

“Thank you, brother,” Castiel whispered.

“Never mind that. I’m about as appalled by this as you are,” Balthazar whispered, pulling Castiel into the street. He gestured to an officer sitting atop a horse. “So is Anna.”

Castiel glanced up at the Roman officer she was possessing.

She nodded at him solemnly, gesturing at them to move.

Balthazar quickly untied the ropes from Jesus’ arms and placed the crossbeam on Castiel’s shoulders. Jesus groaned loudly as his hands fell limp to his sides. Slowly, he looked up at Castiel, squinting through the blood, “Castiel?” he rasped.

Castiel didn’t reply. He just grabbed Jesus’ hand pulled him up off the ground.

Once Jesus was upright, Castiel wrapped his arm tightly around his waist and slowly they began to trudge down the street. He carried the majority of the weight, allowing Jesus to regain his breath.

After a few steps, Castiel glanced at Jesus. “I could heal you,” Castiel said quietly. “Ease the pain at least.”

“No,” Jesus croaked. “I chose this pain. I have to endure it.”

“You didn’t choose this,” Castiel hissed. “You didn’t choose anything.”

“I’m keeping the world and my family safe,” Jesus said bluntly. “This might be the only way I can do that, but it’s still my choice.” He paused. “There’s always a choice, Castiel. We—we’re not puppets.”

“Yes,” Castiel pursed his lips. “So you’ve told me.”

Jesus’ head bobbed to the side of the crowd, scanning it briefly. “I saw my brother in the crowd. He brought Ima and Miriamne here. If you want to help me, Castiel, you’ll make sure they’re safe.”

Castiel nodded.

Hours passed before they made it out of the city gates.

Castiel set his eyes on Golgotha, a small hill lined with posts on top of it. The two other men that had been sentenced were already getting nailed to their crosses. He could hear their screams in the distance.

When they got up to the top of the hill, Castiel tossed the crossbeam from his shoulders as he eased Jesus down into the dirt. He glanced around at the hillside before crouched down in front of Jesus. “Michael’s men aren’t here. I’ll stay with you. So you’re not alone.”

“No. Y-you should go.” Jesus shook his head, his body half slumped. “You’re in enough trouble as it is.”
“I can’t do that. I won’t leave you here!” Castiel paused. “I can’t say farewell to you. Not like this.”

Jesus looked up at him, his eyes staring at him with certainty. “We’ll see each other again. You know that.”

Castiel read his mind then, and briefly saw a face. One he didn’t know. A strange face with features he had never seen, but with those same green eyes. The face had a strange name in a language that didn’t exist yet, but it was a name Castiel had always known, one that was seared within Castiel’s foundation as much as Jesus’. The Soul would dwell within that man, just as it done in many others, but that man would be as Jesus was. He too would be The Son.

Almost as quickly as the vision appeared, it was gone again.

“Yes,” Castiel swallowed. “But it won’t be you.”

Jesus did not speak for some time. “No. he won’t be.” He smiled sadly. “That’s a good thing. He’ll be a stronger man than I.”

“Jesus—”

“Please Castiel. Just,” Jesus’ voice trembled. “Go. I can’t bear for you to witness this. Get my wife to safety. Get my family to safety. Do that for me.”

Reluctantly, Castiel nodded. Before he turned to walk away, he placed his hand firmly on Jesus’ left shoulder. “I will see you again,” he murmured. Grace flashed throughout his hand, soaking into Jesus’s tunic and down into his tender skin. Even though it left a mark behind, Jesus was too bruised and bloody for anyone to notice it.

Castiel had just begun to make his way down the hill when he saw Mary and James walking up the hill, Miriamne trailing close behind, her heavy stomach making the trek somewhat more difficult for her.

Castiel stopped. Slowly, he looked at James. “Hello, James,” he said, his voice echoing guilt and sadness.

James froze dead in his tracks. He looked him up and down. “Castiel?” His voice cracked.

Castiel nodded.

James narrowed his eyes. He grabbed Castiel by his tunic. “You coward! Why didn’t you stop this!?” he yelled. His hazel eyes filled with tears. “You’re supposed to be protecting Jesus! Why didn’t you fight them off?”

“I tried!” Castiel retorted, pulling free from James’ grasp. “I can’t stop this!”

“Can’t or won’t?”

Castiel glared at him. “This is bigger than the two of you, James. You know that.”

“Don’t tell me that.” James spat, tears streaming down his cheeks. “I’m the reason he’s doing this.”

Castiel didn’t respond. He looked over to Mary and Miriamne. “You should go back to the city. It’s not safe for any of you here, especially Miriamne. In her condition—”

“No,” James said bluntly, wiping the tears away. “If my brother is going to die, he’s going to die with his family near him.” He glared. “He’s not going to die alone with strangers mocking him.”
The three of them continued up the hill. They only got a couple steps before Castiel turned around and said softly. “I’m sorry.”

James stopped and looked back at him. “I’m sure you are.”

Castiel stood there, just below the crest of the hill, listening until he heard Mary begin to weep. After that, he left. He was at the base of the hill when he heard Jesus’ first blood-curdling scream.

It was the first scream of many. Some took the form of groans. Others took the form prayers. Hours passed before the final one left his mouth.

Death himself, riding a white stallion and dressed in a long black toga, came to reap Jesus. Soon after, the ground quaked. The dead rose and walked out of their tombs and ossuaries. The sky began to bleed.

While Simon the Zealot and the rest of Judas’ hunter clan worked tirelessly to slay the risen dead, Judas himself was nowhere to be found. As night fell, Castiel found his body swinging from an olive tree not far from Golgotha, the front of his tunic soaked in wine and bile. Castiel cut Judas down and placed his body back inside the cave near the Dead Sea he had originally been buried in.

He burned the noose.

When he finally returned to the city, Jesus’ body had been taken down from the cross and placed inside a tomb with little more than a quick washing and a fine linen sheet covering him. The sun had set, and with it came the Sabbath. During the night, Castiel sat inside the tomb, watching the pale body cool and stiffen.

Come daybreak, Castiel left the tomb, keeping watch among the trees and hills around it.

He assumed the body would remain there. Jesus was dead and his mission had died with him. The Soul had no further use for the body. With the Seals reset, the angels had no use for the body either, or so Castiel had thought. In the hours before the sun rose the day after the Sabbath, a high pitched buzzing sound filled the air and the tomb began to glow with a blinding light that dissipated almost as soon as it had appeared. Castiel ran into the tomb to find the inside of the limestone scorched black and soaked with angel grace. The body was gone. Disappeared, vanished.

That morning, Miriamne and James said that they had found the tomb empty and had seen Jesus risen with wounds in his wrists and ankles. They swore he wasn’t a ghost because they could see his wounds and touch him with iron. The morning after that, Apostles spoke of the same. That Jesus had, in fact, conquered not only Hell, but Death himself. Soon they started to claim that he was always supposed to conquer death and that, in fact, that he had always spoken of it.

But Jesus had never said such things. Not once.

Castiel was never sure which angel took the body or where they took it, just as he was never sure which angel planted visions and thoughts in the heads of the Apostles and Jesus’ family. Zachariah, Naomi, Michael or maybe some from his garrison who wanted Jesus’ mission to live on in a different form. He wasn’t given the chance to find out because as soon as the cloaking sigils he carved into his vessel healed over, he was pulled from Simon and taken back to Heaven.

Not long after, a war broke out, one that Castiel’s garrison, the one that had protected Jesus, lost. Some of his rank and file siblings were killed outright. Officers like he and Anna were spared, but recalibrated. Only one, Balthazar, managed to get away. Michael made a decree that no angel could take a vessel and the survivors of the rebellion were to be stationed on Earth, incorporeal and
invisible, watching and observing humanity without any way to help them.

But such a decree didn’t stop the angels from giving the Apostles more visions.

Castiel watched as they gave such visions to a man called Saul of Tarsus. They did so because he could write and speak Greek, was a Roman citizen and could travel around the empire and had no problem spreading his ideas among pagans. But most importantly, he never knew Jesus. The angels could fill his head with all manner of ideas that they could never do to men and women who had known him.

Once all of the Apostles and Jesus’ family had died, they skewed the visions and writings of men they made into prophets even further. The angels had them write Jesus’ mother as a perpetual virgin who never had other children and they turned Judas into a wicked man possessed by Lucifer himself. Sometimes, they had the authors write Jesus as a mystical fountain of secret knowledge, but the version of Jesus that stuck was the man who was God incarnate and who died for the sins of humanity. Something Jesus never truly was and never did.

At first, it made Castiel angry, but soon, none of it mattered to him. Under Naomi’s constant poking and prodding, Castiel began to forget. He forgot Jesus’ humanity. The way Jesus smiled and laughed around his third cup of wine. In time, Castiel even forgot the reason why Jesus had died. The real reason.

But there was one thing Castiel never forgot, even as the decades turned into centuries and centuries turned into millennia.

He never forgot those green eyes.

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September 18, 2008.

Hell.

Castiel knew exactly what he had to do. He had practiced it so many times since the Righteous Man entered Hell, he could recite his task by rote. He executed the tests runs Naomi set out for him perfectly, over and over, until Naomi was certain he was ready for his mission.

Castiel was to save The Righteous Man—The Messiah—from Perdition and reunite his battered and smoked caked soul with his flesh. After that, Castiel was to task him with his holy mission and guide him to become a Servant of Heaven. Even though he was tainted by Hell, Michael could still wear him. He was to do the same if and when he was Chosen. That was it. No more and no less.

Castiel knew that. He had practiced it a billion times since the soul had entered Hell. He was ready.

But when his feet touched down inside Alastair’s dungeon, something happened. He heard it. A voice. Desperate, anguished, guilt-ridden and weeping, it prayed—pleaded— for salvation.

“Somebody help me! Please! I can’t do this anymore…”

It was a voice Castiel knew, but he couldn’t remember who it belonged to. It was an echo, a foggy,
half-forgotten memory. For an instant, Castiel saw a hill topped with wooden posts. Three of the posts had horizontal beams attached to the top of them. He heard the voice again, this time rattling from the top of one of the posts. It rung out in a deep, rasping cry of pain in an old language he had almost forgotten, just before the memory slipped away.

He stopped, clutching his temples before he shook his head and moved on. He had to focus on his mission.

Castiel moved quickly through the halls of the dungeon, smiting demons and hellhounds in his wake, searching until he found The Righteous Man. Even among the smoke and sulfur, his soul still glowed, though some of the smoke had started to stick upon it like tar pitch.

He was kneeling in an empty cell, his arms were slick with thick black blood up to his elbows. More blood splattered his face and naked torso. A knife sat on the floor next to him. The soul had been flayed. Ripped and burned. The palms burned ice cold where wounds refused to heal. But there was something else on the soul. Scars. Scars that marked his side, wrists, ankles, back, and forehead. Old scars that healed over and faded lifetimes ago. They burned with almost indictable heat, like a cooled ember.

His left shoulder was a scar that burned slightly brighter than all the other scars. It was a vestige of angel grace. Castiel’s grace.

Startled, The Righteous Man looked up at him.

Green eyes stared back at Castiel. Green as an olive ripe on the vine.

At the sight of them, Castiel clutched his head. The last bit of Naomi’s programming faded away.

He remembered the eyes. He had always remembered them. He had forged them deep within the recesses of his mind, lest Naomi get her clutches on their memory and yank it away like she had so many memories before.

They were the same green eyes with flecks of honey gold hidden around the iris that had haunted him for two millennia. Green eyes that held sadness, compassion, and rage. Green eyes that Castiel remembered creasing with laughter. Eyes he had last seen bloodshot and glassed with tears and fatigue. Those same eyes were filled with terror and pain.

It was The Soul. It was Jesus bar Joseph. But it wasn’t Jesus. He bore a different face and figure. He was taller and his skin was pale and freckled, his hair a sandy brown.

He was different. He lacked faith, but what he lacked in faith, he made up for with a will as strong as iron. He was rough and angry, but despite all of that, there was great kindness and love within him.

Dean Winchester.

In one quick movement, Castiel grabbed him. He slammed his hand onto Dean’s shoulder, holding on to it with such force that his grace burned into deep into the flesh, searing it.

Dean cried out in pain and terror.

With the touch, his grace engulfed the whole of the cell in blinding white light. When it faded, Dean was alive, waking inside of a coffin, buried in a shallow grave. A circle of downed trees surrounded the grave that only a few milliseconds ago had been standing tall.

“Dean Winchester is saved!” Castiel bellowed, floating invisible, high above the grave.
This time, he was saved.

This time he had truly conquered death.

This time, Castiel would protect him.

