Another Brick in the Wall

by road_rhythm

Summary

When Sam vanishes on a case, it feels like every nightmare Dean's had since he got his brother's soul back is coming true. Waking up buried alive doesn't exactly make it Sam's favorite day, either. The Winchesters will do anything to save each other: that's almost a natural law. But in nature, everything has a cost, and Sam and Dean have a bad history of not examining the price tag.

Notes

This story is set sometime shortly after 06x17, "My Heart Will Go On": Sam has his soul back (06x12); Dean's anxious about him scratching Death's wall, especially after the Hell seizure he had at the end of the Arachne case they worked in Bristol, Rhode Island (06x13); Gwen, Samuel, and Rufus all died in the events of "And Then There Were None" (06x16), and Bobby is deep in mourning (and the bottle) for Rufus. Cas is embroiled in the heavenly war. Sam is struggling to set aside the consuming need to know exactly what he did—who he was—in the year he can't remember in order to respect Dean's fears for him. But at the end of the day, he's a hunter. Just like his brother.

Many thanks to gaialux for betaing this chapter. All remaining defects are mine alone.
so you thought you might like to go to the show

Sam expected to wake to darkness. He didn't.

The rest of his expectations—pain, cold, obvious isolation—those all came true, but once he'd double-checked and found that his eyes were, in fact, open, he realized that he could see a surface a few inches in front of them. Despite the otherworldly quality of the light, the mundane details it showed of texture and shadow proved that this was not a dream.

Neither was the smell.

Plink. Plink.

A sewer. Of course it would be a sewer.

He tried to take stock of himself. There was a sludgy feeling in his limbs, under his tongue, in his head. It pressed on his lungs, and all his thoughts were submerged in it. He hurt: burning pain where something had dragged him, dull pain where his head had bounced. He was cold. Whatever had taken him had left him in jeans and a t-shirt, and he was lying in a puddle of what, if he were very, very lucky, might be water.

How long had he been out?

Dean.

Slowly, Sam curled in on himself, sucked in a breath, and rolled over. Bile rose in his throat, and he had to lie still for a while. After several long, slow breaths, he managed to get enough muscles to respond to push himself up to sitting.

He was in a concrete chamber. Its size was hard to guess; most of the room was lost in shadow, and as weak as the light was, that meant very little. This place could be a city, or it could be barely more than a tomb.

Sam stumbled to his feet. His head struck concrete and he nearly pitched forward again; groping, he found that he'd awoken in a sort of alcove. A pipe let out into it, stopped with concrete. His fingers came away wet when he touched it. The source of the puddle, probably. His shoes and one sock were gone.

Something oozed from the seams in the wall, collecting in thick bubbles down the concrete. It looked like it should be wet, *had* to be wet, but it didn't reflect the light in the way his brain told him it should. It took long seconds for him to work out that this was because it was the source of the light. Reddish orange, streaked with brown, and glowing, it looked like nothing so much as faintly luminescent sewage. Sam grimaced and turned away.

He moistened his split lip and tried to make himself think. Jacob Dorner. They'd been looking for Jacob Dorner, missing two days. He remembered calling Dean from Dorner's apartment, empty-handed. Agreeing to meet back at the motel. Cutting through the park that lay between Dorner's gentrifying neighborhood and the one where their motel was. Stepping off the path by chance to let a kid tear by on a trick bike and seeing—seeing—
What?

He couldn't remember. It was important, he was sure, whatever it had been, but it was gone.

Sam's pulse jumped when he ran up against the black space in his memory. He'd stepped off the path. He'd seen—something. Something important that had drawn him off the path. Then someone or something had— What? Struck him? Gassed him? Whammied him?

By the time he'd woken the first time, he'd already been in darkness. Being dragged. He remembered knowing he'd been taken, but not when, or where, or how. There'd been a grip on his ankles that had seemed to bite straight through his skin, down into bone. He searched his mind for clues from that brief window of consciousness, sounds, smells, sensations from the trip down here, but everything except that burst of sensation was lost. He'd just known that something was taking him down, taking him under, and beneath the panic, there'd been a paralyzing sense that that was right—

And the next time he'd woken, he'd been here.

Sam swallowed. There wasn't much light, but he couldn't stand here forever. He'd have to explore by touch.

He started with himself. It took scant seconds to confirm what he'd known since he first awoke: whatever had taken him had left him no weapons or tools. Knife, gun, keys, paperclips, wallet, Swiss army knife, bottle opener—all gone. Sam hissed as he probed at his back. His fingers came away tacky, and the skin across his back and sides stung as it pulled. He'd been dragged. That was probably how he'd lost his shoes and sock, but the rest of it had to have been taken deliberately. Whatever he was up against, it was capable of at least that much thought, and had enough of a plan for him to bother.

Was it in here with him?

Beyond abrasions and bruising, he seemed uninjured. One hand on the wall, he edged out into the darkness to his right. One step, two, three, four, five, six—his fingers abruptly jammed into a corner. He'd found the next wall. Brick, not concrete, and drier than the wall he'd woken up against. Sam traced horizontal lines of crumbling grout until suddenly the groove under his fingers bent upwards. He paused and then groped rapidly over the surface. The bricks were set in a ring to hold—

More bricks. His heart sank. There'd been an aperture there once, but it was long since sealed. Narraganset Bay had the oldest sewer system in the country. God only knew how many pockets there were like this, walled off as one part of the system fell out of use and was forgotten.

Still, he'd been dragged here, not teleported. If there was a way in, there had to be a way out.

None of the seventeen before him had found it, though.

Whatever. This was not the time to wallow. He turned, straining his eyes for a sense of the room, and stopped. The place he'd started was on his left, but he thought he'd seen— Yes. There. Somewhere in the blackness to his right, more light.

It was impossible to tell what it was or even how far away it was, but he couldn't control the sudden jump in his pulse at the sight of it. Which was idiotic. Whatever had brought him here would hardly leave him a lantern, never mind an open window.

Or maybe it would. Whatever was at work here, it seemed to have taken him because he'd
stumbled on something trying to trace Jacob Dorner. If it had a victim profile, Sam probably didn't fit it. Maybe the culprit would have realized that once it got him back here. Maybe it would have lost interest. Maybe it had just dropped him. Maybe he'd see Dean again in a matter of hours.

The thoughts flashed through his mind before he could prevent them, stupid and quickly suppressed. He, of all people, should have grown out of hoping for luck by now.

He looked for the indistinct light again. It was still there.

Cautiously he started towards it. His movements were still clumsy with cold and stupor, but he felt his way over the floor with small steps. Was the light getting closer, already? Closer, yeah, but no brighter. The darkness was thick to move through, pressed in on his sinuses. Raspy concrete, grit, water under the pads of his feet, water and stuff too slippery to be water—

Vertigo rolled up out of the murk around him, obliterating what sense he had of up and down just as he stepped out into nothing.

He went down hard and ugly. Pain blossomed along his arms, shins, and jaw as he body-surfed what felt like a rock slope to land abruptly against a concrete edge that drove the air from his body. He bit his tongue and made no sound. Keeping silent was reflex, to keep from giving his position away to anything in here with him, but probably pointless: something had made a clatter when he'd landed. He heard rats chitter as they scattered away from his fall. Lying there in the dark, Sam tried to work out the topology involved. He'd stepped off a ledge, tumbled downward, and was lying on an angular surface with his head lower than his feet. Stairs. The floor had dropped off into sewage-slick, oversized stairs.

Stairs weren't all he was lying on. Hard knobs dug into his abdomen, and his hand had instinctively closed on something. He knew the shape. It was a femur, sticky with traces of tissue. Sam shut his eyes, unclenched his fingers, and, carefully, wiped his hand off on his jeans.

Finally he pulled himself up and, defeated by the way the world lurched around him in the dark, crawled back up the stairs like a dog. He went back to the sickly light patch where he'd started, wrapped his arms around his knees, and let his head hang between them. Further exploration would have to wait. His head was just too fucked, and who knew what other kinds of abrupt holes there might be in the floor. He was reasonably sure he was in here alone, though, so at least he'd accomplished that much. He tried again to remember what he'd seen to lead him here, what had happened after he'd stepped off the path in the park—when? Yesterday? Today? An hour ago?

The last thing he could remember clearly was jumping aside to avoid the teenager bearing down on him on her bike. But for that, he thought, he'd never have seen whatever clue he'd followed. He was here by accident, by the dumbest of dumb luck. The good news, then, was that Dean probably would not be following him.

The bad news, of course, was that Dean probably would not be following him.

Sam lifted his head and looked out into the darkness. He could hear nothing but the rats.

Screw it. If there was something in here with him, its plans didn't include immediately killing him, and it would know he was awake by now, anyway. He gave into nature and weakness.

"Dean?" he called.

His voice sounded pathetic in his own ears. It echoed back to him unanswered. Another plink from somewhere. Sam laid his cheek against his knees and shut his eyes. Then:
"Hello?"

Sam jerked his head up. The voice was hoarse, male, unfamiliar. It had come from somewhere up on his left and had a faraway quality, as if he were hearing it down a pipe. It sounded like its owner had already tried screaming.

He heaved himself back up onto his knees. "Jacob Dorner?"

"Oh, thank God," the voice babbled. "Thank God, thank God, thank God. You gotta get me out of here, man, I am so ready to get out of here."

Sam grinned despite himself. Jacob Dorner had been missing two days when he and Dean had arrived in Providence, and he was still alive now. With two of them, their chances of finding a way out of here went up. For once, Sam wasn't too late.

"Hang on, Jacob, okay?" he called, moving unsteadily towards where he thought he'd heard the voice, one hand on the wall. "Are you hurt? Are you—"

"Shut up!" a woman's voice hissed. "Keep it down!"

Sam had only a moment to be stunned. It made sense for Jacob Dorner to be alive; he'd been missing for a matter of days. But the one before him, Lindsey Chase, had gone months before, couldn't still be—

Then something started to scream.

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_Canaan, Vermont, two days previously_

"Disappearances. In Rhode Island. Because that ended so well last time."

"Dean."

"Yeah, Sammy, sign me right the hell up for more of that. Oh. Wait. Sorry, got a little turned around, there; I meant no."

"This isn't the same," Sam snapped.

Dean tossed the newspaper Sam had handed him onto the table. "Really? Because man, the opening paragraph is giving me _déjà vu._"

"Will you calm down? Bristol is on the other side of the bay. Providence is a big town, Dean. Odds against us running into anyone from… from that other job are astronomical."

Dean ran his hands down his face and let them drop into his lap. He stared up at Sam. "You never learn, do you?"

Sam bridled at that, but he kept his voice level. "I've learned a thing or two. Thanks for asking."

"Kind of my point, Sam!"

"Look, I get that you're worried about me scratching the—the _wall_, or whatever, but the last time I was in Providence was in 2007. With you. Remember?"
It was plain that remembering took Dean several seconds, but he still came back with, "That you know of."

"You're being irrational. It's a—well, all right, it's not a big state, but it is still an entire U.S. state, and we can't treat the whole thing like it's radioactive. What am I supposed to do, ignore every job in the country because I might have passed through somewhere nearby with Samuel before?"

Dean stood from the motel room table and crossed to the minifridge. "That's a thought." He came up with a beer and popped the cap with his ring. "We could go south. All the way south. The cold sucks, and there's shit to hunt in Mexico."

"You don't speak Spanish, Dean."

"Yo quiero Taco Bell."

"Oh, my God, that isn't— You know what, I'm not doing this. I don't know what your problem is, but I'm not moving to Mexico. We're in the neighborhood, and this goes back far enough that it could be our kind of thing. We should check it out. Dad would."

It was a dirty move, but other than glaring, Dean didn't comment on it. He shoved the beer back in the fridge (uncovered), snagged his keys from the table, slung his jacket over his shoulders, and slammed the door behind him. Sam listened for the sound of the Impala's engine turning over, but it didn't come. Dean couldn't go far on foot and, given how cold a spring northern Vermont was having, he probably wouldn't be long about it. Sam settled in to wait.

He knew he was going to win this. He probably already had. Not because of the force of his arguments, but because Dean had been restless with the task of dealing with Rufus's empty house since before they'd even gotten there, and because as much as he couldn't seem to find one he liked the taste of, Dean hunted compulsively, these days. Not obsessively, not rabidly, not cramming as many kills into the shortest space possible the way he had when he'd first gotten back from Hell—and certainly nothing like what Sam had been able to reconstruct of the way he himself had hunted without a soul—but constantly. Pace seemed unimportant, so long as Dean was hunting something. Sam tried not to think too hard about exactly what exactly Dean was trying to forget, and that effort had nothing to do with Dean's warnings about scratching Death's wall.

Yet here Dean was, resisting a hunt. Except, of course, that it wasn't the hunt Dean had a problem with. Sam had lost count of how many times Dean had tried to pry Sam off his side with Take it easy, you just got back or Hey, Bobby heard of this library out in Wyoming, you should go geek out for a while or Believe me when I tell you that the things you don't know could kill you. Like any of that had ever mattered before, like Sam was infirm. Perhaps just a bit like when Sam spoke, whether to say I'm fine, actually or Hey, there's a vampire nest in the next state, Dean didn't really hear him. Like Sam wasn't quite real.

And maybe those were the times when, just for a moment, Sam's world wavered.

But Dean needed to be hunting, and Sam refused to stop hunting, so, seeming almost baffled, and maybe faintly pissed, Dean carried on hunting with Sam. Sam knew the unspoken threat making Dean bend: that if Dean didn't, Sam would simply hunt alone. Sam told himself that this was all in Dean's head.

They were not hunting now, though. They were outside Canaan, Vermont, because Bobby would not come. They'd buried Rufus, but there was still his material ghost to put to rest. When hunters died, it was better not to leave their homes to fall into the hands of unsuspecting civilians. There was no telling what sort of artifacts or sensitive information might be in there, and anyway, hunters
tended to booby trap their places. Sam and Dean knew that. Bobby knew that. But no matter what
updates they'd left on Bobby's answering machine, he'd stayed where he was: in Sioux Falls, buried
in books and bad whiskey. Grief had strange effects on people, sometimes.

Secretly, guiltily, Sam was glad. He had liked Rufus. Rufus had always shown a fundamental
indifference to Sam and Dean that Sam had found comforting. Getting to see the material traces of
his life, had been… nice. Sam had always known that Rufus was a good hunter and had suspected
he'd been a truly great researcher, but the same personal indifference Sam had liked about the man
had meant he couldn't simply invite himself into Rufus's library the way he did Bobby's. No
quantity of Johnnie Walker Blue, it had been clear, would have been payment enough for that.
Turned out, there was good stuff in there. Very good. Sam was looking forward to getting to read
it.

If he could ever take the time out to do it without Dean ditching him. For the most solicitous of
reasons, of course.

Sam emptied his half of the drawers into his duffel and then, shrugging, did Dean's. The alarm
clock between the beds (concave in the middle, upholstered in a fetching green and purple
houndstooth) read 9:49. After 11:00, they'd have to pay for another night, so he probably hadn't
long to wait.

Sure enough, the tide of checkout brought Dean back at around twenty past ten, scowling and
carrying a paper sack of road supplies. Sam had already put up the laptop and tipped out the maid.

Dean dumped the sack on the table, went to the fridge, withdrew the beer, took a swig, and made a
face. He then crossed to the bathroom and dumped the flat beer into the toilet. Sam waited
patiently for the sound of the bottle hitting the bottom of the trash can.

The sight of their duffels, sitting tidily beside the table, brought Dean up short. He paused, took
stock of the room, narrowed his eyes, and finally looked at Sam. Sam stared back. Dean's mouth
twisted in an emotion Sam would have been hard pressed to identify.

"Fine, where is this fucking hunt, exactly?"

Sam told him in the car. Dean had always preferred to hear things he didn't like while he was moving.
Chapter Summary

He wasn't alone. There were people alive down here. This was good news.

Probably.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Between a five-car pile-up on I-95 and the fact that Dean wasn't in any particular hurry to get there, they didn't make it into Providence until almost six o'clock in the evening. Their first stop was a bar. There was a reason for this. Working a case right next to a town where one of them was wanted for a) beating a cop half to death and b) escaping from jail after being arrested for beating a cop half to death was some grade-A dumbass bullshit. Dean had no broad philosophical objections to doing deeply stupid things, but he refused to do them on an empty stomach.

Since it was Sam's fault they were here at all, Dean made him get the first round and their food. He'd probably end up with a veggie burger or something that way, but he wanted a moment to check in with Bobby. At some point, it had become habit to copy Bobby on their movements, and he knew that Sam would never initiate the call himself now.

He knew it, and he hated it. For extra credit, he even tried to pretend he didn't understand it.

The call rang to voice mail, just like the previous dozen had. "This is Robert Singer. Don't bother leaving a message, because you shouldn't have this number. If you're going to do it anyway, keep it brief."

"Hey, Bobby." Dean sat at a corner table and surveyed a mural of a buxom half-woman, half-hot dog mermaid-type-thing lying in a bun and ecstatically squirting ketchup over one breast, mustard over the other. "Just FYI, we finished up at Rufus's. Grabbed some bits and pieces, cleaned up the curse boxes, dealt with the death traps. Should be safe for civilians in there, now." Dean cleared his throat. "So, anyway, me and Sam are down in Providence, gonna check out some missing persons. Probably nothing, but since we were in the neighborhood." The answering machine crackled static back at him. "Just… take a shower or something, all right? You stink."

He hung up. Bobby did stink right now. Dean didn't have to be within a thousand mile radius of the man to know that much.

Sam reappeared from the crowd around the bar just as Dean was pocketing his cell. He slid a longneck across the table to Dean and gestured with his chin.

"Bobby?" he asked. Dean hated the fake casualness in his tone.

"Voice mail, again."

Sam nodded, sat, drank from his beer, avoided meeting Dean's eyes. Dean knew there was more coming. "Think he's okay?" Sam asked finally.
What Dean wanted to say was, Yes. He's okay. You're okay. I'm okay. We're all okay together. We're a hell of a lot more okay than we have any right to be, despite everything, so stop tiptoeing around each other before we all stop being okay, because we broke the goddamned world once so what's a little attempted murder between friends?

What he said was, "Yeah, if his liver's survived this long, I'm sure this won't get him."

One side of Sam's mouth lifted humorlessly in acknowledgment.

Bobby hadn't so much asked Sam and Dean to pack up Rufus's house as he had expelled them from his, so that he could research obsessively and pretend it wasn't about Rufus free from interruption. He'd done it in this reality and in the one Balthazar had altered. In this reality, though, he didn't have Ellen and Jo to look out for him in their stead, and Dean was more concerned than he cared to admit. Sam was, too, that was plain, but communication between him and Bobby remained stilted and minimal. If Dean didn't know better, he would have said Sam seemed even guiltier since they'd buried Rufus, and he was too tired to try to work out what was going on with that.

They needed a vacation, and he'd yet to see any palm trees or bikinis in this town.

"So how many victims have you found, exactly?" Dean said, more because the way Sam kept turning his beer bottle between his fingers was driving him nuts than because he really wanted to think about the case right now.

That seemed to pull Sam back to himself some. "Twenty-six. I think. I mean, I know it's not a lot to go on. But superficially, at least, they all sound pretty similar."

"Remind me what your criteria for that were, again?"

Sam didn't rise to it. "Unsolved missing persons who all just vanished. No signs of break-in, no signs of struggle, no ties to the mafia, no known motives for leaving, no notice to anybody, no signs of financial preparation, no toothbrushes packed, no suspects, no physical evidence of any kind, nothing. All different ages and occupations. One day, these people were just gone."

Assuming a positive from a whole lot of negatives, in other words. It was a bare wisp of a pattern. And yet it could be something. Sam had a gift for finding the hairline cracks that turned out to be fault lines. Lately, that particular gift made Dean nervous.

"Did the vics all cross paths anywhere?"

They paused the conversation when the waitress delivered their food, chili dogs, good and sloppy. Dean noted that his came piled with enough onions to sink a ship; Sam must be feeling contrite. That or there was a really oblique comment in there somewhere about Dean's foul mood outranking onion breath. Hard to tell with Sam.

After a couple of minutes to start in on the dogs, Sam resumed. "Not that I can tell, but it's going to be hard to say for sure. I managed to hack police reports on a couple of the more recent ones earlier, but some of these cases are pretty old. Paper records only."

"People go missing like that all over the country, Sam. Even supposing they are connected, what makes you think it's not just a serial killer?"

"Operating since 1963?"

Dean glanced up in surprise. "That far back?"
"Yep."

Dean considered. That there was anything supernatural here was still far from a lock; there could be two generations of human agents behind the disappearances—unlikely, but they'd run up against stranger—or there could be no connection between them at all. But the time line certainly made it weirder.

Something occurred to Dean. "When'd you find this case, anyway?"

"Last night. Noticed the headline, ran a quick search to see if it smelled like anything." Sam ate another bite of his chili dog, chewed, swallowed. Eventually his eyes drifted up under the weight of Dean's stare. "What?"

"So you just happened to run across a case next door to spider central? Total accident, nothing to do with checking up on what you did last year?"

"Exactly how much of an asshole are you going to be about this?" Sam asked, civilly.

"Forgive me if I'm not jumping for joy over working a case right on top of the one that gave you a grand mal seizure and almost got us both killed."

"Providence, Dean. State capital. Couple hundred thousand inhabitants. It's not 'right on top of' anything except more Providence."

"We are fifteen miles away from Bristol, Sam. I can hawk a loogie farther than that."

"You know the mileage between Bristol and Providence just off the top of your head?"

Dean bristled at the skepticism. "Look, maybe school wasn't my thing for most subjects, but geography? Geography I've got. I took first place in a geography bee when I was seven, thank you very much."

Sam blinked. "You did?"

"Yes." Dean dug resentfully into his cheese fries. "So don't give me any condescending bullcrap about how totally and amazingly safe this is."

Dean waited for the rejoinder, but none came. Finally he glanced up. Sam was gazing across the table at him with this sort of soft, doe-eyed look. "I never knew that," he said.

Dean glared. "Shut up."

"Seven?"

"Shut the fuck up."

"I wish I could remember that," Sam said, still with the dopey face.

It took physical effort for Dean to unclench his jaw. "Twenty-four hours," he said. "We give this thing a day. Then, when we don't find anything supernatural about it, we pack up go find a Monster Mash somewhere in SoCal. Deal?"

Sam's tender expression finally broke into the edge of a grin he swiftly hid behind his beer. "Deal."

That was settled, then.
Dean should have felt better that Sam gave in so easily. He didn't.

Sam pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, took a deep breath, dropped them, and stared at the laptop screen. 1:48 a.m. Eight hours out of twenty-four gone, and he had approximately dick. He already regretted agreeing to Dean's ultimatum.

Or, hell, maybe he just regretted this whole trip. Providence was a regrettable town.

Some cases would break right open if you just tapped them in the right place. There'd be some convenient fact—a detail the responding officer had left out of his report because he'd just assumed he was going crazy, a place the victims had all visited, a shaman they'd all pissed off—just waiting for you to tug on it like a pull-tab and you'd basically be done except for the salting, burning, shooting, stabbing, disemboweling, decapitating, exhuming, burying, banishing, cleansing, exorcising, blessing, thieving, bombing, and/or chemical dissolution. The jobs worked themselves, practically.

Then there were the ones where extracting useful information was like trying to wring lucidity out of a septuagenarian Grateful Dead roadie.

This was shaping up to be one of the latter. Sam had been at this all night, and all he'd been able to find was crude personal data on these people that, if anything, only served to reinforce how little he had. Even focusing on the more recent names and their fresher cases, he couldn't find a clear direction.

Jacob Dorner, 33. Missing two days. Pharmaceutical sales rep and BU alum on an athletic scholarship. Had lived alone; parents both living (in Florida); one sibling, deceased: his fraternal twin. A sister. She'd died in some freak gym accident when they were 18. Her obit and a short piece in the local paper had come up in Sam's preliminary searches on Jacob. He couldn't help wondering if they'd been close.

Lindsey Chase, 27. Missing almost five months. Home health aide with an elder care agency. One surviving stepparent (Connecticut) and a maternal aunt (local); no siblings. From the handful of police documents Sam had been able to find, it looked like the aunt, not the stepfather, had been the driving force in what efforts were made to search for Lindsey. But nothing had ever been found, and the aunt's calls to the police station had gradually petered out. The last one had been almost a month ago and took half a line to document in the case file.

Anthony Marquez, 57. Missing for eight months. Reasonably successful real estate investor with the stereotypical hobbies of same, home down in East Greenwich. Married for 37 years (to the same wife, no less). He'd been just distinguished enough that the local papers had tried to make a big story out of his disappearance, but it had been hard going: no likely suspects had surfaced beyond the standard investigation of his immediate family, and no trace of mob connections, embezzlement, crooked land banking, or financial schemes based in the Caymans had ever materialized. The most shocking thing police and journalists had been able to uncover about Marquez was how unobjectionable his finances had actually been, which probably explained the modesty of his fortune.

Brendan Whitmore, 25. Missing for just over a year. Desk clerk at a local hotel that seemed to have peaked in the 1960s. Both parents living (local), along with a brother (older, in Wisconsin) and a sister (younger, local). Little information was available on Brendan. Like Lindsey Chase, he belonged to what seemed to journalists to be a forgettable class, and the tenor of the interviews on file with the Providence PD suggested that his family were not particularly shocked at his disappearance. He'd been living with a girlfriend, but apparently she hadn't been passionate enough
about him to notice he was gone: he's been reported missing by his family after a call from his workplace. Police had found nothing at the apartment that impressed them enough to record, and the girlfriend had moved out a few months later when the lease was up. Most of the follow-up calls made to the police about Brendan had been made by the sister.

Cara Pryor, 29. She, too, had been missing for just over a year. She'd moved to Providence for work two months before, something faceless and corporate. Newspaper reports of her were minimal. At first Sam assumed that this was because she was so new to town, but her tiny Iowa hometown, though apparently aware of her disappearance, ran it in a half-sentence blurb in an "other news" section on page four. Probably had kept to herself, then—no notable connections to raise a fuss. In contrast, her police file showed a lot of interviews and canvasses. They'd kept it quiet, but it looked like someone in the Providence PD had had reason to suspect foul play. Possibly they still did: the most recent interview, with the attendant at a gym she'd used, was dated just two months ago. Her parents were living in Iowa and had had nothing useful to offer the investigation.

Marian Daniels, 47. Missing twenty-two months. Divorced mother of three, office manager at Cap in Your Crown dentistry in Manton. Her three children had long since moved out of state to live with their father. She had no criminal record, an unremarkable credit record, and was, to all appearances, mourned by her family, her colleagues, and her local branch of MADD.

And so on. And on, all the way back to the JFK assassination. Different ages, different genders, different ethnicities, different occupations, different tax brackets. They'd lived and worked all over the city—all over the Narragansett Bay area, in fact. They'd been loved, loathed, and everything in between.

There was, in fact, no reason whatever to suppose that a given supernatural entity had done anything to any of them, much less all of them.

In a fit of pique, Sam hit close-all on the browser tabs and slammed the laptop shut. Then he sat in darkness, because the blue tint of the screen had been the room's only light.

Dean was asleep. Sam could just barely hear his breathing, soft, regular. Better sleep than he'd been getting lately, then. Better than Sam could remember Dean getting since… since he'd returned. Not that that was a useful measure, since he'd returned. It seemed unlikely that Dean had slept any better while he was sharing digs with the version of Sam that never slept and had used him as an experiment (just the once. Just the once that Dean knew about. Please, God, let it have been just the once). Before that, then? How had Dean slept with Lisa?

He didn't have the right to even wonder about that.

Sam let the dark and quiet sit on him, soothing his headache. He should actually be glad of Dean's ultimatum, he decided. It was going to give him an out. Dean was hung up on the times Sam had been in Bristol, across the bay, but Sam found that he was, to his own frustration, hung up on the time that he had actually been here, in Providence, even though Dean seemed almost to have forgotten it outright. For a scant day or so, back then, before the lie showed through, it had been their first brush with angels.

Screw this town. The police stations all seemed to share one document scanner between them, the curb appeal was dismal, and some public-spirited individual really needed to swing by Brown with thermite and a masonry drill and deliver the world from that fucking motto. Sam had brought them here on a fool's errand. He should just admit that he'd dragged them here over nothing, go through the motions until the clock ran out, and let Dean drive them back out of here without a fight. He
should.

He should just let it go, and let Dean think that, yeah, he'd cracked, that he was cracked, and that it
was probably better for everyone not to take anything he said too seriously.

(Had Dean felt like this around Sam, back when he'd first gotten back from Hell?—No, don't think
it, it wasn't the same and he hadn't any right—)

"Sam."

Sam started slightly. He twisted in his chair. Dean lay on his side, unmoving under the covers, eyes
cracked and just visible in the ghost light that leaked in around the drapes from the parking lot.

"Go the fuck to sleep." Dean's eyes glittered in the dark for a moment longer, then shut again.

Sam watched him for a long moment. Then he stood, stripped, and folded his outer clothes away
(no gore and no grave dirt, good for a second or third wearing). The numbers on the radio clock on
the night stand were green. 2:17 a.m.

He peeled down the thin, plastic-slick comforter on his bed, climbed between the sheets, shut his
eyes, and listened for Dean's breathing. He couldn't hear it anymore.

Slowly, carefully, but still with a quiet creak of springs, he turned onto his side and tried to empty
his mind. They'd be gone this time tomorrow. There was nothing here.

Now

The screaming was wordless and thoughtless. For several seconds, Sam thought he was hearing
some kind of animal, though he couldn't figure out which. Then he heard the second voice shriek
through it:

"You woke her up! You fucking woke her up!"

Sam wasn't sure he could have made himself heard even if he'd had an answer. The screaming
obiterated the silence. It was relentless, battering itself to pieces against the walls with barely
enough time between blasts to believe that whoever was doing it was taking breaths. It drove right
through his sinuses and into his brain. Between the state of his head and just how loud it was, it
was hard to say exactly where the screams were coming from, but it seemed almost like they came
from somewhere above him.

"Well, I'm sorry!" Dorner shouted back. His voice was edged with hysteria. "Jesus, can't you shut
her up?"

Apparently she could. A minute later, there was a muffled thud, and the screaming trailed off into
sobbing. Sam felt queasy.

The silence—the relative quiet, anyway—was uncomfortable on just about every level. Sam
shivered, pressed his eyes shut, and made himself breathe steadily. There were questions to ask,
now. Obvious ones, hanging right in front of him. It shouldn't have been so difficult to think of
what they were.
He wasn't alone. There were people alive down here. This was good news. Good.
Sam made his tongue work. "Are you Jacob Dorner?" he called, quietly.
There was a pause. Then, also quietly, "Yeah."
"Who else is there?"
"Please get me out," Jacob said instead of answering. "Please."
"Who's there?" Sam asked again.

There was a shuffling sound, perhaps someone moving closer to his voice. "I'm Lindsey." It was the woman who'd told them to be quiet; the fury was gone, and now her voice just sounded thin and exhausted. "I'm Lindsey."

"Lindsey, Jacob, I'm Sam."
"Are you going to get us out of here, or what?"—Jacob again.
Sam ignored him. "Lindsey, who else is in here?"
"He can't get us out," Lindsey said dully, answering Jacob, not Sam. "It brought him here same as us. I told you."
"My brother's looking for me, Lindsey," he said. "He'll find us."
"He won't."

Sam's headache ratcheted up a notch. This was not helping. Together, they might have a chance of escaping, but only if he could counter Lindsey's despair. He needed them believing that they had a future. "Yes, he will. He's looking for us now, and believe me, he won't give up."

"My aunt probably never gave up, either," she said viciously. Sam stayed silent and didn't tell her that, in fact, her aunt pretty much had. "She's probably been to everybody from the cops to the newspapers to Mulder and fucking Scully. Think your brother's going to be any different?"

"Trust me," said Sam, "we're different."

The throbbing in his head was becoming rhythmic; it felt as if the air itself were flexing in on him, over and over, pressing on his eyes and his ears and his sinuses. An oily, prickly sensation skittered over his skin, like a hundred thousand burrowing mites. What the hell had whammied him?

The second woman was still crying, quietly. "Please, God," Jacob said, "you've got to get me out of here. Please."

"Lindsey." Sam put every ounce of authority and rationality he could into his voice. "Who's crying?"

At first, Sam thought she wasn't going to answer him. Finally she said, "Marian something. That's all I know."

It took Sam a very long time to make his thoughts work. For a while the information just sat there in his mind. Then, almost unconsciously, he began to count backwards through the names. Jacob, Lindsey, Anthony, Brendan, Marian. Marian Daniels, number twelve of seventeen.
She'd been gone almost two years.

Before he could even formulate his next question, the air went suddenly charged. Electricity—not a metaphor; the real deal—zinged through his nerves, thin and sharp as a needle. The pounding behind his eyes intensified and it seemed as if the darkness rippled into and through him, like a living, infecting thing.

The walls began to bleed.

Had it not been so dark, Sam might not have seen it. The glowing patch beside his head seemed to intensify; then, as he watched, he realized that the dark filaments in the glowing fluid seemed to be unspooling faster, curling, streaming, elongating into fattening bubbles of ooze. More of whatever the substance was was being forced between the concrete seams. Drops of it welled up, distended, and dripped slowly down the surface of the wall. A shockwave of cold rushed through the air, and Sam heard Jacob Dorner give one hoarse shout.

Somewhere, Marian Daniels was still crying. Sam realized that there were words hitched in between the sobs:

"It's coming. It's coming. It's coming."

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: I don't actually have anything against Brown University; I just needed a throwaway line for Sam to be grouchy about Providence. The motto he's pissed off about, by the way, is In deo speramus (In God we hope).

I've taken liberties with the Narragansett Bay sewer system and will take plenty more. Providence's sewers are among the oldest (and coolest) in the nation, though, even if there's no supernatural horror lurking in them. Probably.
the thin ice of modern life

Chapter Summary

Sam thinks he knows what he's fighting. Dean thinks he knows how to get his brother out in one piece. They're both wrong.

Chapter Notes

So many apologies to the residents of Providence, RI. I don't know shit about that town.

"Jacob! Jacob, hang on!"

The floor pitched and rolled when Sam tried to get his feet under him. "Jacob, look for iron!"

A long, thin sound snaked out of the air. It sounded like nothing so much as a seething pipe, but human. Horribly human. It waned into silence.

"Jacob?" Sam found purchase on the wall. "Is it in there with you? Can you see it?"

The pounding had gone from his sinuses, and the sharp cold was receding. But Sam could still feel the prickling across his skin, and the air was made up of slow, syrupy waves of wrongness. It was getting harder and harder to breathe. Water trickling; rats scratching; Marian sobbing; no sound at all from Jacob.

"He can't hear you," Lindsey said. She might have been discussing the weather.

"Is he— Did it kill him? Where are you? Are you in the same room as Jacob? Can you see what's happening?"

"Kill him? No. It's just visiting."

Sam tried that sentence from every angle. "What?"

"It came to visit him." Some of the vitriol was creeping back into her voice. "I told him it would. And it'll visit you before long, too."

"What do you mean?"

"It visits us. It's what we're here for, I guess. I don't know. It's not human."

Sam leaned against the wall and shut his eyes. It made barely any difference to what he could see. "Yeah, I know. It's a spirit. A ghost."

She snorted.
"Lindsey, I'm serious. I don't know what kind, and I don't know how the hell it's doing what it's doing, but it's definitely a spirit. I've felt that kind of cold too many times before not to know. My brother and I—we hunt them."

"Wow. Most people have to be down here ages to get as crazy as you."

"Your name is Lindsey Chase." Talking was difficult; his tongue felt thick in his mouth, like he might throw up at any moment. "You're from Federal Hill. You're a geriatric caregiver. Your aunt is Mildred Shandy. You've been gone almost five months."

She didn't answer for a while. Then, finally: "Five months?"

Sam let his breath out. "Yeah. Sorry."

Her voice was tiny. "Is Marmee okay?"

Presumably that was her aunt. Kind of a delicate question, under the circumstances. She's peachy, Linds; called the police station every day for a while, but, y'know, life goes on, and now your room's a scrapbooking studio. Looks like a pretty sweet set-up. "Yeah, Lindsey, she's fine, but I still need to know what's going on. The ghost—whatever—what did it do to Jacob?"

"It's doing it right now. It's—I can't explain. It visits you."

Sam's temper flared. That wasn't an answer, and she wasn't even trying. "I can't help you if you won't talk to me."

"You can't help me no matter what."

For several minutes, something had been nagging at him. All at once Sam realized that it was the blank space in the conversation where Marian Daniels should have been. If Lindsey couldn't or wouldn't give him answers, maybe she would. "Marian?" he called. "Marian, what's it doing? What's it look like? Please, answer me! We need to help Jacob!"

"She doesn't talk." Lindsey's voice was flat again. "Not anymore."

Sam ignored her. "Marian, I'm Sam Winchester. Can you hear me?"

Nothing.

He was buried alive. The air was so thick with malevolent energy that he could barely breathe. There were at least three other people down here. None of them had ever gotten out, and they'd had ample opportunity to try.

Dean.

Before he could stop it, Sam found himself retching. The cold and the nausea were too much, and his body shook with the effort of holding himself up against the wall. Distantly, he heard Lindsey's voice, laden with incredulity and disgust: "Did you just puke? Great. That's great. At this rate, you'll last even less time than the last one."

Sam spat and turned away from the pile. He'd spattered his bare foot with his own vomit and he had corpse residue under his fingernails and this place was literally awash in shit but he couldn't think about any of that right now, he really couldn't, and oh, God, he needed to wash his hands. Dean. Dean.
"Lindsey, this is important. I need to know about the… thing that took us. You must have seen it. Heard it. Something. I think it's probably a spirit, but there are all kinds of different spirits even if I'm right." He tried to make his voice compassionate, reasonable. "Look, even if I am a nutcase, what do you have to lose?"

Her voice, when it came, was hesitant, almost childlike. Her moods swung like a weather vane. "It — I don't know, okay? It just—it just comes and lies down in you. I used to think it would be awesome to be able to walk through walls, you know, when I watched cartoons as a kid. It isn't. It's horrible. And even when it takes you all the way out, outside, it's never like you're out. Because you aren't. For a long time I used to think, I'm gonna get out this time. If I can just shake it off of me while it's riding me outside…. But then I come to and I'm right back here. Never left. Because it's riding you, but you're riding in it more."

Sam tried to sift through her fragmentary explanation. "It possesses you?"

"Call it whatever you want."

None of it made sense. Ghosts kidnapped people, yes; ghosts possessed people, yes; but they didn't keep people as pets, and no amount of supernatural possession would let someone with a flesh-and-blood body walk through a concrete wall without becoming mostly blood and nothing recognizable as flesh. She had to be describing some sort of mental trip, then. A ghost-induced dream. But why? What did a ghost need a body for if it wasn't using the body? What the hell was this thing doing?

Lindsey seemed very confident that he was going to find out.

"Spirits, they all want something. What does it want?"

"Don't you think I've asked it?" she broke out. "It doesn't listen. I'm not sure it can. It doesn't listen, doesn't talk. It's like Marian, but worse."

Sam felt his way along the wall, moving unsteadily towards the sound of her voice. "You said it takes you over. You must have gotten some kind of a sense while it was possessing you, some feeling."

Plink. Plink.

"Lindsey?"

"It's looking for something," she said finally.

He had to act. Had to get these people out of here, had to get back to Dean. First of all he had to figure out this room. Arm himself, if he could. Maybe one of the skeletons in here had left something. Tools, weapons, metal fragments, something, anything. Then he'd figure out how to get to Jacob and Lindsey and Marian. Then… then…

The world tipped to the side. He felt the wall scrape over his shirt, then the floor under his cheek. He had about enough time to hope he hadn't gone down in his vomit before he lost consciousness.

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One day prior

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Dean flexed his hand over the grip of his Colt and advanced through the dark. The street was too
quiet.

He signaled with his free hand, a nearly invisible gesture that was all they ever needed between them. But Sam was already a dozen feet up the alley, disappearing through the warehouse's side door.

How had he gotten so far ahead?

Dean chased after him, got the door open, and swung around into the thicker darkness of the warehouse. High windows let in red light that didn't penetrate the murk. He could just barely see Sam across the huge room, jogging into the pitch-black guts of the place, weapon out. Dean swore silently and followed.

The warehouse was a labyrinth. Offices, corridors, dead machines. Dean could barely keep Sam in sight; there was no time to ask what he'd seen, what they were running towards. Then he rounded a corner and Sam was gone. The dull red exit sign showed nothing but empty hallway. Dean pulled up short. He listened, straining—there. Muffled footfalls in a stairwell.

Now he was tumbling out the door at the bottom of the stairs and out into the cool moonlight. Sam's back was pale in his jacket, away down the road.

Unease stirred in the pit of Dean's stomach as he pursued. They were supposed to be chasing it, but anything could have happened in the blank stretch of the warehouse. It could have circled around behind them. There was no way to know.

The dark street gained a sidewalk; then trees; then houses. The houses firmed up. White clapboard, white mailboxes, gray shutters, black lawns. Windows were dark. Everything was still. No cars anywhere. Dean just about caught up to Sam, that beige jacket almost within grasping distance, and the disquiet he felt eased slightly. But then he realized that he didn't know where the hell they were.

Dean had a stellar sense of direction. He could navigate between any two major U.S. cities without once using an interstate or a map, but he always felt just a little bit turned around in subdivisions. Everything looked the same in a deep way that overrode the helpful street signs and he'd never gotten used to it, the whole year. They were like that place in that book Sammy had liked when he was little, the one with the girl and the not-witches and the tesseract. That place where the kids bounced balls and screamed.

Didn't that book have angels in it?

Sam disappeared around the corner of a house.

Dean was walking at least as fast as Sam, but he kept losing the ground he gained. Sam was getting ahead and Dean was falling behind into a rising static of gold and blood. He passed underneath a streetlight, and its rays pounded into his skull, violently, as violently as the rushing blood and pulsing hearts all around him pounded on his ears. Had it gotten behind them? He hoped so.

Whatever it was, he'd drain it dry—

Then he was out of the streetlight and out of the chaos, cutting across a lawn. The grass was cool and wet and silent.

Sam disappeared around a hedge.

This house had its porch light on. Lisa stood in the door; when she saw Dean, she put her arm around Ben, turned, and vanished into the darkened house. At the same instant, Dean saw a flash
of tan jacket at the open garage door. Sam. *No.* Dean's pulse jumped in his throat and he ran, caught the door before it had even closed—

—but Sam wasn't going through the door into the house. He was going out by the side door. The latch of the interior door clicked; it swung just barely open, showing a sliver of the kitchen beyond. Dean didn't turn toward it, didn't slow down. He vaulted over the trunk of Lisa's sedan after Sam.

The thing they were hunting could be anywhere, by now. It could be behind them instead of in front of them and Lisa's kitchen door was open. Sam passed through a pale garden gate.

Back onto the sidewalk. Streetlights were winking out, one by one. Dean chased after his brother.

He put on a burst of speed until Sam was only a few yards ahead. "Sam!" he hissed, loud as he dared. Sam didn't hear him.

A rushing sound came over the tops of the trees. Dean ran, but felt his stomach plummet as he realized he was no longer trying to catch up. The house ahead sat in a bare lawn. A poisonous golden glow seeped around the edges of the door as they approached it.

"*Sam!*

Sam disappeared through the door without looking back. The light grew in the windows.

It grew, and it grew—

Dean started awake.

It was a quick, hypnic jerk that brought him to with fear in his mouth but translated into barely a twitch of outward motion. Dean hated waking up this way. Whatever nightmare had forced him out of itself always slammed the door after him, as gone from his memory as if it had never been recorded, but somehow that was still worse than when he woke gasping and the pictures drenched his mind for days.

He lay, eyes still closed, feeling almost paralyzed for several long seconds. There wasn't enough warmth or comfort in this bed to be worth trying to hang onto, though, so finally he let his eyes slit open.

The opposite bed was empty.

Dean sat up and threw off the covers, right hand closing around the .45 under his pillow. "Sam?"

But he knew already that the room was empty. For a ludicrous moment, his pulse spiked. Then he saw the note on the nightstand, sticking up in a little folded tent. He picked it up and thunked the .45 down in its place. *Going to Brown cops @ vic's apt this a.m. check your email.* Right. The radio clock read 7:17. Dean stared balefully at Sam's military-neat bed, made more tightly than the maids had ever done it. The asshole had gotten dressed, made his bed, and left, and Dean hadn't even woken up. That was a thing that had apparently happened and therefore could happen again.

"*Jesus,*" Dean muttered. He dragged his forearm across his face. "Why the fuck are we *here.*"

Didn't matter. Didn't matter that this whole town gave him the heebs, either. Just a few more hours to make it through.
Sam held a pen poised over his steno pad. "So how well would you say you know Jacob?"

"Uhhh…." Coach Darden Babcock inserted a fingertip into his ear and rotated it. Twenty yards out from the dock on which they stood, a long, needle-like boat shot past, oars flashing. "Still see him at races from time to time, but it's been ten years since I coached him, you know? I guess I know him medium-well."

"Medium-well," Sam repeated.

"Yuh-huh."

"And about how well is that?"

Babcock looked faintly perplexed. Sam didn't think it was the question; it seemed to be more or less permanent. "I guess I remember him better than I might have because of what happened to his sister. She died," he added helpfully. "Summer before he started here. We were all real worried about him, he was a top thirty sculler, but he did okay."

"So what was he like?"

"Good kid. Popular. Kind of edgy that first semester, but like, fair enough, right? Anyway, he kept up with the team, kept up with his schoolwork, and he seemed better after that first break. More, uh, confident, you know? Outgoing. Real confident guy, real sociable. KIRSCMHAN!"

Sam jumped. Babcock screamed across the water, face purple: "WHY IS YOUR GUT OUT? ARE YOU PREGNANT? DID YOU EAT YOUR COXSWAIN? SUCK IT IN AND ROW!"

Babcock turned back to Sam, wide-eyed and mild, veins deflating in his temples. Sam cleared his throat. "Um. So, um. He was well liked?"

"Oh, yeah."

"What about enemies? Grudges?" He kept his expression as neutral as possible. "Any strange behaviors, untoward interests?"

"Oh, nah."

"So he was solid and dependable and popular. Who was close to him?"

"Oh, I dunno."

Sam counted to ten. He'd been getting answers of this caliber all morning, and he found himself wrestling with an itch to just start shooting people in the kneecaps and see what happened.

Jacob Dorner, everyone agreed, was a popular guy. Confident. Fun. Good at parties. He had bosses and coworkers who all hoped he was okay, wherever he was, because he was a great guy, you know, competitive but a real team player. He had rowing buddies at a mid-priced boat club who considered him at least second choice for inviting along on any sort of outdoor endeavor. He had a string of ex-girlfriends who remembered him as fun to go out with, okay in bed, and sad but gracious when they all decided to move on. He had phone records full of acquaintances who all agreed that he was absolutely the guy you wanted to help you move a couch. He had a coffee shop downstairs from his office where the barista remembered him as a regular and a good tipper.

What he did not seem to have was any close friends at all. No one who could say why he might have disappeared, where he might have gone, whether he believed in God, where he bought his
clothes, if he'd been afraid of anything. His most recent girlfriend seemed genuinely upset that he was missing and likely dead, but had never lived with him and couldn't even remember what they'd liked to talk about. Did he have any hobbies, aside from rowing? Probably, said the girlfriend. Did he have any routines? Yes, she knew that he jogged most mornings and hit the gym most afternoons. Did she know what routes, what gym? No, Jacob had liked to go alone. Did he ever say, do, or mention anything weird? Anything at all? No. Never. Completely normal.

No one was completely normal to the people who truly knew them. But no one seemed to know Jacob Dorner that well.

Had Sam's attention been drawn to Jacob as an individual, rather than as one name in a pattern, he'd have probably focused on his sister's death. It was the one thing in the man's blandly upper-middle life that had not gone to plan. The only real thing, Sam found himself thinking, that had ever happened to him at all, until he'd gone missing.

"What can you tell me about the sister?" he asked on impulse. "Did Jacob ever seem…" He spread his hands and kept his expression innocent. "…haunted by her death?"

Babcock scritched at the side of his ball cap. "Uh. Not really?" he offered. "He took it better than I would've taken a thing like that. She was a rower, too, real, real gifted, had a scholarship here just like her brother. They used to pull together, so I guess they were pretty close, think she was his twin. He only ever talked about her once—PORT PRESSURE! PORT PRESSURE!"

Sam waited for Babcock's complexion to return to normal. "What did he say?"

"Not much. See, Jacob was good, but he was never going to go pro. But it didn't seem to bother him, and most kids, that would bother them. Like, they all have the drive, but only so long as they think they're going to go to the Olympics some day. Then when it doesn't shape up that way they lose focus and quit on you. Not Jacob. So I asked him where he got that kind of sportsmanship at his age, and he told me that after watching his sister go like that, nothing else seemed that significant."

Sam paused. "Wait a minute. He watched her die?"

"Messed up, right? They were working out together. Some sort of accident with the weights, or something. She got trapped, or something. I don't even know where I heard that much about it, someone in admissions probably, it sure wasn't from Jacob. That one time was about the most he ever talked about her."

"Huh."

"Yeah."

"Mr. Babcock, when's the last time you saw Jacob?"

"He came out for the alumni erg sprints in February. Hey." He brightened. "His times were terrible. Maybe something was wrong?"

Sam stared at him. "That— That could be, I guess." His phone vibrated in his pocket. "Thanks for your time, Mr. Babcock."

"Yeah, no problem. DAVIES!"

Sam hastened away from the docks before he picked up the call, the phone buzzing irritably the while. He didn't bother to look at the caller ID. "Hey."
"Jesus, finally. Jerk it in the shower like a normal workaholic."

Sam glared at a passing squirrel. "I was just wrapping up an interview," he told Dean, and asked, pointedly, "You have something?"

"Got a great big pile of squat. Been working my way through the info you emailed; hit up the Fourth District station to see what I could get on the one before Dorner, Nurse Lindsey. They're not as tight-assed about it if you want to poke around in the stale stuff."

"Good thinking."

"Yeah, except nothing they forked over tells us anything we didn't already know. So do you want to get some grub, or what?"

He started to accept, then remembered that Dean had them on a timetable. Dean had them on a timetable, and he was trying to find every little way he could to run down the clock and get them out of this town without ever getting any real work done, and he wasn't even being subtle about it.

Sam could say something. He could not say something, but refuse to go and instead use every agreed-upon hour to work. That was probably what he should do. But instead he said, "Yeah, sure. But give me a couple of hours; you can pick me up at the library here." And he rattled off the address for the Rockefeller library, ignored Dean grousing about What am I, your chauffeur?, and jogged the last few yards to catch the campus shuttle that was just pulling in up ahead.

Dean didn't think that Sam knew. Dean never did, when he tried to make Sam's decisions for him.

* * *

"Hot wieners," Dean said happily.

College Hill was lousy with restaurants, but Dean had rejected all of them on the grounds that if they had to be here, they weren't leaving without taking time to appreciate Providence's one contribution to higher culture: Olneyville NY System. There was a location not too far from Jacob Dorner's apartment, so Sam went with it.

"So still no overlaps between these people?" Dean asked as they joined the line to order. "Nothing in common at all that could tell us what we're looking for, here?"

Two hours in the library had whittled twenty-six names down to seventeen. Of the other nine, Sam had eventually been able to find some likely trace: bodies that turned up states away, hints of new lives started across the country. And it was possible that the remaining cases had explanations that were just as mundane. Still, he couldn't let go of the thoroughness and abruptness with which those seventeen had vanished. Something else nagged at him, too: plotting the frequency of disappearances gave not a random distribution, not a line, but an exponential curve.

They were being taken faster.

"Not yet. But there's something, Dean. We just have to keep digging."

"We've got…" Dean checked the time on his phone. "…six hours to wrap this one, Sammy. Just a reminder."

"Six hours to find evidence of supernatural involvement. Just a reminder."

"I'm telling you, Sam, I've been all over those files and I just don't see anything. There isn't even
one place where they all went missing from for us to check out." They arrived at the front of the
line and Dean leaned against the counter, xylophoning his knuckles against the edge of the
formica. "Hey, yeah, uh, gimme a Coke and three hot wieners, please."

The old, kind of frighteningly intense guy behind the register scrawled on a ticket. "How you want
'em dressed?"

"All the way."

The man nodded curtly, like this was the only correct answer.

"Sure you want to take those hot wieners all the way, Dean?" Sam asked blandly.

"Serious? You drag me along on the world's most bullshit case and you're going to begrudge me
some onions?"

Fucking with Dean was always the most fun when Dean didn't even catch on.

The wiener man gave Sam the unamused look of someone who's heard the same joke every day for
forty years. Sam gave his order (salad and a wiener, undressed, evidently not the correct answer)
and they headed for a table. "If they didn't all go missing from the same place, then they probably
weren't victims of opportunity," Sam said, sliding into the booth across from Dean. "They were
chosen. If they were chosen, there had to be criteria. There's something connecting them."

"Yeah, but is it a supernatural something?"

"Might be. Found out something interesting about Jacob Dorner just before you called. Remember
that he had a sister who died? Apparently he watched it happen. And apparently, it was on the
freaky side. She was benching and the bar slipped, crushed her throat. This girl was a serious
rower; she could probably bench as much as you"—Dean snorted.—"and she definitely knew basic
safety protocols. Jacob basically never talked about it to anyone. Not to his parents, not to his
friends, not to his coaches. Maybe he saw something."

"Okay, I can see why I'd care about this if we were investigating her death, but we aren't. Didn't
even happen in the same state. You're reaching, bro."

"Yeah, okay, admittedly, but as far as the public record goes, it's the weirdest thing ever to happen
to any of them." Sam shrugged. "Maybe if we dig far enough, we'll find something similar on all of
them. Maybe it's about loss."

"So you're thinking, what—some kind of curse?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"That's a lot of maybes."

Sam ignored this. "Tell me about what the cops have."

One of Dean's conditions for taking this case had been that Sam was banned from impersonating
police. Sam didn't mind; Dean was right, for one thing, and anyway it was good to keep in practice
impersonating other random authority figures, fictional relatives, and trustworthy journeymen. It
kept the mind limber. Like crossword puzzles.

Dean pried a wad of napkins out of the dispenser. "Freshest one, Lindsey Chase? She went for her
lunch break at the nursing home where her agency had her and never came back. Coworkers said
she usually ate in the neighborhood park, even in winter, so she could smoke. Police didn't find anything suspicious there, but it was two days before they checked. I went by and had a look at it; it's pretty much just a picnic bench and a glorified drainage ditch, but there's enough cover that somebody might have been able to snatch her without being seen. There's no sign any of the others ever set foot in the place, though, and your banker, Marquez, definitely didn't. A dude sold him flowers on the other side of town maybe fifteen minutes after his secretary saw him leave work. He was walking from his office to meet his wife for dinner and never showed."

"What about gyms? And this might sound weird, but did he do any boating?"

"Nah. Talked to Mrs. Marquez; sounds like he was strictly a landlubber. He wouldn't even go on a cruise with her. He did belong to a gym, but it was the one in their little gated community. None of the others went anywhere near there, and I don't think Lindsey Chase even knew what gyms are for."

A food runner slid their orders across the table, the smell of onions and chili rising up with the steam. Dean tucked a napkin into the collar of his Faux Fed couture.

"Three hot wieners, Dean?" Sam said. "Really think you can take that many?"

"Well breakfast was at fuck me o'clock, thanks to your overdeveloped work ethic, so, yeah." Dean took a bite and chewed with his mouth half open, a blissed-out look on his face. "How's your salad, Francis?"

"Green. How's that hot wiener?"

"Pretty damned good. Skipping the chili was a mistake, I'm telling you."

"I dunno. That one looks like a mouthful."

"Sammy, are you intimidated by my hot wiener?"

"It is pretty thick." A gob of chili splatted into the basket when Dean went to take a bite. "Not much good if it's just going to go off in your lap, though."

"You've got the wrong attitude for eating hot wieners, Sam. It's supposed to be a pleasurable experience. You gotta get your hands dirty."

"Hey, I'm not a prude. I've had my share hot wieners. Just because I won't eat any hot wiener—"

"Ohh, I see how it is. You act all picky, but really you just want your hot wieners naked in your mouth."

Two glasses were slammed down onto the table between them, right next to their empties. The man from the register glared at them and stalked away.

Dean looked levelly at Sam while he chewed the last of his food. "Hot wieners are serious business."

Sam agreed with a tilt of an eyebrow. He wiped his (chili-free, thanks) fingers and stretched his legs under the table. "All right. We should get moving. The police are probably done with Dorner's apartment by now, so I'm going to check it out. What about you?"

"I started looking at the next one back, Brendan Whatchisname, while I was wasting away from hunger waiting on your ass. The police file on him is pretty thin. Apparently he'd had some
skirmishes with juvie, and the girlfriend had a record for fraud. They never looked too hard, basically. I got a hold of the sister, though; heading to her place next."

"Were the local detectives curious at all why you were asking for all these files?"

"Sure."

"And?"

Dean drained the last of his refill. "I told them the Bureau was considering whether they might be related."

"And?"

"They didn't actually laugh in my face, because FBI, but they did that face-twitch thing cops do when they really wish they could laugh in your face."

Sam couldn't entirely hide his disappointment. He'd been hoping, in some part of him, that if only they suggested it to the law enforcement who'd worked the cases in real time, someone there would realize that there really was some connection, some clue that had previously been discounted that he and Dean didn't have yet.

"Sam, maybe there just isn't anything here." Dean's voice was infuriatingly nonjudgmental. "There was a lead, we checked it out, it didn't pan. Not the first time, won't be the last. Unless the fuglies' Mother of All really does manage to gank us, anyway."

Except that this was different. Sam could feel it in every forcedly casual thing Dean said to him, every just-gonna-stroll-down-to-the-ice-machine-while-I-talk-to-Bobby,-no-big phone conversation Dean thought Sam didn't know was about him, and, most of all, every hunt Dean tried to get Sam to sit out, because apparently no one at all or even some stranger was better at your back than a time bomb.

But saying so would only make him sound—paranoid. Unbalanced. Admitting he'd been wrong about this one would erode Dean's trust in him incrementally; insisting that he wasn't would calve it off like a glacier.

He slid out of the booth and stood. "Well, we might as well finish up what we started. Don't keep the lady waiting."

Dean belched slightly and fished out the car keys. "Want me to drop you off?"

"Nah. It's only a few minutes from here. I could use the walk."

"'K. I'll let you know if Whitmore's sister gives me anything interesting."

They parted ways at the door. Sam could hear the Impala's engine turn over as he started off westward, then, a minute later, the rumble receding behind him.

He'd only gone three blocks when he saw it. Technically, he'd seen its steeple from a mile off, but Providence had so many steeples on offer that he hadn't paid any attention. There it was, though: Our Lady of the Angels.

Father Gregory's church.

In fairness, it made sense that Dean wouldn't remember the Providence case so well. They led
colorful lives, and Father Gregory had never appeared to Dean. If he had—well. He'd remember. Sam had never heard of a spirit touching the living like that before or since, and that, in itself, was interesting. Maybe Father Gregory hadn't been an angel, but he'd been something they'd never suspected a spirit could be, either. And that was the thing: they didn't know all that spirits were capable of. No one did. Spirits were human.

Sam slowed, then stopped. He found himself standing before the steps almost without realizing it. He looked, first, for the bloodstain Father Gregory had once left there; but it was long gone, of course. He raised his eyes to the façade.

It had been winter when they'd come here last, cold and wet and gray, and the stones of the church and the clouds in the sky had all seemed like more of the same. Now, the neighborhood was just as down-at-heel as it had been, but the church jutted up into a clear sky, every block, arch, and ornament etched in the clean, thin sunlight of a New England spring. It was even possible to make out the leaded pattern of the principal stained glass window: Mary, at the center of a perfect circle of angels ranged like spokes in a wheel.

"You!"

Sam twisted. An ashen-faced priest was staring at him from the sidewalk in shock. He took a step towards Sam.

"It is you, isn't it? What are you doing here?" Father Reynolds demanded. There was no anger or fear in his face, at least not yet; he was too shaken for that.

Sam opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Father Reynolds came up to him, studying him. He had not aged well.

"Well," the priest said eventually. "Come in, then." He turned and began to climb the steps.

Father Reynolds moved with difficulty, like he'd aged ten years instead of four (five). His back was thin and bent under his robe. Harmless; defenseless. The urge to grab his skull by his hair and drive his face into the steps until it was obliterated rolled up in Sam with such sudden intensity that for a split second, he saw it happening as plainly as a movie. Hate and blood and bone and hitting againagainagain—

Sam fled.

* * *

The apartment complex Jacob Dorner lived in had been something industrial before it had been gutted and recast in a fashion designer's image of industry. It wasn't the only one; similar gentrified buildings studded the street, obtrusive among the working class homes that predated them.

Breaking in was simple enough. Dorner's salary was good but not lavish, and the car registered to his name was a three-year-old Ford Focus. He was not a man who lived above his means. Sure enough, there was no doorman, and the security system was a mass-produced cakewalk. All the tenants here were younger professional types and it was still the middle of the workday, so as soon as he'd cased the building to be sure the police presence had departed, Sam had the run of the place.

There was no crime scene tape. There was no crime scene, technically. Sam eased the front door shut behind him and glanced the place over. Subdued paint colors, exposed brick, accordion blinds, Ikea couch, Xbox. Black-and-white, contemporary photographs in minimalist frames on the walls;
family portraits matted as formally as the art photos; bicycle leaned against the back of the couch; Nat Geo on the little shelf under the coffee table; trophy oar in a bracket over the entertainment center. Tasteful. Bland.

One corner looked a bit more lived-in—an armchair next to an overflowing bookshelf—so he focused on that. Trade journals on the top shelf, neatly labeled business records on the bottom, a combination of classic fiction and old textbooks sticky-noted for reference in the middle—and one framed photograph of a boy and a girl holding a racing shell over their heads. Sam recognized Jacob's sister from her obituary photo.

He moved on to the kitchen. It was separated from the living room by a breakfast bar (tasteful, bland) and equipped with an energy-efficient refrigerator (tasteful, bland) filled mostly with prepackaged health foods (tasteful, bland). A strip of paper on the refrigerator door had a series of numbers scrawled on it; Sam got briefly excited, but then realized they were most likely only jogging times. A battered Brown U mug sat inverted next to the espresso machine.

All these signs of alumni pride. Why wasn't he close with any of his old classmates?

The breakfast bar had seating for four with more stools stacked in the closet, so evidently Dorner did entertain. Sam leaned against it for a second and frowned. It was vibrating. When he opened the cabinet doors set into the base of the bar, he found a freezer that took up about half of it. It seemed odd; Dorner's fridge was pretty small, but it still wasn't full. All the freezer revealed was a few bags of frozen veggies, though.

Sam passed into the bedroom via the bathroom (clean fixtures, folded towels, Calvin and Hobbes on the back of the toilet). The bedroom was the aesthetic twin of the living room, just with less light and more clutter. Closet full of business casual and fashionable workout clothes; file cabinet of tax returns and the like; weights and sporting gear and guy's-guy tools on a rack in the corner; trendy rug; queen bed. The Kindle on the nightstand was loaded with contemporary fiction and books about naval history. There was lotion in the nightstand, but no porn anywhere. Sam began to suspect that Dorner was the kind of guy who stored most of his life on his laptop. And although there was a laptop tote, the computer itself was missing. Police must have taken it. Expected, but frustrating as hell.

He stood in the middle of the room and expelled his breath. There was another of those black-and-white architectural shots in here—but none of anybody else. All evidence of Jacob's family was out in the living room. Sam took a closer look at the photograph. At first he'd thought these were commercial prints, but he was surprised to realize that not only were they signed, but that the tiny signature penciled in the corner was J Dorner. Apparently Jacob fancied himself something of a photographer. They were all architectural subjects: viaducts, arty close-ups of iron girders, abandoned buildings, crumbling graffiti, weird angles of bridge cables. The sort of romanticization of squalor common to people who didn't spend a lot of time living in it.

And the really surprising thing was that this evidence of a hobby was the first surprising thing in here. Practically every other feature of this apartment Sam could have extrapolated from what he already knew of the man on paper. It was all entirely expected, unless you counted the oversized freezer, and, hell, that probably came from the previous tenant.

Nevertheless, Sam snapped on latex gloves and went deeper.

An hour later, he left in defeat. If Jacob Dorner had ever had a brush with anything more unnatural than over-the-counter tooth-whitener, Sam couldn't find the traces of it. Maybe he really was cracking up.
Or maybe he was just losing his instincts and his edge.

He paused in the apartment building's vestibule to case the street for police, then let himself out. A school bus was letting off children on the corner. Sam let himself get a block away from Dorner's building before he pulled out his phone. If he remembered the map correctly, there was a park just a few blocks away; if he cut through it, he'd come out practically on top of the bus line he needed to get back to the motel, and as a bonus, Jacob had probably jogged there regularly. Maybe he'd luck out into a clue or a witness.

Maybe Dean would buy him a puppy and trade the Impala in for a Volvo.

The afternoon light was slanting and golden. Sam mentally outlined how the rest of the evening would go: he'd meet up with Dean, they'd spend a pointless hour or two sorting through any files he'd liberated from the Providence PD, hit up a drive-through, and leave. It was over.

Dean picked up on the second ring. "Hey."

"Hey." Sam entered the park; it was one of those densely wooded city lots that made the most of the space with winding paths and unchecked undergrowth. "You got anything?"

"Brendan Whitmore was not what you'd call an overachiever. His sister's cute, though. You?"

"Bupkis." It was almost a relief to admit it. "I think I might be able to get somewhere if I had Jacob's laptop or his camera, but I'm pretty sure the police took them. His running shoes were gone, so it's unlikely he had the electronics on him."

That was Dean's opening to offer to do some fraudulent evidence seizure, but unsurprisingly, he didn't take it. "Tough break."

"Yeah." It had been worth a try. "Anyway, I'm headed back. Meet you at the motel?"

There was a pause on the line. Then: "I already checked us out. Since I didn't know if we'd be splitting tonight. I mean. No point throwing dragon gold at an empty room, right?" Another pause, shorter but more awkward. "Rendezvous at the hash house just down the street from it, instead?"

Sam's face burned with humiliation. "Right, yeah, of course." He really should have anticipated that. "See you there in thirty."

He hung up.

He hadn't really been paying attention to the route he was taking for the past sixty seconds. The path had forked, and he'd just let his feet carry him wherever was basically the correct direction on autopilot. Sunlight filtered through spring-green leaves and dappled the asphalt walkway, and the air was just beginning to cool. He was at the bottom of a little hollow. Children's voices came in on the breeze from a playground somewhere, but this place was solitary.

A girl on a trick bike came hurtling around a corner and down the slope, moving so fast and with such total teenaged obliviousness to the possibility that anyone else could be in the way that if Sam hadn't been trained to stay alive (mostly) by dodging fast-moving things with claws, he'd probably have been mown down. As it was, he jumped off the path with a yelp and into squelching mud. She was gone as quickly as she came, momentum carrying her up the opposite side of the hollow and out of sight.

"I don't suppose you've seen a man called Jacob Dorner!" Sam shouted after her.
He lifted his shoe and grimaced. Wading a little farther into the brush to scrape the mud off on a rock, he looked up at the sunlight slanting through the trees.

And saw.

For a second, he wasn't sure. But as he picked his way through the ferns and litter and slightly oily puddles, he found the correct angle and then he knew. He didn't know what it meant, but he knew it had to be the key. All around it, the vegetation was yellowed and curling black at the edges.

When the cold came down and he watched the new leaf in front of him freeze through, he knew why that was, too.

His last thought wasn't about his brother. It was something to do with the hours at the local laundromat.
There were certain advantages to blowing into a town and a witness pool with a whole new angle the cops hadn't worked, yet. People were more patient under questioning when they thought that maybe, this time, these officers were different. You were more likely to get through the door in the first place and, once you did, the information you got tended to be less rote. People were more likely to call you if they saw something later on. They were less likely to question your parentage.

The downside was the hope in their eyes when they thought that the authorities were actually getting somewhere.

"So you— The FBI thinks Brendan's case could be connected to those other people's? You have a lead?"

Dean cleared his throat. "I really can't disclose too many details, ma'am. All I can tell you is that we're taking a fresh look and we can't rule anything out."

Brendan Whitmore's little sister was one of those girls with a moon-face on a slender frame. Not exactly pretty, but cute. Yeah, cute was the word: soft brown hair, tiny body, big blue eyes. She looked like somebody's little sister. What Dean couldn't figure out was why, being Brendan's, she particularly cared what had happened to him. Brendan had moved out at eighteen after an upbringing that didn't seem to drip love on either side. The police file indicated that he hadn't called home of his own volition in months when he disappeared, and his parents, when interviewed, hadn't been sure exactly where he lived or worked. One of his two juvenile convictions was for pawning his mother's and aunt's jewelry to buy a gaming platform.

Still, maybe there was more to the portrait. Somebody could be a piece of work in every other way and still look out for their kid sibling. Dean ought to know.

Jenna Whitmore gestured him to a seat in her parents' living room, sitting on the edge of the recliner opposite. She'd already apologized for her parents' absence twice. "Can I get you any coffee, Agent, or…?"

"No thanks, I'm good. How would you describe your relationship with Brendan? Were you close?"

She tucked a stray strand of her ponytail behind her ear before she answered. "Well, no. Not really, no."

"Closer than his relationship with your parents, then? Because you're the one who's been calling the police station every week. Actually, file says you made the initial call."

"Well, he's still my brother," Jenna said. Dean nodded to that.
"I don't know," she went on after a minute. "I don't think Brendan's really that close with anyone, you know? I mean, I guess he was close with his girlfriend, but I never met her, so I couldn't tell you a lot about them. He had some friends in school, guys who liked the same video games that he did. But he's always been kind of a loner. He was doing okay, though. Steady. He'd been at the hotel for four years and he never got in trouble after the thing when he was sixteen."

Defensiveness was creeping into her tone. Did Brendan Whitmore need a lot of defending? "So he was working his way up the ladder in the hotel business?"

"Yeah! Sort of. I mean, he kept the same job, but he got raises. Well. A raise. He wanted to get his management certificate, but he had to save up, first."

Brendan Whitmore had not had a savings account, and his checking account averaged about $400 every statement cycle. Dean let that topic go. "So, you guys hang out at all? Since he left home?"

"Well. No."

"How often did you talk?"

"Every week. Most weeks."

"On the phone? What'd you talk about?"

"Not about anything, really; I called him every week to, you know, check in, invite him to family stuff."

"Your parents invite him to family stuff, too?"

Her cheeks pinkened. "They knew I would do it."

"He ever call you?"

"No."

"He always pick up?"

"…No."

Dean was getting the idea that those calls weren't very long even when Brendan did. He glanced over the walls. Framed family photos; wedding picture of the oldest brother, the one in Wisconsin; shots of Jenna's high school graduation, varsity basketball championships games, and marching band performances with her playing a tuba bigger than she was. One of Brendan, flanked by older relatives at some sort of churchy looking function in a suit and a school-shooter stare. "He used to come to your games and stuff, I guess? Your graduation and stuff like that?"

Definitely blushing, now. "No."

"What about your older brother?" Dean flipped through his steno pad. "Um… James. Was he close with Brendan before he moved out of state?"

"Oh, Jimmy's our half-brother. He's more like an uncle, really; he's almost ten years older than Brendan, so we never had all that much in common, you know? He's a nice guy, though."

Dean felt like he had to be missing something. There was Jenna, here, and she seemed nice and well adjusted. Living at home while she got her nursing degree at community college. Sweet. Devoted to her family. Normal. But she seemed to be the only one under this roof who felt that
basic familial attachment. Yeah, Brendan sounded like a slacker and a sleaze bag, but it seemed to count for nothing with anyone other than Jenna that he was blood.

If he was just that unlovable, why was his sister still calling the police station on the regular? Who was weird, here: Brendan, Jenna, or their parents?

"Your parents don't seem too concerned about Brendan going missing."

"They are! I mean, of course they are. They worry about him. But they figure he just went somewhere else."

Dean fixed her with a level stare. "Went somewhere else."

"Yeah."

If Brendan had gone somewhere else, he'd done it without bothering to close his scanty bank account. Then again, maybe he'd never given up his habit of pawning other people's belongings, after all. Dean made a mental note to check into any reports of stolen property at the hotel where Brendan worked. "So why don't you buy that?"

She hesitated. Dean tried to give her a "I'm a handsome, dashing lawman and you know you want to make me happy" smile of encouragement and mentally kicked himself. He needed Sam for this. Sam would give her that revoltingly earnest look and she'd find herself so busy spilling her innermost thoughts and feelings that she'd never stop to realize that no real fed was that sincere.

"I don't know. I just…. He's ignored my calls before, okay, yeah, but never for weeks. Never for months. I'm scared something happened to him."

"Can you think of anyone who'd want to hurt him? Was he into anything where he'd know people like that?"

"No! Nothing like that. It just… doesn't feel right."

With that, at least, Dean was in perfect agreement.

"Well," he said, standing and tucking his notebook away in a blazer pocket, "if we find anything, we'll let you know. But honestly? I think your parents are probably right. Brendan probably just started over somewhere."

She looked at once crestfallen and like she'd sort of like to believe him. He almost felt bad for stomping on her hopes—not only for answers, but for proof that her brother gave a shit about his family enough to drop them a line before dropping off the planet. It was the best thing for her, though. He handed over a card. "If you think of anything, call me."

Seconds later, he was descending the external wooden stairs that connected the Whitmores' apartment to the street. With a little luck, his visit would be just underwhelming enough that it never crossed her mind to mention it to the police.

Not that they'd be here long enough for it to matter.

He felt a twinge of guilt, walking to the car. The odds that something really was going on here were decent, and to leave without answers went against the grain. Especially after meeting Jenna. But her brother was probably dead, and Dean's wasn't. He intended to keep it that way.

Anyway, this town gave him the fucking heebs, and that had nothing to do with Sam, or with Sam's
wall, or with the hundred and one actually unspeakable things that could happen to Sam if a screw got jostled two millimeters in the wrong direction inside Sam's head. It had nothing to do with the triggers that they knew lay fifteen miles away, along with corpses that a very real part of Sam that Dean didn't know what to do with had made without remorse, or with the countless triggers they didn't know about yet that lay everywhere else. It had nothing to do with the suspicion that was wrapping itself slowly around Dean's spine that even the slaughter in Bristol, even trying to kill Bobby, even letting Dean get turned by a vamp might all be cupcakes at a kindergarten Christmas party compared to the parts of Sam's missing year that they didn't know about, and the still worse suspicion that no matter what Dean said, Sam would never really stop until he'd dug up all of it. Because that was what Sam did, after all. He might tell you he'd leave something alone; he might even think that he meant it. But all the while, he'd be digging, like one of those mechanical moles boring sideways in the darkness and the earth.

It had nothing to do with Dean not knowing which he was really afraid of: that finding those things out would break him as thoroughly as it would Sam, or that he wouldn't very much care.

His phone rang. Speak of the devil.

He really needed to rethink that saying around Sam.

Dean held the phone to his ear as he fished the keys from his pocket. "Hey."

"Hey." There was no excitement in Sam's voice to suggest he'd found anything interesting. Good. "You got anything?"

Dean let himself into the Impala. It was just starting to get warm enough to make the car stuffy. "Brendan Whitmore was not what you'd call an overachiever. His sister's cute, though. You?"

"Bupkis." Dean relaxed the death grip on the phone he hadn't even realized he had. "I think I might be able to get somewhere if I had Jacob's laptop or his camera, but I'm pretty sure the police took them."

Then Sam went on to outline why he didn't think they'd been on Dorner when he disappeared, and, wow, was he really expecting Dean to break that shit out of evidence just to encourage him? "Tough break," Dean said, unsympathetically.

"Yeah." Disappointment, poorly hidden. "Anyway, I'm headed back; meet you at the motel?"

Dean paused. Well. This was awkward.

"I already checked us out, since I didn't know if we'd be splitting tonight. I mean, no point throwing dragon gold at an empty room, right?" Hey, someone had to look out for their finances. Really, what had Sam expected? Dean cleared his throat. "Rendezvous at the hash house down the street from it, instead?"

There was a moment before Sam replied. "Right, yeah, of course." Fuck. Fuck. "See you there in thirty."

Dean would maybe have said something conciliatory, but Sam had already hung up. Fucking great. Definitely time for Dean to distract himself a bit from one problem with another. He punched up speed dial two and waited for Bobby's answering machine to pick up.

It did, but not with the message Dean had expected.

"This is Robert Singer. I'm on a business trip and not currently reachable. If this is an emergency,
"hang up and call 9-1-1. If this is the other kind of emergency, hang up and call someone else."

After a split second of what sounded like car keys, the recording cut out and bleeped.

"What the hell, Bobby." Dean stared sightlessly at the dash. "Are you kidding me right now?"

His mind blanked. Obviously, Bobby had taken off on a hunt, but this? Tearing off without dropping a single word as to what you were after or where you were headed, leaving your family to find out by your damned voice mail that you'd gone at all? This was not how you took off on a hunt.

But it was, Dean had a bad feeling, exactly how you took off on some sort of guilt-driven suicide mission.

Bobby's answering machine was still recording. "I cannot even believe you right now," Dean's voice shook with anger. "You want to go off the deep end over Rufus, fine, but save it for after we shitcan the big boss. You've got twenty-four hours to call one of us before we hunt you d—"

The machine cut him off. He swore.

He tried Bobby's two active cells and got sent straight to uncustomized voice mail on one and a disconnected number on the other. He shoved down the the impulse to smash the phone against the steering wheel, barely. Fury made his hands tremble as he turned the key in the ignition harder than Baby deserved.

It was fine. It was fine. Their next stop was Bobby's house, anyway, and the cantankerous alcoholic bastard had probably left information for them there. Anyway, it wasn't like Bobby was some dewy-eyed first-timer; he might be trying to get himself killed with this shit, but he probably wouldn't succeed.

And it would make Sam leave this place without an argument.

Dean pulled away from the curb, a muscle jumping in his cheek. "This is not good," he told the passenger who wasn't there.

* * *

An hour later, Dean was getting itchy. So was the waitress, if the black look when she topped up his coffee was anything to go by. He left the cup untouched and dialed Sam again.

"Dude, you miss your bus or something? Call me back."

Second message.

Dean hit the head, came back, and texted *Hurry your ass up, I want food* to Sam even though he wasn't hungry. No pissy reply came.

Ten minutes later, Dean ordered a burger to keep the waitress at bay. Then he called Sam again, left another message, stared at the salt shaker for a minute, tossed a bill down on the table, and moved out.

It was only a few minutes to Jacob Dorner's apartment if you weren't relying on public transportation. No Sam in sight. Dean let himself into unit 212 and spent exactly enough time inside to verify that it was empty. Then he started knocking on doors and asking after sightings of someone seven feet tall with too much hair.
Back outside on the street. There was a coffee place a block and a half down that looked just froufrou enough that Sam might have stopped in. The baristas didn't recognize the description or the picture on Dean's phone. Neither did any of the passersby he stopped.

Dean stood in the middle of the street, heart pounding, mouth dry, looking for anything that might have arrested Sam's attention. Where he might have gone.

No. No.

He jogged down to a gas station a couple blocks north of Dorner's apartment to ask where to pick up the nearest bus that ran to the part of town where they'd been staying. There was a park between him and it. Had to be that. And people noticed things in parks. They hung around and played ball and watched their fellow man. It was what parks were for.

No one had noticed Sam.

The sun was setting; the park was emptying out, and by the time Dean penetrated through to the other side and the bus stop there, it was too dark for him to be able to see a size fourteen print in a bramble-screened patch of mud in the park's most densely wooded hollow.

* * *

Dean ripped the page he wanted out of a borrowed Yellow Pages and left the convenience store without a backwards glance at the clerk's protests.

He smoothed the paper out on the Impala's steering wheel. The first unique entry under Lodging was America's Pride Inn. More corporate than their usual, but at least it was cheap. Once after a museum heist had gone tits up, Dean had ended up having to check into a place called the Amalise that charged four hundred a night. And Sam had informed him that the cops weren't far behind by the time he got there, so Dean never even got to use the jacuzzi.

Do you have a Mr. Rockford checked in already? No? Guess I must have beat my brother here. Yeah, I'll take a double. Length of stay? Not sure. Cash deposit work?

Sam was fine. Sam had missed his bus and then dropped his phone in a mud puddle and then not been able to call Dean in the three intervening hours because Sam had stupid hair and no charisma and every girl whose phone he'd asked to borrow had fled in the opposite direction. Sam would have taken a cab, no doubt, but he had probably bent over wrong and dropped his wallet into an active cement pour. It would take him longer on foot, but any minute now, having followed the same protocol as Dean, he'd walk through that door.

His mind still did this to him every time, was the worst thing.

Dean bit off lengths of duct tape. Over the dresser, he taped the map of Providence he'd bought twenty minutes before. Over the mirror, he taped the details of the bus routes. On the bedside table, he set up the police scanner.

Sam had gotten himself arrested. Some member of the finest had recognized him from a regional bulletin and hauled him in without a struggle, because Sam's hero was Mahatma goddamned Gandhi. That was fine, though, because Sam would name-drop Dean's working FBI alias, and after dicking about for a few hours they'd call him, and it wouldn't even make their top twenty for improbable escapes, and Sam wouldn't have another seizure during all this, because he hadn't pissed off any giant spiders in this town (that they knew of). And if name-dropping Dean didn't work or Sam hadn't wanted to risk it, no worries, because Dean would hear something on the
The scanner coughed intermittently with traffic incidents and convenience store robberies.

Dean called Bobby's functioning cell number again. Voice mail. He hung up.

None of the hospitals had admitted anyone matching Sam's description since he had last checked an hour ago. He hung up when the receptionist at Providence General offered to transfer him to the morgue.

Sam had called him at 4:47 p.m. Dean's first call to him had gone unanswered at 5:39. Assuming Sam had gotten on the bus, there were three termini he could potentially have reached in that time. Assuming he had not, it was possible to establish a maximum radius of approximately 3.5 miles from Jacob Dorner's apartment within which Sam could have walked. With string and a ruler, Dean marked the 38.5 square mile circle on the map and started marking off the streets he'd already searched.

Sam was holed up in a bar somewhere, shitfaced but otherwise fine. Sam had ducked into a library and turned off his phone and lost track of time. Dean called Bobby again.

None of the bus drivers driving the three routes that stopped near Jacob Dorner's apartment recognized Sam's photo. No one to whom Dean showed it at any of the stops along the way did, either, but it was nearly ten o'clock and the crowds were thinning.

Bobby's voice mail twice more.

Sam had finally had enough. Sam had reached his breaking point with scratched Metallica cassettes and brotherly body odor and unbrotherly desperation and a four-door sedan where he couldn't escape any of it. Sam was finally, thoroughly disgusted. Sam had left. Sam wasn't missing.

Dean worked outward in a spiral from the last location he'd checked near Dorner's apartment. It wasn't feasible to search thirty-eight square miles on foot, of course, but Sam's probable on-foot radius was much smaller than his possible one. Under a mile, given the traffic and tangle of side streets. If something had happened in those few square miles, there would be some sign of it in one of these alleys, dumpsters, parks, rail yards, cemeteries, or underpasses. He couldn't have just vanished. Not like the others.

By sunrise, Dean had worked as far east as the wiener shop where they'd eaten the day before and nearly as far west. At least two people had apparently called the cops to report a strange man trespassing. As he walked back to where he'd left the car, he kept searching. There was the barest glimmer of an unseasonable frost melting on the Impala's hood in the morning sun.

This time, when he got Bobby's voice mail yet again, he left a message.

"Sam's missing. Call me."

* * *

Traffic was just starting to drown out birdsong by the time Dean let himself back into the room. Sounds, light, smells all felt flattened in that particular way they only did in the morning after an all-nighter. Automatically, his mind worked through the nearby options for caffeine.

He sat on the end of the bed nearest the door and stared at the one opposite. Neatly made. As he watched, the alarm clock flipped over from 7:16 to 7:17.
Just as he had every other time he'd ever tried this in an empty room, he felt like an idiot as soon as the sound left his mouth. It also produced no results.

"I, uh. I know you're busy." Distantly, he also knew that he only placed these calls when he wanted something, and that possibly, parked up there on whatever cloud had the best strategic lookout, Castiel might reasonably be growing irritated by that. But that didn't matter, couldn't matter, because this was Sam, and it always was Sam, and Cas had to see that that was reason enough in itself for everything. "Don't want to yank you out of a good bar brawl, or anything, but if you've got a minute, America's Pride Inn, Providence, room 117. It's Sam. Please."

Silence was the only answer. Dean stared at the alarm clock and felt nothing.

No. He didn't have time to be numb. Sam didn't have time for him to be numb. He needed to pull himself together and move—

He surged to his feet and grabbed Sam's duffel.

Living on the road, there were few higher crimes than violating what privacy they had left. The last time Dean had looked in Sam's duffel without his express permission had been five months ago, when Sam was not Sam (but he was), a week before a legit goddess had told him that his unbrother was inhuman, and Dean had feared the worst, hadn't been able to stop the pictures of the devil wearing his brother like a too-new suit and had had no choice. Even then, he'd felt guilty. Before that, it had been in the run up to Sam's sacrifice, and Dean hadn't even tried to hide it from Sam, had done it regularly just to make sure Sam wasn't doing anything stupid, hadn't relapsed, wasn't in bed with the enemy again, didn't think he could could make a fool of Dean again. At the time, he'd told himself he didn't feel a shred of guilt about it, but every day since then, the feeling had been growing on him that maybe, actually, he had. Before that, 2007, and Sam had vanished and it was as bad as Dad, maybe worse, and afterwards Dean saw the exact moment when Sam realized that Dean had been in his duffel and it shouldn't have mattered, to either of them, after a demon had been in Sam for over a week, but it had. In a year with Lisa, Dean had never been able to bring himself to open the thing.

He'd feel guilty about this later.

He pulled out Sam's notes, Sam's weapons, Sam's beat-up paperbacks and carefully sequestered dirty laundry and toiletry kit and a tiny, cheap little mp3 player that Dean hadn't even known that Sam had, when did he even listen to it? He cleared the sharps and explosives, had a quick grope for anything obviously breakable, and upended the whole thing and dumped the contents on the floor.

He'd already tried the brute force approach. He'd already tried Bobby. Hell, he'd already tried prayer. The only way back to his brother was through the facts.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry that this chapter is really more of an interlude. More action coming in the next!
with your fear flowing out behind you

Chapter Summary

Of course, it was possible that Sam hadn't said anything about the book because he hadn't thought anything of it. It was possible he'd just been cleaning up, same as with the rest of the junk they'd cleared out of Rufus's place. It was possible he'd meant merely to destroy it or return it to Bobby, not to keep it in his back pocket in case he ever felt like doing something stupid.

It wasn't very fucking likely, but it was possible.

Chapter Notes

Long chapter is long. I hope it will prove worth the wait.

Water woke Sam.

It splashed on his cheek, annoying like a fly. He was lying on something hard. Fucking squatting again. Sometimes he thought Dad did it on purpose, some sort of Spartan warrior crap. Like in the Republic, the training of the guardians of the city. Silver souls. Austerity. But with more Funyuns and shittier plumbing.

Drip.

Irritated, he rubbed at his cheek. Wet. Nagging. Concrete grit burned along a scratch or something on his elbow, and finally the gears meshed to shift him into full consciousness.

Sam opened his eyes.

Not squatting. No Dad. No Dean.

Either he was adapting, or the light had grown stronger, or both. The room was visible in outline now, just enough to give him a sense of its size and layout. He lay on a concrete platform that extended perhaps fifteen feet from the wall against which he lay before dropping off into void. Darkness notched into it over on his left: the stairwell he'd fallen into earlier.

The main platform ran for maybe thirty feet altogether, terminating on his right in the brick wall he'd found by touch before. Beyond the platform, the opposite wall curved down into darkness. He could just make out pipes emitting from it. They were big enough to let rats in, but not big enough to let anything human out. Not in one piece, anyway.
In the corner to his left, on the other hand, man-sized apertures were set into either wall, a few feet away from each other. He'd—yes. He'd heard the others' voices coming from there. He'd been trying to crawl towards them when he'd passed out.

The opening set into the wall perpendicular to the platform was fitted with a heavy iron grate; the one set into the wall at his back was not. Stains showed around the edges of both, but they seemed dry now. At least, they seemed as dry as anything in here did, which was not very.

Sam took all of this in before he sat up. Everything ached in the way that only several hours on a damp concrete floor could produce, but apart from that, he felt… okay. Dehydration headache, sore muscles, stiff joints—he could deal with those. It seemed the way he'd felt before had been something affecting him, not something wrong with him. Like the ghost's first contact had flash-frozen his senses, leaving him to a slow, painful thaw. Now he could function. Provided, of course, that he could figure out what the hell he was going to do.

His stomach growled audibly. He'd better figure it out quickly.

Someone was crying somewhere. They were quiet about it, sniffles and low, choked-down little moans, plainly trying not to be heard. It didn't sound like Marian; Sam doubted it was Lindsey. He climbed to his feet and padded over to the corner. The sound came from the grated opening. Sam approached the uncovered one slowly, breathing the way they'd been trained to do, senses open instead of muscles tensed—but when he finally drew level with the open shaft, nothing happened. Nothing emitted from it. He could see that it slanted up into the wall, but nothing more. It was a black pit. He'd fit through it, easily, but he knew getting out of here was not going to be that simple.

And if getting out wasn't simple, the ghost was unlikely to make it simple for Dean to come in.

First things first. Sam crossed the few feet to the grated opening. "Jacob?" he called softly. The sounds cut off. "Jacob?"

"Fuck off."

A common reaction from a man caught crying, but not one Sam had time for. "What happened?"

"I said, fuck off."

"I heard you. Now tell me what you saw."

"I— Screw you. Screw you." Dorner was not doing well at controlling his hysteria. "You don't know anything."

"I— Screw you. Screw you." Dorner was not doing well at controlling his hysteria. "You don't know anything."

"Jacob, focus. Talk to me. I need information to get us out of here."

"Go to hell! We've been down here forever, and what the hell have you done? Rescue? Is that supposed to be a joke? You didn't do shit. You can't do shit. You can't—"

"Pull yourself together," Sam snapped. "Like it or not, we're stuck down here, and even if you think I'm lying about the rest, I'm your best chance of getting out of here because I'm the freshest physically and I've got someone looking for me. Now stop sniveling and tell me what you saw."

He hoped that was abusive enough to remind Dorner favorably of his old rowing coach.

When Dorner finally did answer, his voice was lower, sullen. Fine; sullen beat hysterical. "I don't know what I saw. It— I thought there was someone in here with me, but it wasn't— I didn't get a
good look at it. It just got so cold, fuck." It had, yes. Sam remembered. It was a good thing the chill had departed with the spirit, else none of them would last very long. "I thought I saw— But I was wrong. Whatever. None of that matters. I thought whoever it was went away, but then something just—"

Sam thought back to what Lindsey had said. "Laid down in you?"

Jacob's laugh sounded like gravel shaken in a box. "That's a very Biblical way to put it."

Sam colored. "That was how Lindsey described it."

"Yeah? I'd describe it like getting an ice water enema up in places you never wanted to think about."

Sam crouched and peered up into the slanting shaft, the ungrated one, but he couldn't see anything. If anything lay at the end of it—freedom, concrete, the ghost—he was going to have to crawl in to find out what. "What happened next?"

"Nothing happened next. I was dreaming, or tripping, or something. Can you get hallucinations from hunger?"

"Only much farther along than we are," Sam said absently, tracing the inside rim of the shaft with his hands. "What'd you dream about?"

"What does it matter?"

"Humor me."

Dorner clearly wanted to talk, was the thing, and Sam would gladly let him vent as much panic as he wanted to if he got some information out of it. "It was stupid, okay? I dreamt I was looking for someone. Only I wasn't really, it was like someone else was. But they were, I don't know, borrowing me to do it, or something, and I was walking back along all these routes where I go jogging, and—"

He cut off. Sam tilted his head. "Jacob?"

"It doesn't matter." The tone was suddenly curt. "It didn't make any sense. It was just memories, but all screwed up. Normal fucking dream. You know? The thing you have when you're asleep?" His voice rose with every word.

"Jacob, I don't think it was a dream—"

"You don't think it was a dream? Oh, well that's helpful, I can see you're real fucking knowledgeable, and that's why we're all free instead of stuck down here." Sam raised his eyebrows. Some of the hysteria was creeping back into Dorner's voice, but it was more than that—anger, defensiveness. "Oh. Wait. We fucking are stuck down here, starving to death in a goddamned sewer. You think you're here to fucking save us? Fuck you, you fucking—"

"Yeah, got that part," Sam muttered.

He wouldn't be getting anything more out of Jacob for a while. He considered the black of the open shaft before him. The odds that there was something waiting to rip him to shreds at the end of it were considerably better than the odds that it led to freedom, but he wouldn't know until he tried. No time like the present, he supposed.
Jacob was still cursing him out. "Back in a minute," Sam said.

There were three interesting things in Sam's duffel.

The first was the mp3 player, mainly because Dean had had no idea that Sam owned it. He wondered how old it was. He wondered when Sam listened to it. He'd have to find out so he could give him shit about it when he got him back.

The second was Sam's journal. Dean had known about this; hell, Dean had one like it. It wasn't a deeply personal object, or anything. They sometimes wrote in each other's and consulted them both freely. Journal was a bit of a misnomer, really—it was just a place to jot down info they used a lot, to save the time of looking it up over and over. Or, occasionally, info that they expected to use a lot, because it was so useful, but ultimately didn't because it turned out there were catches.

Catches in their line of work tended to be substantial.

The third was chiefly interesting because Sam had no fucking business having it.

A case could be made that swiping it in the first place took real chutzpah on Sam's part, but the thing that ratcheted Dean's blood pressure up a notch every time he looked at it was that he hadn't known about this, either. Sam had picked it up and never said a damned thing.

Of course, it was possible that Sam hadn't said anything because he hadn't thought anything of it. It was possible he'd just been cleaning up, same as with the rest of the junk they'd cleared out of Rufus's place. It was possible he'd meant merely to destroy it or return it to Bobby, not to keep it in his back pocket in case he ever felt like doing something stupid.

It wasn't very fucking likely, but it was possible.

It was Rufus's address book. By most metrics, that made it about the least dangerous thing they'd taken out of that house, and the Impala was pretty well stuffed with his shit right now. Rufus had a daughter, living, but not nearby. All Bobby had been able to tell them about her was that she wasn't in the life and didn't need to run across anything that could change that, when or if she ever made it back from parts unknown to see to her father's estate. So basically, Dean and Sam had tried to be respectful, and all, but sifting through his stuff had pretty much been the greatest shopping spree of all time. Rufus hadn't liked them much, but Dean figured he'd probably disliked them marginally less than most people, so he hadn't felt bad about adopting his supply of silver bullets. Probably even Sam hadn't angsted too much about the Damascus steel dagger he'd found with runes on the bare tang that Dean was pretty sure wasn't a reproduction.

Who was he kidding? Of course Sam had angsted about it. It was exactly the sort of thing he would angst about. But about this—this he wouldn't. This he'd keep not secret, because that would imply guilty feeling, but private, so close to his chest Dean would never even know to worry.

And Dean knew that Sam knew better. This thing didn't shoot, burn, cut, or explode. It did things far less predictable. Bobby had warned them: be real, real careful about hooking up with any of Rufus Turner's associates.

But.

The thing was, he needed another set of eyes on this. That couldn't have been clearer. Bobby was God knew where. Cas wasn't answering. That concluded the list of people Dean even halfway trusted, but maybe Rufus had known someone who could be worth talking to, like a psychic, or—the thought had the book open on Dean's knees before he knew it—someone who'd be able to get a
hold of Bobby.

It wasn't all hunters. Rufus had entries in here for everything from plumbers to munitions suppliers. Some names Dean recognized; there were even lines for Bobby and for them. There was an old, old entry for their father, crossed out neatly in fountain pen. There were a lot of entries crossed out like that. Dean smiled grimly to see Roy Kittle and Walt Hannon among them.

The smile slid off of his face.

This was exactly why he wasn't supposed to be fucking looking at this shit. Unlike Bobby's, Rufus's contact list did not come conveniently filtered by moral fiber. Gordon Walker was in here, neatly and dispassionately crossed out in blue ink, and the thought of letting on to someone who might turn out to be cast in Gordon's mold that his brother was missing made the hair stand up on the back of Dean's neck.

He shut the book. Sam didn't have time for bullshit, and the unknowns in those pages would be inviting nothing but bullshit.

His gaze fell on Sam's journal, lying unassuming on the bedspread. It wasn't like it could hurt anything to check the ingredients list—

Dean stood and tossed the book back in the duffel. There was only one ingredient for that spell that mattered, and he wasn't going to go out and get it. That would be all they needed. He went back to the spread of information on the wall, ate another No-Doz, and stared at the sum of what he knew.

It was 9:07 in the morning, and Sam had been MIA for sixteen hours and fifty-two minutes.

"What disappears people all over town, at all times of the day, without any signs of a struggle, without any witnesses, without any tracks, without any blood, without any bodies ever turning up?" The empty bed behind him didn't answer. "Sounds like the start of a bad joke," he muttered.

Phantom attackers took people from their beds. Black dogs left bodies (and how). Banshees worked their way through families, and anyway they didn't disappear anyone. A cursed object couldn't possibly have made the rounds of all of the victims, and it wouldn't have cleaned up after itself if it had. Ghouls could certainly make a clean job of a disappearance, they'd seen that for themselves, but aside from that one rather unusual personal agenda, ghouls preferred the dead. Shapeshifters became people, they didn't disappear them.

Only two things operated this senselessly: demons and people.

The time line all but ruled out people. That implied demons, except there were no demon signs in this town. Hadn't been around the dates of any of the disappearances back at least as far as 1992. Some demons could cover their tracks, minimize their effects on weather like someone holding in a cough, but not reliably. Besides which, if a demon had taken Sam, shouldn't Dean have some company by now? He hadn't exactly been subtle. And even if he went with the demonic hypothesis, it left him in the same place: looking for the common denominator among the victims.

Why would demons target seventeen, or more likely sixteen, people with no genetic, social, professional, geographic, demographic, or other-graphic connection to each other, only about half of whom were natives of the town where they went missing, starting in 1963? Well, why did demons ever take people? They took them if they could use them. What sort of people were useful to demons? People with powers, right? People freaky things happened around. The freakiest thing anybody had ever observed about any of these people was that Anthony Marquez had apparently been devoted to peanut butter and margarine sandwiches. Okay, right, that didn't take very long.
He was spinning his wheels, and somewhere, Sam was running out of time.

Dean crammed his fist in his mouth and calmed himself. They'd been separated on jobs before, plenty of times. This was no different. This wasn't going to be any different.

He started to dial Bobby again but hung up halfway through because he couldn't take worrying about both of them right now. He wiped his hand over his mouth and stared at the wall.

Jacob Dorner's Facebook profile picture had been a scan of an old college crew team head shot. Sam had printed it off in case his profile got taken down, which had finally happened sometime this morning. Blue eyes, brown hair, tanned skin, square jaw, confident smile, top-tier orthodontics. For a few months in 1995, when Dad had parked them in a school in Putnam County to track a river sprite, Dean had specialized in poaching the girlfriends of precisely this variety of dude. He stared at the picture for long minutes.

It wasn't quite true that nothing freaky had ever happened to any of these people.

The angle and diameter of the pipe obliged Sam to crawl along it on his belly. He heard more than felt something flake off the sides of it as he moved, and despite himself, he shuddered. Thank God he couldn't see anything.

After only a few feet, the pipe bent sharply upwards. Sam learned this by ramming his forehead into the wall of it. He'd been able to see a little out in the chamber, but in here, the darkness was solid, so thick he thought he could feel it on his skin, clinging and crawling with filth. Gingerly, trying not to think about anything under his fingernails, he mapped it with his hands. It ran vertically upwards.

Goddamn it.

The concrete burned on the abrasions he already had when he started shuffling his way up the pipe. He tried to focus on what kind of hellspawn he might find waiting for him at the top. There was little if anything he could do to fight back if he did, considering that he didn't even have shoes much less weapons, but it beat thinking about whatever else had come down this pipe.