Chapter End Notes

:: Shavuot, also called the Feast of Weeks and Pentecost, is a Jewish festival that commemorates God giving the Torah to Moses. It is one of Three Pilgrimage Festivals, along with Passover and Sukkot, when the ancient Jewish people were commanded to visit the Temple in Jerusalem. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, such requirements were no longer mandatory.

:: Hashem, meaning ‘The Name’, is one of the names for God in Judaism. In Judaism, God’s name is considered to be very powerful and is treated with the utmost respect. The four letter name of God (The Tetragrammaton) is never spoken out loud. The word “Adoni” meaning “The Lord” is used in both Jewish prayer and liturgy. Outside of a religious context, God is typically referred to as Hashem.

:: Though synagogues existed long before the destruction of the Temple, (especially in Jewish diaspora communities), their use for communal worship was not nearly as prevalent prior to the destruction of the Temple and subsequent expulsion of the Jewish people from Judea. Jesus visiting and preaching in synagogues, while not historically unlikely, is more a reflection of the times that the gospels were written in (post 70 CE) than the era in which he lived.

:: Judah of Gamala, also called Judah of Galilee, was a Jewish leader who led an armed resistance to the census of Quirinius in 6 CE (the same census mentioned in the Gospel of Luke). The revolt was crushed brutally by Rome. Along with Simon of Perea and Simon bar Kokhba, Judah is one of the better known Messiah claimants from the era of Roman occupation.

:: While in popular culture and in Christian tradition Mary Magdalene is often thought to have been a prostitute, in the actual text of the gospels this is not the case. The Gospel of Luke and Mark describe her as being a women whom Jesus cast out seven demons (one common theory for the demons being that they were a metaphor for seizures.) In the gospels of Mathew, Mark and John she witnesses both the crucifixion and the resurrection. In the Gnostic Gospel of Phillip, Mary is described as being Jesus’ ‘companion’ whom he would ‘kiss often on the mouth,’ the implication being that they were married.

:: The War of the Sons of Light Against the Sons of Darkness, also referred to as The War Scroll, is one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a wide range of Jewish religious documents found in the caves at Qumran near in the Dead Sea. Typically thought to be the product of the Essenes, the scroll contains an apocalyptic prophecy of a war between the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness. Dating of the document has ranged between the Second Century BCE and the First Century CE.

:: Though Lucifer and Hell have always existed in the Supernatural universe, anthropologically they are concepts that evolved over time. Lucifer, has some (though
not all) of his roots in the angel Samael who is referred to in various Jewish apocryphal texts as ‘HaSatan’ or ‘The Adversary’ and is said to have been cast down from Heaven by Michael. Likewise, Hell has its roots in the Jewish concept of Sheol, a realm of the dead were everyone – both righteous and unrighteous- went after death. A place similar to Hades in Greek mythology. Late second temple Judaism developed the concept of Gehenna, a section of Sheol were the wicked went after death to suffer. While I can have Castiel and other angels refer to Lucifer and Hell as Lucifer and Hell, having Jesus refer them as such would be anachronistic.

:: Divine Julius is part of the Imperial Cult that identified emperors as divinely sanctioned authorities of the Roman State. The two most noted for deification were Julius Caesar and Augustus. Temples were built for them across the empire. Augustus, as Julius Caesar's adopted son, was referred to a ‘Divi filius’ or ‘Son of the Divine One.’
February 25, 2009.

Breaux Bridge, Louisiana.

Sam picked aimlessly at the mushy blueberries seeping into his cold waffles. He wasn’t sure why he even ordered it. He hadn’t eaten in two days, but the smell of old grease and maple syrup permeated the entire Waffle House and it made his stomach turn.

The drunken chatter from a group of frat boys behind him combined with the sound of knives and forks clattering against plates did nothing for the broken glass like pain against his temples. He tossed his fork down onto the plate and pushed it away from him. Instead, he grabbed his mug of stale coffee and took a sip.

Sam pulled his phone out of his jacket pocket, hoping for a text from Ruby. His last messages — *where are you? I ran out. I’m serious. I need you*— remained unanswered. He tossed his phone onto the countertop, dragging a shaking hand through his hair.

Ruby had been gone for two weeks.

After Dean left, Sam called her out of desperation. He focused instead on his training, going out on the road with her. Sam enjoyed the steady supply of blood, and in three weeks, he had grown stronger than he’d ever been. Then one morning Sam woke up alone. He found a note saying Ruby had to take care of some business and that she had left him enough blood to hold him over until she returned.

The blood Ruby gave him lasted only a few days.

Sam checked his messages again. Nothing. He shoved this phone back into his hoodie, sighing angrily while he took another sip of coffee.

Instead, he picked up the newspaper beside him, scanning the front page briefly before flipping through the obituaries and classifieds. Between looking for hunts, he searched for any stories that could point to Dean. Heartwarming pieces on spontaneously cured cancer patients, the ravings of a pastor in the religion section, even anecdotes about running into a hitchhiker matching Dean’s description in fluff pieces. Anything that could be a lead.

Much to Sam’s dismay, he found neither a hunt nor Dean.

A waitress with name Jean on her tag walked over to Sam. She was short, with a pure white pixie cut and blot of ash on her forehead. She studied him for a second before refilling his cup. “Had a little too much fun in Lafayette? Looks like Jack, Jim and their brother Jose picked a fight with you
last night,” she joked.

Sam nodded. “Yeah, and they all kicked my ass.” In truth, Sam hadn’t had a drop of alcohol in weeks. He dumped a handful of sugar packets into his replenished coffee.

“You know, they say bacon’s a good remedy for that. It’ll certainly be easier on your stomach than that waffle,” Jean said in the motherly tone. “Assuming you’re able to eat meat today that is.”

Sam cleared his throat. “I’m all set, thanks.”

Jean nodded. She dropped the check down onto the counter and turned away. She only got a few steps before Sam called out to her.

“Do you work here a lot?”

“Oh, every day, honey,” she replied, wiping the counter with a dishrag. “Sometimes twice a day.”

Sam nodded, biting back a smile. “You didn’t happen to see a drifter with a duffle bag come through here recently, did you?” he asked, taking his wallet out of his back pocket and pulling out a creased photo. It was one of Dean tinkering with the Impala’s engine. Sam had taken it the summer after Dean made his deal and it had been in his wallet ever since. “He’d be a little shorter than me and have light brown hair and green eyes? He probably ordered just a black coffee and hummed cheesy ‘80’s rock music to himself?”

Jean paused; looking at the photo. She shook her head. “No, can’t say that I have. And we get everybody going to and from Baton Rouge.”

Sam nodded slowly, shoving it back into his wallet before taking a dejected sip from his coffee. “Okay. Thanks.”

Jean cocked an eyebrow. “That guy you looking for a friend of yours or something?”

“No. It’s a—” Sam shifted in his seat. He pulled a police badge out of his hoodie pocket and held it up long enough for Jean to get a cursory glance. “Missing person’s case.”

“Well, I haven’t seen him,” Jean said. “But I hope you find him.”

“Thanks.” Sam took a few bills from his wallet and put them down on the counter before he walked out. He crossed the street, heading back to his motel where the Impala was parked, taking his cell phone back out of his jacket.

Sam scrolled through his contacts until he found Pamela’s number. He waited a second before dialing it.

The phone rang twice. “Sam Winchester. What do you need, Handsome?”

Sam took a deep breath. “Hey, Pamela.”

“Where’s Dean?” Pamela asked, curiously. “I don’t sense him nearby.”

“He’s back in the motel room drying out,” Sam lied. “He took off last night, saying he needed a break from the whole Jesus Christ Superstar thing.”

Pamela paused, then scoffed. “I can’t say I blame him.”

“Yeah.” Sam cleared his throat. “So, we’re outside of Lafayette, Louisiana. Do you know of any
“Hoodoo?” Pamala’s voice turned serious. “This isn’t more angel shit, is it?”

“No,” Sam replied. “We’re just hunting demons and — all things considered— Dean could use some extra protection.”

There was a silence.

“Well,” Pamela took a deep breath. “There’s Estelle Rohan. Last I remember she’s right down the road from Breaux Bridge.”

“Is she the real deal?” Sam asked.

“You bet. She’s from an old Creole family,” Pamela said. “And she’s Catholic so she’s exactly what you boys would be looking for.”

Sam grinned. “That’s perfect. Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

Sam hung up the phone and climbed into the Impala.

Sam climbed the steps of the cottage; its wood was painted in a colorful blend of oranges, greens, and reds, stark against the two ancient weeping willow trees that flanked it on either side. The red front porch bent and creaked under his feet as he ascended, scuffling against the steps. From the front window, Sam could see that the house was dark, save for the low glow of candles that lined the windowsill.

Sam shoved a ziplock bag containing one of Dean’s t-shirts into the front pocket of his hoodie and knocked.

A moment later the door opened. The scent of frankincense poured from the house, nearly making Sam gag. A woman emerged from behind the door. She was wearing a T-shirt and jeans, with a wooden rosary around her neck and bangle earrings. There was a black smudge on her forehead, just below the red scarf tied around her head.

She looked at Sam and blinked.

“Are you Estelle Rohan?” Sam asked.

“I am.” Estelle eyed Sam. She smirked. ”And you’re a day late, son. All the college kids visited me yesterday.”

Sam shook his head. “I’m not here for Mardi Gras.” He cleared his throat. “My name is Sam Winchester. Pamela Barnes sent me here.”

Without missing a beat, Estelle let Sam into the house. "So what you looking for? Goofer Dust? Mojo bag?” She studied him. “Crossroad's deal broke maybe?” she asked, closing the door behind them.
Sam shook his head. “No,” he said. “Just a reading.” Even though he was sure he could trust what Pamela had told him about the woman, he had to get a feel for her first.

Estelle nodded. She walked Sam down a small hallway into the living room. Against the walls sat a series of tables covered with saint statues and mansion jars filled with herbs. In the center of the room was a round coffee table on which rested stubby candles and a stack of tarot cards flanked by an old love seat and armchair. Estelle gestured to the couch for Sam to sit on while she sat down in the armchair.

She grabbed the stack of tarot cards and placed them in front of Sam. “Focus yourself and shuffle the cards until you’re ready.”

Slowly, Sam picked the cards up and began to shuffle them; slipping the cards and going overhand with the deck a few times before he cut them into three piles, putting them back together on the table and sliding it back to Estelle.

The first card Estelle put down in the center of the table was Death. It was followed by The Tower, Strength, The Eight of Wands, The Star, The Devil, The Seven of Cups and The Priestess.

Sam stiffened at the sight of them.

Slowly, Estelle raised her gaze to Sam. “What’s going with you, boy?”

“Nothing.” Sam’s voice turned defensive. “I’m fine.”

“Don’t look that way to me, son. The cards don’t lie.”

The final two cards were The Hanged Man and The Sun.

Sam looked down at them. He swallowed hard, lifting his gaze back up. “My brother Dean is the one I’m worried about.” He paused. “He’s why I’m here.”

Estelle glanced down briefly at the cards. “And what’s wrong with him?”

Sam took a deep breath. “He has stigmata.” The confession hung in the air. “I came here for help.”

“And where is this stigmatic brother of yours?” Estelle asked incredulously, glancing around the room.

Sam shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. Last I heard he was out roaming the highways and healing people.”

Estelle shot Sam a look. “If you’re playing games with me—”

“—I’m not.” Sam reached into his pocket and pulled out the bag. He handed it to her.

Estelle opened it, flooding the room with the scent of roses. She snatched the shirt from the bag and unfolded it, draping it across the table, revealing the long streaks of bright red blood that stained the back. Estelle crossed herself and shoved it back in the bag.

Sam picked the bag up and put it back into his pocket. “I need to find a way to fix him. Do you know of any manuscripts, spells, herbs or amulets— anything that can remove the stigmata?” he asked.

Estelle locked her eyes on Sam. She was hushed. “No. I don’t.” She shook her head, “I wouldn’t recommend you tryin’ to find any either. You messing with stuff well above your pay grade.”
“You don’t understand. I can’t sit around doing nothing,” Sam said desperately. “This is killing my brother.”

“Is it?” Estelle shot Sam a look. “You know of Saint Francis, don’t you? Francis identified so strongly with Christ’s suffering that the wounds appeared on his body,” Estelle recounted. “The stigmata are just a manifestation of that connection.”

Sam scoffed. “Dean doesn’t have a ‘connection’ Jesus. He doesn’t even have Faith.” He raised his voice, frustrated.

Estelle glanced down at The Hanged Man and The Sun cards. "Maybe not the ‘Dean’ you know."

Sam glared. "I didn’t come here to listen to you mumble New Age crap. I came here for help."

“I can’t help you. No one can help you.” Estelle shook her head. “Even if I could, it ain’t our place to do anything about it. This is your brother’s pain. He’s gotta bear it on his own.”

“Dean. Doesn’t. Want. This,” Sam spat. “He never has. He’s been calling the stigmata a burden since the night he got them.”

Estelle cocked an eyebrow. “The same brother who is wandering highways healing folks, instead of sitting here with you, trying to find a way remove the wounds from his body?”

Sam’s jaw tensed. “You don’t—”

“—Your brother is scared of having the stigmata, probably because he doesn’t think that he’s worthy of them, but he’s accepted them and all that comes with them,” Estelle said, as though it should be obvious. She looked down at the cards, before raising her gaze back up at Sam. “The only one who can’t accept them is you.”

Sam jumped up so fast that the couch slid back. He marched out of the house, slamming the door behind him.

He climbed into the Impala, tossing the bag onto the passenger seat. Pressing his fingers to the bridge of his nose, Sam closed his eyes. He cleared his throat and prayed. “Castiel, you listening? I need to find Dean. Tell me where he is.”

Silence. No rustling of wings, no gravelly ‘Hello’. Nothing. After a moment, Sam tried again. He took a deep breath.

“Come on. I know you know where Dean is. You have to know.” Sam waited. “I know you’re listening.”

Still, there was nothing. Just like every other time Sam prayed to Castiel.

Sam gripped the steering wheel and glared, staring at the worn leather. “What? I’m not good enough for you, you winged dick? Is that it?” Sam grumbled. “Show yourself goddamn it!”

Once again there was silence.

Sam looked down at the bag, leering at the bright red stains.

He hurled the bag into the back seat and drove off.
Sam pulled into the parking lot of the motel. As soon as he turned the corner, he saw the yellow mustang parked a few spaces down from his motel room. Ruby was standing outside his motel room door. Waiting.

Sam let out a deep sigh of relief. He slid into the parking spot next to her car, just barely managing to put the Impala in park and shut the engine off before he climbed out and marched over to her.

Drawing closer, Sam could almost hear the blood pumping through her veins.

He could smell it, practically taste the sulfur and iron. The Power.

Sam grabbed her, kissing her roughly against the door. “Where the fuck have you been?” He hissed through gritted teeth.

“I told you,” Ruby breathed, kissing him back. “It was demon business.”

“You coulda left more than two days’ worth of stuff.” Sam bit her lip. “I needed you.”

“Well, I’m here now, aren’t I?”

“Yeah. You are.” Sam pulled away from Ruby just long enough to unlock the door. As soon as it was open, he grabbed her again, pushing her into the motel room. While she stumbled out of her boots, Sam kicked the door shut behind them. He kicked his boots off and jerked his hoodie and t-shirt over his head and tossed them onto the floor. Without missing a beat, he ripped Ruby’s flannel open. Buttons flew like shrapnel while he yanked it off of her.

Sam grabbed her by her thighs, lifting her up.

Ruby wrapped her legs around his waist, pressing open-mouthed kisses to the corner of Sam’s mouth.

He carried her to the table in the kitchenette, dropping her onto it with a thud. He immediately moved his lips to her collarbone, unhooking her bra, flinging it aimlessly across the room.

He nuzzled his way down her chest, wrapping his lips around one of her nipples. He sucked just hard enough to leave a deep red mark on her skin. Moving lower, he pressed his face just beneath the swell of her breast, where he could feel her pulse beating wildly.

Then he bit down. Hard.

Ruby gasped just as the first taste of blood and sulfur washed over Sam’s teeth and tongue. Instantly, the pain in his temples receded. Smoke flowed through his veins, washing over him like a fog. Sam let out a satisfied groan.

Sam bit her again and again, biting harder and more furiously, his teeth digging into her flesh. Sam listened as her gasps turned into moans. He trailed his fingers down her stomach to the waistline of her jeans. He undid the button and fly, shoving his hand into her panties.

She was wet.

Sam smirked, thrusting two of his fingers inside of her.

Ruby let out a guttural moan, jerking her hips closer to him. She reached up, pulling Sam’s hair tight
until their eyes met.

Sam pulled against her grip, causing pain to sear through his scalp. He let out a growl and gripped her wrist, squeezing it.

Ruby loosened her fingers, running them through his scalp instead.

Sam pulled his fingers out. He took Ruby’s jeans off, leaving her only in her panties before he wrapped his arms around her waist.

Ruby hooked her ankles behind his back.

Sam lifted her effortlessly from the table and carried her over to the bed where he tossed her onto the mattress. He watched her slide out of her panties while he took off his jeans. When he was free of them, Sam climbed on to the bed, kneeling flush against Ruby’s body. He lifted her left leg, his fingers skimming down the smooth skin of her calf until he found the leather holster that housed her knife.

He pulled the knife out, trailing the blade up her leg until he reached the meat of her inner thigh.

Sam dragged it quickly across the flesh, creating a wound that was long and deep. He dropped the knife on to the bed as he licked his way up her thigh, capturing the streak of blood before it fell onto the bedspread. When he reached the wound, he sucked on it viciously.

He reveled in the smoke filling his veins. He missed the blood. He craved it. He needed it. The taste of it on his tongue was better than anything Sam had ever known.

Sam pulled his tented boxers down to his knees, exposing his hard cock. “I missed you,” he groaned, stroking himself.

Ruby watched him while she lowered her hand between her thighs. Just before she reached her clit, Sam slapped her hand away.

“That’s mine,” he growled.

Kneeling in between her thighs, Sam picked up the blade, cutting her once across the labia. He surged forward, licking over her slit. Slick and blood and sulfur mixed on his tongue and his knees buckled. He reached down, stroking his cock in time with the flicks to her clit over and over until both were wet and trembling with need.

Sam bit her clit.

Ruby’s thighs clenched around his head and she came with a deep moan.

Though her thighs had loosened, Sam didn’t stop.

“That,” Ruby moaned, yanking at Sam’s hair. “Fuck me.”

Sam ignored her, content to run his tongue over her clit and drink until she jerked herself away from the touch of his tongue. Instantly Sam pulled himself up, crashing his blood coated mouth against Ruby’s.

Ruby opened her legs wide and Sam slid inside her with one deep thrust. He felt her nails scratching down his back as she cried out. He could feel the sting as blood welled up over his shoulder blades, but he didn’t care. He thrusted, again and again, setting a brutal pace while he rubbed a thumb
against Ruby’s clit.

Ruby climaxed again. Her body clenged around Sam, sending him over the edge.

Sam’s body stiffened. He let out low, shuddering breath as pleasure swept through him.

He collapsed on top of Ruby with a groan. Once his climax faded, Sam slid out of her and turned onto his side. Fulfilled, he gently ghosted his fingers, over her shoulder and down her arm until he reached her fingertips, where he laced his fingers with hers.

Ruby jerked, pulling away from the touch.

Sam tightened his grip, keeping their hands clasped.

Silence filled the room.

Sam drifted, the fog of the blood in his veins mixing with sated exhaustion. He closed his eyes; listening to Ruby’s quiet, even breathing next to him.

After a few minutes, Ruby climbed out of bed, her wounds already half healed. Sam watched as she walked into the bathroom. He lay there quietly, listening to the shower turn on.

Sam climbed out of bed, washing his hands and face in the small kitchenette sink before pulling on his boxers. He fell back onto the mattress, idly tracing the stain of crimson on the bedspread.

A moment later, Ruby walked out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her chest. She walked over to the bed and laid down next to Sam, wrapping her arms around his waist.

“So what was that about?” Ruby asked.

“You left me hanging for two weeks, Ruby.” Sam shot her look. “What else was I supposed to do?”

“I told you, Sam,” Ruby sighed. “I was on demon business.”

“Oh yeah?” Sam cocked an eyebrow. “What kind of demon business is so important that you had to leave?”

“Intel,” Ruby replied flatly.

“On?”

Ruby paused. “Lilith. We’re getting close to finding her.”

Sam narrowed his eyes. “Good.”

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**Six Weeks Later. April 9, 2009.**

**Akron, Ohio.**

“We can make this really easy.” Sam’s voice carried through the dark, dust-covered basement. He locked his gaze on the demon standing inside a spray-painted devil’s trap. It was wearing a teenage
The demon scoffed. “I got no idea where the bitch is. Even if I did know, I wouldn’t tell you.” The demon glanced over to Ruby, perched on the edge of an old washing machine. “Or the demon riding your joystick.”

Sam smirked. “Fine. We’re doing this the hard way.” Sam raised his hand.

The demon let out a blood-curdling scream, collapsing to his knees.

“Let’s try this again.” Sam lowered his hand. “Where’s Lilith?”

“I don’t know where Lilith is,” he panted, shaking his head. “But I know of someone who would know.”

Just then, Sam felt his cell phone buzzing in his jacket pocket with a phone call. He let it ring.

“Who?” Sam asked, flexing his fingers.

The demon flinched, smoke began to pool out of his mouth before Sam flicked his fingers, making it surge back into the boy the demon was possessing.

“Her chef!” the demon yelled. “She likes to wear Neo-Natal nurses. Makes it easier to get the food.”

“And where would she be…?” Sam started to raise his hand again.

“Last I heard she was in Cold Spring, Minnesota,” the demon blurted out.

Sam nodded. “Thanks.” He took his flask out of his jacket and took a long drink. He put it away and shut his eyes.

Almost immediately, a flash of light sparked through the demon’s head. He collapsed to the cement floor with a thud.

The boy he was possessing remained utterly still.

Sam walked over to him. He reached down to his neck and checked for a pulse. There was none. Without saying a word, Sam turned, making his way to the stairs.

Ruby jumped off the washing machine, following him. She grinned. “This is great Sam. Lilith’s chef is part of her entourage; she’ll know exactly where Lilith is. Once we nab her, we’ll have Lilith in the bag. About time too, we’re getting down to the wire.”

“How many Seals are left?” Sam asked, climbing up the stairs.

“Not many. Three or four. Max.” Ruby paused. “We’ve got to move fast.”

“Right.” Sam nodded. “We’ll head to Cold Spring tonight.”

Just as Sam reached the top of the stairs, his cell phone buzzed again, this time with a voicemail.

Sam had three missed calls. He deleted the first one, a number with an Illinois area code he didn’t recognize. The last two were from Bobby.

“Hang on a sec, Ruby.” Sam raised his index finger to her as he stepped over to the side of the
kitchen and called his voicemail, pressing the phone to his ear.

To Sam’s shock, it wasn’t Bobby’s voice that greeted him. It was Dean’s.

At first, Sam could barely recognize him. His voice was raspy and hushed. Quiet even. Each word came out in a slow and labored manner.

“….Sammy. It’s-It’s me. I’m staying at Bobby’s…I don’t know where you are, but I really need you here, man.” Dean paused, his breath shaking. It was followed by the sound of sniffling and rustling against the speaker. “If for some reason you can’t get here by tomorrow…I just want you to know that no matter what’s going on with you…you’re still my little brother.” There was a beat of silence before the message ended.

It was then that Sam remembered. He had seen parishioners walking out of church on Sunday carrying palm branches in hand. At the time, Sam didn’t think anything of it, but now realization washed over him like a flood.

It was Holy Thursday.

Sam froze, staring at the phone in horror.

“Sam?” Ruby looked up at him. “You okay?”

“Shit,” Sam hissed. Without saying another word, he shoved the phone into his pocket as he ran out of the house.

Ruby followed behind him. “What’s going on?”

Just before reaching the Impala, Sam stopped, looking at her. “We’re putting this Lilith stuff on hold. I gotta go right now.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

Sam swallowed the lump that formed in the pit of his throat. “Tomorrow is Good Friday.”

Chapter End Notes

::The tarot reading was done in a spread of ten in a pattern that is often referred to as the Celtic Cross; one of the most basic of tarot card spreads. The cards go as such: 1.) The Present. 2) The Immediate Challenge. 3) The Distant Past. 4.) The Most Recent Past. 5).The Best Outcome. 6.) The Immediate Future. 7.) Factors Effecting the Situation. 8.) External Forces. 9.) Hopes/Fears Surrounding the Situation. 10 The Final Outcome.

Sam’s spread and its meaning based on my interpretation of the tarot is as follows: 1.) Death: Sam's Addiction, 2.) The Tower: His Powers Manifesting. 3.) Strength: Azazel Giving Him His Powers/Killing Mary, 4.) Eight of Wands: Sam and Dean fighting over his powers. 5.) The Star: The seals bring broken. 6.) The Devil: Lucifer being released. 7.) Seven of Cups: Sam's Hubris 8.) The Priestess: Ruby manipulating him. 9.) The Hanged Man: The threat of Dean Dying. 10.) The Sun: Dean becoming something sacred.
And In The Naked Light I Saw

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

April 5, 2009.