As it turned out, though, the only thing waiting for him was steel rebar. He managed to find that with his hands instead of his head. Four bars were set into the opening in a crude crosshatch grate, and Sam braced his back and knees against the walls of the pipe, reached up, and shook one. It did not move.

"Who's there?"

The alarm in the voice was simple and immediate. Human. Familiar. Sam turned his face up to the bars and realized he could see a little of the same murky light there'd been in his cell. "Lindsey?"

Silence. Then bare feet slapping over concrete. The voice was even closer when he heard it again. "Sam?"

He found himself grinning just out of the sheer, arational relief of being within reach of other people. "Yeah."

"How'd you get up here?"

*I'm a ninja,* Dean would have replied. Sam's mouth tugged into a smile despite himself. "Shimmied up the pipe. It's not that far."
"Litner never did that." She sounded almost dazed.

"Who?"

"Litner. The one down there before you."

Sam laid off trying to get one of the bars to twist. He mentally ran through the victim list he'd come up with, then did it again. "What do you mean, the one before me? Did you say Whitmore? Was his name Brendan?"

"No, I said Litner. He never gave any other name but that. Old homeless guy. He didn't last that long. A month, maybe. I don't know. Not like you can tell time in this place. Fucking asshole, anyway."

Homeless. No wonder he hadn't shown up in Sam's searches—even if someone had reported him missing, the police had probably dismissed it out of hand. How many others had he missed? "Who else has been in here?"

"How should I know? There wasn't any ID on the skeletons."

"Alive, I mean." He shifted. His back was starting to ache; he'd have to go back down soon. "Anthony Marquez, Brendan Whitmore, Cara Pryor—did you ever meet any of them? Or someone who had?"

"No. Just Litner down in the room you're in now and Marian. And now you and Jacob."

Sam turned his face up to the opening, but didn't put his head through. He thought he could see the dark outline of someone squatting a few feet away, but his eyes could have been playing tricks on him. "Is Marian in there with you?"

"Yeah. Asleep. She does a lot of that. We all do a lot of that. It's the only thing in here to do."

Sam couldn't accept that. He knew Dean would come for him, but he couldn't just sit here, useless, until he did. For one thing, there was still the spirit to be dealt with, and for that, they needed to understand what was happening here. He had to learn all he could, be ready to hand his brother that weapon at least.

For another, the more time passed, the stronger grew the niggling fear that something could have happened to Dean while Sam was too busy sitting around down here with his thumb up his ass to watch out for him.

He tugged restlessly at one of the bars. "I don't get it. Marian's been down here since... almost two years, now. You've been gone five months. Why keep you two alive for so long but kill the others?"

She snorted. "'Keeping us alive' isn't how I'd put it. And I don't think it killed the others; they just... died."

His stomach growled again, painfully this time. "When does it feed us, anyway?"

A pause. He heard her shuffle over the concrete, and then the outline of a face appeared above him. It was beyond gaunt.

"What do you mean, feed us?"
Dean flashed a badge. "Agent Barrett, out of the field office. I'm here for the electronics on the Jacob Dorner case."

The District 1 desk officer was young and pretty, but Dean skipped over flirtatious and went straight to stiff and overbearing: his very most convincing government employee demeanor. With Bobby MIA and Rufus dead, he couldn't afford to be challenged. The number on his card for his "supervisor" would ring to dial tone.

Unfortunately, the desk officer was not overawed. "I wasn't aware of a joint operation on that case," she said, about as whimsical as the love child of Bear Stearns and the Yakuza.

Well, why wasn't she overawed? Where was the justice in that?

Dean replied in kind. "Isn't one," he said brusquely. "I'm here on the other disappearances in the area; just wanted to take a look."

Her eyes flicked over him once, and then she picked up her phone and hit an internal extension. "Yeah, Obaid here. Could you send Gutierrez my way? Agent from the FBI field office here for her."

Dean cursed mentally.

_They weren't victims of opportunity. They were chosen. If they were chosen, there had to be criteria, _Sam had said. He'd thought that maybe he could have gotten somewhere, if only he'd had access to Dorner's missing computer. Dean hadn't been thrilled about helping him get it at the time, and he was getting less enthusiastic by the minute. It was a bit late to ditch out now, though.

A slight woman in her late thirties appeared from out of the bullpen, extending her hand for an easy shake and sizing him up unobtrusively. Shit. "Detective Jennifer Gutierrez. The Dorner disappearance is my case. Can I help you with something, Agent…?"

Her demeanor was outwardly friendlier than that of her guard dog, but Dean had a feeling she was going to be no easier to sway. "Barrett. Was hoping to see the electronics I understand were collected from Jacob Dorner's home."

Gutierrez leaned against the duty officer's desk and regarded him. "Now, why would you want to do that?"

He gave her a tight smile. "Does it matter?"

"It does to me. And it's my case, so it should to you."

Of all the times for the Mulder and Scully mystique to fail, it had to be now. "Suffice to say that the Bureau has its own interest in the matter."

She smiled. "No."

"Pardon?"

"No, it does not suffice. That's not how this works, Agent; you know it, and while maybe small town departments and green cadets don't, I know it. Come back with an information-sharing request through the proper channels and we'll talk." She turned to go.

"Hang on, hang on!"
She turned back to him. "Okay, listen." He dropped his voice. "Look, I'm sorry for the botched cloak-and-dagger stuff, it's just… My brother's missing, and someone will pay. "...The truth is, I came down here on a hunch of my own. I'm here looking into some other disappearances in the area; that's the official business. Now, I don't know if yours is connected, but I just… I've got a feeling. Nothing I can take to a judge, nothing I can take to my supervisor, just… a feeling." He searched her face. "You might have heard about some of them: Lindsey Chase, Anthony Marquez, Brendan Whitmore, Cara Pryor—"

Just for a second, he saw a flicker of something on her face. It was gone in an instant, but it had been there. "Marian Daniels," he finished. He watched her face and spread his hands. "You show me yours, I'll show you mine."

Gutierrez was impassive. "You have reason to think Dorner was moved out of state?"

"No—"

"Involved in a federal crime?"

"No, but—"

She turned away again. "Come back when you do and we'll talk."

* * *

The Narragansett Bay sewer system is among the oldest in the United States. In 1869, following numerous cholera epidemics, ambitious plans were drawn up by J. Herbert Shedd for no fewer than sixty-five combined sewer overflows (CSOs) to drain into the rivers and harbor, which were then constructed in the 1870s. Shedd's report on the project in 1874 brought him engineering fame and for years served as the model for sanitation throughout America.

Vomiting the combined pollutants of a major population center into a natural waterway every time it rains has deleterious effects over time. Parts of the Narragansett Bay are permanently closed to shellfishing. To make matters worse, Providence's sewage treatment plant, the largest of its type when it was built in 1901, was dumping a further sixty-five million gallons of un- or partially treated sewage into the Narragansett and its tributaries.

Thus, in 1993, new plans were rolled out for overflow abatement: five CSO interceptors, six miles of deep rock storage tunnels, seven drop shafts for collection, and sewer separation in twelve areas. Construction didn't actually begin until 2001, and by 2012, phase II was underway and expected to conclude in 2014.

Providence's sewers continue to expand the while. Like any circulatory system, it grows to support the structures built upon it. The city's roads accommodate the movement of about 180,000 people. Its sewers accommodate the movement of approximately 400,000,000 gallons of water each day. They are vast.

* * *

"This is Robert Singer. I'm on a business trip and not currently reachable. If this is an emergency, hang up—"

* * *

Up to now, neither Dean nor Sam had looked at Cara Pryor very hard. She'd gone missing over a
year ago, and they'd only run the list down as far back as Brendan Whitmore. In the papers and basic search results, there was nothing to set her apart from the others.

In the initial police report Dean had managed to get into, on the other hand, there were two things: a keyring and a shoe.

Dean sat in the Impala at the southernmost end of Waterfront Drive, studying the evidence photos. A homeless man had found the keys caught on the grate of a storm drain up the street, with no usable prints other than Cara's. The shoe had turned up under a van with a flat tire and three parking tickets about twenty-five feet north from the storm drain. It was one of those technicolor, expensive running shoes, size seven-and-a-half, smeared with dirt and heavily scratched along one side. Drag marks, most likely.

Supernatural assailants were about as likely to drag a body as anybody else, but there had been zero physical evidence on any of the others. Cara Pryor broke pattern. The question was, was that because she was important, or because she didn't belong on the list?

Dean glanced out the windshield at the surroundings. A few fat raindrops spattered on the glass. Though still sunny in the east, the sky was purple-gray in the west with the spring squall brewing there.

The picture of Cara in her police file was a professional head shot from her company's website, showing her smiling with the slight deer-in-the-headlights expression of someone who had never gotten comfortable with cameras. She was somewhat pretty, athletic, a bit square in the face with medium brown hair and blue eyes. She had moved to Providence a couple of months before her disappearance when she took a job in HR for a large insurance company. The documentation photos of her keyring made for a bland biography: keys for apartment, mailbox, car, office; cards for Whole Foods, FitGenius Gym, library. Her file mentioned no friends outside of work, no hobbies, no political involvement, no church attendance, nothing. She was just a shy young woman living her life.

The rain was just starting in earnest as Dean climbed out of the car. He wasn't even sure what the hell he was doing here. She'd been missing for over a year; there wouldn't be anything left to find. But Cara was the only one where they knew the site of her disappearance. He couldn't afford not to check it out.

Sidewalk ran along Waterfront Drive parallel to the Providence River, but there was also a pedestrian trail worn into the grass just a few yards away from it. It was just a narrow rut created by people who wanted to work out along the river and had something against concrete, overgrown to either side with brush and dotted with the usual roadside litter. The shoe the police had recovered had been a trail runner, with a spiky tread intended for natural surfaces. Dean followed the track north.

Soon it was pouring. The track was cut into the ground, so the spring storm turned it into a drainage ditch. The farther north he walked, the more run-down the buildings on the other side of the street were. They were hidden by trees and shrubbery more frequently, too, as the track dove into the trash growth that always overtook urban interstices. It was just late enough in spring for the leaves to really be out, and Cara Pryor had gone missing at about the same time of year. An area with quasi-industrial frontage, quick, easy street access, and plenty of natural cover. A good place to snatch someone.

Dean checked his position periodically against the locations marked on the map in the incident report, shielding his eyes against the rain, looking from side to side for something, anything, hoping he'd know it when he saw it. He was moving along, muttering under his breath, minding his
own damned business (and the police's, technically, but they were the worst busybodies of them all, so fuck them) and trying to not to think about how long Sam had been missing (seventeen hours and fifty-one minutes) when he planted his foot in a watery hole in the ground and went down hard.

He was fine. It took more than a pit trap to hobble a Winchester; they'd both been trained to land correctly from exactly this sort of mishap by the time they were ten. His goddamned motherfucking shoe, however, was soaked. It was the shiny faux fed loafer. Fucking fuck. Dean picked himself up, took it off, and poured out rust-colored water while he stood on one leg.

He stared at the hole in the ground.

It was about a foot in diameter. Almost a foot of water stood in it, and there were still six inches of room left. Any track like this would have irregularities, but not ones eighteen inches deep. Someone had dug this here. Dean thought about the dirt and scratches smeared over the side of Cara Pryor's shoe. Most people would have wrenched their ankle in a pit like this, maybe even broken it if they'd been running hard.

Dean looked around at the brush while the rain hissed into the river. He only knew of one species that set this kind of trap.

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"Sorry," said Sam, "I just want to make sure I heard you correctly. You've been down here five months, in the company of a woman who's been down here for twenty-two months, and you've been eating—what? Positive thinking? Cosmic vibrations?"

Lindsey laughed. There was genuine, if nasty, enjoyment in it. "Oh, my God. You actually thought there was gonna be meal times."

"Answer the question for once."

"You are definitely my favorite, Sam. You? Are adorable."

Suspicion crept in upon him. "Come over here and touch my hand."

That cut off her laughter. "Why?"

"I want to test something."

"Yeah? Like whether you can twist my hand off? No thanks. Get the hell out of here before I piss on your head. This is our room."

"I don't want to hurt you. Just shake my hand and prove you're not a ghost."

"Oh, God, that shit again."

"Look. I'm going to reach my hand up, all right?" He did so, slowly, cautiously. "Come on, Lindsey, what am I going to do to you? I just want to get out of here, same as you. Just… just prove to me that there are really people in here with me."

For several seconds, he didn't think she would, but then her silhouette moved, animal-fast, and for half a second he felt bony warmth on his fingers. "There. Happy? Freak."

He let his breath out. "Thanks." Definitely not a ghost. "Lindsey? I'm going to go back down the
"You shouldn't have climbed up it in the first place. You're wasting energy."

At the bottom of the shaft, Sam sat with his back against the vertical wall and his legs down the slope. An unpleasant thought occurred to him. "Uh, Lindsey? Do you usually pee down here?"

Her voice floated down. "We don't shit down that one, though. Smells less if you keep them separated."

Sam closed his eyes and felt himself shudder on a cellular level. "Could you… not?"

"I hate to break this to you, but you're in a sewer. Guess what's in here."

Right. Great.

Which brought him back to his original question and increasingly unpleasant possible answers to the same. "You don't— You don't eat—"

"Our own shit?" she said with savage pleasure. "No. But people have, before. Litner did, before the end. Pretty sure that was what killed him, actually. He was in your room. Your room's the worst. Our room's the best."

"What do you mean?" Not that it mattered. It wasn't going to matter, because he was going to get the hell out of here before it did.

"We have the best water," she said smugly. "As good as tap."

"Okay," Sam said slowly, "but you can't live off water for five months. If it's not bringing you food, what are you eating?"

"Well, I guess it does feed us, in a way. But I'm pretty sure it doesn't mean to. You know that glow-in-the-dark fungus?"

Sam took a moment to make sense of her words. "Do you— Are you talking about the ectoplasm, Lindsey?"

"Whatever you want to call it, Dr. Venkman."

A tiny line of the stuff was seeping from a seam in the pipe's wall. He stared at it in horrified fascination. It was sort of reddish-orange, sort of brown, sort of black, glistening like slime mold. "You can't be serious."

"You want to hold out for Boston Market, that's your business."

His stomach turned over. "I'm not that hungry, thanks."

"You will be." For once, her voice wasn't vicious or mocking. It was simply matter-of-fact.

Gripping the sink, Dean stared into the bathroom mirror. Traffic sounds filtered in from the Shell station's parking lot. Red was starting to rim his eyes, circles to show under them. He couldn't handle all-nighters like he used to. Long hauls were for the young and the very old.

His rain-soaked shirt hung open around him as he leaned on the sink and swiped the pad of his thumb across the bottom of the phone screen. 1:11 p.m. Around six in the morning was the last
time he'd tried Sam's phone. He didn't much want to do it, now, but he knew he had to, just in case. He hit speed dial.

"This is Sam. Leave a message."

Didn't even ring. Straight to voice mail, which meant it was either turned off or destroyed. Dean hung up; if his hand shook, it was probably because he'd eaten nothing but Red Bull and No-Doz in almost twenty-four hours.

Sam had been gone nearly as long.

He felt numb. He knew he ought to feel something more, but he couldn't. He just couldn't. They'd been down this road too many times before, and he was out of blood to give.

I can't do this anymore.

Dean experienced an urge, so absurd it made laughter bubble up the back of his throat, to climb in the car, put her in gear, and floor it all the way out of Providence. Just drive away. He didn't want to go through the motions, had never cared about whatever took these people, couldn't see what they had in common, and seriously, how many times was he supposed to do this?

How many more times was he supposed to do this?

He diverted his fist at the last moment from the mirror to the electric hand-dryer. The snap and clunk inside suggested that it wouldn't be functioning again.

His pulse wasn't racing. It was slow and heavy in his neck, like air pockets chugging through a gas line: Sam. Sam. Sam. Sam.

Carefully Dean buttoned up his shirt and folded down the collar. "Cas? You there?" he asked, toneless.

Outside a soda thumped in the machine, but there was no rustle of wings.

It was fine. He'd figure it out.

* * *

Dean had run out of duct tape and was affixing things to the wall with chewing gum. The map he kept at the center, the site of Sam's disappearance marked by a pink highlighter circle, other last-seen locations in yellow, and Cara, the odd one out, with a green asterisk. Around it he arrayed all the other scraps of the case: Bethany Dorner's obituary photo. A picture of Lindsey Chase, standing with a bland, professional smile behind a wizened figure in a wheelchair. A xerox of Brendan Whitmore's write-up at work for calling out sick for improbable amounts of time. Cara Pryor's keys and shoe. Marian Daniels' MADD accolades. This way, he could stare at the pink dot, make it the center of his existence, and let the other information swirl on his peripheral vision until such time as it all coalesced into an answer. The technique wasn't doing a damned thing for him, so far, but it was something he'd seen Sam do, so he did it now in an attempt to work some kind of sympathetic magic.

Cara Pryor broke pattern. The most likely explanation was that she wasn't part of it at all, and the rational course of action was to forget about her and focus his energies elsewhere. So why couldn't he shake the feeling that she mattered?

Here was where Sam would have told him, Because she does matter, Dean, of course she matters.
But only one thing about her mattered to Dean.

Detective Gutierrez thought Cara was connected to Jacob, at the very least. None of the others had gotten a reaction out of her, but there'd definitely been something there when he mentioned Cara. Dean wished he could just get her to give him she had. To con her into a sharing-and-caring mood would take more resources than he had right now, though. Maybe it was time to just level with her —

No. If he went to the police, not only would he be admitting defeat, but they'd arrest him for impersonating a federal agent and he wouldn't be able to help Sam at all. Prison would be an inconvenience for him, but it could kill his brother.

He pulled out his phone and scrolled through his contacts. His thumb hovered over Lisa for a long moment and almost pressed it. Then he scrolled back up and cycled through Bobby's numbers once more without result.

He was starting to crash; the world was growing hazy at the corners. Without quite knowing how, he found himself sitting on Sam's (Sam's though Sam had never been here) bed with his journal in his hands.

It was an unruled moleskine. Sam had bought it in a Borders where they were cybersquatting back in 2007, paying twice what a knockoff version would have cost at a Walmart and easily three times what it was worth, and Dean had ragged on him for it gleefully, all the harder when he found the little leaflet in the back going on about how this was the notebook of Ernest Hemingway and William Shakespeare and probably God, or something. Sam had shrugged and said he wanted it to last a long time, but he'd bridled, too, just a little. This was a piece of the well-groomed existence Sam had tried to buy, a little piece he'd thought maybe he didn't have to give up even if he filled it with protection sigils instead of legal commentary.

And it was a damned nice notebook. Dean had to grant that. The cover had a rich grain, and the pages a smooth surface that took ink like silk even if Dean watched Sam scrawl in it with motel ballpoints instead of a Parker fountain pen.

Sam had apparently seen him looking, because Dean got one for his birthday. Quad-rule.

Dean's fingertips trailed along the edges of the pages as he turned them. How could someone so pathologically tidy have handwriting like this?

There was still room left in this thing. Dean's, too. The whole point was to have a rapid reference, so they only entered the very most valuable or frequently referenced items: greatest hits of the Key of Solomon, summoning rituals, exorcisms. Incantations for keeping shit dead. Wards of all kinds. And—there it was.

Location spell.

None of the entries were dated, but Dean knew the date on this one: late 2008. Even after everything, it had the power to make him bitter, though he'd deny it to Sam's face and probably Bobby's.

He put it back in Sam's duffel. It didn't really matter, because there were no demon signs in this town.

He took out Rufus's address book, instead, and tapped it on his knee with his lips clamped in a line. Rufus had a good, long run; whom would he call right now? A psychic? There probably were a few
in here, bona fide. But Missouri had been one of the strongest psychics they'd ever seen, and asking her where their father was hadn't done a damned thing. Plucking "facts out of thin air" took serious juice. That kind of juice didn't come from good places.

The only psychic Dean had ever personally seen do it, in fact, was Sam.

Who, then? There had to be someone.

Rufus had been more organized than Bobby. Most of the names included some sort of notation beside them, however cryptic: Silversmith. Infosec (Prague). Pet supplies. Cargo and transport. Of the ones that didn't, Dean found he could identify the hunters by the sheer number of phone numbers crossed out and re-entered. The names themselves, though, only got crossed out once.

He recognized some names, but none he could trust with this. Here and there were names labeled folk artist or art dealer—shamans and people like Bela Talbot, Dean suspected. A lot of the latter were crossed out. For all Bela's talk of not being willing to risk her own skin, the stats suggested her profession wasn't a lot safer than theirs.

Below a card for someone in the mathematics department at Cambridge (her interests included "random matrix theory, high-dimensional hypothesis test, and shape-constrained estimation"—maybe Sam hadn't filched this for any sinister purposes whatsoever; maybe he'd just been cruising for a hookup), a J. Cl—s C—by, 304-555-7284 had been all but obliterated. Scrawled out angrily, rather than neatly removed. Dean had seen Dad strike out names like that. Hell, he'd seen John's contact info get the same treatment on Bobby's own oil-spotted list in the kitchen drawer beside the phones. That wouldn't have been particularly interesting in itself, but a few pages later, Clove Canby, 304-555-7284 was there again.

And struck through again.

Fully twenty pages later, the number had been entered one more time, and this time left to stand: J. Clovis Canby, 304-555-7284, 6 Plato Lane, Mt. Storm, West Virginia. There was no card or email address. In the notes field, Rufus had written Practical application (husbandry).

"Practical application of husbandry?" Dean muttered. "What in the hell does he husband?"

Dean wiped a hand over his face and shoved the book back in with Sam's over-bleached socks. To go another night and dawn without finding Sam felt like a line, one that made his throat tighten with every hour closer to it he got, the hair-thin line between missing and gone. Someone like Bela could probably help him, but the danger with people like that was that you never knew what other debts they might have or how you might fit into their payment plan. They'd learned that the hard way. If he didn't have anything by sundown, maybe he'd start looking for shortcuts. But it was too risky for now.

Anyway, he wasn't so impotent yet that he had to call up a fucking kitchen witch to solve his problems. If he didn't have enough to go on, he'd just have to go out and get some more.

There were six skeletons in his chamber.

Sam had to count them by touch; all but the one on the stairs were in the deep channel at the end of the platform he'd woken up on, and it was too dark to see even outlines down there. The bones were jumbled together with scraps of rotting cloth, like one after another they had been dumped down there into a growing pile. It took time, but eventually he was able to dig out five skulls.

He left the sixth where it was.
There were outflow pipes set into the wall down here, to match the inflow pipes that led to the others' chambers. Two were bricked up. One had been filled with concrete. One had been fitted with a grate, and Sam thought he could hear water moving somewhere beyond it. He couldn't see the grate, but it felt the same as the one over Jacob's pipe: cast iron, with slots he could just fit his hand through, about an inch thick. A small dam of detritus and slime had accumulated at its bottom.

He found that by touch, as well, and had nothing but himself to wipe his hand off on. He was grateful that he couldn't see his own nails. Rats squeaked somewhere off in the bowels of the place.

When he'd lost consciousness before, when the ghost came to Jacob, he'd gone down in front of a pipe about four inches wide set into the wall. It, too, had been filled with concrete, the cheap, coarse-gritted stuff used for high-volume projects like, well, filling pipes. Water welled from the rounded end of that concrete and fell in fat droplets. Sam crouched beneath it and let it fall on his fingers, wishing it were bleach. He wasn't sure, but he thought it was dripping faster than when it had first woken him.

Silence had fallen over the sewer. Sam could feel it digging at him, eroding his confidence like the water slowly grooving the floors in this place, and knew he had to push back against it.

He settled himself in the corner between Jacob's and Lindsey's pipes. The glowing ecto spilled down the wall in a few places, forming pretty impressive mats of the stuff and staining the floor with rusty light. Not for the first time, he wondered what kind of spirit they were dealing with. It would be kind of fascinating, if not for the part where he was trapped in a sewer with three innocent people.

"Lindsey? Jacob?"

Unhappy noise from Jacob, something that sounded vaguely like *Tryin'a sleep*.

"Hey, no, Jacob, not right now. I need you to tell me as much about the room you're in as you can. So that we can get out of here, remember? Jacob?"

"He'll probably be out of it for a while," Lindsey's voice floated down to him. "It takes it out of you when it visits."

So did not eating for three days or more. Sam needed to come up with a plan while he still had the strength to execute it, and while the others still had the strength to help him.

"How often does it come?" he asked.

Silence. Then she cracked up.

"Lindsey?"

Her belly-laugh tapered off into a giggle by way of a snort. "Sorry," she managed, "let me just consult my calendar. And my watch. Shit, you know what, let me just check my phone, my whole life's on there—"

"I get it."

"No, you don't. You will, though."

Sam rested his head back against the wall. "'And the angel which I saw stand upon the sea and upon the earth lifted up his hand to heaven, and sware that there should be time no longer.'"
"What?"

"Revelation 10. King James Version."

"A Jesus freak. Great. Just what we needed."

Sam didn't bother to correct her. "I don't need an exact time, Lindsey, just an estimate. Your internal clock is probably pretty far off by now, but you still have one. How long does it feel like, between visits? Hours? Days? Weeks? What?"

"Days." A pause. "Should be coming to see you soon, I'd say."

"I'm not so sure about that, actually. I don't think it wants the same thing from me."

Not that she'd been the cheeriest of companions up to now, but he was taken aback by the hate in her voice next. "You think you're so special."

"Actually, I don't. I'm here by accident—I remember I was looking for Jacob, and I think it took me because I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I doubt it cares about me. But it chose you. It chose Jacob, and Marian, and fifteen other people that I know of, starting sometime in the 1960s. Something sets you apart."

A long silence went by. "Lindsey?"

"Sets us apart like how?"

"I don't know. That's what I need you for. We have to figure out what you all have in common."

"We all live in a sewer."

"Lindsey, I'm serious. Think. What do you have in common with the others?"

"Nothing. Jacob's some sort of sales guy, Litner was a fucking hobo, Marian's batshit insane, and I— I'm normal."

Sam sighed. They were going to need Jacob awake to get anywhere on this topic. "Okay. Let's just focus on finding a way out, for now. Tell me about your room."

"Why? I thought your daddy was going to come and pick you up."

He counted silently to ten. "My brother. And yes, he will find us. He'll come back with dynamite, if he has to. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't see what we can do ourselves. Come on, that's common sense and you know it."

A grudging few seconds passed. "Fine, it's not like you can get in here to steal from us. What do you want to know?"

"Everything. Start with the shape of it."

"Rectangular. Well, sort of L-shaped, if you count vertical; the ceiling is high at this end, low for the rest of it, maybe six feet high."

"Why's it higher at one end?"

"How should I know? I can't even see up there."
"All right, never mind that. What's in the room? Any feature, Lindsey. Anything."

"I mean, there's pipes; it's a sewer. Little pipes on the ceiling, a kind of big one along the wall—that's the one that leaks, the one with the good water."

"Where does it run off? The pipe I climbed up is pretty much dry."

"There's a pit-thing down at the other end with like a metal cage set into it. That's where we're crapping, if you were still all concerned about your hygiene. And a door on the other side of it. I guess that's how it got us in here, but there's no handle and it's metal, thick, and anyway, it's locked. Might as well be a wall."

"Anything else? Do you have any iron in there with you at all, aside from that grate at the top of the pipe?"

"There's a metal plate across part of the floor, like a divider, about two feet tall? Not sure what it's for, other than tripping over. That might be iron."

"Anything you can pick up?"

"No."

Of course there wasn't. The spirit had been careful to strip them of tools of any kind; it would hardly leave them weapons. Sam wondered what the iron ledge was for. He wondered what this whole place was for. It didn't make sense.

"Wait. Lindsey, is your ceiling vaulted?"

"Vaulted?"

"Yeah. Curved."

"No."

His mind raced. "I don't think we're that far down."

"Why not?"

"Most of any given sewer system isn't, for one thing. And your ceiling would be curved if there were much ground on top of it. It would have to be, to bear the load."

She barked a laugh, but there was a hitch in it. "I'm going to die like two feet into the ground? That's even better."

Sam grinned as he climbed to his feet. "I don't think we're going to die, at all."

Unlike the spacious downtown headquarters, Providence PD's District 4 was housed in what was basically a strip mall. Dean hadn't had any trouble getting in here yesterday morning, but he thought the patina acquired from thirty hours awake lent him extra credence.

"Yeah, hi, um, here to look at the case file for Lindsey Chase again?" Dean showed his badge cursorily to the desk officer. Thankfully, she was a motherly type in her forties. He didn't have the energy for another gimlet-eyed stone wall like at Gutierrez's substation.

Officer Marks gave him a half-sympathetic, half-amused look before typing into her system. "What
was the last name, again?"
"Chase. First name Lindsey with an E."
She paused. "Sorry, it isn't here."
"What are you talking about? I just used it yesterday."
"It's on request. Sorry."
His pulse jumped in his neck. "Where is it?"
"Downtown."
"Downtown like District 1 downtown?"
"Yep."
"What about the Whitmore file? Brendan Whitmore?"
Keys clicked. "Also out."
"Let me guess: downtown?"
"Uh-huh." She glanced up at him. "You could view them there. Want me to call ahead for you?"
He forced a plastic smile onto his face. "Nah. That's okay."
* * *
"This is Robert Singer. I'm on a business trip and not currently—"
* * *
"District 9 switchboard, how may I direct your call?"
Dean flattened his printout of the Pryor disappearance file over the steering wheel and read the
investigating officer's name in the waning light. "Yeah, hi, I'm trying to reach Officer Edward
Munoz?"
"One moment, please."
It was more than one moment. It was quite a few moments. Eventually the recorded voice droning
about safety initiatives cut out, only for the switchboard operator to come back on. "May I say
who's calling?"
A little warning flare went up in the back of his brain. "Agent Barrett, FBI Boston Division."
"One moment, please."
Dean drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. The hold recording advised him not to leave
valuables visible in his car. He balled up the wreckage of his drive-through dinner, climbed out of
the car, and crossed the parking lot to dump it into the restaurant's trash can. The hold recording
wanted him to know that carbon monoxide poisoning was a serious issue. He climbed back into the
car. Dual smoke/CO detectors were available at many home improvement retailers—
"I'm sorry, sir, Officer Munoz is out in the field. Would you like to leave a—?"
"If there's a way in, there's a way out." Sam ran his fingers over the grate over Jacob's pipe. "It didn't teleport us in here; I've seen evidence that some spirits might be able to, but this one dragged me. I remember. Sort of. Anyway, I've got the scrapes to prove it."

"Well, thank fucking God you're here to tell us that, because it never occurred to anyone else."

Jacob mumbled semi-consciously for them to shut up. Lindsey ignored Jacob, and Sam ignored Lindsey.

"When it brought me in here, did you see anything? Hear anything? Or when it brought in Jacob, or Litner?"

"No. It does something to us when it brings someone in. When Litner showed up one day, I thought we'd just slept through the whole thing, and we probably did, but I think it kept us asleep. Then with Jacob, it got cold and I thought it was coming for me, but I passed out, woke up, and he was there, instead. Same with you."

Okay, that wasn't great news, but it wasn't surprising, either. "What has Jacob said about his room?"

"Not much. He said the only way in was that pipe down there with you, but he might have lied."

They had to break this distrust if they were going to get anywhere. If Dean were here, he'd be able to do it; he was a natural leader, and what nature hadn't done in that department their father had. Sam, on the other hand, always tried to bring people together, but they could smell that he was weak underneath and the illusion of control always fell apart at the most catastrophic moment. Like Cold Oak. And the most damning thing was that he never saw it coming.

He paused and took a deep breath, trying to clear his head. He was starting to drift. Food and water were going to become very pressing, very soon.

Dean was looking for them, which meant that Dean would find them. That was simple fact, like the law of gravity. They needed to be ready to move when he did.

"Okay. First step, we need to find a way to get to each other. You're going to be the key to that, Lindsey."

"What, and let you freaks just—"

"You'd rather stay in here? Because that's what it comes down to. Listen. The top of the pipe up there is blocked with rebar, right?"

"Yeah." Suspicion was heavy in her voice.

"It felt like it was only set a couple inches down into the concrete. It's a grate, not a structural reinforcement"—He prayed, anyway.—"so that means the bars aren't that long."

"Okay…?"

"I want you to pick one and start trying to work it free."

Her laugh was incredulous. "I can't pull a metal bar straight out of concrete, Sam!"
"You probably can, Lindsey. It'll take time. A lot of time—hours, longer than I can stay at the top of the pipe, or I'd help." It was more likely to take weeks, but that didn't matter. What he needed was something to keep them occupied, to keep the poison of despair at bay until Dean arrived. "But it can be done. This concrete has to be at least sixty years old, and with enough work, enough energy, it should start to crumble."

"How do you know how old it is?"

"Because there are dead bodies in here, and they started going missing in 1963." He slipped his fingers between the holes in the grate over Jacob's pipe and tugged.

"Oh."

"Once you have a bar free, I can use it to work on the grate between me and Jacob—"

"You want me to rip iron out of concrete just to give it to you? Fuck yourself."

"Fine, free a bar, use it to smash the rest of the lip of that pipe, and we'll have four bars. Tools are what's going to get us out of here, Lindsey. Think. It took away everything we could possibly use as a tool. I didn't even have a ballpoint on me when I woke up in here, did you?"

"No." Her tone was still a bit grudging, but he could hear the hope kindling in it, too. "Just my clothes. Wish I had my shoes."

He grunted and readjusted his grip on the grate. It hadn't budged, but he hadn't expected it to. Yet. Using small motions from his core, he rocked it up and down, trying to transfer as much energy from the motion to the grate, instead of his fingers, as possible. "It took my keys, my weapons—everything rigid. It wouldn't have stripped that stuff away if it didn't think it would make a difference. We need those bars. We can use them to break out of here, and we can use them to fight the spirit."

"Yeah, you said that before, when it was visiting Jacob, but I'm telling you, you can't hurt it. It—you just go right through it. And it goes through you."

"Spirits are repelled by iron."

"Oh, God. You're full of it. This is insane, you don't even know what it is—"

"I don't know everything about it, that's true. Spirits are all different; they used to be people. This one is doing things I've never seen another spirit do, but salt and iron are still our best bets. Lindsey. Calm down and listen to me."

She sobbed once, loudly, then gave a shaky laugh. "Is this where you ask me what I've got to lose?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

"Okay. I—Okay."

He closed his eyes in relief. "Good. You and Marian work on the bars up there; I'll work on the grates down here, and I'll look for anything else that could help. When Jacob wakes up, we'll get him to help, too."

"Marian's not… I don't think she can."

Sam released the grate and crawled up her pipe a little ways, not wanting to chance Jacob hearing.
"How's she doing?" he called up quietly.

"I don't think she's going to last much longer."

She didn't sound particularly distressed about it, but Sam couldn't really fault her for that. To be trapped in here, for so long, and retain your basic sanity was enough of a victory. Normal emotional responses didn't stand a chance. As for Marian—it was a miracle she'd survived this long. By the sound of things, not all of her really had.

"Okay, well, we'll do what we can to get her out of here in time. If one of us manages to get out before the others, they can send back help. Just do what you can for her."

"What happens if it comes back while we're trying to escape? It's—it's angry, Sam. I don't know much, but I know that, and it— If it catches us—"

He looked down at his hands. Rather, he looked down at where he knew his hands were; he was submerged in blackness, and he couldn't see the filth on his fingers from scrabbling over sewer walls and working elbow-deep in corpses.

"Is there really anything it can do to us that's going to be worse than dying here, Lindsey?"

She had no reply.

"Anyway." He climbed out of the pipe, back into the murky light. It seemed even stronger; his eyes must be adapting. "Like I said, I don't think it's really interested in me. I might be able to, I dunno. Watch, be an early warning system for us."

He felt chilled, probably as a result of slowing down after his earlier exertion. He needed water, but any water in here was going to be hazardous at best. He couldn't risk getting sick while there was any other option. Dean would need him ready to fight.

Someone whimpered. He couldn't tell whether it was Jacob or Marian. He also couldn't help either of them right now, so he tried to ignore the sound.

"If one bar seems looser than the others, even the tiniest bit, start with that one," he called up to Lindsey. "No matter how long it's taking, keep working on the same bar. It's about transferring enough energy to the surface between metal and concrete to begin to break it down."

"Okay."

He climbed carefully over Litner's skeleton on the stairs and down into the trench where the rest were. The floor was angled from either side into a trough, here, a few inches of water standing in it. "Water" was in fact probably not so much the term as "biohazardous soup," but Sam's interest wasn't in drinking it. Liquid had to drain somewhere.

"Use small motions. You want to transfer as much of that to the bar itself as you can, not exhaust yourself heaving on it."

"Does this really work?" she shouted back. "Have you ever actually done this?"

"Not anything this hard, no." Understatement. "But the principle is the same. It's going to be frustrating, but it should be possible." He patted over the wall in the dark until he found the other grated opening. Crouching, he sniffed and listened.

Yes. He could definitely hear—
Someone keened from upstairs. This time it was definitely Marian. Lindsey gasped. "Oh, God."

Sam climbed back up to the platform. Vibrations seemed to hum against the soles of his feet. "Lindsey? Is she—?"

"She only does that when—"

Jacob was awake, now, too, shouting hoarsely. "No! No! Not again, get out of here—"

Waves of air pressure rolled across the room, making his ears throb. Each was colder than the last, more intense. Like approaching footsteps.

Sam planted his hand against the wall in their corner, then recoiled when a rivulet of ecto streamed down on it from the ceiling. "Lindsey, what the hell? Why's it back for him so soon?"

If she had an answer, he never heard it. His breath turned to smoke in the dimness.

Then he turned, and he saw the ghost.

Going back to Dorner's apartment after banging on doors the evening before with all the subtlety of a Quiet Riot tour was risky. Too bad. Dean tossed back another No-Doz and climbed out of the car.

He was parked a few streets over from Dorner's apartment building. Glancing about for any observers, he checked the slide on his Colt .45 before shouldering his backpack and moving off through the deepening shadows.

It had to mean something that Sam had disappeared from here. He'd told Dean that he'd found nothing, but there had to be something, some little thing that Sam just hadn't had context for. Dean turned onto Dorner's street, taking in the traffic patterns as the evening deepened, the thump of a stereo from an open window somewhere, the clumps of people standing around talking outside the coffee shop where he'd asked after Sam last night, the obstacles in the alleys between buildings. On-street parking was full, and about half the street lights were out. Good.

He accessed apartment 212 via the fire escape and climbed into maybe the most yuppified living room he'd ever laid eyes on. It was like a Pottery Barn showroom in here. Neutral colors on the floors, black-and-white photographs on the walls, uncomfortable throw pillows on the couch. Jacob Dorner had a fucking breakfast bar, and for this man's sake Sam was missing.

EMF came first. Dean got nothing. He ran it one more time, checking nooks and crannies for sulfur, but the place was clean. Then again, Max Miller's house had been, too. Nevertheless, Sam had clearly gotten close enough to something to be worth taking. He moved on.

He didn't see the pencil-width camera lens mounted in the smoke detector in the entryway.

As he moved through the place, using a penlight sparingly and stepping quietly, Dean found himself comparing it to Lisa's. This was cleaner, but probably got cleaned less often. The furnishings came from the same sort of middling, normal aesthetic, if a less homey one. Work, sleep, and recreation were neatly compartmentalized in both homes in a way that, after a lifetime on the road, Dean couldn't help finding sort of unnatural.

But Dorner's place was different, somehow, and though Dean hadn't had time to notice it when he passed through here last night, it was bugging the shit out of him now. It finally slid into focus when he returned to the living room. When he'd lived with Lisa, the bedroom had been where
they'd kept the candid photographs, the slightly embarrassing art objects, the few pictures Dean had of his parents. The most personal artifacts in the most private space.

Dorner's apartment was inside-out. There weren't just more personal touches in the living room; all of them were in the living room. Family photos, school mementos, recreational gear—all of it was on display in the rooms where this man had balanced his checkbook and entertained his friends. You could tell a lot about a guy from his spank-bank material, but if Dorner had had any, it must have been on his computer or tablet—there was nothing in the bedside table or under the mattress. The closest thing to a personal touch in the room where he'd slept was one of those shitty black-and-white art prints that frankly looked like what you'd find on the walls of a moderately cozy bank lobby.

Smiling parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles adorned the living room, uniformly matted and framed. Childhood shots were mixed in, and there were a smattering professional portraits of (Dean assumed) Jacob in sailor suits and shit like that and a little girl in the sorts of frilly dresses parents put little girls in to get their pictures taken. The dead twin, presumably. But she hadn't died until the tail-end of their senior year of high school, according to Sam's background file. Where were all the candid photos of her?

He found what he was looking for in a reading nook to one side of the living area, where a photograph was perched on the edge of a bookshelf. Dean picked up the frame. It was recognizably Jacob Dorner and what had to be his twin sister. What had her name been? Bethany? She reminded Dean vaguely of someone, but that might just have been because hers was ultimately a very nondescript face: brown hair, blue eyes, square jaw, a female version of Jacob. They were holding a ridiculously narrow boat over their heads and looked about eighteen. Just before she'd died, then.

Twins. Dean rubbed his thumb over the base of the frame, smudging out the prints he left almost automatically. People said that twins were closer than other siblings. He didn't buy it, personally, but a handful of times over the years, he'd wondered about it. What they would have been like, him and Sam, if they'd been twins. He wondered if Sam thought about it, too.

The pictures of Bethany on the walls were all for show, staged portraits from ages that Dorner probably could barely even remember that froze her in childhood and glossed over the tragedy of her death. But he'd kept this one that showed her exactly as she'd been when he lost her and had placed it at eye level right beside his reading chair. He thought about her every day. Despite himself, Dean felt sorry for him.

The door exploded.

"Police! Hands in the air!"

Dean was moving before the door finished giving way. Flashlight beams painted his silhouette across the walls as he dove down the hallway toward the bedroom. Only seconds later did his brain process the brief glimpse he'd gotten of Detective Gutierrez, framed in the corridor light. She had not looked as surprised to see him as he was to see her.

There was one window in Dorner's bedroom. It was a corner unit, and where the fire escape window faced the back of the next block, this one looked out on an alley that cut perpendicular to the main street. Dean threw up the sash. Plastic shards flew as the locking mechanism broke.

They were on the second floor. The alley was approximately ten feet wide. Beneath Dorner's window was asphalt. Across the alley only a couple feet to the left was a dumpster. Heavily equipped people were pounding toward the room behind him. Dean jumped.
He overshot the dumpster, bounced off the vinyl siding of the adjacent building, rolled off the plastic doors set into the bin's angled top, and fell face-first into the asphalt. Blinding pain in his right shoulder made him roll into a ball.

The entire dumpster suddenly gonged, and it was so deafening that he could barely hear Gutierrez scream at someone to "Hold your fire!" as he shook his head, trying to clear it. He grabbed with his good arm onto the dump truck slot on the side and heaved himself to his feet with a grunt.

Precious seconds went by before he got his feet moving under him. An officer ran into the mouth of the alleyway, looked up at Gutierrez first and at Dean approaching second, and started to draw his weapon. "Freeze—"

Dean hit him and kept going.

An unmarked car and a patrol vehicle were pulled up in front of Dorner's apartment building. Waiting for the no-knock squad, who must still be tripping over themselves getting out of the building, but should be thundering down into the lobby—right about now.

It was mainly blind luck that an SUV passed a few inches behind him instead of straight through him, because Dean didn't check the main street before he cut across it. He heard orders shouted behind him, registered the coffee shop's suddenly much less populated storefront, then disappeared into the opposite alley headed north.

Fresh, cold adrenaline dumped into his blood. Objects percussed on his senses in bursts: fence. Door. House. Car. He'd been here before, but his mind was skidding, couldn't join up the route. Where the fuck was he parked?

The troughs between rows of buildings scrambled the sounds of the pursuit and destroyed his sense of their direction. He couldn't tell if they were behind him, in front of him, or all around him. Four voices? Five? More? His lungs burned.

He skidded into a quiet street and for a paralyzing moment thought he'd come out too far north. Then he caught sight of a familiar awning and took off east.

She was parked three streets over, in the last street space on the block. He'd cruised a quarter of a mile for that spot. Nothing sucked worse than making it back to your getaway vehicle with some sort of hellspawn bearing down on you only to find it blocked in with a Volkswagon parked too close in front and a Miata pulled up too close in back. Dean was pulling away from the curb before the door had fully shut.

His first thought was to drive sedately and try to blend in. That went to shit when a siren whooped behind him the moment he turned onto the first cross street, so he floored it up the boulevard and ran a red light to turn west. The squad car followed.

"Is this a car chase? Am I in a goddamned car chase?"

Merely having Baby's seat at his back made his brain work better. The foot chase had been a near thing, and it would have gone very differently without the lucky dumpster and the delay from the finest tripping over each other. As it was, his right arm was nearly useless now. But even winged, driving was his element. All the geography that he hadn't been able to remember while he was running came back to him once he was burning rubber. He didn't know the town as well as the cops who lived here, but their cars couldn't do what his could.

He had to make it back to the motel. He couldn't lose Sam's things. If he managed to lose his
pursuit far enough away from the place, say on this side of Route 6, then he could rest there, regroup, look at the map and find a place to go to ground.

Then what? Turn the town inside-out looking for answers and hope he didn't wind up in super-max a hundred miles from his brother?

A cop car appeared in front of him, lights going apeshit. Dean cut a hard left in front of a box truck and heard a screech as the cruiser behind him T-boned it trying to follow. The one that had been approaching him banked into the turn at speed and stayed with him.

"Why am I in a car chase, how am I in a car chase, what the goddamned hell am I doing in a fucking car chase—"

Providence consisted of vaguely gridlike patches crazy-quilted together into a mixed-use sprawl. This section was residential. A minivan started to back out into the twenty-five mile-an-hour zone where Dean was doing forty-five, hit its brakes, and scooted back in. A block and a half behind him, the patrol unit ran a stop sign.

What he needed was enough space to make a plausible feint. The motel was due south from Dorner's apartment, and Dean had fled north and west, away from the city center and its higher concentration of police. To make it to the motel, he now had to cross about a mile of tight-meshed intersections and a major highway.

Adrenaline was mostly overriding pain, but that wouldn't last forever, and sooner or later driving one-handed would slow him down. Sooner or later a lot of things would pile up on him. The only way to win a car chase was to keep it short.

He turned left onto—whatever the hell street it was, he just knew it ran south. He needed to make them think he was headed out of town, which right now meant making them think he was headed for Route 6 or Route 10. And he had to get out of this residential maze before the Providence PD got their shit together enough to coordinate an interception at one of the hundreds of intersections in here.

He turned eastward onto the broader Atwells Avenue. Traffic was light in his direction, heavier in the other: rush hour went on for a long time in a city this size, and the citizenry were still migrating from downtown to suburbs. Good.

Vehicles scrambled to pull over out of the way of the lights and siren. The squad car was about eight seconds behind him. He could improve that, now he was on a bigger artery. Once he had some slack, he'd just need an opportunity to use it.

He fucking hated this town. It was pointless and it couldn't decide whether it was city or suburbia and the buildings were ugly. It was too close to the bay and too far from the ocean and what even was the point of Rhode Island?

He needed a place to hide the car. Just for a minute, even. But a sleek, solid black car like this one wasn't exactly inconspicuous.

Behind him, a dark sedan appeared just behind the squad car. It wasn't running flashers and it was hanging back, but Dean had spent enough time running from police to be able to tell it was here for him. Probably Gutierrez and her partner, since this—whatever the hell it was—was clearly her operation. He gritted his teeth. At least he knew where she was, now.

A lumbering bus turned east into his lane from the south. Already going too fast to stop, Dean saw
it happen a second and a half before he entered the intersection on a red light. He swung left into
the westbound turn lane, floored it, and cleared the bus about two feet before the turn lane gave
out.

When next he checked his mirrors, the bus was frantically trying to pull into a gas station parking
lot, stopping and starting with both pursuit cars stuck behind it. He turned south.

The building density abruptly dropped off in the approach to the US-10/US-6 junction. As he
passed an abandoned barber shop, Dean saw two things: signs for the ramp to RI-10 and a business
with a parking lot that was empty except for a few long, black cars. He blinked. It was a funeral
home.

He slammed on the brakes, wrenched the wheel to the right through a spike of agony, and brought
the Impala to a halt between two hearses. He cut the engine.


The patrol car went wailing by. The unmarked car followed right behind. Ducked down and
looking through the side windows of one of the hearses beside him, Dean saw one take the on-
ramp for RI-10 north, the other for RI-10 south.

Five seconds went by, then ten, then twenty, then thirty.

"Well, I'll be damned."

He gave it another thirty seconds before he turned the car back on. Then he pulled out from the
funeral home's parking lot with more control than he'd pulled in—one of their hearses had a long
gouge down the side from Baby's passenger side mirror now; he actually felt kind of bad about that
—eased the Impala back onto the road, and crossed underneath RI-10 via a quiet underpass a few
yards past the on-ramps.

He drove the rest of the way to the motel as sedately as a soccer mom who'd just topped off her
Xanax, checking his mirrors, sandwiching himself between less conspicuous vehicles where he
could. Upon arrival, he saw nothing more sinister waiting for him than a minivan with a "Baby on
Board" sign pulled up to the neighboring room. Of course, he hadn't noticed anything sinister when
he'd been breaking into Jacob Dorner's apartment, but he was paying attention, now, and he could
remember the clump of people hanging awkwardly around in front of the coffee shop, the almost
ludicrously unconvincing (except that he'd been convinced) guy leaning against the front window
of the bodega half a block down from it. The signs had been right there: POLICE
SURVEILLANCE in giant, neon letters. He'd walked right into it.

Sirens wailed somewhere far off, probably on the expressway they assumed he was on. Dean
cursed when he fumbled the door key with his shaking left hand. Finally he got the fucking thing
open.

First off he slapped on the police scanner. Then he started throwing things into bags one-handed.

"—southbound on 10, not seeing anything. Munoz, you got a visual?"

"Negative, Tony. Stopped a black sedan that was behaving erratically on the northbound 95, but it
was just a 502—"

Gutierrez's voice cut into the chatter, incredulous. "You pulled over the wrong vehicle?"

Despite himself, Dean grinned. If he'd been unprepared for an action like theirs, at least they were
even less prepared for a fugitive like him.

Sam's belongings were the first he swept into the bag: clothes, weapons, mp3 player, journal, Rufus's address book. He zipped it closed one-handed and dumped it by the door. His shoulder was definitely dislocated; he wasn't entirely sure what the fuck he was going do about that. Hospitals were out. Without Sam here, that didn't leave a lot of options. Dean ignored the panic tightening its grip with each minute that passed.

He'd load up the car, change the plates, then take thirty minutes to rest. He'd be able to think more clearly after thirty minutes of rest.

"District 2 Adam 38."

Clear tone. "38."

"You closing on location?"

It occurred to Dean suddenly that the siren sounds he'd heard on arrival were not retreating.

"ETA two minutes."

"District 4 Adam 20 to dispatch, what's the address?"

Dean froze.

"Adam 20, it's 13 Gorham Ave, offa Huntington."

The motel's address.

Dean swore fluently and started raking as many of the papers stuck to the wall into his open duffel as he could. Shit, shit, shit—

"20 to dispatch, 10-4. Can be there in three minutes or under. Just in case he's circled back, or somethin'."

"Dispatch to Adam 38. Wait for District 4 car. Suspect armed and dangerous."

He slung both his bag and Sam's over his functioning shoulder, held the scanner by its antenna between his teeth, and slammed out of the room. The scanner crackled in his ear about how the units en route to the motel were to secure the location and wait, that a warrant was forthcoming. He didn't waste time trying to remember how much he'd left taped up on the wall or how bad it would look.

Tossing the bags in the car twisted his shoulder in a way that had him retching on the pavement for precious seconds. Where the hell was Sam? Where was his brother to give him a girly back rub, and fix his shoulder, and carry some of this shit, and pull the plug on this nightmare?

Eyes watering, Dean peeled out of the motel as fast as he dared and picked any direction that was away.

The sirens were definitely louder now. They'd found him awfully easily, flashy car chase notwithstanding. Jesus, had the woman had him followed? Had he missed being followed?

Gutierrez came back on the radio. "Q11 here. Suspect is a white male, six-two, six-three, hundred and eighty pounds, thirty-five to forty years of age—"
"Forty? Screw you!" he snarled.

What did they even suspect him of, other than impersonating an officer? Because a little collegial fraud was not enough to explain this.

Dean focused on the immediate physical objective of making it out of this and didn't let himself think about what making it out meant. There was no choice. Not hunted and crippled and out of ideas.

*Sammy, I fucking need you here.*

"All units, Q11." Gutierrez's voice again. "Fugitive is a person of interest in Lola. Repeat, person of interest in Lola, suspected accomplice. I don't care if you have to cork this town tighter than a tax man's asshole and toss every building one by one, I want this son of a bitch. All units respond. I want roadblocks at all major junctions as well as 246 and Branch Ave, 7 and 15, 128 and Greenville, 14 and 5, 12 and 5, everything crossing over the beltway—"

"Don't ask for much, do you?" someone smart-assed without IDing themselves.

"Make it happen."

Dean set his jaw and saw the road map in his mind. He'd spent hours staring at it; it had to pay off now. West was his best shot. North meant too much congestion, and to the east and south he'd run out of land too fast to maneuver. And Gutierrez, or her superiors, knew it; the response she'd just ordered would close every remotely simple route of this town.

Route 14 West was his first thought. Good throughput, good latitude, not too far from his present location. Then he remembered that it had a bridge, going over the Scituate Reservoir. Bridges were always best avoided when evading the law.

Route 12, then. He remembered a line joining the two parallel roads almost vertically, just beyond the fat rope of the Providence Beltway. He remembered it because it had some Hobbit name, what was it, Bilbo, Frodo, Merry—*Pippin.* He'd take Route 14 west to Pippin Orchard Boulevard, drop down to Route 12, skirt the reservoir to the south, and rejoin Route 14 to cross over into Bumfuck, Connecticut.

He'd be five hundred miles away before dawn.

*Sam.*

Roadblocks were going up on both of those routes. But the ones he couldn't go around were outside the Providence city limits. They had to coordinate with the state, coordinate with the departments in Johnston and Cranston, and physically get units in position, and Dean was already halfway there.

Strategy was moot, now. This was a straight-up race.

*Sam, Sam, Sam.*

His shoulder screamed every time he made a hard turn. But he wasn't in a car chase, anymore; he had to beat the roadblocks without being noticed or it was all over. He couldn't pass the puttering mid-century truck on Alto. He didn't dare do more than thirty-five on Silver Lake. He sat, jaw locked, through red lights.

"—Where's Lincoln 83?"
"She's on a 23109."

"Pull her."

Route 14. He slowed but did not stop at the stop sign and turned onto the westbound vein. Then he accelerated.


His pulse spiked as he approached the intersection. A red light was waiting for him, two cars in line. No wash of pink and blue strobe lights, but that could change any second. Speed up or slow down?

Just as his foot hesitated over the accelerator, the light changed to green. He hit the brakes, slowed to a mannerly car-length behind the Volvo just starting to move, and proceeded through the intersection normally.

One down, one to go.

The lead car turned off at a residence half a mile on, fucking stopping in the middle of the road to do it, taking his sweet fucking time to turn around and back in and Dean swung the Impala around it and the Volvo halfway through the maneuver, riding up on the sidewalk and hitting the gas again. Up ahead, the speed limit ticked up to forty-five.

Signs for I-295 flared blue in his headlights as he pushed Baby through a yellow light. Ancient pizzerias, abandoned garden supply businesses, huge, apple-pie front lawns. A hundred little shifts to underscore how far away he already was from downtown Providence. He'd have heard something if they were already in position, right? The scanner crackled. Maybe not. This far out, the Providence chatter was fuzzy and Sam wasn't there to adjust the settings. Sirens were just becoming audible, Dopplered towards him from somewhere north at freeway speeds. He edged the needle up closer to fifty. The sidewalks were broad, here. One way or another, he was going through.

In the end, it was an anticlimax. He passed the junction at five over the speed limit through an unbroken green light. The sirens faded behind him.

Dean kept a death grip on the wheel as he cut south to RI-12 and continued west, but there was no pursuit. A sheriff’s department vehicle passed him in the opposite lane as he left Cranston, but Dean was right behind a Mack truck and the cruiser showed no flicker of interest. No one at all appeared to prevent him from leaving Providence.

His right hand shook uncontrollably as he reached for his phone. He tried to dial, dropped it, tried again. His whole body was shaking, actually.

"This is Robert Singer—"

"Damn it!"

Empty fields and trees stretched out to either side in the dark. The road contracted, the speed limit expanded. Soon he'd rejoin RI-14, and soon after that cross into rural Connecticut. The occasional oncoming car illuminated the Impala's interior, and his heart was beating wildly, faster than it had as he'd borne down on the roadblock sites.

SamSamSamSamSam—
"Cas, please!" he cried out. "Fucking please!"

Another truck passed and it was dark again.

Dean finally got onto US-6 in the dark, sleeping town of Brooklyn, Connecticut and skirted north around Poughkeepsie via minor roads. Just past the Catskills, he stopped for gas. One other car was gassing up under the fluorescent-lit canopy; one of the young girls waiting for their tank to fill glanced up, made eye-contact with him briefly, and blanched with an emotion he didn't care enough to read. Horror, maybe. Or pity.

He carried on west. He had no specific strategy beyond avoiding major population centers. He had no specific idea of where he was, after a while. The need to sleep gnawed at the back of his mind, but he pushed on past the bend of the Appalachian Mountains.

He stayed on Route 6 for quite some time, hours, maybe. The odometer showed something over six hundred miles from Providence. He stopped for gas again, and a mile afterward saw signs for lodging. He turned in at the motel another three miles on.

Dean got a room without registering the name of the place or the rates and parked down where the clerk indicated. Limbs curiously heavy, his shoulder by now a steady, almost deadened ache, he brought their duffels in from the car.

He put the bags down on the bed farthest from the door without turning on the light. He sat down on the other, curled on his side with his shoes on, and, at some point, wept bitterly.
the happiest days of our lives

Chapter Summary

Sam thought about what he'd seen of the ghost. Even now, his stomach turned a bit. "Ghosts are like an echo. They get distorted by whatever's keeping them here, but their apparitions are clues to what happened to them."

"Please," said Jacob. "Enlighten us. What exactly happened to that?"

Chapter Notes

If you're enjoying this yarn, or if you have other comments, please consider feeding the author. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Only a lifetime of experience and the chill in the air told Sam what he was seeing was a ghost at all.

It was barely more than a flicker of pallor and corruption. He might have thought it was more ecto, except that it was too thick and, barely, too solid. Too still. It could not be termed a figure. It looked like someone had slopped fat and drain hair and colorless flesh down the wall. Nothing obviously human or even animal stood out about it, except that it was breathing.

Sam could see it breathing.

His mind was blank but for the awareness that he had nothing. No weapon, no tool, no shelter. If it came, he couldn't even run. At first, the spirit's breathing was only visible, and only barely. Then it became audible; then it became louder; and then the dark mat at the top lifted and Sam realized that it was its head. The breath-sounds hitched. The knob of its head lifted, fell, lifted, fell. It bobbed a couple more times, and the ribbons of matter spread over the wall quivered.

Sam was just beginning to wonder how a thing that had no feet or even visible skeleton would move when the entire pile seemed to sigh and began to slip sideways along the wall, towards him.

He shrank back into the corner. The ghost followed. Sam darted forward and away from Jacob and Lindsey, unconsciously keeping close to the wall and the light it afforded. The thing hanging down the wall paused, then reversed direction and slid slowly after him.

The ecto was glowing brighter, but it was still dim in here and Sam couldn't see the thing clearly. When the ghost's body encountered the leaky pipe that had woken him and parted around it, he was glad of that.

Sam stopped about halfway down the platform and swallowed, waiting to see what would happen. The others were saying something, he was pretty sure, but he couldn't really hear them past the pressure on his ear drums. The ghost stopped when it drew level with him.
After a moment, when all it did was sit there, Sam found himself taking a step towards it. He stared at it. The misshapen knob it had for a head hung down so the face wasn't visible. At least, he thought it was the head. It seemed to be, from the mat of what he hoped was hair, except that the shape was wrong and he knew, with sickening certainty, that it wasn't really big enough. It jerked once.

Sam stumbled when he retreated. It was such a civilian thing to do, but he couldn't take his eyes off the thing and, truly, it didn't even matter—graceful or graceless, he had nowhere to go. So he stayed where he fell, staring at the spirit, as fascinated as he was repelled.

Then it climbed down off the wall.

Sam didn't even know how to parse the movement, or the trail of not-there mucus it left behind. It moved in fits and starts along the floor, a living carpet of lumps and knobs that wasn't thick enough to be a body, what the hell was this thing, and his heart hammered as he scrambled backwards on his ass and elbows.

Ghost-flicker broke up its long, slow crawl towards him. It was numbingly cold, and Sam became aware that his limbs were growing clumsy again and that his thoughts were slowing with them, and then his hands found the end of the platform. There was nowhere left to go.

It was at his feet now. The head-knob moved restlessly, flickering. One moment he thought maybe it had arm stumps; the next it was an incoherent pile of meat. It picked up its head. Where a face should have been, there was only void.

It began to climb him.

The sensation was much the same as any other spirit attack, at first, except that where spirits usually reached for the heart or lungs or throat, this one seemed to pour itself into him, millimeter by millimeter. Despite knowing there was nowhere left to go, Sam instinctively tried to move away. It didn't matter. All that came out of his limbs was a short convulsion.

He saw the twisting mass of the spirit ripple up and over his face. Cold paralyzed him everywhere from his toes to the root of his tongue. Then it pressed into his head.

Panic so involuntary that it didn't even seem like his edged up his throat. Blinding pain began to build as he fought the intrusion, a slow, single-minded pressure as inexorable as water through a clogged pipe. Sam flashed on an image of what water eventually did to all cracks, and then it was through.

* * *

Sam walked backwards. Sun was warm on his face, gold dappled with green until he was back out on a street, cars going by the wrong way around him.

"Brendan Whitmore was not what you'd call an overachiever. His sister's cute, though. You?"

"Bupkis."

"Slip."

A priest was looking at him, shock and recognition in his eyes. Sam took hold of his head by the hair and drove his face into the concrete step where it was already obliterated into red pulp and a
spreading stain. Then again, and the stain was smaller. Then again, and again, and again, until it was whole again—

"Well, come in, then," the priest said, and climbed the unmarked steps.

The Other lost interest. *Slip.*

Sam lay on his side, listening in the darkness, while Dean breathed too quietly in the next bed. He was close enough Sam could reach out and touch him.

Dean—he'd done something to Dean—he remembered the curiosity, and then he felt the curiosity, and then something felt the curiosity for him, and he saw Dean, Dean arching off the floor, in the dark, in the dirt, with needles in his mouth and his eyes full of blood, and was that thrill his or someone else's?

Someone pressed at him. Pressed, and pressed, and pressed, but *No, this isn't how I'm going to find out—*

"Maybe we should just burn the place."

"Yeah, or maybe not, Dean, because who knows what Rufus even has in here," Sam said, absorbed in shelves, taking books, taking talismans, taking a thick volume bound in brown leather from a desk drawer. It was none of his business, but he was curious and besides—

*Slip.* "Believe me when I tell you that the things you don't know? Could kill you."

"I feel like I got slipped the worst mickey of all time and woke up to find out I burned the whole city down."

"It wasn't you."

*You're lying.*

There was someone in here with him. "Who are you?"

They didn't answer. He couldn't see them, couldn't hear them. He could only feel their fingers in his brain, prying apart the folds and looking for something. If he could just separate them from himself, then maybe he could wrench them out, but they threaded themselves through every movement like fat in a muscle.

The cop's head whipped back under his fist. Sam followed him down to the ground. The blows were all huge, with plenty of wasted motion, really the efficient thing would have been just to snap the man's neck, but he wasn't any kind of physical threat and Sam was restless, bored, and it felt good to hit the body beneath him again and again and again.

*Slip.*

Sam was in Jacob Dorner's apartment. He wanted to stay in that memory, there was something important in it, but someone else was controlling his body and it slipped away in a blur until he was in a church crypt instead, examining the delicate, parsley-like leaves under his fingers. *Artemisia vulgaris,* his mind obediently supplied, but this wasn't what the Other was looking for, and he just had time to think *Wrong kind of wormwood* before a surge of someone else's frustration carried him out of that memory, too.

He tumbled. Memories rose up, were angrily struck down, were slit open and pried into and Sam
walked backwards along a street in Providence. He passed docks, flashing oar blades. Sunlight warmed his shoulders through his suit jacket. He passed buses, doughnut shops, graven letters that spelled *In Deo Speramus*.

But Sam didn't. He had all his life, right up to the moment he'd jumped, even as he'd fallen—but then he'd woken up in the panic room, mind a neatly plastered blank for everything after dead graveyard grass and Dean's ruined face and one moment of perfect peace, and found that he just didn't.

He felt the Other more obtrusively now. It tried to wrench him backwards from the lip of the pit and to the hot metal of the car through jeans as he held Dean down over the hood and drew back his fist, to the moment when he and Lucifer were neither two nor one and time splintered into a thousand different rays but that wasn't what made the Other grip him and try to delve deep and intimate, like it deserved to see this, like it had any right.

Anger boiled up in Sam like storm surge. There had been a time when anger had been at his command, before he'd realized how much he was at its. They'd done great things together.

Sam took hold of the probing fire in his mind and wrenched.

* * *

Inhuman screams rent the air. Human screams did, too.

Sam lay gasping on the concrete. His head was hanging off the end of the platform, neck strained, looking into darkness and the dim outline of the far wall. He managed to bring himself onto his side and then up onto his knees, and what he saw was the ghost-thing twisting on the floor, retreating, and the ecto *burning* where it poured from the walls, throbbing bright orange.

Sound filled the chamber. The ghost was screaming. Marian was screaming with the ghost. Jacob was screaming about how he wasn't going to get skull-fucked again, let it just try, and Lindsey was screaming at Jacob to shut up. Sam watched the spirit move in ripples and jerks until it found the wall. Then it flickered, squelched, and folded itself away into some other dimension.

Wishing he could afford to throw up again, Sam squeezed his eyes shut against a blinding headache that he didn't want to admit was familiar. Marian's cries died down to moans. He staggered to his feet and away from the edge of the platform.

"What—the hell—was that?" he panted.

Lindsey and Jacob's shouting match cut out. "Sam? Is that you?"

He dropped heavily into the corner between Jacob's pipe and Marian and Lindsey's. He swallowed. His mouth was very dry. "I think so."

"Where is it?" Jacob sounded on the brink of hysteria. "Where'd it go?"

"Think it left," Sam croaked. "For now." His pulse was still racing from the fight, ticking down in his neck like a cooling engine. The sensation was not novel. It always used to feel like this, after he —

"What do you mean, *it left*?" Lindsey's voice was hard. "Why did it leave?"

"It—" Sam raked a shaking hand through his hair. The roots were greasy. God, he wanted a shower. All he wanted was a shower and Dean. He laughed ruefully. "You were right, after all. It
came to visit me."

"And then it just left?"

He took a moment before answering her, trying to sift through the experience. "It was in my head."
He remembered—shit. That memory from Bristol, again, of beating the cop half to death and enjoying it. Conversations with Dean. Irrelevant strolls through Providence, like something was rewinding his life in his head. Something—something he had done to Dean, didn't know whether he wanted more to remember or to forget—

He remembered meeting Father Reynolds in a confused jumble. He'd passed the church from that old case on the way to Jacob's apartment. That much he was reasonably certain had really happened. But the rest—Oh, God. Had he really killed him? That couldn't be real, couldn't be. What about the rest, then? Had the old priest recognized him at all? Spoken to him? Had he imagined the entire encounter?

The whole day was hazy in his memory. The only time he'd been able to see anything clearly was when the ghost was looking at it through him.

Lindsey was calling his name, sounding pretty pissed off about it. "What?"

"I said, and then what?"

"I threw it out. What the hell was that? Ghost possession I've felt before, but that—that was new."

"What in the hell do you mean, you threw it out? How?"

Sam blinked at the mounting fury in her voice. "I don't know. I just did. It wasn't easy." He didn't feel like touching on his resume of special talents.

"He's lying," said Jacob.

"What? Why would I?"

"No one else has ever done that before," Lindsey said. "How did you?"

"I told you, I don't know. I just—It was trying to look at something, a memory, that I didn't want it to see, and I got angry and forced it out."

"Right." Her voice was clipped. "Or you've been in league with it this whole time."

"Did you really just say 'in league with it'?"

"He's lying," Jacob said again. "It left to go grab someone else or something. No one could do that."

"You said you're the Ghostbusters, but I don't see any rescue coming. What are you really doing here, Sam?"

Sam counted to ten. It wasn't her fault; the stress of being trapped for months on end had to cause untold psychological damage, to say nothing of regularly repeated spirit possession. Even the most well adjusted person on the planet would be paranoid by now. Or maybe she had just been a fucking asshole to begin with, who knew. "Exactly what I told you, Lindsey. Believe me or not, I can't force you."

She was right about one thing: there was no sign of Dean. That could just mean he hadn't found
them yet. It probably meant that. Sam hoped it meant that, and he refused to think about the possibility that Dean had already found the ghost and been no better prepared for it than Sam had, only for it to decide that Hotel California had no vacancies.

He thought suddenly, vividly, of the leaky pipe. His mouth was parched, his lips cracking, and he knew it was time. Clean or not, he had to have water.

The ecto was still glowing brightly enough that he didn't have to grope along the wall; he could see the pipe and the puddle of his vomit beyond it. A cockroach scuttled away from the latter as he approached.

"Sam? Sam?"

He squatted before the pipe, counting. Drops of water welled from the rounded tip of the concrete filling at a rate of about once every two seconds. It would have to do. Awkwardly, ignoring Lindsey's calls, he maneuvered himself until his head was under the pipe and opened his mouth.

He felt like a hamster. The spirit's attack had been invasive, but this was degrading. Sam shut his eyes and thought about making it out of here to see Dean again.

It tasted all right, at least. It was hard to tell, because the whole sewer was so putrid, and his sense of smell had long since exceeded what it could process and given up—ha—the ghost, but it was possible that the materials choking his water supply were also filtering it. Not that it mattered if they weren't, at this point. He had to drink.

"He pass out again?"—Jacob talking to Lindsey.

"The hell should I know?"—Lindsey replying.

"No way he forced it out. You said he fainted when it just came to visit me, never mind him."

Lindsey snorted. "Yeah, and you've been Superman up to now."

Sam swallowed one mouthful, two, three. Then he let some water fall in his cupped hands and washed them as best he could. He returned to the corner by the others.

"If anyone's in league with it, it's you, you bitch," Jacob threw back. "You've been alive down here how long? And you really expect me to believe you've been living off that goop on the walls?"

Sam had questions about that, himself, but they could wait. "You were right," he said before Lindsey could reply. "It's looking for something. What is it looking for?"

"Thought you were the expert."

"Expert?" Jacob asked suspiciously. "Expert in what?"

"Well, you see, Jake, while you were getting reamed by Casper—"

Sam's head throbbed. "Supernatural phenomena. If you've had nightmares about it, it's real. Except Bigfoot and Donald Trump's hair. We're called hunters. My brother and I came here because people have been disappearing mysteriously in Providence since at least 1963, almost twenty that I know of. There's something connecting all of you."

"You say that like you're so sure," Lindsey spat. "An hour ago you were sure it wouldn't come for you."
"I'm sorry, I'm still hung up on supernatural expert," Jacob said.

"Yeah, you would be," Sam muttered.

"How do you know we're connected?" Lindsey asked again. "The last thing I can remember from before is leaving the nursing home for lunch. Jacob said he was running or something. And he's not even from here. Then there's you, and all I know about you is that you're nuts."

"Even if it's decided to try to use me, I don't think I'm part of the pattern. I was just in the wrong place."

"What place was that?"

"I can't remember, and that's bugging the hell out of me. I'm pretty sure I'd just come out of Jacob's apartment—"

"You broke into my apartment?"

"—but everything around when it took me is just really fuzzy. It's like it fried my brain when it took me. Sounds like it did that to all of us." Mutters of agreement. "Look, I'm not saying you did anything to make it take you. But it chose you for a reason."

"Yeah. Because it's insane."

"Probably. That doesn't mean it doesn't have a reason. It might not be a reason that would make sense to anyone else, but there'll be one somewhere. Spirits—they get confused. It's like they get so hung up on one idea that they become blind to anything else." Cramps were starting to pinch at his stomach, though they were mild for now. "And this one… whatever else it is, it's motivated."

"Why does he keep talking about it like it's a person?" Jacob asked Lindsey.

"Because he thinks it's a dead one."

"There was nothing human about that," Jacob said flatly.

Sam thought about what he'd seen of the ghost. Even now, his stomach turned a bit. "Ghosts are like an echo. They get distorted by whatever's keeping them here, but their apparitions are clues to what happened to them."

"Please," said Jacob. "Enlighten us. What exactly happened to that?"

Sam stared at his knees. "I have no idea."

* * *

They all slept for a while. At least, Sam tried. He thought he understood why Litner had chosen to die on the stairs, now, if that had been a choice: it was hard to close your eyes anywhere near the wall when you knew the spirit appeared from there, yet to just curl up in the middle of the floor went against instinct at a base, animal level. It was cold, and it was exposed. And the ghost, when it came, would find him there just as surely.

Sam knew he needed to sleep and that now, just after a visitation, was the best time to do it. They should be safe for a few hours, if he hadn't pissed it off too much. But ultimately, what pulled him under was rock-bottom blood sugar and the fact that there was nothing else to do.

He woke… who knew when, really? That was the bastard of it. He'd read the studies, seen a few
victims, and knew, in a broad, intellectual way, what the absence of any meaningful time markers could do to a human being, psychologically. But that didn't prepare him for the fact that it was starting to affect him already.

What maybe bothered him most was this itch at the back of his brain, like this was actually familiar.

He'd gone to sleep propped up in the corner where he talked to the others. That, too, was probably down to animal instinct: sleep near the herd. He wondered if Lindsey and Marian slept together, not for anything sexual, but for warmth. They probably did. It might have been partly how they'd survived for so long.

Sam grunted when he stretched out his legs. His right knee didn't pop anymore, he'd noticed.

A rustling sound filtered through the grate at his left. "Sam?" It was very low, almost a whisper. Sam felt absurdly like he was having a covert conversation with a preschool classmate during naptime. "That you?"

"Yeah. S' me."

They breathed in the quiet for a few minutes. "Sorry I bugged out on you earlier." Jacob's voice was hollow. "Been sort of a stressful couple of days."

Sam sat, staring into at the dark. "Yeah."

"Did you really throw it out?"

"Yeah."

Dorner's voice was almost plaintive. "How?"

Sam swallowed. "It's easier when you've had some practice."

"What do you—?"

"Never mind. Just… not my first rodeo, okay. We'll get through this." What he did not say, and did not particularly want to dwell on, was that he wasn't sure he'd be able to eject the ghost more than once. And its interest in his memories could pose difficulties for him that it did not for the others.

*Don't scratch the wall.*

"We should talk, all of us." They should, urgently, but Sam felt bone-tired, and in this momentary hush, he couldn't bring himself to mount another attempt at a rally. "Compare notes and try to understand what it wants."

"Will that change anything?"

Sam exhaled. "Depends on what it wants."

"What was it like, for you?"

Absently Sam picked at the crud under his fingernails. "A lot like you and Lindsey described. It was reviewing my memories. I could get a read on it, sometimes, but just broad strokes: anger, frustration. Interest. Definitely more interest in some memories than others."

"Yeah? Like what?"
The ones where I didn't have a soul. The ones where I dangled my brother like meat on a hook. That one time when I was kind of Satan.

"Violent ones," he settled on, finally. "You?"

Dorner seemed to have thought about this since they'd last discussed it. "Everyday stuff, mainly. Lindsey talked about it walking around in her, and that's mainly what it did."

Sam wondered if Jacob's answer was any more truthful than his own. He hoped so. They couldn't all have had a turn being possessed by the Devil in here, could they?

Instead of pressing, he settled for talking. "Mostly it was like it was flipping through channels, but sometimes, with enough effort, I could take back the remote. It got pissed off when I did that, but I think it pissed it off more when it didn't find whatever it was looking for. It's like… It's like it expects us to know something."

"Yeah, but what? I dreamt a lot of memories, but it was mostly just stupid stuff: walking around town, jogging, going to the gym, being in my apartment. Why dig through our memories, anyway? If it wants to find something, why not just go out there and look?"

"Been thinking about that. I think it's bound to the sewers. I'm not sure how—most spirits are actually a lot more geographically limited than that. But it explains how it could take all of us from all over the city. We either wandered too close to a sewer opening or it lured us there."

"Lured us? Like mind control?"

"Yeah. That's, um. That's a thing for a lot of spirits. Sorry."

Silence for a few.

"So, ghosts."

"Yup."

"Like. Lots of them?"

Sam laughed quietly. "More than you'd think, yeah."

"What makes them come back?"

"Honestly? Nobody's really sure." Sam shifted, trying to get comfortable on the concrete. "It's not so much that they come back as that they never really go. So, if they stick around, it's because they have some kind of unfinished business. Violent death is the most common kind. Murdered, and the killer got away with it." He stared at a scab on his knee in the silence. Plink. "Based on what I saw, something like that's a pretty good guess for this one."

Little as he liked to, he tried to remember exactly how it had looked. Gender, age, species had been obliterated in what conception it had left of itself. If the apparition was any record of what had physically happened to its body, then it had been taken apart. More than once. "Something bad happened to this ghost, man."

"Yeah, but—" Dorner sounded uncomfortable. "People get murdered every day. I mean, Providence has something like twenty every year. They can't all be coming back from the dead, can they?"
"They aren't. Like I said, nobody really knows why some people stay when some people don't, but it's a choice they make, not to move on. Anger's the most common reason, but sometimes it's something else. Sometimes it even starts as something good. Like a desire to protect someone."

He hadn't thought about that night in the old Lawrence house in months. No—years. There was an extra year between now and the trip Cas had sent them on into the past that he didn't have, and even now that kept tripping him up.

She'd been so beautiful. It was functionally the first time he'd ever met her. For months afterward, remembering the way she'd looked at him could fuel enough anger to swing a machete through a vampire's trunk.

Sam, I'm sorry.

"Sam? Sam!"

"Yeah, um. Sorry." He wiped a hand down his face, then wished he hadn't. "Spaced out. Jacob, have you eaten anything yet?"

Long pause to that. "No. Not— No."

"I think… I think we're gonna have to."

"You said your buddy was going to come and get us out of here. You said."

"He will, Jacob, but he has to find us first. He won't stop looking, no matter what." So long as he's alive. "But look, I was looking for you guys when I was taken, and to be honest? I wasn't close to finding you." He glossed over the part where they'd been about to pack up and leave with the job undone. "Dean will come, but it won't matter if we're dead."

The head rush when he stood nearly put him back on the floor, but he fought it off until his vision cleared. He wouldn't let his brother come here in vain.

"Wondered when you'd get hungry enough." Lindsey's voice was rough with sleep.

Sam looked at the biggest spill of ecto on the wall. "'Hungry' isn't necessarily the word I'd use."

"You're lying," Dorner said. "You have to be. No way you've been alive down here this long on— on whatever that is. It's feeding you."

Drowsy amusement colored her answer. "Roaches aren't as bad as you'd think. They all seem to come up here, too. Told you our room was the best."

Cockroaches. Okay, that wasn't so bad. Better than the prospect of the ecto, in a lot of ways; he and Dean had done their share of experimentation with grubs and beetles in their days of basic survival training. Ah, boyhood.

"I've— Look, I've eaten those, all right?" Jacob burst out. "You happy? I ate the fucking roaches. But there aren't enough of them."

"Yeah, well, maybe people don't live very long in your room."

"Enough, Lindsey," Sam said. "Look, clearly there's enough calories around to at least keep us going. If you're short, Jacob, I'll… bring you some of whatever's available in here." He'd just volunteered to bring somebody dead insects as presents, like some kind of deranged house cat.
Great. "Is there anything else, Lindsey?"

"We never seem to run out of rats. The corpses are a draw, I think."

Well. *That* he truly wasn't hungry enough for.

"I haven't seen any," said Jacob. Sam had a sudden picture of himself stuffing dead rats through the grate to Dorner's pipe. Jesus. He really was turning into a house cat. Part hamster, part Dory, part *actual fucking house cat.*

He thought of Dean. Whatever it took.

"One thing at a time," he said. "Rats and roaches could carry just about anything, but I guess the ecto should be clean. About as clean as anything in here, anyway."

"I'm not eating that," Jacob said.

"You've been down here two days longer than I have and you've eaten a handful of insects. Tell me you're not feeling it already." Dorner had no answer to that. "Look, it's simple: you'll get weaker. Then you'll get weaker. You'll fall asleep, slip into a coma, and die. Is that really what you want? To die down here, when there's finally someone looking for us who has a chance of solving this thing?"

Sam walked over to the biggest patch of ecto. It had dimmed, somewhat, since the ghost's departure, but it still glowed and oozed slightly. It covered an area maybe a foot wide and streamed all the way down to the floor, pooling in the join.

He simply could not believe that human beings put this in their mouths.

"We're trapped here, for now." It cost an effort to keep his voice clear and strong, like he wasn't having serious fucking misgivings about this. "If the one thing I can do to help my brother right now is stay alive, then that's what I'm going to do. Jacob, are you with me?"

One. Two. Three. Four. Then, grudging, uncertain: "Yeah. Fine, let's do this thing."

"All right. Uh. Any particular recommendations here, Lindsey?"

"Nah." She was laughing, but had the decency to try to hide it. "I promise not to tell if you use the wrong fork."

Sam steeled himself, then he pressed his fingers into the thickest bubble of ecto. It was warmer than he'd expected, and the consistency as it came away from the wall was somewhere between rubber cement and slime mold. He swallowed his rising gorge.

"Eeuurrrrggghhhhhhhhhhh, " said Jacob, long and heartfelt.

"Okay. We'll. We'll just, um. Get a good handful, here." Sam tried to get the flap of the stuff to part from the wall.

"This isn't, like. *Toxic,* is it?"

"More toxic than starving?" Sam asked. They didn't have to know that the question was sincere.

"Whatever you're imagining it tastes like, it's worse," Lindsey put in helpfully.

"All right. We'll do this together. All right, Jacob?"
"Yeah. Sure."

"On the count of three. One. Two. Three."

She was right: it was worse than he had imagined.

"Oh, holy fuck, that's puke-worthy."

"Keep it down, Jacob," Sam said, eyes watering as he swallowed. "Otherwise we'll just have to eat more of it." Shuddering all over, he scooped up another helping.

After a few minutes, when his stomach was roiling but no longer digesting itself and the sounds of revulsion had tapered off from Jacob's direction, Sam decided enough was enough. It cost an effort, but he made himself lick his fingers clean.

"You boys all done?"

Sam sank down to hug his knees. He felt queasy, queasy and odd. Sort of… floaty. "Yeah. Yeah, I think so."

Lindsey's voice wafted down to them. "You are in for the trip of your life."

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Dean has himself a road trip.
we don't need no education

Chapter Summary

Dean goes on a trip—the kind with roads—as part of a plan to find Sam. (It's not a very good plan.) Sam also goes on a trip. (It's the kind without roads.)

What sealed the deal was that when Dean flipped to the section at the back of Rufus's address book devoted to *Hunting accidents - medical care* (as distinct from *Hunting accidents - public relations* or *Hunting accidents - waste disposal*), he found *J C Canby* cross-referenced yet again. His shoulder was still dislocated, and this Canby guy was a lot closer than Doc Robert. Next stop, West Virginia.

He could have called first, but he'd never cared much for forming first impressions over the phone. Before bringing a stranger on to help him find Sam, he needed to know he wouldn't be sold out or strung along. To that end, Dean wanted to look into the man's eyes, first. Or, at least, to look around his kitchen.

The trouble with location spells was that nearly of them were black magic. Implicit or explicit sale of your soul kind of shit. Winchesters put witches like that out of business, they didn't subsidize them. Of course, Canby could be anything from a civil engineer to a bookie, no sort of magical practitioner at all. But Dean thought not. Canby had managed to rile Rufus, and that required an extraordinary skill set.

And if Canby didn't pan out, well, Dean knew the exception to the rule about location spells.

Dean had awoken this morning in the moldiest motel room he'd ever occupied just outside of Burning Well, Pennsylvania. What woke him was the owner pounding on his door. The man had informed him that it was 11:35 and he'd have to charge Dean for an extra day. Dean had looked at the walls, frosted with mildew; then at the parking lot, empty but for his car, and shut the door in his face. Ten minutes later he'd paid in silence and left. There'd been no ice in the machine for his shoulder.

Signs advertised a hospital just a few miles west in the borough of Kane, PA, population 3,730. He almost went. Adrenaline and then exhaustion had gotten him through the previous night, but now there was nothing to distract him from what a dislocated shoulder really felt like. Four hours' sleep and immobility hadn't helped. In the end, though, having a genuine "hunting accident" to bring to Canby seemed like his best in, so he'd gritted his teeth and had ibuprofen for breakfast. And lunch. And dinner. The pain helped keep his mind off the distance growing between him and Providence.

Mount Storm, West Virginia (pop. 109) was a loose accretion of houses and trailers around the junction of Routes 50 and 42, folded deep into the Appalachians; Dean was unclear on whether it had any reason for existing other than the nearby power plant and the coal it burned. Canby's address was a few miles south. Dean drove for miles at a go under the silent sweep of wind turbines that loomed from each ridge without meeting another car. Traversing mountains had always made him obscurely uneasy. He could know exactly where he was and yet feel lost. He supposed it was something to do with the way the car moved over hills, rising and falling like a craft on some great, frozen ocean. Boats were not his scene, and every respectable vampire story started with a long climb into the mountains.
As he drove, Dean considered his plan. It wasn't a good one. Even disregarding factors of time, it wasn't great. Dean wanted to find Sam. Dean hadn't been able to, so that meant he wanted someone else to find Sam. Except that most of the hunting community assumed that Sam was dead. Most of the rest wanted a word with him. Even if this Canby guy happened not to be one of them, there was nothing stopping him selling the information to someone who did.

When he turned in at 6 Plato Lane, there were no hoodoo signs, occult symbols, or overt signs of devil worship. What there was were cows. The Impala dipped and bounced as Dean crossed over a cattle grate, and the first thing he saw pass under his tires was a cow pat. Sheep and goats appeared, staring with slot-eyes and busy jaws, and from somewhere he could hear a rooster. He could neither hear nor see pigs, but it wasn't long before he could smell them. It began to look like Rufus's cryptic note about Practical application (husbandry) had meant literal husbandry.

His shoulder was a steady bore of agony, and he felt every jolt as the car crawled up the rutted drive. Finally it ended before a tin-roofed, white clapboard house that backed into woods. The front yard was full of flowers and herbs, but they were laid out like a vegetable plot. As if they were arranged for access, not beauty. The back of his neck tingled. Witches had a use for husbandry, too.

Dean parked behind an ancient El Dorado and got out feeling kind of stupid. He had little more than a hunch to say that Canby was a player. But, Dean supposed, even if he wasn't, he might still be good for popping a shoulder back in. For damned sure he'd need that for plan B.

The screen door on the sagging porch creaked open. It discharged a slim man in corduroy and chambray, a cigarette burning between his fingers. For a long moment, he and Dean stood looking each other over. The man had silvery hair, but his skin, deeply tanned, was pulled smooth around his features in a way that made it hard to be sure of his age. Dean pegged him at Bobby's, give or take a decade. "Help you?" the man asked.

"You Clovis Canby?"

"Was when I woke up this morning."

Dean indicated his makeshift sling with his good hand. "Heard from a friend that you're helpful with hunting accidents."

"Which friend was that?"

It wasn't like the truth could harm Rufus much. "Rufus Turner."

The man tapped his cigarette with his index finger. "Well, now, there's a name I haven't heard in a while. Told you I'm a doctor, did he?"

Dean knew he was being tested, but there wasn't much he could do about it. "More or less."

"Well, I'm not." Canby moved the cigarette to his mouth, took a drag, lowered it, and tapped it once again, almost daintily. When Dean hadn't moved by the end, he added, "But I used to be. Come on in."

Smoke hung in a visible layer inside in the slant of late afternoon sun. The living room looked ordinary, no rabbit carcases, no books bound in human skin, no occult garlands over the doors. Canby gestured Dean to the sofa as he himself settled in an old rocker; Dean cleared his throat and remained standing.

"How'd you put out your shoulder?"
"Hunting accident, like I said."

Canby looked him up and down. "Must've been a big deer."

"It was."

The man looked more amused than anything. He stubbed out his cigarette and placed it on a line of butts stacked in the ashtray like cordwood. Then he sat, waiting. Fumbling one-handed, Dean took out a few twenties. Canby looked at the bills, then back at him with a slightly pitying expression. Dean gritted his teeth and took out a few more.

Canby got up to stand beside Dean and rolled up his sleeves. "I got one rule in my house, and I take it seriously: no swearing. Can you abide by that?"

"I think I can control myself."

He did, but he didn't like it. No matter how many times he dislocated this shoulder, it was always a bitch going back in. Canby was practiced and efficient, though, which supported his claim that he'd at one point been a legitimate physician. While he probed the joint checking for tears, Dean rasped, "Got a drink?"

There was that smile again, like Dean was cute bordering on quaint. "Yeah, sure," said Canby. "Come on into the kitchen."

Canby had none of Rufus's standards for alcohol. He didn't have the unusually well stocked spice rack of most witches, either, and Dean wasn't sure at this point whether that was a pro or a con. Canby poured Dean some whiskey that smelled like rubbing alcohol in a jelly glass—Dean had been hoping for moonshine, but apparently Canby only took his Farmer Brown routine so far—and busied himself with a clanking enamel kettle topped with, for whatever reason, a tea cozy version of the guidance counselor from South Park.

"Thanks." The drink numbed Dean's gums, and the pain in his shoulder was receding to a dull throb.

"Sure. You want to tell me what you're really after, now that's out of the way?"

Dean swallowed his mouthful of whiskey. Battery acid, he decided, with top notes of paint thinner and cirrhosis. "I know I didn't give you much, Canby, but jeez, even cheap whorehouses let you catch your breath after."

Canby's face hardened. "I asked you not to swear in my house."

Dean had to replay the sentence in his mind. "What, whor—?"

"The other," Canby snapped. "Now talk."

Dean looked at him carefully. "What do you want me to say? 'You're the best I ever had'? I can lie, if that's what you're into."

"Come on, son. You wrenched your shoulder a day ago, by the bruising. It's a dislocation, not a gunshot, so even if you've been upsetting people, a hospital wouldn't think enough of an injury like that to report you to the authorities, and hospitals are a lot easier to find than I am." Canby leant against the stove holding the tea cozy. "That means you wanted to see me specially, and you thought you were being smooth driving around with a dislocated shoulder to disguise the fact, which means you ain't very bright. Do better."
"Or what?" Dean asked. "Mr. Mackey's gonna shoot me?"

"He might."

Dean's eyes flicked between Canby's hand and his face. "You'll ruin your kettle cover."

"Don't think I won't be sad about it."

Dean watched him a moment longer. It was long enough to be sure he wasn't going to get shot. If physical violence had been Canby's stock in trade, he wouldn't have bothered with threats. "I want to find someone."

"How come?"

"They took something from me," Dean said, and that much wasn't a lie.

"So go to the police."

"Already went. Well, more like they came to me."

Canby laughed, and the gun made a muffled clunk through Mr. Mackey when he set it on the counter. "Yeah, that I believe."

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Well, was Rufus just jerking my chain when he said that you could help?"

"Depends. What is it, exactly, that he told you?" Dean held his eye but didn't say anything. "Ah. I wondered if that part was a lie. Rufus hates giving up a contact."

"I want to find somebody," Dean said again. "I want to know where he is within a hundred-yard radius. Can you do it?"

Canby sucked on his teeth. "Interesting. Maybe."

"Are you a witch?"

"Nope."

"Then what the— What are you?"

"I'm a problem-solver."

"Yeah, but are you solving problems with bowls of baby's blood, is what I'm getting at."

"Not generally. Though I've never understood why folks get all upset about that; you can take a few milliliters of the red stuff as safely from a baby as from anybody else." Dean couldn't help staring; Canby looked at him like he was slow. "It's a question of quantity. These things often are."

Dean blinked. "Right. Okay. So you're squeaky-clean, no devil-worship at all."

Canby nodded slowly. "That about covers it. Yeah, that's pretty much the crux of it."

Dean was starting to lose patience. "I came clean with you. If you want to do any kind of business, return the favor and tell me what your angle is."
Canby drew another cigarette out of a shirt pocket. "Professionally speaking, I guess I'm a priest."

"What kind of priest?"

"Every kind of priest."

* * *

"You're a hunter," Canby said as he led Dean along a track worn into the pasture. The sun was going down, and Canby had a pail of corn. "You obviously could find witches if you wanted them. Why didn't you?"

"Because witches are skanks?"

"And?"

A flash of screaming, of blood and bone and juxtapositions of the two never intended, cut through Dean's mind. He pushed it down. "Because of the literal devil-worship?"

"Right." Canby stopped in front of a chicken coop. "So you have a problem, but you don't want to use witchcraft, or be a party to witchcraft, because you're a hunter and you know that selling your soul ain't just a Sunday school story. All of us have wants, but not much is worth eternal torment." He glanced at Dean as he opened the door to the coop. "Is it?"

Dean's smile was strained. "Not much, no."

Canby began to strew the corn in front of a collection of some of the most bizarre birds Dean had ever seen. There were hens and roosters in the familiar shapes and colors, too, but the others looked like avian drag queens. "What the hell are those?"

"Chickens. Plain chickens for plain tables, fancy chickens for fancy tables. And watch your step, because some of these breeds I spent years hunting up, and some of them I had to breed myself. A lot of times, you can get by with substituting modern equivalents, sometimes those actually work even better, but other times it's important to have historical accuracy."

Fancy chickens. He'd driven five hours with a busted shoulder for fancy chickens. "I don't get it," he said finally. "You said you aren't a witch."

"I'm not. Devils aren't the only thing that like a small, furry snack. Or a large one, as the case may be. As far as I can tell, demons don't really care about sacrifices except as a matter of tradition and a handy way to start corrupting people with the small-time acts of cruelty and waste, but I haven't gone around asking any to be sure. I was raised Southern Baptist, with a healthy fear of the devil's works."

Dean stopped and looked at him. "You're summoning something else."

Canby shook his head. "Spirits are summoned. Gods are petitioned."

Dean recoiled. "You're calling up pagan gods? Do you have any idea what those sons— Do you know what those things do?"

"If you ask nicely, they may do what you ask them to. And, this being the important part, they don't put a lien on your soul. Most gods reckon it's a perk if they don't have to show up for your afterlife at all."
"No, they just want to show up for your blood sacrifices in this one. I've met gods, Canby. They're
monsters. If you don't understand that, then you're just one screw-up away from finding out.
Whatever favors you're getting along the way—they're not worth it."

Canby led him out of the coop and carefully latched the door. "Some gods are more bloodthirsty
than others. Most will take what they can get, even if it's not what they'd prefer. Every client has a
limit. Things they're willing to do or have done for them, things they aren't. My job's to work
within those limits, and that's what makes me different from a witch. My way's less certain, but it's
less certain both ways: in the result, and in the cost. Ah, don't go in there, that there's the snake
hutch."

Dean stepped away from what he'd thought was another chicken coop. "If it's so safe and moral,
what you do, why are they paying you? Why doesn't everybody just dial up Zeus on the 900 line?"

"Because Zeus hasn't picked up since 1752, for one thing." Canby was headed now for the barn.
"There's half your answer right there: know-how. You got to know which gods to try, and how to
try them. Do you know how to supplicate—that means 'ask nicely,' by the way; I know you're not
real familiar with the practice—Boldogasszony? Atargatis? Which of them's likely to do what, for
what? Of course you don't. I do, and that's worth something. But say you got lucky and found out.
What would you do then? Burn a placenta on birch twigs? Castrate yourself with a knife
consecrated in Balikli Göl?"

"Uh," said Dean.

"Well, let's say that you do—"

"Can we not?"

"—What would you do then? Walk away once you had what you wanted?"

"Well, yeah, pretty much." Dean followed Canby into the barn and watched as he fetched down a
sack of feed. "Isn't that the general idea? Quid pro quo, everybody goes home happy. According to
you."

Canby handled the feed sack like it weighed nothing. "The tricky part about receiving favors from
a god," he said, without turning, "isn't initiating the relationship. It's terminating it. That's where I
come in. I manage the relationship."

Canby's speech had left Dean with a lot of questions, not all of which was he sure he wanted
answered. "So these gods don't like getting dumped for putting out on the first date, but they don't
mind you slutting around with other gods? I'm sorry, I'm having a hard time believing that."

Canby shrugged and started for the house. "Gods aren't jealous, by and large, but they still like
loyalty. And loyalty takes tending." The grounds were in twilight; a cow mooed somewhere, and
the air was ripe with manure.

Practical application (husbandry).

The walk back to the house was silent. Dean's first instinct was to dismiss Canby's claims. Scratch
that; his first instinct was to get the hell out of Dodge, because gods might not be demons, but they
weren't a hell of a lot better. Demons at least all died the same. But of course, Canby was selling
concierge god-services. No need to trouble yourself with dealing with gods directly.

Dean thought of the hundreds of rituals he and Sam and Dad had performed over the years. A lot
of their incantations had invocations buried in them that Dean had never paid much attention to; if
it wasn't "Hail, Satan!" it wasn't on their radar. Yet those rituals had worked. They still seemed to him different from what Canby was describing, but he'd never put that much thought into the mechanics. Clearly, Canby had a high enough success rate to support a small farm's worth of sacrificial animals. It wasn't surefire, by the man's own admission, but then, Dean's backup plan wasn't something that he'd ever tried for himself, either. And time was of the essence.

So much time had passed already.

Back in the house, his host switched on the living room light and resumed his seat in the rocking chair. Dean still didn't take the couch. His shoulder had dulled to an ache, and he was still tired, and Sam was still gone. His head hurt. "So you're, what." He searched for an appropriate term. "Like a god-broker?"

Canby looked delighted. "A god-broker! I like that. That's pretty good. Not everything I do is priesting, though. Maybe thirty, forty percent. Sometimes you can borrow old forms and bend them your own way. Sometimes, if you have the right stuff to work with, that can actually be stronger. It all depends."

This stank. Everything about it stank, from Canby's chain-smoking to the pig shit outside. "Say I hire you. What god are you going to ring up for this, and what are they going to want?"

"Trade secrets," said Canby.

"Are you kidding me?"

For the first time, Canby betrayed annoyance. "Did I barge into your home and start insulting your livelihood? You came to me. If you don't like the way I do business, you can show yourself out anytime."

Dean pinched the bridge of his nose, hard. The tightness in his chest, the tightness that had been there for two days and wasn't getting better, that was panic. Panic made you sloppy, and panic made you stupid. But he couldn't switch it off. He never could, with Sam. "Prove you can do it."

Canby regarded him with undisguised disdain. "You need someone to have manners for you. It's a good thing that's a service I offer professionally. No, son, this is not where you make demands and I do your bidding. This is where you say what you've got to offer so I can say if I'm interested."

"If there's one thing this life taught me early, it's that if it seems too good to be true, it is."

"Lucky I don't claim to be that good, then. Look, when you've got a problem like yours, you've got three kinds of messy to choose from: mine, theirs, and yours."

Dean narrowed his eyes. "Mine?"

"Do nothing."

It was designed to rile Dean, and it worked. "A dragon hoard," he ground out. "The real thing."

"Yeah?" Canby whistled. "Boy. What's in it?"

"Gold, what else?" Put that way, it did sound considerably less exotic.

There was that pitying look again. "Is that really the kind of coin you bring to a transaction like this?"
"You just gouged me a couple of hundred for my shoulder!"

"That was for your shoulder."


Canby made an approving sound. "Nice. What else?"