Peoria, Illinois.

Midmorning light filtered softly through the stained glass windows of the Cathedral. It reflected off the highly polished pews and illuminated the dust that drifted in the air, stirred up by the frenzied exodus of the parishioners of the the mass Dean had attended. They were long gone now, headed home for Sunday dinners and baseball games, but Dean was still there, sequestered in the last pew in the far left corner.

He watched as altar boys rushed to restock the tables behind him with fresh palm leaves for the next mass. Families filtered in slowly from the vestibule, picking up palms as they made their way to the pews their grandfathers probably claimed when the cathedral was built over a hundred years ago.

Dean watched as a little girl in a frilly dress pulled at her collar, scratching absently at the back of her neck. Her big brown eyes caught his gaze and she smiled, gap-toothed, as children often do: automatically, guileless and trusting even of strangers.

Dean smiled back at her, self-consciously pulling his sleeves down further over his wrists. Much to his relief, the little girl ran up the aisle to sit with her mother.

He couldn’t stay. He needed to leave before too many more people filtered in and he drew attention to himself. He contemplated standing up and slipping away through the nave, but he doubted his body could make it. He doubted even more that he could take sit through another Palm Sunday Mass.

The mass had reopened his wounds and this time, the bleeding had been worse. The Eucharist, usually a balm to the pain, barely took the edge off.

Dean glanced down at the floor where drops of blood had fallen from his wrists. They had coalesced into a small, bright red pool on the parquet floor. He bent down and swiftly wiped it away with his sleeve.

Dean wished he could move and not just because of the bleeding. Though church had always made him feel uncomfortable, it felt almost foreign to him now. Alien. The organ music made him long for the sound of a cantor chanting in Hebrew. The statues stirred up anger at Roman battle standards — graven images—placed outside The Temple. Though it was covered by a purple cloth, he couldn’t even look at the crucifix hanging behind the altar. It brought up images of half-rotted corpses tied up along roadsides.

He shook his head, trying to dispel the sound of his own screams.

Dean was starting to remember more and more. The words of food blessings or the process of making wood stain out of honey and olive oil that had only haunted him in his sleep and during ecstatic visions had become as much a part of him as the lyrics to Hey Jude or the proper way to pack a rock salt shotgun shell.
He remembered that Palm Sunday — the feast commemorated during the mass—never happened. There was no donkey. No palm branches. No crowds. He—Jesus had walked into Jerusalem as nothing more than a pilgrim, as he had done for countless Passovers before.

Dean had scoffed at the pomp and circumstance of it all during the last the mass, gaining more than one angry look from the parishioners who had sat around him.

The organ began to play a low, mournful hymn.

“So much for leaving before the next mass,” Dean muttered to himself, head bowed, as he slid a palm frond reflexively through his fingers, feeling the slightly sharp edge of the leaf over on his calloused skin.

He heard heavy footfalls come to a stop next to him at the end of his pew. A tattered trench coat fell into his peripheral vision.

His heart sank for just a moment, though he didn't know why.

“Hello, Dean.” Castiel’s voice seemed to echo through the church despite the growing din of the churchgoers around him as they all chatted with one another before the start of the mass.

“Hey Cas,” Dean said softly. He didn’t look up at him.

“If I’m not mistaken,” Castiel began, “it’s customary to leave your head uncovered while in church.” His voice was leading.

Dean cleared his throat. “Yeah. It is. But I’ve been praying…I guess.” He looked at Castiel. “And for some reason, I feel better keeping it covered.”

Some of Dean’s memories had become instincts. A beard he hadn’t shaved. A beanie he kept on his head, not only to hide the bruises on his forehead, but because he felt compelled to keep his head covered.

Castiel nodded. He slid into the pew, sitting next to him. “How much of the wall has come down?” he asked.

Dean scoffed. “Too damn much of it.” Instead of speaking English, he replied in Aramaic. The language flowed from his lips as naturally as English, like he had been speaking it his entire life.

Castiel stiffened in the seat next to him. “I haven’t heard that language spoken in centuries,” he said mournfully. “It’s strange to hear it again.”

Dean grew quiet. Slowly, he lifted his head up, gazing at the crucifix hanging behind the altar. “This is my blood, spilt for the sins of many,” he whispered, still speaking Aramaic. He looked at the crucifix only briefly before turning his eyes to Castiel. “You were there that night. At the Last Supper.” This time Dean spoke in English, his voice no more than a hoarse whisper. “Do you remember it?”

Castiel nodded. “I do.”

“Then you remember what I——” Dean quickly spit the word out. “—He was really talking about.”

“Yes.” Castiel paused. “It’s not about what Jesus was dying for, but why he was dying.” He shot Dean a guilt-ridden look. “And—by extension—who it was that killed him.”
“Dean narrowed his eyes. “He knew you winged jackasses were going to twist everything after you ganked him. He wanted to make sure there was something of his you couldn’t change.” He chuckled bitterly. “That’s what the Eucharist is: a big middle finger to the angels and I—” Dean cut himself off, clenching his fists. “I woulda done the exact. Same. Thing.”

“Dean—”

“—How much of me is actually me, Cas?” Dean hissed. “I mean, I’ve got his wounds and his memories. Christ, Cas, at this point, his mother feels more real to me than my own mom.” Tears flooded Dean’s eyes. He quickly wiped them away, running a hand over his mouth. “I have his fucking soul, Cas. His Soul. The most basic part of me doesn’t even belong to me.”

An old man sitting a few pews in front of them turned in his seat, shooting Dean dirty look before turning back around.

Dean took a deep, awkward breath.

“I told you, Dean. It does belong to you”, Castiel insisted, whispering. “Your name is imprinted upon it as much as his was. You are your own man and you always have been.”

“Am I?” Dean cocked an eyebrow. “You know, when he died he felt abandoned by God. All of his faith was gone. For all I know, the reason why I don’t have faith has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that I’ve spent my whole life watching good people get ripped apart by evil while you guys sat on your asses and everything to do with him losing his.”

Just then, the sound of the main church door closing echoed through the Cathedral. One of the sisters from the convent walked in, making her way over to the side aisle. Dean quickly he turned away from her, staring at the floor.

When she walked passed the pew, Dean lifted his head back up. He stayed quiet until he saw her take a seat near the altar. “I gotta get outta here, Cas,” he said desperately. “I can’t stay here. Not now.”

“Where do you want to go, Dean?” Castiel asked concerned.

“Bobby’s,” Dean said bluntly. “That’s the only place I wanna be right now.” Dean wrapped his arms around his torso, ghosting his fingers over the bones on the left side of his ribcage.

Two days ago, a sharp twinge of pain between his fifth and sixth ribs woke him up from a dead sleep. There had been an undercurrent of fear in the back of his mind ever since.

Dean looked at Castiel. “Once I grab my stuff, you mind helping me with that?”

Castiel shook his head. “Not at all.” He climbed out of the pew, standing in the aisle.

“Good.” Dean smiled sadly he stood up from the pew, half stumbling out of it.

Castiel quickly grabbed him, gripping on to both of his shoulders to steady him.

As soon as Castiel hands touched him, a smell flooded Dean’s nostrils. The stench of blood and sweat surrounding him. It was followed swiftly by the sound of shouts and jeers and cries. A voice—raspy and deep—whispered to him, begging him to let him stay. Standing before him was Castiel, but it wasn’t Castiel. He had dark eyes and tanned skin wearing a rough wool tunic, but he bore same the expression on his face. One of guilt and anger, sadness and pity. He pressed his hand gently on Dean’s left shoulder and a bright light emanated from it, soaking into the raw skin.
Just as quickly as the memory came on, it left, and Dean found himself back in the church with Castiel—Cas—holding his shoulders.

Immediately, Dean’s gaze went to his left shoulder, the shoulder with the handprint scar. He pulled Castiel’s hand off of it and stepped away from him.

“Dean,” Castiel sighed. “Listen—”

“—No. I get it.” Dean stopped. He turned around, facing Castiel. “I’m your charge. I always have been.” Sadness filled his voice. “You’re just doing your job.”

Dean walked up the aisle without saying another word.

April 5, 2009.

Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

“Lemme get this straight.” Bobby leaned forward, shooting Dean a confused look. “You left your brother and your car to hitch hike across the lower forty-eight with nothing but a damn duffle bag?”

“When you put it like that you make it sound stupid,” Dean said, taking a reluctant sip from his coffee.

Castiel leaned against the kitchen door post, watching the conversation. Mostly, Castiel was watching Dean. Though he looked the same, some of his mannerisms had changed. Some of the changes were subtle. The beat Dean drummed on the table belonged to Avinu Malkeinu, an old Hebrew prayer Castiel had heard spoken many times before. Some were more obvious. The quiet pause Dean took before taking his first sip of coffee, used to silently say a blessing over it. These were mannerisms Castiel had once known well, but they had been wiped from his memory. Taken. Though Castiel wanted to find comfort in seeing these gestures again, watching Dean perform them brought him nothing but sadness. They were a shadow, a vestige of someone long gone. A reminder of Castiel’s own failings.

Briefly Castiel turned his gaze to Bobby. As far as he could tell, the older man hadn’t noticed the changes in Dean, or if he had noticed them, Bobby didn’t feel compelled to mention them.

“That’s because it is,” Bobby retorted, taking a sip from his coffee. “You’re not exactly batting a thousand here, Dean.”

“I haven’t been batting a thousand for months now,” Dean said. “And I’ve spent that whole time hunting.”

“That’s different. You had your brother there to keep an eye on you.” Bobby pointedly fixed his gaze on Dean. “Speaking of which, why did you leave Sam?”

Dean paused. He shrugged. “I just needed time by myself.” He picked at the wood grain, tracing the pattern with the rough edge of his index finger. It was a nervous tick Castiel had seen many times
“You needed almost *three months* away from your brother?” Bobby shot Dean an incredulous look.

“This isn’t the first time I’ve gone months without seeing him, Bobby,” Dean said defensively. “Shit, I went four years barely even *speaking* to him. When Sam was at Stanford, I saw him once before Dad disappeared.”

“Exactly. When John disappeared, Sam was the *first* person you went to,” Bobby pointed out. “You sold your soul for him, Dean. You’re gonna sit here and tell me you could just up and leave him?” He glanced down to the blood stained bandages around Dean’s wrists. “Especially now?”

Dean looked away from Bobby. “I *had* to leave Sam.” He drummed his fingers against the wood of the table, faster than before. “The day after my birthday we went to this megachurch outside of Kansas City. The pastor was possessed by this big league demon. Alastair. He’s the one that had me in The Pit. He tried to kill me, but Sam got to him first using his psychic crap.”

Dean didn’t say anything more.

“And?” Bobby asked, leading.

“Sam had blood smeared all over his mouth.” Dean’s voice was quiet, almost a whisper. “And it smelled like sulfur.”

Bobby froze. “What?”

Dean took a deep breath. “Sam drinks demon blood. It makes his powers stronger. Ruby’s his dealer and she’s got him cracked out real bad.”

“Why didn’t you call me?” Bobby asked, his tone half concern, half anger. “We coulda locked his ass in the panic room and dried him out. In fact, we still can—”

“—Doing that would do jack shit.” Dean scoffed. “I have ‘phenomenal cosmic powers’ and *I* couldn’t even heal him.”

“Come again?” Bobby blinked.

“I *tried* to heal Sam. That was the very first thing I did after I found out. It didn’t work.” Dean stared down at his hands. “I did the whole laying on of hands thing and nothing happened. In fact, the only thing that *did* happen was I started to bleed.” Guilt filled his voice. “I’ve healed blindness, childhood Leukemia, fuck, I’ve even brought people back from the dead.” Dean took a deep breath. “I just can't heal Sam.”

Bobby looked over to Castiel. “That true?”

“Unfortunately,” Castiel said. “Dean has certain restrictions. Healing Sam is one of them.”

“And even if he could be—” Dean bit his lip. “—even if he could be healed, the whole time I was gone, he never tracked me down. He’s a good hunter and between the bleeding wounds, miracles and spending a month in a convent, I wouldn’t have been that tricky to find. Sam didn’t look very hard. If he even looked at all.”

“Did you try calling him?” Bobby asked.

Dean nodded. “Once at the convent. He didn’t pick up and he didn’t call back either so…”
looked at Bobby. “I don’t wanna spend the next four days looking for him. All things considered.”

Bobby nodded. He was quiet for a moment before he took a deep breath. “You hungry?” He gestured to the stove. “I’ve got Canadian bacon frying up. I could throw another one on for you—“

Dean raised his voice, disgusted. “No.” The word barely left his mouth when he cleared his throat. “No.” This time it was placid. Apathetic. “I’m not hungry.”

Bobby stared at Dean, studying him. “You gonna need anything else?” He asked. “A prayer shawl maybe?”

“No.” Dean pulled his beanie off, shoving it into his back pocket. “I’m fine.”

Castiel knew Dean wasn’t fine. The kitchen reeked with the stench of bacon grease. From the moment they stepped into the room, he could sense that it was giving Dean a headache and twisting his stomach.

“I just— Right now, I just wanna sleep.”

“Well,” Bobby sighed. “You’re welcome to the upstairs bedroom.”

“Thanks.” Dean stood up from the table, trudging out of the kitchen and over to the stairs.

As soon as Dean’s feet hit the second-floor landing, Castiel turned and started to make his way through the kitchen to the front door.

“You’re not stickin’ around?” Bobby called out to him.

“No,” Castiel said bluntly. “I need to return to Heaven.”

“You sure about that?” Bobby squinted at him. “Because from where I’m standing it seems to me like you’re gonna be needed here.”

Castiel froze. “I have orders to follow and they don’t come from you.” He stared at Bobby. “If I’m needed here, Dean will let me know.”

With that, Castiel left.

He didn’t want to stay. He couldn’t stay. He couldn’t watch The Righteous Man die again when there was nothing he could do to stop it. Not again.

Though in many ways Jesus and Dean were very different men, in just as many they were not.

Jesus would have relented and told of Sam’s addiction when pressed just as Dean had done. Though he would have spoken about it with less self-hatred than Dean did, the guilt Jesus would have carried over it would have been the same. The only real difference was that Jesus would spoke of it far sooner and with less pressing than Dean had done.

Dean was more stubborn, more willful, far less willing to accept his fate. Though that gave Castiel some hope, it couldn’t drive the ghost from him.
Dean was dreaming. He was remembering. This time, it was the sound of shattering pottery, cracking wood and spilling coins, shouting and chaos. A whip hewn from ropes he held so tightly it nearly burned the flesh of his hand.

A voice, male and very familiar, hissed at him, “...What did you do that for?! Do you have any idea how stupid that was?” The man standing in front of him was James. Little Brother.

“I know. I know.” Dean snapped, his voice raspy and hoarse. “I’m just,” he paused. “I’m tired. I’m tired of this. I was supposed to fight Rome but now...” Fear washed over him. “I have to fight you.”

"I won't say yes,” James said bluntly, verging on anger. “You know that.”

“I know you won’t. I won’t either,” Dean swallowed hard. His voice shook. “But they might not give us the choice.”

Dean woke with a start. He placed his hands over his eyes, rubbing them tensely. Though he remembered the conversation, he couldn’t remember what it was about. All he knew was that it was something important. Something dire.

He sat up, trying to focus, to pull the memory out, but he couldn’t. It was locked.

“Son of a bitch,” Dean hissed, running a hand through his hair.

Out of the corner of his eye, Dean caught sight of something sitting on the nightstand, he turned his head to find a neatly folded blue and white striped prayer shawl sitting on top of it. It’s fringes dangled over the side of the nightstand. Bobby— Dean assumed—had left it there while he was sleeping.

“Damn it, Bobby.” He rolled his eyes, shoving the blankets off and throwing his legs over the side of the bed. He stared awkwardly at the shawl before running his hand over the stripes, making his way down to one of the long corner fringes, running its threads slowly through his fingers.

He remembered Jesus—his—own prayer shawl. Hand dyed and spun from wool, it always had the faint smell of olive wood. He had worn it during every Morning Prayer and synagogue service from the time he was thirteen years old. Sarah—his little sister—had made it for his bar mitzvah.

The memory flooded Dean with guilt. A kind of guilt that Dean was all too familiar with. It was the same guilt he felt every time he drove through Fort Douglas, Wisconsin, where that shtriga had attacked Sam when they were children, the same guilt that had driven him to make a crossroads deal. A job he had failed to do. A sibling he had failed to protect.

It was the exact same guilt he felt during the dream.

Dean dropped the fringe and stood up from the bed. He changed his bandages and clothes before leaving the room, making his way down the stairs and into the kitchen.

Bobby was sitting at the kitchen table, threading a fishing pole. A second pole leaned against the table.
“Morning sleeping beauty,” Bobby said.

“What’s with the fishing poles?” Dean asked, pouring himself a cup of coffee. “You getting ready to whack Fredo or something?”

“Get your Hail Mary’s ready, boy,” Bobby said, not looking up from the pole. “We’re going fishing.”

Dean furrowed his brow. Even though he loved fishing, he didn’t want to go anywhere. “Do we have to?” He took an apprehensive sip from his coffee.

Bobby shot him a look. “Yes princess, you do. Fresh air will do you some good.”

Dean sighed. “Bobby, seriously I’m not—”

“I got lawn chairs and a six pack sitting in the trunk of the Chevelle.” Bobby stood from the table, taking both fishing poles into his hands. “I’m not taking ‘no’ for an answer, Dean.” With that he walked out in the foyer. “You got ten minutes!” he called out, shutting the front door behind him.

Dean rolled his eyes. He took a big sip of his coffee before dumping the rest out into the sink and grabbing his jacket, walking out to Bobby’s car. “I got one stipulation,” Dean said, closing the car door of the front passenger seat. He eyed the radio. “I call dibs on the tunes.”

Bobby smirked. “What’s that thing you always say about shotguns and music?”

“Come on Bobby,” Dean sighed. “I’ve spent the last month listening to nothing but church organ music.”

Bobby chuckled. “Fine son, have at it.” He started the car. “Just don’t have the damn thing blaring. I wanna keep my ear drums.”

Dean nodded. He turned the dial to a local classic rock station. Donovan’s Hurdy Gurdy Man — psychedelic folk rock with screeching guitars— filled the cabin. It was moody and ominous, prophetic even.

Dean tried his best to tune it out.

After a fifteen minute drive down Route 42, they arrived at a small lake with a single boat launch, quiet and secluded.

Climbing out of the Chevelle, Dean was enveloped by the smell of cold lake water and trees. Leaning against the side of the car, he took in a deep contented breath, letting the cool, fresh air fill his lungs.

Bobby shot Dean a look as he opened the trunk. “Told ya.”

Dean nodded. “You did.”

They made their way down to the dock, setting up their chairs and baiting their lures. Once they were cast, Bobby reached down and handed Dean a beer.

Even though the beer tasted like ash, Dean took a large pull from it.

While Bobby made an effort to keep an eye on his line, Dean just held it between his knees, choosing instead to stare out at the lake.
The lake was quiet, still. The soft, rhythmic splash of the water against the dock brought Dean a level of calm he hadn’t had in months. Lakes had always had that effect on Dean. They brought him comfort and solitude in a way that nothing else could.

But the more Dean stared at the water, the more he remembered.

Jesus had loved the water as well. The Sea of Galilee was one of the few places he was ever truly at peace. It was the only place that could cool the heat in his veins and calm the buzzing in his ears. So much so that the only time he truly ever got any rest was inside a fishing boat.

A lump grew in Dean’s throat.

“So… I’m not just The Second Coming.” Dean’s words hung in the air. He took another deep pull from his beer, turning his gaze over to Bobby. “Turns out I was a carpenter in a previous life.”

Bobby was silent. Then he nodded. He took a sip of his beer before he looked over to Dean. “Who told you?” he asked simply.

Bobby had accepted it with little trouble, like it was a foregone conclusion. The only relief that brought Dean was knowing that he didn’t have to spend time convincing and explaining it to Bobby.

Part of Dean wondered how Sam would react if he told him. Another part of Dean knew this was something he could never tell Sam.

“Cas,” Dean said bluntly, drumming his thumb against the bottle. “He told me while I was staying at the convent.”

Bobby paused. “So,” he locked his gaze on Dean’s forehead, squinting. “This means the stigmata aren’t just something Heaven put on you because they come with the territory. They’re a part of you.”

“Basically, yeah.” Dean took another sip of his beer. “But that’s not the only thing.” Dean tapped his index finger against his temple. “I have this wall...thing up here. It’s holding all of those memories back but—” He took a deep breath. “—It’s breaking. It’s been breaking since the night I started getting the wounds.”

Silence fell between them.

Finally, Bobby asked, “How fast is it breaking?” That question was loaded with reluctance and fear.

“Well, I can say ‘That’ll be five denarii’ in Aramaic now, so…” Dean licked his lips. “So, one way or another, come Friday afternoon I’m pretty sure I’m not gonna be here.”

“Damn it, Dean,” Bobby hissed. He ran his free hand through his hair before nervously readjusting his baseball cap.

Dean quickly looked away from him. "Come on. There ain’t anything I could about this, Bobby.” He pursed his lips. “We both know this wasn’t gonna end pretty for me.”

"I know. I just...” Bobby paused. He took a deep, shaken breath. “I just got you back, son.”

Dean didn’t respond.

He chugged the rest of his beer and opened a second bottle.
April 9, 2009.
Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

The day had started off well for Dean. He woke up early and had spent the morning in Bobby’s salvage yard taking apart cars. The hubcaps and tires on a 1993 Toyota Celica, the transmission on a 2007 Honda Accord, the brake pads on a 2004 Chevrolet Silverado.

Dean hoped it was a good sign. That maybe, against all odds, he was getting better. Another part of him thought it was something more ominous, a last gasp of energy and drive before the inevitable. Dean ignored it while he spent the afternoon tuning up Bobby’s Chevelle. He ignored it still shortly after sunset while he and Bobby sat down for a dinner of burgers and beers.

Dean was halfway through eating when it happened. An ache slammed into his chest, heavy and tight. Sadness stole his appetite and robbed him of what energy he had left.

Then it was gone. There was no silence. No flapping wings. No visions. No twinges of pain, no bleeding. Nothing. There was only the sadness that lingered around him like the last rays of sunlight streaming onto the kitchen table.

That, more than anything, scared Dean. Thought during Lent his wounds opened slowly and were foreshadowed by sadness, when he received a new wound the pain had always come on with great speed and suddenness, enveloping him in an ecstatic cacophony of vision and suffering where the most visceral and agonizing parts were over before they even began.

He wanted the pain to come that way; he needed the pain to come that way, but it wasn’t going to.

Dean wouldn’t receive The Spear until late the following afternoon and there was a good chance he wouldn’t even be there to witness it.

“Did I overcook it?” Bobby asked, putting his plate in the sink.

“No.” Dean shook his head, pushing his plate away. “I’m just not hungry I guess.” He said leading, downing the rest of his beer.

Bobby stared at him. “Well,” he sighed. “I got a bottle of Johnny Walker Blue Label Rufus gave me a few months back sitting in the basement somewhere. How about I dig her out and we crack her open?”

Dean nodded.

With that Bobby left the kitchen, disappearing into the basement.

Dean stood up and walked over to the row of phones in Bobby’s kitchen, picking up the house phone. He stared down at the receiver, taking a deep breath before he dialed Sam’s cell phone number.

The phone rang once. Twice. Three times, four times. There was no ‘hello’ or even the sudden cut off of a ring; a sign that call was rejected. It just kept ringing.
Finally, it went to Sam’s voicemail. “It’s Sam. I’m not here right now. Leave a message.”

Dean paused, taking a deep breath. “Sammy. It’s—It’s me. I’m staying at Bobby’s… I don’t know where you are, but I really need you here, man.” Tears flooded Dean’s eyes. He quickly wiped them down his face with his hand. “If for some reason you can’t get here by tomorrow…I just want you to know that no matter what’s going on with you…you’re still my little brother.” Dean stared at the receiver before ending the call, hanging the phone back up with a clang. He leaned tensely against the kitchen counter.

Bobby walked back into the kitchen, a bottle of whiskey and two low ball glasses in his hands.

“You didn’t get to Sam, did you?” Bobby asked, his face falling.

“No.” Dean shook his head. “He’s not—He’s not answering his phone.”

“Well,” Bobby sighed, holding the bottle up. “Found it. How about we watch some Clint Eastwood movies?”

Dean nodded, clearing his throat. “Sounds like a plan.” Dean followed Bobby into the living room, setting the bottle and the glasses on the coffee table. While Bobby got the Pale Rider queued up in the VCR, Dean sat down on the couch and started pouring the whiskey, putting two shots into one of the glasses.

As he went to pour the second glass, a smell washed over him. The smell of roasted lamb and fresh baked bread. With a blink, Bobby’s coffee table become a long, low table lit by the dim light of oil lamps and covered with a Seder plate. The glass and whiskey bottle turned into a wooden goblet and a clay jug of wine.