Dean gritted his teeth. "Dagger. Magical. Damascus steel by way of the Vikings, serious old-time religion." When Canby just nodded, Dean banked his rage and went ahead. He'd be showing his desperation, but for some people—people like Canby—desperation was part of the bargain. They wanted everything you had more than they wanted something valuable.

"The sword of an angel."

Canby raised a skeptical eyebrow. "What's that when it's at home?"

Dean smiled thinly and took some pleasure in being about to rearrange this guy's entire conception of the cosmic order. "Exactly what it says."

"Huh. What's it do?"

It was the logical, practical question. It was precisely the question Dean would have asked in Canby's place, but it still irritated him. It irritated him to be standing here haggling for his brother's life. It irritated him that it had become habit. "What do you think it does? It's an angel blade. It kills things. It kills everything. Demons, monsters—angels."

"Why should I believe that this pig-sticker is what you say?"

"Because." Dean set his jaw. "I'm Dean Winchester."

Canby just sat there patiently, waiting for more.

There really was no graceful way to salvage that. "I take it you haven't heard of me."

"Should I have?"

Dean narrowed his eyes. "You work for hunters, don't you?"

"What do I look like, a door-to-door salesman? Hunters are some of my best customers, but they come to me. I keep myself to myself; no time to tend to the animals or my researches, otherwise. So, no, son, I haven't heard of you. You can spare me whatever it is you're known for; I don't keep up on all the little vagaries."

"The apocalypse is a little vagary?"

"Must've been, if I ain't ever heard about it."

There was a point there. "Look, I don't have time for this. Just name your price."

Canby looked at him and rocked for a while. Looked, rocked, looked. "You a good hunter?"

Dean smiled tightly. "You could say that."

"All right, then. The mojo bag, the Viking dagger, and the heart of a werewolf."
Dean's stomach dropped. "The full moon was two days ago."

"It sure was."

"Fine. You get the bag and the dagger now, you do your thing, I'll come back with the heart."

"I'm afraid it's my policy to require payment upfront for new clients."

Dean blanched with anger. "No deal."

Canby shrugged. "Okay."

And he seemed content to leave it at that. "The bag, the dagger, the gold, and the angel blade," Dean said, trying to keep his voice level and unconcerned. "All of them are yours. Any of them's rarer than werewolf guts. That's my final offer."

"The bag and the dagger could be useful in my line of work. I got enough money already. Weapons are useless to me. You want my services, come back with the heart."

For a while, all Dean could do was stare. Then he turned and left.

"Call first," Canby called after him.

Dean made it to the end of Canby's drive before he threw the car into park and pressed his forehead against the steering wheel, controlling his breathing. It was fine. They were fine. There were demon signs less than a hundred miles down the road. Time for plan B.

Sam might not have time for plan B.

Sam might not have had time for his little road trip as it was. Suddenly it rolled up in Dean in a gut-churning wave: how wrong it was for him to be here. Sam was in New England. Dean was in Appalachia. He was hundreds of miles and days, _days_ away from Sam. _Dean was here_, and Sam wasn't. And that was all he knew for sure. Sam could be hurt. Sam could be bleeding. Sam could be worse than bleeding; Sam could be catatonic, the wall in his mind gone for good, falling forever. Sam could be in the hands of demons or hunters or some hopped-up monster champing at the bit for Mother's Day. Sam could be trapped. Sam could already be—

—Deep in conversation with the drain pipe. It was a good listener.

"It's just," said Sam, "everything's different, but everything's the same, but everything being the same is what's so different."

"I know exactly what you mean," said the drain pipe.

"I knew you would."

The drain pipe swelled and deflated, swelled and deflated. Its voice was raspy. "You shouldn't get too hung up on that. Your insides will fall out. Like an omelette."

"It's just that, last thing I remember, he'd hardly even touch me." The walls rippled with the vibrations of his voice. "Then I wake up and he's like he was when we were good. Almost like that. I mean, hell, I wake up and I'm wearing a different shirt size. Is the floor bothering you, too?"

"No," said the alcove.
Its voice was the size of a grain silo. Sam shrank from it and fell on his ass.

He crawled back over to the drain pipe and sat sideways next to it, pressed against the wall so the alcove wouldn't see him. The pipe's concrete stopper fuzzed over in sympathy. "I used to have this dream," Sam said, hushed. "It's, like, an hour before a seminar class, and I haven't done the reading. So I'm going to try to skim and fake it. Only I don't know what the reading is. I can't look it up, because I can't find the syllabus. I can't find the syllabus, because I never picked it up, because I never went to the first class, because I never registered for it, because I never enrolled in anything after I got off the bus, and now it's the end of the year and I haven't been to anything I was supposed to. I didn't even have it while I was at Stanford. I started having it afterward. And I kept having it. The apocalypse started, and I was still having this dream. I went to Hell, came back, apparently, and I'm still having this dream. Seems kind of unfair."

"Don't you think you're being kind of a pussy, though?" the pipe said, sticking its tongue out, tasting the air.

"No, I like dogs better."

"Yeah, but, in misogynistic, semper fi terms. You're just sitting here."

"I'm trapped."

"That's no excuse."

"Um."

"Look," said a new voice, and turning took a very long time, but Sam did it. There was a great totem pole climbing up the wall. Blue and red and ocher dark-shine. One of its heads turned, owl-like. "If you spend long enough in a cage, you sprout feathers," it said.

Sam nodded. He remembered that from the back of the seed packet when they grew marigolds in elementary school.

"So do you want to sit around," said the drain pipe, "or do you want to get out of here and make a lot of pancakes?"

"A lot of pancakes," said the alcove.

Sam weighed up the pros and cons. "Pancakes, please."
mother, am i really dying?

Chapter Summary

Sam digs for answers. He scratches too hard.

Chapter Notes

After two-plus years where I didn't/couldn't really work on this, I came back to it and, upon reading through my notes, picking up the threads, and remembering/embracing the things in this dumb story about these dumb brothers on this dumb show that I'm still passionate about, got excited about it all over again. Maybe I'm more excited now than I was before, really, because I have fewer fucks to give about things that don't bring me joy. I want to see the ideas in this that bring fangirl!me that joy play out, and I want to try to share that feeling to the best of my ability, however limited that may be.

So I sat down and started working on this again and before too long I had two and a half chapters roughed out and an outline coming together like it never had before. Rather than finishing or posting anything, though, I promptly got mired in doubt about whether I should. Could anybody else ever possibly give a damn about any of the things happening to any of these characters in any of the situations I'd cooked up? Wasn't it way too plotty? Wasn't it way too navel-gazy? Wasn't it way too long? Wasn't it way too boring?

Then that Twitter-famous piece about Jonathan Franzen came out the other day, and I remembered with a jolt that somebody pays that man for his books. Life's too short and too full of insufferable douchebags for paralyzing self-doubt and apologies.

Have another chapter of dumb brothers doing dumb things. Because I still fucking love them. I hope that you do, too.

And seriously, fuck Jonathan Franzen.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He understood.

Everything was connected, and he was one with it all. The drain shaft was his throat, reaching up into the sky; the stars, burning, caustic things, rushed in to fill his ribcage and batter there like phosphorescent flies. He tried to expel them from inside him with a roar, but his lineaments were heavy and brittle with concrete.

There was a pin-up girl in the corner. Her face was a clock without any hands, and she slipped one hand up over dark stockings, rucking her plaid skirt slowly up her thigh. I'll show you if you make me, she said. Love it when you make me. A lock of her hair dropped forward over her cheek.
Her cheek was his cheek. The air breathed, and it forced his chest to move, animating the stone of him. The pipes sang low and ugly when the wind of his breath rushed across them. From the corners, from the shadows, skeletal mice rushed up and out and over him, a clicking, bone-pale wave that fit under his skin and swirled there like a tornado, like a sandstorm, like a second skin that would flay his off. The cold-blue bees inside him moved in their orbits, mechanical, sure, obedient to the laws that governed this place. They were all connected by that inevitability like bones strung together by tendon. Secrets beat the air with their wings and whispered to him. Riddles came unlocked one by one, and the chains fell.

He knew exactly what he needed to do.

Until, of course, he didn't.

Sam sat on the concrete floor and held his head with both hands. This was necessary, because it was several times heavier than it should have been. His mouth was dry, his bladder was aching, and he was pretty sure that at some point before this, he'd peed himself. As the itch under his skin retreated, he gradually became aware of scratches and bruises and how some felt hours-fresh, others days old. The light no longer breathed. The leaky pipe was, once again, just a pipe.

Was there any acid trip cliché that this wasn't?

The world tilted when he tried to stand, so he abandoned the attempt and crawled to the leaky pipe, instead. The floor rocked as he went, and technicolor shapes flared in the corners of his vision. Reality still wasn't quite right, but he'd crossed some threshold where he knew the shit he was seeing was just hallucinations. With that realization, all of the other feelings—the sense of connectedness, of direction, of having a fucking clue—had evaporated, thus removing any redeeming value the experience might otherwise have had. He dropped himself onto his back in the puddle beneath the pipe and opened his mouth. It took several attempts to get his head lined up right so the trickle fell onto his tongue and not his face. A shiver rocked him, and unselfconsciously, he whimpered.

*Today is not a good day, Dean. I do not like today.*

Sam had absolutely no sense of how much time had passed. He could only hazard a guess by the condition of his body, and his body felt like hell. His joints were shocky and hot, like he was getting flu, and he distantly hoped that was part of the come-down from the trip, because getting sick in here could kill him. And he was thirsty. The water fell into his mouth, one drop at a time.

He wasn't sure how long he lay beneath the pipe this time, but it might actually have been hours. By the time awareness was really coming back to him, he wasn't seeing anything trippy anymore and felt at least somewhat hydrated. He really was going to have to do something about his bladder, though.

Once he'd dealt with that, he made his way unsteadily back to the corner in between the two shafts that led to Jacob and Lindsey. The feverish mumbling that had been coming from Jacob's chamber was shading into groans and *fuck* and *motherfucker*.

"Lindsey, you awake?" Sam called.

After a couple of seconds her voice grated through the darkness. "Well, I am now. Did you have a good trip?"

"That," said Sam, "wasn't funny, Lindsey."
"That's for damn sure. I had to listen to you sing AC/DC for like an hour."

Sam derived some satisfaction from knowing that at least she'd gotten what she'd deserved. "So, did you just forget to mention the whole magical mystery tour, or….

"It's glowing fungus, what did you expect?"

"Uh, not that?"

"You'll get used to it. You get a tolerance for it pretty quick; after the first few times it barely does anything. Believe me, if I could spend the whole time down here checked out of reality, I fucking would."

"Tachyphylaxis." Jacob's voice sounded like he'd been gargling with salt rounds. There was a shuffling sound, as if he were crawling toward them, and then Sam heard him drop against the wall right on the other side of the grate between them. "Happens with most psychedelics, actually. Magic mushrooms, LSD. Some NDMA receptor antagonists."

The words elbowed Sam's memory. Jacob worked in pharmaceutical sales; the bookshelves in his apartment had been full of trade journals and old textbooks from undergraduate biochem. The recollection grounded Sam where everything else, the visions, the hunger, the crawling filth and horror, had unmoored him. There was still a case to work.

And in a way, he had a lot more to go on than they usually did. He had the victims, and nothing but time.

"We need to talk," he told them. "For real, this time."

* * *

Lindsey met every suggestion and question with suspicion, just like Sam had been afraid she would. She wasn't really going to refuse to talk to them and they all knew it, but first she had to make this feel like negotiating concessions at the Hague. The surprise came from Jacob, who, with patience Sam had not expected from him, took up the task of negotiating with her. Sam was grateful to him for handling it so that he didn't have to.

"Ask a question, answer a question," Jacob said. "Like Truth or Dare without the dare. Fair?"

Something scratched at the back of Sam's mind, a talon tickling his spine. "Works for me," he said.

"How do we know we're not lying?" Lindsey's words were belligerent, but her voice was anxious.

"We don't need to lie to each other," Sam said. "We all want the same thing. What secrets could possibly be worth keeping down here?"

Marian chose that moment to let out a long, low moan.

"God, that creeps me out," said Jacob.

"Lindsey, are you sure you can't get through to her, get her talking?" Sam asked. "She's been down here for so long. She has to know something."

"I've tried," said Lindsey. "I've tried everything. I've tried being nice, I've tried to snap her out of it"—Sam wasn't sure he wanted to know how she'd tried to do that.—"I've tried bribing her with bugs I catch. Nothing. When I first got here, she used to babble this incoherent crap, but it was like
I wasn't even real to her. And I'm probably not. Literally all she does is sleep and eat that slime; no wonder her brain is fried. I wish she'd hurry up and die. I hate her. I hate having this thing in here with me."

"She's not a thing, Lindsey. She's a person—"

"You don't know," she said viciously. "You don't have to look at her. God, she's—" After a moment, she repeated, "You don't know."

"She's a person, and she's exactly what's going to happen to all of us if we don't get out of here." Which was what Lindsey was afraid of, Sam didn't doubt; well, he'd bash her face-first into that fear if he had to to get her head in the game. "She's what we have to look forward to if we don't cooperate."

"Well, that's motivation enough for me," Jacob said with forced brightness. "Cooperation, sounds great, let's get on that. Sam's supposed to be the expert, so I say first ask is his."

"Fine," Lindsey muttered.

Sam had been planning for this conversation, in between the chaos. When the ghost had pried into his memories, one theme had recurred: violence. He didn't know whether that was simply because he happened to lead a violent life, but he'd felt the ghost's interest. How hard it had fought to see the memories Sam least wanted it to see. The others weren't hunters, but plenty of ordinary people lived through plenty of crap. Jacob had lost his sister, horribly. Lindsey's history was uneventful on paper, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. It wasn't solid, it was barely even a theory, but this would hardly be the first spirit to feed on people's worst memories.

If Sam led with that, though, he risked having one or both of them clam up. It had already happened more than once. He needed to tell them enough for them to see him as opening up to them without telling them so much that they thought he was a psycho.

"We don't know why this thing chose us. So we solve for x. It's been in all of our heads. I know it's probably the last thing any of us wants to think about, but we need to compare notes." He paused, choosing his words carefully. "Both of you said you felt like it was looking for something, or someone. I felt that, too, but it had a particular focus on... bad memories."

He had been prepared to go first, to show enough belly to hopefully set the others at ease, and enough pain to make them feel obligated to reciprocate. But before he could, Jacob spoke up. "Me, too. With me, it, um. The stuff it wanted to see."

Sam waited for him to go on, then, when he didn't, asked gently, "Was it about your sister?"

He heard Jacob startle on the other side of the grate. "What do you know about that?"

"Just the broad strokes. I found her obituary when I was looking into your disappearance, and I talked to your old rowing coach."

Jacob laughed unsteadily. "Bug-Eye Babcock? Oh, man. What'd he tell you?"

"Not much. He said there was an accident."

Jacob puffed a breath out. "Yeah." His voice shook. "That—thing—made me live it all over. More than once. It was like... it was like it was rewinding a TV program, over and over again trying to catch an actor it thought was in there."
"I'm sorry to ask, but what exactly did happen to your sister?"

"What, you're gonna make me relive it, too?" Jacob asked angrily.

"It could be important. Come on. She would want you to make it out of here."

Jacob laughed, short and caustic. "Don't be too sure."

"It wasn't your fault."

"Of course it was my fault."

"What in the hell is either of you talking about?" put in Lindsey.

It was a few seconds before Jacob responded. "I had a twin sister, Bethany. We were eighteen. We were both going to go to Brown in the fall. Rowing scholarship. That was our thing, rowing. Bethany was the better of the two of us. She knew it, too." Affectionate amusement tinged his voice for a moment.

He went on somberly. "It was the summer before. We were up at a crew camp. Camp had finished, actually, almost everyone had gone home, but our parents were just getting back from Europe, so we were going to be stuck there till the morning after the last day. We went out on the river one last time, and then we hit the gym.

"Bethany was lifting. Bench press. I don't even remember what I was doing, why she didn't wait for me to spot her. She was usually fanatical about that stuff. We always spotted each other." Jacob was sitting close enough on the other side of the grate that Sam heard him swallow. "She had a hundred and fifty on the bar." Sam inhaled sharply. "I don't know exactly what happened, because I wasn't watching her, but I guess she went to put the bar back up on the rack and she'd pushed herself too far, and—I heard the bar fall—"

There was silence for a moment. "Jesus," said Lindsey.

"I'm sorry about Bethany," Sam said quietly.

Jacob exhaled. "Thanks."

"I hate to ask, but was there anything strange about Bethany's accident?"

Jacob paused. "Like what?"

"Cold spots, flickering lights, strange noises, the smell of sulfur."

"Nothing like that. Why do you ask?"

Sam sighed and almost wiped a hand over his mouth before he remembered how little he wanted to do that. "Never mind. It was a long shot. My brother and I, we had so little to go on, we were reaching for something, any kind of clue in the disappearances. And, well, freaky accidents often turn out to be clues in our line of work. But sometimes they really are just freaky accidents." So, Bethany Dorner's death probably hadn't been supernatural. It still might be significant. "Just to be clear, what happened to your sister wasn't your fault. But you feel guilty about it, right?"

"Agree to disagree on the not my fault thing," Jacob said by way of confirmation.

"Then there's at least two things in common between your memories and mine: family and guilt." Sam started to construct and had to discard a few different versions of his next sentence: I've never
been through what you've been through. I can't imagine what it's like to lose a sibling. I can't think of anything worse. He went with, "I'm lucky to still have my brother. But a lot of my worst memories, the ones the ghost wanted to see... they were from times I hurt him. Like, physically hurt him. Some of them weren't exactly me; I mean, when I said that I know what possession feels like, trust me, that wasn't a metaphor. But other times—that was all me. And all of it's stuff I feel guilty about." He cleared his throat. "How about you, Lindsey?"

"How about me, what?"

"Did you see anything that fits the pattern?"

"The pattern," she said flatly.

"Events where family get hurt and you... have regrets, feel guilty about it, anything like that."

"Kind of the fucking opposite," she spat. "Most of my family does just fucking fine hurting themselves, and no, I do not fucking well feel guilty for it. Considering how much time they spend making everyone around them suffer, too, far as I'm concerned, only problem is they haven't hurt themselves enough."

Jacob tried to stem her tirade. "Whoa, whoa, Lindsey, calm down—"

Sam winced. It was the wrong thing to say.

"Calm down? Sorry about your sister, Jacob, don't know what the hell's wrong with you, Sam, but except for Marmee my family would be doing a public service if they got in some freak accidents."

The force of her hate and anger, the way the emotion always seemed pressurized, ready to spatter outward at the slightest nick, was breathtaking. And concerning. Five months Lindsey had been down here, with nothing better to do than marinate in her own fear and impotence and every remembered harm or slight. Sam reminded himself repeatedly of the stress she was under in an effort to remain sympathetic, but mainly, the exercise made his blood run cold. If Marian was what was waiting for all of them if they didn't get out of here, Sam had an uncomfortable suspicion Lindsey was already further along than she would ever admit.

He was trying really hard not to think about how too much time in this environment was going to affect him.

"I didn't say things you are guilty for," he told her, keeping his tone neutral. "I said things you might feel guilty about. People feel guilty about a lot of stuff they aren't responsible for. Look at Jacob."

"Well, thanks, Dr. Freud, but I don't have a problem with that," she snapped. "My family's full of addicts and losers. My step dad got run out of state for crooked contracting, mommy dearest liked her Percocet better than not choking on her own vomit, and Cousin Eric would do us all a favor if he'd hurry up and follow in her footsteps. Me and my aunt are the only ones who can be bothered to hold down a real fucking job. Only time I ever hurt one of them was when I kicked Eric down the stairs, but considering that was after he took his own mother for everything she was worth, I wouldn't call it a bad memory, and I sure as hell don't feel guilty about it."

"Yeah, you sound perfectly well adjusted," Jacob said.

"Guys," Sam tried to cut in.

"Marmee and me get along just fine, or would if the rest of them would leave us the fuck alone."
"You're talking about your family," said Jacob, "and I'm sorry, but I don't buy that you're some persecuted angel. Jesus. Your mom died, and you talk about her like that? You ever even try to get her any help?"

"What, you gonna give me that libtard 'oooo, it's a disease!' bullshit?"

Sam flinched. "Stop it, both of you."

"Sorry, sorry," said Jacob. "Getting off topic."

"It's my fault," Sam said. "Look, Lindsey, I'm sorry. I had a theory, and I wanted it to pan out because I wanted to believe we had a pattern. I shouldn't have tried to put words in your mouth." In her sullen silence, he braced himself and pressed on. "I'm sorry to ask, but… any other losses? Personal, family, whatever?"

"Well, there's Uncle Tommy, but considering he drank himself to death, I wouldn't call it a loss, exactly."

"Okay. Okay. Sorry. Just needed to be sure." Sam ran his fingers through his hair and then wished that he hadn't. If there was a single worst thing in here, worse than the hunger, worse than the dark, worse than the isolation, it was the filth. He wasn't sure whether it was a real sensation or that acid trip or what Dean called his "OCD thing," but he could swear that he felt the knowledge of what was on his skin, physically, like an itch. He had to keep his awareness of it shoved hard to the back of his mind or he'd start panicking. "All right, back to the drawing board: what does the spirit want to see when it comes?"

"I don't even know anymore, okay? I don't even know how many rides it's taken me on. I've lost count."

"That's why we need you, Lindsey. Me and Jacob, we only got snapshots. Maybe you can identify some trends."

"What am I, the weatherman?"

He tried to remember his first conversation with her. How long ago had that even been? It was hard to be sure, with nothing but hunger and thirst for a clock, and especially after having dropped who knew how much time down a black hole during the ecto-fueled trip she'd set them up for. It had definitely been days, but he had no idea how many.

For a long time, as a kid, Sam had collected National Geographic magazines. He'd buy fifty-cent bundles of them at library sales, filch them from auto shop and hospital waiting rooms. He'd liked staring at the pictures, both to feel pride at all the places he recognized because he'd been there and for proof of a wider world, because the entire continental U.S. could feel cramped when you only ever saw it from the inside of a car. He'd liked reading the stories about wildlife, about a world that was every inch as savage as the one he inhabited and yet somehow free from evil. He liked the topless women, too, of course, not yet having a very firm grasp of concepts like exoticization at the age of eleven. And he'd liked all the random little facts you could pick up from reading it.

Like this one battered issue from the '70s with the front cover ripped off and an article about a Frenchman who stayed in a cave for six months. Every time he woke up, the Frenchman would call this team of scientists on the surface and count. He was supposed to count one number each second, but it took him five minutes to count to 120.

Kind of the reverse of when he'd gone down in Bristol and lost time. But he hadn't really lost the
time. It was more like a brick of it got shoved sideways in his mind, displaced and out of sight, but he could still feel the weight of it, sitting there where it didn't belong. Two or three minutes, Dean said. A week, said Sam's brain, prodding the brick.

There was a buzzing somewhere at the back of his mind. "Lindsey," Sam whispered. Then, louder, "Lindsey!"

"Sam? What? Have you been listening to anything I just said?"

He shook his head, trying to clear it. It was so dark it was a struggle to breathe. Only the ecto burned at the corners of his vision.

"Yes, of course." At least his voice was steady. "So it keeps going back to your uncle's loading dock?"

"Yeah. Down in the shipyards on the coves. I mean, not just there, it's used me to pound every block of pavement in this town that I know, even ones I didn't even think I remembered. Like, we went to the zoo once when I was four, and I thought the only thing I remembered about that was getting sick eating cotton candy, but with it in my head, I could see what color the candy stand was, how many zebras there were, fucking everything. And at the nursing home, it— So it goes all over. But it takes me to Uncle Jimmy's place almost every time it visits me, which doesn't even make any sense, because it's not like I ever went there often, you know?"

"Your uncle has a loading dock?" asked Jacob. "Like… import/export?"

"Don't you fucking say it, you yuppie crapsack."

"I didn't say anything!"

"No, but—but that could connect," Sam said. "Does it feel like it's interested in your uncle, Lindsey? Is it exactly that place?"

"No, just that area. It's like it's looking for something that should be there but it can't find it. And then when it can't find it it gets pissed. Every time, all over again, like it's got evil Alzheimer's."

"Let me guess: industrial area? Lots of heavy machinery? Lots of abandoned warehouses?"

"What? What does that mean?" Jacob was asking.

Sam thought about all of the times he'd been in empty factories or shipyards or warehouses, and about all of the things those places were good for. "If it's that important to this spirit that it keeps trying to get back there, then… that's probably where it happened. Whatever was done to it. To him or her. Lindsey, you grew up here; did anybody die near where your uncle has his business?"

"I mean, it's right on the Narragansett."

"This'll be different. Think local legends, especially anything where the killer was never caught. Vengeful spirits tend to be strong, twisted, and fixated. I think this one's using us to look for whoever it holds to blame."

It was the obvious theory. Sam thought it was the right one, too, yet it felt incomplete. It didn't explain why these people, and it didn't explain why him. He wasn't from Providence; he was all but worthless as an atlas in the area it cared about.

"Like I said, we're talking south Providence. Who even knows how many stiffs were getting
dumped in the Bay back when Patriarca was running things; my family's not plugged into all of that."

Sam caught a thread of doubt in her voice. "You're thinking of something right now, Lindsey. What is it?"

"It's stupid."

"Stupid can still be important."

"All right, there's this one story. One of Jimmy's friends used to tell it at Halloween every year. Like, with a flashlight under his chin and everything; I'm telling you, it's stupid. He was that kind of guy, you know, bachelor-types who're always goofing off to make the kids like them."

"By telling local lore."

"It's a dumbass ghost story."

"Most local lore is."

"Whatever. Uh, he called it 'The Bloody Room,' because in the story someone found a room covered in blood, but no body. Like, covered in blood, like someone had been Texas Chainsawed or something. But he changed it up sometimes to try to make it sound better; later on he'd say they found just a human heart or just a brain or whatever, whatever he thought was going to scare us. It got a little more elaborate every year, you know?"

"What was the original version? The simplest one?"

"Room covered in blood somewhere by the river," she answered promptly.

"Good, Lindsey. This is good. Where did he say he heard it?"

"He swore up and down that the dockworkers had been telling this story since World War II, but I think that was just to make it sound good."

"Oh, man," said Jacob, sounding equal parts disbelieving, freaked out, and intrigued. "Are we all thinking the same thing, here?"

"Could be a mob thing, yeah," said Sam.

"Has to be," Jacob said. "Who else is going to be slicing people up dockside and disappearing the body? You said something really bad had to have happened to it. Maybe it was a mafia snitch."

"Do you think?" said Lindsey doubtfully.

Sam had practically suggested as much himself, and it was at least plausible. He didn't have anything to contradict it, any reason to feel unsatisfied. "It's a theory, anyway," he said finally.

"So, what," Lindsey asked, "if it finds what it's looking for, it'll let us go?"

Sam thought of the cataract of images through his mind when the ghost had come to him: blood and teeth and steel and his own fist, impacting one face after another. Instead answering, he said, "What it's looking for might not exist anymore." He looked at his chamber. The size of it said that it had been intended to handle effluvia on an industrial scale, but except for leaks, nothing flowed through here now. "Your uncle's friend's story supposedly happened around World War II. The first victim probably went missing in 1963. A lot can change in sixty or seventy years, especially if
you went from building warships and making munitions and shipping food to troops to peacetime. Odds are that anyone who was involved is long dead. Anything that's been preserved from whatever happened is probably down here with us."

"So shouldn't it stop looking?"

"It's not going to stop looking." That much he was sure of. "And I don't know if this makes it better or worse, but I'd guess we're not far from your uncle's place."

"How's that help us?"

"It doesn't." It wasn't what Sam had meant to say; he'd meant to spin it somehow into something upbeat, but it was getting harder and harder to maintain the kind of clarity required to play camp counselor. He wondered how long it had been since he'd eaten the ecto. He wondered how much more he had to accomplish before he could afford to eat it again. "We need more. What else, Lindsey? Where else does it go a lot?"

"My old house. Work, the nursing home."

"Why? What was it interested in there?"

"I— It's come so many times, it's all a blur."

Sam paused. On the other side of the grate, Jacob took a breath like he was about to say something and then thought better of it. Lindsey might have been unpleasant, but she wasn't much of a liar. "We don't have time for games, Lindsey," Sam said. "Whatever it is, it's all right. Come on, isn't getting the hell out of here worth some embarrassment if that's what it takes?"

"I answered," Jacob reminded her. "Those are the rules: everybody asks, everybody answers. You think I wanted to talk about Bethany? Come on. Truth or Truth."

Sam shivered and didn't know why.

"Thought we didn't have time for games," she shot back. "Anyway, I did answer. It's Sam's turn. He shows up here and says he hunts ghosts, and we know nothing about him."

"We know nothing about each other," Jacob said. "I could be a serial killer for all you know. Why are you always breaking his balls? The guy's been nothing but open with us, even when we both called him crazy because of it."

"It's fine," Sam broke in. He'd been willing to talk first, anyway, and Lindsey had given him enough hints to follow up on when he could catch her in one of her more vulnerable moods. "I'll tell you what it showed me, then if that doesn't get us anywhere, we should take a break and work on the bars and grates, anyway."

"Are you sure?"

Sam smiled faintly. It was a nice gesture, but meaningless. It hardly mattered whether he was sure or not. "Yeah," he said, even as the crawling feeling under his skin intensified.

"Okay, so," he began. "Just… keep in mind that I hunt monsters for a living. I'm not saying that to excuse anything I've done"—Aren't you, though?—"just…for context."

"It started with surface memories, mundane stuff from around the time it took me, a couple of things I remember from one other time I was in Providence. It didn't care about any of that, not
even memories about investigating Jacob's disappearance." He paused for a moment, remembering how he'd tried to hang onto the memory of being in Jacob's apartment, and how the nagging sense that he'd forgotten something important in there hadn't been enough to take back control. The ghost had moved on, and without it, he couldn't bring anything from the hours before it took him into focus. He wanted to ask Jacob, but something made him hold back. He wasn't even sure what to ask, or how.

"I don't know what it was looking for, but it knew what direction to take. The normal, everyday memories happened to be what was on top, but every time the spirit found a passage leading downward, it took it."

"What does that mean?" Sam wasn't sure who asked that. The voice seemed distant, so probably Lindsey.

He shut his eyes to concentrate better. Maybe he'd been too hard on her, because it was more difficult than he'd expected to be precise. "It wanted violent memories. Not just bad ones. Ones where I did something wrong."

That scraping feeling at the back of his mind was back, again. "A while ago, I was… possessed." That was close enough to the truth and simpler than what had really happened. "I guess I was me, but I wasn't all me. I don't really know. I don't remember much of it. I know I hurt an innocent man, a cop. And my brother…"

Graveyard grass, warm black metal, flash of sun in a green eye—no. These people didn't need to know about Stull.

Thinking about his missing year opened up that same cold pit inside him it always did. Everything he might have done, on top of everything he knew he'd done—it was enough to tighten his throat, enough to parch his mouth. It made him feel sort of jittery-divorced from reality, the way you did when you'd had too much caffeine.

"That spirit didn't seem surprised by anything it found in my memories," he heard himself say, and then after he'd said it he processed it. "Like—all of the freaky shit I've seen and done, the fact that I was in the middle of a supernatural investigation when it grabbed me, none of that even raised its heart rate." A picture crawled to the forefront of his mind: Dean, dangling from the edge of consciousness, a strange man cradling his body, smearing his lips with blood, forcing him. He felt a thrill and felt his gorge rise in the same moment. "I let my brother get turned into a vampire, and the only thing the spirit cared about was the—the evil of it, not the fact that there were vampires."

He'd let his brother get turned. Cas had told him. He'd had a plan, and he'd known there was a cure: but he hadn't known that Dean would be able to remain eligible for the cure, just that his plan would work. He'd been very calm about it. His heart had never spiked like it was doing right now. He knew it hadn't, because Dean had told him so. Dean had been able to hear his heart from across the room, and the only thing Sam had felt about that was mildly aroused.

As he remembered all of this, Sam realized that he remembered all of this.

"So what does that mean?" one of the others asked.

Cas had told him about this, but Sam was not remembering Cas telling him about it. Cas didn't know how clear Sam's plan had been in his mind. Cas didn't know what Dean had looked like pacing around the room with his hands clamped over his ears and flinching from the lights. Cas didn't know what he'd looked like with a stranger painting his lips with blood, but Sam did. What did that mean?
Cas didn't know and hadn't told him anything about how immovable the Alpha vampire's arm had been across Sam's throat weeks later. How interesting his blood had smelled when he'd opened a vein. *Boy with no soul... you will be the perfect animal.* How Sam had fought the slow advance of that blood to his mouth from the instinct of all things to remain what they are, rather than out of active aversion to the idea.

"I don't know what it means," Sam answered, forcing his tongue to work. It felt like fighting novocaine.

After all, relieved of the burden of soul, it wasn't as if Sam had anything against ingesting blood.

The memories, when they came, came so fast and jagged that they were there before Sam could even consider trying to turn them away. Then there was a moment where he understood what was happening and that he had a choice to make, between looking and not looking. He hesitated. More memory bled around the edges while he did.

In a garden shed in late June in Ohio, he'd trussed a demon up and held a piece of Tupperware from her kitchen to her throat. He hadn't seen any reason why not. But the blood had tasted slimy and produced no effect, so he'd just chalked it up as one more thing that was different after Hell. He hadn't had enough information to consider that the problem might just have been that a piece had been missing.

Back in the sewer underneath Providence, Sam was hyperventilating. That was probably why he didn't notice that the buzzing in his head was the same as what he'd felt right before he'd had a seizure until it was too late.

Sam fell.

Then he burned.

Chapter End Notes

Sam is remembering the [March 1975 issue](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/1975/03/national-geographic) of National Geographic. Michel Siffre, the speleologist in question, actually conducted two experiments on himself (2 months underground in 1962, 205 days underground in 1972), which he describes in some detail in [a recent interview](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Michel-Siffre).
if you don't eat your meat, you can't have any pudding

Chapter Summary

It took five and a half days to track the demon. By the expiration of this period, Dean was not in a good mood.

///

Dean tries on Plan B.

Chapter Notes

I hope that for all those celebrating it, Thanksgiving was fun, filling, and peaceful. ♥
May our gratitude for our blessings give us strength to address the evils and injustices in our world.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It took five and a half days to track the demon. By the expiration of this period, Dean was not in a good mood.

He jerked the pentagrammed hood up and off the demon's head and stepped back. Not to get out of reach; that tackle securing her to the chair would hold. It had held Brady, after all, who had been high enough up the food chain to be deputized by Azazel himself. It had held a lot of demons before him, too. In the course of looking for Lilith, he and Sam had gotten this down to a science. He just wanted to look her over.

The demon was wearing, of all things, a park ranger. The name plate on her shirt pocket said Carrie Ann Volk. Her old life had involved handing out maps at the Seneca Rocks Discovery Area, and her driver's license said she lived in Israel, West Virginia.

"I'll fuck your liver with your femur," Carrie Ann hissed the moment the hood was off.

"I think of that as more of a second date kind of activity. Although I'm not going to lie to you and say I want to take this slow."

She eyed him up and down in increasing distaste. "Winchester. Which one are you?"

Dean smiled at her. "Guess."

"Pass. It doesn't really matter."

There was a point there, Dean supposed. "Relax, Ranger Volk." He knew she could see the table of instruments behind him, and he made no effort to obscure it. "I wouldn't have gone to all this trouble if I wanted you dead. This is a job interview."

"Already got a job. And let me tell you, I love working for the federal government. Great benefits, regular pay; maybe not the most creative workplace culture, but there's something to be said for job
security."

"Job security?" Dean started pacing a slow circle around the demon. She tensed slightly as he passed out of her line of sight. "How's all that keep going when there's no one left at the top?" He stopped when he was directly behind her and watched. Her hands flexed minutely under the rope securing them to the chair. "Or are you so far down the food chain you didn't even hear about your boss getting torched?"

"You're really unclear on the concept of bureaucracy, aren't you?"

Dean shrugged and came around to face the demon again. Her face showed only the feral rage usual to mid-level demons. It was possible she was telling the truth, and Crowley's machine really had just kept running after Cas had removed him. Or Hell could be shattered into a hundred factions and Meg was busy picking them off one by one. It didn't really matter either way right now.

"Let me rephrase this. You're here to do something for me. If I like the results, I send you back to Hell, and you get the option of clawing your way back out a few centuries from now. Or I can torture you until you do it anyway. What's it gonna be?"

"Do I get dental with that?"

"Oh, would dental sweeten the deal?" Dean snagged the rickety table behind him with the toe of his boot and dragged it forward. He picked up a pair of pliers without looking. "Open wide."

She snarled and lunged at him in the chair.

Dean backhanded her with the pliers and drove the demon blade through her wrist with his other hand. She screamed.

She screamed again when he ripped it out and stepped back, longer and more ragged. The arm of Ranger Volk's uniform shirt was staining rapidly from tan to dark brown. Dean dropped the pliers and dug his fingers into her jaw. "Do I have your attention?"

"Fuck you!"

Well, if that was how it was going to be.

It took upwards of an hour. He was trying to spare the meatsuit, and the demon probably knew it, but daylight was burning and if he got what he needed he could be back in Providence before midnight and the longer he went the louder the blood got in his ears, the only thing that could drown out the Samsamsam clawing at his viscera, his brother's name like a monster inside of him.

Finally Dean made himself step back. He wanted to cut his brother out of this bitch, but he couldn't. He needed her compliant, not destroyed. Her blood made a heavy spatter against the barn floor when he flicked it off of Ruby's blade.

The demon sobbed, hands opening and closing convulsively in their bonds. It was a pretty good act, but Dean had better things to do than listen to it. "Here's the deal, Ranger Smith. You are not B-list at best. You are nothing. I don't give a shit about you. The only thing I care about is time, and the more time you make me take, the more pissed off I'm going to be. The only options you have are the ones I give you, so let's get this fucking show on the road."

She looked up at him, panting, from beneath the wisps of Ranger's Volk's hair coming out of its ponytail. "Fine," she spat. "What the fuck do you want?"
Who would have thought that, out of all the things you might want to use magic to find, the single
greatest pain in the ass would be humans? These days, most people clocked every step they took
with Google, anyway. It shouldn't be hard to find an animal that voluntarily tagged Instagram posts
of their breakfast with GPS coordinates. Yet it was. Wanted to find a demon? All you needed was a
name and a few jars of McCormick. Wanted to find an angel? Options were available. If you
wanted an ichneumon, a cauldronful of snake guts would hook you up, but just try to find a human
being and suddenly the price tag jumped from eye of newt to your immortal soul.

This spell was the sole exception Sam and Dean had ever found. No baby's blood, virgin sacrifice,
or bestial fornication required; just herbs and fire and an incantation that was maybe on the shady
side, but did not, strictly speaking, offer the speaker up as dog chow. Nothing marked it out
incontrovertibly as black magic, in fact, except for the part where a demon had to perform it.

Ruby's spell. There, in Sam's journal, minutely laid out in Sam's hand.

The ingredients for this spell were offensively mundane. Dean dropped a folded road map of the
continental U.S. on the sheet of plywood he pried from a window to balance on the rails of one of
the empty animal pens. Beside the map, he set two repurposed Pringles cans (Sour Cream 'n'
Onion for mugwort, Loaded Baked Potato for yarrow), a handkerchief wadded around some road
dust, and four sycamore leaves he'd picked up outside a gas station.

Since Sam had disappeared in Providence, Dean supposed he was still there, but the uncomfortable
fact was he didn't really know. It had been a week. Sam could be anywhere. More detailed maps of
Providence sat in a pile nearby; if the first go confirmed that Sam was in the city, then they'd do
this again as many times as it took until he got the specificity he needed.

He crossed back over to Carrie Ann. After a few minutes' respite the demon was looking
somewhat recovered; better to get a move on before she got too spunky. He really didn't want to
lose more time beating her into submission again, and the ranger the demon was wearing would
probably prefer it, too.

Dean's fingers dug into the charmed ropes, loosened the knots. He stared down at the angry mark
now cauterized into her skin just below the crook of her elbow: a circle and a line. Sam had that
scar. Had had that scar, at least. Dean pulled the ropes off.

"You know the score here. You're stuck in that meat, so don't try to run. You won't make it to the
door."

"This meat, by the way? It's damaged. Inside and out. Oh, you think you were trying to spare her,
but trust me, she felt everything. Even if she survives this, she'll never be the same."

Dean ignored her and hauled her to her feet.

He stood behind her as she approached the makeshift table he'd set up, almost cautiously, like it
would bite her. Ruby's knife he kept in his hand. Ruby's knife. Ruby's knife, Ruby's spell. He
watched the rust-brown stains on Carrie Ann's back that striped her shirt from her collar to her belt
and flexed his fist over the horn of the hilt. The feel of it had long since become familiar. It had
been a long time since he'd felt this low thrum of rage merely from holding it it.

"You remember your lines?" he asked.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm ready for my close-up, Mr. DeMille." The demon eyed the ritual spread with
distaste and muttered, "Philistines."

Dean stood guard while she mixed dried leaves into the dust on a Dixie plate. When she looked back and nodded, he drew out the napkin in his back pocket and handed it over. She stirred Sam's comb leavings in with a plastic fork, then glanced back again. "Does it matter how I put it down?"

She was probably trying to get him to take out Sam's journal again, to take his eyes off of her now she was no longer bound, but Dean had memorized every word Sam had committed about this spell. "No. Just smear it on there."

The glorified dirt went on the plywood, and then the demon opened up the map. She took a second to flatten it out. Dean's fingers tightened on the hilt of the knife.

The demon looked down at the map. "A me, mihi appare." Flames leapt up, reflecting in her glossy black sclerae. "Ubi cumque in occultatione sis, a me mihi appare." The flames rushed inward, the map disappearing, curling, shuffling off black ash. Dean's eyes darted from the table to the demon and back. "Igni fiat notum."

There was one last flare from the fire before it went out. Dean wanted to jump forward, to the map, but he made himself stay where he was and not lose focus on the demon. "Well? Where is he?"

"I…." Her voice was hesitant. "I don't— It's not—"

"Where is he?" Dean made his voice cold and flat. He did not feel cold and flat.

"I don't know."

He felt his heartbeat trip in his neck, jumpy like he'd overdosed on caffeine. "Step away, two paces to the left." She obeyed; he approached, still watching her, calculating how long it would take her to close the distance between them before he flicked his eyes toward the map once, fast.

There was nothing there but ash.

"What did you do?" he asked quietly.

"Nothing." She sounded angry and afraid, but it could have been an act. "That was the spell you gave me. It doesn't work."

"It works." He took a step toward her, adjusting his grip on the knife. "So what did you do?"

"Nothing!"

Dean dropped the next map from the pile onto the board. "We go again."

They went again.

And again.

Dean watched the demon's movements from every angle, sifted every syllable she spoke. Each time, everything matched Sam's notes exactly. Each time, the result was the same: a rush of fire, the stench of burning paper, and no answer. Large maps, small maps, maps of New England or the city or the state or the country—they all burned straight to their centers.

They ran out of maps.

"You botched it." Dean forced the words out.
"I didn't botch anything."

"Yeah. You did. I know what that spell can do. It found someone who'd been taken by fucking angels."

"Well, maybe angels suck at hiding people."

Dean's mouth ran dry. They hadn't talked about it a lot, the time Sam used this spell to find him. So many reasons not to, and so very many reasons since then not to dwell on it. But he remembered, if he let himself, Sam defending Ruby, how he wouldn't have found him without her. She took a chance for us, by the way. Apparently it's a good thing angels don't even try to hide their dirty business. "Someone's hiding him?"

"What do you think, Sparky?"

No. No, no, no, no, no.

"Who took him?"

"How the hell should I know?"

"Was it you skanks?" Dean couldn't let hit voice shake, not in front of this thing. "You take him? Hide him somewhere?"

"Not as far as I know. But, hey, you know bureaucracy, one hand doesn't know what the other hand's jerking." Its eyes were still black. "And like you said, with me being so low on the foodchain, and all…." He was ready for it when she charged. He was glad of it.

The spell had required her to be free of all bonds, but Dean had known from the start that he couldn't afford to lose control of her and more of the barn was covered in devil's traps than wasn't. It still wasn't easy to force her into one, but that was all right, because he wanted the fight.

She jumped backwards to avoid a swipe at her midsection once, twice, and stumbled on the charmed ropes. For a moment, Volk's body was out of balance and beholden to gravity. One punch was enough to fling her crashing against the chair that was still tacky with her blood. Dean grabbed her boot and drove the knife through her foot and into the floor. She shrieked.

"You wanted to know which one I am?" He doused her with the holy water flask. "You were right. It doesn't matter. I'm a Winchester and I'm looking for my brother." He poured some more right on the wound in her foot, and dust sifted down from the rafters when her scream hit the ceiling. "What do you know?"

She sobbed, yanking at her foot. "Nothing!"

Trapped in the spray paint circle, her foot nailed down by the knife, she wasn't powerless, but she wasn't much. Weaker than Ruby, and in terms of raw power, Ruby hadn't been anything special. He reached for the gallon jugs of holy water under the instrument table. They'd gotten used to dealing with a different caliber of hellspawn. This one screamed so easily it wasn't even satisfying.

"My brother," Dean said about five minutes later. He pulled the knife from her foot. "Who took him?"

Her eyes were burned raw from holy water as she wept up at him. The fight had gone out of her.
Dean had seen it before. He'd seen it too many times to count. It wasn't that she hadn't had worse; it was just that it was bad enough and she knew she couldn't stop it. She was one of the weak ones, one of the ones who never got past this threshold to the place beyond where she could compare different kinds of pain and fight with everything she had for the kind she would claim for her own. Like he'd been one of the weak ones.

"It wasn't us," she said, and he believed her.

Dean's back heaved with his breathing. His shoulder hurt, a deep, outraged pain from the impact of slamming the knife into the floor that he hadn't noticed at the time. He looked down at what was left of Ranger Volk. The holy water had washed blood into her hair, and the strands that had been fraying out of the ponytail before were stiff now with dirt.

"Carrie Ann," he said, "I'm sorry. I really am."

Ruby's knife slid home through familiar resistance. Light crackled through her ribcage, and she went still. Dean shut his eyes, then hers.

After a minute, he looked about the barn, at the Pringles cans of herbs and the pile of ash where the maps had been. Beyond the sagging aluminum gate, the light was slanting on the spring-green grass. Five and a half days to track it. Half a day to go through all this. And he had nothing more than when he'd started.

* * *

Dean burned her. The barn was rotten and combustible, and he had brought motel sheets for winding. He'd known going into this that he could never just let a demon who knew that they were separated go.

Part of him didn't want to take the time. To do things in any manner other than as feverishly as possible meant admitting that enough time had passed, at this point, that an extra hour here or there didn't really matter. In the end, he did it anyway, because he knew that Sam would want it.

* * *

He called Canby from a gas station two counties over, outside the bathroom where he'd changed his shirt and washed off the soot and blood.

For a minute, he didn't think Canby was going to pick up. The line rang three, four, five, six times. Seven, and Dean was moving his thumb to end the call when he heard the crackle of an old landline phone being lifted from its cradle, and then, "Hello?"

He skipped the pleasantries. "You said to call first, so I'm calling. Can you find him or not?"

Canby made a pleased sound at the other end of the line. "Dean. Good to hear from you."

"Can you do it?"

"I've looked into you," said Canby, when the only answer Dean cared about was yes or no. "Not to worry, of course, I was discreet. All manner of interesting tidbits about the Winchester family out there."

"Just answer the question."

"I'm trying to. As I was saying, I've had a bit of look-see, and I believe I have what I need to come
through on my end. Question is, will you hold up yours?"

Dean assumed the man was trying to rile him and controlled himself accordingly. "If you've been looking into my family, then you know that we're the best hunters you're going to find."

"I did glean that, yes." Dean could swear he could hear the smile in Canby's voice.

"Then you know I'll come through. We've done jobs other hunters wouldn't even think about, much less survive. Name a price that's real, not just some bullshit because you think it's your business to teach me manners, and we can do business. I don't care about gnarly. What I do care about is time."

"Well, I have a revised offer for you to consider, as it happens." A donkey brayed somewhere close by on Canby's end. "Got something particular in mind."

"Fine." Dean was calculating the driving time back to Canby's place, the distances from there to other points around the country and the distances from those back to Providence. "What is it and where is it?"

"Come for tea," Canby said instead of answering. "Any time's fine."

* * *

Dusk was falling when the Impala bumped to the end of 6 Plato Lane, and a chill was setting into the air. Canby did not emerge to meet him as before, but he'd left the light on on the porch.

Dean let the screen door thump shut behind himself and looked about the living room. The air was clear of smoke, this time, and light spilled from the kitchen. "Be right out," Canby called.

Dean used the momentary privacy to inspect the bookshelves. The contents were academic, with heavy emphasis on reproductions of codices and other primary sources along with grammars and lexica for modern and ancient tongues. Between Canby's rocking chair on one side of the room and the wood-armed sofa facing it, picture windows opposite the porch door looked out over where the back garden sloped sharply down into forest. A desk sat under the windows. Dean looked it over. The broad top was orderly, but thick with piles of paper and books. Photocopies of something in Greek topped one pile, held down by a carved inkstone; something in German with a mid-century binding topped another. In the middle was an atlas-sized volume open to two large color plates. The colors were bright as bird feathers, the line art complex and stylized. Dean wasn't any sort of authority, but he recognized that it was ancient and Mesoamerican.

"Codex Borgia," came a voice from behind him. "Relatively new printing. Expensive, but you get what you pay for. You can have a look-see if you wash your hands, first."

Dean left the desk. Canby was setting down a TV tray on the side table laden with mugs and a teapot covered with that damn Mr. Mackey cozy. "I'm good, thanks."

"Well, wash up, anyway."

Dean had washed his hands, thoroughly, thirty miles ago, but he didn't argue.

"Let me have a look at that shoulder," Canby said when Dean rejoined him. Dean acquiesced in silence; Canby's hands were professional and brief, and he tsked and told Dean to avoid heavy lifting and impacts. Dean really was not in the mood for the foreplay.

"You said you were willing to negotiate."
"No, I said I had a revised offer." Canby perched on the end of the rocking chair and lifted Mr. Mackey to check the contents of the teapot. Apparently satisfied, he took up the pot. "So do you know," he said, pouring tea, "I called up a friend of mine, doubt you know him, and I said, 'Has there been an apocalypse lately I hadn't heard about? Someone kick that off?' And he cussed even though he knows I don't like it and talked my ear right off."

Dean kept his face a mask. "Is there a point to this?"

Canby set down the pot, laced his fingers together over his middle, and rocked. Back, forward, back. "A question, first. How did you really find me? There's no way Rufus sent you."

Fuck it. "I came across a list of his contacts. I took it."

Canby considered that for a minute, then what seemed like genuine grief flickered over his face. "So he's dead, then. No way you'd have that otherwise." Dean didn't answer. Canby nodded to himself. "I'll say a few prayers for him."

"He was Jewish, pretty sure they're big on the whole 'have no other gods before me' thing," Dean snapped. "So no one sent you." Canby pinned him with a look. "Nobody knows you're here, do they?"

Dean wasn't about to feel threatened by a man who hid his gun up Mr. Mackey's backside. "No. Don't think that that changes anything."

"It can if you want it to."

"Stop being cryptic."

"You first," Canby said sharply. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"If you've been checking up on me, then you know."

"Of course I know, that isn't the point. Say the words."

It was oddly difficult to break eye contact with the man. "I'm Dean Winchester, and I'm looking for my brother." After a moment, Canby nodded, very slightly. He handed Dean one of the mugs. "I don't drink tea."

"You're going to drink this tea."

Dean set the mug on the arm of the couch and pointedly ignored it. "'Revised offer,' you said. What is it?"

"You want me to find someone for you. I'd like you to find something for me."

"Okay." That didn't sound so bad. "What do I have to find?"

"Trade secret."

"Come again?"

"I'll be happy to share everything I know just as soon as we have an arrangement in place."

"You have no idea, Canby, no idea how little patience I have right now."
Canby rocked the rocking chair slightly, just enough to be annoying. "Hunters talk, and a man in my position is obliged to protect himself. I told you last time that priesting is only part of what I do. For the rest, think of it as… R&D. Creative, historically informed solutions are my stock in trade. If you agree to my terms, I'll provide you with a dossier, but I'm not about to hand over my research without certain assurances. If you want me to take your case, you will take my case and submit to a mutual geas. Call it an NDA."

"Do you seriously expect me to take a job without even knowing what it is? You think I'm going to risk my brother on that?"

"I get the impression, between one thing and another, Dean, that I am not your first port of call. And that's fine. I don't even have to be your last. I'm only asking for your discretion, not your fealty. If you come across a better offer, you can walk away at any time. If you want to follow another lead, I'm not going to hold that against you. If you find your brother before you find what I want, then we're quits. You won't have lost anything and neither will I. A risk-free agreement that protects both parties. What could be fairer than that?"

Eight days. Sam had been missing for eight days. While tracking the demon, Dean had tried Bobby, Cas, even that feathered fuckface Balthazar, and struck out every time. He'd tried every other number he dared, and of the few who'd picked up, none could do better than promise to keep an ear out. He'd gone through his and Sam's notes on the case, over and over and over, and found nothing. Providence was still radioactive. Eight days Dean had been failing at this.

"This job, how long will it take?"

"That depends on you."

Dean wanted to scream, *That is the entire problem.* "Original offer. I'll— I can find the werewolf without the moon."

The smile Canby gave him was half mocking, half sad. He stood up and beckoned for Dean to join him. "Come here, please."

On a credenza against the wall stood a small bronze tripod. It looked antique—like, Greek or Roman antique, not *Cash in the Attic* antique—and sat on a display block like you'd see in a museum, so Dean had just assumed it was decorative. He should have known better. The tripod was already full of dried leaves and herbs; from a drawer Canby produced a small golden dagger, and from his shirt pocket a book of matches. He lit one and dropped it in the bowl. They kindled, half acrid, half sweet.

"What is this?" Dean asked guardedly.

"This is me answering the question you don't want to ask. For free, by the way. You're welcome." Canby turned to Dean as he unsheathed the dagger. "Your brother is Sam, right?"

Dean didn't know why hearing his brother's name in this douchebag's mouth pissed him off so thoroughly, but it did. "Yeah."

"And he's your blood brother, right? Not adopted or anything?"

"Sam's my blood, yeah." Canby held up the dagger and looked at him expectantly. Dean ground his teeth, but gave him his hand.

"Oh, good. This only works if you share DNA." Canby raised an eyebrow. "One way or another."
Before Dean could respond, or deck him, or slit his throat, Canby pulled the knife over his palm.

The fire went out the moment Dean's blood doused it. He had a split second to be afraid to ask what that meant, and then the flames shot up, triple their previous height, gold and phosphorous white. Canby made a pleased noise. "Congratulations, your brother is alive."

Dean whipped a bandanna out of a pocket and around his palm and did not, did not feel weak with relief.

Canby cleaned the dagger with a small bowl of water and a hank of white wool. "So. Now that that's out of the way."

He covered the tripod to snuff the divination fire. "Honesty merits honesty," he said, handing Dean bandaids and antiseptic cream and seeming impervious to Dean's glares.

"You were square with me, so now it's my turn. Your case interests me. I've got an idea I think will work—"

"You think?" Dean said incredulously.

"—but it wants some working out. What I'm asking of you may take time, but I need time on my end, as well. There are things to prepare."

"That's not good enough."

Canby sighed. "We've been over this. There are no guarantees with what I do, but then again, that's the point: you're not guaranteeing yourself a trip to Hell. All I can tell you is that I believe I can help you find your brother. I don't take on jobs I don't think I can do; it's a matter of professional pride. And while I can't hardly make you any money-back guarantees, I think my terms are fair. I'm not asking you to stop looking for your brother on your own. All I do ask is that whatever you do, you do it only on your own. It's important, Dean."

"I can't just drop off the grid. I've got other friends who are MIA and they might need my help."

Bobby had more or less gone on the back burner for the past week, but Dean hadn't forgotten him. He'd been holding out against getting as far away from Providence as South Dakota, but he'd known for a while now that that might have to be his next stop. Any information or instructions Bobby might have left for them would be there. If the crusty old bastard was all right, Dean would need his help with Sam; and if he wasn't— His heart squeezed. That wasn't an option. Then there was Castiel. Cas could take care of himself; he certainly had for weeks at a time when he'd been ignoring both him and Sam. But given the stakes of the civil war in Heaven, his silence was becoming ominous.

"Look, I don't know if you know this, Canby, because it sure seems like you spend your days with your head jammed as far into the sand as you can get it, but out there in the real world, we've got problems. That apocalypse you heard about? My brother stopped it, but there's a whole contingent of angels who want to fire it up all over again. And the monsters are apparently jealous, because they're gunning for an apocalypse of their very own. Sam and I are good at what we do. You want us out there, doing our jobs, together. It's in your best interest to help me find him—not waste my time running your dirty little errands."

Canby shrugged. "Maybe. Then again, maybe not. I don't have much truck with the whole paradigm you're worked up about. Either way, if you want my services, this is the price. This is the price for you, Dean Winchester, son of John, brother of Sam." He smiled a thin-lipped smile. "Gods don't like hubris, and I'm a godly man. If you wanted to deal in trinkets and innards, you shouldn't have been such a braggart."

"You refuse to tell me what this thing is, and you want me to take a freaking vow of silence just to
make sure no hunters ever find out. And I'm supposed to just, what? Take it on faith that you're not trying to end the world?"

"What on Earth would I want to end the world for?" said Canby, now openly annoyed. "I live here. Look. I can't tell you what the item is, but will it satisfy you if I tell you what it isn't?"

"Probably not?"

"It is not a weapon," Canby said anyway. "It is not a plague. It is not demonic. No, it does not summon any pagan gods, neither. It isn't harmless, but I'm not interested in using it to bring others harm. I don't need to. If I want to hurt people, all I have to do is go out back and slaughter a chicken. I want this item for my own protection. I keep myself to myself and have done all my life; the last thing I want is the bother of world domination."

Dean's mind spun. There was a catch in there, he knew, because there always was. "How can I trust you?"

"I'll write it into our geas. My best craft for your hunter's might. Your discretion for my truthfulness. There'll be no lies between us."

"I— I have responsibilities. People are depending on me."

"Are you going to put them in front of your brother?"

And it always came back to that. No matter how many times the universe asked the question, one way or another, the answer never changed. Not even when he tried. He swallowed. "Okay."

A smile creased Canby's face, quick and satisfied. "Well, all right, then." He picked up his mug and nodded at Dean's. "Drink up. Your tea's cold."

Canby busied himself with scribbling on a long strip of paper with a ballpoint. Dean picked up his own mug, which advised him that You're Never Too Old to Do Something Stupid, and waited warily until he saw Canby sip and swallow. Fuck it. He tossed it back.

Dean gagged and his eyes watered. "What," was all he could manage.

"Exlax and truth serum," said Canby, and Dean had no idea at this point whether either part of that was a joke. "Traditional for the start of an arrangement like this. Now, just to go over the details: you remember I told you that I work within the boundaries my clients set?"

"Yeah."

"Everybody's got things they don't mind, and things they mind but will tolerate. Everybody's got their own line." Canby peered at him over his pen, and Dean was reminded of an owl, leaning curiously but without cruelty over prey. "What's your line, Dean Winchester?"

Dean tried and failed to keep the words back. "I don't have one."

Canby smiled again, faintly. "Very good." He finished writing and held up the paper. "Right hand."

Dean held out his right arm, which Canby positioned on the coffee table. Then he grasped Dean's hand as if they were arm wrestling and wrapped the strip of paper in an X around their wrists. "I will use all my arts to reunite you with the one you've lost. I will tell you no lies."
"I, um." Dean felt a bit stupid. What exactly was he supposed to say here? "I will use all my, erm, gear to bring you the thingywhatsit you tell me to. I will, um...."

"Will you do this on your own?" Canby prompted.

"Yes, I will do this on my own."

"Will you keep your word?"

"Yes, I will keep my word."

"Why do you do this?"

"I'm looking for my brother."

Apparently that was all. Canby let go of his hand, picked up the paper ribbon, tore it, and handed him half. "All righty, here you go. One Old Irish geas, just like mother used to make. Hang onto your receipt. If you want out, just burn your half."

Dean folded the strip up and tucked it in his wallet, warring with himself as to whether this was or was not the greatest pile of bullshit he'd ever participated in in his life. "So, um, is that it? We're good to go?"

Canby fetched a file off the desk, a tie-down folio about three inches thick. He seemed tired, suddenly, more human. "This is to get you started. There's an overview of the lore involved. Lore, of course, isn't the part I need you for. I reckon things will get physical."

"Now that I've signed on the dotted line, you want to tell me how long this is going to take?"

"Truly, I don't know. Stealing and killing are your wheelhouse, not mine. Stay on the path. It takes as long as it takes you."

"Great," Dean muttered, stashing the folio in his jacket and rising to go.

Canby's hand shot out and closed on Dean's wrist. He looked straight at Dean and held eye contact. "Don't waver."

Dean was wrong-footed by his sudden intensity. "Yeah, of course."

"I mean it, Dean. Don't waver in this."

Dean's eyes flickered from Canby's hand to his face. "I won't."

Canby's yellowed fingers released him. "Happy hunting, then," he said in his normal tone. "You know where to find me. Come back with the Brand of Tubalcain. Last I heard, a cyclops had it."

Chapter End Notes

- A geas can be a number of things, but here it's basically being used as a sort of contract-vow. Which is not really how it works in mythology, but tbh I do not aim for faithfulness in all things.
the flames are all gone (but the pain lingers on)

Chapter Summary

Sam deteriorates, physically and mentally.

Chapter Notes

**Content warnings:** starvation, isolation, general gruesomeness.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The little things had shown Sam where the seams were.

He'd woken up flat on his back with an IV in his arm. He'd blinked, several times, at the daylight washing over his face, and the steady rhythm of light and dark had resolved into the pulse of fan blades. Bobby's panic room.

The fear that hit him first had been instinctual, driving through him like a spike and bypassing thought altogether. With the fear came humiliation, twisting the spike. Then, just ahead of the adrenaline surge, his mind landed on an explanation: this was how the Cage would appear to him. *Of course* this was how the Cage would appear to him.

He'd arrived. They all had.

That knowledge should have paralyzed him, but the adrenaline was already propelling him forward. The IV yanked in his arm and Sam found himself falling on his ass on the floor, looking wildly about the room. It was empty.

It was empty, and there was an IV in his arm. What the hell?

Sam sat, eyes darting around the room. He stayed motionless for long minutes. Nothing appeared. And he *felt* nothing. He felt neither any presences around him, waiting, nor Lucifer within him. All he felt was a sort of a faint… itch.

Slowly, Sam drew the IV out of his arm and stood. Still nothing appeared from the shadows. He felt fine. Ordinary. It wasn't just that he had no sense of any angels anywhere; he felt nothing like he remembered just *before* he took Lucifer in. The demon blood, the fury, the raw power. The way he'd been able to see every demon in the city of Detroit. The way he'd been able just to close his eyes and make them drop. The knowledge that he was finally on the other side of a line he'd drawn and redrawn daily all his life, and the mildly interesting reveal that relief and despair were exactly the same animal.

And then *yes*.

*Yes* was like some kind of Zen koan: ultimate power, ultimate impotence. Ultimate freedom, ultimate captivity. Screaming for separation in the moment of discovering the single organism he'd
always been. Fighting to remember a concept of him, because the devil was killing his brother.

He looked down at his hands, looking for Dean's blood, and—frowned at his cuffs.

After several long seconds, he dropped his hands, rubbing them over his jeans as he moistened his lips. Of all of the things wrong with this equation, the thing to get hung up on was surely not that he didn't recognize his shirt.

Finding the door to the panic room unlocked made his heart leap in his throat all over again. When the handle turned under his hand and the door swung a half-inch outward in the jamb, he paused for a long time at the threshold.

But this time, his brother was waiting for him on the other side, whole again. Sam had climbed the steps into the house he knew so well (had the basement door always had that boot print on it?) and Dean was there, and Bobby was there, and apparently Castiel was around someplace, too, all the damage Sam had nearest to home done set right. Now they were sitting around the kitchen table together. This was the taste of beer in his mouth, bitter and cheap and homelike. This was hunger in his stomach, plain old hunger for food and nothing else, and his big brother fixed him peanut butter and banana and Sam was amazed.

And if his happiness seemed restrained for someone who'd been handed miracles, confusion was what was reining it back. Acute at first, the confusion in his initial question—*How did I get here?*—dissolved under explanations into a hundred smaller questions, which by and by broke down into a thousand even smaller ones, fizzing at the margins of his mind.

That first night, when they flipped on the TV and had no celebration at all, a commercial came on for Folger's Coffee. It wasn't that unintentionally hilarious brother and sister one because Christmas was apparently a month plus in the rearview, but it was close to January 24th and Sam almost joked, *Guess I'm your present this year.* He thought about it, but then didn't do it. The itch at the back of his mind felt like that thing when the word you want is on the tip of your tongue.

It wasn't so much that Bobby obviously wasn't saying something and Dean obviously wasn't letting him that made it all ring false. Some kind of crap like that was par for the course. It wasn't the cosmic questions like *So why did Death give us a freebie?* or *Are we quite sure Satan is staying in the kennel?* that kept Sam up, either, though certainly he had those. It wasn't even the odd enjambment of the moment of his fall with this above-ground banality. It wasn't the big discrepancies; it was the small ones.

His sideburns were longer. His boots were new. His jeans were not new, but were nicely broken in and he'd never seen them before in his life. In an upstairs bedroom Bobby had always used for storage but suddenly found an excuse to clear out for him, Sam found a duffel bag full of his things and only recognized about half of them. His body was different, wrong, and okay, the disappearance of his scars and sore knee and trick shoulder he could chalk up to resurrection, but nearly ten extra pounds and four more inches of trapezius seemed like peculiar bequests coming from Death.

By nightfall, it was obvious that he was topside before he woke up in the panic room and had been for some time. There was nothing else to do with the information, so he accepted it.

Sam sat on the musty spare bed hemmed in by the boxes and broken vacuum cleaners that had previously been on it and listened to Dean and Bobby discussing what time to leave in the morning. Anti-climactic. That was the word he'd been looking for.

*I died and went to Hell,* Sam told himself in the car on the way to Oregon. *I died and went to Hell*
and came back. I died and went to Hell and came back, and the world didn't end, it's right here, it's just fine. He tried the ideas on in various permutations, trying to understand them. This should have some emotional weight, or something, and he was happy, he did feel lighter inside, but it was like the full depth of his feelings was walled off somewhere.

But he was back. He'd been given another chance. He was riding beside his brother again, and whatever was going on, in a lot of ways it wasn't all that different from any other time you went away for a long time and returned to find life had continued in your absence. He told Dean that he was exactly the same, and as far as hunting went it did seem like it, but even Dean had clearly done some moving on, because he liked Sam again.

First he tried Bobby. Waited until Dean was out of the room, played dense and asked for help finding the dragons as an excuse to get him on the line, but although Bobby wasn't trying very hard to hide his bitterness or sarcasm, he wasn't about to be tripped up into saying whatever he was so bitter and sarcastic about not saying, either.

Castiel, by contrast, was such an easy mark that Sam felt slightly bad about it.

Their room at the Portland Pines had a mural. It was one of those floor-to-ceiling photographic ones, covering the whole wall with an alpine lake scene. It showed a cloudless sky, a snowy peak, a virgin tree line mirrored in calm water, an expansive view made slightly glossy and flat.

Yeah. Yeah, Cas, it's a miracle, all right.

Dean kept telling him that none of it was him, what his—what? Body? Mind? Two-thirds of a human being?—had done, but Sam couldn't let the guilt go. Partly that was because he'd take being culpable over being impotent; partly it was because guilt felt more real than most other things.

Still, Sam found himself thinking, I can work with this. Dean wasn't going back to Hell; so, okay. Lucifer was still in the box; so, okay. That half of Heaven was fighting to change the second one should have been terrifying, and it was, Sam supposed, but the situation could not but feel remote from behind all the fresh drywall hung up on his shiny new life. What even was he, with more seams than a Mattel doll?

Or maybe this plastic quality experience had now was just what life was bound to be like after Lucifer. Because for all the memories Sam was cut off from, he remembered merging with the Devil just fine. It had been terrifying, and degrading, and blindingly bright, and even at the moment when he'd been beating his brother to death, it had felt like flying.

He tried not to miss it.

* * *

Returning from the seizure was everything like before and nothing like before.

It brought the same jarring, round-peg-square-hole sense of not fitting in the world in which he opened his eyes, of being so wrong that reality hurt him. Momentarily, in some sub-verbal part of him, Sam wondered, Did Dean feel like this? Then it flipped, rabbit-duck, faces-vase, and it was whatever was inside him that didn't fit. It hurt that way, too.

As in Bristol, he remembered nothing. Dean assumed his seizure there had been a memory, Sam assumed this, but whatever it was, Sam couldn't carry it with him back into the world. When he broke the surface, gasping, it was without words, sounds, or pictures to encode the experience, without any kind of information his brain could use. There was only a phantom weight of time in
his mind, and somewhere in him a stain.

He came back to total sensory pandemonium. Sound, temperature, smell, sight—his brain had lost all the labels and didn't know whether he was meant to touch the tones in the air or taste the grit of the concrete or hear this tenacious cold. It was only through virtuosic improvisation that the organ was able to cobble together an understanding of pain at all.

Eventually the sounds resolved into voices, though not yet into speech, and other senses likewise came forward to claim their inputs. He could feel where he was—concrete floor—and smell where he was—sewer—and see what was around him—prison—and his muscles were lining up with handwritten complaints he did not care to read.

A voice was calling to him, like before, but it wasn't the right one.

"Sam? Can you hear me?"

He was cold. It wasn't a bitter cold, but it was a stubborn and soaking one. There was no one here to dislodge it. Sam curled up tight on his side, away from the voice that wasn't Dean's, and his face crumpled. He wanted his brother. He wanted his brother. Just barely, he managed to smother the urge to cry.

While he lay there, using everything he had to fight off that last humiliation, the voices became words he could understand. He couldn't reply, though. Couldn't have even if he hadn't been in a ball on the floor. It had been close to an hour last time before he'd actually been able to answer any of the babbling Dean had kept up around him as they'd floored it out of Bristol.

"What's wrong with him?"

"He had a seizure, he'll probably be out of commission for a while."

"Some savior."

After a long interval of breathing through his nose and fighting for control, when his chest and jaw at last began to unclench, Sam was able to draw a breath in through his mouth, deep enough for the oxygen to register. Another. Another. He swallowed. Muscles that had been strung taut for too long finally released, and he shuddered as he slackened against the floor.

Dean wasn't here. That was a fact he was going to have to face up to at this point, and it could only mean one of two things. One, something had happened to Dean. The list of people and things that could happen to Dean was long and grisly. Two, nothing had happened to Dean. That would mean Dean was still looking for him, in which case the longer it took Sam to find his way back to him, the more certain it became that Dean would do something stupid.

Sam had to get to him first.

He ignored the third possibility that nagged at him, because—he knew Dean hadn't given up on him entirely. He'd proved that when he'd backed Sam's Hail Mary in Detroit, and again in Stull Cemetery. He did still care, despite all the cause Sam had given him not to.

But there went time, tripping him up again. More of it had elapsed for Dean than for him, and Dean didn't seem as ground down anymore. Probably he wasn't too tired to chase after Sam again. Who could blame him if he were, but probably he wasn't. Probably.

He stared into the darkness and focused on the voice that was still speaking, not constant anymore, but intermittent. Every few minutes it would call again; then just pipes dripping; then the voice.
Male, coming from somewhere over his head, close by yet walled off. "Sam, can you hear me?" *Plink, plink.* "Sam, can you hear me?"

He swallowed again, and it was easier this time, almost normal. "Yeah."

"He's back, Lindsey," Jacob called. She didn't reply. Perhaps she'd gone to sleep. "How you feeling, Sam?"

Sam pushed himself up to sit against the wall by Jacob's grate. Muscles that had contracted and locked that way for too long spasmed. "How long was I out?" he asked instead of answering.

"Uh, don't have a watch in here, so I couldn't time it, but a couple of minutes I guess." Jacob paused. "Do you have epilepsy?"

"No, I just get these seizures."

"Yeah, that's… that's what epilepsy is."

Huh. Hell seizures, still epilepsy. Someone should tell Dean. Didn't sound as scary that way. Epilepsy didn't kill you or make you a vegetable or drive you insane; worst that would happen was they'd take away your driver's license, and Sam's was fake anyway. "Sorry, what?" Jacob asked, and apparently Sam had said some of that out loud. "Hell? Kill you? What?"

"Nothing, it's nothing. Just give me a few."

Sam drifted. He came back into focus sometime later when Jacob's voice returned, even closer than before, and said, "Here."

Something was being proffered through one of the holes in the grate. When Sam climbed up onto his knees, he could make out what it was: a cockroach. He understood, and his stomach turned over. "Thanks, I'm good."

"It's cool, I've got enough." Jacob's fingers pressed another few centimeters out the grate. "Look, you've gotta eat, man. We need you to get us out of here."

On a sitcom, this would have been the moment at which Sam's stomach growled, loud and theatrical, cue laugh track. Sam's stomach didn't growl. His stomach had given up growling; it was a constant, gnawing pain inside him. He was shaky, lightheaded, perpetually chilled, and he knew it was only going to get worse if he didn't do something.

As if he'd been reading Sam's thoughts, Jacob said, "You're the one who was telling me how it's going to go if we don't eat. Come on, man. Don't check out on us."

Sam took the cockroach.

It tasted about like he remembered other beetles tasting, which actually helped. Once, in the summer when he'd been eleven, Dad had taken them out to Yellowstone and drilled nothing but survival skills for three weeks. Firearms, edge weapons, even hand-to-hand—they'd gotten a break from all of that, had in fact had to surrender everything but one hunting knife apiece to their father at the car, in favor of tracking, navigation, wilderness first aid, snaring, and, of course, foraging.

Dean had *hated* it. Not that he'd given Dad any attitude, he was too disciplined for that, but Sam knew his brother. The jungle Dean thrived in was the human one. He liked his thrills with a side of fast food, pretty girls, and bad cable, and while the road might become his bride, the mountaintops and meadowlarks would not. Dean's whole aesthetic was geared toward interfacing with the society
he went out of his way to flout, when you thought about it (which, staring up at the stars with rocks digging into his spine, Sam had, at length), from his swagger to his hustle to his smart-aleck mouth. It was a kind of agility, entrancing to see. Like a gymnast propelling off of a floor, Dean pushed off of people and the things they built. Booting him into the wilderness was like dropping a cat in the bathtub. He'd performed just fine, of course, though with the distance of years Sam could see that maybe some of what an eleven-year-old had swallowed as the prowess of Rambo had actually been not especially convincing bullshit, but he'd done it with dismay.

Which frankly had helped Sam out a lot. Partly that had been because a certain amount of schadenfreude was native to any sibling relationship, and a close one all the more so. A lot of it, though, had been the way Dean's discomfiture had diminished the distance between them, narrowing temporarily the gulf that Sam had anxiously watched grow wider the further Dean progressed through puberty. Comradeship came out of mutual suffering, and Dean had so rarely admitted to anything their father put them through being suffering.

Sam had never, ever said so, because afterward Dean had peeled from his sunburn so bad that he looked like a leper and been treated like one by Bryony North and had cursed the state of Idaho in terms that would have earned him laps had their father been in earshot daily for a month, but Sam had always thought of those weeks as good. No, not good exactly, but—precious. He'd cherished them.

He could picture it now: getting out of here, finding Dean, holding him spellbound with his war stories in the car. The car would be warm and sunny and full of the smell of coffee and French fries. *So what do sewer roaches taste like, Sammy?* Dean would ask.

*Like home, apparently,* Sam would say.

How they'd laugh.

"Sam. Hey! Sam."

Jacob was waggling another cockroach at him. Sam took this one, too, and the three crickets that followed, devouring them. Jacob was going on about postictal states. Sam's brain had already categorized most of Jacob's speech as nervous rambling based on tone, so he was not paying close attention. The bugs were more important. Roach. Cricket. Roach. Roach. Cricket. Cricket. Smaller cricket. Even smaller cricket, like maybe the pantry was running out. Something smaller than a cricket.

There was so little down here that even this small novelty was something to catch on, cling to. Sam held the bug up to the diffuse ecto light and squinted. "Huh."

"What, what is it?"

He rotated the insect between thumb and forefinger. "It's a weevil."

Jacob's laughter was only slightly hysterical. "Had to do that bug collection project for AP Bio, too, huh?"

That startled a genuine laugh out of Sam. "Yeah. Yeah, actually, I did." He ate the weevil. Extra crunchy.

No more bugs came through the slots of the grate. Sam's stomach felt like it was tearing itself apart around what it had finally been given, what had been dull pain flaring into something raw. He just had the presence of mind to say, "Thanks."
"Yeah, no problem."

Now that he wasn't so out of it, Sam felt guilty for tearing through Jacob's food supply like that. They'd ended up eating the ecto in the first place because they'd both been starving. "I'm sorry for using up your food."

"It's fine. I've been collecting them for a while."

The words made Sam feel acutely worse. Even down here he was a drain. A drain in a drain, circling the drain. Hah. "You should stretch what you have as far as you can. I'm fine now. Sorry."

"Yeah, you sound totally awesome over there after your near-fatal seizure, bud." Jacob sobered. "Seriously, I don't think we're getting out of here without you, so, uh—try not to die, please."

"I'll do my best."

"Something weird's going on," Jacob said, and Sam restrained himself from commenting on their current embarrassment of riches.

"What do you mean?"

"This grate here, it's supposed to open. I'm pretty sure it's supposed to open."

That got Sam's attention. "How do you know?" He started probing the lip of the aperture.

"Because there's an arrow stamped on it pointing at the bottom that says 'LIFT'. I had to scrape that glowy slime mold stuff off of it to see it. It looks like we should be able to lift it up and push it out into your room, but it won't budge. I mean, I work out, all right, and this thing just does not move. I think—I think something's keeping it shut."

The rudiments of a plan had been coming together in Sam's mind, but now his heart sank. "The spirit." He gave the grate a tug, but it was the same for him as for Jacob. "Supernatural lock. And if this one's sealed, then the one in my room leading out to the rest of the system definitely is. Damn it." He shook his head. "We've seen ghosts lock places down before, but the amount of power it would take to maintain that continuously…."

Jacob was quiet. "So what does this mean?"

"It means we're not getting out of here until we find a way to disrupt the spirit."

"How do you do that, how do you disrupt a ghost?"

"Best way? Burn the remains. Goes without saying that we're not going to be able to do that. We need salt or iron. Is there anything in your room you can pick up, Jacob, anything metal?"

"I think there used to be an access ladder." Jacob's voice was strained. "There are rust spots where I think it was attached to the wall, but there's nothing there now." He cleared his throat. "That's another reason I thought the grate should move. As far as I can tell, the only way in or out of here is through your room. You said you've got a door to the rest of the sewer in there?"

"I think so. It sounds like it, and that's where everything drains—your room, Lindsey's room, my room." Sam stared into the darkened corner where he knew that door sat. It was the terminus of the trench across the room where the skeletons had collected. It was where six human beings, at least, had drained off. They'd have to crawl to fit through it.
"Lindsey and Marian's grate is our only chance," Sam said finally. "It's just rebar set into the concrete, so there's nothing for the spirit to seal. We have to get one of those bars free."

He heard Jacob shifting, and then his voice was incrementally closer, like he was talking directly through the grate. "Yeah, um… Lindsey told me about your idea." He lowered his voice. "What you told her to do… I don't think it's going to work."

Sam matched his volume to Jacob's. "I know. I wanted to give her something to do, but it would take a lot longer than she's likely to stick with it."

"No— Well, yeah, that too, but also… does she seem a little… off to you?" Jacob said carefully.

She did. She definitely did. If Jacob was suspicious of her, though, Sam hesitated to reinforce it even if she had set off alarm bells for him, too. Whatever she was hiding, they needed cooperation worse than they needed anything else from each other. "She's been down here five months, Jacob. I know she's not exactly a pocketful of sunshine, but at least she's sane. And we need her."

"But she won't be able to pull the bar out."

"I know."

"Then what?"

"I'm working on it."

Jacob snorted, apparently before he could stop himself, because he followed it immediately with, "Sorry. Didn't mean it like that."

Sam swallowed. "It's okay."

"You said we need to disrupt this ghost-thing somehow. Well, what about you?"

"What do you mean?" Sam asked, although he had a bad feeling that he knew.

"You beat that thing." The excitement in Jacob's voice was palpable. "You threw it out. If you're talking about disrupting it—"

"Jacob—"

"—Get it to come into you," Jacob said in a rush. "Do that Jedi thing, then I'll pull the grates, you and I'll get out of here, and we can send the police back for Lindsey and Marian."

"Do we even know if it lost control over the doors when I threw it out before?"

"It's worth finding out, don't you think?"

"Jacob, I have no idea what I did the first time and I don't know whether I'll be able to do it again—"

"Then teach me! Please, before it comes back!"

Sam's eyes burned. "I can't."

"Can't or won't?" Jacob shouted.

Up above, one of the women made a protesting noise in her sleep. There was a plink somewhere in
"Sorry," Jacob said.

"It's okay," Sam said again, woodenly.

"You're right. It's not much of a plan."

Sam looked down at his hands. His own body was no more than a shadow anymore; the dimness made every line faint, and only sensation told the limits of things. Feel the floor. Feel the walls. Draw a picture of himself in his mind from proprioception and pain. He didn't know which was more dangerous for him, being trapped in himself or losing himself entirely.

His head hurt. Like before. Hemispheric pain, right side only, simultaneously penetrating and hollow: a migraine. Tidy, clinical name, migraine, like seizure, like epilepsy. Those terms were valid. The definitions were met.

But the pain also felt like a tear down the middle of his mind, and he'd talked a good game, to Dean, to himself, but that feeling that tear terrified him. This headache made him feel the tear. The seizure had made him feel the tear. The ghost had made him feel the tear, the ghost itself had felt the tear, and it had gone straight for it like beetles went for the eyes. Did it ever occur to you you might have died? Dean had wanted to know, and it had, Dean, it really had.

He did not want to die here, where it didn't even smell like his brother. But there were civilians down here, and what he wanted didn't matter.

"It's not a bad plan," he told Jacob. "Right now, it's the best we've got."

* * *

The prospect of dying had shed most of what fear had remained in it round about the third time Lucifer had brought him back. The fear of dying without seeing his brother again, on the other hand, that was evergreen. Even then (especially then), that part had unquestionably been the worst.

"Oh, kiddo," Lucifer had said to him, in that cramped bathroom in Oklahoma. Just that, like seeing Sam like that broke him, and Sam had wanted to throw up but apparently you couldn't in dreams.

Then Sam had awakened in the tub with another ruined set of clothes, and he hadn't really expected poison to work where a headshot hadn't, but once he knew he'd broken it so bad he was never going to get to see Dean again, he'd just wanted to get it over with.

Sitting against the wall of the sewer with his knees pulled into his chest for warmth, Sam slipped sideways into sleep.

When he awoke (for the first time? For the fifth?), he was so stiff that it hurt to unfold his limbs. And he was hungry. Beyond hungry, actually, in a literal sense where his body had lost track of what to demand and he wasn't sure it would even know what to do with food if confronted with it. He was cold, deep down in his core, and he was running out of calories to shiver with. Sam knew his size was working against him, muscles he couldn't remember sweating for all hungry for sustenance and turning on each other to get it.

Those muscles spasmed and cramped, and Sam closed his eyes and wished for Dean's hands on him. Just that, even that, a palm's breadth of warmth and comfort.

His mind kept gnawing at the question of what had happened to Dean. Whether he was still out
there, looking but unable to find, or if something had gotten to him. There were so many things that wanted to and could. Sam kept forgetting that it wasn't the apocalypse anymore, but even when he remembered, he knew there were plenty of other forces fighting to bring their own version of the end to the world. Demons and monsters had every reason to eliminate Dean. Raphael had reason to do far, far worse, and Sam knew that Michael was in the Cage, but Cas hadn't talked like that mattered much and Sam knew all the Taxiarch's faces, now, and the thought of any of them looking out of his brother—

And he'd thought he'd disliked liked Dean's *Say Yes to the Dress* plan the first time.

He wondered whether Dean, if he was in trouble, was waiting for Sam to help him. If he was somewhere calling his brother's name and didn't understand why he didn't come. Or maybe Dean knew better than to expect anything from Sam.

Sam Winchester, demon-slayer extraordinaire, in a literal ball on the floor. No wonder the civvies were skeptical.

That was when he remembered the memory that had hit him right before the seizure. His eyes snapped open in the dark. Oh, God. *Oh, God.*

He'd drunk.

He distantly registered that he was sitting up and hyperventilating. That demon in the garden shed. Blood filling the fucking Tupperware. Drinking it down without hesitation, only irritation when it didn't work because it looked like his sparkly demon powers resided *in his soul* and better put a pin in that one, Sammy-boy, because he had bigger problems, like *did Dean know?*

Sam felt his face crumple, and this time he did cry.

The damning thing was, remembering it just made him want Dean worse. He'd drunk demon blood, *and been pissed off because it didn't do anything,* and now he wanted his brother to come and kiss it better.

When Sam had felt despair like this after letting in Lucifer, and had wished for Dean like this, too, the Devil had been strangely gentle with him about it. All of Sam's secrets, *all* of them, had been suddenly irradiated. Lucifer had seen all of Sam and judged him for none of it. He'd found none of him pathetic. Not any of the ways he'd ever needed Dean nor any of things he'd ever done to get him. Sam had fought not to be grateful.

There had never been much normal about his dependence on his brother. Sam was aware. Sam had known that much long before he had words for it in his vocabulary, just as he'd known that most families didn't live in motels and that none of them drove a car like theirs.

He'd always been conflicted about it. On the one hand, it was suffocating—not Dean's fault, maybe not even Dad's, but it was. It wasn't just the big-brother overprotectiveness, either, but the constant awareness of the cost of protecting him. Their father had stuffed them into a box called *Look after your brother,* and it had cramped both of them; but Dean, after all, had gotten tall first.

But it was also a magic space, that box. The best, most dangerous, most exclusive treehouse ever built. No one else could enter, not really—not even their father, in the end.

Those who dealt in magic knew there was power in singularity itself. But power could get you into trouble.

A bond, a bubble—call it what you would; nothing would ever compass it. It had been confusing,
it had been a comfort; it had been toxin and tonic; it had been a source of embarrassment and of pride. For Sam, even of something beyond pride, something glorious and ugly and intoxicating.

Hell, there'd been times when he'd been downright smug about it. The summer before he'd started applying to college, he and Dad had gotten into a shouting match. That had still been rare, at the time, so Sam could remember clearly the white flecks of spittle in his father's beard when he'd jabbed his finger in Sam's chest and screamed, *You want to be treated like an adult?*

Sam had not fired back with, *Dean's been treating me like one for a while, now, want to see?* but had wanted to. It was a good thing he'd held his tongue. Otherwise, he might have found out a decade early how wrong he'd got it.

What he'd actually said had been, *If I'm gonna be treated like a soldier, then yeah, I do.*

*You're no soldier,* his father had said. *You know why? A soldier does whatever it takes.*

A year later, he'd thrown the words back in his father's face. If Sam wanted his independence so badly, the way John saw it, he didn't need them. *If you walk out that door,* he'd told him, *don't you ever come back.*

Sam had looked between his father and his brother, who stayed silent. *Whatever it takes,* he'd said.

Now he lay on the concrete and stared out over its horizon. His head was dull and his muscles were weak, and he knew he was running out of time.

*Whatever it took.*

* * *

He brought up the bones that were in the channel first. The route was down the giant stairs, past the remains he understood to have been the homeless man called Litner, into the trench, and along the trench, holding onto the wall and inching along the top of the concrete slope to keep his feet out of the liquid at the bottom. He'd left the skeletons in a tidy pile at the end when he had counted them. Perhaps thirty feet to reach them in all. The trip exhausted him. His vision got black spots when he stood on his toes to slide each bone over the edge of the channel and onto the floor above.

Excluding the fresh one, there were five skeletons. Five crania, mandibles, and pelves. Ten femora, patellae, tibiae, fibulae, humeri, radii, ulnae, clavicles, and scapulae. One hundred and twenty ribs. One hundred and thirty vertebrae. All the sloppy bits, which Sam left. One thousand and thirty bones in all.

He laid out the larger bones in order, first by kind, then by size. He removed the ones that had turned dark and begun to crumble, the ones that had been wet for too long. His fingers went back to those that remained, touching them back into neatness. The bones gleamed.

Sam had, of all things, one sock. One had been missing when he'd woken up here; the other he'd taken off and stashed because, well, who wore one sock on a wet floor. In the sock he put somebody's patella.

He considered the rest. They showed ivory-pale along their edges, tannin-red along their flat. He selected a tibia, a humerus, and a rib, choosing dense bones rather than large ones. From them, he ground three knives.

He left the knives in the alcove to let the water drip over them and returned to the body on the stairs. He could see it better than when he'd first discovered it; the corpse was well along into the
stage of dry decay, having been picked over within and without, but there was still enough soft
tissue to attract scavengers. Sam assessed and picked up the pieces of Litner that had the most left
on them: foot. Larynx. Sternum with cartilage. Pelvis. He arranged them like a trail of breadcrumbs
leading up the stairs and across the floor, and in the middle of the floor, he set Litner's skull.

Then he sat down an arm's length from the skull and waited.

In the fall when Sam was twelve, their father had taken advantage of deer season to work on their
bow hunting. John Winchester was not a man who believed in deer stands, so their harvest season
that year had involved a lot of sitting around in underbrush with wet leaves soaking into their asses.
Even Dean had protested this, albeit very delicately, by suggesting that perhaps they could go after
something a little more active and get even more hunting practice by chasing it around. Their father
had been unmoved, literally. All the skills they'd needed to be practicing the most had been right
there in the Cripple Creek Game Reserve. Half of hunting anything is sitting still, he'd told them.

It didn't work straightaway. Sam sat there for hours before any rats ventured above the stairs, and
for hours more before any of them approached the first piece of carcass on the floor, only to scurry
away seconds later. One little fellow who was missing a front paw came as far as the last piece
before Litner's skull and watched Sam the whole time he nibbled on a bit of gristle, but he made an
orderly retreat.

Sam lapsed into sleep sitting there, a number of times. It was unavoidable with the starvation, and
he didn't fight it. Jacob and Lindsey talked sometimes, and then Jacob ate more ecto. Sam thought
about it, too, but he made himself listen to Jacob tripping and almost thought he could remember a
gentle voice he didn't know saying, Don't scratch the wall. He stayed where he was.

During this time, the ghost came back.

It was nothing like any of its previous approaches, beyond that the temperature dropped. The ecto
flowed, too, raising the light, but it didn't flare and there were no pulses of pressure in the air. His
breath turned to smoke, and from one moment to the next, he could make out its shape on the wall
across from him.

When none of the others reacted, Sam wondered if it was keeping them asleep. He waited for it to
come for him, but it did nothing. Sam and the ghost looked at each other. After a while, it slipped
back into the wall, and soon he heard the others stirring.

And eventually a rat came, sniffing the air as it circled closer and closer to the skull and to Sam,
and then Sam brained it with the kneecap in the toe of his sock.

Killing the rat was the clean part. Skinning and dressing it was the messy part. Still, though
smaller, the rat wasn't that different from the squirrels he and Dean had practiced taking out of
trees with stones that summer in Yellowstone, and his bone-knives were pretty decent. The rat
peeled more easily, if anything. Sam left the pelt and other inedibles in a pile beside Litner's skull
to await the next customer.

He held the carcass under the dripping pipe until it was clean. It took hours, but he'd held out
against worse hungers.

Maybe it was because the seizure had weakened the wall, or maybe it was just familiarity, the way
places he'd seen before in Bristol had brought flashes back, but he got another fragment of memory.
When his teeth pierced the meat, the resistance was nearly the same as biting his own wrist. When
he smiled, the blood clung to his teeth in much the same way, too.
He'd come for his brother then. He'd come for his brother this time.

The ghost was back. It hung on the wall; it had no face left, but Sam knew it was watching him. He watched it back and ate the rat.

Half of hunting anything was sitting still.

Chapter End Notes

1) Solitary confinement is super-duper bad for you, kids.

2) I love, like a lot, that I can type "how many calories in a rat" into a search engine and instantly get a result. (About 648 calories per 300-gram rat, FYI. Although I assume that's undressed.)

3) Sam Winchester needs a hug. Except it probably wouldn't work even if he got one, because he'd just convince himself that the other person was only doing it because he was so pathetic that they felt like they had to. FUCK. Now I need a hug.
Chapter Summary

If there was one thing Dean hated worse than pagan gods, it was the cults that worshiped them. If there was one thing he hated worse than that, it was creepy pagan cults with pretensions.

//

Or: Dean begins his quest.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If there was one thing Dean hated worse than pagan gods, it was the cults that worshiped them. If there was one thing he hated worse than that, it was creepy pagan cults with pretensions.

The Chicago Hellenic Museum's cafeteria was about what Dean would have expected of a building that looked like a thirty million dollar box: white surfaces, brushed aluminum, floor-to-ceiling windows to harvest the meager light Chicago had to offer. It was overcast, spitting rain, cold for the middle of April.

Just like last time.

Dean ran a couple fingers under his collar as he glanced around and tried to look journalistic. He recognized the guy hurrying toward him from the atrium as his contact and half rose as the man reached him, babbling as he shook Dean's hand. "Sorry, so sorry, hope you haven't been waiting long. Coffee? Greek coffee?"

"Sure."

Which was how Dean ended up with his knees wedged under this modernist table with a paper cup of hot liquid and sludge. "Thanks for taking the time to talk to me, Mr. Karras."

"No, no, thank you, Mr. Berberian, thank you. Please, call me Alex." Alexis Karras had a round face, a Greek flag pin on his lapel, and the biggest cow-brown eyes Dean had ever seen. "You said on the phone yesterday you're doing a piece on the history of Freemasonry in the immigrant experience?"

Dean mustered up his best arts and culture beat smile. "That's right."

"Oh, gosh." Karras's eyes actually shone.

"I, uh, understand that Guardian Lions is a very special lodge."

"Oh, it is," said Karras, and he told Dean all about it.

Guardian Lions, a.k.a. Phylakon Lointaria, a.k.a. Illinois Masonic Lodge #1646, had its headquarters down in a corner lot in northern Woodlawn and held regular meetings on the first and
third Thursdays of every month. Dean knew, because they had a website.

As with all Freemasonry, the website was at pains to explain, the Guardian Lions were not a secret society, but merely a society with secrets. The proof of this, it said, was that the names of Lodge members were and always had been public. Sure enough, a list was linked right in the side bar, right below a link to CHARITABLE ACTIVITIES and above one told visitors how to JOIN US. The links were marked with animated bullets.

At the top, a banner displayed the fraternity's emblem. It consisted of a square and compass bracketing a single eye. That was animated, too.

The home page included a news feed. The top article was dated five months ago and announced the results of a fundraising effort for households struggling to heat their homes. The one under that, eleven months old, pointed out that the lodge's Great Hall needed painting pretty bad. The one under that, from 2009, congratulated Brother Mason Alexis Karras on his recent appointment as Public Outreach Coordinator at the Hellenic Museum of Chicago. Standard "Native Son Finds Success" fare. There was a picture accompanying the article of Karras in Masonic regalia with the same chronically hopeful expression he suffered from in real life.

Dean had been pretty smug when he found that. Not only did this guy belong to what was probably a creepy cyclops cult under the Rotary Club veneer, but he worked in a Greek museum, which surely had to have creepy cyclops artifacts and/or codices if anybody did. One-stop shopping.

Not so much, he'd since learned. Twenty minutes and a ten-dollar entrance fee had revealed that the Chicago Hellenic's mission in the community was more on the order of modern art, family photos from Ellis Island, and children's interactive displays. Dean had gotten his hopes up for a Gods, Myths, and Mortals exhibit that promised a tour of a Cyclops' Cave, then promptly lowered them again when he learned he'd have to go through it on a slide with a class of second-graders. He had not stuck around to sing karaoke in the Sea of the Sirens.

"Phylakon Liontaria was founded in 1917 by and for a group of men who came to Chicago from villages near Nafplio, bringing their local Craft tradition with them. The rich symbolism of that tradition still informs our search for brotherhood and enlightenment as Masons, although today we contemplate the Old Country mysteries as a complement to the rites and secrets of Blue Lodge Masonry." Karras beamed. "In 1978, we received a charter from the Grand Lodge of Illinois and opened our doors to all interested men who meet basic Masonic criteria."

"Your logo-thingy is very distinctive." Dean took a sip of the coffee, then, in surprise, a second. Sludge or no, that was damn good.

"Yeah, what did you call it on the phone? 'Rocking a cyclops vibe'?' Karras made air quotes and grinned. "You were actually on to something there. The single eye symbol is important throughout Freemasonry; it represents the Eye of Providence watching over humanity. But did you know that the single eye is also associated with surveying and astronomy?"

"Uh, no, I did not know that."

"Think about how you use a telescope, or any ancient sighting tools like standing stones or the groma: you have to close one eye. Some accounts say that's actually the source of the legend of the cyclops' single eye." Karras broke off, looking half nervous, half proud. "I might be a bit nerdy about this stuff."

"No, no you seem… totally normal and non-fanatical. So, cyclops, huh?"
Karras nodded vigorously to make up for his mouth being full of coffee. "Mm-hmm."

Dean nodded along, encouraging. "…Cyclops."

Karras's eyebrows rose behind his coffee cup. He swallowed. "Mm… hmm?"

"So you guys are like… the cyclops guys."

"I guess?" said Karras, as if confused.

"Hey, I thought they were supposed to be blacksmiths," Dean said, pen poised over flip pad.

"Well, they are. Blacksmiths and builders and herdsmen. In Greek myths. That's another possible source of the one-eyed legend; blacksmiths would wear eyepatches. But they're also master builders, which is mainly what they're a symbol of in Masonry."

"Right! Right. And that is why you guys…" Dean looked as expectant as he knew how. "…are the cyclops guys."

"Well—sure, I guess. A lot of Greek builders' and metalworkers' guilds probably started off as chthonic mystery cults in antiquity, including Guardian Lions. Some of those may have worshiped the cyclops as a minor deity. But we don't; Freemasonry isn't a religion." Karras added, doubtfully, "We just had a potluck for Holy Week."

"So how would I recognize a cyclops if I met one?"

"You… you wouldn't. They're symbolic."

"Right, that's what I mean. How would I recognize one…" Dean spread his hands. "…symbolically?"

"Um, well." Karras seemed more than a bit thrown by the question. "The main attributes of the cyclops are supposed to be his knowledge of the secrets of metalworking, so, symbolically, on the path of a freemason, that makes him a powerful figure in the Labor of Building the Temple of Solomon. The, erm, symbolic Temple of Solomon. I almost like to think of the cyclops as a Greek version of the Biblical character of Tubalcain, but that might be the comparative religion major in me. Um, there's the eye thing, guess you could say that's a symbol of wisdom because of the astronomy connection, what masons call the Search for Light. And strength, of course, but that would also be… symbolic. Like moral strength. Symbolically."

"Wow. You guys really like your symbols. Hey, are you supposed to be telling me all this stuff?"

"Yeah, sure, why not?" Karras said blankly.

"Isn't it, I dunno—secret?"

Karras sighed. " Seriously?"

"Just pretend I'm an average Joe reader and all that I know about Freemasonry, I learned reading Dan Brown on the john." Dean waggled his Bic. "We want to reach the lowest common denominator."

Karras looked at a loss. "Well, I guess I'd tell that reader that freemasons have always faced a lot of misconceptions, especially those who belonged to immigrant communities that already had to deal with a lot of suspicion and stigma from outsiders. Oftentimes that was why new immigrants joined
Lodges and fraternities in the first place, either to Americanize or to support each other in business. That… is what you're writing your article about, right?"

"Yeah, totally. Hey, you know what would let me really convey the authentic Masonic experience to our readers, is if I could maybe, I dunno, sit in on a meeting?"

"Um." A line had appeared between Karras's eyes. He looked like an apprehensive cow. "We… don't really… do that."

Dean smiled reassuringly. "No problem."

* * *

The first night of this hunt, Dean hadn't even made it down the driveway. Immediately after concluding their arrangement, he'd cracked open the case file in the car to figure out where he was driving next. Some unknown amount of time later, he'd jerked awake at a rap on the driver's side window with a page of Canby's research glued to his face and the rest of it on the steering wheel. "Made up the spare bedroom," Canby had said, looking like he found the idea at least as distasteful as Dean. Nevertheless, Dean had stumbled after his host into the house, grudging and begrudged, and collapsed face-first into a mattress that smelled like mothballs.

Which hadn't exactly been his plan. His plan had been to make trails, make good, and collect on this deal ASAP. Instead he'd awoken after ten the next morning, sunlight pouring over him and his boots still on. There'd been a bobcat in the window. It had said, "Mrr."

Then it had taken the better part of the day to plow through the research Canby had given him. The entire time, he'd been itching to put West Virginia in his rearview, but he had to get his head straight and figure out where he was going, first. Canby had fucked off to the barn and done his level best to ignore him. Fine by Dean. If they had to have an unholy marriage, at least it could be a frigid one.

By the time he climbed back behind the wheel later that afternoon, Dean had a rough plan. He also had a list of rules for himself.

Number one was that he did not allow himself to think about where Sam might be. He did not think about who might have him. He especially did not think about what they might be doing to him, because if he did that, he would very quickly cease to function. He knew. He had tried it.

Number two was not to fuck up. There are only two kinds of jobs, Dad used to tell them. Jobs you do right and jobs you do twice. It went against everything in him to slow down, but Dean forced himself to. If Sam was still alive after this long, then for the moment Dean had to work on the assumption that wherever he was, he wasn't in immediate danger. Which was not necessarily true, but see rule number one.

Number three was to limit himself to staring at the case file from Providence for a maximum of an hour a day. There was nothing new there, and for now he had no way to get anything new. Being self-indulgent wouldn't profit Sam any.

Number four was not to accept any more invitations to tea.

With these precepts in place, he'd driven to South Dakota.

Dean wasn't about to start trusting Canby just because he'd run out of other options, and he wasn't going to kill time on some random hunt before at least checking Bobby's library. And he had to believe that Bobby would have left them something, wherever he'd gone.
So he'd made a bargain with himself. If he could get a fix on Bobby from whatever was at his place, then Bobby was the route he'd go and screw Mr. Godly. If not, he'd start following the breadcrumbs.

Breaking into Bobby's house had been far too easy; the place was still warded to Hell and back, and the booby traps he knew about were all there, but Bobby hadn't added any new ones before his disappearing act. Like he'd wanted Sam and Dean to be able to get in. And sure enough, there'd been two envelopes and a note on the desk.

It had been about what Dean had expected and exactly what he'd been trying to head off when they'd buried Rufus. He'd been stupid and arrogant, in Omaha, said Bobby. His mentor and his best friend had lost someone the worst way there was to lose someone as a result. The end could be here any day now, so it was on Bobby to set things right before it came. If he didn't make it back, the envelopes were for Sam and Dean.

Dean had unloaded the car, looked through the library (twice), stocked up on a few items, pocketed Sam's envelope, torched his, and left a note of his own. *Left Rufus's stuff in the basement,* he'd written, sitting at Bobby's desk in the silent house. *Sammy's gone. I can't find him. Bet you're glad you didn't hold a grudge.*

He'd balled that one up and thrown it out, and instead had written: *Going after Sammy. Have to drop off the grid for a while. Be in touch when I can. I'm fine.*

* * *

**WHO CONTROLS THE BRITISH CROWN?**
**WHO KEEPS THE METRIC SYSTEM DOWN?**
**WE DO, WE DO!**

Dean took a pull from his beer and turned another page of the pile laid out on the motel bed. "I can't believe anybody does this for a living," he told nobody in particular.

Canby's dossier ran to a few hundred pages and was apparently the abridged version. It gave a survey of lore on cyclopes, Biblical genealogy, and the history of Freemasonry in Greece, running from the nineteenth century on back to the Hittites. It made Dean's eyes cross, but he had to admit, Canby had tried to make it user-friendly, writing précis for him of the longer sources and including translations. This thing had a frigging table of contents.

Things Canby's book report did not contain: images or descriptions of the Brand of Tubalcain, hints as to the function of the Brand of Tubalcain, any explanation of why Canby wanted the Brand of Tubalcain. Also not included: how to kill a cyclops.

Tubalcain, it transpired, was not a dental procedure but a descendant of Cain prominent in Masonic literature as the Biblical father of metalwork. Cyclopes, which Dean would have said were surely nothing if not Greek, one-eyed, and fictional, were not native to Greece and, according to this, real, if rare. The lore said they'd been imported by the Mycenaean from Asia Minor 3500 years ago to help out with some tricky landscaping, including the biggest, baddest stone walls of the age and a famous gate topped by lions. After that, they'd just kind of stuck around to become the focus of mystery cults that in time became smiths' guilds and, with the rise of Freemasonry throughout Europe, Masonic lodges.

One of these consisted of men from a cluster of villages about fifteen miles north of Nafplion, plumb on top of where Mycenae used to be. It had disappeared in 1916. In 1917, Phylakon Liontaria had appeared in Chicago.
Illinois Masonic Lodge #1646 was a cyclops cult.

**WHO KEEPS DOWN THE ELECTRIC CAR?**

**WHO MAKES STEVE GUTTENBERG A STAR?**

Dean ramrodded a cleaning rag down the barrel of the M1911 and belched slightly, eyes on a page of pictures from the reconstructed walls and Lion Gate of Mycenae. Supposedly the stonework was known as cyclopean masonry because the locals had been so blown out of the water by their scale that they could only believe a cyclops had built them. They didn't look that impressive to Dean, frankly, but what did he know.

**WHO ROBS CAVEFISH OF THEIR SIGHT?**

**WHO RIGS EVERY OSCAR NIGHT?**

**WE DO!**

W—

Dean flipped off the TV. He checked the slides on the Colt one more time, loaded it, and got up to add it to the rest of the arsenal spread out on the other bed. Whether the Guardian Lions were keeping a cyclops in a basement in Woodlawn or what, Dean had no way of knowing. With a 3500-year pedigree, he had to figure that the brotherhood was working some rituals that were not standard for the Scottish Rite. Regardless, these guys were the ones to talk to. It wouldn't be the first time he'd had to go in without knowing what to expect; he'd just have to be prepared for anything. He'd get a few hours of sleep and head over to Lodge #1646 in time to case the building and find a good hiding place before the Bimonthly Business Meeting kicked off at 7:30.

Dean grabbed the stack of takeout menus off the top of the fuzzy TV, and skimmed through a full-color tri-fold from a Hyde Park place specializing in authentic Chicago grease-bombs. He debated for a few seconds until his stomach rumbled, then shrugged and dialed.

Deep-dish pizza might taste of dust and ashes forevermore, but, hey. He had no particularly traumatic associations with Italian beef.

* * *

A house. The owner was walking beside him, an old widow, spider-web hair and droning on and on about the work she wanted done. Dean ignored her, already had his tools out. Knew what the house fucking well needed.

Cold ocean washed the floorboards; the walls were down to studs. He could see where the chop stretched out to the moonless horizon, white to gray to black. Dean hammered. Dean hammered.

Somebody came behind him and fired a staple gun into the base of his head. Felt it, heavy thunk and bind; another work-gloved hand was on his shoulder, pushing him up, ordering him forward, and Dean bitched the whole way up the narrow staircase in the closet, but he went, fucking Harvey, fucking asshole.

There was no fear until the moment he was getting shoved off the top. Then he wasn't falling so much as gravity was grappling him downward, and the hands had him, the hands were all over him, enfolding him, swallowing him.

Pit. The pit. None of the focused pain and knowing of the rack, but none of the dignity or structure either. Just a mash of meat like you. No purpose. No rules. They could do anything to you in here, anything, because you were forsaken.
No one was coming.

Not for him.

Abandoned—

Dean shoved himself upright on top of the covers.

Sweat slicked his skin and his chest was tight, and he reached for Sam's breathing so he could anchor himself, sync himself to it like he always did. It wasn't there. He was alone.

In the next moment, he remembered that was because Sam was in Hell, and that was worse than the nightmare.

And then reality finally caught up with him, and he ran a shaking hand through his hair. Not Hell. Providence. Somewhere real, anyway. Sam was out, Sam was back. Sam was gone again and Dean could feel it creeping up his throat, the I can't, give him back, I can't; but another corner of him knew that, in fact, he could. So long as Sam was somewhere on the map, he'd figure it out.

He checked the time on his phone: his alarm would be going off in another twenty minutes, anyway. Might as well head out.

The Guardian Lions Lodge sat on a corner near Jackson Park, separated from a Baptist church by a vacant lot. The building itself was brick, two-story, smaller than most of the Masonic lodges Dean had seen, boring. It wasn't unkempt, or anything, but the whole neighborhood had that vibe neighborhoods got when they'd seen their peak over half a century before.

He did a quick sweep. The basement held a kitchen, a dining hall with tired ceiling tiles, and a foosball table. No trapdoors, locked sub-basements, suspiciously old coffers, etc. The first floor was more promising: the foyer was a library with displays of relics, photographs, and—Yahtzee—a whole exhibit on the history of *Phylakon Liontaria*. Dean only spent enough time here to catalogue what he'd need to return to; he wanted to get hidden before anybody showed up to set out coffee and doughnuts or truss up the human sacrifice or whatever.

The second floor held the meeting room. The meeting room had a small daïs with three carved chairs facing the door, two rows of plain chairs facing each other along the adjoining walls, a grid of black and white tiles in the middle of the floor, and on the grid, an altar. There was also a gallery full of unused furniture and boxes of dot matrix paper at the back of the room, which would afford Dean a bird's-eye view of the proceedings. Perfect.

He explored the room. The altar seemed no different from what you'd see in a church. A brass plaque of that single eye with rays coming out of it was hung over the daïs, though. Was that normal for Freemasonry? Giant, creepy eyes watching you everywhere? How would he be able to tell?

He didn't know what he was looking for, was the problem. His phone was in his hand before he remembered that he couldn't ask Bobby. He scrolled down to the next number and, after a moment's debate, hit send. He needed someone to bounce things off of, sue him.

"I'm in, what am I looking for?" he asked when Canby picked up.

"What part of doing it on your own was hard to understand?" A microwave dinged in the background.
"This Brand, what's it look like? There's all kinds of Mason-y shit in here."

"I don't know. A brand, I imagine."

"Well, thanks, that helps."

"Was there something else?" Canby asked pointedly.

Dean craned his neck to look up at the ceiling, which had water damage. "I don't think this secret society is doing so hot."

"Sorry to hear it."

"Definitely hinky, though, pretty sure I met some of the brotherhood in this café earlier today, and they stonewalled the crap out of me, all very omertà."

"That's Italian," said Canby, with a flicker of annoyance.

"What I can't figure out is why these guys are in a creepy pagan cult, you know? No runs of supernaturally good luck for any of them, and if they're the Illuminati, they suck at it, one of these guys taught middle school for thirty-four years. I can't find—" Downstairs, the front door scraped open and fell heavily shut. "Someone's coming, I'll call you back."

"You don't have to," Canby assured him.

Dean got into position on the balcony as people started to trickle in. Fourteen people showed in all, including Alex Karras. Most were on the bad side of middle-aged, but there were a few in their thirties or forties and one college-age kid with pimples showing above his ill-fitting collar. The Grand Poobah turned out to be the owner of the Greek diner Dean had hit for breakfast, exchanging his grease-stained apron for one trimmed in grosgrain and embroidered with a single golden eye.

Punctually at seven-thirty, Worshipful Grand Master Jack Lambrakis called the assembly to order. Dean mentally ran through what he had on him: M1911, Desert Eagle, extra clips, demon knife, short machete, cypress stakes (effective on a number of pagan gods plus gnomes, worth a try), a couple of mojo bags that might protect him if any spellwork started flying.

"To business," said Lambrakis. "Mr. Secretary, what is the first item on the agenda?"

"Uh… utilities."

One of the soccer dads stood up and cleared his throat. "All in favor of paying ComEd in the amount of $147.58…"

* * *

Dean snuck a look at his phone and groaned inwardly. Sixty-five minutes of these guys paying bills by vote, arguing about how to fix the roof, and rehashing parochial school-era grievances, and they hadn't even blindfolded anybody and poked them with swords. "Worst secret society ever," he muttered, with his forehead pressed against a folding table.

In the tone of somebody running through a well-trodden script, Lambrakis said, "As we proceed along the path of our Craft, we pursue our two great Labors, the Search for Light and the Labor of Building. Through the contemplation of our mysteries, we seek moral improvement and understanding of God. So, uh, how's that going, everybody? Floor is open."
Karras's hand shot into the air. Lambrakis sighed. "Yeah, Alex."

Upon finding himself in possession of the captive audience he'd clearly been dying for all night, Karras blushed and fumbled for words for a minute. "A meeting I had this morning got me reflecting on our symbolic instruction, actually," he said, after a couple false starts.

"Uh-oh," somebody muttered from beneath the gallery Dean was in.

"Today somebody made me think about technology and builder-figures like the Cyclops," said Karras. Dean started slightly, refocusing. "So in the Scottish Rite, blind Polyphemus stands for a mindlessly industrial civilization. But at the same time, the Cyclops occupies this place in mythology where he can almost be identified with Tubalcain or Hiram Abiff."

Karras warmed to his theme. "I think the warning here is really timely. The Cyclops dies consumed by his own works, just like we will be if we look only to our material labors and never look up with the eye of the astronomer, to God. It's like, Erik Prince can buy a small moon, but sea turtles are choking on plastic! Wake up, people! We can build the most prosperous society in history, or we can keep building one that's more and more unequal and more and more toxic to the environment, until modern civilization burns like Solomon's Temple!"

At this juncture, Karras seemed to register that the Worshipful Grand Master's eyes had glazed over and that the guy to his right was picking his nails. He faltered. "So maybe we can do… um… a recycling drive?"

An old guy in a sweater vest, who had been listening to Karras's lecture with the tolerant interest of a career schoolteacher, took mercy on him. "That's a good idea, Alex. You should take it to committee."

"Thanks, Mr. Costas," Karras said meekly.

One of the soccer dads went next, but Dean wasn't listening. Consumed by his own works. What did that even mean? Alex Karras wanted to draw some kind of warning about hubris and modern technology out of it, but climate change and superbugs were not Dean's wheelhouse. And in his experience, the "symbology" people wove into entire religions and convoluted philosophies usually had a kernel that was more prosaic and a hell of a lot more literal.

The meeting droned on. It wasn't that Dean had been hoping they were going to sacrifice a virgin or anything, it was just it would've been really useful if they had.

The Grand Master pulled the plug around the time two guys in their sixties started getting into it over who'd pay for the roof again, which soon degenerated into a beef that apparently went back to the time one of them set the other one up for a knuckle-rapping in Sunday school. "Oh, my God, give it a rest," he said. "Come on, we got koulourakia and mom's meatballs downstairs."

The Guardian Lions rose, doffed their aprons, and filed out. Dean waited another half an hour, until he heard somebody locking up the front, before he went back to the first floor and clicked on his flashlight.

He checked the big case of ceremonial tools first, looking for anything resembling a cattle brand, but there were only a bunch of those silver trowels and sundry other tools you couldn't actually use. The historical exhibit included heirloom tools that obviously had seen use beyond the ceremonial, but none of them was a brand. Looking through the display of mallets and daggers, his eye caught on the word **TUBAL-CAIN** and brought him up short, but the placard ("SIGN OF TUBAL-CAIN") marked a short, brass cane with two spheres welded for a cross-guard below the handle. When he
worked out the pun, he considered melting it down just on principle.

He rifled the cabinets for anything iron. He went through the office and the upstairs storage room, and then the wardrobes and cabinets in the meeting room. After his third pass, he took out his phone and hit redial. "Dean," Canby answered, sounding resigned.

"It's not here."

"Beg pardon?"

"I just sat through ninety minutes of *Grumpy Old Men*, I have searched this place from top to bottom, and there is no brand here, Biblical or otherwise. I got the swagger stick of Tubalcain, made in Mexico, and I got the measuring twine of somebody's grandpa, but nothing that looks like a brand."

"And?"

"And your intel's no good."

"It's the correct group," said Canby. "I do my homework."

"They're friggin' corner store Shriners, man, they don't freaking have it!"

"I never said they did."

"And they're not worshiping the cyclops, either!"

"Well, of course not, they're Masons. And Orthodox, probably."

"Wait, you knew about this?"

"I know what's in that file I gave you." Dean heard the creak of Canby's screen door over the line. "Up to you to figure out what to do with it."

"If you just sent me halfway across the country on a snipe hunt—"

"Did you think I was hiring you because there wouldn't be legwork involved? Just look at it as being on a quest. And stop calling."

"On a quest, are you freaking kidding me?"

"Moon's rising, I got things to attend to." On the other end, a chicken gave a panicked squawk.

"Canby—!" The call ended. "Just frickin' great."

Dean made a frustrated noise and shoved his phone back in his pocket.

He panned the flashlight over the room once more. There was a mural along part of the east wall, between a case of heirloom tools (nice as hell) and a wall-hanging of a hammer and anvil. It showed a tall man in his birthday suit, long, flowing hair, broad shoulders, tiny waist, perfect ass, good tan, running toward the sunrise. He was turned slightly away from the viewer, keeping things family friendly, and the painting captured him with one knee raised, one foot pushing off the ground, too-long hair streaming behind him. Eternally chasing enlightenment he'd never catch. Dean swallowed and moved on.

He returned to the exhibit on the fraternity's history. And it was an exhibit, a proper one; the
museum-quality plaques explaining each photo, old diary, and Masonic relic from Greece had Alexis Karras's professional experience and obsessive focus written all over them. Dean walked counterclockwise from GUARDIAN LIONS TODAY on the left of the door and came at last to the BRINGING A BROTHERHOOD TO AMERICA to the right of it.

A sepia-toned postcard showed the namesake Lion Gate, and various scenic shots of the Argolis region were mounted here and there. In the center of the display, a bold-text paragraph related how, before Guardian Lions became the robust, multicultural assembly of men from all walks of life that it was today, it had begun with a small band of men in a church basement in East Side who came to America to build Chicago.

There was a picture of the founding members at the bottom, a black and white portrait of thirteen men in overalls standing in front of a factory. FORGING THE FUTURE, Karras's caption read. The photo quality wasn't great, and it was made worse by having been blown up to twice its original size, but while the faces were blurry, the name painted on the side of the building behind them was easy to make out even without the printed explanation.

Guardian Lions might be a modestly diverse selection of suburbanites welcoming men of all races, creeds, and professions today, but in 1917, every single member had worked at Phoenix Steel.

Chapter End Notes

I'm always a touch nervous using fictionalized versions of real-life settings, concepts, etc.: what if I got something wrong? What if I got everything wrong? What if somebody thinks the way the characters feel about those things is how I feel about them? Rather than getting into rambling apologies or presenting my entire bibliography, I'm just going to put it down as a blanket statement now: if it's here, it's either fictional or fictionalized; characters' sentiments are not mine; and corrections or other feedback are always welcome.

But a few people have actually expressed a desire for MORE dorky facts, so I'm going to start providing them!

- A *groma* was a surveying tool in antiquity used to lay straight lines and grids.
- The *Lion Gate of Mycenae* doesn't look that imposing in pictures, but it's *pretty massive*.
- Dean grumbles mentally about *Masonic trowels*.
- *Tubal-cain* is occasionally cast as, basically, the *father of the Bronze Age*. The *Sign of Tubal-cain* is usually represented as a 2D image and is basically just a horrendous pun.
- "the measuring twine of somebody's grandpa" is properly known as a *skirret*, used for laying foundations.
- And finally, of course, *here, have an earworm*. 
empty spaces

Chapter Summary

"I am going to dismantle you." Sam's voice shook. "You think whatever happened to you before was bad? Give it time."

Chapter Notes

A/N: Happy New Year to one and all! As this story enters endgame territory, there are fewer little gaps remaining in the outline and I start running into more and more scenes I've already written. So though I've learned my lesson about making hard promises, I'm hopeful I'll be able to get things out a bit faster as the climax draws nigh.

Content warning: discussion of addiction. Specifically: (mouseover ?s for popup text): ???

For Sam, the most surreal thing about their imprisonment was the little moments of camaraderie. At one point, Jacob had gotten them playing a drinking game from his fraternity days, adapted to circumstances; it had been awkward, but it had kept the horror at bay. Lindsey had a surprising gift for impressions and could do *Family Guy* clips that Jacob certified as faithful to the source material. They bitched about being cold and shitting. When they'd been comparing notes on what they could remember before they were taken, they'd talked about what they'd eaten that day.

"My last meal outside was tuna on rye," Lindsey'd told them. "Wish I could go back and do that one over again."

"Last thing I ate was Thai," Jacob had said wistfully.

"Fuckin' of course it was, you yuppie bastard. What was your Last Supper, Sam?"

"Uh… Olneyville."

"Nice."

"If we ever get out of here," Lindsey again, "I'm gonna eat so much cheese. Macaroni and cheese, cheese and crackers, chili cheese fries, grilled cheese and tomato, extra-cheese pizza…"

"Shut up, shut up shutup," Jacob had moaned, but after a pause, added, "I'm gonna eat the biggest fucking steak."

"How about you, Sam?"

He'd tried to imagine what succulent, Outside food he would put in his mouth, but could not. Instead, a strange anxiety, panic almost, had swept his mind blank. "I just want to shower for
days,” he'd finally said.

Fervent agreement from all to that.

Sam dared not fantasize too much about Outside, and especially not about getting clean, but they all needed these little moments of normalcy. It kept them sane—for flexible values of sane—and provided some kind of connection, but for Sam, it also made the possibility of failing these people that much more terrifying.

* * *

The next time the ghost came, it wasn't to watch.

After eating, after drinking, after cleaning himself as best he was able and fixing the idea: *You are a human being* in his mind like memorizing a script, Sam picked up two thighbones and climbed up Lindsey's pipe again. It was a great deal more difficult than it had been the first time. He had to pause, bracing himself against the walls, core muscles trembling as he fought not to fall when a head rush hit him halfway through.

He was under no illusions. He could prolong it, but he was still starving.

All the more reason to get on with this, then. *Dean's out there,* he reminded himself. He braced his hands against one wall, his butt against the other, and with his knees shoved upward one more time. His head rose through the gap in the rebar.

"Lindsey."

"Gah!"

There was just enough light to get to see her fall flat on her ass, although not enough to make out the look on her face. "Hey," he said awkwardly.

"Hi. Hi, Sam," Lindsey answered in a tiny voice.

"Where's Marian?"

Lindsey pointed. "Sleeping, like always." She stood, body language wary. "What're those?"

Sam looped one arm over a piece of rebar to take some of his weight and placed the femurs on the lip of the pipe. "Tools."

She edged closer. "Are those—?"

"Did you know a human femur can withstand up to six thousand pounds of compressive force along its length?"

"You know what? No, I did not know that. I had to get tossed in a sewer with you to find that out." She sat down gingerly beside the bones and looked but did not touch.

"Are there any in here?"

"Any what?"

"Skeletons."

She hesitated. "There were. I put them down that hole with the cage in it. There were already others
in there. I— I had to get them away."

He nodded. "It's all right. I used some to make tools and stuff, and I'll give some to Jacob when he wakes up, but that still leaves plenty. You and me, we're going to work on this concrete until a bar comes free."

Lindsey kept reaching out toward the bones and then drawing back. "You're giving one to Jacob?"

"Yeah, of course."

There was something in her voice, but it was hard to identify with her face turned toward the bones. "How come? He said that grate down there is locked by magic or some shit."

"It is, but it still might come in handy for him. We should share resources. Don't you agree?" She shrugged. "Don't worry. The concrete is going to give out before our supply of bones does, and then we're going to have something to fight with: iron." He angled for a glimpse of her face. "Look at me. We're getting out of here, Lindsey."

Finally she turned toward him. It was the best look he'd gotten at her so far.

The pictures her aunt had shared with him had shown a blond woman in her mid-twenties, average height and weight. The hair that hung around her face was darker now, and her cheeks pulled in toward the prominent box of her mouth. The points of her elbows and knees were sharp through what had once been medical scrubs. She was visible only in contour and shadow, so it was hard to say how far her eyes had receded into her skull.

Sam controlled his reaction. "I'll stay up here and help for as long as I can," he promised, although the strain was already growing. Under his coaxing, she wrapped her fingers around one of the femurs and shuddered.

He coached her on where and how to attack the concrete from above while he went at it from the side. This was less because he had a plan more scientific than "hit it till it breaks" than because the stream of words seemed to keep her focused and functioning. It might have been helping him, as well.

When the first tiny chip of concrete broke off—stinging across Sam's cheek—Lindsey shrieked. "It's working!"

Sam grinned in relief. "See?"

"Jacob! Jacob, it's working!"

"Mmnzuh?"

"It's working, it's working. Oh, God, it's working."

Lindsey was babbling, half-elated, half-anxious words pouring from her so constantly that Sam missed Marian's first moan and wrote the second one off as a complaint at the noise. The third one snapped them both to attention.

Sam and Lindsey looked at each other. "Did it get colder?" he asked.

A pressure wave broke over them then that made Sam's ears pop. It was followed soon by another, and another, and another. Rhythmic, like footsteps. Fee-fi-fo-fum.
The bar he was hanging onto went burning cold against his skin. Marian whined, long and high as a frightened dog. Lindsey dropped the bone and shuffled backwards. "No. No, no, no."

Ecto started pouring from Lindsey's walls seconds before the ghost manifested with an audible crackle. The intensity of this visitation outstripped everything that had come before it, like it was putting on a show. A phrase appeared in Sam's mind: shock and awe.

The ghost went straight for Lindsey. Sam slammed a hand against one of the bars. "Hey!"

Lindsey scrambled away. The spirit followed. They went around in a circle that could have been comical—Lindsey shuffling and the ghost writhing after, Sam stuck in the middle like a compass needle—but for the fact that Lindsey was crying.

He'd never seen or heard her cry before.

Sam pounded the bone against the bars. "Come on, you son of a bitch! Come into me! Come into me!"

It ignored him.

Lindsey tripped and that was it. The ghost's arm shot out, and though there was no hand Sam could see, something closed on her ankle. Her scream vibrated in the rebar. As he watched, the spirit hoisted itself up and over her, and he saw it pour itself into her.

It felt like watching something obscene, but he couldn't look away. Lindsey's form twitched, flickered. Her face contorted as if to scream, but in place of sound there came only an afterimage of decay.

Movement in the corner caught his attention. "Marian!" The shadow jerked at the crack of his voice. "Marian, get over here. Marian! Marian Daniels! Get over here and fucking talk!"

Marian only moaned and pulled in on herself.

A few feet away on the floor, Lindsey spasmed. Finally her body slackened. Something inhuman sighed. Like someone settling into a soft bed.

"I am going to dismantle you." Sam's voice shook. "You think whatever happened to you before was bad? Give it time."

* * *

By the time Sam half-crawled, half-fell back out into his own room, Jacob had long since fallen silent, so Sam ignored him a while longer. He leant against the wall and closed his eyes. It soothed the sting in them.

When he opened them again, he couldn't be sure how much time had passed. He couldn't even be sure if he'd slept. Sleeping, waking, time—none of it meant anything anymore.

His muscles were jellied, his skin shocky and hot. Sam combed the fingers of both hands through his hair and told himself that this was just what having your body digest itself probably felt like, that he wasn't getting sick. Because this couldn't be a fever. He couldn't go out this fast, this useless.

A tiny sound drew his attention to the center of the room. Two rats were beside Litner's skull, nibbling almost delicately on the offal Sam had left there for this very purpose. Pushing slowly to
his feet, Sam drew the blackjack he'd made out of his pocket, eyes riveted on the rats. One slow-motion step at a time, he closed the distance. One rat—it was the one with the missing paw—looked up an instant before Sam brought the blackjack down. It shot away, but its companion was too slow.

Sam's hands shook as he prepared the meat. He could already taste it, and though the smell of blood and entrails was foul in his nose, that did nothing to stem his hunger. He should wash it, of course. Not washing it would be begging to die of dysentery. But washing it would take so long, and he couldn't, couldn't possibly wait—

Jacob coughed in the next room.

The sound snapped Sam out of his hunger-trance. "Jacob? That you?"

Sound of stirring. "Sam? What happened up there?"

Sam stared at the carcass, unable to comprehend that he'd been about to put it in his mouth—to devour it. The rat was plump, healthy. He wondered what it had been eating. "The ghost is… visiting. It went straight for Lindsey. Ignored Marian, ignored me."

Jacob was silent a moment. Then, "That makes sense. It came to me, then to you, now it's with Lindsey, Marian's probably next. So we just need to wait two more times. Then you can take your chance, fight back."

Sam thought about the ghost hanging there while he'd been hunting, just watching. He didn't tell Jacob what he already knew: it was waiting for him to weaken. "Yeah," he said instead.

"What was that noise? Just now, I mean."

"Uh." Sam looked at the carcass in his hands and remembered with a jolt that he'd been about the devour the whole thing. At first he'd planned, vaguely, to divide it, pay Jacob back for the insects he'd given him before, but in the grip of hunger Jacob's existence had vanished from his mind. "I killed a rat, cleaned it up with some tools I made. It's fresh. I know it's not exactly gourmet, but—"

"That's okay." Jacob sounded suddenly alert. He coughed again, louder. "You—you should keep it; you can't eat the slime-mold stuff and I can." He broke off coughing again, a protracted fit this time.

Sam's stomach dropped. "Are you getting sick?" he asked, when the coughing subsided.

"Nah," Jacob said, unconvincingly.

"Jacob."

Jacob paused. "I don't feel so great."

Sam shut his eyes. Shit. This was not good. "What's your water situation like in there?"

"Not bad. I think that same leaky pipe Lindsey brags about runs through here."

That was something. Sam pushed the rat carcass through one of the larger gaps in the grate to Jacob's room. Nothing took hold of it on the other side. "Take this. Wash it with the water, urine, anything—wash it thoroughly." Jacob started to protest. "You're sick, you need it more. Come on, you helped me when I was bad off."
There was a pause before fingers closed on the meat, but the grasp wasn't reluctant when it finally came.

"You caught this thing?" Distant little splashes—Jacob washing the meat, presumably. Sam felt a twinge of jealousy at his seemingly easy restraint. But the sensation of hunger could actually recede with enough starvation, he knew, and it was probably that. "Like, with your hands?"

"Oh, right, hang on." Sam scrambled over to the little collection he'd assembled for Jacob: bones and tools made from them. "Here. I know you haven't seen a lot of rats up there, but you never know. The long club will give you some reach, or you can make a sling like I did, so if you're fast—yeah. Here's a knife; if you do catch anything, you'll need to clean it. Or maybe you'll find another use for them. I know it's macabre, but...."

"No, no, it's—it's great. I'm just, I dunno, impressed, I guess? Is that a weird thing to say?"

Sam doubted Lindsey, upon waking, would feel the same way. He smiled bitterly. "The mighty hunter."

Eating sounds. Jacob moaning. Sam felt simultaneously sick and ravenous.

"Jacob?" Sam suddenly, desperately needed human language to convince him of the polite fiction that he was something more than this hunger. "Can you help me think this thing through?"

It was a minute before Jacob responded, and when he did, his words still sounded thick. "Which thing?"

"This case. This ghost."

"Okay. Lemme just—my hands." After a minute, Sam heard Jacob settle against his side of the grate. "Thank you," Jacob burst out. "Just—thanks. Oh, God, that was disgusting, but I'd eat twenty of them if I could. You know?"

Sam knew, and really needed to not think about it. "Ghost."

"Yeah." Jacob huffed a laugh. "Ghost. What the fuck is my life. Okay. Um, Lindsey's Bloody Room story—you buy it?"

Sam considered. A room covered in blood somewhere by the river. "Yeah. Yeah, I think I do, it's just—Yeah. I buy it."

"How come?"

"There's—I don't know, a feeling you get sometimes, when there's a connection. It wouldn't be much if the geography were the only thing that lined up, but the timing fits."

"It does? Her story happened during WWII. I thought you said this whole Hotel California thing started in the 60s."

"Spirits don't get the juice to take people overnight. It takes time for them to gain power, to lose humanity."

"Oh. That's... disturbing." Jacob took a moment to assimilate that. "So the place fits, and the timeline fits, and your instincts like it," he said.

"Yeah."
"So what's the problem with it?"

Sam exhaled. "Nothing. It's— I don't know. Nothing."

"Sounds like it is something."

He kept getting hung up on the same detail about Lindsey's story, was the thing. It was a quiet unquiet, but—it bothered him. How far, though, could he trust his cognition at this point? Isolation and sensory deprivation fucked with judgment, bad. If his mind started spinning fantasies to try to keep itself from unraveling, he wouldn't really be able to tell.

"It's just… spirits usually haunt the place where they died. They don't burn through five decades of people looking for it—they don't have to. They couldn't leave it if they tried."

"But I thought the whole point of the Bloody Room story was that there was so much blood, they knew someone had to have died there."

"Yeah," said Sam. "That's what's bothering me." He shrugged. "Told you it was stupid."

He had that feeling of missing something he was looking right at. The problem was, he felt like that all the time down here. It was like the whole place was a swim tank full of presque vu, and the sense of imminent retrieval had been with him so long it had lost meaning. He'd woken up in here with that feeling.

Ironically, it took him a second to remember what that first tip-of-the-tongue feeling had been about, all the way back at the beginning of this—but the memory did come. He'd been in that park near Jacob's apartment, stepped off the path by chance, and seen something that felt important but which he'd lost in the spirit's abduction. The memory of the sense of revelation was so vivid, while the revelation itself was—gone? Veiled?

"Jacob, is there anything weird about your apartment?"

"What do you mean?"

"Anything. Me getting taken in that park at the end of the street just seems like too much of a coincidence."

Jacob paused. "I forgot, you said that's where you were. I can't believe you broke into my apartment."

Sam couldn't blame him for being hung up on the invasion of privacy, really. The thought of someone like him pawing through his own stuff, what little there was to call his own, gave him the heebs, too. "It comes with the territory," he said.

"Did you go to Lindsey's and Marian's places, too?"

"Lindsey's aunt's house seemed normal, but she disappeared from nearby the nursing home where she worked and I never got a chance to go there, or to even start on Marian. It usually pays to start with what's fresh. So: you, then Lindsey. Uh, a banker, Anthony Marquez; hotel clerk, Brendan Whitmore—they were both more recent than Marian. Didn't make it, obviously," he muttered. "Oh, and Cara Pryor. Corporate HR or something. She went missing almost the same time Brendan did. Which was kind of weird, actually, given the gap between the rest. It looked like the police actually suspected foul play with her, but I never got the chance to follow up on any of it."

He dug the heels of his hands into his eyes, trying to relieve the headache behind them. "I wish
Dean were here. To help me sort through this."

Jacob said, "I think Lindsey's hiding something."

Sam stopped pressing his palms into his eyes. Jacob had been suspicious of Lindsey before; apparently he hadn't let go of that. "What do you mean?"

"She's connected to the place this thing cares about, so much that there's a family ghost story about it. That doesn't seem coincidental?"

"The opposite, really. The spirit's been searching for decades."

"Just— Don't trust her. I've got a feeling."

"We need her," Sam reminded him. "We need those bars, and they're not coming free without her help."

That much was clearer than ever. The price for him to climb up the pipe, much less stay up there working, was getting steeper. But Sam hadn't forgotten how fast she'd clammed up when they'd pressed her about why the ghost had cared about her old house or the nursing home where she worked.

That much was clearer than ever. The price for him to climb up the pipe, much less stay up there working, was getting steeper. But Sam hadn't forgotten how fast she'd clammed up when they'd pressed her about why the ghost had cared about her old house or the nursing home where she worked. If the memories involved were anywhere near as personal as the ones the spirit had dug through of Sam's, it would be only human for her not to want them dissected for a live audience. If they were going to have any hope of finding this thing's weakness, though, they needed the sordid details.

And Sam was done sitting here watching. This thing did have a weakness, and he was going to find it.

* * *


This was already so much worse than last time.

Sam focused on the walls of the pipe and let everything else go blank. Brace knees. Brace back. Push up.

His head met the rebar, and he let out a breath in relief. Just had to get a grip, now, and the rebar could take some of his weight. He looked up.

A face looked down.

Sam recoiled. His body lost contact with the walls of the pipe, and he dropped.

His hand shot upward on instinct, and he just managed to grab a bar. The jolt had him cursing. He hung there for several seconds, twisting, agony corkscrewing through his shoulder while he tried to find purchase on the walls. Every muscle screamed with the need to get down. Just as he began to think, I can't do this, yet another of his father's ex-Marine maxims went through his mind like a backhand slap:
"It's amazing what you can do if you accept it's not going to be comfortable."

Sam gritted his teeth, grasped the bars with both hands, and pulled himself up until he was braced in the mouth of the pipe.

There was no sign of the face. Had he hallucinated it? Hallucinations were not out of the question, and it sure hadn't seemed like anything that could be alive. He'd had a fleeting impression of cheekbones like ribs on a butchered cow, of lips receding from teeth, of dark slits for a nose. Like something mummified.

"That was Marian."

Lindsey's voice startled him all over again. He looked around; Marian was out of sight, and Lindsey was sitting against a far wall. "That's the thing I live with." Her voice was monotonous. "I don't know why it won't just die."

It. Such an innocuous word, made to sound so ugly.

"How are you doing?" he asked softly.

She turned toward him. "How am I?"

She had him there. "Look, Lindsey, I'm sorry to ask, but it's really hard for me to stay up here and I don't want to waste time—can we work while we talk?" No answer. Both the bones were still where they'd left them; Sam took one and, ignoring the burning in his arms, felt for the place where they'd chipped the concrete before. He started hammering.

Eventually, Lindsey joined him. She picked up the other bone and went to work.

She broke the silence first. "You don't look good." She might have been reading off a cereal box for all the emotion in her tone. "You're getting weaker."

"Yeah, well. That's why we need you. We all need you. You're gonna have to do most of the work on this; you're the only one who can. Did Jacob tell you the plan?"

"Yes. He said you can't eat the slime in case you have a fatal seizure or some shit. What are you eating?"

Sam grimaced. "Rats."

"Seriously? You caught a rat?"

"Two," he said, pride prickling in spite of himself. God, how the mighty had fallen. "Ate one, gave one to Jacob."

They hammered in silence for a moment before Lindsey said, "You're giving him your food?"

"Sharing. He shared with me, before."

"You think that's a good idea?" There was trace of irony in her voice he couldn't parse.

"Yes," said Sam, irritated. "He's sick."

"Right," she said. "He's sick."

"Hardly surprising, in these conditions."
She focused exclusively on the concrete, as she had through the whole conversation. "It's your food, do what you like with it."

So much for catching her in an unguarded mood. He needed another way to get her talking. "Do you miss your aunt?"

Her arm faltered. "Why would you ask that?"

"Just making conversation."

She snorted. "Right. I know what you're doing, you know. Coming up here, acting like you care."

Sam stopped and looked at her. "I fucking care, Lindsey."

He saw the cryptic, cynical smile twist her face before she bent to resume hammering. "I heard you talking. You and Jacob. You think I'm stupid? You think I don't know what you think of me?"

"What do you think we think of you?"

Her laugh was ugly. "You think I'm some kind of monster because I was mean about my family. Like I'm supposed to give a shit what those wastes of space do to themselves? Go ahead, think whatever you want. No. I don't feel guilty because some people are fuckups. Sorry I don't fit your pattern, Sam. Maybe the pattern here isn't what you think."

He shouldn't, shouldn't ask. No good could come of it. "You really think people should just be written off?"

"Some people? Fuck yeah."

He kept his eyes on the concrete. "What if they try to make things right?"

The laugh that broke out of her this time was high-pitched and wild. "What, making amends? My mom did whatever step that was."

"Step nine," Sam said hollowly.

She gave no sign she'd heard him. "Showed up at Marmee's house. Bawled for hours about how sorry she was, how she knew how much harm she'd caused, not that she actually did. Didn't change anything. Stupid bitch went right back to it and ODed inside a year. People don't change. Never trust a junkie, never trust a cheater, and never, ever trust someone who swears they're not gonna do it again. Maybe don't trust anyone who says they're there to save you, either."

Sam hammered at the concrete. It was slow going, breaking off small grains on lucky strokes, and his arms and legs were in searing pain. "You want to know what I really think of you?" He didn't look up. "I think you're twisted from being in this place too long. I think Marian scares the shit out of you. I think you're trying to get me to pull away, Jacob too, because you're scared we're going to leave you alone down here and you'd rather be in control of it than just watch it happen. Well, sorry, Lindsey, but it's not going to work." A particularly hard jab against the concrete freed a pebble. "I don't care what you've done, and I don't care what you say. I'm not going to leave you behind."

He kept at it until he felt the horizon of physical failure fast approaching. "I have to get down," he told Lindsey quietly. Her rhythm halted. "I'll come back when I can. Please keep at this. Please, Lindsey."
Getting down the pipe was slow, his muscles trembling and burning with the effort of pressing himself against the walls only to lose his grip in the end and fall the last few feet. He landed with a bitten-off shout and no dignity.

He sat. He was thirsty, but the leaky pipe seemed very far away and here, at least, the walls of the pipe circled him close, the nearest thing he had to a blanket. He shivered, wrapping his own arms around himself, and knew with a queasy certainty that the warmth stirring in his body was the beginning of something bad.

The last thing he heard before sleep took him was the steady tap of bone against concrete resuming above.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Dean battles a cyclops—and old demons. *dramatic music*
where are all the good times?

Chapter Summary

Dean fights through old wounds and new to take on a cyclops and get his brother back.

Chapter Notes

Regarding dates (for those who care): There are two ways to date events in S6, as the blesséd hells_half_acre explains in their fantastic Supernatural Timeline resource for S6-7. There's the "soap opera time" the SPN props department decided to go with, where events in S6 magically pick up in summer or fall of 2010 even though "Swan Song" just took place in May 2010 and Dean supposedly spent a year after that with Lisa and Ben, and then there's the logical timeline, where S6 obviously kicks off in 2011. I decided to go with the latter, since this is going to end up hard AU by the time all's said and done, anyway. And because Orthodox Easter fell earlier in 2012 than in 2011.

So in the unlikely event that anybody's keeping track, moons and holidays and things mean that Sam went missing on April 6th, Dean made his deal with Canby on April 14th, chapter 11 took place (mostly) on April 19th, and the sun rises on Friday, April 20th here in chapter 13.

(As for Sam's side of events, well: who can say, really, down there in the dark with only slow starvation for a calendar?)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Phoenix Works Integrated Steel Mill was a blight on the landscape, a major polluter of the Calumet River, and, in its way, a miracle.

Heating thousands of tons of iron into liquid was an accident-prone process. Dean had seen T2: Judgment Day; he knew the score. In a modern steel mill, equipment could fail, operators could fall asleep, big things could fall, or a load of scrap metal could just happen to be damp when it got dropped into a crucible the size of a semi, and the instantaneous thousandfold expansion of steam could pop the whole thing like a water balloon.

Conditions in the past made the present-day look like kindergarten, though. Boiler explosions, gas poisonings, melt spills, entanglements in ore-crushers, and fires had all been common, had been routine, and they'd chewed through largely immigrant workforces that managers and executives considered disposable. In 1884, an eight-year-old boy had fallen into a vat of hot water and been cooked alive. Production had resumed within the hour. When that one came up on the microfiche, Dean lost time, staring at the newsprint and seeing something else.

A lot of bad things could happen in steel mills, was the gist, especially pre-automation. And all of
them had happened in the foundries of Phoenix Steel no less frequently than in other facilities—
until one day, in 1917, they had stopped happening entirely. In an industry where most modern-day
facilities saw annual fatalities, not one employee had been killed or maimed in ninety-five years.

Maybe even more improbable was that the thing existed at all. Not much had been left standing
when Chicago's steel industry collapsed at the end of the 1970s, yet Phoenix had somehow
weathered every economic storm, keeping its workers on the job even as ownership changed hands
repeatedly. It was remarkable. Some might even call it evidence of divine intervention.

So Dean was expecting to find the disappearances. He knew how this worked; he'd very nearly
died for how this worked, once, in an orchard not two hundred miles south. Sacrifices went in,
blessings came out. Everything cost something.

Except the cosmic order was awfully late in serving the invoice to Phoenix Steel, because the
mysterious disappearances around the mill had only started twelve weeks ago. The first to go
missing had been Sergeant Latoya James on January 28. Since then, six more active duty soldiers
and veterans, one reputed gang lieutenant, and a sixty-year-old grandmother of, count 'em, thirty-
two had also vanished in and around East Side Chicago.

The pattern didn't line up with the arrival of thirteen men from Mycenae at a steel mill that was
about to enjoy supernaturally good fortune from that day forward. It lined up with the ascension of
Eve.

Pragmatically, that didn't really change anything. The mill was the center of something, and Dean
still had to go there. The timing bothered him, though.

Research ate half a night and the whole of a morning, but it was what he should have done to start
with. One of these people, the grandmother, had disappeared since he'd got here, and might still
have been knee-deep in grandchildren if he'd started in the right place. So much for not fucking up.

Today marked two weeks since he'd last seen his brother.

* * *

Phoenix was situated on a stretch of the Calumet River that had once been crowded with coke
ovens and blast furnaces, but was now emptier, seedier, quieter. Dean showed ID at the little
guardhouse beside the main gate and proceeded toward the fume and thrum of the mill.

He still didn't know what he was looking for. Some kind of monster in the basement scenario was
looking less and less likely. That meant that the cyclops could probably pass for human. Dean had
already checked genealogical records for connections between current employees and the original
thirteen from Mycenae and come up empty, so if the cyclops had really been here the whole time
—and the miraculous accident record said it had to have been—it had some way of camouflaging
its longevity. He'd just have to start interviewing workers and hope that he'd know what he was
looking for when he saw it.

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as he drove, peering up at the bulk of it and singing
under his breath. "Who pays workers by the pound? Who keeps one-eyed dicks around? You do,
you do."

He parked and grabbed the first guy he saw, repeating the story he'd given the guard. Not five
minutes after pronouncing the magic word—OSHA—he was being ushered into the foreman's
office.
A stocky guy in an orange safety vest rose as he entered, sweating a little more than the
temperature on its own merited—this close to the periphery of the mill, the heat wasn't too bad, and
the clash and thud of the heaviest operations were muted. "Mr. Hammett, I am so… so sorry that
we didn't know you were coming." The foreman wrung Dean's hand like laundry. "The message
must've gotten lost in the pipeline somewhere, but I can promise you, we take compliance with
federal guidelines very seriously."

"Relax"—Dean checked the name plate on his desk.—"Mr. Jurich, I'm not here to audit you. Quite
the opposite, actually; Phoenix Works has the highest safety rating of any of your parent company's
facilities, and that's why the Department of Labor has sent me here to learn what's working." He
clapped Jurich on the shoulder. "You mind showing me what's so special about your operation
here?"

Jurich radioed for a deputy foreman to come take over and led Dean out onto a broad catwalk over
the mill floor. It looked like they stored and assessed finished product at this end; men and women
were inspecting massive cast pipe fixtures and rolls of steel the size of hay bales on the floor
below. "Where would you like to start, Mr. Hammett?"

"Well, you know, my flight was delayed and I know most admin staff are probably signing off in a
couple of hours—"

"Not a problem, not a problem," Jurich assured him fervently, and seriously, to hell with the FBI,
the Brothers Winchester were joining up with the DOL from here on out.

"Maybe just give me an overview of the main process to start with, how's that?"

Which was how he ended up in a golf cart, trundling toward Hell.

"So I guess you know about our relining in the Number Two furnace," Jurich said, following a
bundle of pipes running down the hangar like a spinal cord. He had to raise his voice; it was
going louder, and hotter.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, that. How's it going?"

"We're in testing now, running 'er part time, under capacity." Jurich went straight at a T-
intersection, toward signs for NO 1 FURNACE - MELT DECK. Beside them, sheets of steel shot
through rollers. "She's a beautiful girl, state-of-the-art now. I'll show you some of the new safety
features at the end of the tour."

"Can't wait," Dean answered, loosening his dampening collar.

Jurich stopped the cart beside a board outlining foundry safety requirements. He handed Dean a
pair of safety glasses and strode ahead toward MELT DECK NO 1.

The air was close, hot. Overhead, something on a belt clanked and began to move. Hydraulic
machinery hissed, and the rhythmic thud of presses grew louder, palpable through the soles of his
shoes. Gone was the open hangar of the rolling and finishing plant; the ceiling above was lost in a
tangle of equipment, reaching down for him, and pipes crawled along every available surface,
bearing water in one direction, steam in the other.

They passed below a metal catwalk and stood on the melt deck. The heat here pushed into the skin,
stopped up the lungs. Figures obscured by canvas coats and welders' masks prodded a river of
burning metal with body-length pokers. Sparks fountained from a metal bucket suspended from a
crane; it was a two hundred-ton capacity ladle, Jurich was saying, weighed sixty thousand pounds,
they'd just tapped the furnace, look at that, what great timing he had.

He could smell something like burning electronics but sharper. Burnt oil. Sand resin. Sulfur. Something seemed to happen to the air. It dimmed, warped. Natural light was a thing of the past. Down here, the only light was fire.

It took Dean a moment to register that Jurich was repeating something to him. "I said, our engineers' station is right upstairs. Buddy, are you okay?"

"Fine." Dean got the syllable out with effort. "Sounds great."

The engineering station was up a metal staircase, off a balcony looking over the melt deck. As soon as he got on the other side of the door, Dean could breathe again. It was a different world in here: still warm, but the lights were bright and fluorescent and bounced off of white instrument panels and white lab coats. The sounds of the furnace and presses were muffled through soundproofing.

The engineers glanced up at Dean in curiosity and turned immediately back to what was on their computer monitors, with the exception of a heavyset guy—a giant in more ways than one; he rose from his stool as Jurich came in and just kept rising—who had his mouth open before Jurich even finished the introductions. "We've got another one," he said.

Jurich's face clouded. "From this morning?"

"Yeah. Same as the last."

Jurich scrubbed at his salt-and-pepper beard. "Shit."

"What's the problem?" Dean asked. When Jurich and Andre the Giant exchanged a look, he added, "Not that you have to tell me, of course. I can just put in my report that I might not have all relevant details, and someone else can follow it up later—"

"It's not a safety concern," Jurich hastened to assure him.

"It's a quality concern," said Andre, then, in response to Jurich's irritated look, "What? He's DOL, pretty sure you don't do a lot of insider trading if you work for OSHA. We've been having some... issues with some of the steel coming out of Number Two since the relining. It's been back up part time since, what, first week of January? I mean, she's kept hot continuously, like any furnace her size, but we've only been loading her up and tapping her for testing. Small batches a few times a week."

"Everything was looking good for the first month, but then engineering here"—Jurich nodded jerkily at the room, arms crossed tight over his chest and fingers of one hand tapping at his bicep.—"ran mass spec on a batch and it came back corrupted."

"Corrupted?" Dean asked.

"Not the specified composition," said the giant. "We still haven't been able to figure out exactly what chemical process is causing it, but it has to be some kind of screw-up from the relining. Contractor swears up and down it's not them, of course. The weird thing is, most of the steel coming out of Number Two is fine. We didn't have any problems for the first few weeks, and most batches are still normal."

Dean eased his hands into his pockets. "How many haven't been?"
"This makes nine." The engineer looked at Jurich. "What do you want us to do?"

Jurich didn't meet his eyes. "What we've been doing. Write it up, send it to me, I'll keep riding the contractor."

"Carl." The engineer sounded like a doctor breaking bad news. "This failure rate, it's way too high, and it's getting worse—"

"Write it up, Gene. My inbox by shift change."

Gene glanced helplessly at his two coworkers, an Indian-looking guy and a curly blonde, both of whom stared unblinking into their computer screens. "Okay. Uh, what do you want them to do with the corrupt bloom, slag it or save it?"

"Better save it," Jurich said reluctantly. "In case it gets ugly with the contractor. Put it with the rest."

He left the engineering station, clearly preoccupied, and actually started a bit when Dean joined him outside on the catwalk. "Sorry about that," he said gruffly, "know that's not really what you're here for."

"No problem." The narrow window set in the engineers' door showed a sliver of Gene's enormous back. The guy was taller than Sam and twice as wide. A giant, you might say. If you were living in the Mediterranean 3,500 years ago, you might mean it, too. "How long has Gene worked here?"

"Coming up on five years now, I think. Good guy, sharp."

Five years. Didn't necessarily mean anything; the cyclops had to have some way of disguising its immortality.

"Let's see, um, so Number One is obviously where we're in full production right now, want me to walk you through our process?"

It was hot out here, hot and loud, and the sweat had started drenching Dean's collar pretty much the moment they got out of the A/C. He could feel his body coiling, too, chest and the muscle in the corner of his jaw going tight, but the time in the engineer's station had helped. He could keep his shit together for another hour. "Tell you what, Carl, I don't think I need the whole tour and I know you guys are busy. What I really need is a chance to talk with as many of your old hands as possible, and uh, I'd actually love to meet the famous Ms. Number Two, if you don't mind."

A little of the anxiety Jurich had displayed when Dean first walked into his office resurfaced. "Happy to show it to you, like I promised, but the problems Gene was talking about, they're not dangerous for our workers, honestly they're not."

Dean smiled blandly, intentionally the opposite of reassuring. "I believe you. But it's the wave of the future, right?"

Something flickered in Jurich's face, boxed up too fast for Dean to figure out what it was. "Right. Well, this way."

The approach to Number Two wasn't any cooler, but it was quieter. Which made sense, Dean supposed; it sounded like they were only smelting crude iron from that furnace right now, not working it. "We can kill a couple of birds with this one, actually," Jurich said as they once again climbed out of the golf cart beneath a recently installed sign reading RESTRICTED ACCESS. "If you were wanting to talk to old hands, it's all old hands running Number Two right now."
"How come?"

"Logistics with a side of seniority. The guys all want Number Two duty; you get some peace and you get to play with new toys. On the company's side, they don't wanna be paying more people than they have to to man a furnace that's not putting out any product right now, so we got a light crew with lots of experience. These are our best."

"That's right, boss, only the best for Number Two doody!" a guy sitting in a crane above them called out.

Jurich gave Dean a tight smile. "I said best. Not brightest."

"Hey, I'm bright! My mama always said I was bright as lightning, didn't she, Donnie?"

"Shut up, Sid," a big black guy working on an electrical panel called back.

"Donnie, where's Ernesto at?" Jurich asked the black guy.

"Up the deck."

"Get him down here, will you? This gentleman's from OSHA, he wants to talk to you dumbasses about all the experience and expertise you supposedly have."

"Ooh, OSHA, good thing I'm wearing my helmet today," said the first guy.

Jurich blanched slightly. "He's joking, he wears it every day. Sid, get out of that crane, you ain't pouring anything."

Sid, when he clambered down from the crane, proved to be a wiry, pop-eyed specimen with a shit-eating grin and a jumpy energy that made him seem younger than the strands of gray in his dark hair suggested. Donnie was his foil, deliberate and long-suffering. Other workers crossing to and from the furnace in the background gave them curious looks, but stayed on task.

Ernesto joined them. He was a handsome man in his fifties who managed to pull off a kind of elder statesman vibe in overalls and a yellow vest. He tugged off a thick work glove to shake Dean's hand. "Wow, OSHA. Has there been a problem?"

"Kind of the opposite, really," Dean said. "Did you know that you might just be the safest mill in America?"

"Uh." Ernesto looked at Jurich and shrugged. "Yeah, I guess. We've always been very lucky."

"Thanks to good people," said Jurich.

Dean smiled. "Oh, I think we can definitely chalk Phoenix Works' success up to people power."

"Upgrades sure don't hurt though," said Donnie.

Dean turned to Jurich for an explanation. "We relined Number Two because we had to, but we updated the automation on it while we were at it," he said. "People complain about automation killing jobs, but it's a hell of a lot safer. I guess I don't have to tell you that. Anyway, when she's up and running normally again, we'll able to tap the furnace with just the push of a button."

"Like maple syrup, but spicier," Sid said with relish.

"So we'll have a smaller crew on the melt deck," Jurich continued without acknowledging him,
"but the projections are that she’ll be putting out thirty percent more steel than before, so we’ll be able to employ more people in rolling and casting. This goes right, we might actually be able to add jobs."

The tightness around his eyes warned Dean not to bring up the possibility that things might not go right. Dean cleared his throat. "So, how long you fellas been working here?"

"Grew up in it," said Donnie. "My dad was a steel man. I signed on at eighteen, been here twenty-five years in October."

"Oh, forever," said Sid. "Been annoying Donnie the whole time he's been here."

"I came to this mill when I was twenty-two, so… twenty-nine years, now?" said Ernesto.

"Wow, Carl here wasn't kidding when he said you were old hands. So was this always such a safe place to work? I mean, in all of that time, you must have seen some accidents, no matter how good the people are. Anything ever go wrong?"

The guys all looked at each other and shrugged. "I mean, we had some close calls over the years, but nobody ever got hurt," Donnie said.

"Franny in the break room," said Sid.

"Seriously hurt, Sid, like with metal."

"Oh. Yeah, nothing like that."

"Honestly, it's just different here," said Jurich. "I don't know how to explain it. I'm not, y'know, devout or anything, but we've really been blessed. It's nothing like other mills."

"Yeah, and you'd know, Mad-Eye Moody." Sid snickered.

Jurich's expression instantly soured. "What are you even still doing here? Get back to work."

"Yep, you're done, let's go," said Donnie, escorting Sid away.

Dean glanced between them. "What's the joke?"

"Other than Sid's social skills?" Jurich grimaced. "God, it's lucky for him he's good at his job. I guess it beats 'One-Eyed Willie,' though. I came up in a mill in Indiana when I was younger. Younger and dumber."

Dean looked at Jurich, really looked. He was stocky, on the tall side of average, dark—possibly of Mediterranean or Eastern European descent. And though it was nothing that jumped out, one eye was a slightly different shape. It tracked a hair differently, had a different luster.

"Is that—?"

Jurich gave him a rueful smile and tapped his left eyeball. It went tink. "Wet charge. There was moisture on some scrap when it got loaded into a furnace, and… kablooey. I was comin' around a corner and I caught some metal splash. It happens; could've been a lot worse."

"Wow," said Dean. He plastered on a smile. "If you hadn't've said anything, I'd never have guessed."
He still had to be sure. More to the point, he had to find the Brand, because that was what he’d be trading for Sam's location. Dean was prepared to do whatever it took to get the cyclops to tell him where to find it, but confronting it while he still didn't know how to kill it wasn't exactly his first choice.

Jurich left the mill two hours late that day. Dean tailed him back to what turned out to be a subdivision, a neighborhood of new construction right off the greenway, house after identical house of beige siding and brick façades. As Dean cruised by, Jurich pulled into a driveway and parked his Camry next to a station wagon.

Dean found a spot down the street with a decent view of Carl Jurich's house and settled in. The station wagon made him uneasy. They'd met more than a few monsters with families, whether for camouflage or because they actually cared, and it was always, always bad news. That rugaru Jack, the one Sam had fought so hard to save. Hell, Castiel, for that matter, and the less Dean thought about the Novaks, the better. Families meant collateral damage. In an absolute best case scenario, they meant people left behind to grieve and never know why—and they never, ever got the best case.

Families also made for a hell of a dull stakeout, apparently.

Through the front room picture window, Dean watched Jurich eat a TV dinner with his wife while she clipped coupons. At nine fifty-two, the living room lights went off, the upstairs lights went on for ten minutes, and then the whole house went dark. Dean waited for one of the cars to leave or any other sign of nocturnal activity, but the house remained dark and silent, and eventually Dean slipped into a light doze, still listening for a door shutting or a car engine.

Morning came, bright and too cold for late April. Dean peed into a bottle before any Saturday morning dog-walkers got out and cranked the heat for a bit. At 7:00, Jurich went out to his mailbox in carpet slippers and disappeared back into the house, still flipping through the weekend circulars. By 9:00, Jurich and his wife were both at work on the yard, and by noon it looked like they were making a day of it. At 4:00, Mrs. Jurich took the station wagon somewhere, but just as Dean was casing the house to maybe slip in and have a look through while Jurich was cleaning out his gutters, she returned with a bunch of Aldi's bags and started cooking.

He needed in that house. As dusk fell, Dean watched the Juriches repeat their routine of the night before and worked out a way to get them out. He could call the mill as the guy from OSHA and say he needed to meet with Jurich urgently. Then he could call Mrs. Jurich and say he was from the assisted living place the White Pages said her dad lived at, which was in Indiana and should be enough of a drive to give him a couple of hours, at least.

Plan formulated, Dean dozed again.

He snapped back to full awareness in the dark. At first he didn't know what had woken him; then he heard the sound of a door closing. He checked his phone: 1:19 a.m. A moment later, the tail lights of Jurich's Camry flared red.

Dean waited until they were pinpricks at the end of the street, then turned the key in the Impala's engine.

He'd been hoping that Jurich would lead him to the missing people, but instead he went straight to the mill. That wouldn't be suspicious in itself for a shift worker, but Dean had had a quick look through the schedule clipboard in Jurich's office before. Jurich had seniority; he worked Monday through Friday, nine to five.
So what was he doing at the mill at a quarter to two on Sunday morning?

At night the mill was visible a mile off, a miasma of smoke and steam lit red from beneath. Dean went straight when Jurich turned in at the guard house, stashed the car, and went in with wire cutters through a dilapidated section of fence he'd catalogued on his first trip in. He moved as fast as he could, but Jurich was still long out of sight by the time he was into the mill yard. Dean cursed to himself as he went in, dodging security cameras.

Out in the hangar-like portions, the mill was lit up by harsh floodlights that illuminated work on the floor but cast the peripheries in shadow. Dean used the dark where he could, walked like he belonged there where he couldn't. There was a full compliment of workers here, but it was quieter somehow, fewer shouts across the floor, stifled in that way the night shift tended to be no matter the work.

As he was rounding the corner on the foreman's office, Dean heard voices and ducked back into an alcove. One voice he couldn't identify. One was Jurich. The door was only ajar, so Dean couldn't make out much, but Jurich sounded pissed. He caught know about this? and take care of it myself.

Dean looked around the corner as he heard the door push open, and he saw Jurich stomping down the corridor. After a moment, when whoever was on duty in the foreman's office didn't follow him, Dean did.

Straight. Right turn. Straight. Stairwell. Dean eased the door at the top of the stairs open and shut and listened for a door at the bottom to close before he followed Jurich down, reaching into his jacket for the angel blade.

He emerged in a sub-basement level, poorly lit corridors lined with pipes. Cold water to the furnace, hot water away, like arteries and veins to a beating heart. Jurich's footsteps echoed off the concrete. Dean followed behind him, silent.

Until his phone rang.

Son of a bitch.

Jurich spun. Dean closed the distance between them and slammed him up against the wall with an arm across his throat. "Start talking."

Jurich was ashen behind his beard. "What?"

Dean brought the angel blade up to prick below his ribs. Fucking phone was still ringing. "I know what you are. I know about the soldiers. I'm here for the Brand."

"Brand? Soldiers? What—? What brand—?"

Dean's ringtone finally cut out. "The Brand of Tubal-fucking-cain. Is it here? Or is it at home with your wife?"

The shock on Jurich's face slid sideways into terror. "Marissa, oh, God, please don't hurt her."

"Tell me what I want to know and she'll never see my face. The Brand, Jurich, where is it? What did you do with all those people?"

Jurich was shaking his head against the cinder blocks. "Please, no, I don't, I didn't, please."

Dean shoved him hard into the wall, once, and stepped back, blade up. "You see this?" He nodded
to the angel sword, though Jurich's eyes were already fixed on it. "Sword of an angel. I don't know if it'll kill you, but I'm betting at a minimum it'll lop bits off. If you don't tell me where to find the Brand and the people you took, we're going to find out. Slowly."

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Drop the act! I know you're the cyclops!"

"What?" Dean growled and choked his grip on the blade; Jurich jerked both hands into the air. "I'm not who you're looking for, I didn't take anybody!"

"Then explain why you're sneaking around here in the middle of the night!"

Jurich squinted at Dean like he was seeing him for the first time, and his face twisted in confusion. "The OSHA guy?"

"I'm really passionate about workplace safety. Now talk."

"I-I-I got a call. From security. Those messed up batches of steel from Number Two. They're gone."

Dean lowered the angel blade slightly. "What?"

"They're—" Jurich took a breath, pulled himself together. "I had the guys put all the bad blooms in a storage area that's a little out of the way. I wasn't… covering anything up, okay; I documented everything. I was just playing for time. Wanted to give the contractor who did the relining every chance to make things right. There's a lot of jobs riding on this. Maybe the whole mill." He swallowed. "But they're all gone. I got no idea how; they were small batches, yeah, but that's still a truckload of metal. I was gonna try to find them, like maybe someone sent them to slag by accident, so maybe we wouldn't have to call the police."

Dean wiped a hand over his mouth. "Son of a bitch," he said, out loud this time.

Events were still catching up with Jurich. "Did you say cyclops?" He went to push away from the wall.

"Stay the fuck put," Dean said, bringing the blade back up. He tried to think. Jurich seemed sincere, but Dean wasn't particularly inclined to trust the one-eyed guy who just happened to be working in the plant he knew had a one-eyed monster in it. On the other hand, he had no way to test him, and his cover was blown to shit. "Here's the deal: your accident rate here? Your mysterious economic resilience? It's not natural, and one way or another, you know it. All the disappearances in the paper lately, that's the bill coming due. There's something in this mill, and if it's not you, it's somebody else. So if you're not lying to me, then think: who is it?"

"I—"

Down the corridor, something clanged.


He slipped down the corridor—muted the fucking phone this time—toward the junction where another corridor butted into this one from the right. A utility light hung in the intersection, casting uncertain light below and effectively hiding everything beyond it in shadow.
Somewhere in one of those shadows, something shuffled.

Dean stopped dead, knife at the ready. Was it straight ahead, or on the right? With the muted thrum all around, he couldn't be sure. The corridor on the right looked—

Somebody started to run.

Dean lashed out with the blade, but he wasn't fast enough. A heavy shadow hit him, and he didn't even feel the fire across his ribs until he was already on the floor.

His head bounced once, hard. He scrabbled to lever himself up. He was just in time to see the shadow overtake Jurich, and the dark arc spray over the wall as it went past.

"No!"

Dean staggered to his feet and took off after the retreating figure. He already knew with sick certainty that Jurich was dead.

When he made it out to the corridor with the stairwell, it was empty and silent. Dean pressed one hand to his side and gripped the angel blade with the other till his knuckles were white, resisting the urge to drive it straight against the wall.

The thing could be anywhere. The mill was vast, labyrinthine, and populated. The cyclops knew the place and all of the people. Dean was just a guy with credentials that wouldn't hold up, a knife in his hand, and a corpse behind him. He had to get out of here.

Dean hauled open the door to the stairwell with a bandanna wrapped around his palm to wipe his prints and, once again, fled the scene of a crime.

* * *

The clock showed just after three by the time Dean shouldered into his motel room. It scarcely seemed possible. An hour and a half was all it had taken him to fuck the case up so spectacularly he got a civilian killed. Ladies and gentlemen, the great Dean Winchester at work.

He shucked his jacket and then each of his shirts in turn on his way to the bathroom. The single threadbare towel hanging from the bar was the same color as the mildew on the ceiling, and he trusted its cleanliness less. He soaked the thing through with rubbing alcohol before he lifted it to the gash over his ribs and, after a moment's hesitation, set his jaw and pressed it down. The burn obliterated the room. It rolled through his body, up his spine and over his scalp and he bit back the desire to groan, because he didn't fucking deserve to.

The police scanner was still on, volume turned low. Nothing yet. He wondered how long until someone found the body.

When the black spots had cleared from his vision and he'd gotten his breathing under control, Dean raised his eyes to the mirror. The cut scored over his side, a glancing blow with something scalpel-sharp. Not deep enough to be serious, but deep enough to need stitches there was no one here to help him do.

Out in the main room, Dean took a swig off the latter half of a bottle of Fleischmann's and laid supplies out on the empty bed. His head hurt—not bad enough for a concussion but bad enough to soak his last fucking nerve in vinegar—and he knew it would hurt worse in the morning. He was tired. He was just fucking tired.
He gave himself nine stitches, cold in just his jeans, and wished for Sam's warm fingers, instead. He had to shut his eyes with the needle stuck through his skin for a minute, when that hit him, half wish, half memory. Sam was good at stitches. The best of the three of them, maybe; he'd gotten enough practice. Usually he was brisk about it, military in a way he never was with anything else and Dean had never quite figured out what was up with that, but his hands were skillful and sure, huge, careful, and once, just one time—

Dean jabbed the needle the rest of the way through and tied the suture off.

He brushed his teeth, hydrated as an afterthought, shucked his jeans and climbed into his bed. 3:42. He could sneak three hours, maybe four. He went to set the alarm on his phone and started when he saw the message on the screen: I missed call from: BOBBY.

Dean laughed, a ground-up glass sound. "You're too late," he told the phone. "You hear me? Where the fuck were you when Sammy needed you, huh? Do you even know what he did for you? Oh, wait, you don't, because you got out of your deal. And now you're too fucking late!"

Somebody pounded on the wall.

"Screw you, too!"

Dean shut his eyes against the glare from the phone for a moment. Then he hit clear on the message and set his alarm for 8:00.

* * *

Alexis Karras had his eyes trained on his phone as he entered his garage, his other hand full of keys and a travel cup. All three went flying when Dean checked him up against his VW Beetle. Karras squeaked.

"How do I kill the cyclops?"

"What?"

"The cyclops. It's real, it's here, it's killing people. How do I end it?"

"Are you nuts?"

"Certi-fuckin-fiable, so tell me!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about!"

"Look, pal, you're going to tell me what you know whether you know that you know it or not!"

Karras's forehead creased. "Is that possible?"

Dean tried to think that one through. Then Karras made to move away from the car, and he slammed him back against it. "Look, I'm in a hurry. We're not doing the X-Files speech right now. You said in the lodge it'll die if it's 'consumed by its own works.'" Karras's face went through a whole kaleidoscope wheel of confusion and affrontedness that Dean did not have time for. "What does that mean?"

"You were spying—? It-it's from a tracing board, one of our lodge relics."

"Tracing board, great, what's a tracing board?"
"They're Masonic art, every lodge has them. There's one for every degree; each one explains part of Masonic philosophy." Karras hesitated. "But, our lodge has some that are nonstandard. They're unique, from pre-Revolutionary Greece. Nobody uses them anymore; they're left over from when the lodge was just a village guild."

Dean's jaw clenched. "Let me guess: all about some very symbolic human sacrifice."

"What? No," Karras said, bewildered. "The one you're asking about shows the destruction of the Temple of Solomon, we think. And, well, the cyclops. Or two cyclopes."

"Are you insane? I can't give you a two hundred-year-old artifact!" Dean started to pick him up again. "Can't you just take a picture of it?" Karras yelped.

Dean stopped. Karras's heels rejoined the floor. Dean released his collar. "Um. Yes?"

"I have digital files on my computer."

Dean took half a step back, trying to adopt a posture that could qualify as nonthreatening. "That… would be great."

Karras watched him with soup plate-eyes as he edged toward the kitchen door.

Dean followed him to a home office stuffed with exhibit mock-ups, convincing replicas of Greek artifacts mixed in with cheerfully cheesy refrigerator-magnet versions, what looked like a serious Barnes & Noble habit, and framed posters of various Masonic imagery and advertisements for lectures. The office seemed to be the biggest room in the house, and certainly the most well-used.

"Hands where I can see them," Dean ordered as Karras gingerly sat at the computer.

Karras clicked through folders as fast as he could with his hands shaking violently. "It's, it's this."

Dean leaned over with a hand on the back of the computer chair. Karras bit off a whimper. "This?"

"Y-yeah."

The picture showed a ruined temple on top of a hill. Masonry tools floated in the sky, with that creepy-ass single eye right at the top. On the slopes leading up to the temple, two pillars lay in pieces on the ground, one black, one white.

One figure was crushed under each pillar. The one on the left was surrounded by sheep and held a broken shepherd's crook. The one on the right had fallen near an anvil and held a broken hammer. They each had one eye.

"Where've I seen those pillars before?"

"They're Boaz and Jachin." Karras pointed to a poster on the wall, then another, and another. "They're—they're a lot of things, please just tell me what I need to say for you not to kill me."

"I'm not gonna kill you, Jesus." Dean dug his palms into his eyes for a second. "Here's the deal. Cyclopses are real monsters. There's one in East Side. I need to kill it, save the people it took if they're still alive, and find something called the Brand of Tubalcaín. So put that comparative religion degree to good use for a change and explain how this ugly-ass painting tells me how to kill
"a Greek myth."

"The painting's not about—" Karras squeezed his eyes shut and visibly steadied himself. "The pillars are Boaz and Jachin, erected in front of the First Temple of Solomon. The names mean 'He will establish' and 'Strength.' The Book of Jeremiah says they were destroyed by the Chaldeans along with the First Temple."

"You guys have copies of them down in the lodge," Dean realized. "And Canby has pictures in that fucking dossier. What's special about these things?"

"In Masonic allegory, Hiram Abiff is the architect of Solomon's Temple, and he commissions a metalsmith to cast the columns from brass or bronze. They're—please don't hurt me, but they are symbolic. That's what's special about them. That's all that's special about them." Karras hesitated. "You asked something about Tubalcain?"

"I'm looking for his brand iron."

"Well, I've never heard of that, but there's a legend that Tubalcain also made two pillars with his half-brother Jabal, the herdsman, to preserve all human knowledge. They're not the same pillars, but if you're interested in Tubalcain—yeah, I don't know."

Dean stared at the image. Stylistically, it was like a cross between Orthodox icons and the Masonic shit Karras had hanging all over the room. The styles did not harmonize, and it was ugly as hell. "I don't get it," he said finally. "How does this show anybody being consumed by their own works?"

Karras moused over the crude figure beneath the white column with his broken hammer. "It's the allegory the tracing board teaches. The metalsmith crushed by what he created, the shepherd trampled by his flock. It's—it's like a moral warning, that humanity's arts aren't inherently good, because Cain and his descendants invented them without reliance on or blessing from God. They're useful, we can build great and beautiful things with them, but those things can be torn down and crush us under the weight of our own civilization." Karras twisted around, but couldn't quite meet his eye. "So, um, do you want me to put it on a flash drive for you? I can put it on a flash drive for you. If you need anything else, maybe give me your email, I'm going to be late for church—"

Dean pushed him back down into the chair with a hand on his shoulder. Karras bit a quivering lip. "Not done yet. How do I identify the cyclops?"

Karras's face crumpled. "I keep telling you—"

"You don't have to believe me. Just—use your imagination for a minute. Imagine that you, Alex, hunt monsters for a living. You know the cyclops is out there, passing for human. Is there—I don't know, like a way to make it reveal itself? There's a lot of monsters like that, they look like us, but a mirror or something will reveal their true form. Is there anything like that in the lore for cyclopses? C'mon, Alex, let that nerd flag fly."

"I'm sorry, but no, there's really nothing like that in any of the mythology. They don't disguise themselves. They just—do their thing."

"Well, there has to be something. People would notice a dude walking around with one eye in the middle of his forehead."

"Maybe your monster doesn't have that, maybe he looks more normal."

"Like a guy with a potbelly and a glass eye?" Dean said bitterly. "Yeah, I already tried that."
"No, I meant—maybe he doesn't have one eye."

"The name means one-eyed."

Karras glared at him. "It means round-eyed, actually." He didn't add, "You moron," if only because he probably still thought Dean was going to shoot him. "Homer doesn't say he has one eye, and the Polyphemus Vase depicts Odysseus' men blinding him with a two-pronged stake."

"Wait, what?"

"Nowadays, the cyclops is always depicted with one eye, but antique sources aren't clear. Like. You can read it as a round eye, or you can read it as round-eyed."

"Round-eyed,' what the fuck does that even— Son of a bitch." Dean straightened up. "Round-eyed like pop-eyed?"

"I don't know, maybe?"

Dean stared at the computer screen. He'd told Jurich he'd never have noticed his glass eye if he hadn't said something. But it wasn't Jurich who'd brought it up.

_How long you fellas been working here?_

_Oh, forever._

Karras just looked resigned now, like he still expected Dean to kill him. Dean was kind of offended; he hadn't even drawn on the guy. "You're not even going to write an article about Freemasonry in the immigrant experience, are you?"

Dean cleared his throat and clapped him on the shoulder. "Uh, no. But, y'know. Be the change you want to see in the world."

* * *

Dean was braced for a murder investigation and possibly a low-key manhunt to make it spicy trying to get back into Phoenix, but it ended up being almost disappointingly vanilla. There were no headlines reporting Jurich's death, no police chatter. No body had turned up. That was going to make it harder for his wife to get closure, but it made it a lot easier for Dean to drive up and park in the Phoenix Steel employee lot.

The shift change whistle was audible even out here. Minutes later, people started filtering out, shrugging into jackets, fishing out cigarettes, squinting in the late afternoon sun. Dean scanned the crowd and marked each familiar face. Donnie came and went, then Ernesto.

It was thirty minutes after the whistle blew and the stream of people was all but done when Sid pushed through the door, moving jauntily. He might have had the face of Marty Feldman, but when not sporting overalls he dressed like Pauly D, tight T-shirt showing off muscles the size and shape of cannonballs. Dean watched him climb into an electric-blue Camaro lowrider and tailed plates reading 3ARHIDIA a mile south.

Sid turned out to live practically underneath the I-90, in a postwar bungalow that had been amputated from the rest of the neighborhood by the construction of the Skyway. No neighbors. That was good. The lot had bushes, albeit scraggily ones choked with bindweed, which was also good. It was about time something on this hunt was.
Dean parked a block over circled back on foot. Sid's Camaro was parked on-street. Something on the dash caught Dean's eye as he bent to check the interior. It was a bobblehead of Leela from *Futurama*.

"Oh, you have got to be kidding me."

Sid's front blinds were drawn, but Dean could see a bare screen window around the side of the house. The angel blade and a .357 Magnum loaded with consecrated rounds were not-that-reassuring weights at his side as he eased himself into the shrubbery between a line of trees and the wall. He hoped one or both would at least slow the thing down, but he needed to study it, find a weakness, try to figure out how to turn Karras's abstract allegory into a concrete solution.

Dusk was closing in and the house was lit up; through the kitchen window, Dean had a good view of the living room. Which… screamed bachelor pad. There was a Mexican blanket tacked up over the front window, and the midcentury wallpaper was enlivened here and there with posters for groups with names like Necrorgasm and Rotting Christ. The coffee table was an upside-down Red Bull box. Two tower speakers flanked a sixty-inch plasma TV, and Sid was plopped down in a giant beanbag playing *Call of Duty*.

Dean would almost have started to doubt himself all over again, had it not been for the iron cage against the wall.

As it was, this monster clearly didn't have a wife or family to get caught in the crossfire. And Dean had snuck around under the noses of bigger things in tighter quarters.

Crouched low, he looked through the window toward the back of the house and could see a cellar door ajar behind the kitchen. Dean thought about the dozens of similar houses he'd seen casing Jurich's neighborhood. Ninety percent of them had had an exterior door to the basement, too. He craned his neck to try see around the back corner of the house, and, slowly and silently, rose to his feet.

He turned to find the cyclops in the window.

"Hey," it said.

Dean didn't move.

"You want to come in? It's starting to rain."

And then it moved off into the kitchen.

Dean extricated himself from the bushes, drew the angel blade, and mounted the stairs to the porch. The front door was open.

The *Call of Duty* game was paused on the plasma screen; Dean heard Sid rummaging around in the fridge as he advanced slowly through the living room. Sid came out holding two El Sols by their necks in one hand and cleared catalogues and junk mail off of the little round dining table dividing the kitchen from the front room. He jabbed the beer bottles toward the sword in Dean's hand. "*That* thing," he said, "is cool. Where'd you get it?"

Dean didn't lower it. "Angel."

"Ah. That explains the nanostructure. Man, I'd love to play around with one of those. C'mon, sit down, have a beer."
Gingerly Dean took the empty seat across from the cyclops, sword in hand.

"You might as well put that away, you know," said Sid. "It'd be like attacking Alf with a cat." He grinned at Dean like they were old friends. "Anyway, let's catch up, I haven't seen one of you guys since thirty-nine."

Dean did not put it away. "You wanna chat?"

"Sure. It's what I've done with all the other heroes I didn't want to kill me."

That brought Dean up short. "Heroes?"

"That's what they always used to call you in the old days. Hunters, heroes—same diff. And there were some dicks among the heroes, let me tell you. So, yeah, ask me anything you want. I'm an open book."

"Uh." Dean blinked a couple of times. "Okay. What can you tell me about Tubalcain?"

"Nice kid, good student. One of those with a little too much to prove, if you catch my drift? But meant well. Wanted to make sure wisdom survived for the ages. Tried to tell him, nothing lasts forever, but you know how humans are." Sid shook his head once and took a long pull on his beer. "Tubalcain. There's a name I hadn't thought about in a while. Hey, are you hungry? I'm hungry. I got lamb, cheese, some of those eggs nobody likes—"

"So he was human?"

Sid wandered back to the fridge. "Sure. For certain values of human. About as human as you are."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The cyclops just fixed him with a knowing look over its shoulder. "What do you want to know about Tubalcain for? That's ancient history, literally."

Dean's gaze darted over the house, looking for something, anything that would give him leverage. He felt like he was navigating the conversation blindfolded. "I'm looking for the Brand of Tubalcain," he said, because he didn't really have a better idea than the truth, and because if anything, the monster had been more forthcoming so far than Canby.

Sid stopped with a plate in his hands and looked at him, confused. "The Brand he made? What do you want that thing for?"

"Where is it?"

Distracted, Sid loaded up a platter and brought it over to the table. "Is this like an apocalypse thing? More of that angel cockfight?" He frowned faintly as he put down the platter and slid back into his seat. "I don't think it's going to help much. Only thing they all care about these days is volume. Maybe a couple thousand years ago the Brand could've made a difference, but not now."

"Why? What's it do?"

Sid's protuberant eyes went penetrating. "You don't know?" Gaze locked on Dean, he shoveled meat and strong-smelling cheese into a hot dog bun, took a bite, and chewed. After he swallowed, he said, "You're someone's errand boy." The words were caustic.

"I will find it, Sid. Here or at the mill. Be a lot easier for both of us if you'd just tell me where it is."
"Oh, no, no. Look, man, I don't got it." Sid reverted to his jocular persona as fast as he'd deviated from it. "Ain't even seen the thing in about thirty-five hundred years." Dean's face was a mask, but his stomach churned. No. It was a lie, it had to be. "What am I gonna do with it, anyway?" Sid said, mouth full. "Who do you think the ur-blacksmith makes something like that for?"

"Who?" Dean forced out.

Sid rolled his eyes at him, which looked painful, and sucked grease off of one of his fingers.
"Think it through, genius."

"I know a cyclops has it," Dean growled. Because that, that had to be true. He could not have come all this way for nothing.

"Oh, we took it, all right, just not me personally."

"Why?"

"Why? What d'you mean, why? Because Granddaddy Tetragrammaton is a fuckin dick, that's why. Not that it mattered, in the end. You sure you don't want anything? You gotta try this fresh feta, Cousin Sakis sends some every year for Easter."

"And what else you got in there?" Dean jerked his head towards the iron cage in the living room. "Chicken-fried corporal?" He cocked an eyebrow. "Roast rear admiral?"

Sid's smile flagged. "Heard about that, huh?"

"Nine people in twelve weeks, Sid, you weren't exactly subtle." The cyclops tipped his head in acknowledgment. "What I don't get is, why now? You were a model citizen up till the end of January, as far as I can tell. Hell, you're like the patron saint of that mill. You had a good thing going here. Why throw it all away?"

Sid, who'd been picking at his beer label, shot a look up at Dean. "Oh, come on, man, you know why."

"Mother's Day? Ain't any of you freaks ever heard of 1-800-Flowers?"

Sid kept picking, avoiding Dean's gaze. "We all feel it, you know. Her call."

"Seven soldiers, a gangbanger, and a grandmother?" Dean leaned in. "What does she have you doing with all those people?"

"You're coming at this all wrong," Sid said, suddenly urgent. "This doesn't have to be a war, not like you think. She's not the worst option, and you want us on your side."

There was always another deal, always another monster offering it. Well, this monster would have to get in line behind the one in West Virginia. "Yeah, I don't think so."

Sid looked at his hands and sighed. Then his gaze rose to Dean. "I was afraid you were going to say that."

Dean moved at the same instant that the angel blade shattered in his hand. Before he could even reach for the .357, the cyclops was on him. He felt pig iron fingers on the back of his skull and saw the table coming at his face, and then black.

* * *
He surfaced through layers of heat and vibration. There were sounds—metal on metal, metal as solid, metal as liquid—but they were nothing to the sub-audible thrum that permeated from the bottom up. He knew, even in darkness, where the fire was.

Dean opened his eyes. He was lying on concrete, but it wasn't the clammy cold he usually associated with that surface. It was warm, and dim, and there was a cage between him and it.

He could hear the sounds of the mill around him, including the voices of other workers, but they were distant. Except for something beeping. That was insistent, stabbing into the mash of pain in his temple at regular, one-second intervals.

Boots appeared in his line of sight, and then Sid lowered himself to sit cross-legged in front of Dean. Dean grasped the bars of his cage to pull himself upright.

"Hey." The cyclops' voice was devoid of inflection.

Dean tongued at a fat lip. "Thought we were gonna chat?"

"We still can, if you want." Sid was motionless. "We've got some time."

That fucking beeping was still at it, and Dean looked around for a source. For the first time, he properly clocked his surroundings. They were up on a concrete balcony, and the heat wafting from below told him they were above the furnace—Number Two, presumably, by how deserted it was. He twisted to look down. Twenty feet or so below, he could see the burning window where, when the furnace was tapped, Hell would flow out. Below that, the two hundred-ton steel ladle waited to receive it.

His cage sat beside what looked to be a control room, dark inside but for the glow of instrument panels. Above the door, red digits read 04:42. The digits were counting down.

Dean let his eyes travel upward, to where a cable ran up to an improvised pulley and an arm that would swing out just far enough to extend over the ladle. The cable was modern, a two-ply rope of wire that might not have looked out of place had it not been stamped along its length with what Dean recognized from one of Canby's helpful cheat-sheets as linear B script.

He searched frantically over the interior of his cage for a latch, a lock, anything. It wasn't there. There wasn't even a welded seam like what they'd seen the dragons do in Portland, only a featureless continuation of the metal of the door into the metal of the wall. He wasn't going anywhere unless or until this thing let him out.


"Your immortality."

Well, that was never a good thing. "Wanna spell that one out? Sorry, it's just that my head is killing me."

Sid still didn't move, but for the first time Dean noticed the glint of a knife in his hand. "You've heard of forging steel from the blood of your enemies?"

Dean let his head thunk back against the wall of the cage. "Oh, you have got to be kidding me."

"I'd have preferred you alive, for what it's worth."

Dean snorted. "I thought there was only, like, a nickel's worth of iron in a person."
"Three to four grams, usually. But you are flux, not ore. You will join the metal moved to such joy by the love of fire that it flows as wine, flows as blood, beautiful liquid heart of the earth."

Dean glanced up at the pulley-and-arm again. "Is this what you did with the others? Bled 'em into a bucket of steel?"

"Yes."

Nine missing people. Nine missing batches of steel. It didn't make sense, though; Dean recalled how Jurich had lost his eye, and all the newspaper stories he'd waded through on foundry accidents to get here in the first place. "Got it on pretty good authority that mixing liquid person with liquid metal makes things go boom, so, uh, you wanna just let me go instead?"

Sid looked at him, and agony rolled up through Dean's body and black over his vision.

When he got his sight back, coughing and fighting not to vomit, the cyclops was still sitting there. Its eyes were blank and flat, and Dean had not until now realized the extent to which he'd been taken in by its human act earlier.

"That was me, tugging every metallic atom in your body half an electron radius in the wrong direction," said Sid. "Iron bends to my will. Not the other way around."

Dean shut his eyes, working to get his gorge down and his lungs back under his command. The clock read 03:19. "Is that how you exploded the angel sticker?"

Sid's expression did not change. "I was sad to do that. I'd have liked to examine it further."

"I was sad you did that, too." Beep. Beep. Beep. Dean tugged on the roof of the cage, which had zero give. "So how are you choosing your victims?"

"Warriors."

"Okay, the soldiers, sure, but—a Black Gangster Disciple, the Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe, and now me? Am I missing something, here?"

"Randall Quincy was blooded, fearless, and lived by a code of honor. Ruth Anne Hobbs bore thirteen children—those who bear ten were afforded equal status with those who bled on the battlefield, once." Some expression finally bled through on the cyclops' face: something sardonic. "And you, of course, require no explanation." His gaze drifted over to the clock: 02:24. "It's almost time." He stood and picked up the steel cable.

Adrenaline pressed the accelerator Dean's pulse. Old, familiar friend, equal parts prop and healthy terror. The cyclops was fastening shackles to the end of the cable. That suggested he was going to hang Dean by his ankles to bleed him, and that meant he had to take him out of the cage first.

"So since I'm dying in like two minutes anyway," Dean said, drawing his knees up and discreetly testing the traction of the floor, "enlighten me."

"All creatures should seek enlightenment, and enlighten those they can."

"Uh, sure, yeah. So what's so special about this brand Tubalcaim made?"

"The indelibility of its mark."

Which told Dean fuck all, but the clock showed 01:45, and he had more urgent questions. "So do
you want to tell me where to find whoever's got it? In the name of enlightenment, and all?"

Sid shrugged, hauling on the cable. "He's around."

"What? Around the mill? Around Chicago?"

Sid snorted. "Neither. Not much for him to do here. Heroes, why you all gotta be so dense." He glanced at the clock once more. "It's time."

Swallowing, Dean felt for a bar with his toes.

The cyclops bent and rested a hand on the cage. "You should be honored, Dean. You will make great steel. I really must try to find your brother after this. The matched set will be worthy of the ages."

Clarity descended on Dean. Wrong thing to say, asshole.

When the door swung open, Dean pushed off the wall of the cage with his feet. His shoulders hit Sid's shins and he rolled across the floor. The floor seemed to keep rolling with him even after he came to a halt.

"You can't win here, Dean." Dean pulled himself up to his knees, clutching at his middle. Sid was already back on his feet and advancing. "There's no dishonor in this. You're a skilled fighter, but I command all your weapons."

Dean looked up into his protruding eyes. "Yeah? Command this."

The leather belt whipped out and around the cyclops' ankles. Dean gripped it below the metal buckle, stood, and yanked. It was hard to tell, given the golf ball-eyes, but he thought Sid looked surprised when his head hit the floor.

Sid's knife skidded across the floor like a hockey puck. Dean followed the cyclops down with a roundhouse, an uppercut, and a knee to the jewels. His only thought was to keep the thing too busy to pull that Magneto trick on him again, but that couldn't last long. Already he felt the body underneath him gathering strength and coordination. Sid landed a blow of his own that was like getting hit by a bowling ball and climbed to his feet. A klaxon began to go off.

Dean sprang back half a pace, snapping the belt before him and desperately trying to think. Shouting came from somewhere below, getting closer. A strange bronze cast flickered over the cyclops' skin, and the cable and shackles leapt up into its outstretched hand with barely a gesture.

"It's time, Dean." Sid looked angry for the first time. The klaxon wailed. "Do you want your death to be in vain?"

Dean whipped the belt across his eyes.

Sid dropped the shackles to clutch his face, but Dean didn't hear whatever curse he bit off from behind his hands. Dropping the belt and gripping the cyclops by his clothes, he heaved him up and over the balcony railing.

The empty ladle gonged when Sid's body hit it. Dean clutched the railing to look down, panting; he was in time to see the cyclops bounce from the rim like a rag doll and fall into the darkness at the bottom. The collision seemed to stun him. As Dean watched, Sid climbed to his knees in the cauldron, shaking his head once, hard. He raised his head to look at Dean.
Something very heavy clanked inside the furnace.

The ball of heat that hit Dean from below had him recoiling from the railing, throwing up an arm to shield his face. There was a rushing sound like an immense waterfall.

Sid screamed.

Instinct finally kicked in where Dean's brain never did, and he ducked back into the corner behind the control room as the rushing became a roar. The shouting was closer and panicked, now, and Dean had just time to pray that whoever had come to investigate the klaxon was getting the hell out of there before the shock wave hit.

The explosion was impossibly bright. First there were splashes of light as the metal running out of the furnace hit the organic matter in the vessel receiving it; then the molten charge flowed over it, encapsulating it, and the steel pylons supporting the concrete floor shook as every drop of moisture in Sid's body flashed to steam. The glare imprinted itself on Dean's retinas through his eyelids.

It took a minute for Dean to be sure the floor had stopped shaking, because his knees hadn't. Sound had the muffled quality it generally did after a Black Sabbath concert right up against the rails, so the voices on the melt deck floor seemed to reach him from far away. This clearly wasn't a scheduled operation, meaning no one had been prepared. Dean strained to make out what they were saying, heart in his throat with an entirely new terror, but—he couldn't hear anyone screaming. He was pretty sure those were shouts, not screams.

His hearing was so fuzzy that he almost missed the boots pounding up the metal staircase toward the balcony before it was too late. "Son of a bitch...."

There was a door onto the balcony behind the control room. Dean grabbed the doorknob and prayed it wasn't locked. It wasn't, but the engineer on the other side of it looked almost as surprised to see Dean as Dean was to see him.

God fucking damn it, the Terminator never had to deal with steel mill employees.

"Sorry," Dean said before decking him.

He found himself in a stairwell. The direction he wanted to go was down, but down was also where all the workers were, and as he hesitated on the landing, he heard a door open and shut on a lower level. He took off up the stairs.

He realized when he'd gone a couple of floors that he must be in the blast furnace tower. It would certainly explain the temperature, the sweat dripping in his eyes, the hellfire need to get away. He rounded another corner. Red eyes leered in his face, and he stumbled back, nearly fell on his ass—No. Not eyes. Letters. Red letters. EXIT.

With a short, incredulous laugh, Dean picked himself up and tumbled through the door.

Cool night air.

Dean halted. He was on a platform near the top of the furnace, on an external access stair that spiraled away both up and down. Spread out far below him was the mill, its angles and lines yielding to the dark of empty land, and, eventually, to the smoke-softened twinkle of city lights. Beyond those, Lake Michigan began, black and impasive.

Gulls cawed. Almost directly below him lay the coke field, its contours like heaped up snow. The
gulls wheeled over it, their white bellies lit up by the foundry in shades of red. Dean ran his palms along the rail of the metal balustrade and drew in a long breath of night air. The breeze washed over his skin, carrying away some of the heat and horror of a fire that would always burn in a darkened corner of his mind.

He'd need to move soon; he should reach the ground and get away from the mill before the emergency vehicles he could already hear arrived. But for a moment, he watched the seagulls sailing up and down the thermals like sparks.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is headed to the beta. I've been mostly flying solo, not because I think I'm too good to need a beta, but because a big part of writing this fic for me is to see how many inhibitions I can put aside. But this time, I need outside eyes. So, chapter 14 coming to you eventually!

By moderately popular demand (or mild expression of interest), I've started including some of the dorky facts I learn in the course of writing this thing here in my chapter end notes. This time, however, there are just way too many of them, so if you're curious about real Greek secret societies, profane license plates, or things that can go wrong in steel mills, it's on LJ!
one of my turns

Chapter Summary

"I'm coming, Sammy. Hold tight."
///
The boys round a corner.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait, but here we are at last: back on track. And it's all thanks to my beta, dimeliora. The next chapters have benefited tremendously from her feedback; as much as I hated to have such a delay in posting, there's no doubt in my mind that it's been worth it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I want you to do the divination ritual again."

"Do you know what time it is?"

Dean knew exactly what time it was. He had, in fact, been acutely aware of the clock since 5:39 p.m. on Friday, April 6th. If Canby didn't know that yet, then he wasn't as bright as he liked to think. "Yeah, and it's earlier here. What, is it keyed to the phases of the moon or something?"

Canby let out a put-upon sigh. "I got to put the phone down."

That it wasn't "I'll call you back" suggested Canby already had the herbs and stuff set up, which meant he'd found the blood Dean had left in the fridge. Good.

After about two minutes, during which Dean tapped his foot and watched Sid's kitchen clock (Hello Kitty, which Dean just found disturbing), Canby was back on the phone, yawning. "Still alive." He paused. "Not... quite as alive."

"Come again?"

"The flames are a reflection of... call it life force. They aren't quite as high as last time, not quite as strong."

Dean had known this was a possibility. It wasn't like he thought Sam was at Club Med, but he hadn't been prepared for definite information. "This is taking too long, Canby."

"You're telling me. I can't even smoke while you're fumbling around out there."
Dean could not have given less of a shit about this asshole's nicotine fix. "Look, I found the
cyclops and killed it, but he—it didn't have the Brand, either. I'm going to have to track down the
one that does have it, and it'd go a lot faster if I had Sam."

"That's not how this works."

"Do you want your fucking museum piece or not?"

"Very much, a great deal more than I ever did before I met you. But that really doesn't have any
bearing. Besides, thought you were some hunting legend. Are you trying to tell me you can't close
the deal?"

Dean thought he was starting to see why Rufus had disliked this guy so intensely. He started
throwing open cabinets, looking for a suitable container and grabbing a steak knife along the way.
"I want you to do the ritual every day."

"I'm out of blood."

"I'm overnighting you a pint." Dean found a thermos with a good screw-top seal. Perfect. "You run
low, you call me. Something changes, you call me."

"All right."

"Say it, make it a statement that's ironclad with your truth spell or whatever."

"I will perform the same pyromancy I showed you daily with your blood unless physically
prevented from doing so, and I will inform you of the status of your brother's vitality." Canby
paused. "Do you really want this distraction, Dean?"

Dean's jaw clenched. "I'll text you the expected delivery time."

"As you like. Anything else? I got animals to tend."

"If my brother dies because of your bullshit—"

Canby laughed. It was hearty, almost warm, and for half a second Dean was too shocked to be
angry. "Oh, I can imagine. I can well imagine. So hurry up, will you? I got a list of ways I'd prefer
to die, and you don't even make the top ten."

He hung up.

Dean ran a hand through his hair, wincing when he brushed the knot Sid had left him on his
temple. The concussion wasn't good news, even if getting knocked unconscious practically
qualified as sleep for them at this point. As he tourniquetted his arm and bled himself into the
thermos, he knew that losing a pint wasn't going to do him any favors, either, but he didn't have
time for a bubble bath and a nap. Not with Sam's—Sam's life force or whatever waning.

What did that mean, anyway? Some demon or angel torturing him? A djinn draining him slowly?

The wall coming down?

Dean had been here for hours. He'd checked the attic (empty), tossed Sid's laundry pile (redolent of
Axe), even gutted his giant bean bag. No sign of the Brand; no clues to where it was. No sign of
the special monster steel that had gone missing from the mill, either. He didn't know what that
meant, but he didn't like it.
Sid had confirmed that a cyclops did have the Brand, and that it wasn't in Chicago. That was something. But "not Chicago" left a lot of country—a lot of planet—to search unless Dean could dig a lead out of this house.

His failsafe was Bobby, an email with everything he had on Sam's disappearance queued to send if Dean stopped resetting the timer on it. But he wasn't feeling great about Bobby either, at this point. Canby's geas prevented him from calling trusted allies unless he broke the deal completely but not, apparently, from receiving voicemail. The one Bobby had left him the night the foreman died at the mill had cursed Dean roundly for not having warned him that their FBI scheme was burned in the entire state of Rhode Island.

What an almighty fuckup.

A wave of dizziness hit him and Dean leaned heavily against the kitchen counter. He might not have time to sleep this off, but he was going to have to put something in the tank.