With a second blink, all of it was gone.

“You okay there, Dean?” Bobby asked, cautiously picking his glass up from the table.

“Yeah.” Dean nodded, licking his lips. “Peachy.” He picked up his own glass, knocking both of the shots back.

Bobby watched him as he sat down in his recliner chair before he pressed play on the VCR.

As the credits started to roll, Dean poured himself another two shots.

Dean and Bobby sat in silence, making only brief comments about various scenes. An hour into the film, however, the small talk stopped and the room filled with the sound of Bobby snoring.

Dean looked over to find Bobby sleeping in the chair, his empty glass lying tipped over in his lap. “Figures,” Dean scoffed. He got up and walked over to the chair, grabbing the glass and putting it on the coffee table. He stood absentmindedly staring at the television for a while before wandering into the kitchen. Dean grabbed his jacket from back of one of the chairs and made his way to the front door. On the way, he grabbed the half-full whiskey bottle from the coffee table and walked out onto Bobby’s front porch, closing the door behind him.

Dean stood there for a moment, breathing in the cool, moist air before he took a deep pull from the bottle. He walked slowly down the stairs, every movement sending sharp pain through his ankles. Once at the bottom, Dean stopped and glanced around Bobby’s yard.

He wanted nothing more than to wander around the salvage yard, but his ankles were already throbbing.
Dean’s eyes settled on a tree sitting in the front yard just beside the house. Without a second thought, he walked over to it. Placing the bottle against the base of the tree, he pressed his hand nervously against the bark, raising his eyes to the night sky, clear and brilliantly lit by the full moon.

“Listen, Hashem,” Dean whispered, looking up at the night sky. “I gotta be honest with you, I’m not exactly looking forward to tomorrow.” He took a deep breath, his eyes glossing over. “I mean, I get it. It’s gotta happen, but I—” He blinked away tears, “I can’t— I can’t.”

Then came The Silence. It filled Dean’s ears with nothing but the sound of rustling of wings. But this time, what followed was not the cracking of whips or malicious laughter, only the muffled, distant sound of snoring and whispering. The air became drier and frigid. Bobby’s front yard became a grove of twisted olive trees.

Fear and sorrow washed over Dean. Instantly, his forehead and neck became coated in sweat.

“Please, Abba,” Dean sobbed, collapsing to his knees, his body shaking. “You’re offering me a cup, but I don’t want to drink what’s in it.”

The sound of wings filled the air, followed by footstep shifting against dirt and sand.

“Dean.” Castiel’s voice echoed through the air.

Dean didn’t answer to it, almost as though he couldn’t recognize the language or the name.

The voice called out again, this time in Aramaic.

“Jesus,” it said, desperate and full of worry.

The smell of olive wood faded and the air once again turned cold and filled with the smell of maple trees and engine oil. Dean blinked. He looked up to find Castiel standing few feet in front of him, his expression for once completely clear to Dean. He was afraid.

“C—Cas.” Dean croaked.

Castiel took a deep breath. “Hello, Dean.” His voice was mournful.

Dean stared at him. “You—” He took in a sharp breath as he rose slowly to his feet. “—You like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“That’s because I have.” Castiel didn’t pull his gaze away from him.

A lump grew in Dean’s throat. He ran a hand across the base of his neck. Instead of sweat coating the palm of his hand and fingers, there was blood. Bright red blood that smelled of roses. Dean shuddered, wiping his hand on his jacket. “Maybe I should go back inside.” His eyes glanced nervously at the angel.

Without saying a word, Castiel walked over to him, throwing his arm around his shoulder. He walked him back over to Bobby’s front porch.

Shouts filled Dean’s ears. Castiel became a man named Simon of Cyrene. Dean stared at him through a swollen eye and a mess of blood and thorns.

Dean blinked and he was Cas again. All blue eyes and trench coats.

“You know,” Dean winced as they walked up the stairs. “It’s strange. Part of me is almost relieved that Sammy hasn’t shown up. I don’t know, like he’s safer not being here. I know he’s not, because I
know he’s with Ruby but I—” Dean paused. “I—I didn’t want James there either. In fact, I spent half my time in that damn garden telling him go find Ima— Mom,” he corrected, “But he wouldn’t leave me.” Dean shook his head. “Course not; he never did listen to me, why would he start then, right?”

“I remember. I watched the two of you arguing.”

Dean pursed his lips. “What was I afraid of, Cas?” His voice shook.

Castiel stopped in his tracks. “You feared that the angels were going to come after him.”

Dean swallowed hard. “And did they?”

Castiel looked at him sincerely. “No.”

Without another word, Castiel walked Dean back into the house.

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Dean was in a cell.

A man stood in front of him wearing the uniform of a Roman officer. He was Pontius Pilate. Except he wasn’t Pontius Pilate. A shadow of wings—large and majestic—was sprawled across the brick walls of the cell, lit against the flames of wall torches and angel grace swirled within him.

Archangel grace.

It was radiant and burned with a heat that almost matched the heat that coursed through his own veins. Almost.

Dean had only seen the grace once, some twenty years ago, but he knew exactly what angel it belonged to.

Michael.

“Let me explain something to you.” Michael’s voice echoed through the cell. He gestured to himself as he swaggered around the room. “This man is the only thing that stands between you and the cross and I’m the only thing standing between you and him. In fact, had I not been here, he would have had you and your followers crucified the moment you began flipping tables over in the money changers hall.”

Dean didn’t respond. He remained utterly quiet.


“There is only one thing you wish me to say, Michael.” Dean looked at Michael pointedly. “And you know I won’t say it.”

Michael laughed. “You realize how futile this is, don’t you? Your death won’t be the end of this. You and your precious little brother will be reborn and the seals will break again. It might take centuries—millennia even—for everything to fall back into place, but this will play out as it is meant to, one way or another.”
“You don’t know that,” Dean raised his voice, spitting anger. “The only one who does is Hashem.”

“Exactly.” Michael stepped closer to Dean until he was hovering over him. “And My Father has had this planned from the very beginning.”

Dean didn’t flinch. “And you’re just going to go along with Abba’s plan?” Tears began to well up in Dean’s eyes, but he blinked them away.

Michael’s hand clenched around the hilt of the gladius at his belt. “Yes. I am.” He narrowed his eyes. “Because unlike you, I’m a good son.” Michael turned, making his way out of the cell. “You’ll be taken out with the two zealots this man has already condemned. Your sign will read, ‘Jesus The Nazarene, King of The Jews.’” He closed the gate behind him, looking darkly back at Dean through the iron bars. “I’ll make sure that you’re scourged first.”

Dean opened his eyes to find himself sitting on Bobby’s toilet, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders and the side of his body and face pressed against the bathroom wall. Peeling himself off the wall, he could see blotches of bright red sweat had stained the green wallpaper. Slowly, he stood up and glanced around the bathroom. On the floor was a makeshift bed made out of a musty old sleeping bag and bath towels. Sitting next to it was a first aid kit and rolls and rolls of gauze. Everything was ready, he just had to wait. Aside from the bloody sweat that stopped some hours ago, nothing had happened.

Dean took a deep breath and trudged over to the sink where he washed his face and neck, wiping away the rest of the sweat with a ratty bleach stained washcloth. He stared at his face—pale and gaunt—and the purple bruises that dotted his forehead. Unbroken, they didn’t even so much as ache.

Briefly, Dean lifted his gaze to the light fixture hanging above the mirror.

The light became the rising sun—a swirl of early morning clouds lit in shades of oranges and pinks—and the cool air of the bathroom turned hot and arid.

“Bobby!” Dean yelled. He quickly backed away from the sink, squatting against the bathroom wall. Just as he heard feet running up the stairs, The Silence came.

Dean stood in a courtyard, naked aside from his loincloth. His tunic and prayer shawl lay in a crumpled pile at his feet. Flanking him were three Roman soldiers. They were completely human. No grace swirled inside of them. The same was true of the officer standing in front of him.

“Jesus of Nazareth, you have claimed to be the Messiah. The so-called King of The Jews,” the officer declared in Aramaic, reading from a wax tablet in his hand. “In doing so, you have committed treason and sedition against Rome and Her Empire. For that, you are condemned to death.” The officer looked up from his tablet. “Do you have anything to say?”
Dean didn’t say anything. He locked his eyes hard on the officer, gesturing down to the prayer shawl, “Don’t leave that lying on the ground.”

The officer glared. He stepped forward, slamming his fist into Dean’s eye.

Dean recoiled in pain.

“You people,” the officer spat, annoyed. “You never learn, do you?”

He motioned to the soldiers and they brought Dean over to a pillar, chaining him to it.

Soon after, the scuffling of sandaled feet moved closer to him in tandem with the rattling of metal and leather.

Hearing it, Dean closed his eyes. “You must protect them. You must endure this. You must be strong,” Dean whispered to himself, repeating it quickly like a mantra.

“One!” the officer shouted, this time in Latin.

A whip cut through the air. The small of Dean’s back radiated pain. Stinging, hot pain. He could feel the first rivulets of blood begin to slide down his back. His torso slammed into the pillar, the shackles rubbing against the skin of his wrists hard enough to bruise.

Dean wanted to scream. He needed to scream. But he didn’t.

“Two!” More pain, this time across Dean’s shoulder blades.

“Three!” Between the hips. His vision began to blur.

“Four!” Over the spine. His breath spilled out, but he bit back the cry on the tip of his lips.

“Five!” He didn’t feel the fifth strike. Before it could hit him, everything went black.

Then there was a sharp strike to Dean’s face. When he opened his eyes, he found himself propped up against the wall of the courtyard, a scarlet army cape draped over his shoulders.

The soldiers were crowded around him, passing a jug of wine between them.

“Bless Fortuna! The prince woke up.” One of the soldiers smirked sarcastically. “Now we can finish his coronation.” He picked up a wreath of thorns sitting on the floor and squatted down next to Dean, jamming it on top of his head before punching him in the face. “Hail, The King of The Jews!” He laughed.

Each of the soldiers took turns doing the same. One pulled at his beard, another whacked the side of his head with a stick, driving the thorns in deeper. When they finished, they dumped what was left of the wine over his head, the alcohol sending searing hot pain across his head and back.

He let out a deep guttural scream.

Dean found himself lying on the sleeping bag, his body curled into itself and his hands pressed against his temples, clawing at the crown around his head. His eyes were slammed shut, stinging
with tears and blood and his throat stung. Raspy and raw.

“It’s okay Dean,” Bobby’s voice called out to him, panicked and dripping with fear, but never the less trying it’s best attempt at comfort. “You’re gonna be alright.”

A cool wash cloth brushed gently over Dean’s eyes, taking the salt water and blood with it.

Slowly Dean opened his eyes to find Bobby kneeling on the floor next to him, a bucket of water resting between them.

“Bobby.” Dean’s voice shook. “It— it fucking hurts Bobby,” he sobbed, slowly pulling his shaking hands away from the side of his head as he sat himself up, glancing woozily around the bathroom.

Already the floor was a mess of blood caked tiles and grout and the room stunk of roses.

“I know, son,” Bobby replied, grabbing Dean’s wobbling shoulders to steady him. He quickly grabbed one of gauze bandages and unraveled it, wrapping it around Dean’s head as delicately as he could manage. When Bobby finished, he picked up a bottle of consecrated wine, putting it against to Dean’s lips.

Dean grimaced, swallowing down the taste of wine and blood as he lay back against his pillow, hissing sharply as he pulled and pressed against the wounds on his back.

As soon as Dean was lying back down, Bobby stood up. Without a word, he walked over to the bathroom sink, washing his hands before he plopped himself on the toilet with a sharp groan. He pulled a flask out of the pocket of his jeans, knocking back more than a couple sips from it.

Bobby held it out to Dean but he just shook his head.

Dean took a deep breath. “The soldiers didn’t stop,” he sobbed, narrowing his eyes. “They just kept punching me and kicking me and ripping my beard out. I wanted to kill them, Bobby. Each and every single one of them. But I—I couldn’t. I had to go through with this. I—” Dean’s chest heaved. “—I had a job. I had to protect them,” Dean paused. “I had to protect him.”

“Who?” Bobby asked, wiping his brow and fixing his hat.

“James.” A lump grew in Dean’s throat. “My brother.”

Bobby froze. “You had a brother?”

“I had four of them.” Dean swallowed. “But James. He—We—” Dean shook his head, running his hands through his hair. “I don’t know. It had somethin’ to do with the seals but I can’t fucking remember.”

“Its okay, Dean,” Bobby said softly, rubbing his thumb across the flask. “Just rest, okay son?”

Dean scoffed, biting his lip.

Even though Dean could piece together through the memories he did have that Jesus had convinced himself that he had to die, that it was his destiny even, there was a mantra that played constantly in the back of his mind. It had lingered quietly during the Last Supper and in Gethsemane. Among the torments of the Roman soldiers, it had screamed.

He didn’t deserve it. He didn’t deserve the suffering and pain. He didn’t deserve death. He wished more than anything that God would take the pain away from him. He wanted to hear His voice. Just
once. But God was silent. Cold and distant.

Dean smiled sadly. “I guess some things don’t change.”

Dean was kneeling on a hilltop. His left shoulder stinging with heat and grace.

In the distance, he thought he heard his brother and Castiel yelling at each other. He hoped more than anything that he was wrong.

Before he could give it further thought, a pair of soldiers grabbed him and dragged him across the rocks and sand over to a vertical pole where the crossbeam was lying at the base of it. They laid him down on it, splaying his arms across the beam.

As the soldiers were tying rope around his forearms, he caught sight of a pair figures running up the top of a hill. Figures he knew well. Figures he had prayed would not be there.

One was Miriamne, his wife. The other was Mary, his mother. Ima.

When they reached the top they both froze.

Miriamne lowered herself down into the dirt, her hands protectively cradling her belly.

Ima didn’t look away. She stared at Dean, her eyes wide in horror.

“Brother. Don't let her watch. Don’t let her watch. Please,” he mumbled himself.

Just before one of the soldiers placed the nail against the inside of his right wrist, James appeared on the hill top. He quickly grabbed his mother, pressing her face against his chest, turning her away.

The hammer struck against the nail, driving through skin and tendon, crushing bone. He let out a blood-curdling scream.

Instantly the sound of his mother’s sobs filled Dean’s ears. They were loud and painful, almost as though the nails were being driven into herself.

In some ways, her cries hurt him more than the nails did.

The hammer sounded again. Pain radiated through his left wrist.

The crossbeam was lifted on top of the pole. It was followed by more nails. This time through his ankles, pinning them to both sides of the pole.

There were more screams and more cries.

When the soldiers had finished, an officer, one with Grace swirling inside of him, dismounted from his horse and walked over to Mary, Miriamne and James. He spoke to them briefly before going back to his horse.

As soon as the officer had gotten back on his horse, Mary came running over to the cross. James and Miriamne following behind her.
“My son!” she wept. She ghosted her shaking fingers against one of the nails in his ankles before she collapsed to the ground sobbing.

James ran up to her and grabbed her by the shoulders, lifting her up. “We need to go, Ima,” he pleaded. “Michael’s men are coming.” He didn’t look up at the cross.

“No!” she sobbed. “He’s my son. I won’t leave him!”

“I-Ima,” Dean croaked. He looked briefly over to James, before turning his gaze back to her. “He is also your son. As is Judah, Simon, and Joses. They need you.”

“You’re my eldest.” Mary shook her head. “You were the first one I carried. The first one I held. The first one I nursed. I can’t leave you.”

“Yes.” He glanced over to James. “Now he is your eldest.”

Mary turned away from him, her hands pressed over her eyes.

“Brother. Take care of her. Please.” He looked over to Miriamne. “All three of them.”

James nodded. “I will.”

Bobby had just finished rewrapping Dean’s wrists for the third time when Dean heard a sound, muffled and faint, echoing through the walls of the house. A sound Dean hadn’t heard in months, but recognized instantly. The roar of the Impala’s engine.

Relief and terror warred within Dean at the sound.

The engine shut off and Bobby rose to his feet, leaving the room.

A moment later, the sound of the front door slamming shut followed the all too familiar sound of Sam’s feet running up the stairs, Bobby’s heavier steps following behind them.

They got halfway to the bathroom before they stopped. Dean heard the sound of a heavy thump against the wall.

“Where the fuck have you been, boy?” Bobby hissed, his voice echoing down the hallway.

“I was working a job in Akron.” Sam’s voice was tired and short. “I came here as soon as I got Dean’s voicemail.”

“Well, while you were busy doing whatever it was that was more important than answering your damn phone during Holy Week; your brother’s been laying a pool of his own blood and I’ve been up to my eyeballs in it,” Bobby snapped. “So next time you wanna come storming into my house like that, don’t.”

“I know. I’m sorry, Bobby.” Sam took a deep breath. “You look exhausted. Why don’t you go take a nap? I’ll keep an eye on Dean.”

Quiet grumbling filled the hallway. It was followed by the sound of Bobby’s footsteps making their way back down the stairs.
Then Sam’s feet began to move towards the bathroom. Just before they reached the bathroom, they stopped. Dean heard Sam gag outside the bathroom door.

After a moment, the door creaked open, revealing Sam. His face was pale with nausea and his eyes were bloodshot and rimmed with dark circles. His clothes were wrinkled and his hair was unkempt and sticking up in the back.

Though Dean knew that Sam’s state was likely a product of eighteen hours of almost nonstop driving, save for a power nap or two, he knew just as well that it was a product of something else.

The stench of sulfur surrounded Sam. Strong, but quickly dissipating, like an early morning drunken stupor.

Dean locked his gaze on Sam. “So,” Dean croaked. “What were you hunting in Akron?”

“Vampires. It was a small family nest.” Sam’s words were blunt, but obviously rehearsed.

Dean knew that, in reality, Sam had been exorcising demons with Ruby. They were probably getting very close to finding Lilith.

Nevertheless, the lie hurt.

Dean wanted to punch Sam in the face and scream at him. He wanted to tell Sam to walk right back out the bathroom door and get the hell out of his sight, but he didn’t have the strength to do it. He couldn’t even raise his voice beyond a loud whisper. He didn’t have the time to do it. In a few hours he would be dead and, one way or another, he wasn’t coming back.

Instead, Dean nodded, accepting the lie.

With that, Sam stepped into the bathroom. He glanced nervously at the strips of used, drying gauze hanging down from the shower curtain rod. “Did the wounds open up last night?” He asked, his tone concerned, but awkward.

“No, I was sweating blood last night.” Dean winced, shifting on the sleeping bag. “They didn’t open up until this morning.”

Sam’s expression froze in horror. After a moment’s hesitation, he walked over to Dean. Squatting down in front of him, he pulled the blanket down from Dean’s torso, glancing at his left side. “You don’t have The Spear?” He swallowed hard, dropping the blanket.

“No,” Dean replied, trying as best he could with his stiff, broken fingers to pull the blanket back over himself. He paused. “Not yet anyway.”

Sam nodded. Without saying a word, he looked around the bathroom. Finally he caught sight of a glass that was resting on top of the sink; he filled it with water before walking back over to Dean. Squatting down, Sam placed the glass to Dean’s lips.

Dean took a single sip before pulling his mouth away.

Sam scrunched his brow at him before turning his gaze to the water, now red and fermented. Taking in a deep a breath, Sam unceremoniously dumped the wine into the basin of the tub before sitting on the floor next to Dean.

Silence fell between them.
“Do you—” Sam cleared his throat. “—Do you want something to eat? Broth? Saltines?”

Dean shook his head. “Bobby gave me the Eucharist earlier,” he said quietly. “I’m good.”

“You can’t just have communion wafers and wine Dean,” Sam said annoyed. “You need actual food.”

“I don’t need anything, Sam,” Dean raised his voice slightly. “And I don’t want anything, either. Okay?”

Sam glared at him. “Well, if you’re not going to eat can I at least change your bandages?”

Dean hesitated but then nodded.

Sam stood up and walked over to the bath tub, pulling some of the gauze strips down from the curtain rod before he kneeled in front of Dean, taking Dean’s right arm into his hands.

As soon as Sam touched the blood-stained gauze, his hand recoiled and pain flashed across his face. He paused briefly before he touched it again.

Seeing it, a lump grew in Dean’s throat. “There something you want to tell me, little brother?” He squinted at Sam.

“It’s nothing. I’m fine.” Sam finished changing the bandage, his fingers trembling. He stood up and darted over to the sink, furiously scrubbing his hands.

“It don’t look like nothing.” Dean’s voice was blunt as he watched Sam. “You’re shaking.”

“I’m shaking because I’m scared, Dean,” Sam snapped as he dried his hands off. “You’re going to die in a few hours.”

Even though Dean was laying on the floor and Sam did his best to hide them with the towel, Dean could see that Sam’s hands had red burn welts on them.

Seeing them, Dean narrowed eyes. “When was the last time you had a hit, Sam?” Dean spoke gently, but there was still the hint of iron will beneath his breathless whisper.

Sam didn’t say anything. He turned slowly, his eyes locking hard on Dean.

“I need some fresh air.” With that, Sam left the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

As soon as the door closed, tears flooded Dean’s eyes. When the sound of Sam’s footsteps had disappeared down the hall, Dean let out a broken sob, sucking in raspy breath after raspy breath as his chest heaved.

Suddenly, Dean’s lungs filled with burning pressure and his ankles and wrists began to throb, the flesh twisting against the nails. Dean choked back the sobs with a sharp cry as he wiped the tears away with his stiff fingers. He looked down at his wrists and the blood saturated gauze that wrapped them and slowly lowered them into his lap. He leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes.

His breathing began to slow.
“Come on Dean! Breathe goddamn it!” Sam’s voice echoed through Dean’s ears, panicked and desperate. It was accompanied by the stench of blood and sulfur. Pungent and odorous.

Dean cracked open his eyes to find Sam squatting on the sleeping bag. He was holding Dean’s torso upright, his hands digging into Dean’s shoulders.

Through hooded eyes caked in tears, he averted his gaze from Sam, shaking his head. “I—I can’t Sammy,” Dean sobbed, taking in a few shallow, ragged breaths.

Dean wanted it to be over. He wanted the pain to stop. He almost longed for the bark of hellhounds. A demise that was violent and painful, but quick. Almost.

“Yes you can,” Sam demanded, gritting his teeth. “You did it when you first got the nails, remember? You can do it again.” Sam cupped his face with one of his hands. “You have to stay with me, Dean.”

Dean’s heart began to pound. Fast and violent. Strained. It grew faster, more pained with each passing second.

Then there was silence. The sound of Sam’s voice ceased. The smell of sulfur gave way to the stench of blood, dirt, and sweat. Wood splintered and chaffed his back and rope burned his arms.

Sorrow washed over him. Deep sorrow. Tears flooded his eyes as he sucked in a deep ragged breath, his eyes fixating on the ceiling.

“Abba,” Dean sobbed in Aramaic. “Why have you abandoned me?”

His eyes slipped shut. The race of his heart slowed, then the pain ceased.

There was a flash of white light. Sudden and brilliant.

Then Dean remembered. He remembered everything. Honey cakes. A carpenter’s stall. The smell of Lebanon cedar shavings. A brother’s hair he tussled, another brother’s jaw he punched. Desert heat. Cool lake waters. The near constant taste of wine on his lips. A canopy he finally stood under. The frightening but precious feel of his hand pressed against a swollen belly as his child’s foot kicked it.

He remembered James waking one night on the road to Jerusalem and telling him that God had spoken to him in his sleep. He remembered going off to pray to Castiel and confronting him.

“...Why is Hashem speaking to my brother? ” he asked, his tone concerned as much as it was demanding. “He doesn’t even speak to me.”

“ The Lord isn't speaking to James.” Castiel’s words were blunt, but reluctant.

Dean’s eyes narrowed. “ Then who is? ”

Castiel looked at him, fear flooding his face. “Lucifer.” The word hung in the air. “James is his vessel.”

A lump grew in Dean’s throat. “ Just as I am Michael’s?”

Castiel nodded. “ Yes. ”

Jesus was a Michael Sword. A true vessel of Michael. James was the vessel of Lucifer. Jesus was not only to fight Satan and destroy the world, but fight and kill his own brother and he was to do so not as himself, but as little more than a receptacle for an archangel.
Dean was to do the same. He and Sam were the same. They were pawns, chess pieces in a cosmic fight between brothers. Important but, ultimately, replaceable.

They always had been.

The memories ceased and Dean’s eyes snapped open, locking on Sam with fear and panic.

“Sammy…” He mumbled.

“Dean?” Sam replied desperately.

Before Dean could say anything more, The Silence returned, followed by the agonizing pain of steel cutting between his ribs, sliding past bone and into muscle, radiating through his chest.

Dean let out a hitched gasp as his heart stopped. Abrupt. Violent.

A warm gush of blood ran down his side.

“Dean!”

Sam’s eyes swirled and burned bright yellow.

Dean’s vision faded and his eyes closed.

All he knew was darkness.

Chapter End Notes

:: Holy Week is the week just before Easter. It starts on Palm Sunday and lasts until Holy Saturday. One of the customs during this week is to cover statues and crucifixes purple cloths, the liturgical color of Lent as a symbol of mourning.