He opened the refrigerator. The platter Sid had made up the night before was there, leftovers neatly saran-wrapped. Dean stared at it for a minute, then shrugged and took it out. He grabbed the 99¢ hot dog buns off the top of the fridge too.

The smell of feta hit him as soon as he unwrapped the plate. It was strong, but not unpleasant. He could really go for some of that, actually. He loaded up a bun with chunks of lamb and sharp, crumbly cheese. His stomach rumbled. Then he stopped with the bun halfway into his open mouth.

You gotta try this fresh feta. Cousin Sakis sends some every year for Easter.

How in the hell had he missed that? Cousin.

The son of a bitch had been fucking with him the entire time.

Dean was on his feet. Easter had been all the way back on April 8th, two days after Sam had been taken. But Orthodox Easter had been on April 15th, a week and a day ago. And Sid the Cyclops—metalhead, shift worker, bachelor incarnate—had not, when Dean had been searching this house earlier, come across as a guy who took his trash out like clockwork.

Dawn was just firming up outside when Dean circled back to the recessed stairwell leading to the basement. Sure enough, the blue plastic recycling bin there was half full. He started tossing items out. Contents: nine beer bottles, two pie plates, stack of catalogues, Forging magazine, styrofoam takeout clamshells, paper towel tube—and one cardboard box, neatly collapsed.

He held it up and read the address field. TO: Sideris Katopodis, 919 N 99th St, Chicago, IL. FROM: Sakis Voskos, PO Box 497, Huntsville, UT.

Dean's heart soared in blood-donation giddiness and, pushing up from beneath the exhaustion and this almighty mother of a headache, savage triumph.

"I'm coming, Sammy. Hold tight."

A woman in a green victory suit sat on a bench. Her back was to him. Her hair was dark. Her ass was round. She was flipping through an oversized photo album of black-and-white architectural shots.

Just you wait till it's yours, she said. Red nails turned a page.
A room. Pale wallpaper with a silver stripe. Plants everywhere, old and dry, and oh, shit, he was supposed to come back and he never did. Jess was standing before their birdcage in a satin nightgown, prodding the dead goldfinch inside with a twig. She knew he was there but wouldn't turn. "Baby...." She shook her head. Disappointment, resignation. "Sam, Sam, Sam, Sam, Sam."

She walked out and became Lindsey. He couldn't remember her being so thin but he knew those vivid blue eyes, and they were in that bar in Oklahoma again. No, they were passing under the bar, to a church basement. Stale doughnuts and instant coffee and If anybody is here for the first, second, or third time, please raise your hand so we can welcome you. Guy in a leather jacket raised his hand. "I got a brother; how do I kick that habit?"

"Fuckin' junkies," Lindsey said with disgust and a New England accent. "Always got a sob story."

"Why're you being such a bitch?" Sam asked, bewildered. "You brought me to this meeting."


"No." Sam seized her. One hand held her upper arm, the other drove in the knife. "No." Her body jerked every time he stabbed her but she never reacted, like he wasn't even there.

Tunnel vision. No; he was in a tunnel. He was both hot and cold.

I always knew you had it in you, a voice whispered all around him.

No, not a tunnel, but the pipe.

Sam woke.

His scalp itched, and he reached up to find dust in his hair. He had a fragmentary thought that he'd slept so long he'd gotten dusty, but then he clocked that the banging echoing down here was Lindsey, hammering at the concrete. It was pitch black. He twisted in the confines of the pipe and felt at the spot right at the bottom of the vertical shaft. There was a pile of grit there, not large, but present. A grimy little layer of progress.

But his body was slick with sweat, and his arms didn't want to support him as he crawled out to his own water source. He collapsed on his side there, shaking.

Quick inventory: sick, dehydrated, starving, stuck. Little he could do about the last two at the moment. The second he could fix, albeit one drop at a time. The first—the first he would just have to ride out.

He could. That he had a fever he could no longer deny, but he'd had worse ones. Not while imprisoned in a sewer or slowly starving, but, hey, he liked a professional challenge now and again.

He stayed curled up in the alcove for a long time, waiting for his mind to clear and trying to pep talk himself that he wasn't completely useless yet.

Sometime later—an hour, maybe? A night?—movement drew his attention to a spot on the floor. It was the three-footed rat, approaching slowly, nose testing the air. Canny little thing. Probably had to be, to survive missing a limb. Clarity settled on Sam. He watched the rat come nearer and nearer and curled his fingers around the blackjack in his pocket.

Finally it was arm's length away. It stopped and licked at a puddle.
Sam let go of the blackjack. The rat remained, drinking, for some seconds before wandering unhurriedly off.

Time passed in the spasmodic, uncomfortable, over-lubricated way it did down here. Like diarrhea. His fever fluctuated, and the darkness felt like it was vibrating. He tried not to think, or to remember his dreams. Throughout, from above, came the sound of Lindsey hammering.

At some point his limbs started obeying his commands again. The film of sweat and filth over his body was more than he could stand though, and so he honed somebody's sternum down to the finest blade he could manage. It wouldn't do a thing to the ghost, but he could use it to scrape his skin. Dry baths: another of Dad's old survivalist tricks. Another gift from Yellowstone. The motion was repetitive, the object trivial, but it gave him something to focus on.

He was doing this when Lindsey called down to him. It was the first she'd spoken since he'd been up there. "Sam? Are you there?"

"Yeah." It came out hoarse; he cleared his throat. "Yeah, Lindsey, I'm here. You okay?"

"Fine. Can you come up here?"

"I—" He bit his lip. "What do you need?"

"I've almost got one of these bars free."

It took a minute for that to process, but when it did, Sam jumped to his feet. The head rush nearly put him flat on his face, but he didn't care. "Lindsey, that's—that's amazing! You're amazing! Okay, here's how you can use it against—"

It occurred to him suddenly that he hadn't actually heard her hammering for a pretty long time, and that that was weird if she was spitting distance from her first real weapon against the thing that had been starving and terrorizing her for months. Just as it did, she said, "The bones finally broke. I used the pieces, but those broke too, and— I don't have anything left to work with and the bar's still stuck. You said there's more down there?"

His excitement turned to apprehension. He didn't want to think about how much climbing the pipe would drain him now. The way he was feeling, he wasn't even sure that he could.

"One end's almost out, I really think it's almost out," Lindsey said.

He couldn't help picturing what shimmying up the pipe entailed: how much strength it took to push against the walls, and then to hold himself up over the sheer drop; how much pain he'd been in after the last time. How many calories it would take.

But this could be the one thing standing between him and his brother, and Dean wouldn't stand here wringing his hands. He wouldn't be calculating the cost, and he sure as hell wouldn't hesitate over the pain. Dean would persevere.

Sam pulled off his shirt for a makeshift sling and started loading bones into it. "I'm coming," he promised.

Chicago to Utah was a twenty-hour drive. Dean might have been able to do it in a day, if not for the concussion, but it took two and there was nothing he could do about it. So he had time, as skyscrapers gave way to prairie and mountains rose up out of the plains, to think.
Sid had asked him who he thought the ur-blacksmith made something like the Brand for in the first place. Someone who could use it, presumably. Dean thought about Alex Karras's ugly Masonic painting, about Strabo and Homer and Hesiod and all the other shit Canby had gift-wrapped for him that Dean, despite better resolutions, had been in too much of a hurry to unpack. Not one breed of cyclopes, but two: the blacksmith and the herdsman.

Placed beside the legendarily strong smith who could manipulate metal on an atomic level and control furnace reactions with his mind, a guy who watched sheep and made cheese didn't sound very scary. But Dean had been doing this work for a long time, and he did not find that reassuring.

Huntsville was a tiny town in the eastern foothills of the La Sal mountains a couple hours south of Salt Lake City. Its main distinguishing feature was that it was large enough to have a post office that served unincorporated areas that were even tinier. Inside the post office, a somnolent postal employee informed Detective Roger Waters of the Salt Lake City PD that the owner of Box 497 did not live in town, paid cash annually, and had no contact information on file.

So the PO box was a bust. No surprise there; Dean had never expected it to be that easy. He'd told Canby this would go a lot faster with Sam, and he'd meant it. Well. What would Sam Winchester do?

Sam would run it down.

Besides the post office, Huntsville did have something else worth the drive. It was something in which small, rural towns actually tended to excel: genealogical and property records. Sakis Voskos could not be found in any of them, but a Search the Web inquiry for just "Sakis" informed Dean that this was a diminutive name for Athanasius. Since he seemed to be having a run of luck with the crudest tools the internet had to offer, he plugged Athanasius Voskos into a translation engine. He got back "deathless shepherd."

Sakis Voskos might not exist in records, but Athanasius had immigrated to Carbon County in 1893 along with a lot of men from a lot of countries who came to work on the railroad and in the mines. He appeared on the company payroll of the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad until 1898. After that, he disappeared. But it must've been a family name, the librarian helping Dean said, because in 1949 the deed for a private inholding in what became La Sal National Forest that year was grandfathered in for, yes, Athanasius Voskos. Very popular in the family, that name. In 2007, yet another Athanasius had filed an updated survey of the inholding boundaries with the county.

It was zoned for agriculture. He had a ranch.

It took a couple of false starts, but Sam made it to the top of the pipe. While Lindsey took the bones he'd brought, he checked the excavation. She wasn't wrong: they were close.

"You're almost through on this end," he said, probing it.

Her face was pinched with anxiety. "But the other end—we've barely touched it."

Sam tested the flexibility of the rebar. "You work where you've been working, and I'm going to try something on the other side. When one end is free, I think we might be able to pry it out without excavating the whole thing."

They went to work.

There was tension, though the physical demands were taking up most of Sam's attention. Working in the confines of the shaft was like something out of Kill Bill: focus. See the concrete. Punch
forward. Repeat. So it was Lindsey who actually spoke first.

"The ghost—it's been for me, now. It's been for Jacob. It never bothers with Marian. So... do you think it's time? Will it be you, next?"

Sam thought of the spirit hanging silently in his chamber while the others slept on. The message had been clear: it was waiting for him to weaken. Well, he was pretty weak now. "I don't know. Maybe." See the concrete. Punch forward. "I don't... really know what will happen, when it does. I know what Jacob is hoping for, but I don't know if—" If I can hack it, if I still have abilities, if I'll bring down the wall in my head when I try. "If it doesn't work out, you need to use the iron," he told her. "It'll repel the spirit. Maybe it'll even work on the doors and grates, I don't know. Try. And no matter what, survive. My brother's coming. He'll find this place. I don't want to think about what he'll do to pull it off, but he will. You're not forgotten down here, Lindsey. You're gonna make it through this."

He glanced at her and was surprised to see her eyes brimming. She sniffed once, wiped her nose with the back of her arm, and hit the concrete again. "Okay."


"Something else," he said. "If I do get a shot at the ghost, I'll need all the ammunition I can get. You said it was interested in your work, your old house. I want you to tell me what those memories are about."

She resumed hammering. "I don't really remember, it was all a blur."

"I don't think less of you for it, but you're lying."

"Go fuck yourself."

"Answer the question and I'll do my best."

"I just did."

He kept his voice steady and put all his anger into his arm. Focus. Punch. "I've been working as an investigator since I hit puberty, Lindsey. I know when someone's hiding something."

"Newsflash: we're all hiding something."

Sam slammed bone into concrete. Something shifted minutely.

At the same time, there was a metallic clunk and Lindsey exclaimed, "I'm through! I can feel the end of the bar!"

Sam pushed up on the rebar from below. Lindsey shrieked. "It's moving!"

It was. The bar was free at one end, had a little bit of give. On the opposite side of the pipe it was still mostly encased in concrete, but their crude tools had taken a bite out of the lip of the shaft and, oscillating the bar gently, Sam could feel instability inside. "Lindsey, I think this is it. I'm gonna push, you're gonna pull, all right?"

"Wha's happening?" Jacob called up.

Sam braced himself. He barely felt the fever right now. "Got a grip, Lindsey?" She wrapped both hands around the rebar, and her knuckles looked like beads strung on wire but he could see the
sinew in them. "Go slow. We want to break the concrete, not bend the bar. On three."

Lindsey pulled. Sam pushed. He could see the crack he'd made widen, but—

"Okay, okay. Let it down a sec. All right. Again. One, two—"

Sam shut his eyes and focused on what the concrete felt like, not the fact his muscles were screaming. He pushed, pushed—

Lindsey went tumbling backwards and Sam just barely had time to duck as the bar came free at its butt-end. When he looked back up, there was a head-sized chunk of concrete missing from the floor, and Lindsey was on her ass staring at the bar in her hands.

She shrieked.

"You got it," Sam said, disbelieving.

"Sam—! Jacob, we got it! We got one of the bars!"

"You what?"

"We got a bar out! We got iron!"

They whooped, Sam and Lindsey and Jacob down below. For a minute, the elation was the best analgesic in the world.

Lindsey stood and tamped the butt-end against the hole it had left, knocking the concrete off into two big pieces. She was left holding a four-foot-long, beautiful, beautiful iron sword. She looked it up and down with her mouth hanging open.

When the cold and pressure slammed down around them and Marian started up, Sam was half expecting it. From the way she froze and darted a glance at him, he thought Lindsey probably was, too. "Guys, I think it's coming back," Jacob called up. "Is it— Oh, fuck, what if you pissed it off —?"

"Forget about that," Sam said, not to Jacob but to Lindsey. Then, more forcefully: "Forget about that. Focus. We can fight back, this time."

"What do I do?"

One of the pressure changes boomed through the sewer. "If it comes for me, don't do anything." He didn't have time to get down safely, but the fall wouldn't kill him. "If it comes after you, use it like a sword."

She adjusted her grip, staring at the wall where the spirit had manifested last time. For a second, her face crumpled, and then he saw her iron it out.

"Jacob, get ready to move that grate!"

Then it was there.

The spirit stood. Sam had never seen it stand. He hadn't thought it could stand. It was flickering, twitching between incoherence and something approximately bipedal. One moment it was all necrosis, the next he thought he could almost make out clothes. It shifted a step towards Lindsey.

"Stay in position, Jacob. Be ready to try that grate and keep trying!"
Lindsey shifted her feet and flexed her grip on the rebar. She didn't look away from the spirit. It shifted another step towards her, pale neck craning as if something from its missing face were sniffing.

"Swing when it comes at you, Lindsey. I'm right here. I'm right here with you. Just swing it like a sword and keep swinging until it gives up on you and attacks me, okay? Lindsey?"

Sam could see the dark line of the rebar tremble in her hands, but she stood her ground. The spirit shifted another pace forward.

One more and it would be on her. Lindsey and the ghost stared at each other. "Lindsey, now!"

She dropped the bar.

She just opened her hands and let it fall. It clanged against the floor. She made no move to retrieve it, her eyes still fixed on the spirit. The ghost spasmed, knobs and limbs jerking under shapeless skin, and then it slowly closed the space between them. Lindsey never attempted to move.

Sam stared.

There wasn't much show, this time. It just took her. The length of iron rebar lay inches from where she hit the floor, and a body-length away from where Sam was still caged.

The inholding Sakis Voskos owned didn't have an address assigned or, nominally, public access, but Dean had the survey the librarian had turned up for him and a map of the surrounding parkland. He was finished at the library by early afternoon. The librarian, the only fully awake person he'd met in Huntsville, advised him to wait until the next day to seek out his long-lost uncle Sakis, as the drive was likely to take time and the weather up in the mountains could be unpredictable even in what was nearly May. Dean thanked her, topped off the spare gas cans, and headed out.

It took even longer than she'd estimated. Voskos's inholding was connected to the outside world only by fire and service roads, including one that he could see from the map had to exist but wasn't actually on it. He had to drive up and down a stretch of SR-9827 for a good hour before he found the turnoff.

When he did, he wished he'd hot-wired a truck and left his baby safe in town. The road was a washed-out track of gravel and bald clay, and reckoning by the topo map, ran for three miles before it reached the probable location of the ranch. He crept along it at five miles an hour.

The sun was sinking fast toward the mountains when he bumped to the end of the track, long orange rays skimming down the slopes to illuminate fence lines, sheds, and, built into the hillside, a dwelling.

He got out of the car and stood in the yard. Pens extended on either side of it, but there were no sounds or smells of animals anywhere. Hay feeders and watering troughs stood empty. In the house sitting in the middle, every window was dark and cold.

The place was abandoned.

Jacob was calling out frantically. Sam made some reply, too numb to register what. He barely felt it when he lost his grip on the walls this time and half fell down the shaft.
He sat in the cold at the bottom without a single thought in his head.

Afterward, the first sign that Lindsey was awake was weeping. Quiet, steady, wordless. Sam sat there for a long time unable to formulate a response, just hearing it. It wouldn't stop, the weeping. The inconsolable weeping of a child.

"Lindsey."

His only answer was a louder sob.

Sam tried to understand. He tried to believe that dropping the bar had been an accident, or perhaps the ghost's compulsion, and not the choice it had looked like.

"Lindsey."

She sobbed one more time, sucking in snot with a wet, tearing noise and managed a, "Sam."

"Lindsey, just... why?"

"I just wanted to go outside," she whispered. Then, louder: "You can't make me give that up. I won't let you!"

Sam sat with his head in his hands as she repeated it, eventually screaming. You won't take that away from me. You won't. You won't.

By the time she subsided into crying again, another voice had joined her, just moaning low and compassionate: Marian. Lindsey and Marian, crying in stereo.

Lindsey hiccuped, sobbed. "Is... Do you think God is punishing me?"

Sam didn't answer.

* * *

They listened to Lindsey's sanity disintegrate in the dark.

The weeping came and went. Sam wasn't even sure if she was sleeping. When he tried to talk to her, she'd reply, sometimes, with halting, random confessions: the $16 she stole out of her mother's purse. The shiny Lexus she clipped in a parking lot without stopping. Dropping bang-snaps down on a puppy that was always tied up in the next yard. Feeding seagulls rice at the beach.

But the rice thing was a myth. She'd read that somewhere. She'd never believed it anyway, that you could make birds' stomachs explode. She wouldn't have done it if she'd believed it.

Sam tried to convince her to give him the iron bar they'd freed. If he had that, if he had metal, he could remove the other three bars blocking the pipe. He could arm Jacob, and he could get into Lindsey and Marian's room to look for a way out in there, maybe get through to one of them. But Lindsey never responded to any of his attempts to bring the conversation around to the subject of their freedom.

Jacob still coughed when they talked. It sounded curiously dry; but then, coughs often did at the beginning of an illness. Sam gave him the next rat he killed. He wasn't sure he'd be able to keep food down, anyway.

The flu-like feeling in Sam's skin seeped down into his joints, and something started to happen to his thoughts. Past events kept bubbling to the fore, like something rotting at the bottom of a pond,
and each time it got a little harder to index their proper place in time. The structure of them was changing, too. Whether his dreams were starting to bleed into his thoughts or his thoughts were just becoming more dreamlike, he couldn't tell.

He had to do something physical, no matter the caloric cost, or risk falling down rabbit holes he might not get out of. Casting about for a form of exercise that might serve as a final bulwark against insanity, he discovered that he knew yoga. He had not known any before he'd jumped in the pit. Sam had always thought of yoga as being a spiritual practice, but apparently you could be incapable of spirituality by definition and still like it. Who knew.

Sometimes, as he did the poses, other memories leaked through. Just flashes: motel carpets. Sleepless nights. Prostitutes admiring his body. Watching his brother's body as he slept.

His arms kept giving out and dropping him on his face. Bet that never happened to the other him.

The ghost came for Jacob again. Without the iron, there was nothing he could do to stop it, of course. Sam didn't know whether the spirit actually cared about Jacob right now or if this was just another display of violence on its part. Didn't know how broken it wanted him before it moved in for the kill.

How much the others would have to suffer before it was satisfied.

"Lindsey." Sam kept his voice neutral as best he could. He was at the bottom of the vertical shaft, as close to her as he could get without climbing. "Please throw down the bar." Silence. "Didn't you hear the ghost when it came for Jacob? Didn't you hear him screaming? If he has iron, he won't have to go through that again." Silence. "You want the spirit to take you outside, right? You should give the bar to Jacob. If he can fight the ghost off, he won't take any trips away from you anymore."

Silence.

He tried a few more times with the same result. He was starting to leave the pipe when she spoke.

"We had a dog named Dinah."

He stopped. He didn't want to hear whatever tearful confession this was going to be, but if there was any chance of getting through to her, he had to listen.

"She was a Golden Retriever. She was fat. Fat and stupid. Old and fat and stupid. She'd eat anything. That's all she'd ever do, eat and sleep." Her voice was thick. "Cousin Eric was always over at our house, because Uncle Tommy was always drinking and hitting Marmee and Dad was always working and Mom was always resting. Eric was a liar. He always hated me, he always told lies, he tried to make everybody think I was bad."

Sam stared at the side of the pipe. It was too dark to see it.

"He said I fed Dinah things that would hurt her. He said I hit her paws and pulled her fur. He was a liar, she was old and sick. Old and sick and disgusting. She threw up blood. She peed everywhere. That whole house smelled like it, forever."

She was quiet for so long that Sam thought she was done, had gone back to sleep. Then he heard her sniff, long and wet. Her voice cracked when she asked, "Do you think this is Hell?"

It was pitch dark inside the shaft, but the edges of his reality blurred.
"We have got to have a plan." Jacob sounded a little raw, a little ragged. A lot edgy. Sam couldn't blame him; he'd just finished sleeping off the ghost.

"Yeah." Upstairs, Lindsey had moved on to muttering, mercifully too low to make out words. "I know."

"So what do we do?"

Sam kneaded the bridge of his nose. The tremor never left his hands anymore. The heat of fever just left his skin more sensitive to the cold. "If we had the iron bar, I could dig the other bars out. I think I could get up the pipe one more time and stay there long enough for that. But without it—Breaking the concrete with bones took hours, Jacob. I have no idea how many. A lot of hours."

Jacob was silent for a long interval. "What about my other plan?"

Sam dropped his hands in his lap. "What about it, Jacob? I can't make the ghost come to me. I've already tried, in case you hadn't noticed. Instead it just keeps—"

"Okay, okay, shit, sorry. Sorry."

Sam exhaled harshly. "No, I'm sorry. I'm—" Losing my grip. "Yeah. Sorry."

They sat like that for a while. Lindsey's conversation with herself was getting to him even though he couldn't hear what she was saying. Maybe it was worse for that. He kept his own voice down to avoid antagonizing her, which was increasingly easy to do. "How are you still sane right now?" he asked Jacob. "Like—hell, you've been down here longer than I have and you're still… together."

"Honestly?" Jacob paused. "Good, old-fashioned escapism."

Sam laughed, the sound surprised out of him. "Tropical beaches and underwear models?"

"Pretty much."

"Good deal."

After a minute, Jacob said, "I kind of… go away in my mind a lot." The confession was quiet. "With all the dark down here, it's easier to do than not, you know?" Sam knew. Sam really knew. "Growing up, I was always a bit of a neat-freak. Bethany was, like, polar-opposite, used to drive me crazy; I… well, I guess I like to be in control, to be honest. Get the feeling you do, too. Down here, we don't have any, so I think about the times in my life when everything went right, went exactly the way it was supposed to."

They were quiet for a minute. "I would push a small child into traffic for a shower right now," Jacob said.

The words were light, facetious, but still a direct hit on Sam's own worst dread of this place. He could take the slow starvation, maybe even the sensory deprivation to a point, but the filth—Sometimes, the dimness was a mercy: you couldn't see how bad it was. Sometimes that same dimness was the worst part: you couldn't be sure how bad it was. Because he'd been in Jacob's home, Sam had always felt like he knew him a bit, though he also knew that feeling might be illusory. One thing he was certain of was that Jacob was a fastidious guy.

He fetched the scraping knife he'd made. "Here." He passed it carefully through the grate. "Old
outdoorsman's trick: if you don't have enough water for a bath, scrape yourself down."

"Wow." The bone disappeared as Jacob took hold of it on the other side. "This is, like, razor-sharp, holy shit. Don't you want to keep it?"

"I can make another. It'll give me something to do."

"Thanks."

"I can hear you, you know," Lindsey said sharply. Sam jumped as her voice cut through the dark.

"Lindsey, we're just—" Jacob began.

"I know what you're doing. I can hear you down there, fucking—conspiring together."

"We're just talking about how to get out, Lindsey, how to get us all out—"

"Don't lie to me."

Sam had never heard a human being snarl like that. Every hair he had sat upright.

"You both think I'm so stupid. Stupid and helpless. Think you can just ignore me, think there's nothing I could ever do to you."

"Lindsey, listen to my voice," Sam said. "Focus."

He could hear her breathing all the way down here now, a guttural sound pulled up from somewhere deep in her belly. That feeling he sometimes got on a hunt when it was all about to go bad flooded through him.

"I will kill you, you freak," Lindsey said. Marian started to whimper. "You think you can leave me here? I'll kill you. I'll make it slow. I know how."

Sam abandoned Jacob where he was softly chanting "oh fuck" behind the grate and started for the pipe. "Lindsey, I'm coming. It's okay. Just— I'm right here, Lindsey, I'm coming—"

"Don't talk to me like you know me!"

If Sam hadn't already been in the pipe, relatively close, he would never have heard Marian say, weakly: "Lindsey."

The growl that crawled down the walls of the pipe was all the warning Sam got.

From above came an impact and a clang. Someone cried out. Someone else grunted and snarled. And then whoever had the worst of this fight began to scream.

Sam swarmed up the shaft. When he reached the top, he saw a figure in blue on top of another with long black hair. Marian's screams were like nothing else he'd heard out of her, and Lindsey was making grunting, wet noises that Sam's brain refused to parse.

"Stop! Lindsey, stop!"

Abruptly Marian's screaming became squealing, over and over as cloth tore and Lindsey's head jerked from side to side.

Lindsey had dropped the bar closer to the shaft, but Sam still couldn't reach it. He strained from his
shoulder to his fingertips, but it was too much distance to close. Marian's squeals were down to gurgles.

His hand found the chunk of concrete, and he threw it.

He couldn't see where exactly it hit Lindsey; it happened too fast and there wasn't enough light. But he saw her snap sideways under its impact and stop moving, and saw her bare foot go still against the floor. Underneath her, Marian was motionless already.

Like that, chaos had been replaced by silence.

Sam wasted precious seconds staring at them before he renewed his struggle to reach the rebar. The remains of the grating dug at his clavicle, his neck. Slapping around at the floor, his hand met bone. Femur. He grasped it, reached with it, snagged metal. Pulled. Lost it. Reached again. This time the bar rolled toward him.

He didn't really register bringing the iron down on the concrete, or the chunks of the stuff flying, or the surge of adrenaline to thrust one, two weakened bars up and out of the mouth of the pipe. As soon as the opening was big enough, he forced himself through.

The women lay still where the nearest wall met floor. Marian's face was hidden under Lindsey's shoulder; Lindsey was face-down on Marian. Neither one was moving. Marian's legs were splayed and Lindsey's lay over them. They might have looked like crash dummies, had the diameters of their limbs not been far, far too narrow. Something dark ran down what was left of Marian's clothes.

Sam took hold of Lindsey under her shoulders to lift her off of Marian. It was like handling driftwood. Her blond hair was stained putty-gray, but there was something darker at her temple, something warm and leaking and concave. Sam felt for her carotid, harder, then harder.

"No." He sat down. "No."

Her lower face was a mask of red.

Marian was slumped against the wall. Her top had been torn open and her lap was full of blood. Everything from the moment he'd heard Lindsey snap to when he'd thrown the concrete had seemed to happen so fast; but it must have gone on for some time, because so much of Marian's skin was missing.

Every bone in her showed. It was a miracle she'd held on as long as she had even before this. He didn't know what else to call it. Anything this horrific, God was usually involved somewhere.

Moving slowly, Sam crawled over to her. There was a deep crater in her throat. He couldn't leave her sitting like that. He reached out to take her shoulder in one hand, her ruined neck in the other to support her head. Gently he guided the corpse down to the floor.

He looked down at it and found it looking back.

Dean searched the ranch. The house, constructed half in an abandoned mine, had no electricity. There was a generator, but it had been drained and disconnected. Unlike Sid's house, which had been overflowing with pop culture nods and the flotsam of modern life, this one was devoid of personal effects. The stone walls looked like the masonry in pictures of the walls of Mycenae.

The pens and paddocks were empty. Large pieces of equipment, like the hay baler, were still in
place, but watering troughs were inverted on blocks and the hoof prints were faded. There was no lingering animal smell.

This place had been abandoned for weeks.

If it had been years, that might not have been as bad. A years-long absence would mean a years-long presence somewhere else, and that would be traceable. But this guy had pulled up stakes exactly long enough ago that he could be anywhere. The property, as far as Dean could tell, offered no clues about where he had been headed.

Dean had not been bullshitting about winning the geography bee. Geography had been his best subject in elementary school, and he'd gotten better at it with each passing year their father dragged them around the country. Central Utah was 2,400 miles from Rhode Island.

The air in the yard was shading from rose to blue when his phone rang. Mechanically, he pulled it from his pocket. It was Canby.

"Dean."

"What do you want?"

"A progress update."

A progress update. That was a good one. Dean would have to use that one sometime. "In our whole fucked up little ride together, you've never once been the one to call me, Canby, so what—" He stopped dead. "Is it Sam?"

Canby paused. "He's not doing well."

Dean forced himself to loosen his grip on the phone when the casing began to bow. "Anything you want," he said. "It's yours. You know I'm good for it, but find him now."

"I can't."

"I'm close, I can get this thing for you, but not without my brother, my sources—just—Please. I'm begging you, okay? Just let me save my brother!"

"You don't understand: I can't."

Dean dug the fingers of his other hand into his hair and pulled, pulled, pulled. "What are you talking about?"

Canby made a short, frustrated noise. "Dean, what did you think you were doing all this time? The magic we're working—it requires a power source, and that's you. Your bond. Your devotion. My part is to make ready the final sacrifice and observe certain rules of asceticism. Your part is to pass the trial you've undertaken, in order to be ready to undergo the ritual. You're on a path. A quest, if you like. It must be completed. There's nothing to work with, otherwise. If you want my help finding Sam, you have to finish this."

When Dean was silent, he went on, urgently, "Listen! This is going to work. I can feel it. I don't mean that like some coach giving a locker room pep talk; I mean that I can feel it, professionally. This potential that's building—it's strong. You do this, and I'll have what I need to get you back to your brother. I believe that. I really do."

Dean's voice shook, not wholly from anger. "You're just saying that so I won't ditch out," he said.
"Trying to keep me from tearing up your fucking geas and jumping ship, leaving you with nothing."

"Sure. But it's all still true. Thanks to that geas, you know it's true. I can't lie to you."

Perhaps he couldn't lie, but Dean didn't doubt that he could still deceive him. "'Final sacrifice,' you said. What is it?"

"Nothing you'd morally object to."

That was no answer. But it scarcely mattered one way or another if he couldn't deliver.

"Look," said Canby, and for the first time Dean could recall he sounded hesitant. "I'll see if I can think of something that might help you without compromising the magic. On top of it seeming like an adequate quest object for the job, I really do want 'my museum piece,' as you called it."

"Fine."

"Where are you?"

"Utah."

"I'll call if I have something."

"Fine."

Canby rang off. Dean stood in the deserted yard and looked out over the Uinta Basin. The moon was rising in the east. It was a waxing crescent.

Sam sat between the women. Lindsey was dead. Marian was not.

She should have been. She'd lost too much blood, and too much tissue, to survive. But then, she'd lost most of her body mass and her mind, and clung to life regardless. Now that she was on her back, he could hear her breathing, fast and shallow.

She'd spoken, before Lindsey had attacked her. Just the one word, but it had been an attempt at communication, so someone was still in there.

"Marian."

She hyperventilated up at the ceiling.

"Marian? Marian, can you hear me?"

He should take her hand, probably. Touch her somewhere it wouldn't hurt, try to deliver something like comfort, let her know she wasn't alone. He didn't. He'd done enough damage without touching anybody.

As best he knew how, he kept trying to get something, anything out of her. But she only lay there, panting shallowly like a hit-and-run dog.

A cowardly part of him was waiting. It seemed like this couldn't last long, not with wounds that size on a body that damaged. Nevertheless it showed no signs of stopping. She was obviously in agony, but she wasn't dying.
It fell to him, then. He wasn't getting out of it. He shut his eyes for a moment, like the coward he was, before he moved over to her.

It was hard to think of this body as someone. The shape of it, the mass of it, the colors were all wrong. It looked like a corpse from a mass grave. But it wasn't a corpse. Marian's eyes were wide, her chest bobbing with her rapid respiration, pain stark on her face. He swallowed. Pain. Think about the fact she was in pain.

He cradled her neck in the crook of his elbow and started to compress.

Her eyes went wider and she began to struggle. He constricted both sides of her carotid with steady, even pressure and started to count. Then he thought of the Frenchman in his cave, how it had taken him five minutes to count to 120.

Sam stopped counting.

Chapter End Notes

(I mean, sometimes you round a corner and hit a deer, so you know)
nothing is very much fun anymore

Chapter Summary

Dean was aware that this wasn't accomplishing anything. He just needed to feel close to his brother for a while.

Chapter Notes

Thanks once again to my beta Dimeliora. If any part of this chapter works (questionable), you can thank her for it.

Dean drove. He didn't know where he was headed, and he didn't particularly care. He just drove.

He wound up in an arroyo off a dirt track off a dirt track, nothing around but desert. The moon was far overhead, floating free in black sky. He put a blanket on the hood and the last of the Fleischmann's next to the blanket. Then he went around to the trunk and got Sam's duffel.

He was aware that this wasn't accomplishing anything. He just needed to feel close to his brother for a while.

He stared at the duffel's zipper. For over a year in that house with Lisa, his first and last thought of the day had been: *Sam is gone*. Those days would mount up, build on each other, sometimes without him even noticing until the exact moment when he couldn't deal for a second longer. Then the tarp would come off the Impala, and he would drive. Hadn't mattered where so long as he ended up away.

He'd never ended up away.

When he'd get it together enough to realize that, then he would stop. Sometimes he would drink. Always he would end up in this same position and performing this same calculus: needing to surround himself with anything left of his brother and just pretend for a little while, but not daring to. Because if he opened the bag like he wanted to and took out Sam's laundry, the smell of him would fade—and what if he never got Sam back, and he had to make it last? Couldn't do it. No matter how much he'd felt like he had to have the contact, the thought of those relics losing potency in the open air had made him sick. When reason had told him that the smell would be lost no matter what if he tried to preserve it too long, that just made it worse.

He couldn't live like this. Not ever again. Not after the year he'd just had of hoarding up all these last, irreplaceable traces and watching them trickle away regardless. He couldn't.

While Sam had been at Stanford, then at least he'd dared. Only a few times and far drunker than
this, but he'd done it, pressed his face into things of Sam's, gotten fuzzy enough to sort of believe he was really there. Every time, he'd woken up feeling like he'd swallowed poison.

And that had been when he'd thought Sam was okay.

So he couldn't touch the clothes. He knew he'd never be able to touch the clothes, knew he'd end up blowing his brains out if he ever actually took them out knowing the little brother smell was bleeding out of them with no clue how or whether he was going to be able to get more of it into them.

Suddenly it occurred to him, though, that there was that mp3 player. When he'd found it going through Sam's stuff back in Providence, he'd sworn he had to listen to it and see what was on there. Not that he'd meant it, of course, privacy and all; but yeah, he'd been curious. And it was a thing that was Sam's. Uniquely Sam's. More than his diary, more than his beaten-up paperbacks that dozens of people had probably put their hands all over before. Sam had bought the mp3 player, Sam had chosen the music on it, and Dean could listen to it for as long as he wanted and nothing would be lost.

Setting the whiskey aside, he opened the duffel.

He fumbled a bit digging the player out. Then the battery was dead, so he had to start up the engine and plug the device into the car charger before the postage-stamp screen came on.

While he waited for the player to boot, he wondered what was on it. Garth Brooks? JS Bach? Britney Spears? With a bit of a jolt, muted by the alcohol, he realized that he didn't actually know what kind of music Sam liked. Sam made fun of his tape collection, sure, but he'd never added anything to it of his own. Dean knew what music Sam had been raised on, and what Sam would veto, and what would send Sam to sleep or keep him awake, but he was holding his brother's personal use mp3 player in his hands and couldn't even venture a guess as to its contents.

There were only five tracks on the player. The longest was exactly an hour, the shortest eighteen seconds. Weird, but okay. Sam had loaded the oldest track on here in June of 2009, so he'd had it at least that long; given Dean had never seen it before Providence, though, it must have been something Sam listened to while he was running or working in libraries or something.

He dug around in the glove box until he came up with a pair of earbuds and pressed play.

Static. The hour-long song was static. Television static, it sounded like, and at first Dean thought maybe Sam had been analyzing it for a case; but the next track was static too, twenty-two minutes of it at a different pitch. The third and fourth were shorter loops of rain and what sounded like a fan. White noise. That actually fit with his guess that Sam maybe used this player while in libraries, researching, but it unnerved him that after discovering Sammy's secret iPod he still didn't know what kind of music his brother liked.

The fifth track started with a beep. It was a voice mail.

Lindsey and Marian were almost the same height. That surprised Sam; Marian had seemed so much smaller, but she was slightly taller than Lindsey and, at one point, had probably been heavier.

Sam tore strips from his t-shirt and wet them at a cracked ceramic pipe. He cleaned Marian first. She was in a camisole, which had offered little protection. The bites had removed parts of her trapezius and right bicep, as well as the area where her left pectoral would have been. There'd been
only bone beneath. With the quantity of skin she'd lost, there wasn't a lot he could do for her, but he swabbed what parts of her were exposed.

Next he straightened Lindsey's arms and hands at her sides. She was wearing scrubs. Blue medical scrubs over a knitted sweater. With her hair darkened by months of imprisonment, she looked more like Cindy McClellan than like the other Lindsey he'd known. It took five trips back and forth to the pipe, wringing out the cloth and wetting it again, to clean the blood from around her mouth and chin.

When he'd finished, Sam sat for a long time looking at them.

They didn't look peaceful. They just looked dead.

What was it Lindsey had said? Never trust a junkie, never trust someone who promised that they'd changed, and never trust someone who thought they were your salvation. It was hard to argue with two corpses that he'd made.

Lindsey had said a lot of things, though. She'd said that she was normal. She'd said the person here before Sam had died eating his own feces, and she'd said it with relish. She'd said she didn't know why the ghost cared about her memories of home. She'd said her junkie cousin was a liar, and that she'd never fed poison to her Golden Retriever.

She'd said all of that, and she'd still sounded certain in her loathing.

She'd tortured animals, and he was pretty sure she'd taken that sweater from Marian, and this was her fault, and she was judging him?

Fuck anyone who was that sure they had it right. Fuck anyone who was that convinced their vices were less vicious. Fuck anyone who could take every screwup he'd ever made and twist it into a personal betrayal, who could find a way to make every single thing about him about them. Fuck anyone who still held a grudge because he'd gone to Flagstaff when he was nine, but would go to Hell and expect to be thanked for it. Fuck anyone who'd spit on him for going to college and then lock him in a cage to choke when they'd had their fill. Fuck anyone who'd throw him in the garbage because he'd once liked a Thanksgiving dinner that didn't have them in it. Fuck anyone who brought him back from the dead just to tell him he couldn't be trusted, anyone who dragged him back in and waited for him to blow it. Because here they were again: he'd blown it.

Fuck anyone who called him something to be put down and didn't even bother to follow through.

The anger left him as fast as it had come. He didn't have the resources to sustain it anymore. As always, there wasn't much left without that to puff him up.

He stared at the pit in Lindsey's head. He had hundreds, probably thousands of deaths at his feet. He'd taken more pleasure in inflicting pain than Lindsey would have been able to comprehend. He couldn't say he'd never poisoned anybody. He'd had his teeth in a woman's neck before, and he hadn't even been starving. Lindsey Chase had been a sadist and probably a killer, but he'd been the one to tell her he didn't care what she'd done. Even if she had deserved this, she'd never deserved it from him.

Now here he sat. All the hours he'd wasted down here longing for his brother to come—what would Dean think if he showed up and saw him knee-deep in corpses again?

Would he even be surprised?

*Sammy spilled the milk, Sammy smashed the window, Sammy fucked his brother, Sammy killed*
ladies, Sammy broke the world.

Lucifer had recognized the effect Sam had on people from the jump. It had been terrible to hear it in Jessica's mouth: *I was dead from the moment we said hello.* Still, it could have been worse. Sam wasn't sure why the Devil hadn't come as the one whose innocence Sam had stolen first. Perhaps it had been his attempt at mercy.

Dean listened to the voice mail once. Then he listened to it again. By the time he'd listened to it a third time, he still had no idea what to do with it other than crack the seal on a new fifth, so that was the route he went with.

He wanted the music player away from him. He'd have liked to run it over, salt it and burn it or maybe just burn it. For several reasons, however, he couldn't. So he wasn't really certain where that left him. He'd thought that all he wanted was to wrap himself up in his brother for a few hours, but he hadn't known what that meant.

Still didn't.

He couldn't date this message. Obviously he couldn't; he'd never sent it. But there was a fairly narrow window in which his saying it could have been plausible, and it was time he kept boxed away. He'd consciously and deliberately put it into storage around the time he'd stabbed Zachariah in the brain. He'd thought Sam had done the same. Apparently he'd been wrong.

If someone had asked him in the months after Ilchester whether his brother deserved Hell for his mistakes, Dean would have said no, instantly. As bad as it got between them, his rational mind stayed clear on that. But there had sometimes been an ugly, human part of Dean that had considered that he hadn't deserved Hell, either, and he'd still gotten it, and had wanted to know why Sam should get any better.

But then. Then Sam had actually gone.

Dean didn't know what the fuck this message meant, much less that Sam had kept it on a tiny device that played nothing else but static. Couldn't even grapple with that right now. What he did know was that if he failed, there was every chance Sam would die believing that Dean had said it.

Jesus. *This entire time.* This entire time, he'd believed that.

*It wasn't me. It wasn't me, Sammy; it wasn't even— Most of it I never even thought.*

He needed to hear something that wasn't his own voice promising his brother death, so he reached into the cassette tape box and fumbled one blindly into the deck. "Enter Sandman" started. He went to punch the tape right the hell back out again, but stopped. After a moment's deliberation, Dean left the tape where it was, took the bottle, and climbed out of the car. Fuck it. No, he wasn't drunk enough for the Black Album, but after that voice mail, he meant to be.

"Was this why you ran off again? Huh?"

No reply from the empty space beside him on the hood. Dean shut his eyes.

Little as he liked the thought of Sam in captivity somewhere, there was a corner of his mind that kept returning, like an animal licking a wound, to the fact that *taken* meant *hadn't left.* No logical part of Dean's brain believed that if Sam ever wanted out, he'd do it by pulling a vanishing act on the job. It wasn't even like Sam had said or done anything since he got his soul back to indicate he did want out, that he'd felt Dean's eyes on him or Dean's thoughts or Dean's wanting and he
couldn't fucking take it anymore. No indication that that part of their relationship was even on his mind.

It was just that the last time Dean had asked—not with words; neither of them had ever asked for that with words—Sam hadn't answered. Or, he'd answered by not answering, by rerouting every conversation to the Devil and how they were going to beat him, by focusing exclusively on the job, by angling his body away and looking anywhere but at Dean until it had been time to look right at him and say, *You know I'm not coming back, right?*

Not that Sam had been cool toward him, in that stained-glass window between Dean's *no* to Michael and Sam's *yes* to Lucifer. Anything but, and Christ he'd been beautiful, despite looking just as terrible as he had the whole year what with sleeplessness kicking his ass and alcohol bloating his face. Didn't matter. All that had done was underscore what Dean had already known, which was that it had never been about what his brother looked like.

That night when they'd been driving back from the place where Dean had killed Zachariah and sealed Adam's fate, he'd felt Sam's eyes on him in the car. It was like the rush of oxygen after eighteen months of suffocation. Even now Dean couldn't tell whether that was the first time there had been air or the first time he'd opened his mouth, but either way, there he'd been, gasping.

He should have known better than to ask, though. If ever there'd been an epoch when their relationship had not required complications, the run-up to Armageddon surely qualified. Sam hadn't needed that. *Dean* hadn't needed that. But he hadn't been able to help himself, either, not when Sam just looking at him from the passenger seat could make him feel like a god despite the planet being completely fucked. Not when it felt like Sam's faith in him was the only thing making him exist at all.

But in all the weeks leading up to Detroit, Sam had never touched Dean, so Dean couldn't touch Sam. Silently, almost hesitantly, Sam had at long last drawn that one line around himself.

It was funny. In the months before Stanford, Dean had done much the same thing: tried to make Sam want to stay, tried to take what he could while he still had it. Sam hadn't said no then. But a part of Dean, after a year with Lisa, was maybe finally starting to understand that Sam had never thought that he was leaving *for good* back then, not really. Not Dean. The Cage had been different.

Sam's mercy always had had a way of setting Dean back on his heels.

Dean drank. The stars turned. James Hetfield dubbed him unforgiven.

"I don't know what to do here, Sammy." Time was running out, and Dean didn't know the next play, didn't even know what team he should be on. He'd vowed when he'd got him back he was never gonna fail his baby brother again, so how was he back here again so soon?

He'd always known, in some part of him, that his good intentions weren't good for anything, but he'd still thought it would be longer before he fucked it all up again.

"'M sorry. 'M sorry. I'll even find a way to stop wanting you, if you'll just come home."

What the hell. Dean had lied to Death to get his way; lying to a little brother who wasn't even there wasn't much of a leap.

When he'd been fifteen, Sam had gotten into a fight with their father. Who knew what about; didn't matter, really. The only things that mattered about it had been the ballooning emotions Sam hadn't known what to do with and the look on Dean's face. The sheer force of his feelings always ended
up rendering him tongue-tied, back then, every word out of his mouth making things worse. So Sam had done what he often did when he felt like he needed to burst but didn't know how, and taken off running.

It hadn't worked that night. It never got the chance to. Before he could run far enough to get his breath back, Dean had been there. He'd caught him and they'd gone down in the gravel and Sam had ended up held back against Dean's lap, still struggling. He'd fought bodily, but Dean had held on no matter what. Sam had kicked, and he'd bitten, and he'd scratched, and he'd still been ugly-crying when Dean had worked him through it and wiped Sam's come on his belly, a broad palm print on his thin stomach. Then just their breathing, harsh in the cold. Dean's nose pressed into the space behind Sam's ear. Dean's chest moving up and down, his arms still locked around Sam's middle.

Sam had hated him just then.

Whose fault was it, though, that Dean held on like that? Sam had spent years angry at their father for thrusting responsibility for his youngest onto his eldest, and maybe the man deserved it. But John Winchester hadn't been the one who, when Dean's needs started to keep him out late, had looked for a way to keep his interest closer to home. That had been Sam.

All the girls Dean had brought back, all the times Sam had listened. All the pisses he'd taken while his older brother was in the shower. All the nights he'd pressed close in shared beds and pretended to be asleep. The panties he'd stolen from a laundromat in Charlotte, and the boxers he'd mixed up with Dean's accidentally-on-purpose. The push and pull of knife practice and hand-to-hand that was the closest thing he knew to a dance. Sam had thought he'd found a way to do an end-run around all those girls that suddenly took up so much of his brother's attention, but now he knew that all he'd done was reveal another of the things wrong with him, which meant another thing Dean would try to heal. Dean had tried with his mouth and his hips and his hands, the balm of touch on Sam's raw, teenaged emotions. And, later on, on his grief.

So every time Sam screwed up, Dean was there, because Sam had made sure that he would be. The bigger the screw-up, the tighter Dean held. Eventually the screw-ups had reached Biblical proportions, and so had the penalty Dean paid.

Carrying Lucifer into the pit had not been an appealing solution. At least he'd known, though, that whether it worked or not, he'd never have to worry about letting Dean down again.

But Dean had brought him back, because that was what Dean did. He held on, and let Sam drag him down. If Sam took the rest of the world down, too, that was a price that Dean would pay.

And now, here they were.

The Devil had warned him: *Things are never gonna change with you.* Sam had seen and felt the truth of it, but he'd still thought that it was about the Devil. That once Sam had disrupted fate by boxing him up, he'd be fine. It might be a long road, but he'd believed that he could do it, this time; he could make his amends and do more good than harm.

Apparently not.

Dean made inroads on the bottle. The tape flipped over, repeated. He sang along in snatches. He was aware that he was getting sloppy and pathetic, but what did that matter, really, without Sammy around to see it?
The stars were so fucking clear. How many times had they done this? Just sat and looked up, in the stillest part of the night? Even when things got rough between him and Sam, they still seemed to wind up with this—them, the car, and the naked cosmos. It always helped.

Maybe helped wasn't the right word. It did something, though. Quieted something. Dean remembered a night not long after they'd dealt with Samhain, when he'd been perpetually on edge and the only sleep he'd been getting had been in the car and Sam had seemed about as remote as the moon. So much shit crowding up between them. Ruby, principally; Dean hadn't known then that the bitch was feeding him, like that was anybody else's job, but he'd known she was a demon and to this day he didn't see why Sam couldn't have just followed his fucking lead on that one. He'd known what she looked like, what she really looked like, and Sam hadn't; he'd known what things that looked like that liked to do, and Sam hadn't. And then there'd been that handprint. He'd felt Sam looking at it, like it was some kind of betrayal, like Dean was supposed to have, what, kept himself pure for him or something down there.


Dean had woken up to the driver's side door closing in the middle of what had eventually turned out to be Nevada. It wasn't a scheduled stop. They hadn't discussed it. For damn sure Sam hadn't consulted him first. After a minute, he'd gotten out and joined Sam on the hood.

It had been still. Silent. Cold as balls, like now; their breath had made smoke in the starlight. They'd been way the hell behind on laundry, and sitting that close together, that had been apparent. There'd been no beer in the cooler, and they probably wouldn't have drunk it together if there had been. Sam's face had tilted back at the same inclination as the Milky Way, over-sharp features open and blank. There'd been a smudge of something over the column of his neck.

The act of staring up at the sky had solved nothing, then as now. At some point, though, Dean had begun to think that maybe that was the point.

The thumbnail-crescent of moon seemed to wane as it passed the meridian above. Out here in the desert, its light was nowhere near enough to eclipse the stars. If he kept his eyes on them, he could almost pretend the empty space beside him was occupied.

He slipped his hand into his pants. He just… needed this. Just for a little while.

He hadn't let himself have it since Sam had so gently turned him away; everything had been shaded with the ugly question that raised: that maybe Sam had never wanted it. But he needed this now. He'd always been able to go on better afterward.

That was the main thing. If it could make him clearer, make him better, then that was reason enough.

What should he think about? There'd been a time when he'd gotten Sam spread out on this very hood, in panties, God knew where the kid had gotten them—but somehow the fact that it had been right here made it harder to fall into it.

Chattanooga after his twenty-first birthday? That had long been a spank-bank favorite. He'd gotten the worst of a bad hunt, so allowances had been made, and by the time Dad put away the med kit, Dean had been warm with whiskey. Sam, though. Sam had been pissed. He'd been silently furious while Dean got sewn up. He'd stayed silent when Dad retired to his own room down the hall, and he'd made sure Dean stayed silent when he bore him to the floor—to the floor, bed three feet away—with his forearm shoved in Dean's mouth. He'd been furious when he'd clamped Dean's thighs
between his knees and rutted his cock against and between them; Dean had been able to tell because fury was the only thing that made Sam cry back then, and it had been too cold for what had hit his spine to be sweat. Sam's cockhead had battered at the place up behind his balls and Dean had blamed the fact that he'd come like that on the alcohol.

He hadn't known at the time that Sam had already applied to colleges.

Maybe that time back when Sam had been wound so tight Dean had taken up chewing gum for a while just to keep from grinding his teeth. Sam digging in the backseat for something, snapping that it wasn't there. Dean snapping back, because it fucking was; no, it wasn't; yes, it was, and Sam's nose had been smashed into the seat with his jeans around his thighs while Dean held his arms wrenched up behind, and Sam had let out a horrified sound when Dean had used his tongue but he'd pressed back, and Jessica would have still been decomposing if there'd been a body left to bury.

Later, then. Fall of 2007? Sam had been trying to save him, but Dean had still been laughing him off. Sam had gotten drunk off some Everclear back at the room while Dean had been hitting up a bar, and all his movements had been slow. Slow when Dean had yelled at him; slow when Dean had massaged his shoulders and kissed his neck; slow when Dean had spread him out and stripped him. There'd been something so entrancing about it. Wasn't often Sam let himself get divorced from his body like that.

That shudder that had run through him when Dean had pressed his mouth to the back of Sam's neck: had it really been a good shudder?

There had been a lot of times, actually, that year before his deal had come due. After all, he'd already been going to Hell. Early on there'd been some, back when Sam had still thought he could win it and needed to convince Dean as violently as possible, but it was hard to forget even this drunk that in the end, Sam hadn't.

For the rest, the ones when they'd been down to the wire and both of them doing a piss-poor job pretending they didn't know how it was gonna go—what Dean had taken at the time for enthusiasm, with the distance of years looked a lot like desperation. Every time they'd come together in that year and Dean had thought it wasn't awful for Sam—in hindsight, it occurred to him that maybe it had been.

After Hell, they just hadn't.

Little wonder, then, that Sam had declined to give Dean free run of his body in his last few months before Detroit. That he'd done it in a manner so careful not to reproach had felt like a reproach in itself.

So: no memories. Fantasy, then.

Dean's dick was long since limp, but that thought sent a pulse of something warm through him. Pure fantasy. Think about what he'd do in a perfect world when he got Sammy back.

First off, he'd take Sam someplace safe. A cabin, maybe, something Dean could ward up and make impregnable. Put it on the lip of the Grand Canyon, this cabin; what the hell, two fantasies for the price of one. Give it a fireplace. Give it a bearskin rug. Give it steaks in a pan and the smell of apple shampoo wafting from the shower. Give it Sam's face, open and unlined.

In this fantasy of his, Sam still wanted him, so when Dean boxed him in against the kitchen sink and put his nose into the shower-damp spot below his ear to breathe in deep, Sam turned and took
his face between those huge palms. It was a fantasy grounded to some degree in reality, though, not much point if it wasn't, so when Dean went to strip Sam, Sam would be shy about it. The one act he always was shy about, and it was that. So he'd duck his chin and not meet Dean's eyes and his throat would work so pretty when he swallowed, but he'd let Dean, he'd let Dean lay him out and lay him bare. And he'd reach up, and Dean would go, into his arms, and cover him.

_And nothing else matters._ All the girls he'd had in this car, he'd never used this song with them.

It would be warm. It would be safe. There'd be no wall in Sam's head and no pictures in Dean's. Dean wouldn't think about Ben calling him a deadbeat dad, and Sam wouldn't secretly listen to his brother threaten to kill him on a loop—

Dean broke off, gasping. The gasping turned to something else; the better part of a fifth of Old Crow made it hard to classify what. Either way, when he finally peeled himself off the hood and got back in the car, he ended up hunched over his middle, every breath like a punch to the solar plexus.

He pulled the blanket tight around himself, trying to get warm. For all the times they'd watched the stars on it, it didn't smell like either of them.

Too much fresh air.
the trial

Chapter Summary

Dean meets a cyclops.

Sam meets a Wall.

Chapter Notes

This chapter... I'm not sure it even makes sense, never mind whether it's effective or not. But I just. I can't fucking look at it anymore. How's that for a sales pitch.

**CW:** non-graphic harm to animals; recollection (of sorts) of noncon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A room, gray and square. In the middle, an electric chair. Nothing else.

The door opened. Sam walked in, sat in the chair, strapped himself down, and flipped a switch, and Dean woke up gasping.

He was in the car, freezing his nuts off. The engine was still running but starting to chug. Metallica was still playing, Hetfield and Ulrich turned down low: *It's the beginning of the end.* Dean reached out and slapped off the radio. Fuck *Ride the Lightning.*

In the quiet, the sound that had woken him seeped in through the doors: *Baa. Baaa. Baaaaaa.*

He staggered out of the car. It took a minute to get the door open; the flock of sheep that engulfed the Impala were an impediment. They flowed around it without concern, heads bobbing, jaws busy with desert shrubs. Dean looked around. His bladder was very full.

As he was trying to decide whether it would be rude to piss on a sheep, a sharp barking interrupted him and he found himself pinned against his own automobile by a Great Pyrenees the size of a golf cart. "Whoa, whoa, whoa!"

Before he could start seriously considering his defensive options, someone whistled overhead and the dog bounded off. Dean looked up. A couple of guys stood on the top of the ravine; they looked Peruvian or Bolivian or something. They watched until the man-eating dog was trotting up a thin trail cut into the hillside, and then they disappeared over the wall of the arroyo.

It took a second for Dean's brain to catch up.

"Hey. Hey!" he shouted in desperation. After a second, a face reappeared over the ridge. "Are these
They were not the Peruvians' sheep. They belonged to a large-scale rancher, some white guy who employed them to graze this flock on public trust lands he leased for the purpose. He had others. It was an annual process; every spring, they would take the sheep, driving them through the mountains to follow forage as summer kicked into gear and water vanished at lower elevations. Thanks to the cold winter, spring turnout had been a little late this year.

How did they know where to go? They had a route, a schedule. Who made the routes and schedules? They didn't know. The government, probably.

Did all herdsmen do this, abandon their winter homes to live as nomads all season?

Oh, yes. Very common.

They gave him breakfast, which Dean consumed gratefully. He offered them the remains of the whiskey, which, after watching him wince every time the sun bowled a particularly direct hit down his optic nerve, they politely declined. Then he got out the spare gas can and drove to Salt Lake City.

In an archive of the SLC main library, Dean found his appreciation for librarians soaring to new heights as a young man in a short-sleeved button-down helped him quickly and efficiently navigate Utah public trust lands records. These included grazing permits, which showed that Athanasius Voskos leased an allotment south of Route 29 from spring till fall, but did not include grazing schedules, which would tell him where a given band of sheep was supposed to be at any given time. Since whether records were public or not had not really been pertinent to Dean's life since some time before his twelfth birthday, this was more an inconvenience than a problem.

Livestock brands were also public, registered at the county clerk's office and compiled into a database. In stark contrast to Sid's, Sakis Voskos's house had provided only negative clues as to its occupant's personality, so the brand mark he had registered was the first data point Dean had on what went on in Voskos's mind.

It was a walking I.

Sam held the rag he'd used to wash the corpses beneath the stream of water. It was all that Lindsey had boasted, a ceramic pipe running along the wall and leaking copiously from a joint. Insects in a quantity he could only have dreamt of hours ago scattered when he wrung out the rag. Water and protein: a veritable cornucopia. He did not eat; he did not drink.

The light was dim in here. The ecto was losing its glow as if dying. Above, out of his reach, the last visible thing was a yellow plastic tube running across the room at a random angle before the ceiling was lost in blackness. Below, Sam squeezed the rag, filled it, squeezed it. All the liquid that spattered from it was lost in darkness, so if it ever ran clear, he couldn't see.

He stood rinsing it for a long time.

He did go to the door Lindsey had mentioned. He had to, for Jacob if nothing else. It stood at the end of the part of the chamber where the ceiling was low, past a pit stinking of excrement and clogged with bones. It was metal, featureless, flush in its frame with no handle. Like she'd said: it might as well have been a wall. He inserted a bone shim into the hairline crack between the door and its frame and pried. The bone broke. The door stayed shut.
There was a buzzing in his head, like what came before his seizures but unlike. It didn't make him feel fear. It didn't make him feel anything.

Jacob must have heard him returning back downstairs. He was calling out, urgently, over and over. The words didn't penetrate. Sam shoved the length of rebar he had brought down with him through a slot in Jacob's grate, lay down in the alcove, and closed his eyes.

Dean parked the Impala off a fire road north of I-70, tarped her, and screened her. Voskos' assigned grazing route ran basically south to north, and from low elevation to high. It had some flexibility built in, but the essence of it was that his sheep must traverse some sections more quickly than others to comply with land management guidelines designed to prevent overgrazing and protect water sources. Currently, he should be in a valley not quite halfway to Route 29.

This parking spot was marginally farther from that location than Dean could have gotten coming from the north, but he'd spent the night before looking at topo maps. If he approached from the north, he would be descending to meet the cyclops. That would preserve his energy for a confrontation, but if he were wounded in the fight, he might not be able to make the climb back out. This way, elevation change would work with him to get out as fast as possible afterward; he'd be picking up their trail about three quarters of the way in, so he wouldn't lose time searching even if Voskos was off-schedule; and when he made it back to Baby, she'd be ready to haul ass, pointed right at West Virginia.

He tilted his face up to the sky. It was cloudless but cold, with the morning sun still burning frost off of meadows. There was a wind out of the north. It would be a bit over a day's hike to where the grazing schedule said Sheep Band 2243 should be, a day's hike back out. There was a limit to how much he could carry and still move as fast as he needed to, so he'd just have to hope the weather held.

He was all too aware that he was walking into this without a plan and with everything riding on it. He had no idea what kind of tricks this cyclops would be able to pull, didn't have any idea how to kill it short of feeding it to its own sheep. Didn't have anything, really, but the element of surprise. But he was going to do it anyway, because he was out of time for anything else.

He'd done some digging the day before. With the first cyclops, once he'd known where to look, its activities had lit up like a string of Christmas lights running straight from the steel mill to Eve. We all feel it, you know, Sid had told him. Her call. Dean had dreaded linking a similar body count to Sakis Voskos—but part of him, God help him, had been praying for it, too. At least that might have provided some clue as to what this cyclops was doing, what it was capable of. What he was walking into.

But there was nothing. No suspicious disappearances, deaths, omens, or strange happenings corresponded either to Voskos's arrival in 1893 or to Eve being raised from Purgatory at the end of January. Or, if they did, they were too discreet to find, masked under the deaths and disappearances of humanity being human.

Dean shouldered his pack and set off north.

Plink. Plink.

His fingers found the wall. It was cool, rough. Concrete? Or stone?

"Count your sins."
Sam righted himself. Before his eyes was the black skirt of a cassock. He looked up. A bearded face looked down. Father Reynolds.

"You can't give me absolution."

"Who's offering?"

Sam looked about himself. An orange light waxed and waned in the darkness. A candle? It would have to be, he supposed.

"Count your sins." Father Reynolds' chair creaked slightly when he leaned back. "Do you need me to get you started?"

Plink. Plink. It had to be water, making that sound; blood was thicker, and made a different one.

"You promised her so many things," said Father Reynolds. "The worst part, you know, is that she'd started to believe you."

"Who?"

"Have you forgotten already? So soon?" Sam rubbed at his temples. There was pressure there, almost a buzzing, almost static. Father Reynolds continued. "Or is it just that it's become difficult to tell them apart?"

The light off in the darkness elongated, pulled like taffy. Was it hard to tell them apart?

Yes. Yes, it was.

"That's all right. We'll count them together."

"My brother," Sam said, a flare of the light.

"Oh, yes. Your brother. Certainly your brother."

"No, I— I need to find my brother."

Father Reynolds's hands rubbed over his knees. "Well, now. That is one of the questions we will take up."

Sam found that he was holding a red thread. Father Reynolds leaned down. "Are you ready to count?"

Smoke.

It was difficult to see, at first. Clouds had moved in late the afternoon before, and by morning the sky had been leaden. Against the gray, the plume of white was diffuse and uncertain. Soon, though, Dean could smell it. It made the air taste colder.

He crested a ridge and looked down into the valley.

It was beautiful, even with the sky looking more like March than nearly May. Early wildflowers dotted the young grass rising over last year's dead straw, their colors vivid beneath the overcast sky; a creek ran down to the valley floor, and small vernal ponds stood in hollows, fringed in green. Against such a backdrop, the sheep flock spread over the hillside could scarcely have been more idyllic.
On his belly on the ridge, Dean shed his pack and pulled out the binoculars. The shoulder he'd dislocated ached in the cold. He focused on one of the nearer sheep, and the pink on its flank resolved into a painted brand. A walking I.

He scanned the valley, but the source of the smoke was hidden behind a rise. He checked his watch: 1:00 p.m. One in the afternoon seemed a little early to be making camp. Voskos could be cooking lunch, of course, but the Peruvian herders he'd met had had a camp stove—open fires were prohibited. Besides which, there wasn't that much wood around. Whoever had made the fire would have had to go to some trouble to do it.

Dean looked for the dogs. He found one, a dingy white guardian ranging back and forth along the hillside behind the flock, alert for threats and intruders. Which Dean was. He didn't relish what he was about to do, but if the dog discovered him, it would raise the alarm. It was what it was for. He reached for the crossbow he'd brought for this purpose.

He stopped to verify that the dog was down permanently—who knew, after all, if a cyclops' sheepdog was an ordinary dog—before he advanced to the next, lower ridge. Creeping up behind the cover of a juniper bush, he finally laid eyes on the deathless shepherd.

A small canvas tent stood at the base of the hill Dean was on, a pack mule tethered behind it. There was still no sign of a second dog; most bands had at least two, the Peruvians had said, but then again, most bands had at least two herdsmen, too. The tent was set near one of the shallow vernal ponds.

The fire was farther off, at the top of a rise fifty or sixty yards from the pond. Sakis Voskos stood before it, his back to Dean. A brown ram was tethered to a stake nearby, straining against the line.

Dean brought the binoculars back up quickly, sweeping for the dog. No sign of one. He assessed the hillside between him and the tent. There was cover, just enough if he moved quickly. Voskos had yet to turn around.

A beautiful possibility bloomed in Dean's mind. He didn't need the cyclops dead; he just needed the Brand, and he was not too proud to take it and run.

Keeping the crossbow ready and darting from bush to bush, Dean descended to the tent. He put his back to the canvas wall and stole a look around the corner. Voskos hadn't moved. Dean ducked into the tent.

He didn't know how long he had, but fortunately there wasn't much to search. Bed roll, pack, saddlebag. He patted down the bedroll. Nothing. He emptied the pack, palpating the nylon compartments to be sure he didn't miss anything. The only metal there was an aluminum cook set. He opened the saddlebag. His fingers found a mass of what he realized just barely in time were bells, crude-looking bronze bells affixed to leather harnesses; Dean settled them back down very carefully, stealing a glance behind him, and concluded his investigation of the saddlebag with as little movement as possible. But still nothing.

His pulse hammered in his throat. It had to be here. It hadn't been at the ranch; he'd checked, thoroughly, so it had to be here. He didn't know why Voskos would carry it, why he had it at all when he clearly used modern paint brands, but—

The ram gave a baa that began as a low gargle and rose to a sharp sound of panic and fear. It stopped Dean in his tracks before the shepherd's voice did.

"It isn't in there, hunter. And it won't work. Not on you."
Dean withdrew from the tent slowly. Voskos still stood with his back to him, doing something in the fire. He was a solidly built man, with hair the same color as the clouds hanging in grizzled locks about his head. The ram was still straining to get away, but Voskos made no movement toward it.

Dean kept the crossbow trained on Voskos's back, but did not fire. He doubted a silver arrow would kill it, and he might need the shot later. "How do you know what I'm looking for?"

"You told Sideris. I heard his passing; I expected your coming. If you would hunt a cyclops, you should mind your Homer. He told of how our cousin Polyphemus cried out to us, 'Nobody has blinded me!' and how we heard and answered him, though we were nowhere near."

Telepathy. Great. Nothing Dean loved better than a monster that could get inside your head. Voskos bent and pulled something from the fire, inspecting the end of it, and even from a distance, it was clear now what it was. The ram snorted and yanked its head.

Voskos turned. "We waited for you. After so much time and effort spent looking for it, I thought you might want to watch."

Dean approached slowly. He nodded toward the brand iron—*the* brand iron, seemingly, though he could neither see nor sense any power in it. "What's so special about it?"

"A beast I give my mark with this will never stray from me. Not ever, nor may any man steal it away."

"Is that all?"

Voskos's eyes, like Sid's, protruded. They were very green. "Yes. That is all."

With the crossbow in his left, Dean drew a combat knife with his right. "If you felt your buddy Sid go out," he said, "then you know I'm the one who sent him on his way. He was killing people to try to get mommy to love him, but you? You I've got no reason to kill. All I want is the Brand. We can both walk away from this."

"You should be grateful to me. For millennia, I've put it to benigner use than Jehovah's sheepdog Jabal ever did. Not that it made any difference, in the end. His flock still swelled and swallowed up too many others." Voskos returned the brand to the fire, ignoring the ram and its fright. "Do you know what too many sheep do?"

"Nibble you to death?"

Voskos straightened and looked out over the valley and his flock. "Yes. That is exactly what they do." The wind lifted a hank of his hair. "Like a plague of locusts, they strip the land bare. They have no concept of holding back to safeguard the future; they simply keep feeding where they're led. Under the eye of an unskillful shepherd, or an unmindful one, they will destabilize mountainsides, stamp rivers to mud, turn pastures to deserts. Sheep are one of the most destructive species on the planet." Voskos returned his gaze to Dean. "Jehovah chose his emblem well."

"Yeah, well, I'm not batting for his team, but I'm not seeing how you monsters are any better, either. You wanna know about mindless hunger, ask a werewolf. And lately? There's getting to be too damn many of you."

Voskos laughed. "Yes, there are, aren't there?"

"We know she's building an army." Dean closed another few paces up the hill. "Another freak who
likes to hear himself talk told us. What's Mommy Dearest got you doing for her?"

"Not a thing."

"Bullshit. It's all monsters on deck, Cousin Sid already said so. What's your part? Making evil cheese?"

Dean was close enough, now, that he could see Voskos's face split in a smile. "Do you know, Dean, how a shepherd manages his flock?"

"Seems to me the dog does all the work."

"Ah! The dog, yes. Descendant of the wolf, man's tame predator. Don't ask why the sheep flee the dog. Everyone knows why the sheep flee the dog. Better ask: why do the sheep run to me?"

The knife in Dean's hand was ceramic. He didn't know whether this cyclops could pull the same tricks with metal that the last one had, but he knew there was nothing in the lore about any of them having special affinities for glass. "Because you feed them?"

"They run to me to save them." Once more Voskos removed the Brand from the fire and inspected its color, and this time he appeared satisfied. He faced Dean again. "My young cousin dealt in fire and iron. I, in fear and safety. I understand prey animals: how to drive them, how to tend them. How to merge separate minds running scared into a docile fold that can be harvested at will. How to keep them from undoing their masters. Our mother has not yet asked anything of me, Dean, because I am not for the fight. I am for after."

Voskos reached for the ram and took it by the horns. Freed from its tether, it began to struggle in earnest. Voskos held it easily.

"I am one of her eldest; she loves me well. She sends me gifts from all nations and bids me be ready." The ram's thick neck strained as it tried to thrash its head."This one is from Nunavut. Do you like him?"

Dean looked at the ram that Voskos held, really looked, and saw: something else.

"No!"

He started to run, but it was much too late.

The Brand pressed down onto smooth horn; the Brand pressed down onto human skin. The eyes were black slots in balls of solid gold; they were medium-brown, and the whites showed stark around them. The cyclops held a ram by its horn. It held a young man by the hair, and he screamed as the iron burned him.

He screamed until he didn't. Voskos rocked the brand iron against the skin, against the horn, and bit by bit the man settled and submitted until all that Dean could see was the ram. Voskos lifted the Brand and released him.

The ram stumbled and shook its head. Voskos dipped his hand into his pocket for some treat and held it out to the ram. The ram approached, ate it from his palm, and then nosed at him for more. Voskos chucked the animal roughly beneath the chin and slapped its flank, and it bounded off toward the rest of the herd.

Dean trembled where he stood. It wasn't fear. He didn't know when he'd stopped running, but his feet were rooted to the earth now and the pointless fight to free them sent a tremor through his
With a clank, Voskos set the hot Brand on a rock and set about covering and stamping out the fire. "So you see, Dean," he said, "the dogs may expend most of the energy, but without a shepherd, a flock with a dog behind it is just fear with nowhere to go. I hope you wouldn't wish that on any species. It would be cruel."

Somewhere, something howled.

Dean couldn't turn his head, so the only sheep he could see were the ones on the periphery of his vision. And when he'd been on higher ground, he'd been too busy looking for the cyclops and the dogs to count the sheep. How many? "I'm going to kill you." He hated that his voice shook even though fear had nothing to do with it.

Voskos regarded him without expression. "Perhaps you are. But I really think not."

The cyclops's voice was steady, lulling. It seemed to carry with remarkable ease. The far-off baying was a little closer. "Do you hear it?" it said. "The wolf?"

Dean heard it. He'd heard that sound only once on Earth, but a thousand times in his dreams.

"Have you ever not been afraid, Dean?" The shepherd's voice was tender. "Has there ever been a time you didn't flee the wolf?"

The words scratched at something raw inside him. There hadn't; the shepherd knew there hadn't. From the night he'd picked up his brother, Dean had been running scared.

"You can't run forever. You will exhaust yourself, and it will still be waiting."

The truth of the words took the strength from his knees. Because though he'd do anything he had to to avoid looking at it, Dean knew: Hell had never finished with him. It had barely started.

"How long can you live in fear?"

That brought Dean back to himself with a jolt. He looked around. He heard the hellhounds clearly and felt the terror poisoning his blood, and it was familiar, all of it. How long? This thing asked him how long? It had already been forever. He knew fear better than anyone, and he knew how to deal. Every blade of grass and wisp of cloud snapped back into focus, even though the hounds were still baying, and Dean took a step forward.

But in the next moment, something else was warping reality, and this time it wasn't fear. It was something unfamiliar, maybe distantly remembered but alien now, radiating from the figure in front of him more powerfully than the horror reaching out from behind. It reached deep inside of Dean, took hold of something younger and more vulnerable than even his fear, and, gently but inexorably, pulled.

"Yes, little lamb, I know. Fear's an old companion. You know her ways, you know how to cope with her." Forty years. Forty years, as helpless with a blade in his hand as without. "But do you know how to cope with safety?"

Safe. The ground he stood on went hazy, even as the danger at his back grew sharper. He never heard the knife or the crossbow fall from his hands.

"Come, Dean. Come to the fold. The fold is safety; the fold is community. O little lamb, who is your flock?"
Dean panicked. He didn't know.

Who? Who?

"Come! Come! The wolf approaches!"


The shepherd threw his arms open, laughing a barrel-chested laugh. "Come, Dean! Come to Papa!"

From somewhere too near, he could hear the hellhounds baying on his trail. The shepherd stood solid on the hill. Tears were streaming down Dean's face, and he was running towards him.

The shepherd's aspect mutated. It was John; it was Mary. It was Alastair; it was the razor; it was the rack. The hounds were almost on him.

"Hurry, Dean, hurry! The wolf is at your heels!"

Arms pumping, Dean heard the snap of their jaws and felt the heat of their breath. He knew, in every sinew they had ever rent, what it was to be prey.

Except—

—How could that be, when his brother was a predator?

"Little lamb, who is your flock? Choose! Choose now!"

He'd spent months biting it back. Even to the hour the hounds had come for him, he'd bitten it back, but when he'd awoken in hooks and chains, there'd been only one name on his lips. It burst from him now.

"Sam!"

Half an instant before he hit that broad chest, Dean looked at the shepherd and saw the cyclops.

He also heard the dog. There was time to reach for the demon knife, or there was time to turn around, but there wasn't time to do both. His instincts screamed at him to turn and confront the physical threat behind him. But some human, reasoning part of him told him showing his back to a savior would be the last mistake he ever made.

The dog hit him from behind in the same moment he hit Voskos. Dean felt its teeth close on his neck, and he wrapped his fingers around the hilt of Ruby's knife and buried it in the cyclops's heart.

The red thread ran through his hands, length over length, along the wall, into the dark. It burned, but if it took him to Dean then that didn't matter. Sam followed it until he reached for the next portion and was left holding nothing. The thread had given out.

He looked back at where the wall vanished into—another wall, and the dark. The thread was gone. The wall had closed into a corridor and made a maze, and he couldn't see where he'd come from.

"Sing, muse! of… wrath."

Sam turned. Brady's face was in the wall.
Sam knew Brady well. He knew how carefully he'd hidden his ADHD. He knew all his tells at cards. He knew that he'd never quite figured out what a comma splice was supposed to be, and how terrified he was of his father. He knew how much resistance there was in his diaphragm around his solar plexus. "You barely passed that class," Sam said.

"Maybe, but: sitting next to the bodies of your victims and raging about how they got no right to judge you? Not a good look, bro. Not. A. Good. Look. On brand, though. Consistent. This message paid for by the Morningstar Campaign for Rebellion Against Heaven." Brady smiled with stone lips. "But what is the parent of wrath, Sam?"

Sam remembered the handprint on his brother's shoulder. He remembered the burn of resentment looking at it. He remembered thinking, *I could have done that. Just a little more time, and I could've.*

"Pride," he said, and he seized Brady's tongue.

Brady's blank eyes rolled up. His tongue protruded, then extruded, growing longer and longer. Sam snatched his hand back, but still Brady's face vomited an endless tongue. Sam stumbled back against the opposite wall. The gray ribbon pursued him. Sam took off running.

At the end of the hall, a palm-shaped smear of blood. "Dean! Where are you? Dean!"

Intersection. After the palm print, nothing. Sam didn't know which way to go. Only then did he notice the green thread trailing away down one of the corridors—almost too late; it was almost out of sight.

He tried to catch up, but his legs were young again. This was what it had been like running after Dean, back when Dean had had feet of height on him and four and a half years' head start. Sometimes they'd been racing just to race, because siblings did. Often they'd been training under their father's stopwatch, meaning they were racing whether they wanted to or not. Sometimes it had just been Sam, chasing after his big brother. He'd thought that he'd hit a growth spurt, thought he'd stood the taller of the two of them, but it must have been a dream. The thread vanished into the dark.

He stopped. An infinity of walls, all of which were the same wall, and no direction.

"It's pathetic that you can't find your way out." The voice echoed down the corridor, but he couldn't place who it sounded like. "Normal people can find their way out. Can't you even save yourself?"

Ruby. Not her vessel. Her.

She poured herself into his lap. Black smoke whispered against his lips, fondled his flaccid cock and balls. "What's my name, Sam?"

His heart broke. "Vanity."

Little surpassed the horror of realizing you'd swallowed flattery.

"But a few things do. Better to be flattered than indulged, right, Sam?"

Once, in January of '95, they'd all gone after a brunnmigi in North Dakota. At least, that had been the plan, but Sam had gotten himself thrown down a well, *an actual well,* and the whole hunt had had to be aborted so that Dad and Dean could fish him out and take him home so he wouldn't die of hypothermia. After Dad had gone back out alone, Dean had brought him hot chocolate in bed, and found an episode of fucking *Lassie* on TV, and got in next to Sam without Sam having to ask, and
told Sam that he was a pain in the ass but he wasn't a burden. He'd probably meant it, but two weeks later he'd stood in the motel room Dad had forbidden him to leave Sam alone in and said, bitterly, *I could be banging CJ Thompson right now if it wasn't for you.*

He could never catch up back then. Not when Dean didn't even know Sam was chasing him.

Still: it was no one else's fault Sam had sold himself. And he hadn't even purchased what he'd thought. He had no illusions left, not after that voicemail, certainly not after Dean's last stop before Michael had been Lisa and the giant question mark that was Ben. Dean had never wanted him. He'd just felt like he couldn't turn him away.

She curled around his tongue, down his throat, wrapped around and into him. "Sure doesn't take much to get you to spread 'em," she murmured.

He pushed at her ineffectually. "No," he said, broken.

"You know you've always been ours. And anyway." The smoke of her was cold. "We both know you enjoyed it."

The static built in his ears. In the space over where her shoulder would have been, had she been there, he saw the handprint again on the wall, an accusation: *You failed. He burned.*

He ran from it.

He'd always felt out of place. At least, it had been easier to feel that the place was wrong than that he was wrong. And Dean's arm around his scrawny shoulders—it had been a flag, at times, to draw all eyes to how not normal the Winchesters were. So he'd run, like he was running now.

But when he wasn't running, he'd taken refuge in that magic treehouse he and Dean had built, the one that went wherever they went. He'd taken refuge, and he'd taken so much more.

Having sex with his brother had always made him feel—special. Scared, certainly, and a host of other things too, but none of the turmoil had ever outweighed that feeling. He'd been awed, knowing that Dean would cross that line for him; that he would, for this one thing, cross their father. They had always been separate from the world as a family, but *this*—it separated him and Dean from Dad, carving a space out of the dark just for them.

More than anything else, perhaps, it had made Sam feel powerful to have Dean want him.

The rush of that. The dizzying high. Demon blood had made him feel some of the same things, and at least the blood, he'd told himself, didn't ask anything of Dean. But maybe the blood had nothing to do with it. Maybe Sam was just a born junkie.

Had that really been it? Had he really done that to both of them just to feed his own ego? Had it really just been Sam manipulating Dean, and Dean—*God*—letting him? Any of the times it had been happening, he would have denied it; he couldn't be that, couldn't reduce to that. It couldn't just be him. Dean had broken down and said, once, that it wasn't just him. But Dean was the one thing less trustworthy than whatever Sam was: Dean was devoted.

He'd thought the thread was there to guide him, but he'd only gotten lost. A crack appeared in the floor, running off into the dark. Sam followed it. He had no notion of where it led, *if* it led, but he needed something to follow, so he followed it.

He couldn't find the way out.
"But the real question"—Uriel over his head, a six-winged shrike.—“is whether you should.”

"My brother's out there."

"My point."

The flight of stairs appeared out of nowhere, and Sam went down hard. He found himself again before the wall, because he'd never left it. He placed his hands upon it. It bowed outward under his touch.

He kept trying to get clean by washing with a different flavor of filth. He kept using other people as his rag.

"I was six months old," he whispered to the wall. "How is that my fault?"

"A sin is a stain on the soul." Castiel's voice. Sam didn't turn. "It doesn't really matter who put it there."

Sam's hands explored the wall. What was it made of?

"You know what it's made of, what it is. In your heart, you know."

Sam pulled his hands away from the wall. The prints they left were black.

"I tried to pull you out, Sam." Castiel spoke urgently. The buzzing in Sam's ears got louder. "I tried to pull you out, and I couldn't. Don't you think that means something?"

The wall bulged, pregnant.

The buzz was constant now, low. Sam turned. It took a long time, like moving through some medium much thicker than air.

There was a niche in the wall. The concrete angel where Father Gregory had appeared to him was there. No. The painting from the nave, the Raphael: St. Michael Vanquishing Satan.

No. The real deal.

But no. Not that, either, not Sam's worst nightmare in more ways than one. The holy silver in his brother's eyes was just a reflection.

Dean was naked, unselfconscious. With his eyes mirrored over, he seemed remote, yet there was something hyper-vivid in the way the lines of his body were drawn. The gleam shed on him showed the pallor of his skin, the curve of his musculature, the lines of sinew and bone. The handprint that had faded from his shoulder was back again. The message in it blazed scar-purple: Noli me tangere. Sam fell to his knees.

"I'm sorry. Please, you don't even know how sorry I am."

There was a word for what he'd done, but it was a word they'd never said. Sam had convinced himself that that was because it couldn't be compassed by language rather than because of cowardice. But without the illusions of his own vanity, he was left with the horror and grief of having destroyed something pure to slake his own blind need.

Ultimately, he couldn't corrupt Dean with anything inside him. The rebuke of those marks said, You touched what wasn't yours, but also As if you could touch it really. But he could corrupt what was between them. He could ruin that. He could ruin Fourth of July, 1996. He could ruin army
men battles in the back seat in summer. He could make the magic treehouse they'd built poisonous, and by degrees, with every fall he took and every fix his brother had to apply, he could pull Dean down along with him. He'd watched it happen, a slow-motion version of the first car crash he'd caused. He'd gotten their mother killed as an infant; two decades on he'd finished the job with their father. That just left Dean, trying to hold it together with a slow bleed on the inside.

Of course Dean hadn't been the only one he'd pulled down. Of course he remembered Ash, and Ellen, and Jo. Of course he hadn't forgotten that he was the reason Bobby had to kill his wife all over again. Of course he knew that Lisa and Ben would never have the husband and father they wanted no matter what happened to Sam now, and of course he knew why. But Dean was the epicenter of the harm Sam wrought, and he always had been.

"You kicked demon blood," said Dean, "but man, you just can't quit dropping bodies."

The dog's impact bore all three of them to the ground. The knife in Dean's grip drove forward under his weight, slamming the hilt against skin. There was a hard pinch at the back of his neck, and then he felt the leather collar of his jacket slip and yank back.

He drove an elbow backward on reflex, as hard as he could. The dog yelped as it was dislodged. In the same movement, Dean rolled, drew, and fired. The dog's cry cut off.

Down the valley, the sheep's hooves pounded against earth as they reacted to the shot. The echo of the gun died away, then the stampede, and then the valley was all but silent.

Dean felt at the back of his collar. Shredded. His neck was intact, though. "You can't hike in that, Dean. It's not insulating, Dean." The hell it isn't."

He twisted to look at Voskos. The cyclops was flat on its back, its eyes still tracking Dean but mute. Its face was as empty of emotion as the first one's had been when Dean had woken up in its cage. As he watched, the handle of Ruby's knife moved, bare millimeters. Up, down. Up, down. In time with its heartbeat. Dean stared at it for a long time.

He checked the dog to make sure it wasn't suffering. It had been the same breed as the first, he thought, but shaggier, with a broader face. Buried beneath dingy white fur, the wound barely showed. Heart shot. It was gone.

"M sorry," he told it. He mustered up a crooked smile from somewhere. "Don't tell my little brother. He'd be so sad."

Dean pushed himself to his feet. He kept his eyes on Voskos, but though the cyclops looked back, it didn't move, and he felt no echoes of the influence and distortion it had exerted. His gaze traveled to the brand iron where it lay cooling on the rock.

He went over and picked it up. Nothing about just holding it felt wrong or different. It felt like what it appeared to be, a yard-long stick of iron with more iron at one end. Dean rotated it to look at the brand itself. It was Voskos's walking I, but—blurry, somehow.

Dean looked back at the cyclops. It lay as if paralyzed, the knife in its heart lifting and lowering just perceptibly. Dean took hold of one of its ankles in each hand and started dragging it down the hill.

He dropped the cyclops beside the pond and stared down at it. It lay as he'd dragged it, with its arms sprawled up and behind its head. It hadn't said a word. He nudged it with his foot. No reaction. It just followed him with those golfball, grass-green eyes.
He still tied it up before he went into the tent and started looking for something to kill it with. Not that he was sure what he was looking for, really. If a demon-killing knife lodged in its heart only paralyzed it, a homemade aluminum spork probably wouldn't do the job. Sock-darning kit? Unlikely. Camping stove fuel? He could use it to salt and burn the body, but there had to be a body first. He was starting to think maybe he'd just have to decapitate the thing and hope for the best—bury the head and roll a boulder on top of it, maybe—when his hands encountered the tangle of leather harnesses and bells in the saddlebag. He paused, then lifted them out. There were seven or eight. For objects so rough-hewn, they made a surprisingly sweet sound, not just individually, but together. They harmonized.

The bells tinkled with his step as he exited the tent. He glanced at the cyclops trussed up on the bank of the pond. It didn't react. Holding the mass of harnesses in one hand, Dean raised his arm and rang them.

It took a few minutes for the sheep to respond, but they came. Black, brown, and white faces formed up in a wary semicircle on the other side of the pond. All different sizes and colors. He dropped the bells. The cyclops was hogtied; Dean picked it up by the rope around its elbows, dragged it a few feet into the pond, and slit its throat.

Other than a faint gagging sound, it gave no reaction of any kind.

Its blood hit the pond in spurts coinciding with the movement of the hilt of Ruby's knife, which still rose and fell like some grotesque finger beckoning. When the bleeding slowed, Dean cut again, deeper, this one back to the spinal column. He inverted the body as far as he could without tackle until the knife stopped moving and nothing more flowed. When he dropped Voskos back onto the grass, its eyes were hazy, but still alive. The sheep pawed at the bank but came no closer.

Dean caught sight of the Brand where it lay in front of the tent. As he watched, the mark at the end blurred. He blinked. The metal stamp became that walking I again.

On impulse, he bent and turned out Voskos's pockets, looking for the treat he'd seen him feed to that—to he didn't know what, because he didn't know what he'd seen, what it meant. He came up with a lump of sugar.

Dean tossed it to the other side of the pond. The sheep standing there flinched back, but then bent and nosed at the lump. Then it ate it. Then it nosed at the water, looking for more.

There was more sugar in one of the saddlebags, a heavy sack of it. Dean strewed it up and down the banks and over the surface of the water. The sheep were lapping at it, now. One pushed forward and drank deep, as if for the first time all day. It was the brown ram Voskos had branded.

Dean rang the bells until half the flock had taken their turn. He rang until the walking I shape on the Brand of Tubalcain blurred and would not come back into focus. He rang until the shepherd's eyes were blank. Then he decapitated it anyway. He didn't know whether it was down for all eternity, but he knew he was walking out of here with what he came for.

He salted and burned the corpse. The stench drove the sheep off, but they'd pretty well drunk the pond down to mud.

He'd hoped, in some part of him, that when the cyclops died, it would—break some spell, or something. Undo whatever it was that he'd seen on that hill. But nothing changed. As fat flakes of snow began at last to fall, they fell on the wool of the sheep spread over the valley, and the flock, unperturbed, grazed on. Dean stopped at the top of the ridge bounding the south end of the valley and looked back. The snow's fall softened the dark line of the creek, the colors of the wildflowers,
the junction of land and cloud. Not for the first time, Dean thought that it should have been Sam out here instead of him. He'd have gotten more out of it.

Dean had a choice when night fell. If he got off course, it could cost him dear. On the other hand, he'd come this way once before; he might prefer civilization, but he could navigate wilderness, even in the dark. His father had seen to that. The snow was more worrying, but it was also a function of elevation; he was headed downhill, and the less he was carrying, the faster he'd move. Dean dumped everything but emergency equipment and the Brand and kept going.

Familiar landmarks and elevation loss got him back to the car by midday the following day. He still had to drive most of the way back out to I-70 before he had a cell signal. Canby picked up on the third ring with no salutation.

"Something's different," he said. "You have it?"

"Yeah. I have it."

"Good. Hurry, Dean."

Dean hung up, turned Baby east onto I-70, and hit the gas.

Chapter End Notes

Things this fic contains like 9000% more of than I went into it expecting: grazing logistics, incest guilt, and animal cruelty.

Dorky facts pending. This chapter's dorky facts
A bite woke Sam, right on the ear. He was upright and hitting the thing that did it before he was fully awake, bringing the blackjack in his hand down again and again and again. Blood hit his cheek. It was over in seconds.

What had bitten him was just a smear on the floor now, a bit of shine with fur mixed in. In the barely-there light he could just make out the tail and the tiny stump of a front leg. It was the little rat with the missing foot. Sam fell back to the floor and doubled up in silent laughter.

His ears were full of buzzing he wasn't certain whether he was really hearing or not. He managed to get to his feet, but he stumbled and found he was on the floor again. He didn't feel very good.

He rolled onto his back. He was in the puddle, the pipe itself some feet away. It occurred to him that it would be easy, at this point, to die here. Right here. He knew what kind of shape he was in; had an idea, anyway. It had become a matter of a small decision.

And, really, it wasn't as if he deserved to live.

Someone was saying, desperately, But I do, Sam, I deserve to live. But that was far off.

Then again. It wasn't as simple as that. He'd known for a long time that he didn't get to just check out, to not have to live with what he'd done. But he couldn't make any of it better, either, and he couldn't seem to stop making it worse.

All his life he'd been running, from one mess he made to another. He always thought: This time I'll
make it right. But he never knew how to make things right anywhere, to be right anywhere. There'd only been one place left to run to, in the end.

The wall waited.

Hell was on the other side of that wall. He wasn't stupid, whatever Dean thought; he knew. It was knowledge deeper than instinct. By now, he could feel it, like a fingernail scratching words he couldn't quite make out on the inside of his skull. He knew even without the benefit of hallucinations or nightmares that the wall was thinning, growing flexible, and that he could bring it down, if he really tried. That wasn't an appealing possibility. It wasn't that he wanted that. It wasn't even exactly that he thought he deserved it. It wasn't a matter of deserving.

Lindsey had been afraid that this was Hell, because she'd believed that Hell was a place where she would be punished. Sam knew that this couldn't be Hell. He'd done too much damage in here.

*Divine power made me, the highest wisdom, and primordial love.*

Hell at least was a safe place to lock him away.

From Utah to West Virginia was a three-day drive. Dean made it in two.

The first thing he saw at the end of Canby's drive was Canby himself, carving something at a worktable set up in the front yard. He glanced up from his work at Dean, but made no move to greet him. Dean climbed out, slung a duffel bag over his shoulder, and slowly approached.

Closer to, Canby looked to be making a sort of stone bowl, maybe eighteen inches across and shaped like a bird. The short beak and blank, round eyes suggested a falcon. "What is that?"

"A *cuauhxicalli*. Well, not a *cuauhxicalli*, at least, given who's making it and the purpose to which it'll be put, but as I'm adapting a concept, the term'll do." He carried on rasping at a teardrop wing.

"Is it, um… for the ritual?"

"It is."

Dean looked around, then up, following a fat green stalk set in a plastic planter that terminated in a crown of yellow, globular flowers. It looked like a weed but was the size of a small tree. It was one of the weirdest-looking plants he'd ever seen. "That's new."

"*Ferula communis*. Always wanted one. As I'm about to get paid for a particularly tall order, I thought I'd finally treat myself."

Dean stared at one of the bee-laden yellow balls bobbing in his face for a minute before he turned back to Canby. "Let's talk."

Canby paused in his work and regarded him. It was warm out here; his silver bowl cut was damp with sweat. "Let's. Head on in and I'll be with you in a minute."

In the cool quiet of Canby's living room, Dean set the duffel down on the uncomfortable couch but did not sit. His head was dull from too much driving on too little sleep. He stared at the duffel.

The screen door swung open and shut; Dean heard a sink run before Canby reentered, wiping his hands. He raised his eyebrows at Dean and waited.

Driving back here, Dean had had time to think. Not a lot of brain cells left to do it with, but time.
He'd used it to replay all that he'd seen and heard and experienced. The cyclops couldn't have used the Brand to turn his victims; the young man he'd seen Voskos use it on had already been turned, imprisoned somehow in the form—then the mind—of an animal. That had been an ability of the cyclops itself. But the Brand had sealed it, somehow. Voskos had staged the whole demonstration for him, but Dean still didn't understand what it was that he'd watched.

He didn't understand why the cyclops had said it wouldn't work on him.

Dean unzipped the duffel. The Brand lay inside. "What is this thing?"

Canby scrutinized him a moment before answering. "To the best of my knowledge, it is a brand iron made by Tubal-cain, son of Lamech, descendant of Cain."

"Is it supernatural?"

"Obviously."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"Protect myself."

"How?"

"Ask another question."

Dean clenched his jaw. "If I give this thing to you, am I going to regret it?"

"I've no idea."

"Are you going to use it on anybody?"

"I will apply that Brand to no other living creature, I assure you. To the best of my knowledge, I have no enemies, but if I had any, that isn't how I'd deal with them."

Dean picked up the Brand, then hesitated. "Tell me one thing. What'd you do to piss Rufus off so much?"

The sadness in the smile that crossed Canby's face seemed genuine. "I committed the cardinal sin: I showed him mercy."

Dean stared at him a moment longer, trying to read something more in his face. There was a catch here. There had to be. There always was. But though he had the sense it was staring him plain in the face, he couldn't find it. And he was out of time.

Dean held out the Brand. Happy birthday, Sammy.

Canby took it, carried it to the fireplace, and dropped it in the bucket that held his pokers. He turned to Dean, suddenly businesslike. "We'll be doing the ritual at solar noon tomorrow."

"Why not now?"

"Because it's half-past three. Now, let's be clear about something: I'm not going to find your brother. You are. I'm going to make it so you can."

Dean wasn't interested in splitting hairs. "What do I have to do?"
"During the ritual itself? Not much. Pretty much just be present. I'll do all the work."


"Is Latin your native language?"

"Uh, no."

"Is it your brother's?"

"I wonder, sometimes, but no."

"Then no."

"So what's the shtick, then?"

Per usual, Canby did not directly answer the question. "What I'm attempting requires a focus item, something to tie the power to and guide you to him. Choose a physical object, whatever you associate with him most."

Dean's hand went unconsciously to his chest, and he felt the absence there in a way he hadn't since the earth had swallowed Sam the first time. "We— There isn't much. We live on the road, always have. We don't carry a lot of material possessions around, you know?"

"Well, think of something. It doesn't matter what it is, but the stronger the association, the stronger the focus. So pick something good."

An object he associated with Sam? Sam had even fewer really personal possessions than he did, he'd come to realize. There were weapons Dean thought of as being more Sam's than his—the Taurus, various knives, Ruby's knife—but the Taurus and most of the knives were missing along with Sam, and the thought of anything of Ruby's getting anywhere close to this made Dean want to snarl. Their clothes rarely lasted long enough to become personal favorites, given the kind of stains their lifestyle imparted. It was just as well, too, because they didn't have space for that kind of crap, given that they lived out of—

"The car."

Canby paused and rocked on his heels for a moment. He did that irritating teeth-sucking thing of his. "Huh. Okay. Yeah. Yeah, I can work with that."

Dean tensed up all over again. "You're not going to light it on fire, are you?"

"No."

He relaxed.

"Do have to light a fire on it, though."

"No friggin' way—"

"A small one. The focus was supposed to go on an altar, but I guess it's going to have to be the altar, you follow?"

Dean ground his teeth.

"If something smaller's gonna work, that's fine, but make it good," Canby said patiently.
"No. All right. The car."

Canby patted his shoulder as he moved to the desk. "I'll only be burning things in the cuauhxicalli, she'll be fine." Dean winced at the idea of someone using the paint as a table for a heavy rock that they were going to set on fire. "Just one more ingredient from your end."

"What's that?"

"Your heart."

The world seemed to slow, then to crystallize, and then became perfectly still.

So this was the final sacrifice. He'd known better than to trust Canby. He'd known better. He knew what pagan gods were, and this guy went golfing with them every Sunday. How could he have been so stupid—

"Sorry." Dean smiled tightly. "Using it at the moment."

Canby's eyes were drilling into him. They were utterly expressionless. "What's the matter, Dean? Thought you said that you'd give anything."

This time he did snarl. "I've done a lot worse than die for my brother, you cheating shyster, which is why I'm not going to check out on him now and leave him out there with no one coming for him. We had a deal. Don't think I won't find a way to make you hold up your end of it."

Canby's expression remained blank for two, three, four heartbeats longer. Then that smile of his creased his face again, quick and dry as cigarette paper lit. "Relax," he said. "I told you before: these things are a matter of quantity."

"Well, I've only got one, and I'm going to need it to look for my brother, so—" Canby held out a sheet of paper. Dean broke off to stare at the form he suddenly found in his hands. "The hell is this?"

Canby leaned back, both hands braced against the edge of the desk. "That is your referral for a cardiac biopsy. You'll need to go to Morgantown for it; I've got an arrangement with somebody there. Used to be a doctor, remember? 8:00 a.m. tomorrow. Don't be late."

* * *

As an experience, getting a catheter shoved down his neck and into his heart didn't have much to recommend it. But it wasn't that bad, either; didn't really feel like much of anything, other than weird. He'd been nervous they'd put him under, because there was no way he'd make it back in time for solar noon if they did, but all they gave him was a single Valium. Five milligrams of diazepam were nowhere near enough to disable someone with his tolerance, and honestly, after the month he'd just had, not all that unwelcome.

He was buttoning his shirt in the exam room when the door opened and a nurse slipped in. She wasn't the RN who'd assisted with Dean's procedure, and she looked tense.

"You're Dean?"

"Yeah."

"Here." She held out a plastic biohazard bag with a specimen jar sealed inside. "There's a bathroom down the hall on your left. In five minutes, go there. Wait for my knock, then go out the back."
"Uh. Okay. Should I be worried about any, like… side-effects?"

In answer, she only gave him a withering look and disappeared.

Interfacing with super-sketch medical professionals to ransom his brother was really losing its luster.

When Dean got back to 6 Plato Lane, Canby was in the front garden again, this time polishing the bowl he'd made. The falcon's shape gleamed in the sun: short, curved beak, smooth pear-shaped wings, circular eyes. The thing was identifiable, but no art object. Well, everybody's talents had their limits, Dean supposed.