:: While the synoptic gospels mention that only women (chiefly Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene) were present at Jesus' crucifixion, the gospel of John mentions the presence of 'The Disciple whom Jesus Loved' or 'The Beloved Disciple' at the crucifixion as well. Jesus is described as giving the care of his mother over to him. Traditionally, this disciple is thought to be John the Apostle (aka, John son of Zebedee), I decided that it would make for sense for it be Jesus' own brother.
Sacrificial Lamb

The world was spinning on its axis. Painful throbbing reverberated at the base of his skull and Dean had just enough time to turn onto his side before he vomited violently. He retched and coughed, wincing at the dull ache the motion sent through his abdomen.

Then Dean noticed the smell. Gone was the familiar scent of Bobby’s house—a blend of whiskey, aftershave, and gasoline. In its place was the acrid mixture of body odor, worn vinyl, and floor wax.

Slowly, Dean opened the one eye that wasn’t swollen shut. He found himself lying on the bench of a police station holding cell, his hands cuffed in front of his body.

“Hello?” he called out. He sat up awkwardly, taking in his surroundings.

There was no answer.

Dean stood up from the bench, narrowly avoiding the puddle of vomit at his feet, and walked over to bars. He grabbed them, the chain of his cuffs clinking against the steel.

“Hello!” he shouted.

Still, there was no answer. The station appeared to be empty.

It was then that Dean looked down at his hands. They were gripping onto the bar. His hands shouldn’t have been able to grip the bar. They should have been broken and disjointed, barely able to move, let alone grip a steel bar hard enough to rattle the cell door. He shouldn’t have been able to walk to the bars in the first place, but as he took another step, there was no pain in his ankles.

Dean let go of the bars and pulled his jacket sleeves up enough to expose the wrists. They weren’t marked by open wounds as they had been in the last moment Dean could remember, as they should have been, but by bruises.

Dean stared at them in confusion, his heart sinking. “What the fuck?” he whispered.

Suddenly, the cell was filled with the sound of flapping wings.

Standing outside of the cell was the same angel who had confronted Dean in the abandoned church in Kansas. The one that tormented Dean for days with visions of doubt and pain and spoke to him with a pompous swagger.

Dean narrowed his eyes, his fists clenching despite the tightness of his handcuffs. He was an angel he now knew all too well.

“Zachariah,” he spat. “I had a feeling you had something to do with this.” Dean stepped back surveying the small, dank room. “You’ve got some pretty big cajones showing your face in front of me.”

“Oh?” Zachariah cocked an eyebrow “And why is that, Dean?”

Dean shrugged sarcastically. “Gee, I don’t know, maybe because you possessed one of my disciples, made him betray me and got me nailed to a tree?” He glared at Zachariah, his expression dark. “If I wasn’t handcuffed, I’d stab you in the face.”

“So, Nazarene. You remember?” Zachariah smirked. “Good. That means you and I are on the same
We’re not any page.” Dean gritted his teeth. “You and your boss Michael to go fuck yourselves. I’m not saying ‘yes’ to him. Ever. And I’m sure as hell not letting him use my corpse while my soul’s stuck in wherever the fuck this is.”

Perhaps the place was Purgatory. Perhaps it was Limbo. Perhaps even Heaven. Dean hoped more than anything that it wasn’t Heaven.

“You’re not dead Dean. Not really,” Zachariah said. “But even if you were, Michael can’t inhabit your corpse. He needs all of you. The whole package. Body and soul. That aside, you’re not here so Michael can get consent from you. It’s only a matter of time before you say yes to him anyway. No, I’m here for another reason.”

“Yeah? Then what is it?” Dean asked. “What is this place?”

“The Future,” Zachariah replied easily. “I had a feeling that even after learning the reality of the situation that you were going to be stubborn. So think of this as a ‘taste’ of what’s going to happen to you if you don’t consent to Michael.”

“Yeah,” Dean scoffed. “You’re gonna get me convicted of some trumped-up murder one charge? Makes sense. That way you can get me on death row and lethally injected. I can be your ‘The Lamb of God’ and your precious seals will be reset,” he recounted sarcastically. “Then you’re gonna wait a couple millennia until I’m reborn and start this whole thing all over again because the third time’s always a charm, right?” Dean glared. “I’ve love to see you try.”

“Not exactly,” Zachariah said. “This time, your demise is going to be a bit more of a family affair.”

Dean blinked. “What are you talking about?”

“Standing outside is your abomination of a brother.” Zachariah pointed to the door. “The Son of Perdition with a platoon of demons in tow. He’s going to help Lilith break the final Seal.” He smirked. “But before he does that, he’s going to have you killed.”

Dean froze. “You’re lying.”

“Am I?” Zachariah cocked an eyebrow. “Your own father warned you about Sam. You know far better than anyone how far gone he is. How much envy he has towards you. A few more demon blood martinis and killing you won’t be any issue for him.”

“That’s bullshit!” Dean shook his head. “That’s never gonna happen! Do you understand me?!”

“It will if you keeping acting like a stubborn child and disobeying us. We’ll make sure of that.” Zachariah smirked. “Even if you’re dead we can still use you to fill the pews and fratricide is one of the company’s tried and true narratives. Upper Management won’t even have to alter much, unlike the last time you rebelled.”

“You’re so goddamn sure of that, huh?”

“Oh I am,” Zachariah laughed. “In fact, by the time the Winchester Gospel is written, edited, rewritten, translated, redacted, interpolated and codified into a single volume of text well…let’s just say it will have been a long time since parents named their child ‘Sam.’”

Dean glared at him. “You son of a bitch.”
“This shouldn’t come as a shock, Nazarene,” Zachariah said. “All you have to do is drive down the interstate to see ‘you’ as a blonde haired, blue eyed, gun-toting Savior of The Red States. It’s a bunch of jingoistic, revisionist drivel, but we do nothing about it because it’s good for business.”

Dean narrowed his eyes. “Not if I have any say in it.”

Zachariah let out a hearty laugh. “You don’t.” He met Dean’s angry gaze. “Like I told you before Nazarene, you’re just a vessel. All you are is a glorified ape. Nothing more. That’s all you’ve ever been and all you ever will be.”

With that, Zachariah disappeared.

The sound of footsteps on the tile floor echoed down the hall. A moment later, Ruby walked into the room, leaning casually against the door frame. She was followed by two other demons wearing police officers.

She walked over to the cell, her eyes turning black as she approached. “Hey, Dean.” She smirked. “Long time no see.”

“Hey, bitch.” Dean glared at the demonic face under her meatsuit. “I see you’re just as ugly as you’ve ever been.”

“You shouldn’t talk to me that way,” Ruby threatened. “Sam won’t like that.”

“That so?” Dean gritted his teeth. “He’ll like it even less when I shank your ass with the demon blade.” Dean pursed his lips, glancing between Ruby and the other two demons. “But since that’s not an option right now,” He cleared his throat. “Omnis immundus spiritus, omnis legio diabolica—”

“—Oh, please Dean,” Ruby laughed. “You honestly think we’d come in here unprepared?” She pulled over the neckline of her shirt, revealing a binding sigil carved into her shoulder. “You really are stupid.” She smiled viciously as she lifted up her hand up, thrusting it towards Dean.

Dean slammed into the back cell wall, landing on the floor and hitting his shoulder with a thud and a crack. He grunted in pain.

Ruby unlocked the gate and opened it, stepping into the cell. She walked over to Dean and kicked him hard in the crotch.

He groaned, recoiling.

“That’s for your blood burning my meatsuit.” Ruby hissed. “And this is for you.” She dug into her jacket, producing a wreath of twisted barbed wire. With a quick thrust, Ruby shoved it onto Dean’s head before stepping back out of the cell.

Dean let out a muffled groan, biting it back as the barbs pierced his forehead and blood flowed into his eyes.

“Bring him to Sam. He’ll want to see him.” Ruby motioned to the two other demons.

They entered the cell and grabbed Dean by the shoulders, dragging him face front out of the holding area and outside to the front of the police station, dropping him onto the steps.

A platoon of demon were standing at attention on the sidewalk. Sam faced them, his hands dripping red. Sam turned slowly, revealing a mouth caked with blood and eyes a bright shade of yellow.
“There he is,” Sam smirked. “My dear older brother and our guest of honor.” He paused, then Sam sauntered over to Dean. “Heaven’s Crown Prince.”

“Sammy. I know you’re still in there. You gotta listen to me, okay?” Dean’s voice shook as he picked himself up off the floor. “Whatever it is you’re planning on doing with Lilith, don’t do it. There’s more goin’ on here then you realize.”

Sam glared at him.

“You gotta stop this before—”

“Shut. Up.” Sam lifted his hand up, squeezing it.

Dean choked, collapsing to the floor again, clawing at his neck. Spots of black crept in from the edges of his vision and he grappled for air. Just as Dean’s eyes started to roll into the back of his head, Sam unclenched his hand. Dean wheezed, sucking in air.

“I am sick of listening to you boss me around. I’m sick of listening to you dictating my life with that self-righteous attitude of yours,” Sam hissed, clenching his teeth. “I’m doing exactly what I need to do,” he glared, “so my Father can return.”

“Satan is not your father,” Dean rasped.

Sam scoffed. “But he is. He’s more of a father to me than John ever was and once he rises I’ll inherit the Earth.” He grinned. “And I’ll have you—The Righteous Man—to thank for it.”

Dean’s heart sank.

Sam squatted down in front of Dean. “You know, rumor has it that you broke the first seal because Alastair hung you on a tree.” He laughed, vicious and mocking. “What was the matter? The cross hit a little too close to home for you?”

Tears welled up in Deans eyes. He didn’t say anything. He just glared at his baby brother.

Sam stood back up. He brushed his finger over the barbed wire cruelly pressed into Dean’s temple.

“You know, that gives me an excellent idea. You would be the perfect warning to any angel or hunter that would try to oppose him. A deterrent.”

Dean’s eyes grew wide. “Sam! Don’t!”

Sam ignored him. Glaring, he turned to the demons wearing police officers. “Crucify him.”

“No!”

The two demons grabbed Dean and carried him down the stairs through the horde of demons who followed behind them. They dragged him through the parking lot and into the main road where a wooden utility pole with was standing in the grass just before it.

A two by four, rope, hammer and nails were already lying in the grass. Waiting.

Though Dean hoped more than anything that it was Ruby and not Sam who had planned the crucifixion, it didn’t matter. The intention was all the same. It was pointed and personal. A blend of blasphemy and mockery meant to torment Dean as much as torture him.

Seeing the makeshift cross, Dean didn’t scream. He was utterly quiet and still while the demons unlocked the handcuffs and tied him the two by four. It wasn’t until the nail pierced his right hand,
breaking bones and tendons, that he screamed. Not because of the pain, but because of the sound. The hammer hitting the nail and striking against wood dragged up memories of smoke, sulfur and white eyes. They intermingled with memories of arid heat and a mother’s sobbing. Memories of terror and sadness, hopelessness, and abandonment.

All Dean could do was scream. A guttural wail that cracked his voice and stung his throat raw.

When the nails were in, the demons they lifted the board up and nailed it to the pole, just high enough so Dean’s feet didn’t hit the ground.

They left Dean’s feet dangling, laughing as they backed away from him.

Just as Dean took his first strained breath, a bright light washed over the road. When it dissipated, the demons were lying strewn across the road, their eyes charred black sockets.

Castiel was standing in the middle of the road. His hand extended outward as the white light soaked back into it.

“Cas?” Dean croaked. “How did you—”

“—We don’t have much time,” Castiel said quickly, walking over to the cross. “The other angels will be looking for me and Sam is on his way to break the final seal. You have to stop him.” He pulled the crown gently off of Dean’s head.

Dean winced, despite Castiel’s gentleness. “How the hell am I supposed to do that when I don’t even know what the final seal is?”

Castiel locked his eyes on Dean. “Lilith is the final Seal. You have to stop Sam from killing her.”

A buzzing sound began to fill the air.

Castiel pulled the nails out; Dean let out a hoarse moan of pain. “You told me once a long time ago that we always have a choice.” He untied the ropes. Dean fell from the cross and Castiel caught him, throwing him over his shoulders. “You still have one Dean. You can stop this.”

Just as the buzzing began to hit an earsplitting pitch, everything went black.

Dean let out a gasp, sitting up with a jolt so powerful his head spun. When he opened his eyes he found himself alone, lying on a cot in Bobby’s panic room.

The smell of roses was gone.

He looked down at his hands. The wounds on his wrists had turned into scars.

Works inspired by this one: [Cascade County Community AME Church](https://example.com) by gillasue345

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