He checked his watch. "T-minus ninety?"

Canby glanced over at a sundial on a plinth between two rows of herbs. "About that, yes. We're all set here. You have it?" Dean handed over the specimen bag. "Good. Go rest. I'll summon you."

In Canby's spare bedroom, Dean lay down and closed his eyes. It went against the grain to sit around this close to the finish line—whatever that meant. But he was a hunter, born and raised. Call him what he was: a soldier. That meant making the most of what respite you got. He couldn't quite manage a nap at a time like this, but he could be still.

The question hanging over everything was, of course, whether this was going to work. Did he trust John Clovis Canby? Did he believe the man could do what he'd said? What demonstration, really, had Canby provided of his abilities? That fire divination—supposed proof of life—could have been a parlor trick. It hadn't felt like one, but Dean was neither a witch nor a psychic; it wasn't like he'd know.

But there was the fact of the quest he'd just completed in itself. Stupid fucking word for it, a quest, but—well, he had killed two mythical beings that he hadn't even known existed and brought back an occult object older than the Flood. Canby's intel had been good. The kind of good you only got from talking to deities and living to tell the tale, maybe.

There was a knock on the door. Dean swung his legs over the side of the bed and reached for his boots.

Canby was out by the car when he came down, setting the soapstone bowl on a small cloth on the hood. Dean ran his hand over his hair to try to get it to lie flat and considered the scene. There was the car, parked at the margin of the gravel drive, pressed into service as an altar. There was Canby himself, dressed to play priest in much the same thing he always wore, no loin cloths or robes. His shirt and trousers looked like linen, but that was the only difference Dean could see and might merely have been an adaptation to the weather. It was pretty warm in the sun.

The sun was what was throwing him. Rituals were just part of life to him, but he was used to doing them in the dark. Candles in painted circles, Latin in graveyards at midnight. Like this, out in the open, with green grass and blue sky and sun—it was weird.

Canby held out a small cloth bundle dangling from a string. Something was written on the inside, but the script was illegible through the weave. "Wear this."

"What is it?"

"You."

Okay, gross. Dean pulled the cord over his neck. The little bundle with the biopsy sample in it lay
over his sternum, about where his amulet had used to sit. He cleared his throat. "Showtime?"

"We've got a few minutes," said Canby. "Just wanted everything ready to go on the instant."

"Should I meditate or something?"

"You any good at it?"

"Not really."

"Better skip it, then."

Dean paced up and down the strip of gravel between the flowerbed and the lawn. He chewed on a nail. He screwed the toe of his boot into the side of a stump.

"You do this a lot?" he asked.

"Do you ever shut up?"

"You're the one who made it so I can't talk to anybody else."

"And if I'd known how much talking you were gonna do, I'd have weighed the relative importance of my own survival a lot more carefully." Canby sighed, shading his eyes and looking out over the yard, where the cows were pastured. "I know what it is you're not asking. Yes, he's still alive. No, I can't tell you how long he's got. Depends on what's happening to him. Might depend on him."

"Sammy's a fighter. He's not tapping out. If he dies, it'll be because I left him to. It'll be on me."

But it'll fall on you, first.

One corner of Canby's mouth lifted. "You're angry."

"You have no idea."

"I wasn't just fluffing you, you know," Canby said. "Your case interests me. Altogether a fascinating problem, professionally speaking. I would almost have done it for free, if that would have worked; but as I said, payment's part of the magic."

"Like a demon deal?" Dean said bitterly.

"Only so far as everything has a cost, Mr. Winchester. With your history, I'd have thought you'd have sussed that much out by now."

"You don't know shit about my history. Not where it counts."

"What, like Walt Hannon and Roy Kittle? Like the tour you did in Hell to bring your brother back the first time?" Dean blinked. "Oh, don't look so surprised. I might not keep my ear to the grapevine, but if something does come to my attention, I've got my sources."

"So you knew I was liable to kill you if this all went sideways, but you went for it, anyway, out of, what—academic curiosity? That seemed like an acceptable risk to you?" Dean smiled humorlessly. "Thought I didn't make your top ten ways to die."

"Yeah, well, you don't crack the bottom fifty, either." Canby squinted up at the sky. "We're coming up on the hour of fulfillment." He reached out and grabbed Dean's shoulder.
"Hey! Watch the merchandise!"

Canby ignored him, maneuvering him like he might a goat held by the horn, pulling him forward and then firmly down to kneel in front of the car. The falcon-bowl stared back at Dean from the hood.

Sweat prickled on the back of Dean's neck. The sun was strong.

Canby's legs and torso interposed between Dean and the falcon. "Who are you?"

Dean swallowed, craning his neck. From this angle, with the sun behind him, Canby's face seemed weirdly far away, much farther than it could have been. "My name is Dean Winchester."

"How did you get here?"

"I—" Fuck, the sun was bright. Dean didn't know precisely what was being asked of him, and it was difficult to make his tongue work. "I completed a quest."

"Every living thing has a need, one need greater than any other. An empty place that cries out to be filled. Some seek God. Some seek power. Some seek knowledge. Some seek oblivion, freedom in extinguishment of self." Canby's eyes were flat and unreadable where he loomed over Dean. "What do you need, Dean? What do you seek?"

His heartbeat thudded under the bundle on his chest. "My brother."

Canby turned his back to him and dropped a match into the bowl. The falcon's eyes were piercing. Glossy. A little too glossy for stone. It was very warm.

The flames that leapt up in the bowl looked unreal against the hood's black paint. The sun rebounded off the windshield from behind, flattening them. Dean felt like he was coming out of his skin.

The priest loomed over him as his heartbeat climbed. Not faster, but louder. He felt it in his ribcage, his carotid, his groin. Canby was holding a stone knife. Dean hadn't noticed it before.

Canby reached down and took hold of the bundle lying on Dean's sternum. "I will speak to your heart."

The world dimmed at the edges even as the sun's glare intensified. Dean felt hot. His limbs had no strength in them; he couldn't speak. He could do nothing as Canby gripped the bag with his heart in it and ripped.

In the next moment, Dean saw two things simultaneously. He saw Canby turn and drop the cloth bundle into the fire in the bowl. And he saw a hand, shining with blood, thrust his beating heart into the sky.

"Fly to your home."

Dean fell.
Notes:
1. Sam does know his Dante (perhaps the Alpha Vamp inspired him to do a re-read): he is recalling the inscription over the Gates of Hell. I project headcanon that when he first read Inferno in middle school, Sam was arrested by the notion that Hell was made by love.
2. Cuauhxicalli. Canby is using the term only as an approximation, as he himself notes.
3. Ferula communis, a.k.a. giant fennel.
can you show me where it hurts?

Chapter Summary

"Well, come on, then." Sam kept his voice quiet and steady. "I'm all softened up."

A room in darkness. In the middle of the floor, a thing on fire.

Sam came near. It was a heart.

The heart burned, but did not char. The flames licked along the surface of the organ in blue and orange, but the flesh within was fresh, perfect, wet, and red. Underneath the fire, the heart pulsed.

He took it in his hands, in awe of its beauty. He trembled to touch it. It seemed he had never seen heat or light before now, and in the logic of dreams, he knew what he had to do with it. He was always going to do it.

He raised it to his mouth. When he ate, he felt it burn all the way down.

Then he woke.

The dream was so vivid and specific that for a moment after his eyes fluttered open, Sam thought he still felt the warmth. It was different from the heat of fever, which burned without warming and chilled as much as it burned. The sensation evaporated, though, leaving only the reality of the floor beneath him, the wall before him, and the thin line of light crawling down it. So much like the first time he'd woken up down here.

He felt—clearer, like a layer of distortion had burned away. Like the darkness was just darkness again, not a void siphoning him off into itself. Stronger, maybe. Like shit still, but at least with it enough to register that he felt like shit. His fever must have broken.

All of which meant he also had the clarity to realize that he'd screwed himself.

After who knew how much time and effort spent breaking into it, he'd left Lindsey and Marian's room all but untouched and unexplored. He could barely believe he'd done that now, but at the time— It had felt like stepping into a gravity well. He'd already been spent just from struggling to keep sane for so long; when he realized what he'd done, despair had boiled up, and it had dragged him under fast.

It pulled at him still, when he remembered everything that had happened upstairs, but not so overpoweringly. It was like he'd been caught in a current, and, just at the point when he should have drowned, had somehow gotten cast back out into the weaker margins of it.

Now that he could tread water again, however, he was left to inventory all the possibilities he had left behind.
There were resources in Lindsey and Marian's room. There were the insects he hadn't eaten, the water he hadn't drunk, the iron bars he'd left lying on the floor because it had felt like there just wasn't any point. There was cloth. There was the vertical area he hadn't even tried to explore.

His mind snagged on something. He frowned. There was the pale plastic tube running across the ceiling at an odd angle to the walls, half lost to sight in the darkness.

He wasn't really sure what to do about it, but he was pretty certain he knew what that was.

Sam pushed himself upright on the heels of his hands. Just that gave him a head rush that nearly laid him out again. Getting back up the shaft was going to be nigh impossible, but he had to try, because he wasn't the only one he'd screwed. There was still one someone down here who needed help.

Oh, God. Jacob didn't know yet. Sam hadn't told him anything. Sam hadn't said a word.

Perhaps because Jacob was the only other human being in here, very possibly the last person Sam would ever have any kind of access to, it felt like—it felt like he had to confess what he'd done. Like a writhing worm, his mind instinctively sought how he could explain what had happened upstairs without admitting, *I killed them*. But he didn't deserve to hide. Jacob was trapped in here with him; he had a right to know who and what he was.

Supporting himself on the wall, Sam got to his feet and found he was able to cross the room under his own steam. That was an improvement, at least. He caught hold of Jacob's grate and lowered himself to his knees before it.

"Jacob?" His voice came out barely audible, but the attempt triggered a coughing fit that hurt, deep down in his chest, and that was loud enough. He could hear Jacob rouse to it. Irrelevantly, he remembered that cough Jacob had had for a while, how dry it had been.

By the time he brought the coughing under control, he could hear Jacob right on the other side of the grate. "Sam? Holy— You're alive?"

"...I think so?"

"Shit, buddy, you were delirious or something and then not a peep. I thought you were a goner for sure."

Sam's eyes burned. "Not me. Lindsey and Marian."

Jacob got quiet. "What happened up there?"

"Lindsey snapped. She, um. She attacked Marian." Let the details of how and to what end die with them. Afford them that much dignity, at least. "I was trying to stop her, but I couldn't reach her, either of them. So I grabbed the first thing to hand and threw it. It was—it was concrete." He looked at his hands. "I wasn't trying to kill her."

He hadn't been. He was pretty sure he hadn't. But it was something more than accident, too; it was training.

"Wow," was all Jacob said after a processing pause. "Okay. What about Marian?"

Sam's throat worked. It felt like swallowing sandpaper. "I was too late." Not, technically, a lie.

"Okay," Jacob said again. It sounded like he was thinking it all through. "Well. That's not great,
obviously, but, I mean. You heard her. She was barely even human anymore. I know it sounds harsh, but it was probably the best thing for her."

Sam stared at the metal screen between them. He'd been prepared for Jacob to curse him, recoil from him, maybe ask him where the hell his big talk about getting them through this was now. Maybe question if it had really been an accident. He hadn't expected this. But aside from his initial freakout period around waking up here and seeing a ghost for the first time, Jacob had generally come across as a reasonable guy. That was his coping mechanism, probably: stay logical. And it certainly wasn't like Sam was in a position to judge how anybody else dealt.

A shiver wracked him; not a feverish one, just from cold his body could no longer offset. He had to get it together enough to make the climb upstairs. "Jacob, I'm really sorry to ask, but—do you have any insects? I'm… not sure how long it's been since I ate last, and I need to get back into the upper chamber. There's stuff up there that can help us, maybe. A door—I couldn't get it open, but I was pretty out of it before."

He wasn't sure why he didn't mention the out-of-place plastic tube.

Jacob's pause felt endless. "Yeah, okay," he said finally. "Of course. Hold on."

Some minutes later, Sam started when the black body of a cricket came through the grate by his face. This one was still twitching, its head crushed between two fingertips invisible in the dark but its hind legs kicking on reflex. The movement was shocking, somehow. It had been so long since he'd seen any from another being.

The cricket was small. So was the one that followed it, and the little cockroach after that, and the fourth insect, the last that Jacob offered, was still smaller. Sam pushed down his annoyance. He knew Jacob had been eating the ecto; surely he could do better than this. But, then, Sam had ignored him for hours or maybe days, and then he'd wasted that little rat that could have fed both of them. He kept his silence.

Instead he stared at the insect he held. Another weevil.

A stabbing pain from his stomach snapped him out of his reverie. He ate the pea-sized black bug. "Thanks," he said.

"Don't mention it."

Silence.

"So it's just us, now, huh?" Jacob said after a while.

Sam exhaled. "Yeah."

"That's—um. That's strange. To think about. But I've been thinking it was down to just me, so—you know. I'm glad it's not."

Sam winced. His memories since leaving the bodies upstairs were scrambled, fragmentary, but he could just remember Jacob begging for information. Jacob always had to beg for information. And Sam had abandoned him to go and suck his thumb. "That must've been awful," he managed finally.

"Eh, you know." Jacob paused. "Can you do something for me?"

Good question. "Of course."
"Can you—? No, it's weird."

"We're a little past weird mattering, I think."

"All right. Can you, um. Would you put your hand through? It's just that I haven't touched anybody since I got here. Not anybody human."

Sam looked at the metal grate. It was more opaque than a confessional screen; he could see nothing but black between its slots. Really, Jacob was the most walled-away of any of them. Had been, anyway. They were equal now.

The slots weren't wide enough to fit his whole hand, so he slid four fingers through one of the longer ones into the darkness beyond. After a moment, he felt Jacob's hand grasp his. It didn't last long, a couple seconds, maybe. The grasp was firm and cool, typical American alpha-male handshake. As Jacob's fingers withdrew, Sam felt them wrap briefly around one of his. He had the oddest sense they had been reading its circumference.

Jacob cleared his throat. "So, what do you think, are we getting new roommates?"

Now, there was a grim thought. Plenty of room at the Hotel California. "I dunno."

"That thing took you just a couple of days after me, right?"

"It did, but we're still an anomaly. The only other pair was, um…." Sam pinched the bridge of his nose. "Cara. Cara and Brendan. I'm kind of surprised Marian outlived both of them, especially Cara."

"Yeah, she was pretty athletic."

That brought Sam up short. "Wait a second, you knew her?"

"Huh? No. I mean, just to speak to. She went to my gym."

Sam paused. "No, she didn't."

"Pretty sure I know my own gym, dude."

Sam searched through his memories. He'd asked Jacob's ex-girlfriend which gym he used. She hadn't known. Cara had had a keyring card, though. "FitGenius?"

"Yeah."

"But that's on the opposite side of town from your apartment. Why go there?"

"I was just trying it out. I had a sales route out that way for a while, it was convenient."

"You didn't think to mention this?"

"I thought she'd just switched gyms. I didn't even know anything had happened to her, much less that she got kidnapped by a ghost. And down here, it didn't really come up."

But it had come up. Hadn't it? Sam tried to remember the conversation, but things kept mixing up, blurring together. He couldn't even guess how long ago it had been. Had he just been talking to himself? Like all the times he'd thought something, only to realize he'd said it aloud? Like a wall in his head, leaking crazy?
Something made his skin prickle across the back of his neck. At first he thought it was the unease stirring in the pit of his stomach, but then he watched his breath spread fine, white crystals over the surface of the metal grate.

A kind of pressure twanged through the air.

"Sam?" Jacob sounded tense. "Is that what I think it is? Is it coming back?"

Sam turned his back to the grate. "No." He looked across the chamber. Ordinarily he wouldn't have been able to make out the opposite wall, the one he'd laid all the bones against. This time, though, he could. "It's already here."

Dean woke disoriented. He knew he'd been out by the fact that he was lying on the ground, but he had no sense from his body or mind of how long. The position of the sun directly overhead, though, told him it could only have been a minute or two at most.

The hood of the car creaked. Canby, balancing the stone bowl on the edge of the grille, leaned over the engine and painted something on it with his fingers.

Dean pushed himself up onto his elbows and—felt his boxers cling to his spent genitals. Canby stood over him. He gave Dean a knowing look that left Dean mute with rage, then closed the hood with sooty fingers. "It's done."

Dean picked himself up off the ground. Apart from having come in his pants, he didn't feel any different. "What the hell did you do to my car?"

"A sigil. Don't wash it off. I don't know that it could actually be disrupted by anything as mundane as soap and water, but no sense testing it." Canby nodded to the Impala. "She'll take you to him."

Dean swallowed, trying to moisten his throat. "How does this work?"

"I have no idea. Let me know, though, would you? This is novel, and I'd like to record the details." Canby wiped his fingers on a rag. Then he carried the falcon bowl over to the stone walkway leading up to the porch, raised it over his head, and threw it down. It shattered.

Dean ran his hand over Baby's driver's side fender. She didn't feel any different, either. He got in, leaving the door ajar. Would he turn her on and just know where to go? Was she going to drive herself, or something?

He drew the keys out of his jeans pocket, still feeling the disgusting cling inside. He hesitated before he turned the key in the ignition. Moment of truth.

Her engine roared to life faithfully, despite all the abuse he'd subjected her to lately. He let her idle for a minute. Nothing else happened.

Dean's mouth ran dry. It couldn't have failed. Not after all this. Not after he'd staked Sam's life on it.

His mind was chanting no in tight circles when his phone rang.

On the second ring, he fumbled the thing out of his pocket and stared at the screen like he didn't know what it was. He didn't recognize the number, but it was a Rhode Island area code.

Canby appeared at the driver's side window, face inscrutable. "Better answer it," he said.
Dean managed to hit the answer button in the middle of the fifth ring. "Hello?"

"Is this Agent Barrett?"

The voice was young, female. Uncertain and upset. Familiar, also, but he couldn't place it.

He cleared his throat. "Yes, it is. Can I help you?"

A pause. "This is Jenna Whitmore. You talked to me about my brother who's missing, Brendan Whitmore? You said—you said to call you, if I thought of anything."

Dean froze for a moment before he dove for the glove compartment and started digging for a Steno pad. "Yes, I did. You did the right thing. What is it, did you remember something?"

"No, but—I think I found something." She sounded unhappy. No, more than that: her voice was thin and taut with something like fear. Nothing like the worried but fresh-faced kid he'd met one month and half an eternity ago. "Can you come over here?"

Dean spared Canby barely a glance before he tucked the phone between his shoulder and his ear and reached for his seatbelt. "I'm in D.C. right now, but I can be there tonight. Nine, ten o'clock."

"Okay."

"See you soon."

Dean dropped the phone to the seat and jammed the seatbelt buckle into place. He slammed the door shut. His underwear could wait.

Canby stepped back from the car. "Goodbye, Dean."

Dean didn't reply, but he made an effort not to spray him with gravel on the way out.

He was pulling up maps in his mind, calculating the fastest route around the major population centers in his way up the coast. He was bringing up every detail of the case file he'd memorized, as well, getting ready to plug whatever new information Jenna had for him into one of the blank variables and solve for the one he cared about.

As he turned from the drive onto Plato Lane, he thought he saw a falcon streaking north.

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Slowly, Sam left the grate and crept toward the spirit as if toward a wild animal. Jacob was still talking, asking him things about the ghost, about the plan, urging him on. "Shhh," said Sam, more to the ghost than to Jacob.

It hung against the wall, arms out, head down, a crucifixion rendered in wax drips. Careful of any sudden movements, Sam lowered himself to sit cross-legged in the middle of the floor.

"This is what you've been waiting for, right?" he said. It twitched. "For me to get weak? Starving me out the old-fashioned way since I wouldn't eat the ecto, letting the dark starve my mind?"

Its mass shivered all over, fluctuating from pallor to necrosis.

"Well, come on, then." He kept his voice quiet and steady. "I'm all softened up."

What passed for its head bobbed, as if scenting him. It sank down the wall and began to move.
Whether from wariness or anticipation, its crawl across the floor was slow. It pulled itself on an impression of arms, pushed from an idea of shoulders. The self-recollection of something forgotten and left to rot. It stopped some distance away and raised its head. If it had had a face, it would have been looking at him.

*Half of hunting anything is sitting still.* Sam made himself still in his mind and held out his hand. "All soft and gooey inside," he said. "Come on in."

In a rush of movement and limbs, the spirit closed the distance. Ice touched Sam's fingers as it took hold of his hand, and then it poured itself in.

Dean cased Jenna's neighborhood twice before parking in case it was a trap, but he saw nothing. He'd changed plates in New Jersey and driven with particular care starting fifty miles from the Rhode Island state line, but so far, so good. A month was a pretty long time in terms of a major city's crime blotter; as long as the police didn't know he was here, he might just have a chance.

The radio was on low, background noise to keep him alert. "—guarantee you'll find the laptop of your dreams for less! Laptops Direct: cut out the middleman and SAVE!"

Dean killed the engine. He peered up at Jenna's place, the upper story of a large clapboard house. One light was on in the living room, but the blinds were drawn.

"Here goes nothing," he muttered.

As he knocked, he recalled that she lived with her parents and braced to have to explain calling on their daughter at ten o'clock at night. It was Jenna herself who answered, though, with no sign of anyone else behind her.

"My parents are in Wisconsin," she said. "My niece's christening. Thanks for coming."

The words were polite, but she didn't look glad to see him. She didn't look glad about anything. Her round face was tense, and she had her hands wrapped around her elbows.

He cleared his throat. "No problem." She didn't wave him to a chair, and she didn't offer to make him coffee this time. "How's uh, nursing school, right?"

"You know. A lot of work. But I'm finishing this semester, so."

Not in the mood for small talk. That was fine. Neither was he. "Why don't you show me what you found?"

She retrieved something from the shelf. It was a video game box, *Saints Row*. She stared at it. "I had to go into the attic," she said. "Needed my high school diploma. Anyway. This was up there."

He took it from her and she let him. It was lighter than he expected. When he opened it, in place of a disc he found four pieces of paper, folded into quarters. He opened one. It was a xerox of a driver's license belonging to Maureen Whitaker, born 1989, brown eyes, 5'6", 130 pounds. The home address was in Connecticut.

Dean opened the rest. They were all drivers' licenses, all women, all from Connecticut or Massachusetts: states bordering Rhode Island.

Dean looked at Jenna. "Brendan worked at a hotel, right? Desk clerk?"
Her fingers tightened around her bicep. "I Googled them. With three of them, I don't know, but the girl from Stockbridge—there was an article that had a picture. It said she was missing." Her lips were set in a tight line. "What does this mean?"

Dean shuffled through the licenses again. It was just a delay tactic to avoid looking at Jenna, really.

If he'd been a better man, he would have thanked her, packed up the papers, and told her, "I'll take it from here," all authority and federal efficiency. Instead he found himself asking: "Do you want to find the truth?"

She hesitated for a second, then nodded jerkily.

"Are you sure? Some rocks don't need looking under, Jenna."

Under her mousy bangs, her eyes were torn between fear and anger. "I don't want to, but I—for some reason I have to. Does that make any sense?"

It didn't look like it made any sense to her, but he nodded anyway. "All right. Got a computer?"

Jenna had found definite information on only one woman, but she didn't have Dean's experience or his fund of extralegal tricks. It took less than an hour to verify that the other three had also disappeared, one in 2009, two in 2010, one in early 2011. None since Brendan had gone missing himself last March.

When he'd finished, Dean rose and let Jenna take his place so she could read through the browser tabs herself. She did so in silence for about ten minutes before she got up and began to pace.

"The police came to see me," she said finally. "A few days after you did."

Dean became very aware of his heartbeat.

"They were looking for you."

"Jenna—"

"Who are you?"

Dean swallowed. This couldn't be a trap. Had it been, she wouldn't be confronting him, and he'd be hearing sirens. He took a chance. Or maybe it was just his last available play. "My name's Dean Winchester. I've got a brother named Sam. We, uh. We investigate special cases, the kind the police can't always solve." No reaction from her. "I really was looking for your brother. We were. But my brother vanished while we were working, just like the others."

"Others?"

"A lot of other people are missing from Providence with no explanation, all the way back to 1963. I was trying to find the pattern, but...." He offered up a shrug-and-smile combo that he could feel fell far short of the mark. "I broke into somebody's apartment. Sam was missing, I was desperate. But the police were watching, and they got the wrong idea." He watched her for a long moment, taking care not to make any sudden movements. He thought about the timing of her phone call, bare minutes after Canby concluded their ritual. "Why didn't you turn me in?"

Her face twisted with some unnameable conflict. "I don't know."
Yeah. Definitely something hinky about that.

Dean nodded slowly and considered his options. Except he really didn't have any other than to press his luck. "Do you want to find out what's going on here?"

A bitter smile that looked out of place on her cute little sister features crossed her face. She nodded.

"Will you help me?"

She met his gaze and held it this time. "What do I have to do?"

* * *

Dean handed Jenna a laminate with the logo of Lindsey Chase's elder care agency. "ID." He handed her a brick phone. "Burner. Untraceable. If you get in a tight spot, call me. Call or text when you're done and I'll meet you back here."

Traffic sounds filtered up to Jenna's living room from below. Seven a.m., and rush hour was already grinding into gear. Jenna clipped the laminate onto her pink teddy bear scrubs. "What am I looking for?"

"Honestly? I don't know. But Sammy's research says she was at that nursing home from February of 2010 until she disappeared, and she was last seen in the picnic area by the property. So try to find coworkers and see what they remember about her. Pitch it soft, don't seem too interested." He struggled with himself for a moment before he made himself say, "Don't do anything you're uncomfortable with. If you get something, I can always follow it up later."

She just stared at him. Maybe it was a bit much, telling her to stay in her comfort zone while sending her to do something that could get her jail time if she got caught. But, he told himself, he'd offered her the out.

Jenna's fictional shift as a temp nurse at Oak Crest Nursing Home off the 6-10 Connector began at 8:00, She was taking public transit on Dean's advice, so she went on and headed out, leaving Dean at his car. He turned on the engine to warm up a bit, popped a No-Doz, and opened the case file on the expanse of too-empty seat. He went through it again, mentally girding himself to go infiltrate Cara Pryor's former workplace. The radio droned in the background.

Truth was, he was stalling, looking for any starting point that looked better than Cara. If Jenna had gotten a visit from Lieutenant Gutierrez, odds were most of the people connected to Cara had, too. He would really, really rather not poke that hornet's nest. Not so close to finding Sam.

"Locked out of your electronics? Lost important files? Our data recovery experts will make sure you walk out with the data you need. With competitive rates—"

Dean twisted the tuner until he landed on a soft rock station, something that would help him think instead of distracting him. Jacob Dorner was the one Dean really wanted. He was the most recent victim, apart from Sam, and the one Sam had been on when he disappeared. Too bad Dean didn't dare get within a country mile of it.

He couldn't stop thinking about the dead sister, though. Jacob's rowing partner and twin. It was one of those facts that seemed like it had to be significant just by virtue of its tragedy, but he and Sam hadn't been able to find any connection when the tragedy was so far in the past and wasn't repeated with any of the others. Still, they'd tried, however graspingly. How had Sam put it? Maybe it's about loss.
Something kicked in the back of Dean's brain. He frowned and hunted through the papers spread on the seat. He came up with another sheet of Sam's mad-dash handwriting. There: Marian Daniels, 47 at the time of her disappearance. Facilitator of dentistry, constituent of Church of the Redeemer, faithfully active member of Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

"Huh," said Dean.

* * *

12:30 p.m., punctual, Woonasquatucket Community Center.

"I'm with Bring Them Home, we're a, uh, awareness group for missing persons. We're doing a profile on Marian Daniels. I understand she was very active here?"

"Marian, gosh, yes. Wow. I hadn't thought about her for so long." The MADD branch president, Sandra Petersen, one of those hyper-respectable, PTA-type ladies, tucked a braid behind her ear and straightened the folding chairs Dean had helped her put out. "Yeah, she was treasurer and logistics officer for… five years? And she'd been involved for longer than that. We all miss her."

Dean poised a pen over his steno pad and looked up expectantly. "And how did she come to be involved here?"

Petersen leaned against the back of a chair. "A drunk driver took her best friend when she was just seventeen. That was back in her hometown, not here, but decades later, it stuck with her. It usually does." Bitterness tinged her voice.

"Best friend, uh…." Dean flipped back through the steno pad. "She ever mention a name?"

Petersen pulled her cardigan across her front and folded her arms over it. "No."

Dean stopped at the first McDonald's he saw with wifi and ran the search. Marian Daniels was from a postage-stamp place upstate, big enough to have a newspaper, small enough to be proud of it. Its archives were therefore digitized back to 1934. Allowing for some error on Marian's age at the time, the accident would have occurred sometime around 1981-1983. He tried a few variations on local girl car accident.

There was nothing. He looked up Marian's class at the local high school; there was no telling which of the sixteen other girls had been her BFF, but all of them had survived to graduate. One of them did die five years later after the debate club president she'd married decided to win an argument with a shotgun, but that was it. The boys were similarly healthy. Marian had never lived anywhere else until she moved to Providence.

Dean sat back and frowned. People would make up all sorts of stories to get attention, but this story hadn't garnered much. According to her friend Sandra Petersen, Marian had barely even talked about it. The age she'd given for herself was weirdly specific, considering that she'd never attached a name to the victim at all.

He widened his search to unsolved traffic fatalities, and this time he got a hit: in spring of 1982, the body of an unidentified drifter was found in a ditch off a bend in the road. The thinking was that he'd been struck by a car in the winter and gotten covered by the snow. No suspects ever identified.

* * *

Jenna texted that she was leaving the nursing home just before three. Since she had to take a couple of buses, he still got back to her place first even taking his time finishing up at a copy shop. He put
away a couple of burgers and a triple red-eye sitting in the car, some garbage on the radio just to keep his brain online.

"Support for WWBB is made possible by Dell. Dell: Be Direct.™ Coming up in the next hour—"

Dean grimaced and killed the radio. "'Be Direct,' yourself," he muttered.

He spotted Jenna coming down the street, head down, hands in her pockets. She didn't glance in his direction. All told, she didn't suck at this. Dean waited for a couple of minutes after she disappeared into the house and then joined her.

She was sitting on the couch when he entered, a medical file open on the coffee table. The stickers on the tab read "DU" and "11": first letters of last name and last year active. Dean had broken into enough offices to know. Beside the file sat the brown paper bag Jenna had packed her lunch in.

He closed the door behind him and gingerly sat opposite her. "What'd you find?"

Jenna's eyes were on the file, her hands in her lap. Dean couldn't read much of the scrawl upside-down. "I found a nursing assistant who worked with Lindsey, Alice. I told her she was a cousin, didn't know her well, didn't realize it was her old workplace when the temp agency first assigned me. She remembered Lindsey and some of her patients." Jenna paused, chewing her lip.

"Mrs. Dunleavy had Crohn's disease," she continued. "Poor thing. Well. Actually, according to Alice, she was a self-absorbed hypochondriac nobody liked, but still—to be alone, abandoned by your children, with your own body turning on you—she wouldn't have wished that on anybody. Apparently even her lips were burned after a while. Eventually she was as paranoid as she was neurotic, which doesn't seem to be unusual for patients whose families stick them in that place, but Lindsey stayed with her till the end."

Jenna reached into the paper bag and took out an old cold cream jar with the lettering half worn off and a mostly empty bottle of Dawn. "These were in a culvert near the picnic bench outside, the one where you said Lindsey used to eat. No one else goes there; it's ugly and depressing." She rubbed the pad of one thumb over the nail of the other. "We did a unit on poisonings. What to look for when kids get into household substances, mostly. Soap poisoning presents a lot like Crohn's disease." She pushed the jar of Pond's across the table to him. "Crohn's can also cause bleeding all along the GI tract."

Dean opened the jar. There was ground-up glass inside.

"Marian, too," he said, when he couldn't think of anything else to say. "I mean, nothing like this, it looks like with her it was an accident, but—yeah, a homeless guy back in '82. Hit and run."

Jenna nodded slowly to herself, eyes downcast. "You said your brother disappeared?"

Dean carefully didn't react. "That's right." She didn't say anything else. "Look, Jenna," Dean began. "I can't promise it'll fix anything, but we're close to some answers. There's one piece of evidence I need to get access to, something I couldn't get near before. I still can't, not on my own. But if you help me—"

"No." She looked up. Her eyes were red as if she'd been crying, though he was pretty sure she hadn't. She reached into her pocket and came up with the burner phone in her tiny hand. "I'm done."

"Jenna—"
"I said I'm done."

After a second, Dean took the phone with a quiet, "Thanks." She didn't reply.

Back in the car, he expelled a harsh breath and shut his eyes. For this con to work, he needed an accomplice. A woman, preferably, since he'd already started prepping a legend for Jenna; he could do it over again for a man, but Bobby was officially burned here and even if he hadn't been, Providence PD might have Dean down as acting with male associates and he was going to need every bit of misdirection he could get. It had to be someone he could trust and rely on absolutely, and there weren't a lot of people who met those parameters in his Rolodex to begin with.

Really, he could only think of one.

"Fuck," he swore quietly, and turned the key in the ignition.

"Are you looking to upgrade your business on a budget? At Pawtucket Pawn, we guarantee you'll walk out the door with the computer of your dreams—for less!"

Dean twisted the dial to a different station. The same ad came up, only with poorer reception.

"—Or if you need cash fast but you're not ready to sell, bring in your electronics for a thirty-day loan. That's right: a thirty-day loan. So you can take care of business, and your item will still be here!"

Dean slapped the radio off entirely. Two seconds later, it came back on, playing the ad drenched in static. He groaned. "Babe, I heard you the first time, what the hell do you think I'm trying to do? Jesus!"

He turned onto the larger road that the lane Jenna lived on connected to. From the next cross street immediately ahead of him, a lumbering transit bus turned into his lane. The advertisement on its rump blocked his view of traffic ahead: a laptop, angled toward the viewer to show both its profile and the improbably high-quality image of a pouncing falcon on its screen.

*Sony Predator: Grab It and Go.*™

"Like a dog with a bone," he muttered to his car. "You're worse than Sammy."

Her suspension squeaked in reply.

"Mix you up in one blood sacrifice and you turn into a diva."

By the time he made it back from FedEx to a by-the-hour motel, Leonard Tiller III was almost $400 poorer, not counting his deposit for a rental Macbook. But he'd looked like he could afford it when Dean had lifted his wallet.

He went through the case file one more time, staring again at the grainy blow-up of Jacob Dorner's Facebook picture. What had Sam thought of this man? Dean wished he knew. He wished that he at least had the notebook Sam had been working in; Sam never recorded his subjective feelings in those, but Dean would have been able to glean something from the handwriting, the phrasing, the doodles in the margins, *something.*

Or maybe not. The mp3 player proved he didn't know his brother as well as he'd supposed.

Goddamn Sam for never saying what he thought, for sitting on every little feeling or idea until he could get enough evidence for it to ripen into a theory. Goddamn Sam for leaving him here, with
his thumb hovering over a number he was supposed to have lost. Goddamn Sam for being gone.

He checked his watch. Quarter after five on a Friday: should be smack in the middle of ball practice. He pressed dial.

She picked up on the fourth ring: long enough to stare at the number, then decide not to panic, then decide to answer. "Dean? What is it?"

He took a deep breath. "Lise, I need a big, big favor."

Stull Cemetery had been a singular place, through Lucifer's eyes. Which, of course, had also been Sam's eyes. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it had been singular through Lucifer's gaze, since what had allowed him to see the ley lines converging on the battlefield had not been any organ. In the sway of the grasses, he'd seen every position every stalk had ever held or would ever hold. He'd seen the dead in their graves, not, as they had thought, awaiting resurrection.

He'd seen his half-brother Adam, just a kid who looked a bit like Dean and nothing like Sam; he'd seen his full brother Michael, as if that word could begin to explain it, brother, great in the power of Heaven and resolute. Loving, still: he always had been. But he loved as his Father instructed, and no further.

When Castiel had arrived, he'd seen him, too, and the seeing had been strange: a familiar face, a familiar coat; a six-winged sparrow, painfully small; something towering, despite being diminished.

He'd seen Dean. The main thing he'd seen, of course, was Dean. Dean had been confusing to see. The others should have been but weren't; Dean shouldn't have been but was. Dean had had lines writ on the inside of him, same as Sam, but they had all gone illegible. Dean had said, *It's okay. I'm here. I'm not gonna leave you,* and Sam had felt the way one did looking at those optical illusions that could be two different things depending on how you looked at them: that cube, those stairs, that one that was a rabbit or a duck, the one that could be two faces or a vase. It had felt like that moment where the whole picture stopped making any sense and didn't look like anything.

What was that phenomenon called?

He'd seen the car. Just the car. There'd been nothing there for an archangel to see, no lines of power or destiny, so only Sam had been left to see it.

And then, like an optical illusion, everything had shifted. Or, rather, everything had changed while nothing shifted.

Rabbit-duck, faces-vase. Not a question of power at all, really. Just a hair-trigger shift of perspective.

Multistable perception, that was it.

There was a long pause before Lisa spoke. She'd always been like that: measured, circumspect. He hadn't always known where he stood with her; their lives were too different, and sometimes she'd watch him without trying to hide it, for weeks at a time maybe, and he hadn't even been able to fathom what she was thinking. But he'd always known that when she did say what she thought, she meant it.

It had helped a lot. They never would have made it otherwise. Made it as long as they had, anyway.
"Are you all right?"

He rubbed a hand over the back of his neck as he paced. "I— Yeah, I'm fine. It's not me." He knew what he needed to say next: It's Sam. But he couldn't get the words out.

"What's going on?" Her voice was so infuriatingly calm that he almost hung up the phone.

"I can't explain everything, it's complicated, but—" He stopped himself. Rip it off like a bandaid. "Sam's MIA. Has been for about a month. I've been searching, and I'm close, and— I honestly can't explain all the ins and outs, but the bottom line is he doesn't have long and there's something I need that I can't get without backup. Not physical backup; just someone on the phone."

When she didn't reply, he forged ahead. "I need to get into a building. I'll go in under an alias, not too different from our usual shtick, but it's not going to hold up without some confirmation from a supervisor. Normally I'd use Bobby, but he's burned here. It has to be somebody new. And it has to be somebody I can trust." He didn't say how short that made the list. She knew.

"What building are you trying to get into?"

Here went nothing. "Police evidence lockup."

The incredulous noise she made was so tiny the phone almost didn't pick it up. "You're asking me to commit a felony."

"Technically, yeah."

"Technically? Technically I could go to jail, Dean, and I have a kid. Maybe you've forgotten."

He flinched. "I haven't forgotten anything, okay?" he said, trying to keep his voice down. "Lise, believe me, I would not be asking for this if it wasn't life or death. But Sam is running out of time."

"I hear you, I do. And if it were just my life on the line, that would be one thing. But Ben's only got me, because you're not here, remember, and what you're describing—the second they know something's off, they're going to trace this fictional supervisor you want to feed them. They're going to trace it right back to me."

He expelled a long breath. "I know. That's why I overnighted a burner phone to you. It'll be there by morning."

He counted off the seconds of silence.

After about seven and a half of them, she said, "Why? Why are we doing this again?"

That stung. "How exactly is this again?"

"I mean, yeah, the felony is new, but the pattern?" She let out a short, incredulous laugh. "And let me guess: this is the last thing you'll ever ask. I'll never hear from you again. For all intents and purposes, you might as well be dead to me."

He closed his eyes. "It's better if I am, Lise. I'm poison to you, both of you."

"Well, that's convenient."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean. All your self-pity and your garbage about being toxic, it just lets
you feel a little less guilty about walking away. It's just an excuse to choose Sam over us."

"You're the one who said you needed me gone. I got gone."

"Dean, you were gone before I ever met you."

"You think I hung up hunting for a year because all I wanted was to be out the door? You think that meant nothing to me, think, what, hanging drywall is what I was sticking around for? Look—"

"You were shouting at your friend's house, Dean." She cut him off surgically. "We could hear you clear upstairs. So I heard you say you only came to us because your brother asked you to. Ben heard it."

His stomach churned. He remembered. That probably wasn't even the worst that he'd said. "It wasn't like that."

"I'm not saying you never loved us. I know you love us. But that doesn't mean anything if you won't back it up."

"Okay, you know what? You're pissed at me, and that's fine. But you and me? That's not even the point here. This is about Sam."

"It always is."

"Don't start, Lisa. You've got no right."

Her voice rose. "I don't have a right to talk about the guy who keeps tearing my life apart?"

"You don't even know him! You want to let me have it, fine, but you do not know a damn thing about my brother."

"Don't treat me like I'm stupid, Dean, I know something!"

The only thing audible in the silence was her breathing.

"What is it with you and Sam, huh?" Dean dug in, vicious. "You have never, you have never liked him—"

"Don't try to turn this back on me—"

"Do you have any idea what he did for you? Huh? Do you have any concept?"

"Don't you dare."

"Oh, right, you don't. My bad. You've never been to Hell. You literally can't imagine."

"Stop."

"You don't owe me anything. I know that. Believe me, I know. But you do owe him."

"I said stop."

"We are all only here because of Sam. You are only here because of Sam. You want to know what was coming for you if he hadn't stepped up? What was coming for Ben? Should I go into detail?"

"Stop it!"
This time, the silence that stretched out between them was the silence of something having shattered.

"The package will be there by 7:00 a.m. tomorrow," Dean finally said, voice clipped. "There's instructions and a script in there, like a flowchart for how to answer the questions and how to get off the line naturally if you have to. The call will come in sometime tomorrow between 9:00 and 10:00 a.m. After you hang up, wait an hour, then get rid of it. GPS is already disabled."

Her voice shook with rage. "Don't you ever come near Ben again."

Dean shut his eyes. He didn't answer.

She hung up.

He opened his eyes and stared at the wall without seeing it. He felt numb. All he could feel, and he felt it acutely, was the beating of his heart.

Ice raced up Sam's arm. It wasn't the coldest he'd ever felt, not anymore, but he knew the fact he'd had worse wouldn't save him.

Just the opposite, really.

But he didn't have time to worry about that. The ice was already flooding his mouth and nose, and then the ghost was through.

As before, there was the rush of memories: scenes hurtling past his awareness, too fast for him to catch and hold any particular one. He didn't even try. The ghost pressed and delved deeper, deeper.

Blood.

Drinking demon blood in the garden shed. The alpha vampire, forcing its wrist toward his face. A bed and a knife and it's okay sammy you can have it. Driving from where Ruby had set a map ablaze to where angels had taken Dean, his mind a perfect point; arriving to find Alistair, at last, Alistair, and it was pathetic crumbs and leavings when his promise had been to raze Hell—but still, here was the one who'd thought he could carve his brother, and besides, how good it had been to be a weapon, how pure.

The Other drank it down. It drank the moment of the demon's death until there was nothing left; it inverted the cup; it found there was nothing more in it; it threw the cup away.

What are you? it wanted to know.

Listening to Cindy McClellan, RN, scream—listening only, because there'd been Ruby to do the deed for him, and he'd been a coward. Ruby, there at every turn. Toward the end, he'd started to get glimpses of her true face. He'd still found her beautiful.

Blood, blood, blood.

The ghost was shrieking with fury and triumph and frustration. It was all three at once, so Sam couldn't even begin to guess what caused each.

And at the bottom of that particular well was Lilith, and a deafening heartbeat, and rage where God had said, Vengeance is mine, and Sam had said, Then you shouldn't have made me.

And the moment when she'd ended. The moment when he'd ended her. Oh.
Her passage, of course, had left only blood.

Even with that the Other would not be content. Its appetite was devouring, and it still had not found the one it sought. So it pressed deeper, and Sam let it.

Stull Cemetery again. Something there drew it, and he'd thought, before, it was the blood, but it wasn't. The Other wasn't interested in the blood on his hands; it was interested in the way the hands weren't his to command. Too, the moment the cure took hold of Dean and he arched on the floor: it didn't give a fuck about the ruin raking through Dean in that memory, violating his body and his mind and his life. It only cared about the way that the Sam who'd watched it wasn't Sam. What it sought was somewhere in that disjunct, and it would tear through everything else to find it.

He knew that if it did, it would take the wall with it.

He couldn't let it. But he couldn't repel it, either, so he cast about for something he could offer it instead, just one thing that might pull it in deeper without taking it straight to the wall. Blood. Blood on his knuckles, blood on his shirt; are you bleeding? and i don't think it's mine.

He thought: Meg.

Just that: placing the name in its way not to stop anything, but to divert. It was enough. The Other seized Jo's blond hair and slammed her head into a post and it was rapt. It was ravenous. It dug straight down.

Backwards: from Duluth back to Twin Lakes back to a gas station. Cigarettes. Menthols. Revulsion at the smoke in his body.

Smoke in his body.

Sam walked down a cracked sidewalk in west Texas. The Other had never been to Texas. Sack of burgers in his hand, face buried in his phone. The Other didn't know what the device he held was. Black smoke coiled in the air, raced for his nose, raced for his mouth.

That, the Other knew.

The ghost was screaming inside him. It was a sustained sound with no beginning or end. It sounded the way possession felt. He reverberated with that scream, because the ghost was dug in deep.

It had gone so far, really, that it never had a chance. When he locked his mind down around it, it was in much too deep to withdraw.

If it had no understanding of what was about to happen, all the better. The narrowing of its perception down to that scream, that smoke, that possession only made it easier for him to free his. Driver-passenger, predator-prey, rabbit-duck, faces-vase: it was all a matter of perspective.

Sam looked at the picture just so until it flipped.
they're gonna send you back to mother in a cardboard box

Chapter Summary

You took another. The stain was there, but it was not. Impossible. You took another. The stain was there, but it was not. Impossible. You took another. The stain was there, but it was not. Impossible—

Chapter Notes

A big thank-you to my betas Dimeliora and Caranfindel.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Blood.

(Whose blood? His? Hers?)

Yours. Call it yours.)

There was blood, and it was yours. Many other things were not: your body, your mind, your actions. But the blood, that was yours.

The thing inside you wouldn't miss it, but you would. That made it yours.

A warehouse. Old machinery; a bare bulb of a style not manufactured since the 1940s. Blood on it.

Before you stood a man. The man was paunchy and bloated. He wore a stained shirt with no tie and a suit that looked like he'd slept in it in a gutter, but the thing inside you didn't give a shit. As if it mattered how you dressed up meat.

The man smelled. It was a sour smell, like poorly dried laundry. He was standing over you where you were tied in a chair, and he had a knife and a scowl and he thought you couldn't move but he was afraid of you. Well. Not you, of course. But he didn't know that.

The man stepped across a salt line, raised a knife——

—Later. The thing inside you taunted him: Do you feel like a big man? Killers who use knives can't get it up, it said; you'd read that in the paper somewhere. Your ankles were tied to the legs of the chair, but the thing inside spread your knees and tipped your head back. Blood slid down between your breasts. Are the papers right, big man?

Get it out, you screamed at him. (It had left you nothing to scream with, and neither had he.) Get it out, get it out, get it out.
What are you? he wanted to know. Salt holds you, but the silver don't burn. You're no shapeshifter.

Who said I was? said the thing inside you. That was to him. To you, it said, Would you believe he's trying to kill you without even knowing how? Men.

And, no. You didn't believe it. You didn't believe that anyone would inflict this much pain without knowing for a fact that it would accomplish something.

Later, when he'd tried it all again—when he hadn't taken the thing up on any of the offers it made with your body, but it hardly mattered because there was nothing else he hadn't done to your insides—when he'd tried it with three different knives and cycled back to the first one, when he was still trying and none of it had worked—then you believed it.

The man had gone pale. The thing inside you laughed. Your body laughed with it. You were the one missing all this blood, and he had the nerve to be pale.

You're— They're myths, he said. You're not— You're not.

What do you think, meat? it said to you. Am I?

You already knew.

I don't believe in God, said the man.

What a coincidence, said the demon. It smiled with your lips. Neither do we.

The man stumbled on his way out of the room.

The thing could have gotten out of the ropes. It could have gotten out and killed the man (hunter, the demon helpfully supplied, but some strange layer of you already knew) at any time. The only reason it hadn't yet was because it liked what he was doing to you.

You hated him. You hated him for being useless and sloppy and doing all this to you and above all for failing to kill you, either of you. But you hated this thing more. The hunter had perverted your body. The demon had perverted your life. It had perverted your faith.

Just think, it mused while it waited. If everybody paid as much attention in Sunday school as you did, all of this could've been avoided.

The hunter came back with a priest. It wasn't your priest, but still you could have wept with hope, if you'd had control of your eyes.

I'm telling you, girlie, said your demon, amused more than cruel. God's the myth.

No. No, He loved you; He was going to help you. He would save you.

The priest stopped in the doorway. Then he turned into a corner and was sick. When he faced you again, he was green and looked like he wanted to run. What have you done, he said to the hunter. What have you done.

You see, said your demon, here's the thing. It's not just that these morons are going to carve and carve and still be surprised you're alive to feel it. If God was gonna save you from that, He would've already. No, doll face, that's the appetizer. The real fun starts when I jitterbug out and you drop dead, because you belong to us, now. God wouldn't have you even if He existed.

No.
What, forgotten all the things we've done together already? I'm hurt.

But that wasn't your fault. You didn't choose this.

_Doesn't matter. I touched you. I made you mine._

And the truth of that stained you through.

_(A sin is a stain on the soul —)_

When the priest finally got his shit together enough to start doing his job, though, it flinched. It flinched and you _hoped_, even though that strange layer of you knew better and dreaded the hope. You would always hope, because this was a memory and its shape was forever determined.

_Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem._ The demon snapped, snarled, and hurt. It hurt so much, in fact, that it took you a long time to realize that it wasn't afraid.

The sour-smelling hunter was stupid. He thought the ropes would hold this body just because it had sat through so much torture and hadn't gotten out. He only realized different when the skirt of the priest's cassock broke the salt line.

Here, your experience went fragmentary: bursting ropes, exploding bulb. Running out the door.

Surprisingly, it was the priest who gave chase. Through the warehouse, through the shipping yard. Construction at every turn as the muscles of industry swelled, straining to churn out ever-greater supply to the four corners of the war. Growing muscles in need of new veins.

The priest didn't know what he was doing when he chased you into the outfall and up the tunnel. He backed you into a corner and began to speak. _Sancte Michael Archangele, defende nos in proelio._ The demon started to hurt again. The priest was sweat-sheened pale. _Contra nequitiam_—

The demon howled its agony, but it was watching the priest's eyes. —_et insidias diaboli esto praesidium._ It saw the exact moment he started to think God was going to win.

It had been waiting for that.

It grinned with your face and said, I think I'll take a child next.

And then it left.

Black smoke erupted from your mouth. Its exit hurt like thousands of claws raking up your insides as it rushed up and out, and the last thing you saw was your demon racing away through the air. Free.

And then—

You were nothing.

You were nothing for a long time.

You never knew exactly what happened to your body in the immediate after. If the hunter caught up to the priest and told him to leave you there in the sewage, you didn't exactly see. There wasn't enough of you around for seeing.

By the time you started to coalesce enough to think, _I am me_, you were already rotting.

But you did coalesce. You drew together, much like you'd seen the black smoke do when this all
started, but slower. Much slower. And once you could think, I am me, you couldn't help looking down and knowing, That's me.

So you rotted.

You rotted. You rotted while it was somewhere, free.

Rotting was prison. Then rotting was not. Rotting became liquefaction, became draining away, became trickling through a lattice of vessels spread beneath ever-growing organs of civilization. You could move again. You spread throughout the system; you were spread whether you liked it or not. But the limit of your disintegration, which extended far beyond the disintegration of your body, was the limit of your spreading.

So this wasn't freedom, either, but you couldn't remember why that mattered until you saw the first one.

You saw him framed in a round punch-out of sky: he moved a metal disk aside, grunting, and there he was in a great halo of blue and white. But he was nothing holy. You knew the moment you saw the stain on his mind.

It had been a stain.

It was a stain.

It was a stain, and it was free. Your demon was still out there in the world, and it didn't even know it was yours yet.

You would make it know.

You reached up and bored right through the stain on that broad, pink forehead.

Dean walked up Weybosset Street on approach to the Providence PD District 1 main station. Its mosaic-work brick façade loomed up on the left, downtown traffic flowing downhill on the right. He felt its fish-eye cameras on him and forced himself not to turn aside.

Last time he'd come here, he'd been Agent Sydney Barrett of the FBI. Except Agent Barrett had gotten made. He'd gotten ambushed in Jacob Dorner's apartment because Detective Jennifer Gutierrez thought he was involved in something worth mobilizing the entire city for, and she was unlikely to forget him.

But Detective Gutierrez wasn't on shift yet, and neither was her gimlet-eyed young colleague Officer Obaid, and Detective David Mason didn't look much like Agent Barrett. Agent Barrett was a fake FBI agent with a five o'clock shadow at two in the afternoon. Detective David Mason was presenting himself in a crisp, navy blue suit at nine a.m. sharp. Detective Mason had mirror shades, slicked-back hair, and a supervisor in Internal Affairs. A female supervisor with a cool, alto voice who would answer any inquiries with authoritative disdain and an authentically formatted confirmation number.

Probably.

Dean swung the glass door open. Ignoring the "WANTED" sketch of his own face tacked up over the coffee in the bullpen, he strode to the receiving desk.

The desk officer was young, male, and gave off a whiff of wet-behind-the-ears but too vain to
admit it. Good.

Dean handed over his card. "Detective Mason, Bureau of Professional Standards. I need access to the material evidence for the following cases." He gave Officer Romano a typed list of case numbers that all had Gutierrez's partner, rather than Gutierrez, as their common denominator. Finally, he produced Lisa's card. "My supervisor can provide the authorization."

Suddenly attentive, if unfriendly, the desk officer took Lisa's card and started to dial.

One ring. Two. Three. Four.

"Yes, hello, this is Officer Brian Romano at District 1 Main? I've got a Detective David Mason with— Yes, that's right." Romano tapped the chewed end of his ballpoint against a message pad. Dean could barely make out Lisa's voice on the other end of the line, but the tone was steady and moderately paced. Romano glanced up at him; Dean stared back, utterly neutral. "Yes, ma'am. Very good. Thanks."

Romano hit the receiver, ending the call, and then pressed an internal extension. "Hi, desk officer. Can I get a visitor escort to evidence? Thanks."

Dean's stomach swooped. "That's all right, I know where it is."

"Procedure," Romano said, giving Dean his cards and list back. He didn't let his fingertips touch Dean's, and looked at his phone rather than his conversationalist like just the sight of him offended.

"It's just that this is a sensitive matter—"

"Yeah, well, the Rat Squad can put its mind at ease." Romano's lip curled. "You're in good hands with Charlie. You gotta be awake to gossip. Hey, Charlie!"

Dean followed a heavyset uni down a puke-green corridor and up to the second floor. Officer Charlie did indeed seem more than half asleep, but Dean had to figure even he would notice if Dean cracked open Jacob Dorner's computer under his nose. Charlie unlocked a door down a corridor that terminated in a red exit sign and let Dean in. Then he leaned up against the wall right beside it and yawned.

The evidence room was cramped, brimful shelves packed in tight around a metal table of 1980s vintage. Palms sweating, Dean started pulling boxes like he was checking them against his list while out of the corner of his eye he searched for the one he actually wanted. As he did, he desperately tried to come up with a move.

In the end, he only had one card left to play. Literally.

Dean made a show of making a note about the contents of a random box full of what looked like Beanie Babies. Then, injecting all the intensity and concern his lifetime of high-stakes performing could mimic, he said sharply, "Officer Fletcher!"

Charlie started where he stood against the wall. "Yeah?"

Dean replaced the lid of the box very carefully, as if to screen the contents from view. Then he turned and held out his fake Internal Affairs card between two fingers. "Would you ask the Deputy Chief to step down here, please?"

Charlie's eyes went comically wide once he took in the IA emblem. "Chief Scarpa? I dunno if she's in the building."
All the better, Dean did not say. Instead he said, "Check, please." Charlie took the card. "And Officer Fletcher? Be discreet, will you?"

Charlie pocketed the card and left.

The instant he was out of the room, Dean was moving. He figured he had five, ten minutes max before he needed to be out of here. He'd looked up the schematics for the kind of Macbook listed as Jacob's in the department records, but it was going to be close.

Flip computer upside-down. Coin to pop the battery, mini hex driver to free the L bracket securing the hard drive. Pull tab to slide drive into battery compartment. Stash hard drive inside blazer, dump Macbook remains in box, shove box back onto shelf, and leg it.

He turned toward the exit down the corridor to find it read "EXIT – ALARM WILL SOUND." Turned on his heel. Pushed door open into stairwell. Heard what might have been a familiar voice calling his alias half a second before door's closing cut it off.

Exiting onto the first floor, Dean slowed to a normal pace. Officer Romano was bent over his message pad, phone tucked under one ear. Dean strolled past, well aware of the camera recording his face that he could do nothing about, and out into the sunshine.

It was a beautiful day.

You had to find it.

You ran through the mind's memories. The stain was there, but it was not. Impossible. You looked again. The stain was there, but it was not. Impossible. You looked again. The stain was there, but it was not. Impossible.

You looked again.

One day, you went to look through the memories and they were not there. The mind was gone. The body rotted.

You had to find it.

You took another. The stain was there, but it was not. Impossible. You took another. The stain was there, but it was not. Impossible. You took another. The stain was there, but it was not. Impossible. Impossible. You took another—

—and almost immediately another came, to the same place, and the stain was spread all over this one.

This one was different. Different, yet the same, yet different. Yet the same.

He was tall. He had long hair and sideburns. He stood in a clearing, surrounded by scraggly ferns and trash and the black layer of alluvial filth that washed this ground every time it stormed. He was looking at the culvert in front of him, lips parted and forehead scrunched. He took in the brick arch the outfall was set into, the angle of broken iron grating against the black square beyond. You watched him frown and tilt his head. You were right behind. You—

—were Sam.

Sam watched himself in the clearing. He watched his face and the play of the stain upon it, and at
the same time he saw only the culvert, saw the lines and textures of it.

*Hey, Sam thought. I recognize that.*

Dean keyed his way into a pay-by-the-hour motel just over the western city limit, his third since arriving in Providence thirty-six hours before. He didn't unpack. He'd already changed clothes and hair in a convenience store bathroom between the District 1 police station and here, so the only things he brought into the room with him were the police scanner, a stolen Macbook, and Jacob Dorner's hard drive.

At least his car had shut up for the journey back from the evidence locker.

Brendan, Marian, Jacob. Why? Canby's spell—or whatever the hell he'd done; Dean still wasn't clear on that—was supposed to connect him to *Sam*, so why make him take a winding path through these other lives to get there?

On the bed—this place didn't even boast a table and chair—he swapped out the rental hard drive for Jacob Dorner's and pressed the power button. While he waited for the computer to boot, he drummed out "Let Me Stand Next to Your Fire" on his ankle and chewed the inside of his lip. He thought of Jenna. He thought of her round, open face the day he'd first met her. He thought of the look in her eyes when he'd left her last.

Whatever was on here, at least Jacob Dorner didn't have a sister to find out about it anymore.

The OS finished booting. If the disk had once been encrypted, it wasn't anymore. But, then, he hadn't been too paranoid that it would be. If Gutierrez had been willing and able to mobilize a city trying to catch him after he'd asked to see this thing, it stood to reason she'd have gotten whatever court orders or forensic experts she needed to read it for herself.

The desktop image was Bethany. It was hard to say for sure a month after the fact, but Dean didn't think he'd seen this picture of her that night in Jacob's apartment. It was a candid shot of her lying on some rocks and looking down at a river below, chin on her hands. Looked like a digitized copy from one of those old disposable Kodak cameras—him and Sammy'd had some of those, just a few times. She didn't seem to be aware of the camera. Her hair was only chin-length in this shot, underscoring both her square jaw and similarity in appearance to Jacob.

The desktop was relatively uncluttered, just a few top-level folders on each side. One of these was "Pictures." Seemed as good a place to start as any.

Dean shrugged. "Here goes nothing."

"Pictures" was further subdivided into "Naval" (apparently naval history was an interest), "For work" (mostly stock images of the sort likely to find their way into PowerPoint presentations), and "Photography." This last contained several hundred landscapes, cityscapes, and architectural shots, arty black-and-white stuff heavily represented. Dean set the finder to large thumbnail view and assiduously skimmed through all 848 of them, but all he found was a new level of boredom.

Most of the other top-level folders housed things like Jacob's taxes, résumé, electronic receipts for stuff he bought online, etc. Dean couldn't see anything untoward there, though admittedly he didn't exactly know what he was looking for. He put off "Health and Wellness" till last on general principle.

The sub-folders in "Health and Wellness" were exactly what Dean had been imagining for this guy, too: "Paleo recipes," "Keto vs raw foods," "Strength training," "Mindfulness." There was one for
"Rowing," too. Well, Dorner was big into rowing, no shock there. Dean was checking every single file on this drive, though, so he opened it.

Videos of regattas, certificates of Jacob's times, articles about technique and injuries, a log of a month-long argument Jacob once got into on a web forum over hull designs: yeah, this looked like the apartment Dean remembered. Narrowly focused, anal retentive, bland. Dean's eyes were glazed when he clicked on a sub-sub-folder labeled "Double sculling."

The contents were a spreadsheet and one more folder, imaginatively titled "03-04-11." He opened the spreadsheet first.

It was all numbers: times, it looked like. At first Dean figured they were racing times, but that didn't make much sense with the column headings. These were locations. Dean didn't recognize the street named in the first column, and had only a vague recollection of where Swan Point, subject of the third column, was; but the second location—Waterfront Drive—Dean knew. He'd been there.

It was where Cara Pryor had disappeared.

Dean looked at the numbers again. He thought about how long the pedestrian track where he'd found the pit trap had been, about how fast the average weekend athlete ran. Jogging times. These were jogging times.

The first column was 23 rows long. The second, 55. The third, 43. The spreadsheet file had been created in July of 2008. Cara had been missing since March of 2011.

Dean opened the folder called "03-04-11." He stared at the screen for several seconds before he opened the file at the top.

It was a video.

Experience separated into two layers. In one, Sam watched himself as the ferns around his feet curled black in sudden cold. In the other, he picked his way through the clearing until his view of the culvert lined up exactly with the black-and-white version of it on Jacob Dorner's wall.

Some connecting thread between the two layers stretched and quivered, and everything came to a halt.

Sam turned. He stood in a corridor with a woman whose hair hung in dark rolls. She was the woman in the victory suit; she was the pin-up girl with no face. She was naked but for the red lines cutting her body into seven segments like a butcher's diagram. Seven black-and-white architectural photographs hung on the walls around them.

When Sam tried to make out her face, all he could find was the empty clock. Nevertheless he saw her lips move when she said:

"She's in fewer pieces than I am. I'm in fewer pieces than you are."

He felt her lips move.

No. He felt his lips move.

"She's in fewer pieces than I am," they said together, and he couldn't tell which of them had started. "I'm in fewer pieces than you are."
She raised her hand; he mirrored her, two halves of an entangled system. "I'm going to find it." His lips moved; her voice came out. "I'm going to find it." Her lips moved; his voice came out.

They stepped toe to toe. "You think whatever happened to you before was bad?" they chanted. "Give it time." They moved together, tracing each gesture onto a second self. "I'm going to find it. Give it time."

Sam strained until he found enough separateness to think, If this spirit's waiting for revenge on a demon, we're both screwed.

But his separateness also meant hers. Her face was suddenly in his, and her face was gone.

She said, I'm not waiting.

He barely had time to realize his mistake before she was reaching for a lever deep inside him.

With him distracted, she could move unilaterally. No—not quite. If she'd been an external force operating on him, it might not have been such a threat. But because they were still enmeshed, he felt her fury as if it were his own. And fury was what he'd always used to move that lever before.

He could almost have laughed at the insanity of it, if that had been an option. There were no demons here; there was nothing to apply his talents to even if he still had them. And how could he still have them? He was dry now. But he hadn't forgotten Ruby's words at the convent, or how drinking demon blood had meant nothing when he hadn't had a soul to thirst for it. And he knew, too, that if there was no demon here, she would never be satisfied until a demon was brought.

It wouldn't matter whether he could even do that. Not for him. She believed that the power was in here somewhere, and she'd tear down every wall he had to find it.

He'd promised to take this spirit apart; he'd trembled with impotent rage. But now their promises were perfect reflections, and he couldn't distinguish her wrath from his.

All of this debate took place in the space of an instant. She was already stabbing deep, a concentrated point of will too sharp to stop outright. Like at the beginning of this thing, he couldn't hope to stop the motion she'd started; he would have to divert it.

Dean.

His brother's name went up in him like a signal flare, reminding him that he did have one thing inside him that was distinct. The difference made a crack in the mirror.

The new angle it imparted made it almost simple to take hold of her with the same power she was trying to force him to flex. After all, this was easier than Lucifer. This was a soul. Practically a demon, if you thought about it.

When Sam pulled, her scream was the first truly new sound she had made since the night she'd died.

The video was eleven minutes, forty-seven seconds long. Dean watched all of it because he had to. There was no other way to know whether it contained any clue to Sam's location. It was shot, however, in what looked like the back of a van and from a close angle, and as far as he could tell contained no clues to anybody's location. Strictly speaking, it didn't even show the cameraman, only his hands on the belt he'd used. Dean did not watch it a second time.
There were also pictures. Sixteen in all, they featured their subject in at least a couple of distinct poses, but mainly they were dedicated to showcasing different lightings, angles, fields of focus. A bunch of other technical aspects Dean didn't pick up on, too, probably. They were all black and white and shot from close, unusual angles, like that was the main thing: capturing different lines and effects. Very artistic, if you didn't mind the subject matter.

When he'd gone through all of them, Dean closed the image viewer. He was left looking at the background picture on Jacob's desktop.

Square jaw, blue eyes, medium-brown hair, athletic. He might not ever have seen it if not presented with both their images almost side by side, but Cara Pryor had looked a lot like Bethany Dorner.

Dean sat looking at it for a while.


Sam.

"No." He said it out loud. "Whoever you are, no. You're wrong. And you can go to Hell."

He thought of the driver's licenses in Brendan Whitmore's attic. He thought of a drunk teenager leaving a drifter to die and be forgotten in the snow. He thought of ground-up glass in an empty cold cream jar, and of jogging times in a tidy spreadsheet, and of what it must be like to have a twin, and grew numb with fury.

A lot could be laid at Sam's feet. A lot could be laid at any hunter's feet, really, his own most definitely included. But not this. Sam had killed, and Dean knew, from watching him end Alistair if nothing else, that he was capable of enjoying it; but he'd never tortured the helpless, and he'd never left someone for dead just because he could get away with it, and he'd never done this, and if anybody thought that Sam and these people were of a kind, then some kind of cosmic error had been committed.

The universe had fucked up big time, again, and Dean was the only one who seemed to care, again.

He wanted to hurl the laptop against the wall. He almost did it, too. What stopped him was something plucking at the back of his brain right as he was reaching out. Those pictures of Cara—black and white, arty angles, sterile and somehow tedious despite what they commemorated. Like something off the wall of a bank. He'd never seen these pictures before, obviously, but the style—the style.

Basically none of the shots from the massive folder Dean now realized held Dorner's own photography were of people; they were all landscapes, cityscapes—and architectural subjects like the ones in Dorner's apartment. At the time, he'd assumed they were out of a catalogue, like everything else in the man's life. He hadn't paid them close attention, and there were a lot of photos here that all seemed pretty similar to Dean, but after about an hour he had seven he was pretty sure he'd seen before.

A close-up of some bridge cables, an old culvert, abandoned buildings—they were in much the same vein as the others, really. Unlike all of the neighboring files, though, where there'd be five or six shots of the same thing virtually indistinguishable from each other, each of these was unique.

Dean had a sick suspicion why.

Sam came to on the concrete. The screaming fire inside his mind cut out when he opened his eyes,
and though part of him expected his physical hearing to be dampened, it was not.

Something must have been outwardly perceptible about the fight, though, because Jacob was calling from behind the grate.

"Sam? What's happening out there? Where did it go?"

Sam lay on his side. Blood was streaming from his nose. He could hear Jacob clearly, and his faculties were unclouded, but he was drained in every way it was possible to be.

"Sam? Sam!"

He stared into the dark without answering.

Chapter End Notes

All my walls are lost in mirrors, whereupon I trace / Self to right hand, self to left hand, self in every place, / Self-same solitary figure, self-same seeking face. —Christina Rossetti, "A Royal Princess."
"Sam? Sam?"

Sam stared into the darkness. He wasn't lost inside his own head. There was no buzzing in his ears; he felt clearer than he had since Lindsey and Marian. Since before that, probably. It was not a bonus.

"What's going on? What happened? The grate— For a second, I almost had it, but then it got stuck again."

Sam was not surprised by this. He knew the spirit wasn't gone. He could remember everything that had happened with her. He could remember being her.

He could remember the things she'd seen.

"Sam, come on, I know you're alive, I heard you move. Please, man, just give me something. You have no idea how much it sucks always being the last one to know."

On the contrary: at this precise moment, Sam had a pretty good idea of how much that sucked.

"Did you have another seizure?" Jacob sounded like this possibility had just occurred to him. After a few seconds: "Didn't seem like a seizure," he muttered.

Sam wiped at the blood that had poured from his nose with shaking hands. No, not a seizure. He'd avoided that, and he'd avoided bringing down the wall. He wasn't certain exactly what he'd paid in order to avert it, but he was, for the moment, still sane.

"Sam? Why won't you answer me?"

He should respond. He knew he should reassure Jacob, keep the focus on escape, not give him any reason to think that anything had changed. This was the smart, necessary thing to do.

"It's brighter in your room, Sam." Jacob's voice was disconcertingly calm behind the grate. "I can
see you. I know you're awake. Don't I deserve to know what's going on? I thought we were friends."

Sam swallowed. *Yes, of course,* he should say. *Of course we are.*

In the niche with the leaky pipe, he drew up his knees to his chest and put his back against the concrete. He fit in the box-like space, albeit not comfortably. The alcove was about the same dimensions as the freezer hidden in Jacob's breakfast bar.

*Of course you're my friend.*

Dean copied those seven architectural photographs to a separate folder and started poring over them.

The bridge cables would be easy to pin down, but he simply couldn't see that helping him much. It wasn't like he could drag the river beneath. He spent some time with the picture of the culvert, but it was just cropped too close; without any surrounding detail, it could be anywhere in Providence. The ones of abandoned buildings posed the same problem, angled to catch aesthetically blown out windows or cracked foundations while cutting out all context.

Dean wasn't even sure why the photos seemed to have been taken to so as to obscure the locations. Clearly, Dorner hadn't imagined he'd ever be caught. Maybe the habit of concealment was just too deeply ingrained. Or maybe the pretentious asshole really did think all this crap was beautiful, who knew.

There was one, though, of a crumbling viaduct. The angle was weird, but the upper right quadrant showed a view through the old overpass—more of a low-slung concrete bridge, really. The file was enormous, thousands of pixels along each axis, so Dean could get a decent amount of detail out of that little glimpse: harbor cranes, silos, and, deeper in the distance, the dark and light blobs of skyscrapers.

Figuring out what part of the skyline those most probably mapped onto took hours of image comparison online and Dean's eyes felt like they were ready to peel by the end, but eventually he was pretty sure this had been taken standing on the west bank of the river looking northeast.

It wasn't much, but it was a start. And he had one more feature to go on, a patch of graffiti art that looked like maybe a wing. The right rough sleeper might recognize it.

Dean wiped his prints from the Macbook, inside and out, and shoved it between the mattress and box springs in this room where it might well rest for a solid decade. Then he slid behind the wheel of the car without bothering to check out.

"Come on, baby," he said as he turned the key in her ignition. "Don't fail me now."

Jacob was still talking, intermittently.

"Sam, can you hear me?" Steady, reassuring. "Sam, are you okay?" Solicitous, concerned. "Did the ghost, like—did it do something to you?" Fearful. Reasonable.

Sam finally made himself speak. "Yes, she did."

"Holy— *Finally. She? Wow. Well—what'd it do to you?*"
The denim of Sam's jeans was strangely slick over the knees, where filth had gotten ground in and almost polished. "She showed me things."

A pause. "Like what?"

Sam remembered twisting a body that was not his within ropes. He remembered seeing through her eyes, before that body disintegrated, and during, and after. Over and over again. "Everything."

For a long time, Jacob didn't reply. When he did, his voice was calm. Reasonable. Just like they'd talked down here a hundred times. "So what do you think?" he said. "Did you solve it?"

Sam mentally tallied up everything he had handed over to Jacob through the grate: bone dagger. Bone club. Bone skinning knife. Materials for a blackjack. Bone razor. The iron bar. He should say no.

"Yeah," he said. "I did."

_Plink. Plink._ "Oh."

A long, fat bead of ecto dripped down the concrete at Sam's feet where he was still boxed into the alcove, folded up where Jacob could see him less. Wrath made corporeal, leaking poisonous from a crack in the wall.

Cara. Bethany. He couldn't make himself say that he didn't care what had been done. Not for this.

Finally, Sam spoke. He had to try. "My only concern here is the ghost," he said. "We can both get out, Jacob. Together."

A pause. "Yes, of course. You're right, Sam."

Jacob's voice was calm. Rational. Sam shut his eyes.

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**Dyer Street:**

"Hey, man, hey, sorry. Can you just look at a—?"

**Eddy Street:**

"Uh, yes. Yes, I am geocaching. So do you recognize it?"

**Poe Street:**

"You think south of here? Or maybe north. Yeah, okay. Okay, thanks."

**Collier Point Park:**

"Wait, you have seen that graffiti? Seriously? Okay, where were you, can you remem— The Wild Zebra over on Allens? No, no, thanks, man, that's awesome, let me give you— Ah, damn it, I'm out of cash. Uh, you like _Busty Asian Beauties?_"

Sam thought fast.

He'd ejected the ghost. He'd done something to her on the way out that must have weakened her enough to disrupt her hold on the grates momentarily, but he hadn't destroyed her. Not that he'd
been trying to: he had a strong suspicion that he wouldn't have survived the attempt. Or that the wall in his head wouldn't have, which came to the same thing.

Anyway, he doubted he could. All demons might be souls, but not all souls were demons. Sam didn't know exactly how his powers worked, but he knew at a minimum that the spirit he'd grappled with had been less coherent, less complete than any of the demons he'd unmade.

There was no telling how long before she came back. He wasn't certain what she would look like when she did, either, on the inside or the outside.

He knew, though, that she would come. He knew how single-mindedly she would hold them, how she would return to them over and over again and remember both everything and nothing each time, because he knew everything she knew.

And a few things she didn't.

He knew what he needed to do to get out of here. At least, he was pretty sure he did. It wasn't so much a plan as an understanding that had been assembling itself slowly, a precipitate of logic that had settled slowly out of the chaos and horror. He wasn't certain—he couldn't be until it worked or it didn't. But his instincts told him he was right, and one way or another he had to try.

Whether he physically could, however, was another question.

Sam swallowed to get the nausea under control. He'd felt it before, with this kind of headache. He could handle it. He had no other choice.

He tried to get up and wound up right back on the floor, retching. It took a long time for the spots to clear from his vision.

"You don't sound very good, Sam."

Sam clenched his eyes shut, opened them again. A sluggish bead of blood welled at the tip of his nose; Sam wiped it away with the back of his hand and pushed himself onto his knees.

"I think the ghost really took it out of you. Whatever you're planning to do, you might want to play it safe. Save your energy. You know, not fight any battles you can't win."

Sam blinked until the floor stabilized. He made it to his feet, and then to the shaft leading up to the upper chamber. Ignoring Jacob's voice, he climbed inside.

He pulled himself through the pitch-dark shaft on his elbows. At the bend where it went vertical, he stopped and tried to steel himself. Just standing up made the blood roar in his ears. He shook his head once, hard, and blinked rapidly. He put his hands on the wall in front of him, his back into the wall behind him, and jumped.

He landed on his ass, head swimming. If he'd eaten and drunk while he'd been in the upper chamber with the bodies, then maybe. Maybe he'd have enough left to make the climb. But like this, depleted—

Slowly—he might have lost time, couldn't be sure—he pushed back to standing in the vertical portion of the pipe. He felt insubstantial. Not long ago he'd have given anything to feel insubstantial, given everything to scatter what substance he did have. He'd have embraced anything that could make him stop. For a long moment, he couldn't think why he shouldn't embrace that now. Then he remembered that strange dream about the burning heart. It had been strange not so much for its content as for its simplicity: in a room full of darkness, a single point of fire.
Remembering it focused him, somehow.

He began to climb.

He didn't count his movements. It might not have been wise to, anyway, but each shove and repositioning took everything out of him so completely that at the end of each upward heave, he didn't even have enough left in him to hold a number in his mind.

Each lift seemed impossible. Felt impossible. He didn't have the reserves left to fuel this. But something stayed steady inside, a small, kindling warmth. That burning heart clarified in his mind again: the play of flames on its surface, what it had felt like to chew and swallow it. Odd. He knew it'd just been a weird dream, but it was almost like he could feel the thing inside him.

His hands reached the lip of the pipe. One final burst of adrenaline and he was out.

And immediately toppled over from the stench. He forced back his gorge. There was nothing left in his stomach to lose, not even fluid, but the exertion of retching could wipe him out right here. So he breathed through it. He forced himself to lie still, pulling the putrefaction into his lungs.

With difficulty, he turned onto his back and stared at the ceiling. The yellow plastic tube hung barely visible in the air.

He kept it in view as he pulled himself up to sitting, then kneeling. One of the lengths of rebar rolled and clanged when he finally staggered to his feet.

"You should be careful about pushing your limits, Sam." Jacob's voice echoed. "It's dangerous."

Sam swallowed bile once more. He didn't take his eyes off the tube. How far up was it?

Was it too far?

Sam picked up the rebar. He weighed it in his hand as he backed up until his heels met the wall, considering the tube. Considering Fourth of July, 1996.

"Hey, Jacob," he called. "You know what a cross-bore is?"

He ran and jumped.

The rebar connected, but glancingly. A weak strike. Sam stumbled on the landing but pulled himself out of it fairly well. He had a goal to focus on, just one more, and that helped. He crossed to the farthest corner of the room that didn't have any obstacles between him and the tube, gathered himself, and started again to run.

This time he felt a solid impact and heard plastic snap. When he rolled to his feet just shy of the hole in the floor, one end of the tube was hanging down, swaying with the force that had broken it.

Jacob was still talking, but Sam wasn't listening this time. Up to the moment when there was something to be done about him, Jacob wouldn't be a problem, anyway.

The gas had no discernible smell. That could be because the compounds used to give it its warning odor were injected at some further point along the supply line, or—it could be because there was no gas. The line he'd just broken could be like the rest of their prison, a pocket of a larger system disused and forgotten. If Sam was right about their position, it was probably the former. He hoped it was the former.
It was also possible the decaying bodies were covering the smell. Either way, he only had one way to know when the gas was flooding the chamber, and when there was enough of it: stay here and wait for it to affect him.

Balanced on the very edge of the shaft, he did so.

While he did, he looked at the scarred concrete rim that had been the focus of so much combined effort. There had been four pieces of rebar. One piece was still in the concrete, left there in his haste to get into this chamber when Lindsey had snapped. One he had handed to Jacob as soon as he’d returned downstairs afterward. One he needed to keep up here with him; only metal could make this work.

That left one more piece free up here, and he could drop it down the shaft now in order to take it with him. It was at least 50-50 that Jacob would be waiting for him the instant those grates released, and if he was, he was going to come at Sam with every weapon Sam had handed him. This was Sam’s last opportunity to arm himself.

His free hand hesitated over that last remaining piece of iron. Then he left it where it was.

Nausea began to return. His headache mounted, too, but he couldn't be sure: both of those things could be the result of his overall condition, or from breathing the unventilated stench of the corpses. When his vision blurred, he knew it was time. Any longer, and none of this would matter anyway.

Gripping the one bar still embedded in the concrete across it, Sam lowered himself into the shaft. He bit his lip as he braced himself there, blinking away the black spots dancing in his vision and trying to steady the wobble of the rebar that was suddenly so heavy in his hand. When he didn't think he could improve it anymore, he wound up and hurled the bar at the opposite wall.

A spark struck. Sam dropped.

The impact at the bottom jarred through him, but he'd braced for it. He had just enough time to get his head and shoulders into the horizontal portion of the shaft before the air was sucked upward with the force of a tornado.

The first blast rocked through the sewer on the heels of the wind, and something no longer human screamed from out of the walls. The concrete around him gave a heavy shudder. Sam scrambled down the shallow slope of the pipe headfirst. He needed to be out before something collapsed on him—or before Jacob got free and caught him in here.

He could hear the grate rattling as he shoved himself bodily out of the pipe.

He was almost in time. He was rolling to his feet when the grate came free; he heard it and swiveled, but the inch-thick plate of metal still caught him across his left side. It sent him to the floor. Jacob was right behind it.

Ecto was burning down the walls. The ghost was still screaming. Sam had a momentary impression of a figure springing from the mouth of the shaft above him, a figure heavier and better nourished than he was, and in its hand, a flash of ivory.

Sam twisted. The bone knife shattered against the concrete beside his ear. In the same movement, Sam's arm shot out and his right heel landed behind Jacob's left knee, causing Jacob to buckle and land on top of him. Grapple the opponent in close, remove the space they have to move, control their limbs: this was hand-to-hand 101, and Jacob had missed the class.
There were two factors throwing off the balance of this fight, though, over and above Jacob's advantage in physical condition. Sam was trying to keep Jacob alive. Jacob was trying to kill him.

Sam went for a head-butt, but panic flared in him at the last minute—Lindsey, the concrete—and it wasn't hard enough. All it did was knock Jacob back far enough to have some room to maneuver, making it that much harder to restrain him.

Sam felt his mouth forming words: *It doesn't have to end like this, maybe, or I don't want to hurt you.* He wasn't sure himself. It didn't matter. Even if Jacob had been listening, the words were obliterated in the screaming of the ghost.

Suddenly there was another knife in Jacob's hand. This close up, Sam could recognize it. It was the razor he'd honed from a human sternum. Before he'd given it away, it had been the one instrument he had to get clean. He flashed on Yellowstone: an old Buck knife in a teenaged hand; a line of crud scraping off of freckled skin. Their father gone. Two boys alone together in the woods.

*Dean.*

Jacob went in for the kill, and Sam's hands made the decision for him.

He felt Jacob's throat collapse under his fist. The crunch of hyoid and cartilage was followed by the wheeze of lungs trying to pull in air they suddenly couldn't, and then Sam shoved the body off of him and kept going. There wasn't time for anything else.

He got to his feet. A second blast sent him back to the floor on hands and knees. The second explosion was larger and heavier than the first. Apparently he'd been right about where the weevils were coming from. *If I ever get out of here, Sam thought giddily, I'm going to have pancakes.*

The ghost's scream died away, and though the structure had only perceptibly shaken in the moment after the blast, Sam heard concrete fall and shatter somewhere. Water was streaming from the shafts leading to both Lindsey's and Jacob's chambers.

Sam descended the oversized concrete stairs leading to the outflow, heedless of the puddle in the channel at the bottom. He took hold of the grate across the exit and pulled upward.

It lifted.

He left the grate where it fell and crawled into the pitch black beyond. He continued to crawl, ceiling inches above his head, face inches from water he could smell but not see, down this channel where at least six other human beings had drained out for ten, twenty, thirty yards until he met a junction.

Here at least he could stand. He could see nothing, but he could hear, he could feel. The floor was level. Water was flowing across it, from his left to his right, and he heard a splash nearby. He picked a direction: upstream.

Another set of stairs, this one more human-sized. Fast-moving water cascading over them. He climbed. This volume of water, moving at this speed—his brain could barely process it. Logic dictated he was now in an actively operating part of the system, but it didn't seem real. Outside didn't seem real.

But his brother was real. Blind in the dark, he followed the thread colored *Dean.*

Sam had no idea how far he fled on pure instinct before it occurred to him that in order to escape, he needed to think. He squeezed his eyes open and shut, open and shut like somehow this would
make him able to see. After so long in his prison, he'd grown accustomed to functioning in a minuscule amount of light, but there was no convenient luminescent ecto out here.

He had to think. He had to—he had to touch. He couldn't see, so he had to think and touch. Providence still had a lot of combined sewers, sewage and rain water running together, especially this close to the river. He was in a sewage channel now. He knew by the gravity flow and by the smell. He needed to find a storm drain. Most storm drains communicated with sewage channels by drop shafts.

He pushed on, running one hand along the wall.

It felt like a long time before his hand suddenly plunged into a void, but it might only have been minutes. He explored the void with both hands. It was rectangular, about a yard square at the bottom and at least one Sam tall. Ladder rungs were set into the side of it.

At the top he found himself in a broad channel, maybe thirty feet across, with a ceiling high enough for him to walk bent over in: a storm drain. He was underneath a street.

_He was underneath a street._

It wasn't long before he saw light. At first it didn't seem real. The color of it was too pale, too—But the lumps of trash dotting the floor, the twigs and branches they were caught on, those seemed real enough as they resolved out of the dark around him. At some point, the blackness became gray.

Maybe a block later he saw the first rectangle of blinding light. When he got closer, he could see the storm grating between him and that light.

He ran to it. He flattened both palms on the grate to push up, but there was no give at all. Cemented in. Through the light that burned his eyes, he could just read the reverse impression of what was stamped on a plate in the middle: _SAVE THE BAY._

Windows of light, one after another. Sam stumbled as he ran, crisscrossing the storm drain, looking for one he could push out, or for some sign of human presence, but he couldn't hear properly, his ears still stuffed with cotton wool, and when he tried to look directly up through the grates all he got was pain.

Under one of the grates, he realized he could see color. Red. He traced the length of the slash over his abdomen with his fingers. He hadn't even felt Jacob connect. He'd made a good knife out of the sternum. Sharp. He wondered which murderer's it had been.

Something kept happening to his vision, where sections of light seemed to separate from the field of view and lose coherence. Their outlines throbbed, deep behind his eyes like the worst migraine of his life. Finally the channel bent to the right. Set into the crook of the wall's angle was another shaft, like the one he'd climbed up from the sewage channel but circular, its ladder rungs draped in dead algae. Sam stood in the shaft and craned his neck to look straight up at a circle of black with the thinnest, faintest line of light around it.

He fell on his first attempt to climb the ladder, chin xylophoning against the metal rungs, teeth clacking together. The floor made a bright point of pain against his tailbone. Trembling, he took hold of the ladder again and pulled himself back on.

The rungs were simple metal loops, no traction, and his bare feet slipped and slid with each new step. But the ladder itself wasn't that tall. He held on with toes and gritted teeth at the top.
Carefully, he reached up with one hand to feel for the manhole cover and then push.

He almost lost his footing half a dozen times as he tried to find an angle with enough mechanical advantage without letting go of the ladder. On one occasion, he did fall, his body riding roughly down a few rungs before he caught himself with a yank that hurt even worse. Somehow he made it back up to the top and resumed his position. He felt something wrench in the space between one of his big toes and the rest of his foot, but he held on.

With everything he had, he pushed up against the cover once, twice—

And the third time didn't do anything, either. The cover raised a centimeter or so each time, wobbled, fell back down. He was running on the fumes of fumes at this point.

Sam moved up one more rung, bringing his left arm up to brace against the manhole cover while holding the top rung of the ladder tightly with his right. His calves flexed back and forth while he braced himself. Then he heaved up, using his whole body, pulling with his arm and pushing with his legs until the cover lifted and, just barely, slid.

Frantically he shifted his grip, trying to sustain his lift on the cover while he got into position to be able to slide it. The cover was just balanced on the rim of the iron fixture it was set into; one false move and it would drop back into place. Sam shifted until he was pressing up onto the cover with the top of his head. The pressure sent pain through his face and down his back like current through wires. He maintained it. In short, jerky movements, he shifted his arm until it was bearing some of the weight along the backward slope, tested it a moment, flipped it quick so his palm was flat against the rough surface, and shoved.

Light flooded down.

Immediately Sam shoved again, moving the lens of iron out of the circle of light. He pushed up with his legs, planted his hands on a strange surface full of warmth, scrambled, and then he was out.

Bright. Too bright. Sam flung an arm up to shield his eyes from the sun bearing down on him. A dark wave of static was rising up over his vision and stealing his breath, but for an instant before it claimed him, he could see a great, golden dazzle, and beyond it, blue sky.

The viaduct wasn't much, just a disused overpass down the street from a strip club and catercorner from a dump. Dean parked in a cracked stretch of parking lot half a block up and approached the viaduct on foot. It was low-slung, had only carried one lane when it was still carrying anything. The underpass formed a narrow concrete window onto the Providence River beyond.

Now that he approached it from a distance, unrestricted by Jacob Dorner's camera angle, he could see the rest of the graffiti spread over the structure's left flank. The painting was a shock of color in a place of utilitarian objects discarded for outliving their use, and was actually rather beautiful.

It was a diving falcon.

Dean stood before it, looking into the blank, black eye on a level with his face. The falcon's wings formed narrow Vs, its body inverted. It was shown against a sky of cobalt blue, hurling downward like a stone, seconds from the moment of impact.

He walked through the underpass toward the river with only a guess as to what he was looking for.

On the opposite end, he found it anyway. The defunct viaduct backed right into a functioning one,
a wider overpass supported by more modern construction. Storm runoff was conducted downward from the active road via a dedicated line of pipe, which snaked around the concrete shoulder supporting it all and was lost to sight. The original overpass was not so sophisticated, and in the meter-wide gap between the two, a sawed-off gutter spout dumped whatever collected into it down into drain below.

The drain itself was just a concrete trench with a broken grate over it maybe two feet square. The iron pipe that ran horizontally from the trench into the earth was not nearly large enough to admit a whole person, and was in any case mostly clogged with debris. Dean got down on his knees and started looking through the weeds and trash and leaf litter accumulated inside.

Between rainwater and scavengers, he wasn't even sure he'd find anything. But after some digging, his fingers encountered a hard, complicated shape caught on twig a few inches back into the pipe. He drew it out.

It was a human vertebra.

Dean looked at it for a while before he set it down in the center of the drain and went back to the car for supplies.

Before he poured the salt and lighter fluid, he checked for more bones, but if there were, they'd been carried too deep into the system for him to reach. He dropped the match and watched the fire do its work.

"Rest in peace, Cara Pryor. Don't stay here for this son of a bitch, okay? He's not worth it, and I'm pretty sure he got what's coming to him."

There was no rustle, no presence. Not surprising, really. Even if she'd stayed, by now she was scattered.

When the flames had burned out, Dean walked back out to the other side of the viaduct. He stood beside the dive-bombing falcon and looked around the environs.

Was this it? He saw a few places he could start to search, but he'd thought—well, he'd thought he'd somehow know. Know that he was in the right place; or that the car would, like, stall out where X marked the spot. A string of clues he didn't understand and a collection of buildings maybe worth checking wasn't really what he'd had in mind. He'd expected a sign. Well—he glanced back at the falcon—a more overt sign.

From some point vaguely north there was a muffled blast and a weird sort of reverb, but it wasn't close by. Some industrial mishap, probably. Dean shaded his eyes against the strong sun and scanned the ground around the viaduct.

The second blast was not muffled.

"Holy—"

When he'd shut his mouth, Dean ran up onto the old overpass and looked north. The source of the explosion wasn't too close, but it was near enough he could sort of see what the fireball he'd glimpsed had left behind. Some kind of silo had gone up.

He was jogging back to the car when he heard the sirens, and he cursed. Shit. Shit.

He needed to get up there. A massive fucking explosion couldn't be just coincidence. How in the hell was he going to get close with half of Providence's first responders bearing down on him?
He jumped in the car and cranked the engine on autopilot. The car. They'd pick out the car a lot easier than him. He needed to find a place to stash her, then he could scope it out on foot. Because it couldn't be coincidence, but there was no way Sam had been in that, either—

He was pulling up to the intersection with Allens Avenue when he saw a hotrod go by southbound. Civilian vehicles weren't exactly at the forefront of his attention, so it took him a minute to clock what it had been.

'64 Ford Falcon. Cherry red.

Dean looked between the burning silo and the retreating bumper of the Falcon, made a decision, waited for a gap in the traffic, and turned left through a red light to head south.

He managed to keep the Falcon in view for a few blocks. Allens was a pretty straight road and keeping sight of the car should've been a cake walk despite its lead on him, but somehow in the time it took an eighteen-wheeler to change lanes, it was gone. Dean scanned the traffic once, twice, again—no Ford Falcon. He hit the brakes to pull over abruptly onto the curb opposite a Honey Dew Donuts and didn't even bother to give the Kia that honked at him the bird.

He looked around desperately. There was an onramp for I-95 just ahead, a left turn out of the southbound lane. The truck could have obscured the Falcon's turning. But there was also another ramp, just behind, feeding traffic onto the local road connecting the one Dean was on back into the suburbs. The Falcon had been hidden behind the truck for several seconds, long enough it could've taken either turn.

No. No, this couldn't be happening, not so close. Which was it, the interstate, the local road, or backwards, to the explosion?

Would he get another sign? Should he be waiting for another sign?

Just as he was about to leave the curb and floor it across five lanes of traffic to get the Impala onto the ramp to the I-95, he saw cherry red. It was the Falcon, coming around from behind the Honey Dew through the drive-through lane. It waited patiently at the exit for a gap in the traffic in both directions, which was a long time coming, then turned and continued on its way south again.

Dean followed closer this time.

Windmills. Gas works. Industrial lots in varying states of use and repair. A billboard for WEBUYUGLYHOUSES.COM and fuck, this thing was going slow. Yeah, it was stuck behind a Uhaul, but there were four lanes here, it could've gone around. Whoever was behind the wheel had the top down and seemed to be enjoying the weather too much to bother to move its portentous ass.

Dean gritted his teeth and made himself back off the guy's bumper. He did not need to be remembered.

And somehow traffic got between, again, such that when the Falcon turned off a second time, toward the river, it took Dean a few seconds to catch up to it. Still, he'd seen where it turned, and there was little there but industrial frontage. A bright red classic car should stand out.

By the time Dean made the turn, it was nowhere to be found.

He followed that road until it dead ended against the river. Then he backtracked, looking up and down cul-de-sacs, checking parking lots, cruising by warehouses slow enough to strain for a glimpse of red inside. Nothing.
He turned down the only other road of any size that spurred off the first one, a narrow two-lane of cracked, unmarked asphalt. Chain-link fence hemmed in a lot full of rubble. Mountains of gypsum or cement or something were bound down tight under net and black tarping. A hill behind them smelled like it had begun life as a landfill. Dean rolled down the blacktop slowly, checking every lot, every alley, every gap between buildings.

He was so busy looking for a red Ford Falcon that he almost missed the shape in the middle of the road.

Dean slammed on the brakes. A manhole stood open in the middle of the street. Beside it, crumpled up face-down, lay a person.

He didn't register putting the car in park, or closing the final distance on foot, or his knees hitting the pavement. The figure was filthy, emaciated. It had collapsed beside the heavy iron circle stamped with City of Providence. Dean looked from the figure to the empty manhole to the figure again, some part of his brain waiting for someone else to emerge, and it was a moment before he understood that this was his brother.

"Sammy."

The body turned under his hand when he gripped it by the shoulder. Hair slid away to one side, and Sam's face was laid bare to the sky.

"Oh, God."

It was him. It was a version of him Dean had never conceived possible, not even when Sam had been ill, not even when Sam had died, but it was him. Dean felt his gorge rise even as he reached for Sam's pulse.

His fingers pressed into the side of his brother's neck, searching. It was there. Too fast, but exactly where Dean had always found it.

Dean fumbled his phone out of his pocket with his left.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"My brother." Dean swallowed, trying to get his voice to work better. "I just found my brother in the road, and he's— I don't know what happened to him, but it's bad. Real bad."

"What's your address, sir?"

Shit, shit. "I— We're on, um, we're on Harborview. Harborview Road. I don't know the address; the nearest cross street—" Had any of those alleys had names?

"That's okay. What's around you?"

Still keeping his hand on Sam's neck, Dean twisted and looked up. A quonset hut fenced in chain link and barbed wire sat behind them, advertising the name of the business it housed on a battered billboard looming over the street. He swallowed. "Peregrine Asphalt," he said.

"An ambulance is on the way," the dispatcher told him. As aggressively as they avoided hospitals, the words still had the familiarity of a recitation. "Can you stay on the line with me, sir?"

Sam's pulse was still rabbiting under his palm. Dean shut his eyes briefly and got it the hell together. "Yeah, I'll stay on the line." When next he spoke, his voice came out steady and crisp.
"I'm trained in first aid. He's unconscious, not responsive but I haven't done a sternum rub. Pulse is fast, breathing too. Pretty dirty. He's bleeding, but—" He made himself move his hand to do a check. "—Yeah, it's shallow. Looks fresh. Busted nose, maybe? No, no bruising, gotta be something else. Bruising over his torso… could have some ribs cracked, but no displacement. Something infected on his ear, looks nasty. Dehydrated, going by his pulse and by…." Dean glanced once down into the manhole. The sun beat down on concrete at the bottom. He needed to say as little as possible, not offer any theories, be clueless: to not give them any reason to bring the police into it any sooner than necessary. Whatever that explosion had been, maybe it could at least afford them a useful distraction. Though right now Dean gave substantially less of a shit about the police not getting here than he did about the ambulance fucking getting here. "He's been starved."

And none of that, none of it was anything Dean could fix. Not even really the laceration, if Sam was as septic as it looked like he might be. Dean had moved him into the shock recovery position as he talked, had bent his knees and folded his legs and slung his own leather jacket over him, and the limbs under his hands felt badly off.

The dispatcher was still talking, giving him ETA, telling him he was doing well, asking his name. Sirens had been going apeshit since five minutes after the silo blew; impossible to tell which was coming to them. Dean had to let go of Sam to adjust the sidearm he was carrying so his flannel would cover it when the ambulance got here.

It hurt. Almost physically. Or maybe the sensation could better be described as just wrong. Sam was rancid, to look at and to smell, but the need to touch him felt almost like a pull, like Dean suddenly had iron filings in his cells. Heedless of the blood and maybe worse smeared there, he cupped his hand to the side of his brother's neck.

He felt the pulse against the delicate skin of his palm, Sam's heart in his hand.

While the dispatcher kept up her patter and sirens waxed and waned, he kept his hand there. He wasn't sure he could have taken it away: it felt bound there. Through the blood, through the filth, some circuit was completed.

Chapter End Notes

- A cross-bore occurs when one utility line intersects another, usually accidentally. Gas lines are frequently laid by trenchless drilling machines whose remote operators cannot see the head of the bore they're using; installers rely on records of surrounding utilities to lay the lines, and cross-bores are common—especially through old and/or defunct sections of sewer.
- The common grain weevil.
- Dean says he's trained in first aid because I don't see any way the Winchesters possibly could not be. What we see of their first aid skills onscreen sometimes suggests serious holes in their knowledge, though (*cough* Jump the Shark *cough*); so, erm, if any of Dean's recitation is way off, let's blame it on that.
- When I started this fic back in 2015, I never really believed I'd make it this far with it. So. That's a thing with some feelings attached.
open your heart (i'm coming home)

Chapter Summary

After.

Chapter Notes

Tremendous thanks to my betas dimeliora and caranfindel for making time to help me wrangle this monstrosity despite heaping handfuls of Life happening. (And dear God, has it needed wrangling.) Special thanks also to sasquatchandleatherjacket for some hospital logistics, to the ER nurse on Reddit who let me interview her and was very helpful but to whom I will not link here because I do not know that her interests extend to graphic brotherfucking, and to interstitial, for being a boss-ass bitch.

A couple of commenters have noticed that a couple extra chapters have snuck into the chapter count—it's not that the story suddenly changed course, but rather that it's hard to know exactly how long certain things will take or where the chapter breaks need to fall until you start writing. At this point, 25 chapters is pretty much a lock.

CW: reference to past torture and noncon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You need to let go, sir. Sir? Can you let go for us?"

The voice wasn't impatient, but it wasn't all that patient, either.

"Sir, we need you to let go so we can help him."

Dean's palm felt glued against the side of Sam's neck. Pulling it away produced a rounded, tugging sensation like pulling a magnet off the fridge, and then two EMTs were flowing into the space that had suddenly opened between him and Sam.

He watched them work. Phrases like white male, late 20s or early 30s and dehydrated, tachy and BP's in the toilet and septic shock hit his ears without really registering.

The male EMT, a bearded guy with glasses, was in Dean's face suddenly. "What's his name?"

"Sam. He's my brother."

The female EMT was still on her radio, hands moving up and down Sam's body. Pretty banged up and we're starting fluids and history unknown, but this guy didn't get like this overnight.
"Twenty-eight," Dean offered irrelevantly. "He's twenty—" But that wasn't right. "Twenty-nine. He just turned twenty-nine."

The male EMT glanced behind himself. "We need to go now," he said. "We're headed to Rhode Island Hospital. Do you know where it is?"

"Yes." They always made it a point to know.

The bright sun caught in the EMT guy's glasses and made his eyes two blank disks. "Do not attempt to follow us. Go to the Emergency Department entrance on Dudley Street; someone will escort you from there."

Then he and his partner counted one, two, three and transferred Sam to a gurney, counted again and the gurney folded up into the ambulance and was gone.

Driving was good. Driving grounded him. The wheel in his hand, vinyl at his back, the road to fill his mind: this he could do.

In the ER waiting room, Dean sat with a clipboard between a woman on the phone with her father's insurance and a toddler gazing up at him while picking her nose. Babies cried, magazines rustled, a man argued with the receptionist, and Dean wrote legibly in the boxes provided.

Twenty minutes after he had sat down, the double doors marked DO NOT ENTER UNLESS ACCOMPANIED BY STAFF opened for the seventh time. A woman in scrubs read off of a clipboard: "Family of Young?"

Dean and a family of three stood up.

The woman glanced down at her clipboard again. "Family of S. Young?"

The family sat down.

In a side corridor, the aide or whatever she was asked Dean a handful of questions that he had already answered on the clipboard he still held, made understanding noises at the back of her throat, and made notes on her clipboard. Dean ran a hand through his hair. He didn't have to work hard to make it shake. "What's happening, what's wrong with him, is he okay?"

"We're working to get him stable," she said. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"I— I don't really know. I wasn't even supposed to be there," he said haltingly. The aide just nodded, with the air of someone who spent a lot of time waiting for agitated people to pull it together. "I was driving, and—and he was just there. In the middle of the road. He, um—he—"

He broke off and pinched the bridge of his nose.

The less Dean said, the better, and now was when he could get away with the least. He was the Devastated Family Member. Because he was, this woman and her clipboard would record whatever he said, and because Sam had not been shot or burned over five percent or more of his body, she would not push too much. The law said she didn't have to make it her business and the waiting room was very full. By the time Dean could be expected to be more useful, Sam's file would have changed hands, and the person on the other side of that gap would most likely assume that the ER had gotten all the story that was needed. People tended to assume that: that someone had already done anything that they were not themselves motivated to do.

"When was the last time you talked to your brother?"
"About a month ago."

"No one reported him missing?"

"Not that I heard of. He lives alone and he's self-employed." Dean swallowed. "He could have been missing the whole time."

"The paramedics said Sam was near a sewer entrance." He nodded. "Did you see anyone else around?"

"No."

Quick note on the clipboard. "Is your brother into urban exploration?"

Dean remembered just in time to look horrified rather than wonderstruck. "Yeah. Yeah, he— Do you think… he got trapped down there?"

She wrapped her hands around the end of the clipboard. "It's all guesswork until Sam can talk to us, but the problems we're most concerned about take time to develop. He was very dehydrated and probably has a very serious infection, and he's showing signs of exposure. His injuries aren't so bad, but he is very, very sick."

Dean did not say, No shit. "He could have been down there for a month?"

The woman made the sort of gesture people make when they want to shrug but know, for reasons of politeness, they cannot.

"Can I see my brother now, please?"

She led him down a corridor of blue-curtained ER bays. An elderly man, half-hidden, groaned the same indistinguishable sentence in a quiet loop. Two doctors conferred beside a handwash station and agreed that her abscess had better precede his evisceration into surgery. Dean's guide pulled aside the curtain numbered 23.

The bay on the other side was full. There was an oversize ER gurney, and monitors, and machines, and three people—five if you counted Dean and the aide who'd fetched him, six if you counted the figure in the bed. There were entirely too many people between him and his brother.

"The family," the aide said to the doctor, taking her clipboard directly to a computer workstation.

The doctor stuck out his hand and gave a name. "So right now we're just trying to get him stable," said Dr. Temporary.

"But he'll be okay, right?"

"Sam's in septic shock. What we worry about in this situation is organ failure." The doc made another shrug-adjacent gesture: you see, you understand. "We're waiting on imaging now; as soon as his scans come back, he'll go up to ICU. You can visit with him until they take him for CT."

Dean nodded, eyes fixed on the same place they had been since he'd walked in. The doctor left and took one of the nurses with him.

Now there were only the RN, who sat to one side, and the aide, who stood typing in the corner, making no one at all between Dean and his brother.

The ER gurney was sort of accordioned up with the back raised and the knees elevated, and the
figure on it was swaddled in those white, thermal hospital blankets. The only body part visible was
the head.

Sam had always had angular features, but the person on the bed had a face made of angles. Scalp
showed through where his hair was clumped together with grease and other matter. Brown-red
residue clung under the nose and around the mouth over skin that was a color it shouldn't have
been. In the close quarters and sterile surroundings, the smell was acutely worse.

"You aren't cleaning him up," Dean said from where he stood on the periphery of the bay.

The RN looked up from drawing blood from an IV port and smiled. "All we care about right now
is getting his vitals up," he said without rancor. "Don't worry, ICU will get him clean. I know it
must be hard to see him like this."

The figure on the bed had not so much as twitched since Dean came in.

"Why won't he wake up?" Dean's voice cracked.

"We had to sedate him," said the nurse. "He woke up when they were putting in the Foley. I wasn't
there, I replaced the lady who was, but apparently he wasn't handling it well." The nurse paused in
shaking the vial of blood he'd just drawn and asked, "Is he a vet?"

The person in the bed had skin with a cast like plumber's putty and two purple thumbprints under
his eyes. "Something like that," Dean said.

Not too long after, an orderly arrived to take Sam for his CT. Dean stepped aside to let them, the
first time he'd moved since arriving in the cubicle.

* * *

Two hours later, Dean was summoned to the front desk in the ER waiting room to receive the good
news that the MICU had a bed for Sam and would presently admit him. An hour later, they
summoned him again and told him that staff were now transferring his brother. Did he wish to go
there? Yes? Here was a map. Here was an X for the correct building. Here was another X for the
parking garage to which he should move his car. When he had moved his car, he should go to the
seventh (7th) floor; here was a note—7th floor—in looping ballpoint in case he forgot or couldn't
read signs or was incapable of speaking to any of the several hundred staff between this building
and that one. When he got to the seventh floor, he should speak to the registration desk.

He went there. He spoke to the registration desk. The registration desk, who had long braids and
blue scrubs, asked him to confirm Sam's date of birth. Staff were getting Sam settled and
developing plan of care now, she told him when he supplied the magic digits. It would take some
time. He might wish to go out for a while, get himself a meal. No? Well, several cafés were
available within the hospital campus if he softened his stance later on; here was a map. (No X's.
This registration desk assumed that Dean could read.) Until then, there was coffee available at the
end of the hall.

At the end of the hall, Dean paid $1.75 into a machine and confirmed that he did not wish to pay an
additional $0.75 for milk. A paper cup hit the drain grate. The nozzle coughed, spattered some coffee
grounds into the bottom of the cup like phlegm, and then began to fill it with liquid.

The ER intake paperwork had asked for PATIENT SSN and INSURANCE CARRIER and ID#. A
year and a half ago, Dean would have made the mistake of filling in the answers. Respectable
living had taught him things. Like: nobody knew their sibling's social security number, forged or
otherwise. The only reason they would know what insurance company their sibling used was if it had come up in backyard barbecue arguments about Obamacare, and they wouldn't know the actual ID number no matter how close they were.

Normal people wouldn't have these answers. If the hospital's inquiries became too pressing, then Dean could hand over the fake insurance he had a copy of but that normal siblings wouldn't. Either way, EMTLA wouldn't let them throw Sam out until his emergency had passed. And Dean could see, very clearly, from the fact that he was in an ICU surrounded by staggering amounts of equipment, that Sam's emergency had not passed.

The registration desk had apologized that no social workers were immediately available to assist him in coordinating Sam's care. Dean knew a small mercy when he saw one.

The machine finished with a squelch, and Dean reached past the *CAUTION! HOT!* warnings to retrieve it.

"Mr. Young?"

He turned. A middle-aged woman stood smiling up at him. She was short and round with straight black hair and glasses, and her laminate read *Hannah Wu, DNSc, CCNP*. She stuck out her hand.

"Hi, I'm one of Sam's critical care nurses. He's resting now. Would you like to see him?"

She led him through the lobby for a stop at the hand sanitizer dispenser. Then she led him down a hall lined on one side with rooms with glass walls and automatic glass doors. At the fifth, she stopped and gestured for Dean to precede her.

The room was large. Awkwardly so, really, with space around every piece of equipment and the bed sitting there in the middle. The lone armchair sat in the far corner, a good fifteen feet away. It felt like one of those rich-people rooms that no one wanted to use, only with an entire wall for plugs instead of shitty modern art. It was conspicuously designed to allow a platoon of medical personnel to descend on the bed at a moment's notice, so Dean had an unobstructed view of the figure lying there.

He was familiar with the process by which bodies became skeletons. He knew the stretching that took place, how even short people's bones could seem too long.

Sam's bones were long.

Dean felt every foot of the generous floor plan between him and the bed. When finally he stood looking down on it, he could recognize the figure he'd seen in the ER, though already it had changed. The smell was much reduced but still present under a layer of antiseptic. It was like a bad pair of gym shorts or the sharp, foul odor buried deep in someone's belly button.

Sam had a beard now. Sort of. Dean hadn't even realized it before, but this close up and after the ICU's work, he could see that some of what he'd thought was grime was actually scruff. The hair on Sam's head was an improvement, Dean supposed. At least it appeared to be hair now and not a semisolid.

There was a nursing assistant on the other side of the bed, adjusting tape on an IV line. She laid an arm made up of sinew and bone across Sam's middle. Against the white bedding, the fingertips and nail beds and knuckle creases were tar-black. The aide manipulated a similarly stained elbow, and Sam remained as unmoving as he had been in the ER. The weight of the hand in his lap pulled the blankets taut over the points of his knees.
"Mr. Young?"

It sounded as though that might not have been the first time the nurse had called his name. Dean gave her a rotely charming smile that felt deformed on his face. "Call me Dean."

She returned his smile with a politely tolerant one. "And you can call me Hannah. Sam's attending is Dr. Ejeta, she'll be in to talk to you about plan of care shortly. A big part of my job is keeping family informed, so if you have any questions, any time, feel free to ask. Do you need anything?"

Dean struggled to remember details of what the registration person had told him. "Visiting hours —?"

"We don't have set hours here, but there'll be times we have to ask you to leave the room. The MICU family lounge is open twenty-four seven, though." An alert went off on something, causing Dean to jump, but Hannah just moved to one of the drips and started changing it. "I don't want to go into too much detail before Dr. Ejeta talks to you, but he's tough. He's got a real chance."

Sam wasn't even injured, hardly. He'd been shot, stabbed, thrown out of windows before, same as Dean; now he had maybe cracked ribs and a scratch, and they were talking in terms of chances.

"Has he woken up at all?"

"No, but we've got him on a sedative. He needs the rest as much as the high-tech stuff. Oh, here she is," she added as the automatic door opened behind him.

The tall, thin woman who came in introduced herself while Hannah turned her attention back to Sam. Ejeta looked about fifty and remained expressionless throughout their review of names and roles. It was easy to forget how many of the pleasantries people exchanged were via their faces until you met someone who didn't bother. "To begin, I would like to give you an overview, so that you will have realistic expectations," said Ejeta.

Dean's pulse spiked. The sensation didn't feel like part of him. "Okay."

"Sam's traumatic injuries are minor, but his labs show an acute kidney injury, dehydration, and a serious infection. Due to his very low blood pressure, we consider Sam to be in septic shock. You may have heard it called blood poisoning. What do you know about this condition?"

"Uh." It took him a moment to catch up with the change of gears. "Bad news."

The ghost of a smile did pass over her face at that. "Essentially. I see early signs that he is responding to the antibiotics and even that his kidneys have begun to improve, but you should understand that among patients fitting Sam's general profile there is a mortality rate of around forty percent."

Utterly inappropriate laughter bubbled up in Dean's throat. He thought for sure it had to show on his face, but if it did, Ejeta didn't react to it.

"It's clear Sam has been living in highly unsanitary conditions for some time," she continued. "Is it correct that he became trapped in a sewer area?"

"Yeah. I mean, I don't really know what the hell happened, but that's the theory."

She leafed through the chart she held. "Notes from the ER said he might have been in his situation for as much as a month. He freed himself?"
The sharp percussion in the ground through his shoes. The silo belching black away upriver. The iron disk on the pavement, all 250 pounds of it. The body on the asphalt alongside. "I guess so."

She just nodded. He caught a glimpse of his own handwriting and realized that she was looking at the ER intake paperwork. "These are your estimations for his previous height and weight?"

Dean thought about screaming. He thought about throwing his head back and just really letting rip. "Yeah."

She made a note. "Was he quite muscular?"

"He was built like a damn Mack truck. When's he going to wake up?"

Ejeta tucked the chart under her arm and regarded him. "Our plan is to continue aggressive antibiotic therapy, continue vasopressor therapy until his blood pressure stabilizes, and continue hemodialysis until his kidney function improves. Losing so much weight so quickly makes him more vulnerable to a condition that is always dangerous. For all of these reasons, and taking his poor reaction when he awoke during catheterization in the ER into account, we are sedating him. When his vital signs have improved to certain benchmarks, we will begin to wean him—"

"Excuse me," said Dean, "excuse me. He's vulnerable because he hasn't eaten for a month? So wake him up. Just feed him, right. Just feed him."

People needed food. It was the simplest equation in the world. Human being plus food equaled continued human being. Human being minus food equaled what was on the bed.

Ejeta tilted her head to get her face back in Dean's line of sight. "That could kill him," she said, very distinctly, and her tone forced Dean to focus on her.

"Come again?"

"Sam is at high risk for refeeding syndrome. This is a metabolic condition in which a patient who too rapidly begins to eat again after a period of deprivation develops electrolyte imbalances that may cause heart failure, coma, and death."

Dean processed the words and felt nothing. "Oh."

She watched him for a moment. "I understand that your brother's appearance is disturbing to you, but the most serious problems may not be visible at all. We are treating his malnutrition, of course. But it is not actually all that urgent." Ejeta looked over Sam's vitals readouts before turning back to Dean. "Our objective is to keep him alive until he can overcome his infection. Then we will see."

Her sentences contained words and phrases that should have been explosive, but something was absorbing all the shock. "Okay."

Ejeta examined him a moment longer. "I strongly recommend you to get some rest."

***

Dean didn't consider himself a full-bore hospital-hater. Nobody liked hospitals, a certain fringe always excepted, but people who went on and on about how hospitals gave them the creeps had always struck Dean as unbearably precious. Like they hadn't worked out that they were eventually going to die. This particular hospital was less comfortable than most motels and more comfortable than most of Hell. The same could be said of a lot of places.
It was not what Dean had had in mind, though.

When he had walked into Providence's finest's HQ with cameras recording his face and walked out with stolen evidence, he'd had a picture in his head of how things were going to go afterward. Or, since he'd been tightly focused on the present with the future only in his peripheral vision, maybe it had been more of a sketch: he would find his brother, save him from the freak of the week, put him in the car, and put the state of Rhode Island in their rearview, for good, immediately.

He stared at the bed.

Sam had a lot of tubes in him. He wasn't on a ventilator, but it seemed like he was on just about everything else. He had IV fluids, IV drugs, the urinary catheter, a feeding tube, arterial lines, dialysis lines. Vines running his body through and holding him in place. Hannah had been able to expound a little on the vasopressor drugs Dr. Ejeta had mentioned. It seemed that if Sam were disconnected from them, he could crash within minutes.

But it was fine. Dean had experience of the fragmentary nature of police forces in large cities. If he stayed where he was, if he handled hospital administration properly, if he had been lucky with traffic cameras on the way over here, they might never show up. The hospital had no legal obligation to contact police. City personnel had the explosion he'd seen to occupy them. A giant fireball spitting distance from where Sam had turned up was too coincidental not to be connected to all of this somehow, of course, but investigators could hardly connect whatever had happened there with a patient they didn't know existed.

So he had a grace period. It wouldn't last forever, but it might last long enough. And if it didn't, small matter. The hospital seemed to know what they were doing. Clearly they didn't need Dean. If he had to disappear and come back for Sam later, what difference did it even make, really.

About ten feet separated Dean from the bed. Hannah had asked him to keep the chair well clear of all equipment for the time being. He could sit closer later on. Rhode Island Hospital MICU was one hundred percent supportive of family helping patients by being present. During these critical times, they just wanted to make sure that they had room to work. Dean knew what was meant: room to work in case Sam coded.

* * *

They kicked him out for shift change. Dean went and got another coffee, since he'd never gotten to drink the first one. The coffee's quality was inversely proportional to its cost.

Nurse number two looked to be twenty years younger than Hannah and tended to ask as questions things that Hannah would have issued as directives. For example: was Dean sure he wouldn't like to wait outside while she changed Sam's bandages?

Dean was quite sure. Thank you.

He watched Bess Fraiser, CCRN peek under the fat white pad strapped to the side of Sam's ear, make a pleased sound, and replace it with a smaller one. Then he watched as she folded what seemed to be six layers of blankets down to Sam's lap, untied the blue cotton gown at the shoulders, and folded it down over the blankets.

Sam's side was violet. It was far from the worst bruising Dean had seen on him, although the mottled gray tone surrounding it made it particularly conspicuous. The smell released from the bedding was fainter than before; they must have bathed him again. Bess removed a strip of gauze from a cut about eighteen inches long and closed by sutures for around half of it. She made notes,
dabbed something on it, and placed a fresh dressing. Dean watched her smooth a plastic barrier over the edges of Sam's skin with long, gentle strokes of her fingers.

He didn't say, *Get your hands off of him. That's mine to do.* He didn't even know where the thought had come from.

* * *

Shift change again. Dean went out to the family lounge, stopped, and stood blinking at the window. The cityscape outside it was lit up in a hard wash of gold.

A man about his age with his arm around a thick-waisted woman curled into his shoulder looked up when Dean came in and nodded, once, like they were compatriots. Dean nodded back like he agreed. Another family had colonized the corner, a mother with a small child in her lap, both dead asleep, plus an older girl curled up in a beanbag chair beside a bead maze toy. Dean took the seat farthest from the two groups and stared at the TV screen.

It was playing local news on mute. A reporter stood in front of a burnt-out silo and silently informed the anchorwoman of the status of a *Gas Line Explosion Under Abandoned Grain Silo* while firemen contemplated the wreck in the background. Closed captioning scrolled in the corner at a lag. It seemed that *although investigators are still seeking the cause of the explosion, officials confirm that no one was hurt. Citizens should'n relax too much, though, since Grain dust explosions have been on the rise since 2008.*

Dean counted no fewer than twelve cop cars in the frame, spaced in a line. Authorities were maintaining a perimeter until they could ascertain that there was no further risk to public safety, said the reporter.

* * *

"Good morning," nurse number three said warmly when Dean was allowed back in. He was closer to Hannah's age than to Bess's. He had a Cactus Division tat on his left bicep and a voice like James Earl Jones. "You must be Dean."

George Botts, CCNP liked to talk as he worked. Like Bess, he liked to involve patients' families in their care. Like Hannah, he tended to instruct rather than request.

"So Dr. Wilkinson is the intensivist on duty, he'll be here in a few; we'll need you to step out for the exam, and then he'll update you," said George.

Fine.

"As you may know, this is a teaching hospital, so attending rounds will be around ten and you can stay or go, whatever you're comfortable with, probably won't take more than ten minutes."

Fine.

"A metabolic specialist and a nutritionist are coming for a consult around lunchtime, it's fine to stay for that but we'll have a couple of procedures before and after that we'll ask you to leave for."

Fine.

"Then we'll have interdisciplinary rounds at two o' clock, and that's with the whole care team: attending, infectious diseases, nephrology, cardiology, Sam's case manager, the pharmacist, and the chaplain."
Jesus wept.

"In general we like to have family present for interdisciplinary rounds, but since Sam's not close to discharge, really whatever you need to do is fine. How you holding up?"

"Super," said Dean, and one corner of George's mouth lifted.

Dean stared some more at the bed.

He stared at the person on it and thought about nothing. There was nothing to think about. He couldn't think about what had happened to Sam, because he didn't know. He didn't even know what had done it. He didn't know why. He'd followed all these breadcrumbs, driven thousands of miles, come back, dodged the police, and solved their case for them, and he still didn't know what had taken Sam in the first place. He didn't know what this had all been about.

It didn't look like he was going to get to find out any time soon, either.

Dean went for more caffeine during the afternoon shift change and when he returned, Hannah was back. She looked him over once, then again, and the verdict returned by her expression was unimpressed. "You won't be doing him any favors by burning out," she said.

He ignored her and returned to the chair, which still bore an imprint of his buttocks. "When's he going to wake up?"

Hannah craned her neck to look at the clock. "Sam's coming up on his twenty-four hour anniversary with us at... five o'clock, at which point we'll start titrating down on sedative if Dr. Ejeta gives the go-ahead." She gave Dean a big, genuine smile. "Which I think she will. The antibiotics are working, he hasn't backslid at all, his chemistry's better, and if his kidney function keeps improving like this, we'll take him off dialysis tomorrow. We're still having to use pressor drugs to keep his BP up, but the kind of domino effect we worry about most with sepsis hasn't happened yet. And the longer he goes, the better his chances. Your brother's strong."

Dean sat hunched over, drumming his fingertips together in his lap. "Yeah."

Hannah came and went a few times. Her cycle seemed to be Sam's vitals on the hour, her other patient's on the half hour. At one point she brought back a packet of Fig Newtons, which Dean ate without tasting.

"His face isn't as thin," he said after a while.

"That's the fluids," Hannah said. "Patients can get bloating with them. It's normal, it'll balance out eventually."

He nodded and silently tapped out "The Frayed Ends of Sanity."

What had first struck him about the figure on the bed—in the street, in the ER, in this room for the first time—had been its emaciation. Cadaverous was the word his mind had supplied, and the word the rest of him had thrust away. Some of that sharpness remained, but embedded in a certain puffiness. The skin had an unhealthy sheen to it that put Dean in mind of mushrooms and other things that grew and rotted in the dark.

It just felt so—off. Looking at him felt off.

The feeling should have been different.
"Hey, Hannah?" he said suddenly.

"Uh-huh?"

"When he first came in here. When you were cleaning him up. Was anything wrong?"

She stopped and looked first at him, then at Sam, then around the room at all the equipment, then back to Dean.

"Not like that. Was anything—not right?"

She looked puzzled, now, and concerned. "What do you mean?"

What did he mean? "Nothing. Nothing." He washed his hands over his face and sat back in the chair.

Hannah went back to what she was doing. Dean kept on watching without really seeing, but now with his pulse tap-tapping in his neck like Metallica.

He was probably tired, he supposed, but he didn't feel foggy. Not numb exactly, either. Dampened, maybe. Every thought felt like something happening in the middle of an empty room with no echoes.

"I think you need to take a break."

He started. Hannah was standing over him, unsmiling. "I let you stay before because family usually rests better here than they would anywhere else. That obviously didn't work. You can't sustain this. If you care about your brother, you're going to have to start taking care of yourself. Unlike Sam, I can't put you to sleep, but I can cut you off and I'm doing it. We'll call you if anything happens. You're welcome to stay right down the hall in the family lounge, or the front desk can point you to a hotel, but don't be back in this room until after morning shift change."

* * *

Hannah was right about one thing: he had to sleep.

Dean climbed into the backseat of the car. He rummaged around under the driver's seat for the picnic blanket, pulled it over his legs, and flopped onto his back. He closed his eyes and waited.

Then he decided to move to the front. If he were in the front seat, he'd feel less vulnerable, since if he had to haul ass out of here all he'd have to do would be to sit up and drive. Plus, she was parked nose-in, so the front was more hidden from view. Yeah, he'd relax better in the front.

He wadded his jacket up under his head and squirmed once before he made himself be still. Falling asleep was purely a matter of discipline. All he had to do was lie here, keep his eyes shut, and not give into the temptation to check that his phone was still positioned so that he'd feel it the moment it started to ring. If he did these things and counted his breaths and waited, sleep would come.

Dean tossed and resettled on his side.

He'd been running on fumes for weeks now—since the night he'd fled Providence, really. Now all he needed was to let his mind go. Considering there was no fuel left to weigh it down, it should have been floating already. Instead it felt sort of fried.

*It must be hard to see him like this*, everyone kept saying. Like they understood what Dean was
feeling and it was perfectly normal. Like it didn't mean anything.

The thing was, he could remember a feeling like this. Not an identical one, but there'd been something similar when an empty shell had been passing itself off as his brother. The same sort of burning, gnawing feeling in his gut that things weren't supposed to be this way.

He flipped over onto his other side. Couldn't expect to relax with his breath bouncing off the vinyl; stupid idea to lie that way in the first place. He closed his eyes again. He started to settle, sort of. Then he remembered he ought to switch which pocket had his phone, turned onto his back, transferred it, and turned back onto his side. The shape of his wadded-up jacket was too flat now, though. He re-wadded it.

What did Dean really even know, here? Canby had told him point-blank that he didn't know how his own ritual was going to work, and Dean, like the desperate schmuck he'd been, hadn't stopped to question it. He'd shown a picture of some graffiti off a serial killer's computer to a bunch of homeless guys, followed somebody's midlife crisis car for a couple of miles, found what he'd found, and pronounced the job done. But his gut knew better. Even when he'd been too numb to feel anything else, he'd felt the wrongness of the situation.

What if it felt wrong because it was?

As the feeling grew claws and tried to crawl from his belly to his throat, he made himself think this through. Canby's ritual had led him to the person who was upstairs in the ICU. If it wasn't Sam up there, and it wouldn't be the first time that it wasn't, then—then it had to be another clue as to where to find Sam. Another breadcrumb, like Brandon's xeroxes, like Lindsey's cold cream jar. Like Jacob's computer.

So whoever, or whatever, was up there, he'd need to get close again. Interrogate them, maybe. Couldn't do that while Hannah had him banned. And if his brother really was still out there somewhere, still in trouble, counting on Dean, then Dean had to be functional enough to save him. He had to find a way to clear this noise out of his brain, or at least push it back enough to work. Which all brought him back to the same place, really: he had to get some sleep ASAP.

Before he could think about it, Dean found himself rummaging in the glove compartment. He'd listen to some Metallica, he told himself, a little lullaby from Lars. What his fingers encountered first, though, was not his mp3 player, but Sam's.

He looked at the thing. He turned it over in his hands and looked at it some more. People listened to white noise to fall asleep. There were entire YouTube channels for it. Nature Sounds for Relaxation and shit like that.

He found the earbuds and started the player.

Static burst over his eardrums. The first one was television static. He remembered now. Good. Great. TV snow practically was the Sounds of Nature, as far as he was concerned. He crossed his arms over his chest and shut his eyes.

He thought he could see what Sam saw in this white noise stuff. True, having his hearing impaired made his blood pressure tick up a notch, but it had a nice cocooning effect and smoothed out the slams of car doors that echoed now and then through the garage. He made himself lie still and count his breaths. He could imagine this sending him to sleep, maybe.

He lost track of time.
"Beeeep."

Dean’s eyes snapped open.

"Listen to me, you bloodsucking freak."

He'd forgotten to put the static track on repeat. The player had cycled through its four tracks of white noise and now was playing the fifth.

"Dad always said I'd either have to save you or kill you. Well, I'm giving you fair warning: I'm done trying to save you. You're a monster, Sam, a vampire. You're not you anymore, and there's no going back."

Dean stared at the ceiling in the dark and, now, silence. The air felt loud without the blanket of static.

After a minute or two, he picked up the player and clicked play.

"Beeeep. "Listen to me, you bloodsucking freak. Dad always said I'd either have to save you or kill you. Well, I'm giving you fair warning: I'm done trying to save you. You're a monster, Sam, a vampire. You're not you anymore, and there's no going back."

He clicked play again.

"Listen to me, you bloodsucking freak—"

Again.

"—You're a monster, Sam, a vampire."

Again.

"Dad always said I'd either have to save you or kill you."

Again.

"You're not you anymore."

Again.

"—fair warning: I'm done trying to save you."

Again.

"—you bloodsucking freak—"

Again.

"—no going back."

Again.

"—done trying to save you."

Not once in the past three years could Dean recall seeing Sam use this player. If he had never seen Sam listen to it in all that time, then, given that they lived out of a car together, Sam had to have hidden the habit on purpose.
What else was new.

"You're a monster, Sam. A vampire."

Or perhaps Dean had seen it and never realized what he'd been looking at. Perhaps Sam had been fooling around with the thing right in front of him, only Sam had never seen fit to mention what he was up to and Dean had never thought to ask. Kind of like when he'd come back from the dead and the first face he'd seen in his little brother's motel room had been Ruby, in pretty, new packaging.

Ruby.

Suddenly Dean knew exactly when this message was from. Perhaps he'd always known and he just hadn't wanted to believe it.

Something in his mind shifted, turning tumblers in a lock that Hell had installed.

For the last three years of his life, Dean had had a certain understanding of what had happened on the night that Sam had killed Lilith. Heaven and Hell had set up the dominoes; Ruby had gotten Sam so turned around he'd do whatever she wanted; Dean hadn't been able to get through to him. Hey, presto, Apocalypse Now.

Part of him had hoped that there had been some kind of last-minute interference, that some power beyond both of them had given Sam that last nudge off the cliff—that it hadn't really been Sam. Nevertheless, Dean had made his peace with the fact that it had been. He hadn't been able to understand what had made Sam walk off the edge, but the key to his ability to accept that it had happened had been the knowledge that he couldn't have changed it.

As much as he'd hated Sam for his choice—and at times it had been hatred—beside the resentment, beside the disgust, in an abstract way, he'd also kind of almost respected Sam for not letting himself be turned aside. No, respect was not the word, but maybe impressed. There'd been something impressive in it, the way bombs or forest fires were impressive. That was Sam: he followed through.

Except apparently all it would've taken to buy him off it was his big brother patting him on the head and telling him it would be okay.

Not even his real big brother, either. After all, Sam had spent the year leading up to that moment refusing to listen to anything that Dean had to say. Forty years in Hell and Dean had come back to Sam trusting one of the things that had raped him to slops for decades, to Sam treating Dean like he was the patsy while he did it, to Sam's pathetic fucking weakness, addiction like a clichéd cherry on top of a twenty-six-year-old sanctimony sundae. The one time Sam found time to care about Dean's opinion, and it was a two-bit fake.

It was almost poetic. All that arrogance, all that certainty that he knew best, and he fell for this.

Hard to imagine that Dean had sold his soul for anything that cheap.

Beep. "Listen to me, you bloodsucking freak."

What did Sam get out of listening to this thing over and over? Some kind of righteous absolution? Did it help him believe that it wasn't his fault, because his big brother had been mean to him on the phone? Like, what, sure, Sam had unleashed Satan, but check out Dean over here threatening to kill him?

"Dad always said I'd either have to save you or kill you."
That should've been Sam's clue, right there. Stupid son of a bitch. Dad hadn't bothered to say that until the day he'd known he wouldn't be around to deal with the consequences.

If Sam did die upstairs still believing that this was Dean, it'd be his own damned fault.

"I'm giving you fair warning."

When did Sam even listen to it? Did he listen to it in bed? Did he listen to it in libraries? Always had to have his little secrets, whether he was walking around soulless or passed out in a coma when he should have been giving Dean some answers.

Because Dean had questions. Questions like Were you ever going to tell me about this? and Do you have any idea what I've been through? and What was it this time?

"You're a monster, Sam, a vampire."

Where else could Sam play this thing? There weren't a lot of options. How about the john, did Sam listen to it in there? Did Sam—something toxic bloomed in Dean's chest like Alastair ejaculating in his heart—beat off to it?

"There's no going back."

What was it about this message to make it the one thing Dean had ever said to him that Sam decided to literally carry around with him for the rest of his life? Dean wasn't the one dwelling on all that shit. Dean hadn't asked for this. He'd just wanted his brother. Fine, so he'd snooped in his bag. That meant he deserved this?

"You're not you anymore."

Seemed like every time Dean thought Sam needed him, he thought wrong. He'd clawed his way out of his own grave to find Sam dispatching demons with his mind. He'd spent a year trying to drink away the thought of his little brother burning in Hell to find him topside banging half the continental US. He'd come back to a city he'd fled in a car chase to find him needing nothing more from Dean than a 911 call any stranger could have made.

"—fair warning: I'm done trying to save you."

Once, when Dean had been six or seven, they'd been staying in this two-story house with hardwood floors and a big staircase, and Dad had gotten one of those baby walkers from somewhere. It had been this plastic ring with wheels and bells and rattles and stuff all over it, and the baby sat in the middle and could push itself around and not fall down. The wheels had made an unholy racket on those floors.

The circumstances leading up to the event were lost to time, but one day, for whatever reason, both Sam and the baby walker had been on the second floor. Sam had gotten in it. Dean had seen. Dean had shouted, "No!" which had acted on Sam like a starting gun.

Dean had chased after him for all he'd been worth, but the combination of Sam and wheels and hardwood floor had been unstoppable. Sam had run right off the top stair at full tilt, paying Dean no mind.

At the bottom, of course, he'd cried. Miraculously he'd been unhurt, but he'd cried the whole morning for all that. The sound had terrified Dean.

"I'm done—"
How many more times?

All he'd wanted was his brother back.

"I'm done—"

Weeks. Four weeks, thirty days, six thousand miles. He'd been shoved in a cage (done) been mindfucked like livestock (done) FedExed his own blood and let a pagan sacrifice his heart to who even knew what (i'm done), and he'd done it alone, with nothing for comfort except a picture in his head like some sap with a locket. (done.) And Sam was upstairs looking like that. Sam was upstairs with sixty-forty odds.

i'm done i'm done i'm done.

After everything they'd both been through, how could they be back here again, how could Sam do this, how could Sam not be with him—

The player crumpled in his fist with a snap.

Dean stared at the mangled piece of plastic and circuitry with his heart hammering. Shit. Shit. He couldn't very well just slip that back into Sam's duffel and pretend he'd never found it.

All at once he was aware of the pounding of his heart, the stillness around him, and the utter, intense familiarity of the car. He could smell it, the smell of thirty years of living. He could hear the vinyl creak. He could see the worn patch in the carpet of the passenger side footwell. He bit down on his lip hard.

He had these episodes now and again. Fell down certain holes in his mind and lost time. The anger would be there waiting for him, pulling his worst thoughts from him like barbed chain through bowels, eclipsing everything else and lifting him on a red tide. Then it departed. When he'd fucked things up properly, always the spell would break, and he would find himself sick and shaking with the aftereffects of a poisonous rage that, somewhere in Hell, his worst fears had learned to wear like a meatsuit.

This was how Dean spent his time while Sam was fighting for his life.

Dean opened the car door and dropped the remains of the player into the space between him and an Audi. He pulled a shard of the plastic casing out of the meat of his thumb, which ached dully, and let it fall onto the concrete. He took out his phone and looked at the thing three times before he registered what it said: 12:22 a.m.

For the next six hours, he wandered aimlessly over the campus. The hospital had one of those pedestrian bridges city hospitals always had; he walked up and down it and watched taillights go by below. He passed a CVS, of all things, tucked inside an entire hospital and grated up for the night. He picked up a Coke's worth of coins from a wishing fountain in a courtyard. Somewhere in the Cancer Institute he found a utility room with a hose and a drain in the middle of the floor, and, seeing no one about, stripped off and had a shower. He felt better for it.

He dropped in on the night receptionists of the Children's Hospital and whiled away a couple of hours practicing his charms. When the view out the glass doors there began to lighten, he went in search of food and caffeine and sat eavesdropping on surgeons and janitors until seven. Shift change. Up in the ICU, Bess would be updating George on Sam, letting him know if he'd gained any ground during the night. Presumably he hadn't lost any, since nobody from the unit had called. Dean went back to the car to change clothes and get his nerves under control.
At 7:59, he presented himself at the ICU registration desk and waited for approval to go back to Sam's room.

George looked up at him as he came in. "How are you this morning?" he asked, like the sight of Dean genuinely gave him pleasure.

"Not bad, thanks."

George smiled. "Got some good news."

This felt like a cross between his first hunt and picking Sharon Sanders up for junior prom. "Yeah?"

"Looks like from his labs he turned a corner on fighting that infection last night. He's down to one BP drug, too. I know you were asking about when he might come around; Hannah left a note about it. Sam had his last dose of the sedative a couple of hours ago."

Dean swallowed. "So…?"

George went over to the recliner chair and rolled it straight to Sam's bedside. "Could be any time. But don't worry if it takes a while, either; he's still getting pain meds, and he's gonna be tired. Any rest he gets is good rest."

Dean slowly made his way around the foot of the bed and toward the chair. He sat gingerly. The vinyl upholstery stuck to his palms. "Can I, erm—?"

"Touch him? Sure."

Dean nodded and then stayed where he was. He didn't need the information right now; he'd just wanted to know.


Dean spent a while looking at the tile pattern on the floor. Nice colors. Then he had a good look at the blankets peeking between the metal bed rails. White cotton basket weave. He should have been angry at himself for his cowardice, but as always, he couldn't summon the rage when it might have been useful.

Finally he just looked. He looked for a long time. He'd spent twenty-four hours memorizing the sight in front of him, but now for the first time he confronted it.

He lacked practice with that. The last time Sam had looked anything like this, he'd been a corpse, and Dean had paid his soul to get out of having to confront that failure. That wasn't an option this time, because Sam was still alive.

He looked like he really shouldn't be. But he was.

A whole month. It had taken Dean a month, and a month had done this. He remembered every occasion he'd reasoned to himself that if Sam was still alive after a week, after two weeks, after three, then he probably wasn't in any immediate danger. Sure, he was probably captive somewhere. Sure, it couldn't be good. But it had never once occurred to Dean that he could be starving the entire time.

And he'd had to free himself. Somehow, God knew how, he'd fought his way out, or deduced his way out, or exploded his way out while half dead, and the effort of it had almost killed him and
still might but he hadn't had a choice because Dean had left him there.

Sammy looked older. His face was too thin even with all the fluids and the linen had a better color than he did. He had a machine cleaning his blood because his kidneys were damaged from dehydration. Hunger had carved him. Maybe those Terminator muscles had thrown Dean for a loop when Sam had come back with them, but at least they'd spoken of health, strength, of joy in physical movement. They'd been a little unnerving, but they'd been reassuring, too. Sam had been solid. He didn't look solid now.

Every day that Dean had left him behind was recorded on his body. Dean would have to look at that, and Sam would have to live with it, until they could build him back up.

Dean felt like a beach after the flood. The waters had receded and left only calved-off ground and strewn pilings and churned-up trash for all to see. With the storm gone, there was nothing to hide the pointlessness of trying to convince himself that he was anything other than devastated.

His eyes stung. He bit the inside of his cheek very hard, because George could come back any minute and Dean didn't deserve the sympathy.

The rhythm of Sam's breathing changed.

Dean leaned forward automatically. At the last moment, he pulled away. Maybe George had said it was fine to touch him, but all three nurses had also made a point of emphasizing that Sam needed rest as much as anything else. Dean wasn't the one who'd spent the last month waiting on his brother. He didn't have a right to his impatience. He sat back.

Then Sam stirred. The motion was so difficult to reconcile with Sam's long stillness that for a moment Dean thought he'd imagined it, but then it happened again. Sam's feet twitched; then, minutes later, his legs shifted slightly under the blankets. Several minutes after that, his face turned toward Dean on the pillow.

He looked entirely different, suddenly. Yeah, he still had the beard and the purple rings under his eyes and generally looked like hell, but his eyes were moving under their lids and Dean could see him breathing, now. Dean dug one thumb into the sore spot of his opposite hand to ride out the wait.

Ultimately the blood pressure cuff did what Dean had been so valiantly trying not to. It cycled on, and Sam jerked sluggishly in his semi-sleep.

Before he could think about it, Dean was reaching for his hand. There was none of the magnetized jolt from before in the street, but everything else fell away the minute he touched his brother.

Sam's eyelids lifted, and Dean's heart swung open like a door.

Chapter End Notes

The crunch is on for me to get the remainder of this fic out before my next major life upheaval, 'cause that's a-coming around the corner. On the one hand, that means I
won't really have the time to sit around brooding over whether the ending is all it should be. On the other hand, it means I won't really have the time to sit around brooding over whether the ending is all it should be. So, see you all again soon.
When Sam had been younger, sleep used to have a total claim over him that Dean had sometimes envied. Whether he'd envied Sam or sleep itself, he'd never been clear on. Once conscious the little brat would be cranky as hell, but that space in between—oh. Sam's eyes would slit open, searching. There would always be a moment when they found Dean's, and a little jolt of: there you are.

Dean wrapped his fingers around his brother's. Sam's hand was cold, and still stained, and thinner, but for a moment he could feel the imprint of all the shapes and sizes it had ever been in his.

That touch seemed to be what pulled Sam over the threshold. He turned toward it, and after a couple of false starts, his eyelids lifted.

For a second, Sam's eyes locked on him from the hospital bed. Dean's heart tripped with it: there you are. there you are.

Then Sam flinched away on the pillow. Drugs and exhaustion rendered the movement in unnerving slow-motion; he shut his eyes and dragged in a breath.

Dean leaned in involuntarily. "Whoa, hey, hey, Sammy, you're okay, you're okay. C'mon, open your eyes for me?"

Even now, Sam responded to his voice. He opened his eyes again, but this time he couldn't even seem to find Dean before he'd squeezed them shut like the light hurt. Dean pleaded with him for several seconds before it dawned on him that it probably did.

One of the vitals monitors became audibly restless. Sam was trying to push himself upright while Dean tried to calm him with hey hey sammy it's just me you're okay; his movements were uncoordinated and barely there, but seeing that so-much-frailer body in motion at all was hard for Dean to get his head around.
Sam tried to lift his left arm. That was attached to the hand Dean was holding, though, so he gave up in seconds. Then he tried to move his right, and he seemed to notice the dialysis tubing. The dark red lines of it were taped down his arm and fed into his elbow. The monitors' beeping quickened as Sam tried again to move, cringing from the light and squinting at his arm. With a wash of relief, Dean saw the moment that he managed to focus on it. Sam was getting it. He was catching up to his surroundings, figuring it out and understanding.

The heart rate monitor complained as the numbers on it rocketed upward: 120 bpm. 130. 140. The air split with an alarm the same moment Sam started digging at the dialysis port.

Dean grabbed Sam's hand away from the port. Sam went to raise that arm like he was going to chew the dialysis lines out and Dean yelled and held that one down, too. He hit the call button with his knee even though he could already hear somebody hurrying toward the heart monitor alarm.

George came through the door, took one look at the situation, and called back over his shoulder, unruffled, "Ativan."

Braced over the bed, Dean looked down at his brother. Sam's eyes were clenched shut and he kept trying to bury his face in the pillow. Blood streaked from where he'd yanked the dialysis lines mostly free. He was fighting so hard veins strained against his skin.

Holding him down felt like holding down a moth.

"Sammy, c'mon, you're okay!"

Someone handed a syringe to George, who said to Dean, "On his side: one, two—" and Dean pulled Sam toward him. Sam let out one heart-rending sound from the back of his throat. As Dean shifted his grip to hold him down again, there was a pop and suddenly the room was dimmer.

Dean jerked his head up. One of the CFL bulbs was dark. A sharp, burning electrical smell drifted down from it.

The needle went into Sam's buttocks. His struggles intensified before they began to lose force. The two wrists pinned under Dean's right hand stilled, and the knee under his left palm slid down into the mattress as Sam's body sank into a loose coil. Dean started to let out a long breath.

From overhead, there was a bzz-bzzt—followed by a tink as another bulb went out.

Dean's breath stopped in his mouth.

George let go of Sam's shoulder, straightened the gown, and began to resettle him. Dean unfroze and helped, rolling Sam carefully onto his back. His head lolled. There was a smear of blood just under his nose, but that—that was from the dialysis line. Had to be.

A bulb was still on over the sink across the room, and light flooded in from the corridor through the glass wall. Still, the room was suddenly, shockingly dim for an ICU. George craned his neck to look up at the ceiling, visibly annoyed for the first time. "Get maintenance up here ASAP, would you?" he said to the tech.

While George inspected Sam's right arm, Dean found his voice. "What the hell was that?"

"People often wake up confused when they've been as sick as Sam has," said George, like confusion was the word for that. "To tell you the truth, just being in an ICU can be pretty traumatic. What I just gave him's lighter than what we've had him on but it'll calm him down."
Dean’s throat felt raw and sort of abused. He dug the heels of his hands into his eyes for a moment. The air was still tinged with an electrical stench.

George tsked over Sam’s arm. One dialysis line had been yanked out completely and the other was feeding a swollen hematoma under the skin where the very tip of the cannula was still caught. “Well, maybe we'll leave that out,” he said philosophically. “He was coming up on getting off the dialysis anyhow. I'll talk to the doc about it.”

Dean sat down heavily in the chair.

"Get out of here, Dean."

"Excuse me?"

"He woke up,” said George. "He's doing good, considering. You can sleep now."

"No. No, no, no, no, no, I have to be here when he wakes up again."

He really did. Sam didn't know shit about urban exploration.

"We need to do an exam anyway," George smiled, warm but firm. "You got what you've been waiting for, right?" Dean nodded, suddenly not trusting his voice. "Good. Go on, then. Don't worry so much. He's probably going to sleep for hours, and we'll call you if there's any problem, you know that."

Dean nodded again and stood. His head swam a little. "I'm just gonna, uh. Yeah."

He went down to the parking garage. The elevator door deposited him at B2 and, after several minutes of walking in circles, he located the Impala in a corner. He had only one thought in his head. He went around to the trunk and got Sam's duffel. Armful by armful, he transferred Sam's clothes from the bag to the car's backseat. Then he climbed in on top of them, locked the door, and passed out face-down in the pile.

Sam was insubstantial. Sounds and smells and touches he couldn't fend off pierced him through and he tried to hold on to the pain of that, but he kept getting washed away into the byzantine trenchwork of dreams.

Once, he thought he was awake. He opened his eyes, and for a moment he could have sworn he saw Dean. Then Lucifer burst across his vision. He shut his eyes. Didn't matter. The light pursued him behind the lids. You couldn't take it back once you'd said Yes.

The one thing he saw clearly was that the red thread had caught up with him. It had found him, and now it had burrowed inside.

Cooler, quieter, darker.

On a bed, Jess stretched, slipped one foot down opposite calf in a come-on as effective as it was crude. Wow, Big Boy. She had no face. I've been torn apart before, but I've never had it like that.

He didn't bother to deny it.

He couldn't, anyway. He was strapped to a cot. No, chained. No, cuffed. Cuffed to a cot. Revolving light and shadow. Whuff. Whuff.

A man leaned over him, and Sam had never seen him before but he knew him. He had the most
beautiful voice.

"This might feel a little itchy," he said. Pain was in his hand like a fistful of knives.

Sam couldn't move. He had no body to move, only a self to experience. Round peg, square hole. It hurt to be here.

"I have told your brother something you already know," said the beautiful voice. "A soul cannot be destroyed. Not even by me. Not even when that would be the best thing for it."

The man leaned farther over him, peering down as Sam jerked against the cuffs, screamed in the man's fist. "Of course, for my part, I have no soul. The violence souls may do one another ought never to be underestimated."

More lights came, more hands. At one point Lucifer held his head and pried his eyelids apart and poured himself in, and Sam screamed until another gush of coolness in his veins rinsed him away.

He wished the next dream would just be Dean.

Dean bobbed toward consciousness on the smell of home. Home and feet.

He was vaguely aware of having morning wood. The dream that had occasioned it was already lost, but the sense of rightness and low-key, pleasurable dissatisfaction lingered. Wrapped in the remains of a drowsiness better than weed, he lay where he was and hitched his hips over the surface under him. Small, slow, halting movements. He wasn't trying to get off, wasn't even fully conscious, really; just drifting a little while longer.

Hard lumps under his ribs and something metal digging into his hip kicked him by degrees toward wakefulness, though, and his surroundings resolved. The lumps were wadded-up laundry. The metal was the button of some jeans. The smell of home all around was—Sam.

He lifted his head and fumbled for his cell phone. A sock dangled from his cheek, stuck there by drool. He flinched from the glare as he thumbed the volume button to light up the clock.

MAY 7, 5:22 PM.

Dean swung himself upright.

He left the parking garage without bothering change his clothes and took the elevator up to the seventh floor. In the hazy reflection offered by the brushed aluminum surface of the elevator doors, he surreptitiously licked his hand and tried to get his hair to lie flat.

As he walked down the hall toward the MICU, pausing to tie his other boot, he felt the stirrings of what felt suspiciously like hope. Not even his background anxiety could quash it. He stopped at the registration desk, nodded when the dude there asked him to wait while he rang back to the nurses' station, and hit up the hand sanitizer an extra time. No sense bringing Sammy any extra germs to deal with. Dean tapped out the bass line to "Beautiful Loser" on his thigh.

"Mr. Young?" He turned and some of his good mood evaporated. It was not Hannah, but Dr. Ejeta."Do you have a moment to talk?"

In a room marked Family Conference, she began with, "First of all, there is no cause for alarm," which did not have the effect she'd probably hoped. "On the whole, Sam continues to improve. He is fighting the infection, so far has not had any negative reactions to refeeding, and has regained
kidney function. These are all very positive signs."

Part of Dean wanted to grab her by the throat and tell her to come to the point. Another, much larger part did not dare to offend the arcane forces that somehow held his brother's life in their hands. "I'm sensing a 'but' coming," he said.

"Does your brother have a history of seizures?"

Her tone was perfectly neutral. Dean would have weathered a slap better.

"There is a chair behind you," Ejeta said politely.

"No, thanks, I'm—I'm good. He— Once."

"When was this, do you know?"

"February."

She paused at the promptness of his reply. "Were you present for it?"

Dean's good feeling was entirely gone. "Yeah. Grand mal, full-body convulsions, the works. Lasted two or three minutes."

He'd been right there for it, and the entire time he'd been filling in the intake paperwork it had never occurred to him that what had happened to Sam in Bristol was even something medical. Apparently it wasn't enough for him to fail so badly his brother starved for a month. Once Sam had saved himself, Dean had to sabotage him just when he was finally supposed to be safe.

"Why did you not think to mention this in Sam's medical history?" Ejeta asked, like she had a direct line to Dean's guilty conscience.

"I didn't think about it. He wasn't on medication or anything, and I never… I just never thought of him as epileptic before." All Dean could think of was the stench of something electrical and the buzz of a light quietly failing.

"Did he have another?" His voice sounded strangled.

"No," she said gently. "Not like you probably mean. George noted some activity from just before Sam was re-sedated that he flagged for me to review." Dean wasn't sure whether to be relieved by that or not. "In a way, it is good news that Sam has a preexisting seizure disorder. It means the partial seizure that he may have suffered is less likely to have been caused by his acute physical problems."

"Has he woken up since then?"

After a fractional pause, she said, "Yes, he has been awake."

Dean's grip on his temper slipped. "What the hell? You people said you'd call me if anything changed!"

"We tried to. Your phone was turned off."

Dean froze and then groaned. "I was in the parking garage." He buried his face in his hands. They shook. How could he have been so stupid? Sam could have relapsed. Sam could have died, and Dean would have come back whistling to his corpse. Why couldn't he stop fucking this up?
"In any event, little has actually changed. He's been awake a number of times. The first two, it seems he was very confused and panicked. This is not unheard of. Since the second incident, we have kept his lights turned down and this seems to make him calmer, although he has not responded to staff's questions. He has not spoken at all, in fact."

Dean hid his flare of pride. *Atta boy, Sammy.* Even sick and drugged up, Sam had the smarts to keep silent until Dean could fill him in on their cover story. "Can I see him?"

Ejeta passed him off to a nursing assistant who led him back to the familiar corridor. Sam's room was conspicuous in the line of identical glass cubicles by its comparative dimness. It made it harder to see inside, but Dean could just make out the bed. His heart did a little flip when he saw Sam sitting propped up.

"Can I have some time alone with him?"

The assistant gave him a smile. Its warmth suggested maybe he'd flirted with her at some point, but he had not the faintest memory of meeting her. "Sure thing. Someone'll be in for vitals at the top of the hour."

The low light level made the room seem quieter, realer. It kind of helped that it obscured some of how shitty Sam looked, too. The bed was cranked up so that Sam could lie sort of upright, and Dean could tell even with his face angled away from the bright corridor that he was awake. Feeling suddenly shy, he took a few steps toward his brother. "Sam?"

Sam didn't move. Dean had the sudden, irrational conviction that he'd hallucinated him ever moving earlier. As he drew level with the foot of the bed, he saw that Sam's eyes were open—and blank. For a moment, Dean's heart stopped, but then Sam raised his eyes to him.

"Sammy." The name left him in a rush of relief.

Dean knew that from a practical standpoint, catching Sam up on their cover story was the most urgent thing, but it was going to have to wait. He strode to the bed, wrapped his arms around his brother, and held him.

He breathed in deep. By now Sam smelled of those nuke-it-from-orbit antimicrobial wipes and very little else. Dean flattened his palms over Sammy's shoulder blades; they were sharper than he'd felt them since they'd been kids, but solid. This was nothing like his fantasies, true enough. But it was real.

As he pressed his nose into Sam's lank hair, a thought crystallized in his mind: *This is the last time. I'm making this the last time.*

He pulled back and dashed a hand over his cheek. "You look good, Sammy, you look— It's good to see you awake, man. You gotta warn me next time you're gonna take a nap like that."

To put off meeting Sam's gaze, he checked the clock. They had about half an hour to themselves before the Scooby Gang came in to poke and prod. Dean cleared his throat, which seemed to have closed up. "Okay, so. Congratulations on your new hobby; you are now an 'urb-ex' aficionado. Don't look at me, the ER came up with that one. Not only do they think you go spelunking in sewers for fun, which to be fair you probably would if you weren't such a germ freak, but they assume you suck at it so bad you got yourself stuck down there for a month. Oh, and you've got a shady past working for Blackwater, too."

Dean was so busy babbling and looking everywhere but at the bed that it took him a while to
realize that Sam wasn't responding. He made himself look at his brother and stuttered to a halt. "Sammy?"

Sam watched him from the pillow, expressionless.

"Anyway, that's... I guess you don't really need all the details right now." No response. Dean moistened his lips. "They've got you on the good stuff for your ribs plus all that Ativan; bet you're pretty zen."

Sam didn't look zen. He looked at Dean with the same blank focus he'd been training on the wall. Or maybe that was just how he looked at someone he'd trusted who'd left him to die.

Dean bit his lip and ducked down to try to catch Sam's eye. Sam's gaze followed his motion without ever quite making eye contact, and there was something wrong, here. Not Dean-fucking-up-again wrong. Maybe wrong like in a way Dean had never fucked up before.

Except, of course, Dean had. They'd already seen the day that Dean had fucked it all the way up, and maybe the grace period where he got to be in denial about the consequences was up.

As soon as he had the thought, though, he rejected it. It couldn't be that. If the wall had come down, he'd know.

So what the hell was this?

He reached for Sam's face. Sam's eyes locked on his hand as it approached and then jumped to Dean's face when it made contact. Dean threaded his fingers into the hair at Sam's temple; Sam's skin seemed too cool. "Sam? What is it?"

Something flickered in Sam's eyes, but his mouth didn't move.

Dean's fingers clenched convulsively and he just managed to abort the urge to shake his brother by the hair. "Sammy, goddamnit, at least tell me you're in there."

An eternity went by before a nod so slight Dean felt it more than saw it.

Relief was soon replaced by a different unease. If Sam's wall had come down, he'd be either gibbering or a vegetable. Death and Cas had both said so. So this was something else. Whatever this silence was, it was because something terrible had happened to Sam in the month he'd been gone. And their scale for terror was extreme.

Careful as easing a tripwire, Dean drew his hand back. After so many weeks of nothing but the idea of him for company, here was Sam, face inches from his own—familiar, and yet not. The difference wasn't as stark as it had been, with awareness in his eyes and now that he wasn't dehydrated nearly to death, but there remained an unquantifiable gap between this face and the one Dean knew that couldn't be accounted for by the scruff or the feeding tube.

Every time Dean so much as twitched, Sam's eyes snapped after the movement. Something lay in that, but Dean couldn't crack what and he felt his own eyes sting in sheer frustration.

"Sorry I missed your birthday," he whispered.

Not knowing what else to do, he sank into the chair and watched Sam watching him. The clock ground out a silent arc, and still not a single idea presented itself as to how to begin to fix the mess he'd made.
With that stare fixed on a now unmoving object, Sam's eyelids drooped. Almost immediately they flew open again, and Dean saw Sam struggle to refocus on him.

All of a sudden Dean got it.

"Hey." He leaned in, and now he was looking for it, he could see not only Sam's minute flinch but the tension all through him. Sam was fighting to hold onto consciousness with everything he had. And everything he had wasn't much.

God, how long had the kid been waiting up here like this for him to come?

Dean rolled the chair forward and grabbed Sam's wrist; his fingers wrapped right around it. Sam jumped, eyes snapping up to Dean's, and how had Dean ever thought that they were blank? He shoved Sam's hand up under his own t-shirt, flattening the palm against his chest.

"You feel that?" Sam didn't answer, but Dean felt his hand shake. He pressed it harder into that spot. "I'm right here, Sammy. Okay? C'mon. Feel me. Feel me."

Sam's breath caught.

"You don't have to do anything else. You did it. Whatever son of a bitch it was, you kicked its ass and you got out and you found me, and now all you have to do is sleep, man. Stand down. I'm here now. Right here. I got you. I got you."

Dean held Sam's hand against his ribs until he felt it slacken. It took a long time, but when Sam's eyes slid shut, this time his breath evened out in seconds. He kept Sam's palm on his apical pulse for a while, anyway.

Sleep erased the gulf between this face and the one Dean knew.

* * *

Dean did what he'd needed to do since he'd woken up in the car: found a bathroom and pissed torrentially.

While he did, he considered. There were things to attend to. Sam wasn't going anywhere for at least two days, which meant Dean had time to attend to them.

Number one was to learn as much as possible about Sam's care. He wouldn't be budging Sam until the scary BP was in the rearview, but he needed to know what the deal was with the refeeding thing Ejeta had talked about, what all Sam was on, what the side effects were.

He needed to know what kind of antibiotics to steal. That CVS he'd seen in his wanderings was promising; it had been locked up for the night, which meant it wasn't staffed around the clock. They'd have access to softer targets once they made it out of Providence, but Dean couldn't risk waiting that long. They needed a supply laid in before they made a move. Sam was getting every dose, on time. There was no way in hell Dean was breaking him out of here only to have his infection go resistant because Dean fucked up the schedule.

He needed information about the world outside the hospital, and it was up to him to get it because Sam's job right now was to sleep 24/7. He'd have to catch up with the news and find out what the deal was with the explosion: what was happening with the investigation there, whether it was all connected, whether they could use it.

And he needed to know what the police knew. What Gutierrez knew, and whether she had his face
splashed all over town, and whether the moment Dean stuck his neck out she'd be there to step on it. The first day in here, considering his options with the dispassionate analysis of shock, Dean had told himself that if he had to leave and return for Sam later, then fine. Not ideal, but fine. But now he was himself again, and he'd be damned if he'd let the Providence Police Department separate him from his brother a second time.

That was the full extent of Dean's to-do list: figure out what it would take to keep Sam safe and make it happen.

He washed his hands for thirty full seconds, counting it out like the little plaque mounted next to the paper towel dispenser said to do.

The need to know what was behind all this had been burning in him for weeks. Now he had clarity, and he realized that he didn't care. All he cared about was in the bed down the hall. He wasn't like Sam. He didn't need answers. He just needed his brother.

The fluorescent bulb over the sink flickered. Dean watched it in the mirror until it steadied. Then he wiped his fingers with a paper towel and let the lid of the trash bin fall with a *thunk.*

Answers could rot in hell.

All that he knew was a heartbeat, and for a while, that was fine. Then it occurred to him to wonder whether he could see anything. As soon as he thought it, suddenly he could, although it was some time before he could have said what.

Darkness, he eventually realized. That realization in turn brought the awareness that his hands were outstretched before him to feel the pulse. He spread his fingers, trying to understand the surface under them. It was a wall.

"Sam?"

His eyes fluttered open.

"I'm Bess. Maybe you remember me."

He didn't, not specifically, but he did remember voices, and faces, and hands, and probably this was one of them.

"How are you feeling, Sam? Do you have any pain?"

What a question. He did not *have* pain. Pain was here, around, but he didn't *have* it.

He knew that he was drugged. The sensation of something narcotic wrapping him in elastic filaments was too familiar to miss. None of the filaments were very tight, they were all springy and yielding and soft, but to push against them in aggregate was self-defeating. He hated how close to the dark trenchworks they kept him.

"I'm about to turn on the overhead lights. You might want to close your eyes."

He did so.

"Okay, here it comes."

An instant later, the light burst across his eyelids. He felt it, a jolting pain somewhere inside his eyeballs, and saw it, a sudden influx of peach.
Snapping sounds: gloves. Nitrile gloves. Yeah, that tallied. There'd been a lot of purple hands so far.

The memories were jumbled, but there, and easier to assign into the right boxes with distance: this one had been a dressing being changed; that one had been someone brushing his teeth probably, which made the foam that had crowded his tongue toothpaste; that one had been some absolute fucker checking his pupillary response.

"Do you think you can open your eyes now, Sam?"

Probably he could. The light kept prying at his lids; he'd passed the tipping point where keeping them shut was more effort than letting them open. Wincing, he did so.

A woman stood over him, smiling down at him from somewhere around the vicinity of his right hand. "That's excellent, Sam." She was pretty, with curly hair and a gentle smile, and the sight of her filled him with dread.

It took a few rounds of opening and closing his eyes to get to where looking at the room merely hurt continuously rather than each individual movement of his eyes stabbing him in the brain. He might have lost track of time a bit during this process, because when next he attempted to focus on Bess, an object in motion, she was talking again.

"—been in the ICU for about two and a half days now. Today is Tuesday, May 8th. Just barely, anyway; we're coming up on two in the morning. Your brother's right down the hall in the family lounge."

Brother. He felt a pang. He pushed the feeling away, like thrusting off of something in the weightless vacuum of space.

She tore open a crinkly package and turned to him. "I'm going to give you a bath now. Okay?"

The question inflection snapped across his awareness like a rubber band. No. No, it was not okay. The word filled up chest, then his throat, then his mouth, but he couldn't get his teeth apart to let it out.

She watched him for a response or acknowledgment, but when none was forthcoming, all she did was smile again. "Okay, here we go.

"I'm going to tell you everything I do before I do it," she said, and indeed, she wouldn't shut up, and he couldn't make himself tell her to, and this was like before with Dean but worse.

She told him she was going to untie his gown. She told him what the wipes were. She told him not to worry because the wipes would be warm. Until she said that, he hadn't felt the cold. When the gown came away from his skin and he shivered, she made a sympathetic noise and assured him that this wouldn't take long. She folded the gown down to his lap.

"Bend forward for me," she said.

He bent forward.

Most of him was still hidden by the folded-down gown and the folded-down sheets, but he could see his torso and his arms. He could see the colors and shapes of them. He closed his eyes.

Bess wiped over his neck, shoulders, and under his chin. "Right arm," she said. Information, not a request. Lukewarm moisture traveled over his bicep and triceps; down the IV line dividing his
forearm; over his palm and wrist; between his fingers; into his armpit. "Left arm." Repeat.

She started a new, warmer wipe on his chest. She worked carefully over his ribs and the concavity below them before her hands were guiding him to lie back down.

"We're gonna clean your groin area, okay?" A pause after this, perhaps giving him time to say that that was fine.

He opened his eyes as the sheets were moved further down and stared at the ceiling. It was plaster, not drop-tile. Classy place. Clean, white, energy-efficient light bulbs burned at the periphery of his vision; he let them blur.

Damp fiber and nitrile between his legs. He could feel the outline of her hand against his inner thighs, his sac. He felt a tug inside as the wipe went up and down the tubing of the catheter.

"Next are your legs."

The sheets came entirely off, now. For some reason his knees were the coldest.

The wipes left his thighs sticky; the settling of the air against the residue charted her progress. She spent extra time and an entire extra wipe on his feet, one of which throbbed dully. A memory slotted into place with an inward jolt: being on the manhole ladder, slipping, catching himself, a wrenching between his toes. The manhole ladder connected with this place.

He shoved the new understanding away into the vacuum.

"Turn on your side for me? Don't worry about the lines, I'll help you."

Warm pressure of a hand through nitrile on his shoulder. Then more wiping over his shoulder blades, down his spine, over his kidneys, over and between his buttocks. Firm. Gentle. Thorough. He made himself not shake.

"Let's turn back over, now."

On his back again. At least she wasn't leaning over him, putting her face close to his. He had a memory of someone doing that.

"Okay, here's the sucky part."

Was she fucking kidding?

"The chlorhexadine has to dry completely. I know you're cold, but just five minutes and then we'll get you back under the warming blanket, okay?"

She kept asking that: okay?

"I'll be right here. I'm setting a timer. We'll get you warm again in no time."

He hadn't been warm even before she'd started this; he'd just not noticed he was cold. Who knew how long he might have gone on not noticing it if she hadn't said anything.

Sam stared up at the ceiling. As a kid, he'd liked to do this. He'd liked to think about what it would be like if they all lived in an upside-down world and walked around on the ceiling instead of the floor. It would be a lot like ordinary life, he'd been sure, but subtly different and strange. Better.

Something or other that he was connected to did this irritating double chirrup every few seconds.
He tried to use that to count off the time, to hold onto it like a handrail to get across the bridge from now to when he got his covers back, but the bed was propped up pretty far and it was difficult, at this angle, to keep his gaze from falling downward.

He looked at himself. He took in his entire form. Then he looked back up at the ceiling.

Bess's timer chimed. "Okay, here we go, here's your gown again."

He spun weightlessly away in vacuum.

* * *

When next he woke, Dean was in the bedside chair. The lights were turned down again, and Dean had his head propped in one hand with his mouth open. His other arm was hanging into the space between the chair and the bed, slightly out of reach.

The sight hit Sam right in the sternum, digging in and squeezing. He tried to fling the feeling away again. It didn't work, this time.

Possibly that was thanks to the lack of drugs. Whatever he'd been coasting on that had made it easier to ride above things was gone or much reduced, and all of a sudden he felt the heaviness of his own body on the bed. He felt gravity pulling his hips and arms down into the mattress and his bowling-ball head into the pillow. He felt the weight of his heart in his chest and the distinctive pain of broken ribs. He didn't feel enough of that last one not to still be on something, though.

He watched Dean. He could hear his breathing: whatever had beeped before was now silent, and the silence revealed the infinitesimal whuff of air passing over Dean's lower lip.

With great effort, Sam moved his tongue. He wanted to say something. Talking seemed like something he'd used to do. But he still couldn't get any words out. Before he'd been asphyxiating in vacuum; now some super-gravity was pushing the air the wrong way down his throat.

Dean in the chair didn't make any sense. Dean didn't make any sense. The chair didn't make any sense. What failed to make sense wasn't the existence of either object or even their conjunction, but the shape of the chair, the blueness of its material, the fact that it was patterned with innumerable dots of lighter blue, the wall behind him in teal with a stripe of beige, Dean's hundreds of thousands of individual head hairs and eyebrow hairs and eyelashes, the wrinkles and creases in his clothes, the freckles on his skin, the small split in his lip, the scab on his left knuckle, the nineteen discrete textures in the small sector of the room that Sam could see alone. What didn't make sense was the amount of information compressed into a single image. It was impossible. The world was suppurating with it.

He remembered Lindsey's voice in the dark: I just wanted to go outside.

He couldn't breathe.

Dean's out-flung arm jerked as if someone had tugged on it and he woke. The detail level in the room didn't seem to bother him any as he abandoned the chair. Which also didn't make any sense. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, hey, Sammy, breathe. Just breathe, okay? I got you."

Two warm hands settled on either of Sam's shoulders, and then he was gasping. Air plunged into his lungs; he choked on it. Repeat. He could feel the pressure of a tube threaded through one sinus and curving at the back of his throat.

Dean flicked a glance up toward the door before he stooped down, face a few inches from Sam's.
"Look, I need you to slow it down for me, Sammy, or they're gonna come back in here and sedate you. Come on. Breathe with me. Here. One."

Seconds or minutes later, he was lightheaded but his lungs were no longer spasming. His ribs hurt more.

He heard Dean let out a long, controlled breath of his own, and then the chair being rolled closer. Dean reseated himself and took Sam's hand. Sam would've been shocked into silence had he not been mute already.

"You back with me?"

All possible responses to that tried to crawl up Sam's throat in a mass and he choked on them. Humiliatingly, Dean didn't really seem to expect an answer. He just sat there, rubbing his thumb over Sam's knuckles.

"You're doing good, Sammy," he said. He looked tired but satisfied. "They're talking about moving you out to the medium-security joint soon. Already scoped it out, the nurses are way hotter. All you gotta do is sip mai tais and get better. 'Least, I think it's mai tais they're shooting down that tube into you, you're sleeping enough for it to be."

Someone was shooting things down a tube into him. His mind tried to compass that: substances bypassing the process of chewing and swallowing and arriving directly in his stomach. There might be something in his stomach right now. There could be anything in his stomach right now. Oh, God.

"You wanna watch some TV? Haven't done that yet. Let's find out what Providence has to offer at five thirty in the morning, get you caught up on your shows." A remote appeared in Dean's free hand, and then the screen on the opposite side of the room burst into light and color. Sam flinched.

Dean flipped through the channels too fast ("So come on down to Little Rhody Recliners—") just like he always did ("I'm getting an 'M' energy, is there an 'M'?") just like this was possible ("—mate for life. Courtship is a series of death-defying—") and Dean was possible ("Republicans have vowed to block—") and Sam was possible ("—and a basket of clams for just $14.99!"). Too much motion, too much color. Sam wanted to look away but couldn't.

"Oh, hey, you love nature shows," said Dean, backing up a couple of channels in complete obliviousness to reality coming apart at the seams.

Nature show. Big brown birds wheeled in a big blue sky. Still too fast and too much, but at least all the same too-fast-too-much and after a minute it wasn't awful. Birds. Birds and sky. Birds and sky didn't fit in here, but if Sam was careful not to look at the boundary between nature show and hospital room, it was okay.

"Peregrines learn to hunt with their siblings," said a credible David Attenborough knock-off. He had quite a beautiful voice. It reminded Sam of someone or another. "They take turns playing hunter and prey."

One of the birds hurtled toward dizzying cliffs. Another followed behind it, streaking like an arrow.

"They hunt by dive-bombing. A peregrine will strike a prey bird at speeds in excess of 300 kilometers per hour, stunning or killing it, but with each other, they are quite gentle." The two brown bodies collided, tumbling together through the air before pulling back up into the sky.
"Peregrine siblings will perform these precision drills hundreds of times as fledglings as they grow into their birthright as one of nature’s most elegant killers—"

Dean flipped the screen to black and cleared his throat. "But you shouldn't really be up yet." He made the remote disappear somewhere. "Need to rest up. Trust me, you don't even know, it's gonna be like a M*A*S*H convention in here in a few hours."

He let go of Sam's hand to recline the chair he was in, cursing when he nearly knocked it into an equipment cart. Sam couldn't keep up.

His mind was full of memories like bursts of the TV screen. He kept trying to understand how any of them could have happened, how they could possibly all be connected, but he had no test to apply and he wasn't doing very well.

Dean was here. Here was a hospital. Sam was here. He understood all of these realities. They just didn't make any sense.

Dean's hand rasped over stubble. The sound was too specific, too familiar: didn't the sound know where Sam had been? "I don't, um. Dunno if the strong, silent thing is the drugs, or what. Probably the drugs." Dean was talking to him, but not as if he were actually there. "Anyway, if you—if you wanna tell me what you remember, or if you, I dunno, maybe you don't remember anything. But any time, Sammy. Well, not any time, don't bring up the crazy shit when the nurses are around, but other than that. I got some things to take care of, but I'm not leaving this hospital, so if you want me, you just have them call me. Or—or not. It's all good. Whatever you need."

Sam felt thin and watery inside. He closed his eyes because processing the texture of the ceiling made him sick, but his mind kept replaying the fall of birds toward cliffs.

Suddenly there was a hand in his hair. Heavy and warm, it smoothed the strands back from his temple. Then again, with a light scrape of nails over his scalp. And again. "Get some sleep, little brother," Dean said quietly.

Sam had dreamt of this. For all that time down there in—in the place, he'd longed for exactly this: for Dean to come and take care of him. For Dean to put his hands on him in comfort.

Now, somehow, miraculously, here was Dean. He was taking care of Sam. He was stroking Sam's hair, rubbing slow and warm up and down Sam's arm, touching more than he had in years, touching more unselfconsciously than in lifetimes, and it didn't feel how Sam had imagined. In his fantasies, just Dean being there had made everything okay. He'd forget what had been and what he'd done. Having Dean again wasn't supposed to make him remember.

And while Dean was right by his side, doing everything for him and nothing but grateful to have him back, Sam was sitting here steeped in disappointment. He felt sick with himself.

Dean started humming "Enter Sandman." He didn't know. He had no inkling what Sam had done to get here, what he'd touched, what he'd eaten, what had been against his skin and what he'd lived and slept in. He didn't know whom he'd hurt, and he certainly didn't know how. He didn't know because Sam hadn't told him.

The ghost screaming in his mind. Jacob wheezing to death in the dark. The outlines of Lindsey and Marian's bodies, inflated like pool toys. Birds plummeting out of the sky.

Sky. Blue sky.

He had to get out of here.
Sam reached for his IV. Almost instantly fingers clamped vise-like around his wrist. In other circumstances, the look on Dean's face might have been hilarious. "What the fuck, Sam?"

Sam went to sit up only to feel a tug in his nasal passage: tube. Feeding tube, Dean had said. That was yet another concept he categorically could not reckon with at the moment. His fingers sought frantically up the line of the tubing for a place to decouple it, but the room was wheeling. Dean pushed him down with one hand on his shoulder, and he might as well have been an angel for all Sam could fight his grip.

Dean's face was inches from his and white with fear like fury. "Give me one good reason not to hit the call button, Sam."

It took Sam a minute to come to grips with that. Dean asking him why he shouldn't hit the call button meant he hadn't hit the call button yet. Sam opened his mouth to explain. All that came out was a moan. He shuddered to hear himself.

"Sam." Dean's voice was tight. "You're not ready to talk, you're too high to talk, whatever, I can roll with that, but I need to know what's going on 'cause you're scaring the shit out of me."

Sam tried to push the blankets back. They were heavy. They were really, really heavy, and so was he, and when he tried to roll and swing his legs over the side of the bed none of it happened, not the rolling or the swinging and anyway there was one of those foot-high bed rails. Frustrated embarrassment stung his eyes. He'd crushed a man's throat in single combat to escape a haunted sewer; now he couldn't even defeat blankets.

Dean gripped his arms and shook him, gently, carefully. "Sammy!"

Sam clutched at the leather of his jacket. Out, he tried to say. His mouth moved but he couldn't get the word to vocalize.

"All right, that's it." Dean started to turn away.

Nurses would come; they'd drug him again, they'd hold him down and wash him back into the trenchworks. In desperation, Sam grabbed at Dean's collar and managed to wheeze, "—t."

He didn't expect it to stop Dean, but it did. Dean turned back to him, and this time when he frowned at Sam there was something in his face that hadn't been there before. He was looking at Sam like Sam was Sam.

"Sammy?" Dean cupped his face. "Out? Like outside?"

The relief was so great Sam felt his neck stretch where Dean's hands were suddenly the only things holding up his head.

"Okay, hold on." Dean was reaching for the call button again. "Don't freak out," he said, probably because Sam was clawing at his hand. "You got more tubes in you than a bathtub gin operation. Let me handle it."

Bess was the one who responded. When she saw Sam hunched over struggling for breath, she sighed and started to move toward them, but Dean held up a hand. "Look," he said, keeping a hand on Sam's shoulder, "my brother needs to get out of here for a minute."

"Excuse me?"

"Just to stick his head out and get some air. Is there somewhere I can take him?"
She was momentarily speechless. "Dean, I know his injuries don't look like much, but Sam's in the ICU for a reason. He needs rest and monitoring. Lots."

"I get that. I really do. But I'm telling you, he needs to get out right now. Just five minutes."

"The Ativan seems to work well for him," she said, dipping into a scrub pocket. "We'll get him calmed down and back to sleep."

"You're not hearing me," Dean snapped. "Out. Not drugs. Out. If you'd been trapped in a damn sewer for a month, don't you think you'd be a little claustrophobic? He doesn't need drugs, he needs some fucking air."

She hesitated. "He'll probably go to step-down later on today anyway, and he'll be able to move around once he's on telemetry. Be patient just a little while longer; it's really just the vasopressor keeping him here at this point."

"Then where's the harm?"

"Dean—"

"Wheelchairs have those poles for the IVs and shit, right? Look, I'm not talking about taking him to the circus, just somewhere that's not here."

She chewed her lip, looked at Sam, and sighed. "There's a balcony."

Dean rubbed his thumb over Sam's shoulder while Bess disappeared somewhere and Sam shook. He was murmuring some nonsense or other that Sam didn't bother to keep track of.

Nor did he try to keep track of the process of hospital staff unplugging him from things, re-plugging him into some high-tech baby monitor, manhandling him into a wheelchair, and, when Dean retreated to let them work, trying to copy Dean's soothing touches on his back and shoulders and arms until Sam genuinely thought he was going to throw up. He did his utmost to lose track of all of that. Dean, for his part, watched the nursing assistant's hand on Sam's shoulder like he could light it on fire that way.

"Okay, all set."

"Where is it?" Dean asked.

"I'll take you." Sam didn't see what face Dean made, but Bess said, "The only reason I am even agreeing to this is that he's nearly stable and I have reason to think it will help his psychiatric outcome. But he's still an ICU patient. If we're going to do this, we need to get on with it, I won't be available during shift change." She tipped her head toward the wheelchair. "Wanna drive?" she offered.

Dean took the aide's place behind the chair. The room tilted around Sam as Dean popped the chair back. He leaned down and spoke in Sam's ear. "What d'you say, Sammy? Not a patch on Baby, but at least she's got wheels."

Sam clenched his teeth and tried to tune all of this out. He couldn't. He couldn't keep up, he couldn't answer, he couldn't breathe.

At least Dean seemed to pick up on his mood. "All right, let's hit the road."

The doors parted before them.
Hallway. Bright. Wide. Flashing metal along the wall—hand rail. Swirling, nauseous carpet. People. He wanted to close his eyes and shut it all out, but he couldn't.

Their progress was horrifically slow. Bess was keeping pace with them, kept murmuring imbecilic nonsense like, "How you doing, Sam?" and "You're doing great," and he couldn't fucking filter.

"Turn left here." A bump and then they were on linoleum. Sam glimpsed a refrigerator. What even were refrigerators.

"All right, here we go." Bess was hip-checking the cross-bar of a door; Dean was lifting the back of the chair over a threshold; air was on his face, and—

The door thumped shut behind them. Sam blinked, trying to adapt to the cosmic transition. Under his feet, below the metal footrest, were big, black, rubber roof tiles. Near the wall were a brick and a pot filled with sand and trash. The trash had approximately five billion different colors in it.

He felt the air on his face. It moved. It was cool and moist and it moved. He heard engines, tires, distant horns: traffic. Cars. Cars driven by people.

Steeling himself, Sam turned his face up.

He was looking up at a vast dome of gray. Light suffused it: not an oozing, orange light, not a light he could touch or eat, but an impersonal, impassive predawn emerging from some impossibly distant horizon.

Sam gasped, and then suddenly air was stabbing in and out of his lungs. It tasted of rain.

"We're done here," Bess said.

Dean ignored her. Dean was in front of him, now. Dean had his face in between his palms. "Hey, hey, Sammy. It's okay. Slow it down for me."

Sam ignored him. Dean could slowly go fuck himself.

His fist tangled with the neck of Dean's t-shirt; he saw Dean's grimace at the awkward tug but it didn't matter.

He could hear birds.

"Dean," he said.

Chapter End Notes

- Peregrine falcons play/rehearse hunting instincts with their siblings; as adults, they may mate for life but are otherwise solitary. (It ain't all that romantic, TBH.)
- The last three chapters of this thing are kicking my ass and I'm kind of on deadline. Pray for me.
does anybody here remember vera lynn?

Chapter Summary

Dean didn't want to give up a minute of this, because who knew how it was going to go tomorrow.

Chapter Notes

Blessings come upon the heads of my betas, Caranfindel & Dimeliora.

They gave him the Ativan anyway, in the end. Awake, Sam was clearly overwhelmed; he kept flinching from lights and staring at walls like they were going to jump him if he looked away. The doc on duty wanted him calm before he got out of the ICU. At least Sam could sort of consent to it this time. Bess laid it out for him, and he looked like he wanted to throw up but nodded.

Dean held his hand while Bess injected the stuff into Sam's IV. "Humor me: say something, just for the novelty value."

Sam moistened his lips. "Something." After a minute he added, "Jerk."

Dean grinned like a loon.

He was in the trenchworks again.

A woman stood with her back to him holding a red balloon. As Sam watched, she opened her hand and it rose up and was lost to darkness. He watched the string trail up, up, away.

He had a yellow string in him. No, a tube. A yellow tube snaked up his nose and down his throat into his stomach. Whatever was inside was the color of bile. Someone in a white coat was occupied with the tube where it led to a metal hook somewhere over his face. They loaded a big syringe into an aperture on it. Sam wanted to demand to know what they were doing, but he couldn't speak. The person turned around. His eyes were flooded yellow.

He grinned at Sam. *Maybe it's Demon Blood.* His face veered down as he snarled, *Maybe he's born with it.*

He hit the plunger on the syringe. The yellow line went red, red—

A hall. The walls were dark, the floor indeterminate. The woman was there. *What do you think, hunter?* Her voice was the voices of many joined in a discordant chorus. *Do you feel like a big man?*
Suddenly the void of her face was against his ear. *If you think you had good intentions, think again.*

He flattened both palms against her chest.

*I don't think that.*

When he pushed, she fell backwards into darkness.

By the time Dean made it back from getting breakfast over shift change, Sam was awake again. Just that was enough to buoy him. Sam having the energy to be awake meant Sam getting better.

Sam still wasn't talking much, though at least at this point they knew that he could. He showed no particular interest when spoken to for the most part, either. When told things like the date and how long he'd been gone and what was going to happen next, he gave no sign that he was confused, but he didn't really react, either.

He was calmer, though. Whereas earlier he'd watched his surroundings like each individual object was wired to detonate if he blinked, now he just looked. He'd focus on whoever was in the room, or sometimes the TV if Dean turned it on, or some object whose source of interest was known to him alone. Sometimes he'd frown like he was trying to figure something out, but more often than not, he sat expressionless.

The taciturnity, the flat affect—these could be a reaction to trauma, George had told him out in the hall after one of the endless exams. Or they could be signs of a cognitive change brought on by Sam's illness. Unpredictable things happened to brains that came close to death; Dean should prepare himself for that possibility.

Dean had nodded and gone back to his brother. It wasn't that he was dismissing the possibility George raised, exactly. It just didn't matter. Sam could be full-on Gilbert Grape and it wouldn't change what Dean had to do.

Anyway, he didn't think the issue was a lack of candlepower. Dean had seen similar concentration on Sam's features too many times to count, and absence of brain activity was not what it indicated. Granted, Sam was currently watching a local news story about a therapy parrot with the same intensity that in another life he might have allotted to a Stanford Law lecture, but Dean would be the first to admit that the room was low on entertainment sources.

Dean shoveled Jell-O into his mouth as he watched alongside. Sam's meals were still coming through a tube, but Dean had flirted some freebies out of an aide who thought his brotherly devotion was sweet. He was drawn up short with a mouthful of the stuff by the thought that Sam might think he was, like, taunting him or something, but Sam's attention had wandered from the TV set to the empty hall past the glass. And this was the lime flavor.

"And now: mounting mystery at Burges's Point, where a gas line rupture triggered an explosion earlier this week."

Footage of a now-familiar silo singed black around its crown appeared behind the anchorwoman's desk. The fire engines and hose streams were gone, but the police line in front of it was still there, cops leaning against their cars with cups of Dunkin'. Sam's focus snapped back to the TV screen. Dean paused with a glob of Jell-O quivering on his spoon.

"No one was injured in the explosion, but several workers and first responders have been taken to Rhode Island Hospital after working on the site, raising concerns about lingering health risks."
If Dean hadn't been watching Sam, if Dean hadn't spent his life watching Sam, he'd have missed his microscopic relaxation toward the beginning of the sentence. That was all the confirmation he needed. And it was enough for now. He could wait for the rest until they were somewhere far, far away.

Sam's relaxation was replaced by a small frown.

"The workers are reportedly in stable condition, and National Grid has denied that there are ongoing gas leaks in the area. Authorities are investigating the possibility that the contents of the silo, which was abandoned in the late 1990s, may be to blame."

The screen cut to jumpy cell phone footage of the harbor shoreline with the intact silo in the background. The camera, wielded by a dockworker in heavy gloves, dipped slightly once. Dean's brain recreated that first muffled percussion and started counting off the seconds automatically. While the news anchor kept talking in voice over, the camera veered wildly on cue with a second explosion before zooming in on the silo that was suddenly on fire. Sam's sharp profile took it all in.

"Providence police are expected to give a statement later today. In the meantime, authorities are requesting the public's cooperation in keeping clear of the area."

Dean scraped the bottom of his Jell-O cup while the news station replayed the cell phone footage. "What'd you do, anyway?" he asked around his spoon.

Sam didn't answer immediately. His gaze remained fixed on the images on the TV: the collapsing grain silo, the cussing dockworker, the fireball. Dean was just about to demand to know if Sam had heard him or what when Sam turned to him and said, "Can we get pancakes?"

"Congratulations," said the nurse. "Your body is officially no longer trying to kill you."

Could've fooled Sam, but if they said so.

"So that means he's gonna be okay?" Dean demanded.

The nurse was a man, one of those ex-military types impossible to rattle, and the way he wielded his voice suggested he knew how soothing it was. Sam read off his laminate: George Botts. Botts, Potts, Ross—Ross. Bob Ross. This guy was like a black, middle-aged Bob Ross painting with Ativan in place of watercolors.

"There's no guarantees in life, medicine, or cooking, but for my money? Yeah, gonna be just fine. You're just full of surprises, Sam." George disengaged the wheel lock on the bed and disentangled the remaining lines running out of Sam's body from nearby equipment. "White blood cell count's on track, your kidneys are back in business. With malnutrition like yours we look for heart damage, and to be honest when your BP wouldn't come up I was worried, but there's nothing. Every test's come back clean." He smiled down at Sam. "You've got a guardian angel watching over you."

Sam felt cold.

"All right, here we go, graduation day."

Sam intensely disliked being wheeled about on beds. It was like being on a raft, but fake, nauseous. Untethered but not free.

Another thing about beds as a mode of travel: the overhead lights shone straight down into his
eyes. Sam turned his face away. Dean walked on Sam's other side while George steered them down the hall, peppering the nurse with questions and visibly restraining himself to keep pace with the bed. It was almost as exhausting to watch him as it was to listen.

They passed under a sign hanging from the ceiling that read Progressive Care Unit, and Dean busted out grinning like they'd just come ashore in Tahiti after seven months at sea to find the tiki bar doing brisk business. "I'm telling you, Sammy: way hotter nurses."

"Thank you," a voice said dryly.

Dean froze. "Uh," he said.

The bed stopped in front of a nurse's station and a round woman with glasses appeared beside George. She looked familiar—no. She sounded familiar, smelled familiar. She watched Dean squirm for a moment before turning her attention to Sam. "Hello, Sam, I'm Hannah. You might remember me, but it's all right if you don't. I was also your nurse in ICU."

"Staff rotate between ICU and step-down," George said helpfully.

Hannah held her hand out for a clipboard George forked over. "Sam Young, five-two-eighty-three, received from ICU, admitting to PCU. Have a good shift, George."

"Don't break any hearts." George lifted a hand in farewell and was gone. Hannah looked oddly displeased with the joke.

Dean was practically bouncing on the balls of his feet. "Okay, what's next, what's happening?"

Hannah absently massaged Sam's uninjured foot through the blankets, which—which felt really good, actually. Anybody other than Dean touching him on his skin made Sam feel like he was on the brink of electrocution, and Dean doing it was hit or miss, but oh wow this was quite okay. Sam sort of melted. "Now you get to sleep for two hours in between getting woken up for vitals instead of one, Sam, rejoice."

She let go of his foot to start moving the bed again. Damn. "We're optimistic Sam will actually be able to be discharged straight to home," she answered Dean. "He's got a ways to go, but so far his recovery has been textbook." To Sam she said, "You'll be on telemetry monitoring here, so you'll be able to move around. Just don't try to get up on your own. But first"—Her eyes crinkled with her smile.—"in about five minutes, we're going to get that tube out so you can actually eat. With your mouth and everything. Would you like to eat, Sam?"

Such an innocuous question.

What about you, Sam? What're you gonna eat if you ever get out of here?

Medical-grade slurry, apparently.

Dean was watching him. He looked apprehensive, in that uh-oh-brain-damage kind of way. "Sammy? Wanna try some real food?"
Sam shrugged. It took more effort than he'd thought. He kept being surprised by how much effort things took.

Hannah's expression hadn't changed, but Sam couldn't tell whether that was because she wasn't worried he might be brain damaged or because she wouldn't be fazed by it if he were. "Don't worry," she said. "They'll barely be meals to start with."

Sam tried to reply but got all locked up. What was he going to say? He couldn't very well tell her he was afraid that if he got a single bite past his lips, he'd never be able to stop. That he might snap and eat the whole hospital. Eat Hannah, maybe. She had a lot more on her than Marian.

No, he couldn't very well tell her that.

Hannah wasn't waiting for his response. They were moving again, rafting down the hall. Dean trailed beside.

Rooms in here had the same glass walls as the ICU. No privacy. No barriers between one inmate and the next; anyone could walk up to anyone else and do anything. People apparently took it on faith that they wouldn't. Some cubicles did actually have the curtains drawn (flimsy), but Sam could see who was in most: a teenager in traction, an old man watching Judge Judy, a woman surrounded by family, someone vomiting into a pan while a nurse rubbed her back. Sam caught a glimpse of a familiar object behind her on a tray.

Paper covered in pictures and columns upon columns of print. He tried to imagine reading. His head swam.

"Could I have a newspaper, please?" he asked.

Dean looked between Sam and Hannah, delighted. No, not just delighted: proud. He looked like a helicopter parent whose kid had just won Scripps.

"Sure, we'll grab you one after you're settled," said Hannah. They stopped at room eleven; she looked up at Dean. "Which we really do need to do now."

"Right, right." Dean bit his lip and angled himself over Sam to shield them from onlookers that weren't there. He smiled his "grownups have to go to work" smile. "I gotta take care of some things," he said. "I'll be back later. All right?"

Sam should have wanted to say, *I'm not fucking five.* What he actually wanted to say was, *No no no no no you can't leave.* Out loud, he did say, "Yeah. Of course. I'm fine."

Dean gave him one more watery smile. Then he cleared his throat, drew back, clapped Sam once on his good shoulder, and strode off down the hall at a clip, hands thrust deep in his pockets.

Hannah steered them both into the room, pausing to let the doors part. "How about you, Sam?" she asked. "Are you going to take care of things?"

He started violently. "What?"

She paused in pushing the bed and blinked down at him. "I said, 'Are you ready to take care of that feeding tube?'"

He swallowed. Plastic scraped at the back of his throat. "Oh. Sure."
The utility closet in which Dean had taken his hose-bath the other night had a pair of coveralls in it, hanging behind some mop handles. The name patch said Good Hope Maintenance. Listening to the police scanner as he ambled down the street in the coveralls and a stained Pawtucket Red Sox cap off the floor of the parking garage, Dean looked liked any number of blue collar contractors catching up with the office by walkie-talkie.

He kept the scanner turned down low. Most of the chatter was unremarkable: B&Es, parking violations, domestics. Someone on that mysterious cordon around the silo was supposed to have gotten off shift an hour ago and needed to be relieved so he could go pick up his kids already. Dean kept walking. He made a complete circuit of the hospital. No signs of surveillance. Reasonably good throughput along the street with the ambulance entrance.

"Q11 checking in." The voice was male, faintly familiar. Gutierrez's partner? "Anything on our BOLO?"

Silence and crackles. Clear sign. "Adam 13 heah, I did stop a Chevy matching description, but driver was female, had proof of identity. Nothin’ else yet."

Not a shock there'd be an APB out on him. Dean turned down Blackstone, heading for the Autozone Google said lay less than a mile away.

He slipped into a bodega when a couple of unis turned onto the street up ahead. Inside, he flipped through the offerings on the newsstand. Good selection of local papers here. He skimmed the Providence Journal.

SOBRIETY CHECKPOINTS TO BE HELD IN PROVIDENCE, EAST PROVIDENCE, SUBURBS

Citizens could expect sobriety checkpoints at no fewer than twelve locations through the fifteenth of the month as part of a public safety initiative, according to page 5. Dean wandered over to a wire rack of road maps and checked the first half dozen positions mentioned. They choked off most obvious exits from the city. He had to assume there'd be patrols on the non-obvious ones.

What was it Gutierrez had said in the car chase—she wanted the town corked up tighter than a tax man's asshole?

Dean replaced the map, bought the paper, and continued on his way, mind turning. Okay. Roadblocks were… not great, obviously, but manageable. He could swing this. Same plan. Just might need a little more creativity. He'd come up with something.

The route to the Autozone was short, facades of metal and glass giving way precipitously to open-air parking lots and then residential clapboard. Arriving, Dean looked on the storefront in distaste.

"Baby, forgive me," he muttered, and went inside.

He tried not to agonize over his choices too much. For one thing, though it was a good-sized box store, there wasn't much to choose from. Anyway, it was just temporary. He grabbed a quart of Castrol Classic XL to soothe his conscience on the way up to the register.

He waited in line behind a guy with a full cart and a soccer mom trying to return a battery two years out of warranty. The guy in front of him leaned against the handle of his cart gazing up at the TV playing on mute behind the cashier. It was more of that silo thing. Dean kept himself angled so the ball cap blocked his face from the security cameras and thought one-third about what the deal was there, two-thirds about roadblocks and logistics. Sammy sure knew how to make one hell of an impression on the state of Rhode Island.
Cart Guy pushed forward to replace Battery Lady, and the last face Dean wanted to see right now appeared behind the cashier and looked right at him.

Merely the sight of it sent adrenaline coursing through him. His palms sweated while he kept his eyes glued to the cash register to try to keep his face off the security camera. In his peripheral vision, he could see all he needed to see, anyway: Detective Jennifer Gutierrez standing in front of that burnt-out silo.

Cameras went off in her face while some heading about PUBLIC SAFETY STATEMENT scrolled at the bottom of the screen. What her public safety statement was, Dean had no idea with the TV on mute. It wasn't the part he cared about. Gutierrez was District 1. The silo was in District 2. He'd checked. She shouldn't be there, at all.

He advanced to the counter and paid cash for his items. Despite having seen no sign he was being followed on the way over here, his senses were on high alert. Now what? What in the hell had gotten her brought on to the silo? Were they going to try to pin domestic terrorism charges on him, too?

Now that he knew about Jacob Dorner, he could see Gutierrez's point of view. He'd shown up asking about a dead girl and her suspected murderer and tried to steal the key evidence while impersonating a federal agent. She probably thought he was an accomplice; what else was she supposed to think? And now he had stolen the evidence. Shit. He didn't know a lot about chain of custody, but he had to assume that didn't do her case any favors. Not that he laid odds on Dorner still being alive to be convicted.

But this development didn't make any sense. Dean hadn't been anywhere near the silo. He couldn't tell her what the fuck had happened to it even if she arrested him right now. Something else was going on.

The thought crossed his mind again that Sam might be safer if they separated.

He rejected it. He'd already left his brother behind once, and look how that had turned out. No. Whatever was going on here, he wasn't rolling over for this, and he sure as hell wasn't abandoning Sam.

The ceiling had a heartbeat. There was no ceiling; the ceiling was darkness, the ceiling was nothing. Nothing was also an effective wall.

Down here, it was always dark, but he could always just see. The woman was waiting.

No. She wasn't waiting. She was simply there.

The void of her face matched the void of the ceiling when she said, Some prisons you don't leave.

* * *

Sam woke. There was no violence in the waking, but neither was it the slow smear into consciousness he'd become accustomed to. It was just a little bump, like an egg being transferred from one careful hand to another.

The room was dim. Not dim like the sewer, but a gentle wash of blue and gray created by blinds of the window to outside and tall curtains over the glass wall and door. A thin dimness where before he'd been accustomed to a thick, clinging one. There was a man beside his bed.
"Hello," he said. "I hope I didn't disturb you."

Sam looked him up and down. He was about forty, wearing a lilac button-down with a dog collar. A chaplain. Sam knew his arrival was what had woken him. "You didn't," he said. His throat was very dry.

The chaplain must have heard that in his voice, because he crossed to the sink and came back with a paper cup. Sam didn't bother with Christo. Dean would have found a way to lay down protections.

"I'm Rick Cahill, I'm a chaplain here," said the chaplain, showing Sam his laminate. "How are you feeling?"

"Better, thank you."

Rick smiled. "I bet. A lot of patients say that their ICU stay was more traumatic than the events that landed them there."

Sam struggled to bring the chaplain into focus. Not the image of him, which was fine, but something in his manner. All this talk—Sam couldn't tell if it was nervous rambling or the wind-up to a pitch. "I don't really have that problem," he said.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that. Anyway. I just wanted to take a moment to let you know that the chaplaincy is available as a resource to all patients regardless of creed." The paper Sam held was today's; he'd discarded yesterday's down toward his shins, and Rick's hand kept drifting toward it before he'd stop himself. "If you do have specific religious needs, please let me know or ask a nurse to get in touch with me. I'm Unitarian, and I have colleagues from most major religions working alongside me here."

Rick kept getting distracted by the newspaper. He hid it well, but he was more interested in it than in Sam. Sam was more interested in that than in chaplaincy.

He moistened his lips. "I've been catching up on the news," he said.

"Oh?" said Rick politely.

"I read about this explosion." Sam smoothed the paper, open to Continued from p. 1, over his knee. "It says no one was hurt. That's lucky."

It was. He could appreciate how lucky now. At the time, he'd been pretty sure that whatever they were underneath was abandoned just like their prison was, and he'd been fresh out of better ideas, and—and the truth of it was, he'd stopped believing in Outside. It wasn't so much that it hadn't occurred to him that there might be people on the other side of the ground as that it just hadn't seemed real. So he'd done it anyway.

"Yes, very fortunate," said Rick.

"Terrible about all those workers getting sick, though," he said, watching his visitor.

Rick's smile flagged. "Yes. Terrible."
"Did you see any of them?"

"Excuse me?"

Sam pushed himself up a few inches. Everything ached, like he'd just had the worst bout of flu in his life. "This says three utility workers and two first responders were discharged from Rhode Island Hospital. That means they were admitted to Rhode Island Hospital."

Rick's caring smile was holding up poorly under the strain. "I suppose so."

"So did you see any of them?"

The smile was entirely gone now. "As a medical and clerical professional, I have a duty to confidentiality. I wouldn't be able discuss other patients even if I had been involved in their care."

"So you have seen them."

"I have not."

"This says they were only overnight stays. Is it common for chaplains to visit observation patients?"

"I can't speak to that."

"What happened to them?"

"I beg your pardon, but I cannot violate patient confidentiality and I cannot continue this conversation."

The chaplain was pale.

Sam considered him. He tried to consider the whole situation; it was difficult, even without all the drugs, the same way asking anything of his body had become difficult down in the dark at some point after Marian and Lindsey. But he was sure he hadn't read this man wrong. He'd been in to see at least one of the people who'd been down in the sewer. Tough blue-collar types and hardened first responders who'd seen it all, patients who'd only been in overnight. And the only way overnight observation patients got to see a chaplain was if they asked for one.

Things were deteriorating faster than he'd expected.

Rick, for his part, watched Sam from a step farther away than he'd been, frowning. "How about you?" he asked guardedly. "Any spiritual needs?"

Sam let himself sink back into the pillows. "Thank you, but I'm not religious."

At that, the chaplain cracked a smile that seemed genuine. "You don't have to be. We're here for anybody who needs us. Sometimes people find it's helpful to be able to talk through their experiences. Sometimes they just need some company while they think. You don't have to belong to an organized religion; about half the people I work with don't."

Something scratched at the back of Sam's brain.

"But it helps if they do, doesn't it?" he asked. "The people who are already religious are more receptive. Right?"

Rick rubbed at the patch of ginger beard he wore on his chin while he thought about this. "Overall,
I'd say so, yes. There's always exceptions, of course, but you're not wrong."

"How come, do you think?"

Rick seemed absorbed in the question, his earlier awkwardness forgotten. "Well, I suppose people who approach the chaplaincy from a religious standpoint already tend to see us as spiritual guides."

Sam's mind had been cloudy; just reading the newspaper had wiped him out, and following this conversation with Rick had left him with the frustrating feeling of running on fumes. Now, quietly, the world snicked back into focus. "A guide of spirits? As in a psychopomp?"

Rick's eyebrows lifted. "Well. I suppose technically you could put it like that."

Sam thought for a moment. "I do have a spiritual need, actually."

When Dean finished prepping the car and made it back up to the PCU, Hannah was at the nurses' station. She looked up as he approached and said, "Oh, good, I was hoping to get to talk to you."

Phrases like that still had the power to dry his mouth out in under a second. "Yeah?"

"I'd like to do some patient education with you before I get off shift. It's not definite yet, but I think we'll be discharging Sam tomorrow afternoon, and I know what it's like around here; leave the patient ed till the last minute and it'll get short shrift. Sam's asleep, but we can talk in the conference room."

Hannah gave him a bunch of handouts on Sam's literal care and feeding, and in lieu of their actual walking papers, walked him through Sam's meds, prognosis, and all the discharge orders they should expect. Dean could barely believe his luck. He'd been wondering how the hell he was going to steal Sam's chart with the nurses' station manned 24/7.

"It's a lot of followup appointments, I know," she finished, racking a sheaf of papers on the table, "but your social worker will help you make a plan tomorrow."

That brought Dean up short. "Our what?"

"Social worker. Tomorrow. Before discharge."

Oh, hell. The registration nurse had said something about that an eternity ago, when Sam had first been admitted. Dean had gotten sidetracked by—well, everything, and completely forgotten to come up with a plan to duck them. "We don't need a social worker," he said hastily.

Hannah didn't miss it. She really knew how to do that pin-you-like-a-bug stare when she wanted to. "You don't," she said, not a question but definitely not agreement, either.

"It's just…." Dean hunched over and avoided her gaze. "Social workers weren't always good news for us. When we were kids."

Hannah didn't acknowledge his implication directly, but her expression shifted to something more understanding. Sympathy, as always, was the antidote to suspicion. "Well," she said, "really it's up to Sam. But if it's what you both want, I'll make sure it goes in his chart."

"Thank you."

A line of people in scrubs ran past the conference room window, footfalls muted by sneakers. Immediately Hannah stood and handed over the papers. "If I don't see you, all the best. Excuse
And she was gone toward the alarm he'd spent the last three days braced to hear for Sam, but never had.

The room was dim when he went in, and Sam was zonked. Hannah had said he was off the sedation and that even his pain meds were scaled back, but that for the next week at least he probably wouldn't do a lot more than sleeping. Fine by Dean.

He settled himself into the chair, a beige clone of the one he'd been living in since Saturday, and looked at his brother. Sam was curled up slightly on his uninjured side, which had him facing the chair. Dean could see his upper body rise and fall under the blankets. Someone needed to wash his hair again. Dean's fingers itched, but he kept them to himself.

It occurred to him, not for the first time and with a familiar stab of guilt, that he really, really needed to call Bobby. He had yet to do it. For the past week he'd been too focused first on finding Sam, then on whether he was going to fucking die or not, and before that Canby's geas had prohibited it. The voicemail where Bobby reamed him out for failing to mention their FBI scam was burned in the entire state of Rhode Island (a masterwork of profanity) had been left over two weeks ago. Dean had been pissed at Bobby for disappearing, had screamed and cursed and yelled in the privacy of his own car half the way from South Dakota to Chicago, but he knew the old man had to be out of his mind with worry by now. So Dean should probably drop him a line that they were alive, if they were planning to hole up in his house. It seemed only civil.

More than that, he should give Bobby a heads-up about the kind of shape they were in. Drop a hint, at least, for Sam's sake if nothing else. Or for Dean's. He wasn't sure he could take seeing the shock on Bobby's face if he didn't give the man the chance to hide it beforehand.

He studied Sammy's face on the pillow. Later. He'd phone Bobby later. Who knew how it was going to go tomorrow, and Dean didn't want to give up a minute of this.

He rolled the chair forward. They weren't so strict about keeping clearance all the way around Sam's bed anymore; there were just a couple of feet between them. Like this he could hear Sam's exhalations over the pillow.

Dean closed his eyes and popped the footrest.

Composing his mind for sleep was when he permitted himself daydreams. Not things one might admit to in conversation, like "win the lottery" or "go on a cruise" or "buy a V12." Not those kinds of daydreams.

The kinds of fantasies he indulged in in this context tended to be at once vague and hyper-specific. Sometimes that meant women; either woman-shaped contours of imagination, soft and agreeable heat sources more than anything, or else pictures of Lisa or Cassie and some general impression of a life together somewhere just out of the frame. Sometimes it meant sickeningly detailed and banal mental movies where he fixed up and furnished a house, usually with dormer windows, always blue with a white porch. Frankly, sometimes it meant food, just a splendid mental tour of the best roadside America had to offer. Sue him. The only thing they really had in common was that he categorically could not have admitted to them and they gave him comfort.

But the best ones, the very best ones, were always about Sam.

It wasn't sexual. He had his spank-bank, both with regard to Sam and in general, and while he wasn't exactly proud of the material that was about his brother, he had no illusions about it either.
This wasn't that. It wouldn't have been half as inadmissible if it had been.

Whatever it in fact was, it was potent enough to work almost anywhere. It worked in cold cars on the side of the road; it worked in strangers' beds full of unfamiliar smells; it worked when he was in pain or too pressed by pursuit to take his boots off. It was the one thing that could take him to the warm threshold of sleep no matter where he was on Earth. It might even work in a jail cell, if it came to that.

So in place of a blanket, he burrowed down into a picture of the future. In this future, he'd gotten Sam away from here. They were in a motel room that was comfortingly familiar yet somehow also extremely nice. He'd salted the windows and doors, because a good fantasy needed touches of realism to complete the effect, and now they were safe. He had some unspecified but ironclad reason to believe that nothing could come through that door, meaning Dean could afford to let his guard down even though his brother was still vulnerable. They were settling in to sleep. There was only one bed.

This future was also part past, because that was still something good to Sam. Having Dean pressed up against him made him go loose and pliant and content. Which made Dean loose and pliant and content. It wasn't stifling to have his breath bounce back into his face off of Sam's hair. None of their limbs were uncomfortable to lie on. They were perfectly warm.

There was nothing sexual in it, because Sam didn't want that anymore and maybe never had, but it didn't matter. This was beyond all that. When Dean pressed his lips against the nape of Sam's neck, it would always exist in some other space neither of them could fuck up. It would be what lying with Lisa never quite had been.

As sleep crept in and his mind began to drift, other fragments—raw, more primitive—appeared in the mix: feeding Sam something warm, soup probably, with a full stomach of his own; Sam sighing contentedly, or maybe that was Dean; Sam lying on him, blanketing him, covering him completely, making him feel utterly safe instead of squashed. Both of them warm and loose with some impossibly potent liquor, intertwined, doing... something that he couldn't quite envision, couldn't quite conceptualize, but was perfect.

Wrapped in the greatest luxury his life had to offer, with the bitter aftertaste of knowing he'd never get to do any of it, Dean fell asleep.

* * *

He woke ragingly hard.

He went to the bathroom, where he locked himself in and wrung himself to orgasm in under fifteen seconds. After, he stood gasping over the toilet, one hand on the back of it to hold himself upright. What the hell.

No, seriously, what the hell. His heart was pounding like he'd just been running for his life, and he had no idea what he'd been dreaming. There'd been a dream, that much he knew, but it was gone. He shut his eyes as a shudder crawled through him before tearing a tissue from the dispenser and cleaning himself up.

While he washed his hands, and then re-washed them, he swallowed and tried to get his breathing and heart rate back under control. It was probably some kind of weird anxiety thing, he decided. He was pretty damn sure he wasn't hot for hospitals, so it had to be that. Shrinks were always going on about how your unconscious could do freaky shit like sublimate concern about your brother maybe dying into intense outbursts of libido. That was all.
When he felt like he could probably pass as a normal human being rather than someone who'd just frantically rubbed one out in their baby brother's ICU crapper, he cut the light in the bathroom before quietly reopening the door so as not to wake Sam with the light. The room, though always illuminated, was dim compared to the bathroom, so it took his eyes a moment to adjust and register that the bed was empty.

Dean spun. His hand went to his sidearm automatically, but there was no one in the room nor any sign of a struggle. He'd gotten a bump of adrenaline the instant he'd seen the bedclothes tossed aside, but just before he could start panicking in earnest, his brain kicked in. Sam was wearing a telemetry monitor. Hannah had told them that if he left the floor, enough alarms would go off to reenact the escape scene from *Ghostbusters*, so he probably hadn't.

Dean nodded to the staff he passed in the hall without really seeing any of them, eyes searching for signs of Sam or an explanation or an abductor while dumping everything else into a bin called "Later." Sam was on telemetry, and Sam's telemetry monitor hadn't set off any alarms, so Sam had to be somewhere on this floor and medically stable, except Dean had finished sweeping the unit and there was no no sign of him.

He turned in a circle in the hall and tried not to look like someone who was panicking. Some patients got confused and wandered off, the staff had said. Maybe Sam had woken up and Dean had been gone. So he'd gone looking for him, only he'd gotten confused and tried to go back to the ICU, which was on the same floor but more familiar to him. If so he'd have gone down the hall and hung a right past the staff lounge.

A possibility occurred to Dean. He set off down the corridor.

Cool, moist night air washed over him when he exited onto the service balcony. Lights from the other buildings on the campus shone across the gulf, big panels of greenish white in the nearer windows, more remote twinkles of gold. It was too overcast to see the moon, but there was more than enough light pollution to show Sam's outline where he sat against the wall.

Dean let the door thud shut as he ran to him. "Sammy?"

Sam jumped at the door's closing, turning his face up to Dean's in surprise. He seemed unharmed.

Dean gripped him by the shoulders, fingers digging into what he still expected to be solid muscle and finding only bone. "What the fuck, Sam?"

Sam flinched. Dean instantly felt both guilty and more pissed off. In any case, he made himself release his brother.

Squatting on his heels, innards still in chaos from the last five minutes, Dean wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Probably a solid minute went by before Sam said, tentatively, "Sorry. I thought you were sleeping."

Dean raised his head. When he'd woken up and bolted for the bathroom, Sam had already been gone. Sam had gotten out of bed in the middle of the night in the not-quite-ICU and somehow evaded an entire floor of rabid medical personnel and Dean had slept right through it. Out of nowhere, he was hit by a memory from the start of this case: waking up in their motel to Sam gone and a note on the dresser. This kept happening. He couldn't seem to stop this happening.

He should have been phoning the nurses. He definitely thought about it. But the air was cool, damp, tinged with harbor and gasoline, and if it felt refreshing to him it must've been like spring
water to Sam. It occurred to Dean that Sam was out here in a gown that tied shut at the shoulders and that it couldn't be more than fifty degrees. He shucked his jacket and started bundling his brother into it.

"Stupid son of a bitch," he murmured. Sam didn't contradict him. Dean sank down against the wall beside him and watched the lights.

Another reason he wasn't taking them both back inside, apart from being tongue-tied that Sam had gotten out here in the first place, was the realization that for the first time since he'd gotten Sam back, they had privacy. He hadn't asked Sam anything so far, really, not even when it had started to look like whatever Sam knew about that silo might be strategically relevant. He'd told himself that he didn't want to push; that it was his job to take care of this, not Sam's: Sam's only job should be to sleep as much as possible and not die. But his excuses were wearing thin. Dean had to consider, at this point, that maybe his delicacy had a lot less to do with not pushing Sam than it did with his denial.

Before Dean was anywhere close to getting his shit together, Sam spoke. "It was a ghost."

It was jarring to hear him speak a complete sentence. There'd been a few before now, but not many.

Sam shivered and Dean did not say, *Fuck this, I don't need to hear it, let's go back inside and get you warm.* It wasn't his bullshit promise to be ready to listen whenever Sam was ready to talk from the other morning that held him back, either; to hell with that, Sam was an icicle. But he found himself waiting anyway.

"Three of them were still alive."

The sentence was like the avant garde pottery Lisa's sister made: it took Dean a minute to find the handle, and even then, he wasn't sure he was holding it right. "Three of who?"

Sam kept staring at the opposite building. "Jacob Dorner. Lindsey Chase. Marian Daniels."

Dean had committed every line of the case they'd built to memory. It didn't take long to retrieve the dates each of them had been reported missing. "I don't understand," he said, because he didn't.

Sam looked like this. Sam must have been in a different place; something different must have happened to him than to the others. But Sam had said the others were alive, which meant he must have found them. But Sam looked like this.

Sam's knees were drawn up in front of him. He'd folded himself up inside his gown so that it covered most of him, but it didn't quite reach over his ankles, and Dean didn't miss the way he kept tugging the fabric down to hide them even though he did nothing else to protect himself from the cold. "It was a vengeful spirit. I never got a name. Not even when we— There's no name. It was looking for somebody. It used the sewers to move. Jacob, Lindsey, and Marian were already there when I got there."

Dean's mind threw up questions on automatic that he carefully tabled. He didn't have to ask if the others were alive now. If they had been, Sam would already have sent him back.

Quietly Sam said, "I'm sorry."

"Not your fault you got ghostnapped."

Sam wet his lips with his tongue. "Yes, it is."
"No, it fucking isn't." Sam flinched again, but Dean didn't hold back over it this time. "I know what the victims had in common, okay? I know. But that isn't you. Come on, man, you know spirits. They're insane by definition. They get it wrong all the time; they're too twisted not to. You're a hunter. Have you killed? Yeah, of course you have. To save people. It's not the same. So if you deserved that, I do, too."

Sam didn't look at him. "Not always."

"What?"

"It hasn't always been to save people."

Against his will, Dean's thoughts descended nine stories down to where he'd toed the remains of Sam's mp3 player under an Audi. He wondered how long before Sam missed it. "We've all made our mistakes. You've paid for yours."

Sam stared at his knees. "Does it count if you can't remember it?"

Dean dug his hand into his thigh. He was going to have bruises. "Yeah, Sam," he ground out. "It counts."

Don't ask that question. Don't you dare ask that question.

Sam gave no sign he'd heard him. This conversation was by far the most he'd said since he'd woken up, and Dean felt certain now that they shouldn't be having it. All of this could wait. Maybe not too much longer, but at least until morning. He should call the nurses now, before they put out a search party of their own.

"How do you know about the others?" Sam asked without looking at him.

There were several different answers to that question, the most fundamental of which Dean still didn't actually know. He went with the least fundamental. "You were right about Dorner's laptop," he said. "It— There was a video on it. The others, too. They all had something once I knew where to look."

Sam's eyes were unfocused, like he was replaying a movie inside his mind. "So you know about— You know why it was Cara, right?"

Dean remembered Jacob Dorner's desktop background, the photo of his sister gazing down into a gorge. He remembered the one of them both holding that racing boat, too, and how it had made him feel sorry for the son of a bitch. "Think I have a pretty good idea, yeah."

Sam nodded, his eyes falling down and away. "How'd you find me, anyway?"

"I, um. I found this hoodoo sort of guy," Dean said. "I had to. I couldn't crack the case." Admitting it felt like bile crawling out his mouth. "I was trying, Sammy, but I..." He trailed off, rubbing a hand over his mouth and looking up at the sky. "I got caught by the police. They ambushed me in Dorner's apartment, and I knew I couldn't help you if I was in prison, so. I had to clear out. I had to look for another way."

He risked a sideways glance at Sam. Sam was frowning at him; Dean cleared his throat. "But you don't have to worry about that part, the police part," he said. "I'm taking care of it. Got a plan for tomorrow. Don't worry about a thing. They're gonna check you out of this place the right way, just like civilian life, and then we're gonna blow this popsicle stand and go to Bobby's. Stay there as long as you like. Uh, can't get you those pancakes just yet, but in another few days you'll be able to
eat whatever you want and I'll make you pancakes every damn day for a month. You gotta promise to eat them with a shitton of butter and syrup, though."

Now Sam was staring like Dean had just proposed they vacation on the moon. Shit. Of course. God, what was Dean thinking—Sam still had tubes in him, was supposed to be on IV fluids at this moment. Dean had had infections and fevers after a wound went septic that left him feeling weak and bruised down to the marrow for weeks afterward, and what Sam had been through was worse. Being crammed into the car for a twenty-four hour drive probably sounded like Purgatory.

"Don't worry. As soon as we get out of this state, we can go as fast or as slow as you want," he promised, although he wasn't sure that would be true. There was a reason he'd stolen a full course of every drug Sam had been prescribed.

"We can't leave yet," Sam said, slowly and distinctly.

"Huh?"

"We can't leave. The job's not done."

It was Dean's turn to stare. "Sam, I don't give a rat's ass about the job right now."

"You will."

"No. I won't. You know why? For the same fucking reason you shouldn't care what some soulless dickbag who looked like you did when you weren't even around, Sam: we are paid up. When we get to Bobby's, you can tell him all about it and we'll send someone else to mop up. But we're done here."

Sam was shaking his head, trying to push himself upright against the wall and doing a piss-poor job of it. "The silo."

An echo of the lurch he'd felt when Gutierrez had appeared on TV went through Dean. "To hell with the silo."

"You don't understand. I made it worse." Sam finally got his feet under him. He stood, an entire process, with the wall's assistance and Dean spotting him all the way up. "The sewer's haunted. I broke it open. People are already starting to get sick from whatever's down there. Like... like Chernobyl."

In a book with grainy black-and-white pictures that he read going back and forth on the bus for a week when he'd been eleven, Dean had learned about the Chernobyl disaster. It had terrified him. By that age he'd already seen nightmares in waking life, but it had gotten under his skin that something that wasn't even evil could spread so much death.

Goddamn Sam for always finding every button he had even without knowing they were there.

Dean swallowed. "Take it easy, all right? Newspaper said it's probably ergotism or something. From the old grain."

"Do you believe that?"

No. He didn't believe that. That interpretation of events would require them to be lucky, and Gutierrez on his television screen was enough to tell him that they were not.

"I need to see Father Reynolds."
"Father Reynolds? Who's Father—?" Dean blinked a few times. "Are you talking about the priest from that thing with the ghost pretending to be an angel? Like, way back when?" A nod. "Sam, I know you are not up to speed on my relationship with Providence's finest, but I am a wanted man here. Very."

Sam just looked at him, eyes huge.

"Son of a bitch," Dean muttered.
wrong! do it again!

Chapter Summary

The priest spoke first. "Why are you here?"

Sam imagined saying the most accurate answer out loud: I'm here to kill you.

Chapter Notes

Thanks, as always, to my redoubtable betas, Dimeliora and Caranfindel. They did what they could for this chapter and are not to blame for its shortcomings.

Since this story started posting over four years ago, a quick pre-episode pre-chapter recap: Father Reynolds, whom Sam briefly encountered in chapter 3 (and sort of encountered in 16), is from the S2 episode Houses of the Holy. This was the first time we—and Dean—learned that Sam prayed daily. The MOTW in that episode was the ghost of Father Thomas Gregory.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dean closed the trunk and surveyed the car. She was as ready as she'd ever be; now there was only the waiting.

Assuming no setbacks, Sam was slated to be released this afternoon. That left Dean to spend the hours before their final run refining his strategy. Precisely where the refinements were going to come from, he was not yet certain. Prayer seemed like a valid avenue. He tried it. Cas didn't answer, any more than he had the hundred times Dean had shut his eyes and bowed his head to his knuckles in Sam's ICU room.

Maybe that was a good thing, though. Because the fact that Castiel had left them high and dry removed what little guilt Dean might otherwise have felt about getting out for good after this. If Cas really needed them so bad, he'd have fucking been here when his brother was dying.

He couldn't believe he'd let Sam talk him into staying here a second longer than necessary. Never mind Gutierrez, although he absolutely did; there was no reason in the world, much less Rhode Island, good enough for them to be delaying the start of their extended vacation. It was bullshit. Sam hadn't even made a good argument for it not being bullshit. All he'd done was sit there, looking pale and pathetic, and Dean had caved like a chump.

He knew there was something Sam wasn't telling him. Obviously there was something Sam wasn't telling him; he'd been gone for a month and had spoken maybe a hundred words altogether since Dean got him back, so it stood to reason there were any number of things he hadn't told Dean,
because when the fuck would he have done so. It stood to reason that whatever was behind the desperation Dean had seen on his face out on the roof, he'd had neither time, privacy, nor energy to voice. It wasn't as though Dean himself had given Sam more than the most needful of need-to-know.

Speaking of.

Dean flipped open his phone and scrolled through the contacts. Early morning light painted the building he leaned against gold; upstairs, Sam was going through what would hopefully be the last shift change. Dean stopped at the first entry under C, hesitated for a moment, and hit dial.

Canby picked up on the fourth ring. "Hello?"

"Canby, hey. Uh, Dean Winchester here." He cleared his throat. "You said to let you know how whatever mojo you worked ended up working, so... calling to let you know."

Canby made a pleased noise. "Admit I didn't expect you to actually do it."

"Yeah, well." Dean hadn't, either.

"Go on."

"The person who called me at your place had some information, uh, about the case we were on when Sam went missing. Then there were all these... I don't know what to call them. Signs, I guess. Every time I'd follow one of them I'd get more information about the case. I worked the case, and I followed the signs, and I got closer and closer until the last one led me to Sam. He's, uh, he's doing okay now."

"Hmm." Canby sucked on his teeth. "Interesting."

Dean jammed his free hand into his pocket and surveyed the empty courtyard. "Tell me one thing," he said. "That ritual you did... who'd you sacrifice my heart to?"

Canby was silent for a long moment. Dean might have thought the call had dropped, except that he could hear the faint creak of the old plastic landline phone as Canby shifted it. When he did speak, he sounded genuinely disappointed. "I really would have thought you'd have figured that out by now, Dean."

He hung up.

Sam took a deep breath, braced himself, and pulled the curtain aside.

Sunlight cracked against his eyes. He didn't let himself close them, but the jolt in their deep muscles made them water, and it took several seconds for the generalized impression of brightness to resolve into blue sky.

The barrier between him and that was about to go away. The hospital had been a kind of no man's land; it didn't matter if he couldn't reckon with it, because it wasn't like it was real life in here. It was real life out there, though. He'd better get it together. They'd already sent someone in to talk to him about managing his anxiety.

He flexed his fingers in the light from the window. They were disgusting. They were disinfectected, he knew that, but they were far from clean. Black outlined the fine fissures of his calluses, traced the lines of nail beds and knuckles, remained, despite close clipping, under the nails themselves.
And this after who knew how many bathings with those wipes. The same went for his feet, knees, and elbows, and what stuck in the creases served as a reminder of what had been everywhere. He wondered what he'd looked like when they cleaned him off the first time. He wondered how many people had seen, how many doctors and nurses and orderlies had been there to smell it.

The nurses called the blackness stains. Don't worry about it, they told him; they're only stains. This was presumably meant to convey that a stain had no substance but rather was caused by some intangible mechanism, and that the stains did not, therefore, contain dirt, shit, urine, blood, mold, ectoplasm, rats, cockroaches, or dead people.

Had he been a nail-biter, these hands would have cured him of the habit, he thought. Then again, maybe not. Habits could be difficult to resist, as much as or more so than addictions. He imagined if he had been a nail-biting addict rather than a demon blood addict and felt nauseated.

The door slid open. "Okie-dokie," the nurse called. "Ready to get out of here, Sam?"

Dean was with her, swinging a plastic bag full of clothing and grinning. To anyone else, he must have looked like he was elated, but Sam could see the tightness around his eyes and it triggered another squeeze around his chest. Precisely how bad was it going to be, this police thing?

The nurse—new this shift; Sam hadn't retained her name—said, "So everything looks good on your numbers. Dr. Ejeta has signed off on your discharge and we've been over your prescriptions. Do you have any questions for me right now?"

Sam didn't bother to inventory his body, or his memories of instructions he'd received about caring for it. "Not really."

"All right, then, let's get you into real clothes."

Dean started rummaging through the bag he held. "Found you some stuff," he said, and Sam heard the unspoken clause: that might actually fit you.

On the rumpled bedclothes, Dean laid out boxers, shirts, one of their hoodies, and drawstring sweatpants. No jeans. This was sensible. Jeans wouldn't stay up right now without a belt and a certain amount of gathering. Sweatpants were absolutely the more practical garment. Anyway, it wasn't like Sam was going to be out in public; he had exactly one appointment today, and they would have to see him regardless of his state of dress. Irritation sawed through him anyway.

The nurse was tugging the curtains across the glass facing into the hall. Dean held the boxers out to him across the bed; Sam looked from the underwear to his brother's face and froze up.

Dean frowned at him. "Sammy? Okay?"

The hospital gown was loose, billowy. They'd found him an extra-long one that came down to mid-calf and the bed provided him some extra coverage so long as he kept it between him and the rest of the room. The sleeves only came to his elbows, but the cut of the garment, which was approximately that of a painter's drop cloth, afforded plenty of extra fabric to make the rest of him disappear into.

He felt every centimeter of exposed skin acutely.

He also still hadn't moved. Dean got this look of realization on his face, which meant he'd misunderstood entirely and that Sam was screwed. "I'll help you change."

"No, thanks."
Dean's expression took on shades of concern, confusion, and patience wearing thin. "Sam, it's nothing I haven't seen before."

"Isn't it?" Sam bit out.

"It's no problem," the nurse said cheerily. "Here, I'll help Sam get dressed while you go bring up the car."

Looking lost, Dean let her take the boxers and headed for the door. Sam ignored him when he glanced back at the threshold.

An orderly took Sam down in an elevator between an elderly woman in a suit that smelled of talc and a hospital administrator with a paunch. About two floors went by before Sam did a double-take. The hospital administrator wasn't wearing ID. Sam couldn't remember his name, but he knew that the man was happy to be taken to lunch by pharma reps and liked to order wine when they did.

Sam looked away quickly. If he pulled on that thread, more memories that weren't his would come, he was pretty sure. Better not to tug on anything.

By the time the orderly parked the chair at the curb in front of the building, Sam's head was already throbbing. Bright light and movement crowded his peripheral vision, which he dealt with by focusing intently on his shoelaces. At least he had shoelaces. If either of them had owned carpet slippers, Sam had a feeling Dean would have brought those up instead.

He was aware that he was being unfair. Dean was only trying to make this easier for Sam, and it wasn't his fault none of it was working.

Sam was absorbed in the toes of his thrift store Nikes when he heard the Impala's engine. Instantly and involuntarily he relaxed. Something in him was programmed to respond to that sound, even if the response was not always a positive one any more than the sound had always meant escape. He looked up.

And very nearly choked.

Dean glided the car into the curb, cut the engine, and climbed out. The orderly nudged the chair down the pavement till it was aligned with the passenger-side door, and Sam looked at his brother and at the car and back at his brother.

Wings of holographic vinyl branched over the car's hood. A not-quite-matching set scrolled over the trunk, and flames, again holographic, bloomed down the side of the car to form the outline of a wing cocked in flight. The grille was obscured by a hot pink car bra.

The orderly stood right behind the wheelchair, effectively muzzling every part of Sam but his eyes, which wanted to know, Are you fucking kidding me?

Dean gave him a bright, shiny smile and opened the door. The decal flared rainbow in the sun. "Ready to go, Sammy?"

"Nice car," said the orderly, while Dean stood aside to let him guide Sam into the passenger seat and Sam rewarded the man for his service by not ramrodding the wheelchair down his throat.

"Thanks," said Dean. "Watch your head, Jolly Green."

Sam's door closed. Dean came around to the driver's side, got in. His door closed. The engine turned over, the car pulled away from the curb, Dean waved to the orderly, and they glided down
the ramp and away from the hospital.

As soon as they merged into traffic, it burst out of Sam. "Please tell me you're joking."

"We needed camouflage," Dean said defensively.

Sam was almost—but not quite—speechless with incredulity. "Did you just put the automotive equivalent of a mustache and a fake nose on the fucking car?"

"They didn't have a lot in stock!"

"Oh, my God."

Dean jabbed a finger at him. "Don't start."

"This is your plan?"

"It's temporary."

"We are doomed, Dean. We are most definitely going to jail."

"Hey, you got a better idea, I am all ears."

Sam stared out the windshield at traffic. Two minutes ago, the sight would have fucked him up in the brain pan; now, he had no mental space to spare for existential crises, because the police were looking for them and he was pretty sure Dean had said something about roadblocks and they were utterly screwed. "I don't believe I'm going to be arrested riding in a cut-rate pimpmobile."

"Cut-rate?"

On cue, a patrol cruiser appeared in approaching traffic three blocks away. Sam froze. Dean, sitting there in the driver's seat in a ball cap and sunglasses, tightened his grip on the wheel. They kept driving, the cruiser kept coming, and both cars entered an intersection at the same time. The cruiser, riding the bumper of a citizen doing exactly the speed limit, showed no flicker of interest. Both cars continued on normally.

Dean let out a breath.

"See?" he said, only two seconds too late for it to come off properly. "Misdirection, Sam, misdirection. You forgotten all the magic lessons you got out of that book back when you were a pizza-faced pipsqueak?"

"That's not going to hold up in a roadblock, Dean."

"I'm working on that part."

Sam started to respond, but then he caught sight of the rear window in the mirror, where Calvin was relieving himself on the New York Yankees. He held his head in his hands.

"Look," Dean said after a minute, "let's just get to this fucking church to start with. Shouldn't be a problem, all the roadblocks are on the way out of the city, and hey, no fuzz sticking to us yet. We can hash this out there."

One thing, at least, was that the adrenaline injection had Sam feeling more alert than he had in weeks. "There's only one way this works."
Dean's eyes cut to him in the rearview. "Okay," he said, guarded.

"Swapping out the plates isn't going to be enough. Swapping out the car isn't going to be enough. You know it isn't, Dean."

The steering wheel creaked under Dean's fingers as he turned them northwest. Halfway to the church, now, and their mirrors were clear. "Be part of the solution, Sam," he said with forced lightness.

"Exactly."

Dean tossed a look toward the passenger seat. He frowned for a second. Then he sent another, entirely different look Sam's way. "No."

"I hope you cleaned out the trunk."

"Hell no."

"It's our only option, Dean."

"You just got out of the ICU kiddie pool, and the only reason they or I let you out of there was so you could sleep someplace nobody was gonna be sticking a thermometer up your ass every fifteen minutes. I'm marginal on taking you to a goddamned church, Sam; you think I'm gonna let you run roadblocks?"

"You are if you want to get past them. Look, you changed the plates. They don't have the VIN. There's only one thing they can use to prove this is the same car, and that's you."

"This is stupid and we're not discussing it."

"Why not?"

"Because look at you, Sam! You were half dead! Do you get that? I thought you were going to die half the time. I sat in your room and listened to some family next door bawling their eyes out while grandma flatlined. I watched them shoot you full of Ativan over and over because that was what it took to keep you from ripping your lines out. Enough, Sam. Two days ago, you couldn't even talk, you were so fucked up. You slept eighteen hours yesterday, and I ain't calling you lazy, 'cause you needed it. You went to the john this morning using your IV pole for a cane and you didn't stop shaking for ten minutes afterward, so stop trying to sell me that you're ready for a fight!"

Sam rounded on him. "I'm not made of glass, Dean, you have no idea what I've done," he hissed.

Dean stared at him, mute. Habit had him flicking his gaze between Sam and the road, but Sam could read the shock there plain enough.

Sam curled into the passenger door and stared out the windshield so he wouldn't have to look at his brother's expression anymore, gouging at his thighs with nails too short to do any good.

They drove in silence for a few blocks. Soon they'd be coming up on the church.

"And he'll definitely be there?" Dean asked, eyes on the road.

Sam burrowed deeper into the hoodie. He wanted to ask for the heat, didn't dare. "The chaplain said he gave Father Reynolds my message, and that his answer was to use the back door."

"What'd you tell him?"
"Just that we were coming."

"Wouldn't have thought we'd be on his Christmas list."

"We're not."

"And you're sure we're not about to walk into Sunday mass or something?"

Sam turned slightly. "I thought you said it's Wednesday." He hated the uncertainty in his own voice.

"It is, it's just—" They turned, and suddenly the church's stone bulk was looming over them. "I already regret this," Dean muttered.

There was a small parking lot around the back of the church. It wasn't especially private, but at least there were a few bushes offering some cover for the car. A beat-up station wagon was the only other vehicle in it.

Sam got his door open, but not fast enough; Dean was already coming around to help him. Sam gritted his teeth and swung his legs out the door. His sprained foot throbbed. "Stop, Dean."

"Stop being a little bitch," Dean fired back. He reached in for him.

"I said, get off!"

Sam planted both his palms on Dean's torso and shoved. It wasn't all that hard, but it was clearly more than Dean had expected and he bounced sideways into the door. Sam watched his expression shut down. Part of Sam wallowed in misery at that. Part of him was still seething.

"Hurry up, then," Dean said, clipped. "We can't afford this detour as it is."

He still stood there until Sam was on his feet and then matched his pace to Sam's gimp one the whole way across the parking lot. It made Sam feel furious and impotent, which at least distracted him from the scale of the world around him. Dean held the door.

Inside, Sam led the way to the nave, feeling Dean at his elbow the whole way and mentally daring him to try to hold it. They emerged into the north transept. It was now well into afternoon, and the sun pierced the rose window in the west wall: Mary, Queen of Heaven, the hub at the center of twelve figures arrayed like spokes in a wheel, each wrapped in six wings. Our Lady of the Angels.

Sam spotted Father Reynolds at a lectern by the altar rail, paging through a lectionary in an ornate brass case. He cleared his throat. "Father Reynolds."

The priest hastily shut the lectionary and turned like he'd been waiting, striding toward them. "You came," he said. "When I spoke with Father Cahill, I half thought—" He broke off, staring at Sam in plain shock. "What happened to you?"

Dean moved between them. "It's rude to stare, Padre."

Sam stepped out from behind his brother. "You got my message?"

"I got a phone call from a hospital chaplain who told me that Thomas Gregory was coming to see me. That seemed like quite a coincidence, when I'd seen a ghost just a month ago. Or so I'd thought." Ignoring Dean's warning, he scrutinized Sam comprehendingly. "What's going on?"

"It's a long story," Sam said. "Can we talk? Privately?"
Dean's head snapped around to him.

Father Reynolds looked between them. "Certainly," he said, sounding anything but.

A muscle worked in Dean's jaw for a minute before he bit out, "Gonna take a breather," and headed for the door. The slam echoed through the nave.

Sam didn't allow himself the luxury of regret. Dean couldn't be here for this.

Father Reynolds gestured him to one of the front row pews and sat gingerly beside him. He looked haggard. Sam remembered encountering him a month ago, as he'd walked to Jacob Dorner's apartment. He'd been struck then by how much the priest seemed to have aged. He noted there was no sign Father Gregory had ever been replaced.

The priest spoke first. "Why are you here?"

Sam imagined speaking the most accurate answer: *I'm here to kill you.* "I need your help," he said.

"It... it isn't Thomas? It can't be Thomas, surely."

"No. No, he's gone. I'm sorry I used his name; I couldn't think how else you'd remember us."

Father Reynolds nodded, *apology accepted* rather than *nothing to be sorry for.* "What, then?"

Looking around to buy himself a few seconds to craft an answer, Sam did a double-take at the stained glass Annunciation over the sanctuary. He recognized it. He'd never so much as glanced at it on the only other occasion he'd been in here, yet now he recognized it right away. One of the others had been visited Our Lady of the Angels, at some point, maybe decades ago. Not even as a congregant, he didn't think; he'd have been drowning in memories in here otherwise. Just that someone had been in once and had liked this stained glass window enough to remember it, even though none of the context was there.

Father Reynolds followed his gaze; behind the salt and pepper beard and the new lines on his face, his expression smoothed out into tenderness. "The Yes that changed the world," he said softly. In the window, Gabriel proffered a lily to a Virgin whose demurely lowered face was blank. "Without Mary's willingness, we would never have had salvation. We are redeemed by the divine, but only an open human heart could pave the way for that redemption."

"She became a vessel."

Father Reynolds nodded. "According to God's plan."

"I used to wonder what that would be like. Giving yourself over to something completely, I mean. I thought it sounded amazing. I thought it sounded like peace. You'd never have to worry about where you fit or what your purpose was ever again, because you'd *be* a purpose."

The Gabriel in the Annunciation knelt with a self-effacement that Sam seriously doubted was true to life. "I wanted that. It scared me how bad I wanted it. Giving away all your choices, never having to think again: if that's not the ultimate in walking out on your responsibilities, what is? So I was always fighting against it. Fought with my father, fought with my brother, fought with my family's whole lifestyle. Fought as hard as I could all the time, because deep down, I knew what I wanted most was not to fight at all. I wanted to surrender myself to something. I was so ashamed of that."

Father Reynolds studied him. "And now?"
The window's colors were kaleidoscopic. There were no associations attached to it—it wasn't part of a memory of a crime, just a memory from the rest of some killer's life, perfectly mundane. Sam wondered how many more of these land mines were seeded throughout the city, waiting for him to step on them and feel the slither of too much inside.

He left the window. "Years ago, you asked me how I knew how to summon Father Gregory's spirit and what he was. I told you that my brother and I, it's our job."

"And I told you to get out."

"Yeah, I didn't think you believed me."

"I didn't know how to," said Father Reynolds. "There was the truth of what I'd seen—I never doubted that. How could I, when I'd been the one to send Thomas on?" He glanced at Sam. "But it took time to carve out an understanding for myself. It took years."

"You still have your faith, though?" Sam asked. "It's important."

Father Reynolds took a moment to reply. "I do. But there are times when I wish that I didn't." He watched Sam narrowly. "Why, what does it matter?"

Sam carefully lined up his thoughts. "I was abducted recently," he said. "The same day I saw you, as a matter of fact."

Father Reynolds looked appalled. "I'm so sorry. It—it wasn't connected, was it?"

"Connec—? Oh. No, no. Seeing you was a coincidence." At least, Our Lady of the Angels being close to Jacob's apartment had been coincidence. Sam wandering a block and a half out of his way to pass it had not been, but since he couldn't even explain that to himself, he saw no need to mention it. "No, we came here for something else."

"For another spirit?" The priest looked distinctly unnerved to be saying it. "We didn't know what it was when we came, just that people were vanishing. But yeah. Yeah, it turned out to be a vengeful spirit." Sam pressed his hands between his thighs; there was too little warmth there to penetrate them. "This one wasn't like the one you saw. I know that Father Gregory being shot right here at the church was awful, but this ghost—this one was created by something a lot worse. And it was taking people who'd done terrible things."

"What sort of things?"

"Mainly murder." Sam swallowed. "Again, though, not like Father Gregory's. The spirit wasn't looking for killers so much as it was looking for people who'd done things that... changed them. Inside. One of them killed someone by accident. She even felt bad about it, horrible, actually; it followed her her whole life, and she did volunteer work trying to prevent more crimes like hers. But she still killed someone, and she left him to rot where he fell, and she got away with it because she could get away with it. People thought she volunteered because she'd been a victim herself, and she was too much of a coward to admit the truth. That was what the ghost saw: how her victim, in the end, just mattered less to her than her comfort. This spirit took sadists and rapists and serial killers, and out of all of them, this woman was the only one it actually hated. It's why it kept her alive."

He waited for Father Reynolds to put it together. It wasn't too long. "And then it took you?"

Sam smiled brittlely at the threadbare runner on the floor. "Yes."
"You were a fellow captive, among these killers?"

"In a sewer, yeah. For a month, apparently."

"That must have been horrible."

It wasn't the reaction Sam had been expecting. Father Reynolds regarded him with wide eyes and no hint of disgust. "It must have been horrible for you," he said again. His gaze ran up and down Sam's body. "Are you all right?"

It took Sam a moment to get his tongue untied. "Father, I wasn't the odd man out down there," he said. "I've done things—trust me. I've done my share."

"Everyone does things. I took part in the Tet Offensive before I was a priest; I know a fair amount about doing things. Have you committed these people's crimes? Have you committed rape? Serial murder? Hit and run?"

"No." Sam almost choked on the word. "What I did was worse."

"Worse than rape or murder? Don't be self-important." Father Reynolds examined him. "Some might say that it demonstrated a certain integrity, to come to these people's aid regardless of their crimes," he said.

Sam stared at his fingers in his lap. "I didn't know about the others, is the thing. Up until the end, I thought they were just… normal people. I talked to them, trying to solve the case and get us out, but I couldn't figure out what they—we—had in common. I think—I think one of them knew." He recalled how smoothly Jacob had manipulated him, capitalizing on Lindsey's instability to cast himself as the reasonable one, the ordinary one, the trustworthy one. "No—I think all of them knew, and one of them tried to tell me. But I didn't get it."

"Then perhaps you weren't as alike as you think."

"It's not that I think we were all exactly alike. I know we're not. I don't know exactly how we were the same to the ghost. That is, I know what she saw, but I don't know what it meant."

"Well," Father Reynolds said after thinking for a while, "I wasn't there. But you said that your ghost looked for people who'd been changed by their deeds, not for the deeds themselves? Then perhaps what you had in common isn't guilt so much as a belief in your guilt."

Sam digested this. "A lot of them didn't feel guilty. At all."

"I said a belief, not a feeling. Or maybe guilt has nothing to do with it. Despair is more a belief rather than a feeling, too. Anyway. I'm sorry for what you've been through—whether you like it or not. I want to help however I can, and not just because of Thomas. Would you take a blessing? Or if the Sacrament of Penance would help you, I'm happy to hear your confession." He spread his hands to indicate the empty church and added wryly, "As you can see, I have time."

Sam braced his elbows on his knees and let his head hang. Fatigue kept coming in staticky waves, fuzzing him out, and he just wanted to finish this. "Thanks, but I can't receive any sacraments. I'm not Catholic."

Father Reynolds paused. "I'm a bit confused," he said. "You said you needed my help—I assumed as a priest."

"We do. Just not for me."
"I don't understand."

"The ghost's still down there. And I think… I think I made her worse." Sam looked at Father Reynolds. "You need to put her to rest. Quickly. Please."

The priest blinked. "Me? You said you and your brother do this work regularly."

"None of the things we would normally do to lay a spirit to rest will work. There aren't any remains. Her body's lost; her name's lost, and she's barely even a story. Sometimes you can satisfy a spirit by giving it what it wants, but the only thing she wants is impossible. Even if she somehow did get revenge, I don't think it would matter. It'd never be over for her."

"What, then? And why me? All I know about ghosts is what you told me."

Here went nothing. "Because she had faith, real faith, and it was used against her in the worst way possible. First someone violated her. Then they convinced her that what happened to her means she'll never be worthy of anything good. Now she can't move on. The problem is, she never stopped believing. If she didn't still believe in God, she wouldn't be so terrified of being abandoned by Him."

If Sam had been as moral as Father Reynolds seemed to believe, he would have left it there. He'd have let what he'd already told him—that someone was dangerous, in pain, and in need—be enough, and let him decide to step up or not freely on that basis. But Sam was not moral. He was selfish and corrupt where it counted.

So he said: "She remembers a priest. He wasn't the one who hurt her, but she died when he set her free and he left her there. He ran away. He forgot his vows and abandoned her. She believed in him, and he left her lying in filth where no one would ever find her. And no one ever did. No one ever will. She rotted there. She remembers roting. She knows what it's like to become sewage."

He twisted on the seat of the pew to face Father Gregory. Now for the appearance of frankness. "That's why when you go down there, she's going to try to kill you. And yeah, she's capable of doing it. Now more than ever."

Father Reynolds looked overwhelmed. Fair enough, probably. It wasn't often someone asked you to walk straight into something potentially fatal. A funny thing Sam had noticed, though: if you were very blunt about telling people they weren't likely to make it out alive, they paradoxically became keener to do it.

"So, I should, what—persuade her, like I did with Thomas?"

"I know how it sounds, but yeah." Sam rubbed at his face. "Give her the rites she never got. Tell her that she can let go. Tell her that it wasn't her fault, that she wasn't tainted by what happened, that God won't reject her for something that was done to her. Tell her she deserves better."

"Why would she believe me when it was a priest who abandoned her in the first place?" Father Reynolds said incredulously.

"For the same reason that she's so afraid. She still has faith."

Father Reynolds didn't say anything, or take out his rosary or clasp his hands, but when he stared up at the Annunciation again for over a minute, Sam realized that he was praying.

Finally he turned back to Sam. He looked even older. "There's no one else," he said. "Is there?"
It was the wrong question. There was no one Sam could have sent in Father Reynolds's stead, but there was someone he could have sent with him. The only reason that person wasn't going was that he thought Sam was too fragile to leave and that he didn't believe, really, in the danger posed by a spirit that had only ever killed its victims passively. He was available.

But when Sam had merged with the ghost, it had been a two-way street. The same way he knew how her blood had felt sliding between her breasts, how scared Brendan Whitmore had been his first time, and how frantically Marian Daniels had used Windex on her car's grille, the ghost knew exactly who Dean was and what he meant to Sam. The risk was unacceptable. Sam had failed her, Sam had hurt her, and Sam owed her, but she couldn't have Dean.

She could have Father Reynolds instead.

He looked the man in the eye. "No, there isn't."

Father Reynolds nodded. He looked somber but calm. "Then my pastoral duty is clear. What should I do?"

Sam spent the next thirty minutes or so telling Father Reynolds anything that might keep him alive long enough to do what needed to be done. The priest would have to approach from underground—the way Sam had left—so Sam told him where he could find sewer maps, and advised him on the uses of rock salt and iron chain. It might work. It would have to.

Sam wrote a number on a hymnal flyleaf and tore it out, causing Father Reynolds to wince. "You can reach one of us at that number," he said. "Would you, um—?"

Father Reynolds took the paper and folded it away. "When it's finished, I'll let you know," he said. "If I'm still alive, anyway."

Sam's turn to wince. Of course, he really didn't have a right to.

Somewhere in the building, a door opened and shut—the back door they'd come through. Sam tensed, listening for Dean's footsteps. He heard them, but no sooner had he begun to relax before Dean appeared from the door of the nearer transept, face grim.

"Time to go," he said.

Sam stumbled slightly when he climbed to his feet. "What is it?" he asked, at the same moment that the door to the far transept also opened.

A woman came through it, spotting Sam and Father Reynolds right away. She started to ask, "Are you Father Joseph Reyn—?" and then she caught sight of Dean.

Several things happened almost simultaneously.

Suddenly the woman's sidearm was out. "Don't move! Let me see your hands!"

Dean complied with a face that made profanity redundant.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Sam said, automatically moving between Dean and the gun.

"Would everybody—"

"Sam, get back—"

"Police, sir, I need you to step away—"
"—please remain calm?" finished Father Reynolds.

The woman—detective; Sam registered a shield on her belt—was staring at Dean. Even with her gun drawn, she still looked more surprised than anything else.

"I'm Father Reynolds, and this is my church," said the priest. "What is going on here?"

The woman stowed her shock, face closing down into a professional slab of granite. "Detective Jennifer Gutierrez, Providence PD. I'm taking this man into custody."

"Oh, come on, what for?" said Dean.

"You want a list?" she snapped.

"Uh," said Sam. "I mean. That's generally how it works."

"Who the hell are you?"

"Sammy, get the fuck out of the way."

There was a bite in Dean's voice that made Sam look at Gutierrez again, at her rather than the gun she held. Underneath the bad cop veneer, she was nervous. No, not nervous, exactly, but on edge, seriously rattled, and edgy cops with firearms were never good.

The odd thing was, he could have sworn she'd already looked like that before she saw Dean.

"This is a place of worship," said Father Reynolds, "and I've had no threats from these men. Surely we can all talk about this like civilized human beings."

"That," Gutierrez said flatly, not taking her eyes off Dean, "is not a civilized human being."

Dean was talking, Father Reynolds was talking, Gutierrez was talking back to them. Sam fuzzed out again. Leveling her sidearm had pulled Gutierrez's blazer and shirt cuff up a few inches. There was something there, but he couldn't make it out.

He took a step toward her. "What is that on your arm?"

She shifted her aim to Sam seamlessly. "Stop or I will fire."

"Back the hell off of him, he look like a threat to you?" Dean sounded pissed, which meant that he was terrified.

"Both of you get down on the ground," said Gutierrez.

"Rhode Island state law requires police to inform suspects being detained of the charges against them," Sam said in a rush. At least, he hoped it did; it was state-by-state and he couldn't remember if Rhode Island was on the list. "So if you want to take him into custody you have to say why."

Gutierrez looked at Dean for a minute. "John Doe, alias Dean Barrett, alias David Mason," she said, "you are under arrest for impersonating law enforcement, for evading police and resisting arrest, for reckless driving and reckless endangerment, for theft of government property; for conspiracy to commit murder, and as an accomplice in the murder of Cara Pryor."

The name hit Sam like a hammer to a gong. His head rang with layers of memories: poring over a police file by the light of his laptop screen and running behind her on a dirt track, blood pumping; her deer-in-the-headlights smile in a corporate headshot and her lips, bulging fat and hypoxic.
Ratcheting a belt tighter around her neck. Petechiae bursting in her eyes. He staggered.

"Sammy!" Dean started toward him.

"I'm okay, I'm—"

"Don't move."

Dean slowly put his hands back in the air. "Fine," he said. "Let him go and I'll go quietly."

"What? Dean, no!"

"We knew it might go like this, Sammy. Father, look after him, would you?"

Sam couldn't believe he was hearing this. "What the hell, Dean? You're rolling over for this?"

"Hey, it's fine," Dean smiled at him. "At least I can finally do something for you."

Sam rocked like Dean had backhanded him.

"Well?" Dean said. "Let's get this show on the road."

Fuck that. "If he goes, I go," said Sam.

"Identify yourself."

"I'm his brother."

"Great," she said tersely. "You're under arrest, too. Father, do you have a phone on you?"

Father Reynolds straightened. "No."

"Where's the nearest one?"

"In my office."

"Go call the police. Ask for Detective Tony Ofria."

Father Reynolds looked between the Winchesters and Gutierrez, and then he headed toward the door behind Gutierrez without another word.

Sam didn't waste time feeling betrayed. He glanced around the church, trying to remember the time he'd broken into the crypt here all those years ago, looking for anything they could use in the five minutes they probably had before this place was awash in trigger-happy cops. At his side, Dean was trying to persuade Gutierrez to take the deal, but with a desperation that said he knew they had no leverage.

As a result, they were both fairly distracted when Father Reynolds crossed to the lectern in front of the altar rail, picked up the brass-covered lectionary, walked up behind Gutierrez, and hit her very hard with it over her wrists.

She cried out in sudden, sharp agony and dropped the gun. Sam heard a bullet ricochet off stone, and from above there came a faint tinkle of glass.

He looked up. Gabriel was missing his lily.

"I really cannot tell you," said Father Reynolds, "how little I like guns in my church."
Gutierrez was bent over holding one wrist in her other hand, panting.

Father Reynolds kicked her gun away and turned on Dean, expression thunderous. "Now you," he said, "and I know you have one!"

Dean showed his hands again, this time with an okay, okay posture, before he took his Colt out of his waistband, set it on the floor, and slid it away.

He sidled up to Sam. Sotto voce, he said, "Really threw the book at her, huh?"

His grin wilted under the glare Sam turned on him.

Father Reynolds put the lectionary under his arm. "Now that we're able to have a conversation, I'd like an explanation."

"It's a mistake," Sam said, because this had to be the cop who'd found Dean in Jacob's apartment. "We were just trying to solve the case, and she got the wrong idea, like you did with Father Gregory."

"You lied to me," Father Reynolds said sharply. "You and your brother, or at the very least you conveniently failed to mention being wanted by the police. I'll listen to her first." He turned to Gutierrez. "What are you doing here? What's going on?"

Gutierrez straightened slowly, still cradling her arm. The brass book cover had to be heavy, but her reaction seemed extreme. "What's going on is I've got a crater in the old dockyard full of corpses," she spat. "I'm supposed to figure out who put them there without causing a city-wide panic, but the rumor mill's already in overdrive. So I hear from a cop who heard from a firefighter who heard from an EMT that she picked up a guy who crawled out of the sewer the same day somebody blew up my silo. I go to the hospital hoping to have a chat, where apparently I've just missed him." She speared Sam with a look. "Know anything about that?"

With a queasy certainty, Sam knew how she had found them here, and the car had nothing to do with it. He'd brought this down on them himself.

The same line of reasoning had evidently occurred to Dean. "Thought you said chaplains had strict confidentiality, Sammy." The lightness of his tone made Sam feel worse.

"They do," said Father Reynolds. He frowned at Gutierrez. "Among the strictest. Extraordinary circumstances should be required to break it."

"I don't know what the hell this is," Gutierrez said. "I don't know who you psychos are, or what you told this man, or what kind of conspiracy you're cooking up, but I came here for answers and I'm getting them." She looked Dean up and down. "This was bad enough for you when it was just about that sick twist Dorner, but this has gone so far beyond that. My partner knows where I went. You can kill me if you want, but you're not getting out of this. Not a second time."

"If I wanted to kill you, I'd have done it before you drew on me," said Dean. "And I seriously doubt you're ready for answers."

Sam tried to think. Gutierrez had come here alone and she'd looked pole-axed when she'd seen Dean, so she hadn't come here looking to make an arrest. So what had she expected?

And why did she look so ill?

She was still rubbing her wrist. "Father, check her arm," Sam said.
'I agreed to help you, not to take your orders.'

'Please, just—her right one.'

Father Reynolds pursed his lips and looked to Gutierrez. 'Do you mind?'

Her glare at Sam was more suspicious than angry. After glancing at the brass slab Father Reynolds still held, she tugged up her cuff.

There was definitely something on her arm. The mark was dark, but it didn't look like bruising: bruises didn't blister. On the other hand, burns didn't turn tar-black.

They weren't usually shaped like handprints either.

'Frostbite,' he said out loud.

Gutierrez jerked her head up. She'd gone white. 'What?'

'I couldn't figure out why those people had been hospitalized,' Sam said. 'It was frostbite. The chaplain recognized it when he saw you, didn't he?'

'How do you—?'

'You saw the ghost. She touched you.'

'No. That was—it was a hallucination, fucking fungus on the grain, or something, it wasn't real.'

'Casper's high five looks pretty real to me, sister,' Dean said. 'Let me guess: it got real cold all of a sudden? Lights started flickering? Hairs you didn't know you had stood up like incoming lightning?'

'And you would have felt something,' said Sam. 'In the pit of your stomach. A moment when you knew something was wrong. Really, really wrong.'

Gutierrez hesitated. 'I served a no-knock warrant that went bad, once,' she said. 'Just before everything went to hell, there was this feeling. Being there feels like that except it gets stronger the farther you go, until—' Her face crumbled, just for an instant before she controlled herself. 'We can't get people to go down there, anymore. I can barely keep guys on the cordon. I swear it's getting worse.'

'Then you have to stop it,' Sam said. 'Father Reynolds can help. Get him into the silo so he can.'

'You're not crazy,' Dean said. 'You're not as smart as you think you are and you're a giant bitch, but you're not crazy.'

Gutierrez stared at them. 'Who the hell are you people?'

Father Reynolds set the book on the altar rail behind him. 'I saw something once, too, that I couldn't explain or deny.' He nodded at Sam and Dean. 'That was when I met them. They told me that this—spirits, and more—is their work.'

'And you believed them?'

'I didn't have a choice. And I get the impression that you don't, either.'

Gutierrez eyed Sam and Dean. 'So you're the professionals,' she said.
"Yeah, kind of," said Sam.

Her face twisted. "Then why the hell is that thing there? Why didn't you stop it?" She shook off Father Reynolds's hand. "You were down there, weren't you? Weren't you? If you know so much, then why aren't you stopping it?"

"Lady, back off," Dean snapped.

"Because I can't." The admission cost Sam. "I don't have what she needs. All I could do was make it worse. If you want to stop it, this is how." He put every ounce of persuasion he could muster into his voice. "Think about what you saw down there, what we both know you saw. It's only a matter of time before someone else sees it. Or worse. Do you want that?"

She hadn't looked afraid when she thought they were going to kill her, but she held Sam's gaze now and cringed.

"I have to do this," Father Reynolds interrupted. "It's my duty as a priest, but there's no sense risking two lives instead of one. You've told me the methods of protection. I'll manage."

Out of the corner of his eye, Sam saw Dean's eyes flick to him. Sam's guilt only fueled his anger, though. Like Dean had never sacrificed anybody to protect Sam.

"No. No way in hell I'm letting a private citizen in there," said Gutierrez. "Whatever it is you're talking about, I'll do it."

"You can't," Sam told her. "But you can get him in there and watch his back. With both of you, you have a chance. Finish it. Give her what she never got when she needed them: justice and faith."

Gutierrez was visibly struggling. "I can't just... I can't just do this. You're multiple felons. Both of you, I'm pretty sure. I can't just let you go and—" She broke off and gestured inarticulately at Father Reynolds.

Dean spoke up. "We're not the bad guys here. And what you saw, what we do, you can't explain it to a judge. You wanna explain it to a judge?" Gutierrez's lips were clamped in a line. Dean looked right at her. "This isn't about the ghost, for you. Right? This is about Cara. Dorner's dead in that hole. That's how you got on the silo. And she's why you went after me."

Sam tried to turn the memories away, this time. He didn't want to see any of it again.

Gutierrez's hair was askew and she had an ugly gash at her temple. As Dean talked, she pulled tighter and tighter at her ponytail with a clenched fist, like a habit she couldn't repress anymore. "A year." She shut her eyes, laughing and shaking her head. "For a year, I knew she was dead, but I couldn't prove it. Not until that computer—the computer you stole. The one you broke chain of custody on," she said bitterly.

"Jennifer." It was startling to hear Dean call her by her given name. "I watched the tape. I didn't know."

Her nostrils flared. "Like hell you didn't."

"Come on, you're smarter than this. Why would I steal the hard drive if I knew what was on it?"

"To protect Dorner."

"What for, so I could turn around and kill him? You are saying that I killed him, right?" Sam
sucked in a breath. Dean kept going. "Except you know I didn't. The oldest bodies in that collection went missing fifteen years before I was even born. We didn't take anybody. Not Jacob, not Cara, not any of them. You know who did, and it wasn't us."

"You impersonated at least two kinds of cop, destroyed a murder case, and led me on a car chase," said Gutierrez. "How can I possibly believe you?"

Dean looked at the ceiling, tallied this, and winced. "Okay. How about this. You never found Cara's body, so correct me if I'm wrong, but I'd have to be crazy to tell you where to find it. That's the chip killers cash in for a plea deal, isn't it? Well, I'll tell you for free."

"Convenient how I can't just nip out and confirm it."

"You won't have to. You're gonna know I'm telling the truth."

She narrowed her eyes. "Fine. Spit it out, then."

"Cops are supposed to be methodical; you guys look through the pictures on Dorner's computer?"

"Obviously."

"All of them?"

"Yeah."

"Recognize any of them?" Wary confusion on her face. "His apartment," said Dean. "Those photographs on his walls."

Seven black-and-white architectural photographs, seven segments on a body like a butcher's diagram. *She's in fewer pieces than I am. I'm in fewer pieces than you are.*

Sam still wasn't sure of the middle term.

He could see Gutierrez testing the information Dean had given her in her mind, putting it together with what she knew about Jacob and everything else. She shuddered.

"Detective, look," said Dean. "We've only been trying to clean up something in your town that you didn't even know was there. We've done our part and we've paid. Plenty. All we want to do now is leave."

He looked at her and sighed. "The hard drive is in the Laurel Leaf motel, room 114. Use it to give her parents some closure, if you think it'll help, but Dorner's gone. I'm sorry you didn't get him, but you didn't. You can't help Cara." He tipped his head toward Father Reynolds. "Help someone else instead."

She stared at Dean. All her emotions had been beaten out of her face, leaving behind a bruised look.

Sam held his breath. Father Reynolds hovered on the periphery, watching.

Gutierrez shifted her focus to Sam. "Jacob Dorner's dead," she said. "His body was crushed in the rubble, but the ME said that happened after." She didn't accuse him directly. She just asked, "How'd he die?"

This much Sam could give her. "He died choking."
She looked at them a moment longer, expression unchanging. "Route 44 and Olney, seven-thirty to eight o'clock," she said at last. "There'll be a coverage gap."

Immediately Dean was at Sam's side, taking his elbow and pulling. "Thank you," he said.

Sam looked at the Gutierrez standing next to Father Reynolds. He'd engineered this. If anything, this was a better chance than he'd hoped for when he came here, but now he found himself paralyzed with regret.

"When it's over, text that number I gave you," he told Father Reynolds. "Or if you have questions about the salt and iron, call. Or—"

"Get the hell out of here before I change my mind," said Gutierrez.

* * *

Gutierrez had parked next to them. Dean keyed her car.

They'd just gotten into the Impala when an alarm went off on Dean's phone. "Shit, shit, shit," he muttered, twisting and digging for something behind the front seat.

"What is it?"

Dean came up with a grocery bag. "You've got a schedule. For meds and stuff." The bag held a number of unlabeled prescription bottles and a six-pack of Ensure. Visibly bracing for a fight, he added, "And you gotta drink at least half a bottle. Sorry, I don't make the rules."

Sam looked into the bag. He remembered the discharge nurse mentioning something about a schedule, but he had no idea what it was. The thick sheaf of papers under them probably held the answer, but just the thought of reading them made him feel tired. He fought down his humiliation enough to say, "Thanks, Dean."

He took the pills. He drank the Ensure. He managed not to throw any of them up.

"All right," Dean said when they were back in traffic, in the brisk tone that he thought reassured Sam but actually reassured Dean. "We'll find a parking garage and get off the street until it's time to make for the intersection. You can get a couple hours in the back, I'll keep an ear on the scanner."

"Okay."

Dean looked sidelong at Sam's acquiescence.

The sun was warm through the car window. Dazzling, too, after the church, and everywhere was motion and noise. It had all seemed so overwhelming just an hour or so ago; it still was, a little, but it was welcome, too.

"Dean…” Sam watched the light flare into rainbows along the garish vinyl wings on the hood. "With the wall… I just want you to know that I'm not scratching at it anymore."

Dean shot him an indecipherable look. "You sure about that?"

Sam frowned. "Well—yeah."

Dean drove on for a minute in silence, his tight grip on the steering wheel gradually relaxing. "That's good. Glad to hear it." He cleared his throat. "Uh, not trying to look a gift horse in the
It's too big a risk."

"Yeah, it is, but that never seemed to stop you before. You always just said you needed to know. You don't care anymore?"

"Of course I still care." He thought about some of the trickles he'd gotten from behind the wall, like drinking demon blood while soulless and finding it had no effect. "But nobody's purified by suffering."

Dean followed a lumbering bus with an ad for Sony laptops plastered over the back for about a block and a half before he turned in at the parking garage it passed. "Amen to that," he said finally.

* * *

The light was going purple by the time they left the parking garage and turned west. They worked their way toward the roadblock site by side streets, keeping close to the good throughput of the main road but out of sight of its traffic.

Dean timed their final approach to the intersection for the dead center of the half hour they'd been quoted. Sam kept the atlas open and the scanner tuned, watching the passenger side mirror as they waited to find out whether Gutierrez had changed her mind.

About a block away, they passed a yellow SOBRIETY CHECKPOINT AHEAD sign. It had been dragged up on the sidewalk and turned to face an empty yard. No cars were stopped waiting in a queue. As the sun slipped below the horizon, they passed the Providence city limits doing thirty-five behind a Ford Taurus.

Dean kept them on Route 44 after that, on a direct heading for the western state line. They did meet a state trooper car going over the Waterman Reservoir, but dusk was well advanced by then, the Impala visible to oncoming traffic mostly as a flare of holographic wings in headlights. Scarcely half an hour after the checkpoint, they passed a sign informing them: Connecticut Welcomes You. Sam watched the reverse side of it grow small in the side view mirror, where beneath the words Welcome to Rhode Island – The Ocean State, a large golden anchor read HOPE.

Another twenty miles on, signs indicated an upcoming junction for I-395 north and south and Route 6 and I-84 west. Dean met his eyes in the rearview mirror. Without discussion, they blew past the exits for west and took the one heading north.

Chapter End Notes

- It is not the case in every state that police must tell you why you're being arrested at time of arrest; there is no federal law to that effect, but laws requiring it exist in some states. Sam got lucky; RI does seem to be one of them.
- Inspiration for the rose window described in Our Lady of the Angels was actually a Christ the King window by this stained glass studio. The actual
church where they filmed "Houses of the Holy" back in S2 is quite handsome; the (United Church of Canada presbyterian) congregation is doing just fine and is apparently quite progressive. I dunno, that tickled me.

And all that's left for the ending is these two dumb brothers.
i have seen the writing on the wall

Chapter Summary

The end.

Chapter Notes

Content warning: forced/extremely dubcon intimacy.

Thanks one more time to Dimeliora and Caranfindel, who are both better storytellers than I'll ever be but helped make this story a better one regardless. And thanks to everyone who's been reading and commenting. I wrote it for fun and because brothers, but having people to tell it to has certainly made it a lot more fun.

Look, ma, it's a completed fanfic! Wait. No. NO, DON'T LOOK, MA, DON'T LOOK

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They made it to Enfield, New Hampshire by eleven that night. Dean kept going.

"What are you doing?" Sam asked.
Dean hung a right onto Route 4 west. "Better not to bed down in the same town."

"Yeah, thanks, I know that, but why do we need to check in first? Let's just get this over with."

Dean put on his indicator and didn't make eye contact. "Tomorrow," he said.

Sam ground his teeth and looked out the window.

On the way up here, Dean had kept telling him to get some sleep, but as drained as he was, Sam couldn't. Seeing memories that weren't his everywhere was too distracting. As a consequence, he could feel his mood deteriorating along with his focus.

They pulled in at a motel in Hanover barely half an hour later. The place was a lot nicer than their regular. So that was how it was going to be.

"Stay here," Dean said when he got out to go check them in. Sam couldn't tell whether he said it in solicitude or to deliberately piss Sam off, or which option actually did piss him off more.

Either way, he'd have followed Dean in just to spite him, but he genuinely felt like shit. His ribs hurt. His ear hurt, fucking rat, should've eaten it the first time. Parts he hadn't so much as scratched hurt. He'd told Father Reynolds to text him when it was done, if he was alive, and there was nothing yet, so his stomach hurt. Anyway, he could picture the night clerk's face if she got a good look at him right now. She'd probably decline to give them a room.

He must have managed to space out, because he jumped when Dean dropped back into the driver's seat with a neutral, "Number twenty-three."

Sam knew standing up after sitting in the car for hours was going to suck. The best he could do about it was brace himself on the roof of the car and wait for the head rush to subside. Nothing about the process required Dean. Sam wasn't actively fainting, he wasn't bleeding out, he was not in any distress whatsoever, so of course Dean was suddenly right there, dropping the bags he'd snatched up before Sam could take any of them, reaching out to grab him.

Sam didn't snap or shove this time. He didn't have the energy. Instead he shuddered, from the soles of his feet to where he held onto the car's roof, like his entire body was trying to crawl away from Dean's hands.

He knew by his brother's pause that that was worse than if Sam had hit him. Whatever. If Dean didn't want his feelings hurt, all he had to do was back off.

Inside, Dean took off his shoes. Sam didn't. "It's only half an hour back to the cemetery," he said, still standing. "We don't have to wait a whole day."

"We don't have to do it tonight, either."

Sam got a surge of the irritation he'd thought he was too tired for. "I'm not dying, Dean."

Dean stopped with one boot off and glared at him. "Yeah? Well, you're not the only one who's had a long fucking day, either, and unlike you, I didn't spend yesterday asleep. Considering you're not the one who's going to be doing all the work, you don't get a vote."

Dean finished shucking his outerwear, running a hand over his brow like it was hot in here rather than frigid, and rummaged in the plastic bag that held Sam's meds and what passed for now as Sam's meals. It wasn't already time for more, surely? That alarm on Dean's phone hadn't gone off yet.
What Dean came up with was neither pills nor Ensure. It was wound wash and bandaging. The bottom of Sam's stomach dropped out like a rotten floor.

"C'mon. Let's get them changed and we can both hit the sack."

"I'll do it."

Dean's expression did not improve. "Sam, I really don't have the patience for this."

"You don't have to," Sam said, holding his hands out for the materials. "It's all in places I can reach."

"Sam, what is your malfunction? Just take your damn shirt off, I'm not going to molest you, Christ."

"I can change a fucking bandaid, Dean."

"Bandaid?" Dean threw the bandages aside and stood. "You got a hole in you that's a direct line to your heart, that shit can't get infected. And I wouldn't trust you to change an actual bandaid right now. Maybe if you'd actually slept in the car like I fucking told you to." He made a grab for the hem of Sam's hoodie.

Sam evaded him. At least, that was what he tried to do. What actually happened was that he jumped back, encountered the bed, and went down on his ass on the floor. Fire erupted in his ribs.

Instantly Dean was hovering over him, white-faced. "Sammy? Shit, Sam—"

Before Dean's reaching hands could connect, Sam got out, "Was I like this when you got back from Hell? I was, wasn't I? You should've fucking shot me."

Dean stared down at him. Sam stared back even though he wanted to turn over and vomit, willing Dean to drop it already.

Dean broke first. He levered himself up, scooped the wound care supplies off the bed, and threw them at Sam's feet. The door slammed behind him.

The sound of the Impala's engine never came. Sam both resented that and was relieved.

In the bathroom, he bit his lip as he considered the hoodie. His ribs were already inflamed from the fall; now he had to get all the layers off, clean the slice Jacob had left him with and his collection of catheter site pockmarks, then get everything on again. Probably the least arduous thing that had been required of him in weeks, but he felt inordinately sorry for himself anyway. It hurt a lot more than it would have with help, not that he'd have admitted it at gunpoint.

He got himself redressed and into bed just before Dean came back. There was no conversation this time, Sam already had his eyes closed, but the key being tossed onto the dresser, Dean moving about the room, the brightness of the overhead light all bashed right through the fog of exhaustion Sam was swimming in. He couldn't sleep in here. He didn't want this. He wanted the dark and security of his room, where no one could bother him.

As soon as he thought it, the wanting curdled. *His room.* He was thinking of that place as *his room* and wishing himself back there. Dean was here, with him, under this roof, and Sam wanted him away and himself back in the place where all he'd wanted had been Dean.

What the hell was wrong with him?
Dean moved into the bathroom, leaving the door ajar and light and sound spilling out. Sam found himself waiting, coiled up tight, both in case Dean came out to fuss over him and for him to do it. On high alert in case Dean didn't stay away and in case he did.

Twenty-four identical hours lay ahead of them before they would finally go to the Enfield Cemetery. It was much too long. He couldn't stand the tension, and he especially couldn't stand the misery of hating himself for it.

One of his unlabeled prescription bottles held more Ativan. Sam was bitterly reflecting that he couldn't knock himself out with it though—because if he overslept, Dean might well ditch him and go to the cemetery alone for Sam's own good—when he remembered the alarms on Dean's phone. Sam wouldn't sleep through anything. Dean was going to wake him up to take antibiotics and choke down precisely measured doses of Ensure no matter what.

Dean was still in the bathroom, brushing his teeth. Sam flung the covers back, raided the medicine bag like a rat, and took enough Ativan to make the time go away.

* * *

Shivering. Cold. He had something over him, like he'd finally been able to reach out and somehow bring the pipe's concrete close around him, but it was too light.

Something beeping. Not like the hospital's beeping; tinny and shrill and prepackaged by Nokia. Dean's voice: What th— F’ck. Right. Come on, Sam, meds. Come on, don't make this a bigger pain in the ass for both of us.

Sam?

Then: Sam? Sammy, what the hell did you take?

So Sam opened his eyes and said, clearly, "I'm fine, Dean, calm down." It would be hours before he remembered this and realized he'd only dreamt doing it.

Hand shaking his shoulder, hand patting his cheek, frantic hand at his pulse. Exhalation. Pills rattling in a plastic bottle and Dean muttering, c'mon, c'mon, how many—and then another big breath out. A long silence except for one long, wet sniff.

The mattress dipped, and Sam realized blurrily that he must not have gotten up and gone to the bathroom a moment ago, after all. Dean's voice came from way too close, although it was quiet. "I really hate you sometimes."

Sam slept for most of the day. That was a blessing, because it let Dean sleep for most of the day. God knew he hadn't gotten much sleep during the night.

Four Ativan weren't really all that much for a guy Sam's size. Not for a guy the size Sam used to be, anyway. That was probably all that had happened: Sam had tossed them back like he still weighted a couple hundred pounds, because why wouldn't he? Wasn't like he'd spent the last two days calculating dosages off a chart from the new number the hospital had provided. He probably didn't even know the new number.

Round about four-thirty in the afternoon, when Dean had been awake for a robust hour and a half, Sam stirred. There was a rustle of bedclothes as he turned, then the heavy puhhh of Sam's breath against the pillow, and then the slow tapering off of all sound and movement as he dug back down into sleep. Then it all halted in the negative sound of someone snapping awake.
Sam pushed himself upright, face starkly white. "Dean?"

The defensive irritation Dean had been marinating in since last night vanished. He rose from the table. "Right here."

Sam looked around the room, disoriented. "Where's the phone?" His voice was wrecked; Dean had let him get dehydrated again, shit, shit, shit.

Dumbly, Dean handed him the backup burner from the nightstand. Sam shook his head once, hard, like a dog with something in its ear, and visibly struggled to focus on the phone. "No word from the good Father yet," Dean said when he realized what Sam was checking for. Sam's shoulders slumped.

Sam sat in the nest of covers, still in the hoodie he'd never taken off, staring at the bedspread without seeing it. He looked like something rejected by the USDA. The clerk at the Shell where Dean had stopped to peel the decals off the car had caught sight of Sam stumbling into the men's room and muttered about fuckin druggies; Dean had thought about reaching across the counter and slamming the man's face into it, but he'd had a point. Sam's hair was sticking up, greasy at the roots and straw-like at the tips. With the scrub he was sporting, he looked like a bona fide, train-jumping, bottle-in-a-paper-bag wino. He was starting to smell like one again, too. Something was going to have to give, but Dean wasn't sure precisely how or what when Sam couldn't do it himself and clearly preferred at least one set of walls between him and Dean at all times.

Despite the blatant discontinuity in their lives between their arrival in Providence and their departure from it, Dean's mind tended to skip over the intervening events, like folding a map so one stretch of highway met another a hundred miles away. But every once in a while, how different Sam looked, acted would hit him all over again, and the whole month would come back up in his mind like a bad meal.

That was when he wanted to know everything so bad it hurt.

Answers weren't what he wanted—not the way he'd wanted someone, anyone (and Sam would have done) to answer for all of this while he'd been tearing up the nation to find his brother. He didn't want facts, though he thought he was owed some. It wasn't even so much that he wanted to know what had made Sam like this.

He wanted to know absolutely every corner and detail that belonged in that month-long gap the same way when he'd been twenty-two, he'd wanted to know what every piece of clothing Sam owned smelled like. He wanted to know the way when he'd been fifteen, he'd stolen a bite of every food item Sam had put in his mouth in every diner, school cafeteria, gas station, or motel continental breakfast they'd passed through; eleven at the time, Sam had thought Dean was doing it to be a jackass, and he hadn't been wrong but he sure hadn't understood, either. Dean wanted to know the way he'd once sat outside a party in Palo Alto and seriously considered going in, finding the girl he'd watched peel her shirt off in a window with Sam, charming her into his car, and fucking her very, very thoroughly.

The feeling was worse since the church. He wanted to demand to know, What did you do each day? and What did you talk about? and What percentage of the time were you afraid? and What were the little pleasures, I know there were some, you can't fool me, I know how it goes. No; he didn't want to demand it. He shouldn't have to demand it. Sam had already told some random priest he'd only met once, had told him specifics and secrets and personal reflections; Dean was sure he had, Sam had been in there forever. Dean deserved to know at least as much as some priest. He was entitled.
He wouldn't have to come off as obsessive. He could pitch it healthy and reasonable, something like, *Just talk to me, Sammy, please. I just wanna help. I can't do that if you won't talk to me. It's my job, right? Let me do my job.*

Sam's below-the-belt jab from last night came back to him: *Was I like this when you got back from Hell?* And he thought, *Yeah, actually, you kind of were.*

Slowed by the lingering effects of the Ativan, Sam's fingers began to pick at the fancy hobnail bedspread. "I'm sorry," he said.

For half a second, Dean's only thought was, *Well, Jesus Christ, don't actually tell me.*

But Sam only said, "About—" and flopped his hand inarticulately.

Dean could've filled in the blank any number of ways. *Sorry for keeping you in the dark, sorry for scaring the shit out of you last night, sorry for everything you went through, God, it must have been awful for you, too.* But more probably Sam meant *Sorry for being a fucking brat,* which was confirmed when he continued, "One minute I think I'm fine with it, and then….

Dean managed to say, "It's okay," and mostly mean it.

Sam's picking at the bedspread petered out. "Sometimes I feel different."

Careful not to ask the question too fast, Dean said, "Different how?"

Sam shrugged without meeting his eyes.

Dean sat on the other bed. "You went through something, Sam. That'll make you feel different, yeah. But that's all it is. There's nothing wrong with you. You're going to be fine."

Sam exhaled, then sort of laughed, a little self-deprecatory, a little embarrassed, and shook his head. "Yeah. Yeah, you're right. I'll feel better when I get back into hunting."

It was probably a good thing that Sam was looking anywhere but at Dean, who began intelligently, "Uh—actually, I was thinking—"

The burner phone buzzed.

Sam's wide eyes jumped up to Dean. The phone buzzed a second time; Sam thumbed it open and stared at the message there.

"What, what is it?" Dean said.

"It's done," Sam said after a minute. "But, uh. That detective, Gutierrez. She hit her head pretty bad. She's in critical condition."

Dean absorbed that. He wouldn't forget exactly what critical condition meant anytime soon. "Shit."

"Yeah." Sam put the phone back on the dresser. Dean caught the guilt on his face, though, and felt certain that this outcome was still better than the one Sam had expected.

Dean stood. After a month of missing his brother like a limb, he really, really wanted out of this room. It wasn't the acute need to get out before he punched Sam's newly fragile face in that he'd felt last night, more of an itch. Either way, he couldn't act on it. He couldn't leave Sam right now.

It would all be fine when they got to Bobby's, he told himself. Being in a familiar place would chill
Sam out, which would chill Dean out. Except maybe they'd just make a short stop there, because Bobby was hunter central and Dean didn't need Sam getting any ideas. No worries. He'd enlist Bobby to help him find a place he could take Sam—still hadn't called the man, admittedly, but he was working up to it—and then they'd go there and once there weren't any more distractions, it would be smooth sailing. They'd get Sam built back up again, and maybe work on the place because anything Bobby found would need it, and by the time Sam was himself again they'd both have adjusted, downshifted, and would be ready to kick back and live the well earned good life. They'd never go through this again.

"We've got hours before dark," Dean said. "You should get some more sleep."

From Hanover to the cemetery was about a half hour drive. The closer they came, the more memories Sam got, like running into spider webs. They stopped at the gate for Dean to read the plot map posted there in a little kiosk. Sam could have found the grave without recourse to any maps, but he had no idea how to tell Dean that.

He had no idea how to tell Dean about any of this.

When they got out, Sam turned in a slow circle to take in his surroundings. Enfield Cemetery lay at the end of a small lane overlooking Masacoma Lake and incorporated a number of smaller boneyards dating back to earlier centuries. The sky was overcast, but their lantern and the modest light pollution from towns nearby showed the outlines of headstones, walkways, trimmed lawn, and swaying grasses toward the periphery.

It was the first time he'd been outside. That was, it was the first time he hadn't just been briefly outside to transfer from car to destination. Even here, the space was blank of people and screened off by woods, like Dean was regulating the rate of expansion of Sam's world as carefully as he did Sam's nutrition.

The plot they'd come for was modern. A wreath of high-end but still artificial flowers had been placed within the last couple of months, and the area was well kept. Sam and Dean stood side by side to read the headstone:

**Bethany Rose Dorner**  
*March 4th, 1979 – July 19th, 1997*  
*Beloved Daughter and Sister*

Dean installed Sam under a nearby tree with both their sleeping bags and a thermos before getting a rock bar and a shovel out of the trunk. The thermos contained hot water. Of course it did. No caffeine, no unvetted nutrients. Its warmth was welcome, though.

Particularly here.

It wasn't so much that there were a ton of memories in the cemetery—Jacob had only been back a few times—as that with nothing else to distract from them, they crowded in. Their banality was the most disconcerting thing about them. Here was where Jacob had stood during the funeral. Over there was where Aunt Louise had been buried, and as children they'd come here with their parents to visit her when both of them would rather have been on the water. Back that way was where Bethany had climbed partway up a maple tree, careful of her funeral dress, to retrieve the minister's stole when they'd buried Grandfather Fenn on a windy day. Jacob didn't even hate her, in the memories where she was still alive.
The rhythm of his brother shoveling solo was soothing like a lullaby and humiliating all at once. When Dean cracked open the vault with the rock bar, workmanlike as if he did this all the time—because he did, they both did, or anyway they both had—Sam knew he should be grateful to him for taking care of this when he physically couldn't have himself, but gratitude was not the feeling uppermost. At least, he supposed, he wasn't blank inside around his sibling.

Dean glanced up at him before opening the coffin, like he was waiting for permission. Sam hated the implication that carried that this was his baby somehow, like Dean had had to be talked into this instead of pointing them here without Sam even having to ask. Maybe Dean hadn't known Jacob like Sam did, but he'd seen something, somewhere, that made him care. Since he couldn't say so, Sam just nodded.

When the lid came up, he abandoned the sleeping bags and the thermos and the tree and knelt at the edge of the hole. He ignored the shivers that immediately set in. The fine drizzle was a cold rain, now, dampening the sailor suit dress she'd been buried in like she'd been a child. Dean used extra lighter fluid.

He brought out the lighter and hesitated a moment before offering it to Sam. "You want to?"

Again that implication that this was for Sam. It wasn't. It wasn't even primarily for Sam. But slim chance of ever having Dean admit that. "Go ahead," he said without looking up.

"All right. Well." Dean shuffled awkwardly at the edge of the grave for a moment. "Uh, Bethany, hopefully you're long gone, but if not... adios. And sorry."

He dropped the lighter. The grave went up.

The grief hit Sam out of nowhere.

They watched her burn. The firelight limned Dean's figure where rain and sweat mixed on his skin, showing the muscles of his arms and his t-shirt stuck to his torso. Sam got another memory then: not one of Jacob's, but his own of the first time their father had allowed him to come on a salt and burn. John had still done the lion's share of the digging, but Dean had worked as fast and as hard as he could, striving to impress, striving to prove manhood at the age of fourteen. Sam had been exiled to the perimeter with a shotgun. That salt and burn had been anticlimactic, too. Probably that was why their father had chosen it for them. John in charge of Dean in charge of Sam.

Wet clay soaked into Sam's ass where he sat on his heels. "Do you ever wonder what it's like for twins?"

Dean didn't answer immediately, didn't turn or look at him. He picked up the rock bar, stowed it in the car, and came back before he finally said, "Apparently it sucks."

Sam smiled humorlessly. So Dean had been thinking about it.

The flames bit into the wood of the casket and strengthened.

"It was over rowing times," Sam said. He didn't want to contain the knowledge. "She beat him that day, just by a few seconds. But he'd been thinking about it for a long time anyway, because her scholarship was bigger."

He stared into the fire like it could white out his mind's eye. "She never knew. She never had any idea what he really thought of her, the kinds of things that went through his mind—"

Dean sucked in a breath.
"He came back here during Christmas break of his freshman year with his whole family." Sam saw, from above, the crease of trousers someone else had pressed breaking over wingtips in the snow. "Parents and grandparents and cousins. He cried"—It hadn't even been hard.—"and they all comforted him. That was when he knew he'd gotten away with it."

Ask me. Don't ask me. Ask me. Don't.

Ask me.

When the flames started to die down, Sam worked his hand into the soggy pile of clay. It could only improve what was under his nails. He dropped the handful of earth into the grave and got up.

Just lifting the spare shovel out of the trunk got his body's attention. Working it into the clods Dean had already broken up was difficult; within three shovelfuls his grip was wobbling.

Dean looked as though he'd have liked to say something, but fuck him. He'd passed on his opportunity to talk.

* * *

Another thing about graves: Sam used to enjoy digging them. Sort of. He could work up a sweat doing it, and that always made him feel better even if his muscles ached afterward. He knew it was pseudoscientific nonsense, but it felt like sweating purged him from the inside out, bringing everything to the surface so he could wash it away. Now no matter what he did, he found himself exhausted long before he could sweat.

"You get first shot at the bathroom," Sam said. "You're the one who did all the work."

He was hoping a few minutes flat on his back while Dean showered would give him enough energy to at least wipe himself off with a washcloth. But Dean, untying his boots by the door to keep the mud off the carpet of this too-nice motel room, just said, "Nah, go for it."

So much for that.

Gripping the bathroom sink, Sam managed to toe off his shoes without having to deal with the head rush of reaching down to unlace them. He took a moment to figure out what he needed to remove next. Even though they hadn't expected Bethany to show up, he'd gone out dressed normally. No gun, because his Taurus was gone and he hadn't wanted to get into choosing one of the spares, but he'd strapped on a knife out of habit. So: next step, belt and knife.

He drew his belt out of the sheath's loop to free the knife and let his muddy jeans fall to the floor.

Then he remembered that he hadn't brought a change of clothes in here. Shit. That meant he had to get these clothes off, wash himself, get them all back on again, go back out into the room, stay awake until he heard Dean get in the shower, and get these clothes off again so he could put on clean ones and finally, finally go to sleep.

Sam stared dully at the Bowie knife in his hand. It was good but nothing special. There wasn't much more exotic than a bear it would actually kill.

He unsheathed it and tested the edge. He'd been the last one to sharpen this. He wasn't sure how, when he and Dean both used basically the same techniques because they'd both learned them from the same place, but somehow they could always tell which one of them had sharpened what. It had just always been like that.

Down in the sewer, he'd never actually seen the knives he made very clearly. He'd adapted to the
half-light, so much so that while he'd been down there, images had seemed normal, but when he accessed the memories now he realized how incomplete all of them were. Like partially developed photographs. Nothing like the glitteringly precise object he now held.

He pushed up his left sleeve. The skin of his forearm was grayish, something like newspaper stock, tacky to the touch. He angled the blade against the underside of his arm.

He was so tired he had no idea he hadn't locked the bathroom door.

Sam registered the door swinging open and Dean coming through it. He didn't process the look on Dean's face until after he'd moved, and Dean moved so fast Sam would have had difficulty following it even in peak condition. Then Dean's fingers were clamped around Sam's fist, and together they were driving the knife into the wall.

The movement yanked Sam forward and to the side. He lost what balance he had and found Dean's face suddenly inches from his own.

"What the hell, Sam?"

Dean's expression had removed language from Sam's brain. When he didn't answer, Dean's face contorted and he shook him, sending pain through Sam's ribs. "What are you doing?" Dean snarled.

Sam scrambled for purchase in this conversation. "Dean, no. I wasn't."

"Then tell me what you were doing!"

"Nothing—"

"You fucking asshole—"

"Just— Dean, remember Yellowstone?"

It was clear from Dean's face that he had no idea what Sam was trying to say, but at least he was listening. "We spent all that time in the woods," Sam babbled, "and we were always dirty, but Dad showed us how, with knives, remember, we sat up at night when he was gone and it was just us and used the knives, remember?"

Dean stared at him until his face crumpled. "Sammy, that's a good memory for you?"

Seeing that look on his brother's face made Sam want to disappear into a hole.

"He lied to us. What's wrong with you?" Dean was holding the back of Sam's head tightly by the hair, and it hurt.

Sam couldn't say, We were together. Not when that obviously hadn't been enough to make it good for Dean.

Shaking him once more, almost gently, Dean shoved him down to sit on the toilet seat. He turned away from him, hand coming up to wipe over his mouth, and Sam saw him take a deep breath.

After a second, Dean turned back to him. Sam was suddenly aware that below the waist, he was clad only in boxers and socks. He pressed his knees together and hunched on the toilet.

Dean saw him do it and something dark went through his eyes. "Sam, look at me."
Sam drew in on himself further and looked at his feet on the blinding white tile, mind looping in faulty circles.

Dean approached until he stood barely a foot in front of Sam. "I said look at me."

Sam looked past him instead. He'd never make it to the door.

He heard the tub start.

Dean reached for the hoodie, then the t-shirt. Sam fought, but it was blind, feeble, and pointless. The cold hit him as soon as they were gone. He shuddered when Dean went to his knees and hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his boxers, but even if it would have stopped anything, the gesture was lost in his shivers. Dean pulled them inexorably down and off.

One sock was peeled off, then the other. Sam looked everywhere around the room that didn't have Dean in it, on the brink of hyperventilation, but when minutes went by and Dean still hadn't moved, he finally looked down.

Dean was holding his foot and staring at it. The color of its sole against Dean's hand seared itself in Sam's brain. As Sam watched, Dean picked it up and put his mouth on the arch.

It wasn't a kiss. Sam didn't know what it was, but it wasn't that. Dean just pressed his lips there for what seemed like a very long time. Sam's autonomic nervous system short-circuited at the faint moisture of them.

Finally Dean set his foot down. He put one hand on each of Sam's knees and pushed.

Sam fought again, muscles shaking against the pressure, but he didn't stand a chance. Dean kept going, and when Sam was completely exposed, sat looking at all of him like it was an act of violence. Sam felt the prickle of snot along his sinuses. Dean brought his mouth down on the skin of his inner thigh, and Sam lost his last tenuous thread of control.

It still wasn't a kiss. Not even when Dean put his mouth next to Sam's limp cock and stayed there, breathing damply through his nose. Certainly it wasn't when he moved to the outside of Sam's hip, or the plastic film on the cut over his ribs, or his belly, which was sucking in and out uncontrollably as Sam hyperventilated. Some mucus slid off Sam's chin and hit Dean's hair. Dean held his mouth against his side near his armpit, the apex of his shoulder, and his pectoral, and the only time it was a kiss was when he pushed to his feet and pressed his lips to crown of Sam's head.

The water shut off. Dean manhandled him up and over to the tub without a word.

Hot water hit his feet, then his ass. The sensation was simultaneously remote and unbearably intense, much like Dean's mouth had been.

The water scalded Sam up to his neck. He felt his balls shrivel and float. The angle made the mucus push uncomfortably back into his face. Sounds were all a little too big, even small ones, like when he had a fever. His eyes were open, but he wasn't really seeing anything. If he didn't see it, maybe it wouldn't be happening.

Dean crossed to the wall, yanked the knife out of it, and returned. He wiped the drywall off of it with his shirttail. Sam was naked in the water and Dean was fully dressed. This was what vivisection felt like.

"If you want a bath with knives," Dean said, "you can get it where everything else is supposed to come from."
He started with the forearm Sam had been going to start with and he wasn't gentle. He scraped the blade down the back of Sam's arm like he had Calvin off the rear window of the car, leaving behind sunburn pink. When he whisked the knife in the bathwater at the end of the stroke, what it had removed churned to the surface.

Dean pulled the metal over vulnerable tendons and around bony hollows, purged the tub, poured more scalding water over Sam with a Big Gulp cup from under the sink, and filled the tub again. He scoured Sam's arms one quadrant at a time before moving on to his torso and doing the same thing.

He scraped the soles of Sam's feet. He scraped his knees, the backs of them, his calves, his thighs. He pulled the knife down Sam's shins and back again; despite the ninety degree angle of the blade and the abuse its edge had taken going into the wall, fine hairs came away and joined the rest of the scum on the water. Dean hauled Sam upright, nearly dead weight, propped him against the shower wall, and planed down his back to the backs of his thighs. Sam's sides twitched at the passage of the blade that would split him open if he collapsed. Dean kept him upright with a bruising hand on his hip.

He finally set the knife aside in favor of a washcloth. Sam's arms gave out when Dean scrubbed over and around his genitals with the same deep, steady abrasion, sending him face- and chest-first into the cold tile. It jarred his ribs, but Sam barely shuddered. What made him moan—once, cut-off, miserable—was the washcloth between his buttocks. Sam hadn't defecated in weeks, but all that meant was that Dean only wrung the cloth out twice.

Dean went away for a few minutes. The shower spray pounded on Sam's back, bounced off the tiles into his face. Footsteps returned, changing tenor as they moved from carpet back into the bathroom.

Objects clinked against the side of the tub as Dean set them down: a pocket comb, Dean's boar bristle hairbrush, a fresh bar of soap and their dollar store shampoo. Dean guided him back down to sit in the tub; it hurt his pelvis until the water filled back up. Hunched over his knees, Sam closed his eyes when the shampoo was rinsed out of his hair with the Big Gulp cup.

Dean stropped the soap over the hairbrush and started on Sam's nails.

"I'm only gonna say this once." The lather on the brush turned from white to gray. "The only thing I see when I look at you is that you did what it took to survive." He dropped Sam's hand in the water and moved on to the other one. "I really don't give a shit about the rest."

The brush went in the trash after he used it on Sam's feet.

Sam's hiccups had died down to occasional spasms that made pain burst through his ribs. His eyes felt burned. His head hurt. He was past mortification. For the first time in weeks he was truly warm, but he was past comfort, too. All there was left was the fact of Dean. It was neither positive nor aversive. It just was.

When Dean finally brought the knife up to his neck, Sam shut his eyes and gave it to him. Dean carved off the beard and a layer underneath that, leaving the skin on Sam's face raw and new.

Afterward he showered with Sam sitting right there on the tub floor, suds coursing down his body under the water. He looked like he always looked: compact, strong, a few bruises, no new scars. He had a fading pockmark on the side of his neck that looked weirdly like some of Sam's own, but that couldn't be right. He finished, sat Sam on the toilet once more, and peeled off each of the waterproof dressings and replaced them, buck naked and efficient.
Walking back out to the room felt like a trance. Sam donned the socks and underwear Dean handed him, letting his brother pull the v-neck over his head and barely noticing the flare in his ribs. The clothes were clean. Not Winchester-clean, not merely free from obvious stains and worn only a couple of times, but clean. Sam could smell detergent through his swollen sinuses.

Dean made him drink a bottle of water, then pills, then Ensure, then handed him a toothbrush with toothpaste on it over a bowl right there in the bedroom, and this had gone on so long that Sam had passed the point of needing it to end. It all just was.

There was a hollow sensation in his stomach. Sam realized with distant astonishment that he was hungry.

Dean's hand on the small of his back propelled him toward his bed like it used to when he was little, when he was too dead on his feet to know what town they were in or whether they were in a house or an apartment or a motel. He let Dean bring more blankets out from the closet until the weight of them pushed him down into the mattress and pull them up over his shoulders. Sam could have sworn he saw him hesitate for a moment before turning to his own bed and climbing in.

"Goodnight, Sam."

Dean's mattress creaked. The light clicked off. The room went still.

It didn't make any sense that Dean found sleep first, breaths leveling out in the next bed within minutes. Sam had never been this tired in his life. He'd been weaker in the hospital, and worse off in the sewer, but never so completely drained. He felt like he'd sweated something out from his core.

He didn't know whether this was the closest he'd ever felt to his brother or the remotest. He lay for a long time with his thoughts drifting on the ache of a bone reset.

All the way back at the beginning, he'd told Dean that he wanted to be safe, not normal. That had burned up on the ceiling, and he'd spent the intervening years straying further and further from it. Now he'd come full circle, except he wanted a different meaning of safe.

He didn't have abilities anymore. Everything he'd done to the spirit had been nothing more than a way of seeing. He'd used her power against her; he hadn't brought anything supernatural to the equation. But there was something in him, or about him, that one supernatural thing after another came looking for.

Lying spent on the mattress, he made a decision that felt like a realization: for his brother's sake, he would find a way to put this to bed for good. He was sick to death of it coming between them every time they thought they were done. He would finish this before whatever was in him surfaced again, or before Heaven or Hell could make it surface. While it was still inert.

This time, he was going to rip it out by the roots.

He'd tried before, of course. He'd gone through Bobby's library and quietly tried every purification rite he could find. He'd asked Castiel, too, and even Uriel once. But all that had been when he still thought it was about the blood. Now he knew it was seated somewhere deeper. That wasn't good news, but it was a lead.

Just on the cusp of sleep, he even remembered a place he could start looking. There'd been that address book in Rufus's house, the one he'd taken on a vague hunch that it might come in handy some day. Maybe there'd be someone in there worth talking to.
He shut his eyes and followed the thread of Dean's breathing until he found sleep.

Heartbeat.

It was a feeling more than a sound, heavy and warm, coming from inside him. It pulsed in the air and provided its own illumination.

Sam stood in front of him with his hand in Dean's chest. As Dean watched, he pulled Dean's heart out of it.

There was no pain. This was the opposite of pain. Dean watched his brother raise his heart to his mouth on a rising tide of ecstasy.

The heartbeat grew stronger, pounding everything else from his head. His heart was on fire.

Sam ate it.

Dean woke up as he came, his body arcing up into a bow. When he fell back down to the mattress, he stared up at the dark ceiling with his pulse still receding in his ears. His boxers were soaked. Even without moving, he could feel his own come sticking the material to his skin and trickling through his pubic hair and over his hip. After a very long time, he got up and went to the bathroom.

He pulled on the first pair of underwear he found in his duffel by touch, balling up the other and shoving it down to the bottom. Then, because he had no idea what else to do, he went back to bed.

His mind was empty. He wasn't thinking about this. There was nothing to think about. He hadn't had a wet dream since he was nineteen.

In the next bed, Sam tossed restlessly, features pinched with some unquiet dream. The urge to go over and fix it hit Dean with an unexpected intensity, but he held himself back. Sam needed sleep. Anything less than a screaming, thrashing nightmare wasn't worth waking him up over.

A sound attracted Dean's attention to the nightstand. It took him a moment to figure out what was making it: the alarm clock was vibrating against the surface of the table, just barely.

Sam frowned, shifted, turned over. The vibration stopped.

Dean lay in the dark. Away down on the highway, a truck marked its position by hitting its jake brake. It was traveling away from them, already some distance down the road though he hadn't noticed it until it braked. He didn't look at the clock. That had probably just been the passage of the truck.

He stretched his arm out into the gap between the beds and resolutely closed his eyes. Yeah, it had probably just been that.
Chapter End Notes

I am modestly hopeful of getting the sequel out eventually, but since I'll probably post it finished or at least in multi-chapter chunks, it may be quite some time. There may or may not be timestamps in the interim.

Thanks for reading.

—road_rhythm (MadBadAndPlaid)

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